Choose Life!

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Every year, on the Shabbat right before Rosh HaShannah we read the parasha that prepares us to celebrate the creation of the world and everything that is in it by asking the question, “How will you choose life this year? What routines in your life actively support this intention?”

Before we can answer that question we must first answer this question:

Why are we here? Why are you here? Are you here for yourself? And- or- do you perhaps realize the extent to which your choices impact the future?  Not just whether or not this world will exist as we know it because of climate change, but because the routines and practices you have now vis a vis yourself and one another can help to nourish life, or extinguish it? I am not talking about food choices, or how we use natural resources- our choices in those realms matter greatly as well! - but rather the extent to which we engage with the loneliness epidemic that is killing people, or the way we act to break down this isolation, and to hear and be in relationship with the people around us, as expressed through their being, and their voice. ***Shma koleynu! Hear our voices! To choose life we need people to really see us, to be with us, and to hear our voices.***

Today, on the birthday of the world, we will soon be listening to the ring of our ancient alarm clock, awakening us to 1) *malkhuyot-* the smallness and largeness of our place in all of existence, 2) *zikhronot:* - as we remember and ask God to remember the stream of life that has come before us, we hopefully also consider the life that will come after us and how our choices today create or destroy possibilities for the future generations, and 3) *shofarot-* our ancient, no electricity needed alarm clock technology has served to wake us up over the years, inspiring our ancestors and our ancestors’ ancestors in the opportunity we humans have for increased alertness and actions that reflect our deepest values in spite of the innumerable circumstances that can drag us out of line with what we truly hold dear.

Exactly one week ago, 16 yr old Greta Thurnberg addressed the UN Climate Action Summit in NYC.

Her message started by saying “We’ll be watching you.” At the end of the message she expressly stated that “the eyes of all future generations are upon you.”

I would extend this beyond the climate crisis: the eyes of the future generations are upon us adults, now, wondering and doubting the inheritance we are leaving them.

In the Oct-Nov Shalom that you hopefully just received, Oseh President Michael Cornell asked us: “How are our Jewish values expressed within the Oseh Community?”

He calls upon us to “reflect on where [we] may have been knowingly or unknowingly complicit through silence or inaction and commit to action in the coming year – big or small – to do the right thing, to act on [our] values, and make it a good year filled with deed and intention.”

Today I offer you support for responding to his call and the call of the High Holydays.

First- a question: What are the life affirming routines that connect you to yourself and to others?

A healthy culture connects us to ourself, and one another, and orients us in the changing of the seasons and the particular landscape in which we live. What then are the routines in our lives that support such connection?

According to Jungian analyst James Hollis, “What characterizes the modern era, going back four centures, is that the responsibility for meaning and for the conduct of one’s life has progressively shifted from … institutions to the shoulders of the individual” (Connecting Generations, p. 70). Together with the value of “rugged individualism” that lies at the foundation of the United States, it’s hardly surprising then that even as some are living longer, we now have such a breakdown in the fabric of society that that our lives are actually being shortened.  The close bonds that once provided the framework for growing into strong, confident, healthy adults who had elders to turn to and who in turn mentored those younger than us have eroded almost completely. ***Shma koleynu!* To choose life we need to meet our longing for others to *really see us, to be with us, and to hear our voices.***

Last year I briefly referenced the loneliness epidemic in our country. Here are some additional statistics from a book titled, Connecting Generations: Bridging the Boomer, Gen X, and Millennial Divide, which Hayim Herring- a rabbi, consultant, organizational futurist and author- just published.

At a time when we have an unprecedented 6 generations of people alive, there is more age segregation than ever before, and people *across* the generations are reportedly increasingly “lonely” even as we use the newest technologies to connect with one another in exciting, novel ways. In the 1980s some studies reported 20% of older adults  feeling lonely; In 2012 the National Institute on Aging reported that 43% of Americans over the age of 60 feel lonely, and a more recent study by linkAges reported 55% of respondents feel lonely.

Herring’s book also states that “social scientists and health journalists agree that the number of individuals whom we describe as ‘close confidantes’ has declined dramatically from three to only one (or in some studies, none) since the mid-1980s. The number of close friends that people have today compared to a few decades ago has dropped, and people generally don’t have relationships with those born in other generations” (p. 3). Whereas suicide was once common mostly with the elderly, there has been an increase in every age group. Gen Xer, Jean Twenge, has been studying generational differences for 25 years. In 2012 she already noticed such increases in teen depression and suicide that lead her to claim that “we are ‘on the brink of the worst mental health crisis in decades’” (ibid. p. 12).

Many of our lives are increasingly busy and filled with running from place to place, overwhelmed with the demands placed upon us. We lack a larger cultural support for making space to check in with ourselves, and time and support for relationship building with mentors and those who can catch our stories, non judgmentally listen to us, and also lovingly challenge us when they see we are avoiding the “real work” in our lives. Perhaps some of us are blessed to have a relationship here or there with a couple of individuals who see us as the unique gift that we each are. Perhaps some of us have had relationships as children that remind us over and over again that we each have a unique gift that the world so desperately needs. Perhaps some of us have had support in finding and nurturing that gift. If so, we are the rare, and lucky ones. ***Shma koleynu! As social beings, to choose life we desperately need people to help us see our gifts and to help us nurture them.***

**Is there a way out of this brokenness?**

One of my teachers, Jon Young, has been studying from and building relationships with a San Bushmen tribe in the Kalahari for quite a number of years.

He teaches (8Shields.org) that when their children are very young, the mothers take their children to the elders for a 2 minute lesson.

The elders tell the children, “Long ago, the lions ate many of us. Now they don’t.”

    “Why not?” the children ask.

    “Because now we pay attention.”

And then they point out the various members of the community that can be seen from where they are sitting, and they show how each one of those community members is not “on high alert,” but rather is “paying attention” in a relaxed way that conserves energy and actually nourishes the nervous system.

The adults, the older youth, the elders… **no one** engages in their various work and projects with a laser like focus that shuts down the senses- as so many of us do, sitting indoors and staring at small screens. Instead, their culture is rooted in practices and exercises that not only open their senses, allowing not for “multi-tasking,” but rather a powerful and deep processing of information simultaneously and effortlessly.

Integral to their culture we also find copious amounts of time for personal, individual reflection as well as numerous structured and unstructured times for mentoring as well as non-judgmental relationships with numerous people across the generations. The result? A base level of vitality, “super power” intuition, and other deeply life affirming relationships that are completely unprecedented in our culture. Not only that, but individuals in the community feel deeply accepted for who they are. And this even extends to those who come into the community from the outside! There is my teacher, who has created a world wide movement addressing these issues of disconnection, and who states that he feels most fully accepted for who he is *there*, in the Kalahari, with this group of people. And there is the story he tells of a man from South Africa, who had a stutter, who went to study this tribe. Being in this community, his stutter completely vanished.

No. The lions are not killing them. Nor are they killing us. But *we are* dying. From drugs, guns, health related issues, mental illness and so much more. And at the core of all these “separate” issues we can see deep loneliness, isolation, and the breakdown in intergenerational relationships of support. It is not the lions. Our threat, and the threat to the generations that will come after us lies in “business as usual” routines and systems that reflect the individualistic ethos of our greater culture. A culture in which our stories are not “caught” and our voices are not heard. ***Shma koleynu****!* ***We need our voices to be heard!***

Depressing? Most certainly!

An enlightening framework? Perhaps.

Is there a solution? **Yes!**

In the face of such a depressing reality I cannot emphasize enough two things:

1. The problem was slow in coming, and so we must be patient with the solution, taking action step by step, conversation by conversation, relationship by relationship.
2. As participants in an organized Jewish community we have an *incredible* advantage for “being the change we want to see!”

Let me share a powerful success story from this past year. Following the conclusion of the Shma Koleynu Engagement Initiative that I introduced on Rosh HaShanah last year, Michael - our board president- invited board members and other leaders to “Reconstruction Oseh- A planning session.”

Among those invited were incoming Ed VP, Ben Allen-Kingsland, and Megan Allen-Kingsland, a parent and a volunteer in other capacities. Now Megan and Ben have 3 young children who were then 7 and under, with the youngest not yet 1. They had arranged for child care for that day, but as many parents know, sometimes those plans just fall apart, and that is what happened to them. **Fortunately** they asked if they could bring their children to the meeting, and were met with a clear “Yes!”

Over the course of the next number of hours together in that all day planning session, other adults took turns interacting with and supporting them and their children so that Ben and Megan could contribute in the invaluable ways made possible that day. Having their family with us that day not only didn’t took anything away from anyone, but instead added immensely to all of us there, and even to all of you here. Today, we are *all* the beneficiaries of that “small” and yet momentous example of the life affirming tikkun olam that we can work on right here, in our very own community.

Let me explain:

Coming off the Shma Koleynu initiative we had already seen the pattern that 1) many Oseh folks have many interests, 2) many would like to gather together more with other Oseh-niks to learn, act on the many tikkun olam needs of our time, play, and so much more, and 3) our community faces communication issues at a *number* of levels.

By embracing Megan, Ben, and their children, on the basic, very important human level we - in no prioritized order- accomplished the following: 1) allowed parents to participate in a very important leadership meeting as the talented, caring individuals they are, 2) allowed these parents a little “break” in childcare responsibilities by holding their young son in particular, and engaging with their sweet daughters as well; 3) entered their children’s lives as adults who care for them; and 4) especially for those who do not regularly have young ones in their lives, were nourished by being with that age of human being!

On the organizational level- that all of us now benefit from, key conversations started at that meeting between Ben, Megan, and other leaders there around the communication challenges at Oseh. These conversations ultimately resulted in us as a community deciding to work with Slack - “the collaboration software that moves work- and I’d add ‘play’- forward.”

The isolation that traps so many in our country need not hamper our lives! Last year’s Shma Koleynu initiative also revealed a desire for gathering again in small groups around shared interests, otherwise known as Chavurot. Check The Shalom, our website, and my recent article there for details about Slack and a training on how to use it, the upcoming Chavurot launch, and other avenues for coming together formally and informally.

Because those who come to Oseh span the generational spectrum, we have the unique opportunity to break down isolation by creating more life affirming communal routines on numerous levels as we reweave the fabric of society right here in transformative ways, strand by strand.

We are starting a new year together. As I close today I return to the question: why are ***you*** here? Are you here just for yourself? In the psalms of Hallel that we will soon be singing over Sukkot we are reminded both of our vulnerability as well as the power we have while we are alive- lo ha’metim y’hallelu Ya/ The dead cannot shout out praises for Yah. The dead cannot work to - piece by piece- put back together a system that has deeply life affirming routines and that can break the loneliness epidemic and bring more vitality and meaning to all involved, one person at a time, allowing our voices to be heard, and our souls to be more fully seen.

**Shma Koleynu!** Who hears our voices?

It is not just for God to hear our voices, but for the Godliness in one another to catch our stories and to see us. This year I invite you to routinize - as you are able- your life affirming engagement with Oseh Shalom. And if you are interested, reach out to me as I will be working with a group to further examine the possibilities for nurturing intentionally designed connective culture that can support our relationships with our deeper selves and one another as we us write ourselves into the Book of Life!  Shanah tovah!