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I have 159 friends. I think that's a reasonable number. Now I know people who have over 300 or 400 friends. Even 500. But I only have 159. I probably could have more. I think that if I committed more time to finding more friends I could boost my numbers. Maybe get up to 200, even 250.

It is true that I would not recognize some of these friends if I ran into them on the street. And I would probably grumble if I had to make coffee dates with some of them. But since they are only Facebook friends, I don't really have to have coffee with them. All I have to do is scroll through their posts, see who is watching which television shows with their children, who has the personality of which mammal, and who drank which flavor latte today.

To be honest, I was really excited when I first got on Facebook. I reunited with childhood friends – it was very touching. Especially when I found my dear friend, Iris. She's married and lives in Detroit. I even got a little nostalgic for high school. But then I got overwhelmed, and then I got bored. And now I have all of these long lost friends sending me messages. And I'm busy. So I ignored them. And now I feel guilty.

My mom told me that she wants to be my friend. "Sure," I said. "But since when are you on Facebook?"

"I'm not," she replied.

"So how can I be your friend?"

"I don't know. It just seems like everyone is friends with each other. Maybe I could find out more about your life if I were your friend."

And now back to that guilt...

I wonder how much we really learn about each other from Facebook. It is true that my cousin recently announced his divorce – not just to his wider circle of friends but to his siblings – over Facebook.

It is true that it allows us to keep in touch with old friends. I recently ran into my friend, James, and asked him how he was doing. He replied, "Are you on Facebook? 'Friend' me and you can see pictures from my vacation. Gotta run." And he was gone.

We are increasingly connected to wider and wider circles of people. But are these connections powerful enough to generate and sustain intimate relationships?

Ten years ago Thomas Friedman wrote an op-ed in the New York Times where he tells the story of an Israeli man who was pulled over in the town of Netanya because his car was swaying from one side of the road to the other. The cause of this? It seems that this man had a cell phone in each hand, and engrossed in both conversations, was steering the car with his elbows.

This was ten years ago – before Blackberries, I-phones, blogs, wikis, Friendster, Myspace, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Skype, and of course Twitter – the ultimate micro-blogging tool for connecting us 24-7. Now we worry about people texting while driving.

Technology does enable us to become increasingly connected with greater numbers of people – and it can be extremely useful. It has made the enormous world we live in just a little bit smaller. We can communicate with anyone anywhere anytime. We can organize people in ways that were never before conceivable. It can make the work we do more efficient, more effective, and sometimes, more entertaining.

Friedman deplored the story of the Israeli driver as a symptom of “overconnectedness” – but I disagree. The problem is not that we are *too* connected, but that we are not connected enough, that is, in a real way. For while Facebook and Twitter allow us to communicate with huge numbers of people, they do not, in and of themselves, create *real* connections among us.

When my partner, Renee, is asked why she’s not on Facebook she says it’s because she’s not interested in “fast food friendship.” “Are your 159 friends going to bring you shiva meals? Would they babysit if you were in a bind?” she wants to know.

I’m not nearly as strident as Renee is about Facebook, and sometimes I think it is kind of fun. Facebook, and every other technology that connects people together, has the potential to shape relationships in new ways and to enhance real communities. But the problem is that all too often they create a false sense of community.

Community. What an overused and misused word in our discourse today – everything is a community. A virtual community. A business community. A Facebook community. The very concept has been manipulated and watered down almost beyond recognition. Community is about interlocking human relationships, participation and cooperation with others, shared values, a sense of caring, a spirit of connectedness. Building community takes hard work.

Political Scientist John Freie in his book entitled *Counterfeit Community: The Exploitation of Our Longing for Connectedness* argues that the idea and practice of community has not only declined but mutated. We long to be connected to others, but in the absence of genuine community we are susceptible to counterfeit claims of community – claims that promote economic agendas instead of social relationships. Counterfeit community offers us an easy way to fulfill our communal longings by superficially and symbolically linking us to others and avoiding the challenging work of navigating complex human relationships and building bonds through human interaction. And so we are left with “gated communities” and “chat rooms.” The problem, however, is that while they pose as communities, they do not offer anything of substance. In the absence of a web of real relationships, genuine, sustainable community is impossible.

The truth is that we have become less connected with each other over the last century. As sociologist Robert Putnam showed in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* we participate less in neighborhood groups, civic associations, and community politics. We join religious institutions and social clubs at lower rates. We spend less time with family and friends. We vote less. We participate less in community.

It's not that we don't want to be connected to each other. We do. But creating real community is a radical act. Because in real community we are asked to be responsible for each other, to live up to our highest ideals, and to expect certain behaviors from each other. Facebook and the like are tempting because they do not require much of us. They do not make demands on us.

We are wary of demands on our time, of being overcommitted. Fair enough. But the question is, “What are we committing to?” On this Rosh Hashanah we ask, “Are we committing ourselves to community? Are we reaching out beyond ourselves? Are we doing our fair share? Are we structuring our lives around doing mitzvot, around performing sacred acts of human kindness?”

When we do a mitzvah for someone else – bringing a meal, offering a ride, attending a shiva minyan, providing childcare – it provides something of value for that other person, and that is significant in and of itself. But it also cultivates generosity within ourselves. As Jewish tradition teaches, “*Mitzvah goreret mitzvah* – one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah.” The more we do, the more generous, compassionate, and loving we become.

Community makes demands on us, but it also connects us intimately to other people. It ultimately affirms something that is so important: We matter. We count. We are more than just a Facebook friend. We are responsible for each other.

Many of us have experienced significant losses in the past year. We have lost jobs or significant income. We have watched those we care about become ill and we have struggled with the death of loved ones. Life has perhaps become more precarious. In the face of loss we need each other even more. We need people with whom we can share our hurt, fear, regret, anger, and sadness. And we need to be needed.

The only way to sustain real community is to reach out to others. And yes, it is risky. Whenever I visit someone who is ill I feel slightly nervous when I knock on the door to the hospital room. What if they don't want to see me? What if it's the wrong time? What if I don't have anything valuable to say? The truth is – sometimes they don't want to see me. It is the wrong time. And I don't have anything valuable to say. But it doesn't matter. What matters is that we show up. What matters is that we make ourselves available. That we join, participate, and be there for another person.

Sometimes we are overstretched and we cannot do one more thing. Sometimes we need to prioritize our own well-being. Sometimes we just need to say no. But what about all of those times when we could say yes, when we can commit to community. We can pick up the telephone and reach out to someone who does need our help. Maybe our intentions are totally pure – we reach out because we genuinely want to help someone else. But maybe our intentions are not totally pure – we reach out in order to fulfill some need of ours. It is true that we should consider our motivations and examine why we are doing what we are doing. But really, what matters is that we do the mitzvah. If we only did mitzvot when it didn't feel risky and the time was right and our hearts were pure, the truth is that we would not be doing many mitzvot. Community is messy, commitments are messy, responsibility is messy.

There is a story of a Rebbe who asked his students, “How do we know when the night is over and the day has come?” The students proposed all sorts of answers. “Is it when I can tell the difference between my field and my neighbor's field?” “Is it when I can tell the difference between my house and my neighbor's house?” “Is it when I can see an animal and can tell whether it's a cow or a horse or a sheep?” “Is it when I can see a flower and distinguish its color?”

“No, no, no,” the Rebbe shook his head sadly. “Night is over and the day has come when you look into the face of your neighbor and you can see that he is your brother or your sister. That you belong to each other.”

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us be more than Facebook friends. Let us go beyond mere Twittering. Let us lay down our Blackberries and look into the face of our neighbor. And let us commit ourselves to building real communities and real relationships, showing up, reaching out, and giving of ourselves.

*L'shanah tovah*, may it be a good year.