

Community and Connection, By Tobias Vogelstein, age 28

4000 years ago the Jewish nation would perform the unique mitzvah of Hakhel, by gathering in the Bais Hamikdash in a reenactment of the giving of the Torah. This communal act of devotion serves as an essential reminder that adherence to the Torah is the reason why the nation occupied and retained the Land.

In modern times, we maintain this tradition by going to shul. At shul, we form a deep connection with G-d, but it is also where we congregate and come together with our fellow Jews.

Though of course, I go to shul for one man.

Brian Goldberg is just about the sweetest man you'd ever meet. As my bar mitzvah teacher, Brian helped me learn my parsha in braille since I'm partially deaf-blind. He now runs a youth Minyan, commonly called the Teen Minyan at my local synagogue, which I've been attending for years.

We have our own little subterranean chamber in the corner of the synagogue that Brian likes to refer to as the dungeon.

It is just like any other service minus the cushioned chairs.

We daven, play games, and this one is important, eat the donuts that Brian orders for our break. But Brian goes above and beyond all that. Apart from frequently inviting the entire Minyan to his house for a backyard barbecue, he also makes an effort to arrive early and stay late after services to read to me.

The donuts, the trivia questions, the chance to win fabulous prizes; those are all incentives for everyone else. What I value most about the Teen Minyan is the time I get to spend with Brian, joking around, reading books together, and Brian is pretty much the only person left willing to play my favorite word game with me after everyone else got tired of declaring me the winner.

Of course I'm friends with several other members too, but other than a few brief exchanges during the service, and an email now and then, our communication skills could use some improvement. Thus my connection to them is nowhere near the bond I have with Brian.

I do try to pick out books that I think we will both enjoy. However, Brian would never tell me if a story is really up his alley or not.

So recently, I decided to try and give back to the community in my own way. About every Saturday, halfway through the service, Brian's friend, Doug, goes to the front of the room and gives a speech or D'var Torah either about something in the news or that week's parsha. I noticed that some weeks other members got up to give their own commentary on that week's parsha as well. So I thought I could do the same.

I am not a Torah scholar, and may not even be as religious as say, Doug, but I have learned a thing or two about storytelling. Mainly, just how by tightening the structure of it, the importance of a novel, stories exaggerate and just how special is the magic of community. Realizing that many of the themes found in a well told narrative could be traced back to specific life lessons imparted in the Torah, I started creating monthly speeches to shine a light on just what these

aspects could reveal.

Then the coronavirus hit, and everything changed.

Brian and I could no longer meet at shul. I could no longer inspire the other members with my brilliant insights, and for all intents and purposes, it felt like I have lost a friend.

This year, for the first time on the holiday of Pesach, my grandmother was unable to be with us for the Seder. Instead we had to break tradition, and bring her in on a zoom call. Though her visual representation was there, and she was most certainly with us in spirit, it just wasn't the same.

We are all living in a time like no other. The coronavirus has impacted our lives, our community, and our economy. But the Jewish nation is stronger than all that. If there's one thing that I learned through writing out my speeches, it's that the Jewish people put a high emphasis on the value of community. In the end, all you really have are the people you love. Not your job, not your career, not your awards, not your money, not your stuff. Just your people. Somewhere out there, there are scientists working round the clock to find a cure for this pandemic. We must have faith in their ability to bring these times to an end. Let's hope that time is soon. In the meantime, keep the connections you still have.

Keep praying, and if you're like me, keep writing to bring peace and prosperity to the world.