

GOOD HABITS FOR A MORE CONNECTED COMMUNITY

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One of the most famous and frequently quoted lines of the Torah is **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** We generally cite this principle on its own, as a stand-alone concept. But if we look in the Torah, it’s actually not an independent idea; it comes at the end of a much larger passage about human interaction.

The passage in Kedoshim (Leviticus 19) begins: “You shall not commit injustice in judgment ... You shall judge your neighbor with righteousness. You shall not gossip. You shall not stand idly by ... You shall not have hate in your heart. You shall confront your neighbor ... You shall not take revenge... You shall not bear a grudge ...” And finally, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In laying out these guidelines, the Torah recognizes our human tendencies. It recognizes that conflict among neighbors is inevitable, that we’re inclined to differ, to judge, to grow angry, and even — when pushed to our limits — to be hateful. But the Torah here is seeking to create a process, a progression by which we can move from those natural human tendencies toward love — or, if not love, then appreciation and understanding.

Looking at the context for this tenet to “love your neighbor as yourself,” one guideline stands out. At the root of the progression is the instruction **“You shall confront your neighbor.”** **Among the warnings against hate and vengeance, we are commanded to engage with the other. Even if we disagree, we can never disconnect.**

In many ways — perhaps surprising considering the growing divisiveness we’ve been grappling with for some time — Covid has given us new opportunities to connect and engage.

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Over these last months, while we haven’t been able to be together in the same place — sit side-by-side, let alone share a hug — we’ve found time to Zoom with friends we don’t speak with often, and check in with elderly family members, friends, or neighbors. We’ve held virtual family reunions and tuned into interesting online opportunities taking place all over the world. One of the great ironies of Covid has been that while we’re more physically isolated than ever, in many ways, for those fortunate to have access to technology, geographic barriers have been diminished.

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UJA's pre-Shabbat programs have been one platform that allowed us to connect from a distance. We brought together teachers and community members from across all denominations to learn together, often featuring Jewish leaders that some may otherwise never have had the opportunity to hear. These sessions have been a shining light for so many in our community, a moment of peace and inspiration amid the chaos and uncertainty that has interrupted our lives.

“So how do we make sure the meaningful changes we’re experiencing now will last? When we return to normal, God willing, how do we sustain all the beautiful connections that our community has been forging during this time?”

At a virtual program UJA held in April, Tal Ben-Shahar, the renowned professor of happiness and positive psychology, reminded us that **in the aftermath of 9/11 in New York, there was an enormous wave of kindness.**

In all the unease, people reached out to others and asked about one another. The city known for its gruffness and bustling was infused with a shared sense of purpose and community. But it lasted all of six months, and then we went back to our old ways.

So how do we make sure the meaningful changes we’re experiencing now will last? When we return to normal, God willing, how do we sustain all the beautiful connections that our community has been forging during this time? Tal says that the answer lies in establishing regular rituals, which is the key to creating lasting habits.

We need to establish practices that allow these behaviors of outreach and connecting to become a steady part of our communal calendars and routines. A return to normal social interaction cannot and should not replace the new and improved ways of communication and connection we’ve established — online and off.

Especially in divisive times, as the Torah reminds us, we need to work harder to “love your neighbor.” My hope is that we’ve formed good habits these last six months. And that newly appreciated sense of mutual responsibility will help us sustain an even more vibrant, diverse, and strong Jewish community long after this crisis is over.

