COMMUNITY
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ
ROSH HASHANAH 5777
TEMPLE SHOLOM

A student was visiting Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in the middle of the visit the great scholar of Jewish thought got word – a friend's sister had just died. Heschel rose from his chair announced to his student, "We have to go." They got in his car, they drove, to Boston and hour away and went to the house. Heschel walked in, hugged his friend, and sat beside him on the sofa for an hour. He didn't mumble a single word, not one cliché, not "How old was she?" Not "Time will heal." Not "I know how you feel." He just sat there; in silence for an hour and listened; when he friend was done talking he got up, he hugged him again and he left.

On the ride back the student asked Rabbi Heschel, "did you know her well, the sister of your friend who died?" Heschel responded, "I'd never met her." The student was puzzled, "then Rabbi Heschel if I can ask, why did we drive an hour to sit in silence on his sofa?" The great rabbi responded, 'because that's what he needed'.

Now you could assume that Rabbi Heschel drove to his friend's house because they were best friends, but they weren't.

You could imagine that he drove an hour each way because he was a rabbi, and yes rabbis do that but he was not this man's rabbi.

You could argue that Heschel rushed to be by this man's side because he was an observant Jew and it was a mitzvah. In that you would be half right. Rabbi Heschel did feel an obligation, a commandedness to be by the side of his friend in his moment of grief, but it wasn't only the Torah of these scrolls and these books that propelled him down the highway, it was also the Torah of community, the Torah of being in relationship with other people.

The great Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam calls this kind of Torah, *Social Capital*. "Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, *social capital* refers to connections **among** individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness" good will, fellowship and empathy that arise from being in relationship with others. (Putnam, Bowling Alone p. 19)

Heschel went to his friend because he knew that his friend would have done the same for him, his sense of community more than anything else demanded it of him.

Friends my message in this New Year is simply this – I want us to be for each other like Heschel was for his friend. To become a community that shows up for each other, that listens to each other, that has empathy for each other and is rich in social capital.

I know some of you, many of you will say to yourselves or those sitting next to you, “but we are that already” and in small pockets around this sanctuary I know we are. There are friendships in this congregation that go back decades. Many here have indeed sat in each other’s living rooms at shiva and danced at your children’s weddings. You’re probably sitting next to those people right now.

But look across the aisle, look a few rows this way or that, our congregation is growing, new people and families are joining us every week, you saw the Aliyah for our new members a few moments ago, 20 new families just since last year.

Do you have the same connection with those families? Do you know their stories like you know the ones of those within arm’s reach?

I want to confess something to you, I made a terrible mistake. From the moment I arrived as your rabbi three years ago I began every service with a brief period of welcoming. I asked you to rise from your seats, find someone you didn’t know, introduce yourself and wish them a “Shabbat Shalom”.

It didn’t work, not only because a number of you complained that it broke the mood you wanted for the service, or that you came to sit alone and not be bothered. It didn’t work because it was three minutes between candles and *l’cha dodi* and that’s not enough time, or the right time to broadened our circles of connection, expanded our social capital.