

Rabbi Bethie Miller  
High Holy Day Sermon – 5776  
*To be known, loved, and at home*

It may be Rosh Hashanah [Yom Kippur] and not Passover, but I have 4 questions. You don't have to say anything – just raise your hand if you agree – and you can answer 'yes' to all 4:

1. Do you feel comfortable and 'at home' here in the sanctuary?
2. Do you find yourself wishing you could recognize a few more faces or know a few more names when you look around the congregation?
3. Would you be willing, not right now but in the coming weeks and year, to try something new – maybe even outside your comfort zone – to strengthen your connection to this Larchmont Temple community?
4. This one may seem out of context, but...do you love summer camp? [Did you love summer camp?]

I was ten years old when I first discovered the sacredness of summer camp. Set on a glorious lake in Maine, my all-girls camp would ultimately be the place where I came into my own as a young woman, spiritual seeker, and peer leader. This was largely because every detail of the camp's operations cultivated a supportive, empowering environment, which invited us to take risks. Camp was my sanctuary. And while I may have been reluctant at first, I quickly embraced the tradition of wearing uniforms: green shorts on the bottom, white shirts on top. For eight weeks straight, I didn't have to deal with that eternally stressful question: what should I wear today? Wearing uniforms also sent a message of inclusivity and community: We were one big family; no one should feel like an outsider, standing out as separate.

And yet, I managed to set myself apart during my first week on site. I remember sitting near some girls who were younger than me, and overhearing them refer to me as “that new girl who’s always homesick!” They didn’t know my name, but they already recognized my distinctively teary eyes and rosy cheeks. I had a major case of homesickness, and most embarrassing was feeling like all anyone knew about me was this most visible weakness. I actually was enjoying all of the activities and my bunkmates and counselors; it just would have been much more pleasant, or so I had convinced myself, if only my mother were spending the summer at camp, too...For most of us, if not all of us, it’s really hard to leave home – to leave our comfort zones, and the people who know us the best. But if we never leave, we never go anywhere.

That’s why my first memory is so intertwined with this second one: Happy yet homesick, I’m walking on my own down the bunk line. I’m on my way from one activity to another, and I see my camp big sister heading toward me. Every new camper got paired with an older girl, and anticipating that I would need some extra TLC, the director gave me a really good one. She’s walking toward me with a few other girls, and soon she starts waving and calling out my name – almost singing it. She’s excited to see me and lovingly embarrass me with attention. The other girls join in, embracing me with their sweetness and warmth. At that moment, I felt known, really known, and loved, and very much ‘at home.’ That moment didn’t end my struggle to feel secure in a new setting, but that encounter helped me to realize what was possible.

The desire to feel known, loved and 'at home' radiates from the core of our being. And as much as some of us may try, as independent and self-sufficient as we strive to be, it's pretty much impossible to satisfy this longing of our soul by our selves. We need each other, or at least an Other. There's something about what happens between us.

As a rabbi for this covenantal congregation, it's a real gift to spend time each day and week meeting with people – sitting face-to-face in my office or over coffee – talking, listening, getting to know one another, and exploring what it means to be a Jewish community here in Westchester in 2015. Now it may be because I've been new in town, or because many of us don't realize how large a congregation we actually are with almost 3000 individual members. But most likely, the reason that one topic has come up in conversation more than any other, is because it's what's true and real and live for us: It's the desire to be known. It's what parents want for their children: to feel comfortable, happy and known within the walls of Larchmont Temple. And by articulating this hope for the next generation, we acknowledge our own longing. Plus the thing about feeling connected in a community, is that once we feel it, most of us don't want to lose it. Yet it takes work to maintain. That's why members who have been around for a while, realizing that they don't know as many people as they once did, share a common desire to get to know, and be known by, the more recent additions to our congregation. We each want to find the right grip on that powerful, and often elusive, sense of community.

The desire is clear; how exactly we make ourselves known and at home can be less so. Woody Allen may be correct in teaching us that 80% of success is showing up.<sup>1</sup> But then

there's that other 20% that happens next, that can be more difficult to guarantee. We know a successful connection when we find it – that quality of energy that's created in between us. We lose track of time, our faces become flushed, and not only do we feel known, understood and loved, but we're actively knowing, understanding and loving the being across from us. The encounter is mutual, and what's created in-between-us is magical and momentary. It can't be forced upon us. We can only be open to what might emerge. This is what makes real relationships so challenging, and what makes them divine. And this is why the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber declared: "All real living is meeting."<sup>ii</sup> So if we want to do something within our capacity to increase our chances of truly connecting, I want to suggest today that we consider three things: context, content and consistency.

In Hebrew the same word – נכר – describes both disguising oneself and making oneself known. This means that way before the arrival of social media and modern psychology, the ancients understood that only a fine line exists between the two: between hiding and recognizing, between presenting strength and revealing weakness, between guarding ourselves and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. And with words, as in life, context makes all the difference.

Our biblical ancestor Joseph has much to teach us on this topic. He becomes the subject of both meanings of the verb, initially making too much known and later keeping much about himself to himself. We first encounter Joseph as a self-involved teenager completely unaware of the depth of his father's love. Tromping around in his techni-color dream coat,

Joseph makes a habit of tattling on his older brothers and making known to Jacob that which isn't his to share. He may be trying to further endear himself to his father, but Joseph's behavior has quite the opposite effect on his brothers. And then there're the dreams that Joseph can't help but recount; his dreams in which he's the center of the universe with his brothers surrounding him and bowing down to him. What's clear is that young Joseph is pretty clueless and helpless when it comes to filtering his thoughts or fulfilling his emotional needs. What's also clear is that all he really wants is to be loved and known, embraced and accepted. But in an awkward attempt to make himself known, Joseph comes on way too strong.

As you may recall, Joseph's brothers come to despise him, wanting nothing to do with him, and end up selling him to traders heading toward Egypt. When he finds himself in a brand new context, Joseph slowly reinvents himself, and by the age of 30, he's second in command in Egypt, replacing his dream coat with royal robes, and his given name with an Egyptian one. Eventually famine arrives in the whole region, Joseph's brothers arrive searching for food, and this is how the Torah describes their reunion: "When Joseph sees his brothers, he recognizes them; but he acts like a stranger...and speaks harshly to them. He asks them, 'Where did you come from?'"<sup>iii</sup> Here, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch teaches that Joseph is testing his brothers, feeling them out with this question to see whether or not they recognize him. When they respond saying, "We come from the land of Canaan to procure food," and not with something more familiar, like "We come from the house of our father," Joseph understands that he remains unknown to them.<sup>iv</sup>

The text concludes: “For though he recognizes his brothers, they do not recognize him.”<sup>v</sup> After years of revealing too much, Joseph now does the opposite. Between his appearance and actions, he operates as a complete stranger. He does so perhaps to assert power, or for the pleasure of revenge, or perhaps he does so out of fear. But it’s exhausting and unsatisfying to disguise oneself. Joseph ultimately reveals his true identity when his older brother Judah reveals his own truths, fears and guilt. When the context is right, and Judah is more honest and vulnerable than ever before, Joseph cannot help but do the same: “Joseph can no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cries out, ‘Have everyone leave me!’ So there’s no one else there when Joseph makes himself known to his brothers. His sobs are so loud that the Egyptians can hear...and then Joseph says to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?’”<sup>vi</sup>...When it comes to vulnerability, reciprocity goes a long way.

Last winter, the headline of the Modern Love column in the New York Times read: *To Fall in Love with Anyone, Do This*. The essay below described a social psych experiment from 20 years ago in which Dr. Arthur Aron and his team studied how people fall in love: “a heterosexual man and woman would enter the lab through separate doors. They [would] sit face to face and answer up to 36 increasingly personal questions.”<sup>vii</sup> Then in some versions of the experiment, the pair would stare into each other’s eyes for four minutes. Always intrigued by the concept, author Mandy Len Catron brings the experiment to life for herself and her readers when she pulls up those same 36 questions on her iPhone in the midst of a first date and then recounts what unfolds between them. You probably won’t be surprised to hear that she did in fact fall in love and get married, and that the

story went viral with couples around the globe trying out the questions for themselves and reporting back to the Times. So let me say for the sake of full disclosure: My goal here is not to enter the matchmaking business, but to ignite some new sparks of connection between us.

The 36 questions understand the art and science of building covenantal relationships. They begin quite innocently and may remind you of group icebreakers you either love or love to hate: “Question #1. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest? 2. Would you like to be famous? In what way? 3. Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you’re going to say? Why?”<sup>viii</sup> Then the questions slowly and steadily move the participants away from the script they usually recite about themselves, and push them to reveal less polished layers: “Is there something that you’ve dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven’t you done it? And what, if anything, is too serious to joke about?”<sup>ix</sup> Interspersed with these prompts for self-disclosure are invitations to reflect back: “Alternate sharing something you consider a positive characteristic of your partner. Share a total of five items.”<sup>x</sup> It can be terrifying and exhilarating to see how others see us; that’s why these exchanges are so crucial.

When Mandy Len Catron describes staring into another’s eyes for 4 minutes – for an ultimate face-to-face or *panim-el-panim* encounter, she remarks: “The real crux of the moment was not just that I was really seeing someone, but that I was seeing someone really seeing me...” She continues: “Most of us think about love as something that happens to us.

We fall. We get crushed. But what I like about this study is how it assumes that love is an action...it's about what it means to bother to know someone, which is really a story about what it means to be known."<sup>xi</sup> The results of the study are statistically significant, and support the idea that "mutual vulnerability fosters closeness."<sup>xii</sup> The pairs in the control group, known as the small talk group, also asked each other questions, but those questions didn't take them anywhere because they didn't take down any armature. Their questions included: "When was the last time you walked for more than an hour? Do you like to get up early or stay up late? And what was the last concert you saw?"<sup>xiii</sup> These questions confirm that we can spend a lot of time together without actually becoming known to one another. Certain contexts may be more conducive to building relationships, but content – what we do and what we talk about – matters even more.

"Mutual vulnerability fosters closeness." This may sound reasonable and obvious, but we don't always pursue the most reasonable and obvious path. In fact, we often exert a lot of energy avoiding vulnerability, even as we starve for connections and closeness. We avoid vulnerability, because it's scary and uncomfortable and means giving up control. But sometimes we can't avoid it. We have no choice when vulnerability finds us: When our 13-year-old selves have to dress up, stand right here, and chant in Hebrew in front of our friends and family; or when our family system loses one of its beloved pillars and with them any sense of normalcy; or when we're transplanted from our urban life and find ourselves trying to feel 'at home' among strangers in the suburbs. But this is precisely why we're here. This is the core purpose of a sanctuary: to cultivate a supportive, empowering



environment in which we can be real and take risks – where we can “be strong in the weak places.”<sup>xiv</sup>

It turns out that Joseph isn't the only transplant to a foreign land in need of sanctuary. As a young man, his father Jacob runs from away from his twin brother, hoping to find refuge with his uncle. He's acquired his father's blessing, but he's now completely on his own and all is unknown. This is when Torah teaches: וַיִּפְגַּע בְּמָקוֹם – “Jacob came upon a certain place.” פָּגַע means “to meet, or encounter, or be open to.” When we're vulnerable, we're by definition open to what's around us – unguarded, open to attack, but also open to sacred encounter. “Jacob encounters a certain place - וַיִּפְגַּע בְּמָקוֹם – and he stops there for the night, for the sun has set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he puts it under his head and lies down. He has a dream: a stairway is set on the ground, its top reaches to the sky, and angels of God are going up and down it. God is there too, standing near Jacob and talking with him...”<sup>xv</sup> Now, that's an encounter! When we go beyond our comfort zones, that's when we catch a glimpse of something larger than ourselves. Making this scene sweeter still, the rabbis read the key phrase וַיִּפְגַּע בְּמָקוֹם to mean that Jacob was praying. And just like that, opening ourselves to new encounters becomes a sacred obligation.

This is why here at Larchmont Temple we're launching a new initiative this year called LT Connects. LT Connects is not about falling in love; it's about fostering covenantal love and strengthening our connections to each other, to Judaism and to Larchmont Temple. Now I know that you know how significant it is to gather all together for these High Holy Days.

But you've probably also come to realize that it's unusual to form new personal connections while sitting here in the sanctuary for a few hours with 700 other people. It just is. It's much easier to get to know people in smaller settings and groups, like when we gather in someone's living room, go on a trip, or take a class together. When a group of people gets together consistently over time, that's when sparks of connection get the oxygen they need, and relationships have the space to grow. Consider groups you've joined over the years: teams, committees, campaigns, book groups, support groups. In these group contexts, repeat encounters go a long way, so does shared experience. We all know that when there's one or two or ten people expecting us, we're much more likely to make the effort and show up!

In my own life, small groups are where I've most easily found my way to feeling known and at home. When I eventually outgrew summer camp, I discovered a new sanctuary in the mountains. Reaching a summit and touching the heavens always fills me with awe, but most profound is the experience of hiking together. A small, inclusive group, we support one another, as we literally enter unfamiliar territory one step at a time. Together, we become physically vulnerable, with no means of disguising our increasingly sweaty and dirty selves. The context demands complete honesty of being, and the activity not only provides real content but also invites wonderful dialogue: hiking together on the trail, we share stories, sing songs, tell jokes, and sometimes without even realizing, we open up to one another; and together, we are transformed.

Hiking by myself has its merits, but it's never quite as satisfying. And I've learned, as many of you will agree, the same is true for studying Torah – for intellectual and spiritual mountain climbing. As a united group of explorers, together we enter the unfamiliar territory of our ancient texts. And as JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen explains: “Text study is good precisely because it puts you around the table...where everybody has equal access and the right of insight...And because you're not sitting there talking to one another about yourselves but you're talking to one another about the text, it gives you the distance that you need in order to talk about yourself. It gives you the distance to be personal and build relationships.”<sup>xvi</sup> Ben Bat Binah participants know this, and so do regulars at Shabbat morning Chevrah Torah: something happens between us when we study together. When trust and understanding build over time, when we regularly, or even ritually, encounter each other and our shared past, together, we are transformed.

For all of these reasons and more, congregations across the country are embracing the transformative power of small groups. So now is the time – 5776 is the year – to think BIG about thinking SMALL: Imagine joining a small group of mothers and daughters who read novels about growing up Jewish and then meet once a month at someone's home to talk about what they've read and share their own stories about growing up Jewish. Imagine joining a small group that sets apart the sanctity of Shabbat by biking together to PepsiCo on Saturday mornings. Imagine joining a group of seekers who explore the spirituality of surfing, literally embodying the theological metaphor: God is the ocean, and we are the waves. Imagine a multigenerational group gathering together to talk about coping with loss. Or a group of families visiting Pleasantville Cottages on a monthly basis. Or a group of

MetroNorth commuters sitting on the train with Rabbi Sirkman to discuss Jewish perspectives on the latest news. Or a group cooking together, or meditating together, or studying together the basics of Judaism in anticipation of their oldest becoming bar or bat mitzvah.

These ideas aren't mine. They're not even Rabbi Sirkman's. These ideas for small groups have all emerged from dialogues with members of the LT community. Because phase one of this new initiative LT Connects involves a series of house meetings, which we slowly started this summer and will continue in full force after the holy days. The point of these house meetings is to give you a taste of small groups, with 10-15 people gathering in a living room to eat and drink, study and share stories. We want to learn from and with as many members of the congregation as possible about what connections you've found and what you still may be looking for. We're starting this way, because we want to start with people, not programs, and in partnership create our small groups. That is the covenantal way.

If you're curious about LT Connects and small groups, or want to figure out how to feel more 'at home' here, the next step is to sign up for a House Meeting. You can do that by visiting the Larchmont Temple website or emailing me directly, or of course I'm always happy to talk face-to-face. Please know that we'll be having house meetings over the next few months, and then in early 2016, our goal is to gather together to interpret all we've heard, discussed and brainstormed. We don't know exactly what these groups will look like. We're going to figure it out together. And we have many connectors to lead the way,

including the four whose stories have now become our shared context, content and consistency: the homesick camper seeking comfort in a new setting, eager Joseph drawing our attention to the fine line between hiding and revealing, Modern Love Mandy asking real questions with no fear of eye contact, and dreaming Jacob who reminds us that we're most ripe for connection when we step just beyond what we know...

Always leading us with his poetry to the divine essence of relationships just beyond our reach, Martin Buber offers this teaching:

“It is written in Proverbs: כַּפַּיִם הַפָּנִים לְפָנָיִם כִּן לֵב-הָאָדָם לְאָדָם – As face answers to face in water, So does one man's heart to another.<sup>xvii</sup> Why does the verse read ‘in water’ and not ‘in a mirror’?...Man can see his reflection in water only when he bends close to it, and the heart of man too must lean down to the heart of his fellow; then it will see itself within his heart.”<sup>xviii</sup>

In this year ahead, may we open ourselves to new encounters and to one another, may we connect face-to-face, heart-with-heart, hand-in-hand, and together may we be transformed by what emerges between us. May it be so, and let us say Amen.

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- <sup>i</sup> A variant of his oft-cited quotation: “Showing up is 80% of life.” For more, see [quoteinvestigator.com/2013/06/10/showing-up/](http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/06/10/showing-up/)
- <sup>ii</sup> Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1958, pg. 11. Also translated as: ‘All real life is meeting;’ ‘All actual life is encounter.’
- <sup>iii</sup> Gen. 42:7. I adapted many of the biblical translations into the present tense in order to bring alive the energy of these encounters for the listeners.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Itturei Torah, Sefer Bereshit 2*, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh Ha-Levi from Blaisvis on Gen. 42:8, pg. 374.
- <sup>v</sup> Gen. 42:8.
- <sup>vi</sup> Gen. 45:1-3.
- <sup>vii</sup> Catron, Mandy Len, “To Fall in Love With Anyone, Do This,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 2015: [www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/fashion/modern-love-to-fall-in-love-with-anyone-do-this.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/fashion/modern-love-to-fall-in-love-with-anyone-do-this.html?_r=0)
- <sup>viii</sup> Aron, Arthur et al, “The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 374: [psp.sagepub.com/content/23/4/363.full.pdf+html](http://psp.sagepub.com/content/23/4/363.full.pdf+html).
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid*, 375.
- <sup>xi</sup> Catron, Mandy Len.
- <sup>xii</sup> This wording comes from a follow up article: “Try the 36 Questions on the Way to Love” *The New York Times*, February, 13, 2015: [www.nytimes.com/2015/02/13/style/the-36-questions-on-the-way-to-love.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/13/style/the-36-questions-on-the-way-to-love.html?_r=0); The actual paper about the experiment (“The Experimental Generation...” pgs. 366-7) explains the statistically significant findings: These data support the importance of task type in developing closeness through our procedure. The contents of the tasks—whether they required self-disclosure and other intimacy-associated behaviors—made a considerable difference. Thus any effect of this procedure is not simply a matter of putting two people together in any kind of structured interaction for 45 min.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Aron, Arthur et al.
- <sup>xiv</sup> This language emerged in a conversation with Rabbi Jeffrey Sirkman; it’s a re-wording of a quotation by Ernest Hemingway: “Be strong in the broken places.”
- <sup>xv</sup> Gen. 28:11-13.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Wolfson, Ron, *Relational Judaism*, Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013, pg 171.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Prov. 27:19.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Buber, Martin, *Ten Rungs: Collected Hasidic Sayings*, New York: Citadel Press, 1995, pgs. 79-80.