

Offering Our Presence

I have always found time to travel home fairly frequently to get my fix of the Bay Area's mountain views and the San Francisco fog and see family and friends. These semi-annual trips became more important a few years ago when my mother started to experience the early stages of Alzheimer's. As soon as we knew the reason she was having trouble understanding our regular card games and unlocking the bolt on the front door, I started making the trip as often as I could. I looked for all the pictures and photo albums I could offer to help her remember me and her grandchildren.

For a few years, my dad had to watch my mom nonstop, with some help from my sister. So, there was a good deal of help I could offer, too, when I was in town: chop vegetables with my mother while the family was preparing dinner, reminding her which way to hold the onion. Take an afternoon shift of walking and running errands with her while my dad took some time to himself. I really felt, when I came home like I had a lot to give.

Last year, when I visited, I would remind my mother over and over that I grew up to be a rabbi and now live on the East Coast. Now I just tell her that I'm her son, Jeff. Phone calls, even over Facetime, are too confusing for her. When I plan my trips to visit, I can't help asking myself, what will I be able to offer her? These days, it's mostly music. I play my guitar and sing the Simon and Garfunkel and Peter, Paul and Mary songs she still knows the words to. I sit with her and help her with everyday things. I am grateful that she is usually content, but she has her moments. She does, of course, get aggravated when things aren't the way she thinks they should be. And there are times when she

is just unhappy. There's nothing that can be done. I've learned that the most meaningful gift I can offer my mom is to be with her no matter what she is going through and how she is feeling. After a lifetime of gifts my mother has given me, this is what she needs, and as hard as it is, it's also gratifying to rise to this challenge. Some of you may know the saying: Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo. But what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down.

We know how important it is to be present with each other during hard times. To stay next to someone and help them hold their pain, even when it scares us, and we don't know what to do about it. This is hard to do, and it's hard to let others do for us. Even now, when we bring my mom in to address some painful, intolerable ailment, the moment she is with the doctor, she is just fine, thank you. She is a Jew, and she can kvetch with the rest of us, but when someone's really listening, no matter what else she has forgotten, she remembers this from her childhood: Don't complain. It's selfish; it makes you weak, and nobody wants to hear it.

I have a friend who was sitting in front of her computer at Starbucks when she received a call delivering the most frightening news of her life: a cancer diagnosis. As she hung up the phone, the buzz of normalcy was still around her, but her world was imploding. She was sitting in a crowd of people, and yet she was the most alone she'd ever been. Her silent face contorted, tears came, and without even knowing it, she let out an audible sigh. Impossible to hide.

A stranger at the table next to her reached out. "Are you ok? It looks like there's something wrong." "I'm fine, she said, but thank you." "Are you sure?

It's ok, I can handle it if you'd like to tell me what's going on." She never did share her news with this stranger. She overcame her cancer. But how different might it have been if she had let this empathetic neighbor be a friend to her in her life's worst moment? If they had been allowed to join my friend at the table, walk with her outside, and hold her hand while she trembled in fear? What kind of strength would she have gained from this? What lifelong friendship might have formed? We don't have to ride the bus alone.

When I heard that story from my friend, I couldn't help but wonder about the courage of this person who happened to be sitting nearby. As a new rabbi, if I went to visit someone severely or gravely ill, I would experience a faint panic as I left my car and walked toward the elevator. Feeling suddenly unprepared: should I have brought my "rabbi's manual?" (We have those, by the way.) What questions will this person ask me? What words of wisdom do I have ready? And, armed with nothing, I would force myself to enter the room. Now, hundreds of visits later, I can almost count the number of "profound things" I've said on one hand. I have learned that suffering just is. It cannot be fixed or explained. What is needed is something every one of us is qualified to give: a concerned and caring presence. An affirming conversation. All any of us can offer when the limo breaks down is the courage to get on the bus.

In Temple times, it was Sukkot and not Yom Kippur, which was the big holiday of the year. It was the happiest occasion in Jewish tradition, but their rituals still found a way to hold the community's suffering. The people would start celebrating even before they got to Jerusalem. They spent the night outside in village centers. At dawn, they would walk together by the thousands. There were flutes playing and a bull at the front of the procession,

decorated with a wreath and olive leaves. Each Israelite was carrying their offering of first fruits – olives, figs, or grapes.

After this journey to Jerusalem, they were ready for a week of feasting, music, and dancing. There is even a legend that the head of the rabbinic court would juggle eight burning torches while bent down so far he was almost touching the ground. And as the week began, every person would carry their fruits with them. They would ascend onto the beautiful, grand, and spacious Temple Mount and join the line for their slow, triumphant walk around the Holy of Holies containing the Ark of the Covenant. They were filled with excitement.

There's a text found in the Mishnaⁱ - and described by Rabbi Sharon Brous in her book, *The Amen Effect* - that adds an interesting new detail to what came next: two lines of worshippers, passing by each other face to face as they circled the courtyard, single file. The vast majority of people entered the gate and walked right, counterclockwise like they did every year. But certain people were singled out to walk left: people who fit into categories of mourning, illness, and other hardships. These people's joy was weighted down with grief.

Think of the people sitting here today. What are all of us going through? Some *are* in mourning or dealing with illness. Some are struggling with other crises or are out of a relationship with a loved one. Grief we cannot see as we sit here in rows, side by side.

These grieving worshippers at the Temple Mount could have been invisible to the rest of the community. Maybe they would have chosen to hide their grief. Walking to the right, with the crowd, the pain on their faces might

have gone unnoticed, with everyone looking at the back of the person in front of them. Instead, there they were, face to face with their community, their anguish exposed. As they passed by each of their neighbors, they would be asked a question over and over. "Why do you walk to the left?" An empathetic question, an opening of a door. And they were commanded to give an answer and receive a blessing. "May God comfort you." "May God show your sick relative compassion." "May God help you to reconcile with your neighbor." These blessings spoke of *God's* comfort, but at that moment, the comfort and compassion that were received came from the people in their community.

I find this ancient ritual amazing and inspiring. Within this gathering, they created an opportunity for grievors to be recognized and their grief to be held. Gently, they pushed the grievors into the open. Gently, they prevented the community from looking the other way. These thousands of worshippers may have brought with them gifts of fruit for God, but the most important thing they gave of themselves in the middle of this celebration was this offering of their presence.

I learned a lot from watching my father seek out this presence for himself. When we spoke ahead of my visit to California this May, he told me that the day I arrived, I should come with him to a meeting of the men's group at their synagogue, my home synagogue – get this – Rodef Sholom. Why, I thought? You go to your meeting, and I'll grab a moment to see a friend from college. But it seemed important to him, so I joined. The session was about grief, and as we started, the teacher they had invited asked us to share experiences we had had with grief in our lives. When his turn came, my dad shared his current sadness: how much he missed the partner he used to have

in my mom, his loneliness, now that her memory loss made her unable to be his companion. I was astounded to see how my father didn't hold back. I watched this room full of men, used to hearing about problems they could solve and questions they could answer. They didn't have anything to say or do, but they rode the bus with my dad. They sat facing each other in a circle, not straight ahead, looking at each other's backs. I was happy for my father. He had been able to do what my friend at Starbucks could not: to allow his pain to be seen and heard and accept the offering of presence from his community.

Thriving as a sacred congregation requires that we lean into this deep Jewish and human power to be with each other in pain and grief. We need this to withstand both individual and communal challenges with strength and resilience. In a year like this one – with all the pain we feel for the Jewish people and for all the innocent people affected by the war – this is more important than ever. We will not always agree on how to overcome our challenges, as Jews never do. But I believe the healing that can come from seeing and holding each other's pain is important for these conversations as well. It helps us appreciate each other's humanity, hear and understand each other, and build the relationships that make our community stronger.

There is something else important about the ancient Sukkot celebration. There's another piece of that interaction that lifted up the grievors among the worshippers on the Temple Mount. Not only did they show their faces to those across from them, but they also saw the faces of these neighbors as well. The joy all around must have had an effect on them. Perhaps they thought to themselves, didn't he lose a parent last year? Hasn't

she had her own struggles? And here they are today, walking to the right again. So, there is hope for my journey as well. They heard the music, and maybe they couldn't help singing along.

An important discovery from neuroscience this century has identified something in brains called mirror neurons. These neurons may help humans and animals learn by firing in imitation of actions we see in others. And it is thought by some that mirror neurons can cause us to connect with and imitate the emotions of others, such as a frown, a smile, or a laugh. We reflect the pain, joy, anxiety, or excitement that we see in others, causing us to feel these emotions ourselves, with all the physiological effects that follow. This suggests that a visit to the hospital from a person who exudes optimism and positivity may have a direct, healing effect on the patient.

The presence of other people who are with us on our journey but who can help us see outside our grief is a necessary part of healing. An essential source of strength. A window out of our loneliness. Perhaps this is why Shiva minyans include not only tears but laughter, not only sadness and sometimes despair, but also gratitude, memory, and even joy. When was the last time you left a shiva without feeling uplifted in some way? This is the wisdom in Jewish tradition telling us not to leave a mourner alone. This is why mourners attend Shabbat services during shloshim or a Yahrtzeit, where they will find a Kaddish minyan, kids becoming B'nai Mitzvah, families with their children, music, conversation, and cookies. They come to a place where their sadness is acknowledged, their pain is held, and at the same time, the joy of the community carries them.

So, in addition to having the courage to share with others our pain, we should not hesitate, even with those who are struggling, to share our joy. Invite others into the circle for the hora at a wedding, and allow yourself to be lifted up in your chair – the most dangerous of Jewish sports. Let others gaze at the beautiful face of your baby in the clergy's arms while she receives her Hebrew name. Every moment of celebration is a gift to take hold of and savor, a sacred opportunity that means more than we even realize, a chance to experience joy and lift others up as well.

On Yom Kippur, as we reflect on the experiences we're carrying this year, this is our chance to walk in opposite directions with the people sitting around us so we can see each other's faces. To turn around and look at the joy and the pain of the people behind and in front of you. To see what we are all carrying into Yom Kippur or what we fear about the year ahead. Yom Kippur is a time we spend inside ourselves, but much of the day's content joins us with others. Many of the prayers are in the plural to remind us that we are together, in community, in our struggles as a people, and even a world. That the best thing we have to offer each other is our presence. That there are times we can ride the limo together, but we also have to join each other on the bus.

¹ Semachot 6:11