



Just say hello
Parshat Vayigash

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Izzy Cohen knew everyone. He knew street cleaners and street planners, dishwashers and executive chefs, secretaries and CEO's. His friends knew that an outing with Izzy meant lots of time waiting for him to schmooze. One day, a newcomer became frustrated with Izzy. He said, "it's just not possible that Izzy Cohen knows everyone—I'll prove it!" Izzy Cohen's other friends just laughed.

"Izzy," the newcomer said, "there's no way you know Tom Brady." Izzy just smiled and picked up his phone. "Hey Don, it's Izzy....thanks...Tom, what's up?"

When Izzy got off the phone, the newcomer tried again. "Izzy, there's no way you know Ellen DeGeneres." Again, Izzy smiled and fired off a quick text. A moment later, his phone rang. It was Ellen, Facetiming Izzy from her live show.

When Izzy hung up, the newcomer said, "Ok, fine, you know Ellen and you know Tom, but I bet you a trip to Rome you don't know the pope." Izzy just smiled.

When they arrived at the Vatican, the newcomer was so excited. He couldn't wait to win this bet and get a free trip to Rome. Just then, the doors opened above. He couldn't believe it. Out walked the pope and Izzy Cohen. The newcomer shouted, "I can't believe this guy!"

A tourist turned around in front of him, "you mean the guy with Izzy Cohen?!?"

So picture this—the other day, I'm telling this joke to a group of our teens at a Shabbat dinner. I know it's not the funniest joke, but I'm hoping I'll get enough of a laugh to win their attention for another 2 minutes so I can share a quick dvar. When I reach the punch line, the

adults in the room give me a weak “haha,” but the teens just stare at me with dubious confusion. As I start trying to explain the punch line—never a good idea—I realized that this joke is frozen in time. Our teens have a whole different paradigm for what it means to be popular. Today, it’s not about who you know, but who knows about you. Influence is measured by the number of ‘likes’ on Facebook, by how many followers you have on Instagram, and not necessarily by your ability to be conversant with everyone you come across.

And while it was never easy to start a conversation with strangers, it’s gotten much harder since the advent of smart phones. It used to be that teens and young adults depended on human contact for information and excitement during the day. Now, much of their need for socialization and entertainment is fueled by their device, and they have less energy and attention for strangers in their midst.

Take Natalie Hampton, for example. A few years ago, she was just starting out at a new school, ready to make new friends. But when lunchtime arrived, she couldn’t find anyone to sit with. It was as if Natalie was living out a scene from *Mean Girls*. She would walk up to a lunch table and students would tell her the seat was taken, or just ignore her while staring into their phones.

Eventually, Natalie gave up trying to find new friends. When she reached the cafeteria, she would walk straight to an empty table and sit by herself.

Four years later, Natalie is at a new school. She’s surrounded by friends. No more lonely lunches. What made the difference? According to Natalie, it was that first lunch. Instead of being labeled as “the girl with no friends,” when Natalie switched schools, she found a place to sit with people on her first day. That changed her whole social experience. Natalie realized that all teens are just one lunch away from a successful social life.

So Natalie decides to make a difference. Here's what's interesting. She could have become a public speaker and gone school to school talking about her experiences eating alone. She could have lobbied school boards and parents, working to change awareness about inclusion. Instead Natalie made an app.

Where students like Natalie once had to walk table to table looking for a spot to eat, Sit With Us creates a virtual map of the cafeteria where students can see exactly which tables are open to guests. No more awkward rejections. No more uncomfortable searching.

There is a challenge though. While the app protects teens from visible social rejection, it does so by training teens to focus on their device. The more teens focus in on their phones, believing that the app will solve the problem of lonely classmates, the fewer teens are looking around to see if anyone in the cafeteria needs help. In essence, the app trains teens to be less engaged with the people around them, even though they are using it to reach out to lonely classmates.

In many ways, this app represents what it is like to be a teen or a millennial today. On the one hand, technology offers instant connection, the opportunity to be in touch with an infinite number of people at the touch of a button, the ability to craft a solution to any social ill with a bit of coding and entrepreneurial genius. But, despite these technological advances, young people are growing more and more isolated. They have thousands of Facebook friends and Instagram followers, but the more time they spend with their screens, the fewer real time interactions young people have. Young people are losing the ability to be present in the moment, to see others in need, and to start up a conversation with strangers that doesn't start onscreen.

This is a problem, not only for the social fabric in our communities, but also for the well-being of every young adult. Anxiety and depression are on the rise. 62% of undergraduates

reported overwhelming anxiety last year. That's up from 50% in 2011. Hospital admissions for suicidal teenagers have doubled over the last 10 years. Even the Izzy Cohens of our generation are susceptible to the psychological ills of technology. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 1 in 3 teens suffers from diagnosable anxiety.

So where does this leave us?

Interestingly, these questions emerge already in our Torah reading. Our ancestors weren't sidetracked by iphones, but they were often so consumed by their own individual experiences that they failed to really see the people around them.

Isaac was so traumatized by his near-sacrifice that all he could think about was raising a son who would be strong enough to survive in a dangerous world.

Jacob was so consumed with his own story that he stole the birthright from Esau and lavished attention on his favorite child while disregarding the talents and needs of his other children.

Joseph was so consumed by his own story that he forgets about getting back to Israel, allowing his family to become rooted in Egypt.

In every generation, pain and suffering was caused by individuals who couldn't see beyond their own screens.

After generations of limited perspective, Moshe breaks this pattern. He sees beyond his life in the palace, not only empathizing with the suffering of the people around him, but also tuning into God's voice speaking to him through the natural world. Because Moshe is able to see beyond his own story, because he is able to be present for the people around him and gather community together, Moshe is able to change the trajectory of Jewish history.

Moshe is not the only one who can do this important work. Let me tell you about two of our teens. Jourdan Coller is incredibly self-aware and self-confident. He has autism, something he will readily share with you, and a deep desire to be a part of our teen USY community—especially now that he’s in 8th grade. But Jourdan needs a buddy to participate in USY events.

Matt Walensky is a 10th grader who went with us to Israel last year. He is musical and friendly, and currently serves on our USY board. When I asked him if he would be willing to be a buddy for a teen who otherwise wouldn’t be able to come to the USY Chanukah party, he immediately said yes.

On Saturday night, Matt arrived early to meet Jourdan and his parents. Keep in mind, Jourdan has never been to a USY event before and there are 80 teenagers streaming in to rock it out with a DJ and strobe lights. We were a bit nervous. But within a few minutes it became clear that there was nothing to worry about. Matt and Jourdan walked in together and were immediately surrounded by a group of teens at the video game station. When the DJ invited the teens to pair up for a game, Matt and Jourdan were the first to line up. I wished I had brought my phone so that I could capture their smiles.

Later that night, I went up to Matt to make sure he knew he could spend time with his other friends too. He said ok, and when I next turned around, he was bringing Jourdan a drink and starting up a new game.

Whether we say hello with an emoji or with a smile, we can all make a difference by simply paying attention to the people around us. We can change the world by asking, “how are you?” and really meaning it. Chanukah may be over, but the miracles we create together have only just begun.