

## Too Many Friends

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Thank you, Rabbi Borodin, for your gracious invitation to speak from the pulpit today. It is great to see so many familiar faces here as well as many Panim Hadashot who have been drawn here by the special warmth of your Rabbi and this congregation. I also want to introduce to you, Joanne Frankel, my fiancé who is a Seattle native. I dedicate this talk to her.

While I am conscious that it is Erev Tisha Ba'av, I have chosen to speak on a topic that looks forward to Tu B'av-the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av, the Jewish equivalent of a Sadie Hawkins day. My theme is friendship.

The other day I looked at my Facebook page. On a Facebook page you receive suggestions about people, using the parlance of our time, you can 'friend'. The singer-songwriter, Debbie Friedman, appeared on my page as a prospective friend. Debbie and I have many 'Facebook Friends' in common. Since I have known Debbie since the 80s, I clicked on her to add her as a friend and got this message from Facebook. "Debbie Friedman has too many friends."

Imagine you are at a Kiddush after Shabbat morning services. You spot Debbie Friedman. As you approach another person standing next to her turns to you and says, "I am sorry, but Debbie is unavailable to talk to you. She has too many friends."

Now, I hope the absurdity of Facebook Friending is evident.

Can we have too many friends?

British anthropologist and Oxford Prof, Robin Dunbar, has posed a theory that the number of individuals with whom a stable interpersonal relationship can be maintained is limited by the size of the human brain. The number he suggests is around 150. He also suggests that a group size of 150 or so is the maximal number for a cohesive community. This size is determined by the limits of our mental capacities for maintaining meaningful and stable social relations.

Is the limit of 150 stable social relationships according to Dunbar's studies really true in the Facebook era?

Consider our opportunities for multiplying connections in the Facebook age.

- I can skype my family and friends across continents. (Imagine if Yosef and Yaakov had Skype during those 21 years of separation. Things would have turned out differently.)
- I can send tweets of 140 words about anything I want to my followers

- I can send Instant Messages to people 24/7. (What would have happened if Moshe could tweet during his confrontations with Pharaoh. "Frogs hoping, stay inside!")
- I can let friends automatically know exactly where I am and what I am doing at any moment. (God would not have had the need to ask 'Ayecha' in the Garden of Eden)
- I can meet persons based on internet profiles and communicate for weeks without a face to face meeting.
- I can meet new people through chat rooms or internet affinity groups based on interests.

And if this is not enough

- I can create a new identity on sites like Second Life in the form of an avatar and seek out virtual relationships with other avatars. We can now have fantasy friendships.

All these vastly expand the opportunity for making new connections. However, Facebook, now the mother of all social networks, does set a limit. sets the limit of friends at 5000. Once you are over that you have too many friends. People now boast their Facebook numbers. I overheard a person boast, "I have 3,806 friends. Hey that is more than your 2,897 friends."

Internet relationships in the Facebook Era suggest that we can have hundreds even thousands of friends who we can maintain instant and ongoing relationships through our various devices that now accompany us through life. These devices as well as many internet sites boast of their potential to connect you in ways never imaginable in the past.

What are some of the attributes of friendship in the Facebook era?

- Pushing the Limit: The notion of limits to the number of relationships is blown out of the water. Imagine if you had 3 free hours to just do Facebook connecting. How many friends could you make in that 3 hour period? Try it sometime.
- Lots of Information: I can know all sorts of things about my friends as they report their activities and thoughts on the internet. Take a day off and send out notices of your daily activities and send it to your Facebook list. That is now socially acceptable behavior in many circles.
- Changing Notions of Privacy: For many people sharing the intimate details of their lives on Facebook or Twitter presents no problem.
- Affinity Based Relationships: The internet allows us to filter or select more narrowly who we want to meet. It is a social arena that greatly expands the opportunities for creating new relationships. But it also may reduce the chance of connecting with very different people from ourselves.
- Speed Friending: For me the most distinctive attribute of friendship in the Facebook age is the quickened process for meeting, friending, and relating to others. Previous impediments of place, social circles, age hardly matter.

Our tradition teaches us to be skeptical of the false gods that are promoted in every generation. Our generation is no different. Jewish teachings on friendship stand in sharp

contrast to the allure of connection in the Facebook age. The Jewish understanding does not stem from a Luddite hatred of technology, but a wise view on the nature and limits of true friendship.

Consider this passage in Pirkei Avot (The Ethics of the Sages), "Get yourself a companion ." Kneh Lecha Haver.

The commentary, Avot De Rabbi Natan asks, "For what reason? This saying implies that a person is to get himself a companion who will eat with him, drink with him, read Scripture with him, study Mishnah with him, sleep next to him, and disclose all his secrets to him, secrets of Torah and secrets of worldly matters. Thus, when the two sit and occupy themselves with Torah, if one errs in Halakhah or in the substance of a chapter, or says of what is unclean that it is clean or of what is clean that it is unclean, of what is prohibited that it is permitted and of what is permitted that it is prohibited, his companion will bring him back [to right thinking], as is said, 'Two are better than one, in that they have greater benefit from their labor' (Eccles. 4:9). Avot 1:6; ARN 8.

This is the earliest text on friending that I know of. Pirkei Avot begins with the imperative to 'acquire a friend'. Having a Haver is a social good. We must make great effort to establish a relationship. We should not wait for it to come to us.

But the effort is more than clicking a button on screen. The effort is a sustained focus on creating common and shared time with another person. The first criteria, eating and drinking together is something you can't do on the internet.

What does it mean to sleep next to one another? I don't read this in the erotic sense, but rather that friendship develops only after significant time, not just high moments, but of long hours of low energy, or simply being around each other in the unfolding of daily life.

Of greatest concern to our text is that Havruta is organized around shared Torah study. Torah study is the ultimate dialogical mitzvah-meant to be studied in pairs with someone you completely trust. Friendship informs the Torah study. Torah study informs the friendship.

While our ancient teaching on friendship conceives authentic companionship as centered on the common activity of Torah study, my teacher, Rabbi David Hartman suggests that friendship in Judaism is intricately connected to a mindful practice of Shabbat.

"By helping people to subdue their need to relate to the world in utilitarian terms, Shabbat opens up to us the possibility of love. Shabbat teaches us to look at the other not as an object of our control but as an equal. On Shabbat, power relationships are suspended. There are no masters, no slaves—only creatures standing as equals before the Creator. A person who can live life within the rhythm of the week of labor and the day of rest can work but also rest, a person who can struggle for mastery, but live without total mastery—

such a person can open up to a love relationship with another. Only after one has accepted the limitations of being a creature can one enter into an enduring relationship of mutuality with another person, in short, a covenant.”

Friendship is more easily realized on Shabbat since it offers an alternative social environment from the work week. Friendships can flourish because of an abundance of restful non-instrumental time. Hartman does not deny the value of work or of mastery which are features of the 6 days of the week. But the Sabbath is not about work or mastery. When we are free of labor and when we are free of instrumental striving, we allow time to love and connect to others.

Perhaps you have heard of the ‘Slow Eating’ Movement. The idea is to create an alternative to the fast food culture with the intention of restoring relaxed, healthy, and social gathering to the act of eating. Sabbath can be understood as a day of slow friending. Here is an example.

In 1992 when I was serving CBS as your Rabbi, we invited to our Shabbat table a friend, a single guy visiting from Los Angeles and another young woman from NYC, a friend of a friend, who was working in Seattle for the summer. After Shabbat morning services they came home with us and met for the first time at our table. We all talked and sang, and ate. At the three hour mark we realized that they did not want to leave our table. Because it was Shabbat and there was no rush, we all continued talking. At the four hour mark, they were still going strong. We excused ourselves for our Shabbas Schluf but told them to make themselves comfortable in our living room. At the 6 and ½ hour mark (there were 3 more hours to go on a summer Shabbat in Seattle), we awoke from a long Seattle Shabbas Shluf to still find them talking animatedly in our living room. Stan and Carla are now happily married with two teenagers in Washington DC and are pillars of their shul in Silver Spring.

Shabbat is the festival of slow companionship, fellowship, and friendship if we choose to make it that way and to realize its full spiritual and social potential.

In summary, our tradition teaches that

1. Friendship doesn’t just happen. It requires effort, significant together time, and physical presence.
2. Friendship is not merely a sharing of information, but is spent together engaged in a mutually shared common pursuit in which two persons acquire wisdom and are open to challenging and criticizing each other in the pursuit of truth and understanding.
3. Friendship requires periods of unrushed, non instrumental time, the suspension of the regular marketplace and working conditions we live in during most of our week and most of our lives. Jewish tradition teaches that when we alter our pace of life on a regular basis we create the conditions for true friendship to flourish. This suggests that we be slow to make it true.

Jewish notions of friendship should instill in us a certain wariness about the claims and promises of technologically driven relationships. Our tradition wisely identifies the conditions for establishing enduring, deep, and meaningful relationships and friendships. No wonder the Rabbis were fond of saying. Havruta or Mituta. Friendship or Death. Without true friendship it is as if we are dead.

Finally, Jewish tradition conceives of the human and divine relationship as a friendship. At the beginning of Shabbat many congregations begin Kabbalat Shabbat with Yedid Nefesh-Friend of the Soul. The poem is a meditation on God as the ultimate loving friend. By cultivating authentic friendship we imitate God and also create the opportunity to friend God, lehavdil, in our quest for the most enduring relationship possible for us.