

***“Va-yelchu sh’neihem yahdav ... va-yelchu sh’neihem yahdav.”***  
**“They walked, the two of them, together.”**

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Of all the powerful words in this morning’s searing Torah portion, these ring in my ears. *“Va-yelchu sh’neihem yahdav,”* “They walked, the two of them, together.” Here are Abraham and Isaac, on their way up the mountain, the father to sacrifice the son. Isaac asks, “Where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” And Abraham replies, “God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son.” Here are two people as close as father and son can be. We are told how Abraham loves Isaac, and we can imagine how Isaac looks up to and admires his father. Yet how far apart they are in this crucial moment, as they accompany each other toward the unimaginable. We can only guess at what is going through their minds. Is Isaac, as some commentaries imagine, in some way aware of where he is going and what is supposed to happen to him there? Or, as the plain sense of the text seems to suggest, is he oblivious and full of wonder at this strange journey that his father has taken him on? Either way, how many questions and anxieties might he be carrying with him! How much might he wish to hear his father explain everything to him! As for Abraham, is he filled with perfect faith and unquestioning obedience to God’s command? Or is he wracked with guilt and pain and anger as he walks up the mountain toward the moment when everything he has been given may be taken away? Either way, how much might he long to share his feelings with his son! How might Abraham wish that he could make Isaac understand the impossible position in which he has been placed! But instead, neither of them speaks the things that are in their hearts. They walk together with mouths closed, together but alone. All we—and they—have is this brief and enigmatic talk about a sheep. As it turns out, the Torah records that those are the last words they ever speak to each other in their lives. *“Va-yelchu sh’neihem yahdav.”*

What fascinates me about the repeated use of this phrase is that the words themselves describe a paradox. *“Va-yelchu”* is pretty straightforward—“they walked.” *“Sh’neihem”* is a little more complex. It comes from the word *“shnayim”*—“two”—and appears 60 times in the Hebrew Bible. Although in modern Hebrew it is often translated “both of them,” when we look at its context in the Bible, it is always used to describe people who are very different, often even polar opposites of each other—Adam and Eve, Avimelech and Abraham, and so on. It suggests separateness rather than collectivity, which is why I translate it as “the two of them”—two individuals, each unique and separate from the other, each a world in his or her self. *“Yahdav”* has the opposite meaning. It comes from the root *“yahad”* meaning “to be united,” so it means “together” —deeply connected to each other. So the phrase means something like, “As they walked along, they were two separate and disconnected beings who were, at the same moment, profoundly connected to each other.”

Now, if we reflect on our own lives, this is not such a surprising way to describe a human experience. Each of us is an incredibly complex being, and there are so many things happening both within us and outside us at every moment that we have a hard time even being conscious of

them all. And we know that the myriad of thoughts, and feelings, and impressions, and urges, and emotions that we experience internally are amazingly hard to communicate to others. Our media of expression—our language, our expressions, our bodies—are just not up to the task. So much of what is within us will forever remain inaccessible to anyone else, even to those to whom we feel the closest. That can make the connection between our internal selves and our friends, families, and co-workers hard to maintain. We've all had the experience of thinking we are perfectly in sync with another person, walking together in perfect harmony, only to have them open their mouths and reveal that they are a million miles away from us, a million miles from where we thought they were. Even when we are standing right next to someone, there can be a level of separation or alienation between human beings that can be difficult to overcome.

This truth is illustrated by a well-known Jewish story set in the medieval period, when Jews were often pressured to participate in disputations—formal arguments with Christian clergy. The results of these disputations were rarely, as we might say, “good for the Jews”; even participating in them was risky. The story goes that once a disputation was arranged between the local priest and Yankele, the village fool, who was the only one willing to take on such a dangerous assignment. For reasons known only to the storyteller, the disputation was to take place in sign language. The priest began by drawing a large circle in the air. Yankele replied by stamping his foot on the ground. The priest, looking worried, responded by holding three fingers in the air. Yankele held up one finger. The priest nervously grabbed a chalice of wine and a loaf of bread, drank a bit of wine, and ate a bit of bread. He began to look a little happier. Then Yankele stepped forward with an apple and took a big bite. At this point, the priest threw up his arms in despair and cried, “I give up! Let the Jews live here and be well!”

Startled by the outcome of the disputation, the priest's followers gathered around, asking for an explanation of what had happened. “My children,” said the priest, “I began by drawing an arc, reminding the Jew that God is everywhere. But he stamped on the ground, reminding me that God was not in hell. Then I raised three fingers for the Holy Trinity, but he raised one finger to show that God was One and indivisible. Finally, I took out the holy bread and cup of salvation, but then the Jew brought out the apple, reminding me of original sin, and I knew that our argument had ended.” Meanwhile, the Jews had gathered around Yankele, also demanding an explanation. “Certainly,” said Yankele. “First the priest pointed far away, meaning that the Jews had to leave this town and find another place to live. No, I replied, stepping on the ground, we were going to stay right here! Then he tried to tell me that we had three days in which to leave; I held up one finger, meaning that not a single one of us was leaving. Finally, I guess he gave up, because he took out his lunch—and so I took out mine!”<sup>1</sup>

The interesting thing about this story is that it doesn't first appear in the medieval period, and it isn't originally about a Jewish-Christian disputation. In fact, scholars have discovered an ancient version of this story in Greek sources, in which the disputants are an Athenian and a Spartan! Clearly, this story is not so much about the differences between Christians and Jews as it is about the irreducible differences between human beings and how difficult it can be to reach across the divides that separate us. Whether the divisions are those of age, of family role, of gender, of class, of ideology, or just of habit—how do we bridge the gaps that hold us apart? As

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *The Big Book of Jewish Humor (25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition)* by William Novak and Moshe Waldoks (HarperCollins 2006), pages 88–89.

individual and unique as we all are, how can we truly accompany each other on our journeys? How can we walk together?

As most of you know, before I was a rabbi, I was an anthropologist. And I have to say that using the past tense is not really appropriate here. Just as with lawyers and others who have been trained to look at the world in a certain way, so too with anthropologists: once an anthropologist, always an anthropologist. As you can imagine, anthropology, the study of human beings, has a lot to say about human difference. In fact, its starting point is the idea that human beings are radically, almost unimaginably different from each other. Not only that, anthropologists argue that the differences that are obvious to us, that we can see most readily—like skin color, clothing, and language—are not the only or even the most important ones. They are only the tip of the iceberg. The really radical differences between us are those that are hidden: our patterns of thought, our ways of understanding the world, our beliefs, even our perceptions, the ways that we see and interact with the material world.

If this were all that anthropology brought to the table, there would be good reason to despair. If we are so incredibly different from each other, how can we possibly connect? Luckily, anthropology bases its claims of insight on the idea that, as different as we are, there is a way to bridge the gaps. Because we are all human, we can build on that similarity to start to break through the walls of difference that divide us. If we try to understand other people based only on what we can observe on the surface, we are doomed to failure. As crowded as our world becomes, we will walk through life alone. Instead, we need to try to go inside, to see the unseen. We start by assuming that others are, despite their differences, fully complex human beings parallel to ourselves. From that starting point, we can begin the process of entering into other people's worlds, considering reality from their point of view, putting ourselves in their place rather than trying to understand them from our own place. Then we start to be able to walk with them from a place of deep connection and shared frames of reference that can give meaning to even the most traumatic and difficult of circumstances.

Like Abraham and Isaac, we are all on a journey. And we all have people who are accompanying us, and whom we are accompanying in turn. Sometimes we are walking through moments of great joy and fulfillment—a wedding, the birth of a child, a graduation, a bar or bat mitzvah, a high point in our personal or professional lives. And sometimes we are walking through moments of trauma and grief—an illness, an accident, the death of a loved one, depression, a serious financial or professional setback. Either way, we may be filled with conflicting emotions and anxieties, with words of fear or words of appreciation that we long to share with those around us. But too often, like Abraham and Isaac, our fears silence us. We walk together but apart, unable to express what is in our hearts. Silence engulfs precisely the moments in which such incredible meaning could be added to our lives, if only we could connect with those around us.

Sadly, what is true in our personal lives is equally true in our communal lives, in our neighborhoods, in our cities, and in our nation. We have gotten used to being divided by our differences and locked in our own experiences, alienated from each other. We sometimes even treat others—whether separated from us by politics, religion, or something else—as if they are not fellow travelers on our journey, as if they cannot accompany us and we cannot walk with them. This alienation from people who seem on the surface to be the most different from us is

bad for our world, bad for our community, and bad for our souls. Combating such terrible alienation is one of the central goals of our programs at the Centre. While many of us make important contributions toward this goal—by visiting the frail or infirm, by bringing dinner to families with new babies, by giving rides to those who can no longer drive—there is so much more we need to do, especially for those on the margins of our community. That is why, this year, we are redoubling our efforts to reach out to those within our GJC community who might feel disconnected. We are reaching out to seniors, in an initiative supported by Sid and Bunny Stein, and we are reaching out to young families, through a grant created by Judge Harold Berger. We are also reaching out into our Mt. Airy neighborhood to connect with the Henry School through our Applaud Creativity program, supported by the Federation. And we are reaching out further to connect with other religious communities through our Muslim-Jewish Dialogue program with Muslim partners from the Foundation for Islamic Education. It is too easy for us to fall into the habit of walking the paths of our life separately, disconnected from those around us, only scratching the surface of the potential deep connections we could be forging. We must all do more to connect.

On this second day of Rosh Hashanah, the Torah portion issues us a challenge: “*Va-yelchu sh’neihem y<sup>h</sup>dv.*” We see Abraham and Isaac, walking together but walking separately, silent about all that they could be sharing about the important journey that they are undertaking together. How often are we doing the same thing, walking separately from our partners, from our children, from our parents, from our friends, from those closest to us? How many times have we let the opportunity for connection slip away and failed to say what needs to be said? How much have we relied on shorthand, on the raised finger or the stomping foot, instead of making the effort to speak and to hear, to truly accompany each other?

The Unetaneh Tokef prayer we recite today reminds us that life is brief and its events are impossible to predict. How much we can truly connect with those who walk through our lives with us will determine how meaningful the time that we have on earth can be. So I urge all of us to use this High Holiday season to take stock and to reach out—to our families, to our friends, to our community, and beyond. The time is now, the path is in front of us, and we need each other to walk with.

May we all walk forward together into a new year filled with light and blessing and peace for all of us and for all the world.

L’shanah tovah.