

Gravity and Togetherness
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A traditional Rabbi dies and goes to heaven. As he's approaching the gates, he hears a band of singing and dancing angels approach, and begins to get excited. The lead angel approaches the Rabbi and asks if he would mind stepping aside for a moment. Shocked, the Rabbi does so. The angels march out of the gates and encircle a man who has also approached the gates. The man is an Israeli Egged bus driver. The joyous parade of angels carry the bus driver in ahead of the Rabbi. When the parade is gone, an angel returns to the Rabbi and says, "You can come in now." The angel begins to lead the Rabbi inside alone. The Rabbi, somewhat confused, says, "I'm not one to make waves or anything, but I need to know something. I think I've been a good Rabbi. I've worked hard all my life. Why is it that the Egged bus driver gets led in by a band of angels ahead of me?" The angel says, "Well, frankly, Rabbi, whenever you preached, people slept. But whenever he drove, people prayed."¹

Whether you've been praying this evening or sleeping, we can recognize that humor is one of the many things that can bring us together. Feeling connected, being part of a group or community can help alleviate suffering and solitude, it can forge stronger relationships, and it can lead to a more meaningful life. As Jews, we place a premium on being part of a community. We laugh together, mourn together, celebrate lifecycles, and pray as part of synagogue. All of our important rites, rituals, and celebrations are observed as a group. A minyan, a group of ten Jewish adults over the age of 13, comprise the barest minimum needed to recite the Kaddish out loud and enables us to have a Torah service. Often I point out to my conversion candidates that we don't encourage people to go off into the wilderness as a hermit in search of solitude. Rather we are taught to purposely seek out others as the sage Hillel says in Pirkei Avot, "*Al Tifros min ha-tzibor*", i.e. "don't separate yourself from community." Our tradition has always recognized prayer and the affirmation of our values and God are strongest within a community.

There is much wisdom to this. Togetherness and connection are as essential to our human lives as they are to our universe. Sadly, we are painfully aware of disconnection, alienation, and the terrible feeling of solitude. Even though we live in a time where we can know exactly what our friends are eating or doing at any moment, even though we can get texts, emails, and see postings at every hour of the day or night, we can feel alone. It is ironic during a time of skype and instant messaging, that we can feel isolated. Many of us struggle with depression, anxiety,

and overabundance of stress. Paradoxically, we are over connected technologically while at the same time detached from relationships that really count.

It is in the darkness of solitude, we can mistakenly think that the world is full of anguish and sorrow. One only has to listen to the nightly news to hear of violence, abuse, and danger. The killings and war around our world are relentless with no end in sight. We know that thousands, if not millions, suffer from hunger and disease. There is so much pain, so much suffering to our world. My theology professor, Dr. Rachel Adler at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, devoted an entire course to pain and suffering this past spring. Surprisingly, despite the class being called, "Pain and Suffering," I didn't find her class painful at all. I actually enjoyed it. I found it challenging in different ways though than she intended.

Dr Adler asserted that "To be human is to live in the anticipation of pain and suffering. Our lives are brief, our end is unpredictable, and all that we love, we will ultimately lose." She devoted our class sessions to Jewish texts talking about the presence or absence of God and the ways humans express their grief. The thing that was striking to me was the focus on a person's loss from a psychological, sociological, and theological perspective. I felt as though something significant was missing in this approach because it started and ended with the individual. Yes, Dr. Adler is right, we all experience death. We will all lose people we love, we will wrestle with illness, disappointment, and our own mortality. Ecclesiastes taught "la kol zman v'et l'cho chefetz tachat hashamyim, "A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven." *Et laledet v'et lamut*, a time for being born and a time for dying, *et livchot v'et l'schok*, a time for weeping and a time for laughing." It is indisputable that in the face of grief we must take whatever time it is to mourn. There are no short cuts when it comes to grief. We all face it in different ways. Some of us need weeks, others months, and some of us need years.

But there comes a time when we must ask: How does one walk out of the shadow of death? How does one pick him/herself back up after serious loss? For my professor, it is a belief in a personal intervening God that inexplicably gives us a painful life. I don't find that consoling or helpful. I haven't for years believed in a God that punishes me or anyone for mistakes. God doesn't give anyone cancer to teach them a lesson. I also don't believe that God rewards us, not in a tangible way at least. For me, what helps people get through tough times is knowing that they are not alone. And God can be a significant part of that. God can help inspire people to reach out to one another, be kind, and care for other human beings. Suffering alone can quickly become unbearable. There are forces that can bring us together, make pain tolerable but even more so, can help lead lives worthy of life.

Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement, taught that God is the power that makes for salvation. He writes: “to believe in God means to take for granted that it is man’s destiny to rise about the brute and to eliminate all forms of violence and exploitation from human society. In brief, God is the power in the cosmos that gives human life the direction that enables the human being to reflect the image of God.”² God, for Kaplan, represents the highest of human ideals of goodness and justice. When we live our lives striving for the highest of ideals, our lives will have meaning. God, for Kaplan, is not about an individual but about the way we relate to one another and the world around us. God is the force that brings us together for the greater good, can inspire us to help alleviate violence and suffering, and build stronger connections with one another. Kaplan’s teachings can motivate us to reach out to strangers, go out of our way for the sake of others, and act as instruments of God.

Dr. Adler felt that Kaplan’s views were skewed optimistically on humanity. And I agree. But Kaplan is right but also my dear professor was right. If we look at the world, and focus solely on violence, death, and loss, this is what we will find. On the other hand, if we focus on love, friendship, caring, and work towards fostering these things, then we will see them in abundance.

During one session that was especially pessimistic, I challenged the class and my professor to see the human condition in a more favorable light. Our lives are not just about feeling forlorn. I told the students to take a look around them when they are at the grocery store, park, or taking a walk. “If you look”, I said, “despite there being terrible reports of child abuse, you will notice that almost all the parents around us are very loving to their children.” Really have you noticed the smiles that parents give their children? It’s not just parents, I have seen people stop what they are doing to help a stranger or just small act of kindness at the store where a person will let you go ahead if you are only purchasing a few things.

How about you? Have you noticed a kindness from a stranger, friend, or family member? If we are willing to look for the good, it’s amazing how much we find. And we all know how good it feels to reach out and assist another person. When we know we have acted morally, we feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We are connected with another human being. For Kaplan, acting justly and doing good connects us with the world around us. God is the force that makes for salvation and this happens through the way we relate to others around us.

People reaching out to strangers, supporting friends, and loving family is not only significant for us as human beings but belies a deeper truth of the existence of our universe. There is a natural force or power that never ceases to amaze me. It is gravity. Isaac Newton, in the 17th century, discovered it while watching an apple hit the ground. He pondered why it didn’t move sideways or upwards. He recognized that the earth draws towards its center.³

Even today in the 21st century, we marvel that we can place one foot after the other and not float up to the sky. Gravity not only keeps us grounded but it's critical to the existence of our solar system, galaxy, and universe. On the one hand, we have forces pushing galaxies further and further apart into the widening scope of our universe and yet we have another force bringing planets, stars, solar systems together. Isn't amazing to ponder that our earth is one astronomical unit or 92,955,807 miles from the sun⁴ and yet it doesn't just float away. Our planet would drift to the outer reaches of our solar system if it weren't for the gravitational force of the sun. It is our sun that keeps our planets in orbit and it is gravity that keeps the moon revolving around our planet. And if it weren't for the gravitational force of what we think to be a black hole in the middle of our galaxy, our solar system would careen off into the darkness of space. Even as matter drifts further into the uncharted space of the universe, gravity brings mass together. This force that keeps planets and solar systems together is the same force that enables life to take place on earth.

While I marvel at the laws of gravity, I find that when we gravitate together as a people, great things can happen. Human beings are social creatures. We find solace and comfort in the company of others. We are not meant to live as solitary individuals but rather in groups. When hard times come, the worse thing is facing such challenges alone. When we isolate ourselves from others, it's as though the planet of our life has lost its orbit and we are set adrift.

Judaism has its own gravity. It is through the mitzvot, the commandments, that we are grounded. Let's look at the morning prayer that says: "*Elu devarim shein lahem shior*," "These are the things that are limitless of which a person enjoys the fruit of this world, while the principal remains in the world to come." Some mitzvahs listed are *kibod av v'em*, honoring one's father and mother, engaging in deeds of compassion, *hanasaat orchim*, dealing graciously with guests, *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick, providing for the wedding couple, accompanying the dead for burial, and making peace among people.

How many of you have visited someone who was sick? You can just see their face light up. Even though we can't cure their illness, we have just lifted their spirit. How about inviting someone you don't know well to your home for a meal? It is hamish, warm, and has the potential to forge new friendships. How about attending a funeral and shiva minyan? These can be hard and sad but the mourners are comforted by our presence. And of course celebrating with bride and groom and any other simcha is always a joy. Being there for others, being there for family, and acting as part of a community can help us lead meaningful lives.

There is pain and suffering in our world. There are times when we have to experience sadness. We can weather such times if we are willingly to see the good in our lives and in others. In good and bad times, God can be a source of strength, hope, and in Kaplan's theology

can inspire us to make a difference in the world around us. By giving back, getting connected, the blessings of our lives increase and we have the support to deal with the tough times as well.

May we be able to use this High Holy Day period as an opportunity to gravitate towards one another. To get to know who is sitting next to us. To look for ways to forge greater connections with our neighbors, coworkers, and members of our community. May we be able to volunteer, join, and get involved in order to deepen relationships with people and with God. Even though I'm not driving a bus, I hope that our time here is a time of prayer, reflection, and can inspire us to forge stronger connections with those around us. May there be goodness, sweetness, and meaning for each of you these Yamim Noraim, Days of Awe.

Notes:

1 <http://www.jokes4us.com/religiousjokes/judaismjokes.html>

2 Judaism without Supernaturalism by Mordecai Kaplan Pg. 112

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Newton

Newton himself often told the story that he was inspired to formulate his theory of gravitation by watching the fall of an apple from a tree.^[139] Although it has been said that the apple story is a myth and that he did not arrive at his theory of gravity in any single moment,^[140] acquaintances of Newton (such as [William Stukeley](#), whose manuscript account of 1752 has been made available by the Royal Society) do in fact confirm the incident, though not the cartoon version that the apple actually hit Newton's head. Stukeley recorded in his *Memoirs of Sir Isaac Newton's Life* a conversation with Newton in Kensington on 15 April 1726:^{[141][142]}

we went into the garden, & drank thea under the shade of some appletrees; only he, & my self. amidst other discourse, he told me, he was just in the same situation, as when formerly, the notion of gravitation came into his mind. "why should that apple always descend perpendicularly to the ground," thought he to himself; occasion'd by the fall of an apple, as he sat in a contemplative mood. "why should it not go sideways, or upwards? but constantly to the earths center? assuredly, the reason is, that the earth draws it. there must be a drawing power in matter. & the sum of the drawing power in the matter of the earth must be in the earths center, not in any side of the earth. therefore dos this apple fall perpendicularly, or toward the center. if matter thus draws matter; it must be in proportion of its quantity. therefore the apple draws the earth, as well as the earth draws the apple

4 <http://www.space.com/17081-how-far-is-earth-from-the-sun.html>