

Shanah tovah. May we all be blessed with a healthy and happy New Year. As I mentioned yesterday, each of my High Holiday sermons this year will address a different source of spiritual power. Yesterday, I spoke about the power of laughter. Today, the topic is the power of connection.

We start today's message with the story of a lonely woman walking on the shore. She caught sight of a lamp in the sand. When she picked up the lamp, Aladdin popped out of it and granted her fourteen wishes.

The woman thinks and says, "I'm lonely, single, and I desperately want to get married. So I'm going to make all my wishes about the man of my dreams."

She says, "O Aladdin, I want a man who will have eyes only for me, a man who will be looking at me and thinking about me even when he's talking to others, a man who will always wake up, eat, and sleep at my side.

I want a life partner who will hold me when he wakes up every day, a man who will never leave me, even when he goes to the bathroom, one who will always travel with me, one who cares for me and admires me, one who tells his friends how great I am, one who will panic if he doesn't know where I am, a man who will be devastated if I'm injured and who will take me everywhere he goes."

Aladdin says, "Are you sure that these are your wishes." The woman said, "O Aladdin, I am sure." Aladdin said, "Are you absolutely sure that you want a man who will have with you the kind of relationship you have described?" She said, "Yes, I am sure. That is exactly the kind of relationship I want with a man." So Aladdin clapped his hands and poof he turned her into an iPhone.

The woman in the joke craves connection, something that we all need. It just so happens that Rosh Hashanah is all about the power of connection. Over the course of a year, our spiritual connections become frayed, and this is the time

when we replace the wires so to speak and reconnect with all that is truly valuable.

The first connection that Rosh Hashanah encourages is our connection with friends. The Hebrew word for friend, חבר, literally means “someone with whom you connect.” The problem is that life as we live it has a way of fraying our connection even with people we consider true friends.

Our lives in the early twenty-first century are soaked with a sweet irony. The irony is that, in one sense, we are more connected to each other than ever. We can email or text anyone and have come to expect an answer within hours if not minutes or even seconds.

With Skype and FaceTime and other platforms, we can see each other even though we may be separated by thousands of miles and a dozen or more time zones. On Facebook and Twitter, we can make our opinions and observations known to any number of followers at the speed of light.

In the other, non-digital sense, we are also more disconnected from everyone than ever before. The handwritten letter will soon be a museum oddity. You’ll find that handwritten letter in the same wing as the typewriter, the Atari 2600 of blessed memory, and the blue-ink ditto machine from my elementary school days.

Even simple eye contact is becoming difficult. I’ve noticed that young people and some not so young people are having trouble locking in on another person’s eyes for more than a second. Looking into another person’s eyes is part of the human experience. Many animals take eye contact as a threat, but for us, it is a basic act of kindness and connection.

Friendships are like living things in that they need to be fed. Digital communication in all its forms is wonderful and very useful, but a friendship that

survives on data alone is like a person who survives on popcorn and candy. Sure, the friendship will survive, but it will not thrive, it will not deepen or grow.

In order for a friendship to thrive, it must be fed a regular diet of real, physical, face-to-face contact. Even the most casual kiss-the-air casual hug has more spiritual power than a video chat or an email. Only through physical contact can we really tell how our friends are doing. Being in someone's presence face-to-face allows us to use our senses to get a true sense of the relationship, a real grasp of the connection we have.

Digital communication is not only thing that can threaten our connections with real friends. Relationships frayed and weakened long before the first byte was sent into cyberspace. Simply put, the connection we have with another person is damaged whenever we allow something else to supersede it.

The Torah portion for this day tells the story of Abraham who receives the commandment from God to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. As you read the verses, you can feel the connection between Abraham and Isaac starting to fray.

He had plenty to say to his schlemiel of a nephew, the greedy shepherd Lot. He became an impassioned orator in defense of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But for his own son, his connection slips to nearly zero as he is about to sacrifice him. Abraham speaks to his son in short, clipped statements, never exceeding six lonely Hebrew words.

In truth, Abraham and Isaac's connection was probably already in lousy shape before that fateful day. Relationships rarely snap all at once. They usually fall apart after a long period of neglect or abuse. That is why the so-called conversation we read between Abraham and Isaac in today's Torah reading is the only conversation they ever have.

Why was Abraham's connection with Isaac so bad? I think it's because he allowed something else to override the connection with his son. That something else was his love of God.

Just as some people today allow their cell phones to override their connection with their loved ones, Abraham let his love of God swallow everything else in his life that mattered.

One point of the story is that a Jew is not supposed to do that. Our connections to real people are vital. Nothing, no matter how important, should ever cause us to disconnect from our friends and loved ones.

What have you allowed to override your connections with friends? Is it work? Is it fear? Is it an addiction? Is it depression? Whatever the cause, now is your chance to declare that you will fix the connection problem.

When these disconnections occur, they must be repaired. You know how antsy you get when the internet goes down and you're wondering, is it my computer or is it Comcast?

You should get that anxious about fixing your spiritual connectivity because it's more important than your WiFi signal. And that is why we're here today in part – to repair those connections, or at least get inspired to fix them ourselves.

And just in case you're skeptical, consider the words of Bronnie Ware. Bronnie Ware is a former nurse in a palliative care unit, or hospice. She worked around deathbeds for many years, and she became aware of the most common regrets that people have as they leave this world.

On her list of the five most common deathbed regrets, she lists failing to keep in touch with friends as number four. I love my iPhone, but I guarantee you that not

one of those people who stood in line for days to get the new iPhone 6 will say on his deathbed, “I wish I had lined up even sooner for that phone.”

The things we spend the most time on are often the least important. The things we spend the least time on are often the most crucial. The maintenance and repair of personal connections falls into that second category.

So that’s the first kind of connection that Rosh Hashanah helps us to repair, the personal connections we have with friends. The next kind of connection that is relevant today is our connection with society.

Our connection with society is not one that we need to think about very often. The link we have with society at large is like breathing or digestion, something that generally happens in the background without conscious thought.

Lately, however, our connection with society has become a hot topic because too many people are losing that connection with human civilization. I speak of the young, radical Muslims who are losing their link with Western democratic values and getting sucked into terrorist movements like ISIS and al-Qaeda.

It used to be that older terrorists would handpick and groom new terrorists with a face-to-face, hands-on approach in certain radical mosques. That limited the number of people who would ever be attracted to a life of cruelty.

Now, however, the new Islamic terrorists nominate themselves. They are people who feel lost and disconnected from society for whatever reason. Then they find people who supposedly care about them on the internet, people who encourage them to charge a trip to Turkey on Mom’s credit card. From there, they disappear into the morality-free zone of Iraq and Syria.

According to columnist Jonah Goldberg writing in National Review, we cannot discount the role that simple loneliness plays in radicalization. The kids who are getting radicalized don't have girlfriends.

Virtually any girlfriend would stop this nonsense and say, "No, you're not flying to Syria to learn how to make bombs!" These sick, terrorist tadpoles learn on the internet that if they fly off to the Middle East, they'll have all the girlfriends they want, girlfriends whom they can buy, rape, and torture.

This is why Goldberg calls ISIS, "The Foreign Legion for Losers." He explains that the people who join these movements are losers, drifters who have lost their connection with Western civilization. A real man does not have to enslave women in order to connect with them.

Unable to make it in a society that does not give them the right to bully others, they go where such behavior is not only tolerated but rewarded. In doing so, they leave human society. They have all renounced their human citizenship.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that in addition to being proud Jews, we are also connected to human society as a whole. This day is known as Yom Harat Olam, the day the world was born. This is a day not only to take joy in being a Jew, but to take joy in being human. And if you're not Jewish, you too can rejoice with us, because it's your world that we are celebrating.

The Torah portion we read tells us how Abraham was about to slaughter his son when an angel came out and said, "Abraham, Abraham - don't you touch that boy!" At that moment, Abraham came to his senses and connected with humanity by turning away from barbarism.

The last kind of connection that Rosh Hashanah asks us to repair is our connection with Jewish tradition. This is the easiest connection to damage, especially living in a non-Jewish environment.

Every time we taste a forbidden food, every time we gossip against another person, every time we allow a Shabbat to float by unnoticed, our connection with Jewish tradition frays a little more. Jews who neglect their connection with Jewish tradition weaken their connection with God. Tradition is the language we use to engage with the Holy One.

Therefore, our tradition demands our respect. If we are not able or willing to observe Jewish law as we ought to, we still must make an honest attempt to protect our connection with tradition. We must not just throw up our hands and say, “I give up.”

The act of trying to do something is under appreciated in our society. Americans are all about winning, and don't get me wrong, winning is good and sometimes mandatory. Having said that, I want you to know that trying and failing is a thousand times better than not trying at all, because failure is the best fertilizer for success.

You are not a hypocrite if you observe some Jewish traditions but not others. All the time I hear people say things like, “I don't think I should wear tefillin because I don't keep kosher,” or “I don't go to services because I don't observe Shabbat.”

That's like saying, “I don't think I should wear pants because I don't play poker.” One has nothing to do with the other. Do what you can do, try what you can try. Every attempt strengthens your connection whether you succeed or not.

How is Rosh Hashanah going to help you reconnect to your tradition? Well, the good news is that you're here and that's a great start. There's even more good news. When you listen to the shofar with full intention, your connection heals on the spot. The frayed spiritual wires reconnect and the current goes live, as if you replaced a dead, corroded battery with a fresh one.

Now what if you were either not here or not listening to the Shofar with full intention? Don't worry, because that was only the warm up. The real shofar blasts are during the Musaf service that is coming up. If you've never stayed for Musaf, I encourage you to give it a try. I find it the most meaningful and beautiful part of the service, the real meat and potatoes of Rosh Hashanah.

And what about the rest of the year? It is my hope that Rosh Hashanah, with its majestic stories of the Binding of Isaac and Hannah's prayer will remind you of a precious Jewish connection to tradition. The connection I'm talking about is one that you have almost surely not opened in a long time.

That connection is the Tanakh. I know, I know, what's the Tanakh? The Tanakh is the Bible, the Jewish Bible to be specific. The Tanakh is what non-Jews typically call the Old Testament, but no Jew should ever call it that. It is either the Tanakh or the Bible.

Tanakh is an acronym for the Jewish Bible's three components: The T stands for Torah, the first five books of Moses that we read from the scroll. The N stands for Nevi'im, the books of prophecy, such as Isaiah. The K stands for Ketuvim, the writings such as Psalms and Proverbs. Together they make the Tanakh, our Bible.

Before I make my pitch about why you should connect with the Bible and read it cover to cover, allow me to tell you about a certain hospital in Jerusalem. In the

Giv'at Shaul neighborhood, on Hamelammed Street, you'll find the K'far Sha'ul Mental Health Center.

The place is a psychiatric hospital for sick minds. But whereas the typical mental hospital specializes in major depression, schizophrenia, and personality disorders, at Giv'at Sha'ul they focus on a disease known as Jerusalem Syndrome.

Jerusalem Syndrome is a kind of global delusion. People who suffer from it believe themselves to be characters from the Bible. If you go to Robert Wood Johnson or St. Peters and claim to be King David, the doctors will be talking about you for months. If you make the same claim at K'far Sha'ul, the doctors say, "Hey guys, we got a another King David. That makes five this week!"

People who have Jerusalem Syndrome are too connected with the Bible. They are so connected with it that they lose touch with reality and believe that they literally belong in its pages.

Most American Jews, in contrast, have the opposite of Jerusalem Syndrome. We tend to be disconnected from the Bible, we think that its pages have nothing to do with our lives. This opinion may not be a mental illness, but it most certainly is a delusion. The Bible is relevant to your life as a Jew whether you know it or not.

Why do most American Jews look askance at the Bible? I imagine it's because in our culture, the only people who say "Read your Bible" are fundamentalist preachers, mainly in the South and Midwest. That's a typical highway billboard sign where I'm from. Read Your Bible. In fact, they're called Bible Thumpers!

Be that as it may, the Bible is our book, and it should be be a daily source of spiritual connection for all of us. It was one of the great Jewish gifts to the world.

The Bible remains relevant even thousands of years later because it shows us reflections of our own human frailties. Who among us has not known the rage of King Saul, the mourning of Jeremiah, the joy of King David?

Alas, most of us simply do not know our basic Bible well enough. In my experience, Christians know our own book way better than we do, and it shouldn't be that way.

I challenge all of you to read a chapter a day starting with the book of Joshua. That should take you about 1 to 5 minutes a day, depending on the length of the chapter. In just under two years, you will read the rest of our national saga. Or you could binge read it at a rate of three chapters a day and be done in six months.

We should be the masters of our own Bible. Basic biblical literacy is a mitzvah, a commandment. All Jews should know what happened at the Valley of Achor. All Jews should know who the Witch at Endor was. All Jews should know what Amos was protesting and what Jeremiah was mourning. All Jews should know the pain and sorrow expressed in the Psalms, at least in English.

The goal is not to win a Bible trivia contest. Knowing your Bible is not a trivial matter. The goal is to know and be connected to the most popular and important book in the world bar none the book that continues to generate ideas and thought today.

I hope that I have shown you a part of Rosh Hashanah that you have never seen before. The purpose of Rosh Hashanah is connection, connection with friends, with society, and with our tradition. May it be God's will that we repair our tattered connections, and may we do so with the blessings of health, goodness, and prosperity.