

Secrets to a Long Life Lived Well
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Her call was a surprise. I was delighted she accepted an offer I had made anticipating a wonderful milestone. "I would love to bless you on your 100th birthday in front of the congregation at Qabbalat Shabbat," I told her.

There was only one problem. She wanted the blessing on the actual day of her birthday, but couldn't get to the Temple. 100 years old? I volunteered to come to her home. She declined. It should happen at the Temple. Besides, she would be busy preparing for family arriving for her birthday party. What to do?

Technology offered the answer. We live web stream our services every Friday night and bring Shabbat to hundreds out beyond our walls. It was less than optimal, but why not bless her through the camera? She and her daughter, who was also on the phone, thought it was a wonderful idea. We made a plan. They would Live stream services and connect to the community.

What could go wrong?

Technology is a marvelous development, no matter what age we are. Used properly, it can assist us in engaging in magnificent ways. Our most distant Temple members live in Mannheim, Germany, far from any synagogue, even in their own country. They discovered us on the web and since then attend almost every Qabbalat Shabbat, High Holy Day and most B'nai Mitzvah services. The Internet has brought them to Temple Israel, which they experience as a welcoming community based on, as they say, "respect with open arms, minds, and hearts."

But, we also know how the Internet can be used in nefarious and destructive ways. The ability to wreak havoc and promulgate hateful behavior by unkind and thoughtless individuals has woven an insidious thread throughout the web. Its underbelly is dark and mean. We also know the mere presence of our devices has challenged our abilities to be engaged with others right in front of us.

In a book called "matter-ness," Allison Fine, who has written extensively on the power of social media as a positive force, speaks of the need for people to feel known and credits aspects of the internet and social media as a means to enable it. We spend hours attached and plugged in, we certainly should reap some benefits.

Consider the two different personas of Facebook and Google. On Facebook, the lives of others look magnificent. They have the best spouse, the most loving and adorable children, the cutest and funniest pets, and better vacations than any of us will ever have. Some call it "fakebook" for the way it allows people to gloss over and suppress real life challenges. And yet, Facebook has allowed people to ask for help

and get advice from beyond the walls of our individual worlds. Google has made us feel we can ask it anything, our wildest and craziest questions, which might reveal our deepest, darkest secrets, concerns and fears. We are more connected than ever, and I value these and other platforms for what they provide. I recently attended a shivah minyan service for a dear colleague who had died. People from all over the country were online. Together, but separately we mourned. I was grateful for the opportunity and it drove home this question: What is the effect of being part of a community engaged face to face?

The discovery of blue zones, areas in the world where a disproportionate amount of people live past the age of 100, provides a partial answer. Scientists have explored the phenomenon. They acknowledge the role of diet and exercise in such longevity, but point to the power of personal connections as a critical element. Purpose, community, and relationship are the fundamentals factors for long life. The recognition of the blue zones has led to further research. As you might expect a studyⁱ of the top 10 reasons people live longer listed weight control, exercise, and getting a flu vaccine as important influences but they were not in the top two. The second highest predictor for longevity is close relationships. That makes sense to us. We must have a close circle of friends and family on which to rely, intimate connections on whom we rely for help when it's needed. But the number one indicator for a long life rests on the kind of social interactions we have throughout our day. Those conversations we might dismiss as unremarkable as a brief interaction with the security guard, the person in front of us in line, the cashier at the check out, the fellow congregant sitting next to us we have never met before have a measurable impact.. Our ability to make human and humane connection matters more than just good manners of conveying a pleasant countenance and engaging in conversations. They actually provide a fountain of vitality toward our life expectancy.

In fact, your life expectancy is already higher just by being here.

Other research confirms that what enriches our lives while we grace this earth and has been proven to improve the world as well is affiliation with religious communities. Social scientists, Robert Putnam and David Campbell, discoveredⁱⁱ that members of religious communities, which means all of us here, are more likely to volunteer, give to charity, assist a homeless person, donate blood, spend time with someone feeling depressed, offer a seat to a stranger, help someone find a job, and take part in local civic life. Nothing, they assert, is more central to faith than the need for stronger, deeper, and more enduring relationships.

When the great Temple stood in Jerusalem. People made their pilgrimages to that sacred site. The rabbis of the Mishnah called it *Har habayit*. The House of the Hill. The Hebrew word, *bayit*, remains as part of the name we use to describe what occurs in the synagogue. House of study, prayer, and communal gathering. When the ancients made their way to their sacred home, the Mishnah described how they entered into the Courtyard. Most entered and circled from the right to the left. But

there were those who arrived *sh'eiro devar*-because something unfavorable had occurred, so they filed in from the left to the right, the opposite direction as everyone else to highlight and draw attention to their plight. As they proceeded in, passing the others entering from the opposite direction, they would be asked: *Ma lecha?* What happened? And they would answer: I am a mourner. Or I have been excommunicated. And those who would encounter them would respond: May God bring you comfort and may those here bring you near. That circling face to face allowed for the human contact that asserts connection. They grasped the broken hearted with their physical presence to demonstrate that they were not alone. ⁱⁱⁱ

Those who traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem brought their first fruits as an offering to the Divine. And I believe they made that trek to find one another's presence and contact as well. In our day, we may find that solace and presence on the computer screen right in front of us but also with those sitting right next to us.

When our centenarian agreed to the blessing through the Internet, I thought it was a miraculous moment that brought together technology and community. It was a beautiful expression of her desire for connection. What I didn't anticipate was my own imperfect humanity at this intersection. Here is where my High Holy Day confession comes in.

The night arrived for the centenary birthday blessing. I had checked in with her that day to make sure that she and her daughter had found the live web stream link on our website.

As Qabbalat Shabbat services began, I felt excited by this pending new experience for the congregation. As I stood up, I could only hope that she was actually at the computer and was blessing ready.

I explained to the congregation that I was about to extend our Temple outreach through technology by blessing a fellow Temple Israel member through the camera and the internet to celebrate her 100th birthday. The audible "ah" that followed confirmed the excitement and energy in the room.

I turned to the camera to offer the blessing and intoned a poem I often use that begins "Birth is a beginning" and I usually jump straight to "and life is a journey" but I went on automatic pilot for that split second and instead said the second line: "Death is a destination." Inside my head at that moment, I froze. I couldn't believe I had just offered a blessing to a 100 year old that invoked a reference to death.

I couldn't retract my error as much as I wanted to so I tried to weave my way toward something positive with the words I offered and we ended with a rousing chorus of *siman tov and mazel tov*.

I felt awful. I had let her down. This woman had been one of the kindest and supportive individuals to me over the years. Would she forgive me? Could I ever forgive myself?

I knew that I needed to call her but I decided to wait until after the weekend because of her party. On Tuesday, I took a deep breath and called her to ask for forgiveness.

She answered the phone. Her hello to me seemed cold. My heart started racing. I wished her a happy birthday and inquired about the party. She told me it was lovely and everything she hoped for. I slowly broached the Friday night Internet debacle by asking if she was able to get on the Temple Israel website and attend services. "Oh yes," she offered. I saw the service, she volunteered. And just as I was about to beg for forgiveness she interrupted me. "Rabbi, my daughter and I sat in front of the computer. We watched the whole thing, but we couldn't figure out how to turn on the sound. We didn't hear any thing.

Sometimes what goes wrong turns out right. Or does it? Was I let off the hook because of her lack of technological acumen? I won't ever forget it, even if I forgive myself for my mistake. That's part of the purpose of these holidays. We have all had these moments. We tell stories that contain our mistakes and how we erred. They help connect us with others and strengthen our relationships.

Technology has brought life saving and life affirming value to our lives. Its impact on scientific, medical, and cultural advances is unlimited. Social media and the internet are useful tools that allow for interaction, and yet, they can never replace the ultimate religious and spiritual significance of human contact and connection. To be able to say, *Mah Lecha*, what happened to you? And to offer blessing in return matters significantly. It is what we do here at Temple Israel. Our health and wellbeing are fostered in a human community with our imperfect selves.

I did end up calling our Temple Israel member to confess. I felt like I had to reveal what happened. She laughed that I thought I had offended her. "O, Rabbi," she said, "You were just speaking the truth. And it is true. She died this year. Her memory is a blessing.

Birth is a beginning and we know all too well that Death is a destination, but what comes between those points on the glorious path of life, how we connect and relate to one another, calm our fears and celebrate our joys offers the greatest blessing at every age, even when the sound doesn't work.

Shanah Tovah!

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https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_pinker_the_secret_to_living_longer_may_be_your_social_life?utm_campaign=social&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_content=talk&utm_term=science

ii This Land of Strangers by Robert Hall,
page 88.

iii Middot 2:2

כָּל הַנִּכְנָסִין לְהַר הַבַּיִת נִכְנָסִין דָּרָךְ יָמִין וּמִקִּיפִין וְיוֹצְאִין דָּרָךְ שְׂמָאל, חוּץ מִמִּי
שְׂאָרְעוּ דָּבָר, שֶׁהוּא מִקִּיף לְשְׂמָאל. מַה לָּךְ מִקִּיף לְשְׂמָאל, שְׂאֲנִי אָבֵל, הַשּׁוֹכֵן בַּבַּיִת
הַזֶּה יִנְחָמְךָ. שְׂאֲנִי מְגֻדָּה, הַשּׁוֹכֵן בַּבַּיִת הַזֶּה יִתֵּן בְּלִבְךָ וּיְקַרְבוּךָ, דְּבָרֵי רַבִּי מֵאִיר.
אָמַר לוֹ רַבִּי יוֹסִי, עֲשִׂיתָן כְּאֵלוּ עֲבָרוּ עָלָיו אֶת הַדִּין. אֵלֶּא, הַשּׁוֹכֵן בַּבַּיִת הַזֶּה יִתֵּן
בְּלִבְךָ וְתִשְׁמַע לְדְבָרֵי חֲבֵרֶיךָ וּיְקַרְבוּךָ:

All who would enter the temple mount entered toward the right, and would encircle it and exit through the left, aside for one to which something [unfavorable] has occurred, that he would encircle it towards the left [even when he entered]. [If he was asked] "Why are you encircling towards the left?" [If he answered] "Because I am a mourner, [they would respond] "He who rests in this house should comfort you". [If he answered] "Because I am excommunicated", [they would respond] "He who dwells in this house should put into their [the judges'] hearts and they will draw you near". These are the words of Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Yosi said to him [Rabbi Meir] "You have made as if they [the judges] have exceeded the law [in their excommunication] against him. Rather [they would say] "He who dwells in this house should put into your heart that you will listen to the words of your colleagues and they will draw you near". MIDDOT 2:2