

Making Emotional Connections Yom Kippur Day/Sh'mini Atzeret 5780(2019) Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

Grey material omitted in some or all versions of the spoken presentation.

{singing}Smile though your heart is aching
Smile even though it's breaking
When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by
If you smile through your fear and sorrow
Smile and maybe tomorrow
You'll see the sun come shining through for you¹

A smile is a powerful thing. The physical act of smiling – even a conscious, forced smile – triggers the release of dopamine, which increases happiness, and serotonin, which reduces stress.² The improved mood can contribute to such things as lower blood pressure and a stronger immune system.³

In the Talmud, Rabbi Yochanan realized the great potential of smiling. Contrasting the white of milk with the white of a smiling person's teeth, Rabbi Yochanan said:

טוב המלבין שינים לחבירו יותר ממשקהו חלב

One who whitens one's teeth for a friend is better than one who gives [his friend] milk to drink.⁴

I think Rabbi Yochanan says this because a smile is contagious. When we smile, people around us smile. Hence, by smiling, we are triggering a biochemical reaction not only in ourselves but in others. This means the mood of those around us will improve as well. Smiling is also a great conversation starter. We are more likely to interact with each other if we are smiling.⁵

A shared smile is a simple way for us to connect emotionally and making an emotional connection with others has tremendous significance. For instance, tending to the emotions of sick people has a significant impact on their healing. Drs. Stephen Trzeciak and Anthony Mazzarelli of Cooper Hospital recently published a book titled [Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence That Caring Makes a](#)

¹ "Smile." Music by Charlie Chaplin, lyrics by John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons based on lines and themes from Chaplin's movie, "Modern Times." Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smile_\(Charlie_Chaplin_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smile_(Charlie_Chaplin_song)) (accessed 10/6/19).

² See e.g. <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/smiling-can-trick-your-brain-happiness-boost-your-health-ncna822591> and <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/248433.php>.

³ Id.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 111b. Thank you to my teacher Hakham Isaac Sasson for suggesting this text.

⁵ See e.g. <https://www.inc.com/rhett-power/5-ways-to-start-a-conversation-at-a-networking-event.html>. "Research by Claire Conway, PhD, and her colleagues at University of Aberdeen in Scotland has found that we find people who smile and look directly at us more attractive. Conway also reports that people are 86 percent more likely to strike up conversations with strangers in the street if they are smiling."

Difference,⁶ in which they explore the vast array of evidence that physicians are more effective when they express caring for their patients – even for as little as 40 seconds per patient. When physicians take the time to express compassion for their patients, it reduces pain, improves healing, lowers blood pressure, helps alleviate depression and anxiety, and reduces medical costs.⁷

One need look no further than the first example of a sick person in the Bible to see how important an impact emotions can have on how a sick person feels.

... וַיֹּאמֶר לְיוֹסֵף הִנֵּה אָבִיךָ חָלָה וַיִּקְרָח אֶת־שְׁנֵי בָנָיו עִמּוֹ אֶת־מְנַשֶּׁה וְאֶת־אֶפְרַיִם:
... Joseph was told, “your father is sick,” and he took his two sons with him, Menasheh and Ephraim.
וַיִּגְדַּל לְיַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בְנִי יוֹסֵף בָּא אֵלַיךְ וַיִּתְחַזֵּק יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיָּשָׁב עַל־הַמֶּטֶה:
When Jacob was told “Your son Joseph has come to you” Israel (=Jacob) gained strength and sat upon his bed.⁸

Emotional support is important even when our needs are physical. Rabbi Yitzchak teaches in the Talmud that while one who gives a coin to a poor person receives six blessings, one who speaks comfortingly to a poor person receives eleven blessings.⁹ Rabbi Yitzchak learns the importance of providing emotional support from the words of the Yom Kippur Haftarah:

וַתִּפֹּק לְרַעֲב נַפְשֶׁךָ וַנִּפְּטַשׁ נַעֲמָה תִשְׁבִּיעַ וְזָרַח בְּחֹשֶׁךְ אוֹרְךָ וְאֶפְלַתְךָ כְּצַהֲרַיִם:
When you pour out your soul to the hungry and satisfy the soul of the afflicted, your light will shine through the darkness and your gloom will be like noontime.¹⁰

Emotional connections also help the caregiver. Drs. Trzeciak and Mazzealli note that people who invest time in other people are actually less stressed for time.¹¹ Perhaps this is an aspect to Ben Azai's wisdom in Pirkei Avot that “שכר מצוה מצוה” the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah,¹² doing good deeds helps us put things into perspective and therefore find the time to be even more helpful.

Providing emotional support to others also provides ourselves with emotional support. In the Torah portion we read on Rosh Hashanah, Hagar is hopelessly wandering

⁶ Please note that the link to this book uses UTJ's Amazon Affiliate code. UTJ is a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for us to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites.

⁷ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/04/26/717272708/does-taking-time-for-compassion-make-doctors-better-at-their-jobs>.

⁸ Genesis 48:1-2. The fact that this is the first sickness mentioned in the Bible is noted by Professor Nahum Sarna in the [JPS Torah Commentary on Genesis](#). Please see footnote 6 regarding this Amazon link.

⁹ Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 9b, “אמר רבי יצחק: כל הנותן פרוטה לעני מתברך בשש ברכות, והמפייסו בדברים, מתברך בי"א ברכות. - Rabbi Yitzchak said: Anyone who gives a coin to a pauper is blessed with six blessings, while one who speaks comfortingly toward him is blessed with eleven blessings.”

¹⁰ Isaiah 58:10.

¹¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/04/26/717272708/does-taking-time-for-compassion-make-doctors-better-at-their-jobs>

¹² Mishnah Avot 4:2.

in the desert with her son Yishmael as their water runs out.¹³ An angel calls out to Hagar and says:

קוּמִי שְׂאִי אֶת-הַנֶּעֱר וְהַחֲזִיקִי אֶת-יָדָךְ בִּי כִּי-לִגְוִי גְדוֹל אֲשִׁימֶנּוּ
Get up and pick up the child, and strengthen your hand *through him*, for I will make him into a great nation.¹⁴

In the [Etz Chaim Humash](#),¹⁵ Rabbi Harold Kushner explains, “Often, when we are fearful or depressed, we gain strength and courage by taking someone else by the hand and helping that person.” This may again reflect Ben Azai’s wisdom - by supporting others, we gain confidence in ourselves, which can enable us to do even more good in the future. Similarly, Drs. Trzeciak and Mazzarelli found that despite medical students often being taught to not become attached to their patients, doctors who connect emotionally to their patients are less likely to burn out. Doctor Trzeciak notes that:

We've always heard that burnout crushes compassion. It's probably more likely ... that human connection — and specifically a compassionate connection — can actually build resilience and resistance to burnout. ... The recommended prescription is what I call “escapism” — get away, detach, pull back ... I connected more, not less; cared more, not less; leaned in rather than pulled back. And that was when the fog of burnout began to lift.¹⁶

What a great prescription for everything that ails us today. Many of us are sick of the news and politics, dejected by the constant stream of vapid reports from our friends on social media. The solution isn’t to escape from it all, but rather to dive into deep, meaningful relationships, to do important and impactful things. Of course, our synagogue provides many opportunities to do just that, to delve into a community and create strong and important connections.

There is also a lot of evidence that strong relationships support our mental and physical wellbeing. Joshua ben Perahia teaches of the importance of having positive relationships when he says in Pirkei Avot “עַשֵׂה לָךְ רֵב וְקַנָּה לָךְ חֵבֵר” make for yourself a teacher, and acquire a friend.¹⁷ The Harvard Study of Adult Development followed 700 men since they were teenagers in 1938. Its current Director, Dr. Robert Waldinger, notes that they have learned that “[p]eople who are more socially connected to family, friends, and community are happier, healthier, and live longer than people who are less well connected,” while “[p]eople who are more isolated than they want to be are less happy, their health declines earlier in midlife, their brain function declines sooner, and they live shorter lives than people who are not lonely.”¹⁸ One metastudy that included 309,000

¹³ Genesis 21:14-15.

¹⁴ Genesis 21:18.

¹⁵ Please see footnote 6 regarding this Amazon link.

¹⁶ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/04/26/717272708/does-taking-time-for-compassion-make-doctors-better-at-their-jobs>

¹⁷ Mishnah Avot 1:6.

¹⁸ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mental-health/can-relationships-boost-longevity-and-well-being>). For additional articles on this study, see <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/strengthen-relationships->

people found that lack of strong relationships increased the risk of premature death by 50%, the rough equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day and a higher percentage than obesity and being physically inactive.¹⁹ Several studies have shown that people's satisfaction with their relationships at age 50 was a better predictor of their health at age 80 than their cholesterol level.²⁰

There are so many reasons to nurture strong relationships with deep, supportive, emotional connections. They keep us active and vibrant. They allow us to have our most powerful and positive influence on the world. Those strong relationships that we nurture throughout life are there for us in our times of need.

Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), which we read on Sukkot, reflects many of these important aspects of strong, caring relationships. It says that a person who is alone “גַּם-עֵינָיו עֵינּוֹ לֹא-” תִּשְׂבַּע עֹשֶׁר is never sated from riches,” and thinks “וְלִמְיוֹ אֲנִי עֹמֵל וּמְחַסֵּר אֶת-נַפְשִׁי מִטוֹבָה” for whom do I work and deny myself enjoyment,²¹ while “טוֹבִים הַשְּׂנִיִּים מִן-הָאֶחָד אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלָהֶם” two are better than one, for they have benefit from their toil,²² meaning that even our greatest triumphs are hollow if we can't share the benefit of those triumphs with others. On the other hand, Kohelet tells us that our failures and disappointments are only true tragedies when we lack the caring support of others, “כִּי אִם-יִפְּלוּ הָאֶחָד יִקָּיֵם אֹתוֹ-” if they fall, one will uplift the other, whereas if an individual falls he lacks a second to pick him up.²³

With this in mind, as we turn to remembering our dearly departed through the Yizkor service, we can now have a deeper appreciation for all that they did for us. They taught us how to live and how to love.

The beautiful song with which I opened gives some wonderful advice. Smile. Smiling is a doorway to warm feelings and gateway to warm relationships. The song does get one thing wrong, though, by rejecting the use of tears. Tears are OK (for Shemini Atzeretz sermon: though maybe not on Yom Tov). They are the price we pay for the wonderful relationships we had in the past. But I like what the song says next, “you'll find that life is still worthwhile, If you just smile.” As long as we have people to smile with, people with whom to share our joy and pain, then life is worthwhile. So, too, keeping the memory of our loved ones alive is worthwhile because the beautiful memories we have with them can still make us smile and because they are the models for the relationships

[for-longer-healthier-life](https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/social-relationships-and-longevity) and <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/>.

¹⁹ See https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/social-relationships-and-longevity and https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/social-relationships-and-longevity. The original study is Holt-Lunstad J, et al. "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review," PLoS Medicine (July 2010): Vol. 7, No. 7, electronic publication.

²⁰ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/>.

²¹ Ecclesiastes 4:8. Translation based on JPS.

²² Ecclesiastes 4:9.

²³ Ecclesiastes 4:10.

we continue to sustain and the new relationships that are on the horizon. So, taking a little bit of license with they lyrics, I'll close with words from the song.

{Singing}Light up your face with gladness
Don't hide every trace of sadness
Although a tear may be ever so near
That's the time you must keep on trying
Smile, ~~what's the use of~~ even when you're crying
You'll find that life is still worthwhile
If you just smile²⁴

CONCLUDING PRAYER PRIOR TO FINAL SHOFAR BLAST (REFERENCING THEMES FROM ALL HIGH HOLIDAY SERMONS AS WELL AS MY INTRODUCTION TO NEILAH)

As we hear the final sound of the shofar, may it stir in our hearts a longing to live up to our full potential, helping us become the kindest and most caring people we can be. As we have afflicted our souls today, may our souls long to care for those who are in greater need than we are. As we ask, one final time, for God to grant us success in the coming year, let us resolve once more to seek that success in ways that are honest and forthright and to use our successes for the betterment of the lives of all those who are around us. As we proceed to our meals, let us proceed to a year in which we feed our most noble of desires and thereby invigorate our hunger for further good works. As we leave the synagogue today, may our pride and conviction as people of the Jewish faith bring a rightful smile to our face, and may that smile help establish an everlasting connection to our God, to our past generations, and to all who dwell on earth.

²⁴ "Smile," above footnote 1. Yellow highlights indicate additions to the lyrics and strikethroughs indication omissions.