Yom Kippur 5787
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Congregation Rodeph Sholom
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Bearing Witness:
How Judaism Helps Build a Village

This past year, Sam turned 7. 18 kids from his class RSVP'ed yes to his birthday party, but only 6 of them came.

This past year, Ruth and Daniel got married at a beautiful venue in New York City. They spent the Sunday morning of their wedding rearranging tables because 8 people had texted in the last 24 hours that they weren't going to be able to make it.

This past year, Lisa had 3 coffee dates where the person she was meeting asked to reschedule after she was already seated at the coffee shop.

These are just a few of the stories I've heard this past year about the phenomenon of flakiness.

No, I'm not talking about pastries. Delicious as flaky pastries are, that is not what I want to talk about on Yom Kippur.

I'm talking about the social phenomenon: the cancelling of plans at often short notice owing to not being in the mood, feeling demotivated or tired, or wanting to do something else instead.[1]

Each of us has likely been on the receiving end of someone flaking on us. And, if we're honest with ourselves, we have likely flaked on someone this past year.

Of course, there are going to be times that we need to rearrange our schedules and when unforeseen circumstances and emergencies require us to be flexible.

It's also okay to say no to an invitation. Being honest about our ability to be present is part of being in community.

The phenomenon of flakiness, though, is larger than one emergency or one declined invitation. It is about what happens to a community when we can't count on each other to show up.

And flakiness is part of the larger epidemic of loneliness in our world today.
A recent Pew Research Center study revealed that 16% of Americans say they feel lonely or isolated all or most of the time. 38% of Americans feel lonely sometimes.[2] That means that 54% of the American public experience significant loneliness.

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[1] The Guardian: 'People feel they don't owe anyone anything': the rise in 'flaking' out of social plans

[2] Pew Research Center: Men, Women and Social Connections

Decades of research has shown that loneliness and social isolation are associated with significant increased risk of early death.[3]

Loneliness is dangerous, and flakiness is one symptom of the decrease in connectivity that we feel as a society.

When people flake on us, it's not the cost or the burden of rearranging wedding tables that is most frustrating or upsetting.

We want to feel like we are worth connecting with.
That our moments, big and small, should be honored.

As human beings, we are wired for connection.
We need each other.

The first time we meet humans in the Torah, we learn the story of Adam, the first earthling in the Garden of Eden. God creates a second earthling because "it is not good for a human to be alone."[4]

In the past few years, we've seen a rise in fragmentation and fracture.
Friendships have frayed.
Civic cohesion has fallen apart.

Today, we sit here because we choose to be part of community.
This should not be a radical choice, but in our modern world of disconnection, this is a choice worth celebrating.

We know that today, loneliness can come in many forms.
Loneliness is painful.

There have been many modern attempts to find solutions to the loneliness epidemic in our world, but Judaism gives us a clear prescription, and we don't have to look farther than our prayerbook.

Our morning liturgy includes a prayer called Eilu D'varim. These are the deeds whose benefits are limitless, the prayer begins. And not only can a person enjoy the benefit in this world, but also in the world to come.
These things are:

Honoring one's father and mother
Engaging in deeds of compassion
Arriving early for study, morning and evening
Dealing graciously with guests

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[3] Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community (pg 24)
[4] Genesis 2:18

Visiting the sick
Providing for the wedding couple
Accompanying the dead for burial
Being devoted in prayer
Making peace among people

This list sounds simple, but each of these instructions are key ingredients to a connected life.

By encouraging us to recite Eilu D'varim every day, Jewish tradition reminds us that community and connection don't happen by accident. They are experiences we create intentionally.

Honoring one's father and mother
Each of us comes from a family. Sometimes that family comes from blood and sometimes that family is chosen.
We are responsible for tending the bonds that have been part of our lives for a long time.
Families are not inevitable; they are created.

Engaging in deeds of compassion
Of course, acts of compassion are important.
Looking for ways to act compassionately not only helps to repair the world, it reminds us that each of our neighbors are created in the Divine Image and worthy of care.

Arriving early for study, morning and evening
If we all arrived early for the things we regularly attend, our quick pleasantries could turn into meaningful dialogue.
We should see our classes and our activities not only as transactions, but also as opportunities for building community.

Dealing graciously with guests
This idea goes beyond inviting people to meticulously planned holiday meals or well-organized birthday parties.
We can invite each other into our messy, imperfect lives.
In fact, letting people into the messiness of our lives deepens our bonds.

Visiting the sick
Supporting those who are ill reminds us to be present through every stage of someone's life journey. When someone is sick, we should sit with them in the hardship and the pain and the uncertainty for as long as their mind or body may need.
Providing for the wedding couple
All life transitions deserve to be marked with the presence of community.
We should be present with people when they cross the threshold of a lifecycle moment.

Accompanying the dead for burial
Everyone is worthy of being buried by hands that knew them.
Escorting the dead to their final resting place is the ultimate mitzvah because it cannot be repaid.
And when we accompany the dead for burial, we also accompany the mourners.

We let them know that they will not walk the path of grief alone.

Being devoted in prayer
In Judaism, prayer is a communal experience.
Prayer is not solely about our personal relationship with God, but about our commitment to sitting in the same room at the same time as our fellow worshippers.
We recite ancient words together and we sit in silence together. As we connect with the Divine, we also connect with each other.

Making peace among people
We are called to be bridgebuilders and peacemakers.
Judaism demands that we are not passive about creating communities of *shalom*, peace, and *shalem*, wholeness.

This list of instructions found in our daily liturgy is ancient. It comes from two sections of Mishnah, the earliest compilation of rabbinic writings. These words were written nearly 2000 years ago.

Our lives are very different than our ancestors' lives.
But our needs are not.

Eilu D'varim gives us a roadmap for building communities of connection and belonging.
This ancient prayer is not simply a checklist.
Rather, it offers us a theology of community, a blueprint for building connection.
Community and connection: this is what sustains and nourishes us.

And what's the alternative?
Can we call ourselves a community if we don't do the things outlined in Eilu D'varim?

A community where we ignore the prescription of Eilu D'varim is one where:
Elders are left out because we do not respect them
The sick are left behind because we do not care for them
The dead are buried alone with no one to hear their stories and carry them forward
Life's transitional moments are unmarked or solitary
We never invite each other into our homes and our lives

Life becomes an individual experience rather than a beautifully connected communal one.
We've all heard the phrase "it takes a village."
It usually refers to raising children. That raising children well requires surrounding ourselves with a village of people who are part of their lives.
But I think the idea of a village is broader than raising children.
We all need to be part of a village.
We all deserve to be part of a village.

"It takes a village" is a well-known phrase. But the subject of the sentence—it—is an amorphous pronoun.
A better phrase would be: "We are the village."
"We are the village" is a commitment that each of us can make today.

As we come to the end of the Days of Awe, let's ask ourselves:
In what ways was I a good villager this past year?
In what ways was I on the receiving end of good villagers?
How can I be a better villager in the year to come?

Or, to put these questions another way:
What do we owe each other?
And what do we miss when we don't consistently strengthen our community building muscles?

Eilu D'varim is just one tool in our toolbox. It gives us concrete steps we can take to be good villagers. This list of actions helps us fulfill one of our most basic human needs: the desire to be seen.

When I was a student at Washington University, the dean of my college was a man named James McLeod. He arrived at WashU in 1974. Among many other achievements during his time on campus, Dean McLeod developed our residential college system. He believed that the way we lived impacted the community we could build. And he deeply believed in building community.[5]

His most oft-repeated phrase was that his goal was for every student to be known by name and story.

To be known by name and story is an exquisite gift.
Each of us deserves to be known this way.

I think about Dean McLeod's words every day.
I used to think that it was my role to know everyone by name and story.
I still believe that that is one my core purposes as a rabbi, and I strive to do it well.
But I also believe that part of my calling as a rabbi is to cultivate the capacity for each of us to know each other by name and story.
To multiply the number of people who are invested in knowing one another by name and story.
Because each of us has a part to play in someone else feeling known this deeply.
Our village can be a place where everyone is known by name and story.

Earlier in our service, we recited Shema. Traditionally, Jews recite these words daily in the morning and in the evening.

Throughout history, Shema has been the last words on the lips of Jews as they died.
And traditionally, Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for our death.
We abstain from earthly needs like food and bathing.

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[5] James E. McLeod, 67; Vice chancellor for students and dean of College of Arts & Sciences one of WUSTL's 'greatest citizens and leaders'

We wear tallitot and white like the burial shroud.
We contemplate our mortality.

When Shema is written out, the last letter of Shema, *ayin*, and the last letter of Echad, *dalet*, are enlarged. This textual oddity goes all the way back to our earliest fragments of Torah.

Ayin and *Dalet* when put together spell out the word "Eid," meaning "witness."
When we recite Shema, we are witnesses to God's singularity in this world.

Since we are created in God's image, because we all have sparks of the Divine with us, we are each worthy of being witnessed.

When we recite Shema, we are called not only to be witnesses to God's Oneness, but also to be witnesses to Divine Spark within each of us.

Each time we recite Shema—one of our most recited prayers—our ancient liturgy gives us guidance for our modern lives.

We are called to be witnesses for one another.
To support each other when we are sick and to welcome each other into our homes.
To rejoice at moments of celebration and walk hand in hand in moments of sorrow.
To study together and pray together.
To be good villagers.

Every time we recite Shema, we are reminded of the communities we can build if we are willing to be witnesses to each other's stories.

Judaism gives us the prescription for a connected life.
In 5787, it is up to us to turn that prescription into practice.

Ken y'hi ratzon—may it be so.