

The Social Jews

I want everyone to take out your cell phones. Hopefully they're on silent, but if not, please make sure they're silenced or on vibrate, but don't turn them off! While you have them out, I want you to do me a favor. Think of someone whom you feel close to, or whom you care about, but who is not physically sitting in this room with us. If you have the ability to, on your phone, I want you to send them a text message wishing them a happy new year, a *Shanah Tovah*, or, if they're not Jewish, tell them that you are thinking of them and grateful for their friendship and love. Go ahead, send them a quick text, I'll wait for you to do it and in the meantime, I'm going to text one of my friends and do the same.....Now that you've done that, I want you to double check that your cell phones are on silent and put them back away. I figured, while we're all double checking to make sure our phones are REALLY silenced, why not do something good, like connect to another person and send them a special message at this special time. While it might seem irreverent to some of us to take our phones out during services, for many of us, using technology to connect to others is a way of life.

As Jews, we are all about connecting with others. *Kehillah*, or community, is at the core of what we do: we can't say certain prayers, like the Kaddish, or even the Barchu, without the presence of a *minyan*, or 10 Jewish adults, all together in one space. Holidays and life cycle events focus on family, home, and our relationships. We engage

in the act of *Tikkun Olam*, helping to better the communities and world that we live in through acts of charity and loving kindness. Throughout history, and through the myriad ways that Judaism has shifted and changed and transformed, one thing has remained constant and at the core. It is both what we do and WHO WE ARE that makes us Jewish. It is *how* we connect with ourselves and the outside world that bridges the gap between just practicing religion and engaging in a meaningful and significant spiritual and religious community.

But, the times they are a changin'! No longer is the synagogue building and all the programs within it our only source for communal Jewish activity. That's not to say that great things aren't happening here, at the Reform Temple. I'm more proud, than ever before, of our worship experiences, our outreach and engagement, and our thoughtful and enlightening programming, meeting the needs of all different segments of our synagogue population. But, the reality of living in the 21st century is that we are mobile individuals, busier than ever before. While we are still community oriented as Jews, the pressures of our time require us to put our individual needs first, and not necessarily in traditional spaces or conventional social means. Why? Because that's the world we live in, and as Reform Jews, we are constantly looking at our surroundings and figuring out how we best fit in to it – as we lead lives that are both secular and Jewish, all at the same time. More often than not, it's a balancing act, fitting in our Judaism with the rest of the

demands on our time – work, school, family, friends, vacation, hobbies. It's not that we don't want Judaism to take front and center of our lives, but it can feel time consuming and, let's be real – unless you are a rabbi or a Jewish professional, it's just not likely to happen, all the time, on a consistent basis. To be truthful, sometimes it's even a struggle for us too!

So how do we make it work? How do we not only help Judaism survive but also remain constant and consistent in our own lives? Not in a boring or unrealistic way, but in a way that we'll be excited to maintain. At this time of year, of renewal, of reflection, of introspection, how do we commit ourselves to making Judaism a real and relevant part of who we are, in this year and in coming years? We do it by doing what Jews have done for hundreds of years – we engage with others....socially. Through social engagement, social justice, and social media. By staying true to what we love about Judaism and our own lives, we can really make merging our two worlds more balanced than ever before, by being more social with one another.

We are social creatures. We know that key to animal survival is to live in packs and herds, to fly in flocks and to swim in schools. And while we might not be concerned with outrunning our predator or being picked off for being the slowest, our survival depends on being social, too. As human beings, with minds and psyches, studies have shown us that one can actually gauge the health and happiness of people based on their

experiences in groups, in feeling part of something greater than themselves, and in acceptance within a community. The Terman study, found in the book *The Longevity Project*, from 2012, reportedly found that engaging in more social activities with others was a predictor in leading longer and healthier lives. The more we spend time with others, the healthier our lives will be? That's medicine that I can get behind! But in our society of individualism, it's often easy to forget and take for granted the need to actually engage, socially, with others. We'd rather sit in our seats, eyes forward, or play on our phone (not right now, of course) than acknowledge someone around us. It's uncomfortable and makes us feel vulnerable to have to make small talk or even try to be friendly, for fear that it might not be reciprocated. And, like every other discipline in life, when we don't regularly practice engaging with others, socially, we actually forget how to do it, thus creating a cycle of comfort with our anti-social tendencies. So, let's break that! Turn to the person next to you, smile and say, "Hello. L'shana Tovah!" In this way, we're at least acknowledging the other people around us.

Beyond having the courage to smile and greet others warmly, it's important that we actually engage with each other. At the Union for Reform Judaism Biennial, this last winter, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the President of the URJ, spoke about the importance of "audacious hospitality." He's uses the word audacious to imply that we must be courageous, fearless, and bold in our sense of engaging with others. It's not enough just

to smile politely at someone else and acknowledge them, it's imperative that we actually welcome people into our lives.¹ Our Jewish communities are built on a foundation of love and respect – for Judaism and for the Jewish people. But, that's all just a concept, unless we actually put it into practice. Rabbi Kaiserman has already set a beautiful example of this practice, for us, by initiating his “Havdallah at Home” program. This program invites every single member of the congregation, at some point or another, into his home to engage in the ritual of ending Shabbat. It's also meant to get to know all of you a little bit better, and for you to get to know others, on a personal level – beyond just names and faces. I run a program called “Shabbat in the Home,” connecting young families with our congregation and unaffiliated Jews in the Queens area. This program is designed to experience Saturday morning Shabbat in a setting where connecting to other families is easier, more relaxed, but focused on Judaism and learning, as well. It all happens in the home, in a morning designed by the host family, and it prompts them to invite people, whom they might not necessarily know well, to come into their space and be “audaciously” hospitable, with a little help from us. And now it's your turn. Don't just smile and greet the people next to you, because we tell you to do it, or because it's convenient for you. I challenge you to figure out how you're going to be more “audaciously hospitable” and socially engaging with our community in this next year. Perhaps you can share a *simcha* with us, here at the synagogue, like a birthday or

1 “The Genesis of our Future,” Rabbi Rick Jacobs. URJ Biennial, 2013.

anniversary, by sponsoring an oneg or having your event here. Or take the initiative to organize a Temple activity around something you really love to do – like the Men's Club bike ride that recently occurred, or seeing who wants to go down the street with you to organize a “best bagel shop on the Boulevard” outing. Host a Shabbat dinner, in your home, and invite that family that you always say hello to but just haven't made the time to have over, yet. Whatever you love to do with others, do it now. You will make our Jewish community stronger by strengthening the relationships you have with others in this congregation and in the Jewish world, and by forging new connections with others. Be bold, be unafraid, and reach out your hand to others, socially. Everyone will benefit from this, in the end, individually and communally.

Our Talmud teaches us that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, the great sage of the 2nd Temple period, was known for going out into the marketplace and always being the first to extend his hand – to every Jew and non-Jew, alike. We learn from him that it's not just important to be the first to initiate kindness or social interaction, but that it's important that you do it with everyone around you: both friends and strangers. Social action and social justice are incredibly easy ways for us to connect to the stranger among us and to the world around us, while still engaging with our Judaism. At this high holiday season, at the changing of each year, we call to mind the idea that the world was indeed created and we should celebrate that creation, but that it was made imperfectly and that creation

is not yet complete. As Jews, it is our sacred responsibility and obligation to partner with God in the task of completing the act of creation – by helping all those in it to lead better, more humane, and more just lives. It is, perhaps, the most socially Jewish way for us to engage – not just to sit passively and pray, but to really take action and work to help make those around us live and breathe a little easier. And guess what? It also feels great to help others, too. In that same study in *The Longevity Project*, it was concluded that “beyond social network size, the clearest benefit of social relationships came from helping others. Those who helped their friends and neighbors, advising and caring for others, tended to live to old age.”² Feeling good about helping others shouldn't make us feel guilty – it should compel us to do more of it, and to do it often. Not just for ourselves, but for others, those whom we are helping and those whom we are **inspiring** to help others. While going on *Midnight Run* with our congregation, this last spring, where we bring clothes and food to the homeless on the streets of New York, I witnessed one of our very own congregants give the shoes off of her own feet to a stranger and woman in need, without a second thought as to what she would do without them. It was clear that the recipient was in much greater need and our congregant would figure out a way to get home without her shoes, that night. Even though I wasn't the one performing this act, just witnessing it alone was enough to inspire me to want to continue to help

² The Longevity Project: Surprising Discoveries for Health and Long Life from the Landmark Eight-Decade Study.
Friedman and Martin, 2012

others, in any way, I could. I know it was incredibly inspiring for our teens, as well, who were the majority of the participants in that particular social action event.

Integrating social justice into your lives is much easier than you think. I'll tell you a little secret: social justice is just another fancy way to say “volunteering.” It's about giving up your time or your energy, maybe even some of your money, to help others who don't have the same kinds of luxuries that you do. Many of us do a good job of this already – serving on our social action committee, giving to our food and clothing drives, participating in Mitzvah day, or donating blood when given the chance. But, again, I'm going to challenge you – how will this year be one that helps you to *inspire* others to help do good in the world? How will YOU set an example for others so that all of us can be inspired to actively work to perfect the world? Be SOCIAL about it. One of the most powerful ways to volunteer is to organize others and to organize around what you love and what you're passionate about. We encourage each of our Bar and Bat Mitzvah students to chose a social action project that is near and dear to them, and I would encourage you to do the same. If you're interested in politics and local community, join me and other RTFH congregants with *Faith in New York*, an interfaith community organization working with our local government to improve jobs, housing, and racial and economic disparities. If you're more inclined to want to help a particular population, like the thousands of homeless teens that sleep out on our streets every night, you can

contact Shelter of Peace, a New York Jewish faith-based organization devoted to this cause, and see how we here in the Queens Jewish community can get involved. If you are more passionate about particular issues, like advancing the rights of the GLTBQ community, I encourage you to learn more about Keshet, a Jewish advocacy group for gays and lesbians. If you feel compelled to help end domestic violence, donate to Jewish Women's International, which helps Jewish women living in shelters away from their perpetrators. Lead the way on whatever issue you are called to, and find a Jewish organization devoted to these causes to see what can be done to help raise awareness, right here at our doorstep. And, if being a part of an organization is not something you are interested in, don't push yourself in that direction. Social justice and *Tikkun Olam* are as easy as helping someone on the street who is carrying a heavy load and easing their burden, offering a smile and a kind word, like we just did to our neighbor, and interacting with someone who might feel alone and needs another human being's reassurance. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great modern thinkers, said that "a Jew is a person whose integrity decays when unmoved by the knowledge that wrong has been done to another human being." Our ability to socially and actively help others, to connect with them, to work on behalf of them, not only helps to inspire others, but it connects us to ourselves, and to our Judaism. It's called social justice because we strive, as Jews, to make our society a better place for all to exist and we can do it, together.

Living in the 21st century in community means not just existing with others physically, but also virtually. Technology and social media have changed the way in which we define “community” and what it means to be “social.” For those of us who felt comfortable, a few moments ago, to send a text message, are already well steeped in the benefits of current technology. Nearly all of us carry around in our phones small computers that can search information on any topic, as fast as we can snap our fingers. These “magic” machines also contains our photos, our address books, work and homework presentations, email, and can even call a person to speak to them directly, if you need to! It's a miracle what these little things can do. And, for most of us, it's not our only piece of technology that can do these things. Whether we own televisions, computers, cell phones, or all of the above, there is no getting away from our society that encourages multiple technologies, access to information at lightning fast speed, and many ways to connect to others, right at our fingertips, any time of night or day.

While there can be an overwhelming sense of anxiety to constantly be plugged in all the time, there is also great advantage to being part of a virtual community. Websites and applications like Facebook and Twitter are all part of what we call “social media” with a design to bring together people, ideas, and information as easily and as enjoyably as possible. And it really is possible for ANYONE to access it, as long as you are willing to try and to learn. Our very own Pauline Kurtzman, a more senior and long-time

member of our congregation, told me, a few years ago, that she joined Facebook to see what I was up to and to connect to others in our community. I am happy to report that she has been actively using it and loving it, ever since. Many of the teens in our congregation, including those recent graduates now in college, send instant pictures to one another through Snapchat, giving our younger teens a sense of college life, as well as staying connected to their friends and families back home. Communities, like our very own synagogue, have pages on these sites devoted to their organization and ideas, and members can easily check it for information and to connect to other members in social and relaxed ways.

But it's more than that. Social media and technology are also about connecting and fostering our relationships with others, when we need them. Less than two weeks ago, I was in a car accident. I was going through a green light at an intersection and out of nowhere, someone ran a red light and hit straight into the side of my car. While my car is totaled, I am fortunate to say that I walked away from the accident with non-serious injuries and, more importantly, my life. I stayed home, the following weekend, to rest and recuperate but I felt alone and scared and very shaken. I knew it would be impossible for me to be at services the next night for Shabbat, but I desperately wanted to *bensch Gomeil* – the prayer that is said when one recovers from an illness or survives a tragedy. I posted a message about the accident on Facebook, including *Birkat Gomeil*,

the blessing, and by the next day I had received hundreds of comments and responses to my prayer, text messages, emails, and phone calls asking what I needed, offering up their gratitude for my safety, and wishing me well. I wasn't able to be with anyone, in person, but I was able to pray, to reach out, and to feel as though my community heard my prayer and could respond. No technology or social media can substitute true human connection, but it sure can help supplement it and remind us of the relationships that exist in life, when we cannot actually be with others. It helps spread information instantly and helps us in telling the world what we think, what's happened, and what we need.

Technology and Social Media are here to stay. They're not just a flash in the pan, because by definition as society evolves, technology evolves, as well. And, as Jews, there are many ways that we can take advantage of these things. Every Jewish organization imaginable has a website, and most likely a social media presence as well – if you're ever curious about Jewish education, Reform Judaism, the Torah portion of the week, or have questions about what time our services start or how to register for our trip to Israel, you can find it all online, just by doing a simple search. Young Jews find dating and mating a lot easier, thanks to sites like Jdate or Frumster, where single Jews can find others, looking for love, partnership and marriage. It serves as a 21st century matchmaker, of sorts. Synagogues and spiritual communities are now streaming their

services online. Anyone, around the world, can access prayer with a Jewish community, even if it is not physically accessible to them. Social media and technology is also an aid in HOW we interact with others, based on our own personalities – it helps folks who are a bit more shy face-to-face to still feel connected to others, socially. Or, if you're an EXTRA-extrovert, like me, it's just another way in which to get to build and maintain relationships, no matter where you are. More than anything, it's fun and kind of cool to be tech-savy and connected. If information is power, social media and technology empower all of us. There is no excuse to feel as though our Judaism cannot be accessed and enhanced by the virtual world. It is simply a continuation of the connection that we are always trying to strengthen and develop with our Judaism and our society. So get online, get updated, and get connected to every part of the Jewish world that you love. It's all right there, at your fingertips.

Being an American Jew, in the 21st century is hard. We have so many demands on our time and it's easy to want to put Judaism on a back-burner, until we have the time to make it a priority. But, the truth is, it's easier than ever before for us to integrate it successfully into our busy lives, if we make sure that it's tied into the things we already love to do – being social with others, whether physically or virtually, and through acts of loving kindness and human compassion. Pirke Avot, the teachings of our Rabbis, tells us that we should run to do a mitzvah, even the slightest one, for it will lead to other

mitzvot and turn us away from sin.³ This saying always makes me think about all the people who wake up and run to their jobs because they love what they do. Or the people who run home from work to the ones they love, so they can find happiness in their shared time together. Wouldn't it be great if we created Judaism in our lives that we ran to, not just the actions of the *mitzvot*, but the Judaism that we practice, on the whole? The Jewish community is beautiful and rewarding and meaningful, but it is ever-changing and we must keep up with it, run with it and towards it, if we want to sustain it as a part of our lives. Let's be social, let's engage, let's run together, and let's build a Judaism that is exciting, relevant, and worthy of our precious time.

May this new year bring you and your loved ones many opportunities to access what you enjoy most, to build what is meaningful for you, and to be part of a Jewish community that is inspiring, socially relevant and inviting, and exactly where you would like to be.

Shana Tovah

3 Pirke Avot. Ch. 4, Mishna 2