



The Vanishing Shul

(Rabbi Daniel Green, Rosh Hashana 5778)

Do you Know Who I Am?

Do we live in a healthy society? One barometer is the strength our relationships with those around us. A recent survey studied whether people know the names of their neighbours. What percentage of Americans do you think know the names of the people that live next door?

According to the State Farm Survey - 25%! Three out of every four people living in the United States of America have no idea what their neighbour's name is. A full third have never even had an interaction of any kind with those who live closest to them.

I'm Fine Thank You!

Marc Dunkelman, a Jewish native of Buffalo New York, recently wrote a book titled, "The Vanishing Neighbor". As a member of the Washington establishment, Dunkelman was bothered by the dysfunction of government and our seeming inability to work together anymore. The problem he argues does not start in Washington, it starts with us.

In two areas, society has become connected:

1. We interact more frequently with our family and close friends.
2. We interface more with distant friends and acquaintances through social media.

What are we missing? We've lost touch with the people down the street. The barber around the corner. The owner of the shoe store up the block. We've lost our neighbourhood. We have retreated to islands of isolation – the islands are called our homes and, in the process, our neighbours are vanishing.

The relationships that we're left is the family we're stuck with and the social media connections that we handpick and filter. As a society, we're missing out on variety: diversity of people, diversity of beliefs, diversity of ideas. We're missing out on a freshness of perspective that we can't possibly self-generate. We gravitate towards "affinity groups" that share the same rigid interests and ideas that we do.

We've weaved our own little cocoons, and somewhere down the line convinced ourselves that we really don't want, or need, any more people beyond those that we've

already got. We don't want to be bothered or annoyed by the checkout lady at the grocery store or the teller at the bank. Simply put, we have lost our patience for others.

Yes, we occasionally need to emerge and actually interface with society but our preference is an "in and out" transactional relationship. Time is at a premium. Please don't talk to me! Please don't bother me! Let strangers remain strangers. Just let me get back to my couch and stare at my phone.

It Took a Village

In 1996, First Lady Hillary Clinton, wrote a book called "It Takes a Village." The thesis was that government can't solve all the problems. As a society our strength is our village, our community, the human connections and safety net that we create among ourselves. I found it fascinating that in her recent presidential campaign, exactly 20 years later, Hillary dumped the village. She rarely, if ever, referenced her bestselling book. Why? The village no longer resonates. The village is gone and so is the neighbourhood... and apparently so are our vanishing neighbours.

A recent survey (Amazon Mechanical Turk Marketplace) asked 203 respondents whether they would talk to a stranger in a waiting room. While virtually everyone responded that they would talk to their friend, what percentage of people would initiate a conversation with a stranger? The answer - 7%! 93% percent of seemingly well-adjusted members of our society have absolutely no interest in striking up a conversation with a person they don't know.

Howdy, Stranger!

A fascinating study was published in the Journal of Experimental Psychology. Researchers at the University of Chicago, approached a sample group of commuters and asked them to initiate a conversation with a stranger on the train. They then approached a second sample group and asked them to identify a person on the train and imagine what a conversation with them would be like.

The results? People who actually connected with strangers on the train experienced a much more positive commute than they would have imagined or expected. They actually enjoyed the experience.

In comparison, the second group that sat on the train, identified a stranger, and imagined what a conversation would be like experienced anxiety. The thought of conversing with a stranger was unsettling. There is a disconnect with our disconnect. We have convinced ourselves that people are annoying. We have indoctrinated ourselves that community is not only unnecessary but unpleasant. We think we don't really need to interface. But we do! Man is a social animal. And not only is this natural but, contrary to our warped perceptions, it is actually enjoyable.

People Who Need People

On Rosh Hashana we reflect on Adam during his initial moments in the Garden of Eden. He finds himself in paradise. He is perfect and pristine. Yet... he quickly realizes: "Lo tov heyot haadam levado." It is not good for man to be alone. It's unnatural. Things were bliss in the Garden of Eden – even without an iPhone. Yet, even in the best of settings we need neighbours. It's not good to be alone.

Shabbat or Sunday?

For many years I have the privilege of speaking at the YMCA Peace Medal breakfast together with a Pastor and an Imam. Two years ago, the Pastor turned to me at the breakfast and said: "Daniel we need to go out for a cup of coffee." We met at Second Cup a few days later. The Pastor turned to me and said: "Daniel I have a question... how do you engage the youth of today? How do you excite them about their God?"

I turned to him and said it's interesting that you're asking this because I just had a conversation with two of my teenagers, ages 13 & 14. I asked them what day of the week do you enjoy more Saturday, our Shabbat, or Saturday or Sunday. Just to paint a picture for you, my kids are digital natives and they have their devices, but Saturday is our Shabbat and we power down. No electronics. No cars. No mobility. So here I am asking two teenagers whether they enjoy Shabbat where they're stuck at home, can't go anywhere, have no devices, and no contact with the outside world... or Sundays where they seemingly have everything! They both responded Shabbat. Why? It's the only day of the week that you can count on people being home. You can knock on someone's door and expect it to be opened. It's the only day people actually walk in the streets. Shabbat is the last vestige of a neighbourhood where almost all others are vanishing.

Empty Pews

Judaism is predicated on the concept of a Kehila – a community. Yet, we are witnessing an epidemic in the Jewish world. An epidemic that is attacking the Shul. At the Adas our attendance is still respectable, strong, and growing but that's simply because we have more people. In general, though, Jews are less and less likely to go to Shul. And I'm not talking about millennials or some new emerging demographic. I'm talking about people that actually went to Shul at some point. Yet, now they're plagued by apathy and find themselves disconnected. Why have they lost interest? We are witnessing not only the "vanishing neighbour", but the "vanishing shul"! What is happening?

This is not an isolated symptom. It's not an Adas problem. This is part of a societal phenomenon. According to Dunkelman, our "core social architecture has radically changed" and even the Shul hasn't been spared. Many of us no longer have the patience or desire to be with other people. We're part of the 93% that doesn't like talking to strangers. We don't know our neighbour's names and we're actually happy

about that. It's a small doubt why we're less engaged and not showing up. But ironically as the researchers at the University of Chicago exposed, when we have the patience to try, we actually enjoy.

An Innovative Way to Create Community

A man in Israel, was saying Kaddish for his mother, and made a commitment to never miss a day. One night he was at a wedding and unfortunately forgot. He came home, went to bed, and at about 2:30am – it hit him: He missed Kaddish for his mother. He looked at his watch but refused to give up. He remembered the “*Shtebach*” in Zichron Moshe, a location with minyanim until late a night. It seemed highly unlikely that anyone would be there at 3:00am but at least he had to try.

He got out of bed, got into his car, and drove. The streets were totally deserted. He walked into the little shul and not surprisingly - it was empty. Not a soul was there. He decided to wait. After a few minutes he had an epiphany. He took out his cellphone and called a cab company. “Please send nine taxis to the *Shtebach* in Zichron Moshe?”. - “9 taxis? It’s three o’clock in the morning! Are you crazy? I don’t have nine taxis? I can only send you five.” - “Perfect. Send five!”

He dialed the next number. “Four taxis please to Zichron Moshe...” “Atah meshugah. I only have two! - “Perfect. Send two.”

After a few more calls, a processional of nine taxis began pulling up to the address of the little shul. As they began to line up, the first cab driver got out and said. “Is this a joke? Why do you need so many taxis? There’s nothing going on here!”

- “Just turn on your meter and come inside. I’ll pay whatever the fee is.” “Mah Pitom?” – the cab driver asked. The man responded with one word: “Kaddish.” One by one, the conversation departed itself as nine Israeli cab drivers slowly filled the small Shul. The service began. For some it wasn’t easy. It had been years since they held a siddur but in the end, his mother got her Kaddish.

Aftet ten minutes the finished. The man proceeded outside to settle his bill with a total amount nearing 800 shekel. The man pulled out his wallet and asked the first driver: “How much do I owe you?” - “Adoni, what do you take me for? Do you honestly believe I would take money from you?” He moved down the line to the second driver. Identical reaction. I don’t take money for Kaddish!” And the third, and the fourth... all the way down the line! Not one would take a penny.*

Intuitively we know where we belong and what’s important. Something’s in this world are still priceless.

Judaism celebrates community and our need to interface with others. We created houses of worship but called them Batei Kenesseyet – gathering places. We created an institution called the Minyan to consistently and relentlessly bring us together several times each day. Take a look at the walls around you. Those bricks are the building blocks of community. It is where we belong.

Holy Meatballs

Three weeks ago, I was walking in the Shul kitchen late Friday afternoon. And right there and then I was enveloped by “the aroma.” I knew the scent well. The smell of the iconic Hamilton Kosher meatball. I had grown up with that meatball. An original recipe of Saul Cohen a’h that withstood the test of time. Unbeknownst to me, I was standing at the cusp of a “Meatball Kiddush.”

But why now? Who was this Kiddush host? What was the celebration? A Bar Mitzvah? A wedding? After a few questions I got my answer. The Meatball Kiddush was in honour of couple’s three adult sons. Why? They were all coming home for the weekend. One from Europe, one from New York, and one from Toronto. A celebration of “the boys” coming together.

I was taken aback. I shared my amazement with a longtime congregant. He turned to me and said: “Rabbi, my mother always taught me, when you have a Simcha you celebrate in shul!” When you have a Simcha, you don’t celebrate alone... you celebrate in Shul! You celebrate as a community!

Friendship Day

The Biblical name for Rosh Hashana is actually “Yom Teruah.” While the word Teruah refers to the staccato sound of the shofar blasts the word also has roots in the word Reut – friendship. R. Aharon Carliner points out that Rosh Hashana is the day that we focus on the quality of our friendships.

Two great Chassidic masters were once talking - a father and a grandson. The Tzemach Tzedek with his future heir, the Rebbe Rashab. The Tzemach Tzedek said to his grandson, do you know what is the most important prayer on the night of Rosh Hashana? The one line which must be said with more intent than any other?

His answer: The words “Le’Shana Tova...” What Hashem is looking for as we start our new year is how we greet and connect with our friends. Do we care about each other? Do we connect with each other. Do we reach out or stand by idly as neighbours, our communities, our Shuls, simply vanish.

We have an unbelievable community. I deeply appreciate the people and the friendships that are forged within these great walls. In life there are no strangers... and we certainly can't become one.

In a few short moments we'll have Kiddush. Linger. Don't run away and escape to your island of isolation with your family and closet of friends. Linger. Say, "Shana tova." Strike up a conversation. Learn someone's name. This year... may we all embrace community, may we all embrace each other. Let us stand and linger within these walls and celebrate Jewish life where it belongs – in Shul.

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