

The call usually came just as we were sitting down for dinner.  
Living in our two family home with my grandparents right downstairs,  
frequently in Bobba's kitchen.  
And when it came, my grandfather Solly never hesitated.  
Reaching for his hat in the hall closet and saying to my Bobba:  
"Dora, I'll be back in half an hour; keep it hot."  
By the time I turned 9, I'd postpone my meal as well and join him,  
Walking about 100 feet, to the chapel, right next door, at Temple Emanu-El in Haverhill, Mass.,  
Where—now totaling ten, my grandfather would make the minyan.  
I remember thinking as a kid sitting next to him: "Wow. Solly must be some real *macher*;  
They won't start the service till he gets there!"  
It wasn't until a few years later I came to learn  
That without a quorum of ten, not only was there no *Bar'chu*—no call to Worship,  
There was no *Kaddish* either.  
For the mourners then, my grandfather's appearance was Elijah-esque;  
A harbinger of momentary redemption, for he was the key to creating a community of prayer.  
Indeed, without his appearance, or the corresponding tenth,  
Communal prayer was not [traditionally] possible.  
And the minyan I witnessed and came to so value was the hub;  
The Jewish community's "communication central,"  
The place for meaningful shmoozing & sharing.  
At the minyan, you saw one another, for real; there was no place to hide.  
[Growing up] a congregation without a daily minyan  
was like a meal with no main course... You could eat, but you wouldn't feel nourished.  
    The fulfillment derived, of course,  
    not so much from the prayer itself as from the face to face encounter,  
    where just seeing someone for that 20 minutes,  
    or looking into their eyes for 5 seconds,  
    you could read their mood—even their mind.  
    The Minyan was the sacred family room where congregational relationships  
    were forged & fortified—reconnected & renewed, bringing a spirit that was life-sustaining.  
And though in most Reform congregations there is no direct daily equivalent,  
Whether its the First Friday Kabbalat Shabbat crowd,  
or the third Friday Pre-Oneg Wine-Cheese & Worship regulars,  
or the Shabbat morning Chevrah Torah table learners,  
or the Sat AM Family Shabbat Moms & Dad's praying & crafting with their kids.  
Or even the Bagel & Shmear shmoozers at the Brotherhood Breakfast table,  
It is that weekly or monthly face to face encounter—the time spent together,  
That helps us know our presence matters,  
For the inter-dependence is not alone what we count on,  
But attests how much each one of us count.  
Face to face—*punim to punim*—eye to eye—heart to heart...  
It's what makes the Minyan!.....Or so we'd like to think.

Sherry Turkle, M.I.T. Prof. of Social Science & Technology,  
In her most recent release, Alone Together,  
*Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other*,  
posits that *The Net* makes it possible for us to communicate without ever really showing up.

“We friend strangers on Facebook;  
we text instead of talking. We Tweet our emotional/mental states...  
We connect with the Social Network at will and disengage without  
risk of reprisal.” [NY Times, Book Review, Feb 22, 2011]

Show of hands: If given the choice, how many of us  
would more readily send a text-message than make a phone call?  
[Be honest...It's the HH Days after all.]

Turkle sites large numbers of adolescents, and many adults for that matter  
Who've developed a decided distaste for picking up the phone.  
As one 11<sup>th</sup> grader put it: “Talking on the telephone, too much might show.”

So if emotional investment is low and commitment for deeper connection unnecessary  
When it comes to effective interchange on the Social Network,  
Just what does it mean to connect to our community?  
If we use Chat for meaningful enough conversation,  
or share our newest life-challenge by updating our status,  
or post a comment on our wall to open ourselves up for countless comments in return...  
IF, in this Facebook Age we don't really have to be present at all  
to make our presence felt, where does that leave our Minyan?

Now many of you are no doubt thinking,  
“Come on Rabbi, the Social Network can't replace Synagogue life!”  
Well...Let me post a Jewish Communal Status Update.  
The U.R.J.'s [Union for Reform Judaism] downsizing in national staff and  
infrastructure have been accompanied by several synagogue mergers, some even  
closing up shop...and, at one point, the question of reducing the campuses of  
HUC-JIR by one...President-elect Rabbi Rick Jacobs envisions “reinventing  
Reform” for a new globally-linked world.  
In a Strategic Plan draft this past Spring,  
the Conservative movement's data showed a 14% loss in affiliated families over  
the past decade, two times that percentage in the nation's northeast region.  
At R.R.C., the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College ordinees were urged,  
by the ordination speaker to “rethink their rabbinate in light of the shrinking market.”

Sociologist to the Jewish world, Prof Steven Cohen,  
asked to comment on American Jewish life in 10 words or less said:  
“We are demographically distressed yet culturally creative.”  
I'm not quite sure that brings the uplift it intends.  
Yet, for all this justified Jewish worry,  
With the question of congregational life in flux,  
And the fastest growing segment of American Jews the Independent Minyan,  
It is President of HUC, Rabbi David Ellenson's comment

From his piece on “American Jewish Denominationalism”

That is, so to speak, the most-telling Tweet:

“More and more American Jews are indifferent to denominational labels in their highly eclectic searches for meaning and community. The distinctions in ideology and theology—so crucial to the elite leaders—are increasingly irrelevant to these Jewish folk ...”

[And now the key take-away]

“I would assert the task that confronts denominations—whatever their ideological distinctions, is how to make Judaism relevant, compelling, meaningful, welcoming, comforting and challenging to American Jews and their families who have infinite options, yet still ask that the need for connection to community be fulfilled.”

So, if movement labels—brand name loyalty, is no longer really the draw...

If, as seminal political scientists Robert Putnam & David Campbell conclude,

“that individual choice has become virtually as important as inheritance in explaining Americans’ religious affiliation, raising the stakes for religious marketing and innovation.” [[American Grace](#), pg 160]

And if in our Facebook Age of a ‘porous peoplehood,’ you could virtually go anywhere, what compels us to show up at all?... What could convince us that our presence counts?

Meet 3 Minyans,

Not technically prayer-quorums but sacred communities nonetheless,

The secret ‘tweet’ of what it means to make each, taken together,

creating the password for a Jewish community/congregation that counts.

*Minyan 1—Abby’s Call...*

Returning from our Congregational Israel Mission the 1<sup>st</sup> of the year,

The pile of newspapers awaited, but as I began to plow through, I was taken aback,

Greeted by a familiar face.

The front-page feature of the Jewish Week, on “Generation F,”

An article exploring the spiritual fluidity of the 20-30 somethings

on their Jewish journeys was using—as its prototypical subject

a girl from Westchester, now 37, living with her not Jewish husband and 2 young kids in Park Slope.....OMG...It was Abby Sher!

Citing the fluid nature of Jewish life,

And the extreme popularity among younger Jews of Independent Minyanim,

Open communities of Jewish praying and doing where members are empowered to take hold of shaping their own religious paths, Abby was depicted as a spiritual drifter.

Portraying her Jewish trajectory, as opposed to her straight-line parents,

Who settled in Larchmont, and raised three now grown kids here at LT...

Abby’s spiritual life was a curve ball... Truth be told—it was much more like a circle.

I e-mailed Abby, with whom I am regularly in touch online, and asked her about the PR.

“Listen Rebbe, they just wanted a Jewish wanderer, lost in Brooklyn, so they took me.”

“But Abby, you’re telling me that there’s no place in Jewish Brooklyn

that you guys can find a Jewish home?”

“If you mean, like LT...nothin’ doin’.”

I suggested to Abby that she & her husband Jay should not try to find our temple in Brooklyn, but a place that speaks to their needs as an interfaith, growing family.

A week-plus later, Abby, a successful writer/author, emailed again:

RebSirk... This Anita Diamant Author in Residence thing sounds very cool.

Can I come up and free-load?

To my delight, Abby joined us, along with her then 4-month old in tow.

When a couple of old-time congregants hugged her, one turned to me and whispered:

“Its so wonderful to see her here, home again...”

When Abby got her first post-college job as a member of Chicago’s Improv troupe Second City, she wanted to share it...so she called.

When her Mom Joan spiraled downhill and suddenly passed away,

She called to make arrangements...

When she got engaged to her wonderful Unitarian husband Jay,

Her life-saver, she called...

When her first little girl—the kid they call Moose, was born,

She e-mailed first photos...and I called.

When her book was about to be released, she e-mailed, and called...

When she wanted to memorialize her mom with a plaque on our Wall of memory,

She called...

And when she heard Susan was sick, she e-mailed and sent notes, and called...

“They’re not going to come to us,” says my colleague at WRT, Jon Blake,

“We need to create a synagogue without walls.” hoping, through S3K’s Next Dor initiative, to help that 20-30 something crowd engage in Jewish life.

Actually, they need not come to us, but knowing our LT door is open,

That there is a temple-community that is like a second home, a rabbi you can always call,

The hope is that, for Abby and all of Generation F, navigating their Jewish journeys,

Motivated by the need to be part of a minyan,

they’ll know what a congregational home feels like when they find one...

### *Minyan 2—Buff’s Call...*

One of the special evening programs in the Jewish leadership unit I run for 2 weeks every summer at Eisner Camp makes the 50 12<sup>th</sup> graders the Admissions Comm. of HUC’s Rabbinical School, tasked with the fictitious challenge of deciding which single candidate, Out of the 5 applying, will get the last spot for the coming fall class.

Having strong-armed a combo of actual rabbis, serving with me on faculty, and Eisner senior staff to serve on my panel, this past summer I decided to reach out to the camp doctor’s husband, so I asked Buff.

A wonderfully friendly, curious, thoughtful guy with his own extensive collection of *hashgachas*—kashrut symbols, I figured he’d bring a different perspective...

I just had no idea how much!

More than anyone else on the panel, the two rabbis and two rabbinic students included, Buff’s responses to these 12<sup>th</sup> graders’ questions challenged their assumptions

And prompted more questions...

And though he wasn’t the candidate chosen for admission,

Some of the kids thought he was the one who best understood the value of Jewish commty.

Imagine how surprised they were to find that his official time as a Jew was just over 6 months.

Buff Maniscalco converted on December 29, 2010,  
though his spiritual journey has been filled with Judaism for over two decades.  
Affirming his choice in witness of his entire congregation,  
Temple Sinai of Springfield, Mass., here's how Buff began his statement:  
*"12 years ago on a bimah—on the edge of the wilderness of Maine,  
my friend Marissa stood before a congregation of Jews  
and proclaimed herself to be Jewish, just as I will soon do.  
Within that tiny gathering, our mutual Jewish friend Lois stood beside me,  
turning to me afterwards and saying, "I don't understand why anyone  
would want to join something I've been trying to hide from all my life."  
In my heart I knew the answer...But everyone must choose his/her own time  
to come out of the wilderness. Today it is my time to come home."*  
Buff innately understood:  
It is far too easy to hide in broad daylight. We all must choose.  
Jewish life is constantly calling, incessantly reaching out.  
But to make the minyan, you have to reach back.

### *Minyan 3—Leo's Call...*

The first time I came to visit, he proudly showed me the book  
he'd not alone authored, but illustrated: My First Book of Hebrew Things Book,  
And I was hooked—a fan.

What other 5-year old kid with Leukemia  
doesn't really care that you're the rabbi,

but thinks it's pretty cool you can draw cartoons...

Leo was a character, sweet—but with that spicy side,  
so filled with life that during his four months at NYU's hospital,  
even with all the scans and the treatments, the chemo injections and endless tests,  
he did not for a minute stop being a 5-year old boy,  
growing and laughing and living.

Leo was so filled with spirit that the night the news came that he'd relapsed,  
weakened—as the doctors surmised—by the disease,  
He and his sister Hannah danced again and again  
to one of his favorite Lady GaGa tunes.

Because no matter what life throws at you—you can't stop dancing.  
So when he left this world in July, we all came to say goodbye...WHY?...  
Perhaps we showed up because of his incredibly gracious, loving parents,  
Caitlin telling me point blank just after he died:

"Leo's life was not tragically cut short.

He got 5 ½ years, and filled them, every single day."

Maybe the hundreds who came to his Funeral Service,  
And even the cemetery, wanted the Israelis to know that our hearts were breaking too...  
That we had to be there for the minyan every night, spilling out the door of their home,  
Because it was the least, and the most, we could do...

Our community showed up en masse:

Deb Frankel and the amazing teachers/Staff of LTNS,

The Israelis friends, and friends of friends—a 30-something crowd

too young to be dealing with death, yet nevertheless, as supportive,  
loving, as a community in mourning could be...  
Rabbi Nathan and me, all of us crowded in 8 Shadow Lane  
trying to pray and find a way to hold each other up.  
We all came, but *we* didn't make the minyan—*Leo did*...  
His indefatigable, buoyant, undying spirit was bouncing around  
From shoulder to shoulder, dancing as he always did, from heart to heart.  
Sometimes a presence is so very missed  
that our collective yearning brings them close.  
As it did when one little 5 ½ year-old boy died,  
but left us his joyous sincerity of spirit;  
the life-celebration that remains his love...  
And in the 'Family Israel,' that's what holds us up...

In this Facebook World of virtual community,  
some might view congregational life as almost counter-intuitive,  
Trying to swim against the digital stream...

A few years ago, when Susan joined a Facebook writing group called FARB Soup,  
for all the time she spent in dialogue with people half-way around the globe,  
I dismissed it as pseudo-intellectual entertainment.  
Sure, she related things to the core dozen or so folks on Farb  
that she sometimes didn't even share with her friends...  
And though, through humorous and at times heated exchange,  
The group members' personalities came through,  
I confess thinking, why invest the time, or depth of thought,  
In people you'll never really come to know or see?...  
That was—until Sam's wife died.  
A mid-western, congregationally connected conservative Jew  
married to his Episcopalian wife for over 20 years, he'd been posting pictures  
and talking to select members of the group,  
about how hard it was to watch her fading away...  
I remember walking in late from a Temple Trustees meeting  
As Susan was giving Sam guidance on the Memorial Service he might create...  
My wife was such a support, in fact, that when his beloved passed away,  
she called him, someplace outside of Chicago,  
and they talked—voice to voice—phone friends, for about an hour, heart to heart.  
Even more surprising, five members of the online group made it to Sam's wife's funeral.  
And since that time, over the past year and a half,  
Almost 2 dozen FARB Soup members have gotten together,  
Once stateside, once in London, some traveling from as far away as L.A. and Australia.  
WHY?  
Because the ties sown by the technological, online community transformed,  
with the mutual commitment of some to cross that threshold from virtual to real.  
Far beyond Facebook, ready to risk being seen as more than the words they post,  
willing to let profiles be three-dimensional,  
their relationships had morphed into being there, face to face.



