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Community
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I don't know how many of you saw this in the paper, but Maurizio Montalbini passed away last week. I know, you're thinking "that name rings a bell, but I can't place it." Montalbini was the Italian sociologist who spent months in a cave studying how the mind and body cope with complete isolation. According to the Tribune, he claimed his first world record after spending 210 days alone in a cave in the Apennine Mountains. He broke this record six years later when he was underground for 366 days. The newspaper said that he was survived by his wife.

You know, something just doesn't sound right about this story: He was survived by his wife? What did he say when he headed off to work? "Bye honey, I'll be gone for a little while. I'm spending the next seven months in a cave. Don't forget to feed the cat." I know what some of you *guys* are thinking. You're thinking: he must have had cable and a fridge down there. All kidding aside, there was no cable or fridge. It was just Montalbini in a cave for seven months, by himself.

Can you imagine what that experience must have been like? To not see another soul, not hear another voice, except your own echoing off the walls; to not see the passing of the seasons or even the sun, to not know what's going on in the world above; it's scary to contemplate, let alone to actually do. How would you pass the hours? There's nothing to read, nothing to listen to, nothing to create, what would you do?

When Montalbini was asked how *he* coped with the stress of being alone, he said: "One cannot fight solitude; one must make a friend of it. I succeeded in doing this. I carried everything inside me for seven months – affections, convictions, ideals."

The contrast between Montalbini's experience and our own lives could not be more stark. He lived alone in a cave, while we are so well-connected that the mere thought of being out of reach for five minutes makes us break out in a cold sweat. Do you know that when I meet with families to sign the ketubah before a wedding, I have to remind them to shut off their cell phones. I tell them that everyone they want to speak to is already here, and if they're not, it's really okay if they miss that call.

And then I see the men slowly take their phones out of their pockets and shut them off. Honestly, it's a bit painful to watch because everyone looks so uncomfortable. It's almost as if turning off their cell phone is like I'm asking them to stand there naked. They look so insecure, like they know that the moment they turn it off something important is going to happen and they won't find out about it till later. The Bears might score a touchdown, the market may jump, a war might break out, and they'll be left in the dark. How are they supposed to cope with being so far out of the loop?

And yet, as I look at the relationship we have with our mobile devices, I've begun to wonder. Is the reason we're so attached to them *really* because we want to be connected, or is it the opposite? Maybe the reason we're addicted to our cell phones is because they give us a convenient escape route. As long as I have my phone, there's always a possibility that I might be needed someplace else, right now! More

often than not, these devices don't connect us, they disturb us; disrupt us; take us away. That little ring tone, or buzz, not only does it prevent us from paying too close attention to whoever we're with, it also sends a subtle message. It says: you may not be as important to me as whoever is calling. Excuse me while I make that judgment.

The sad fact is that so many of our lives revolve around running from place to place, from one conversation to the next. We're on the move so much that many of us have lost our ability to connect. In an odd way, our lives are *not* so very different than Montalbini's. For even though we don't live in a cave, we've *also* learned to carry our affections, convictions and ideals *inside* of ourselves. We carry them inside, because our lifestyle doesn't encourage us to share them with others.

In truth, the biggest difference between Montalbini and us is that when you're living in a cave, *you can't escape the fact that you're alone*. When you live up here in our world, so busy with everything under the sun, it's much harder to notice how alone you really are; how much life you're missing.

Am I wrong? Too harsh? Tell me: how often are you fully present in your life? Is there any place you give your undivided attention? Is there anywhere you go that your phone doesn't travel with you? Phones were *supposed* to help us stay in touch, keep us connected, but more often than not they get in the way and interrupt our lives. Sadly, this happens so often that we've become accustomed to it. We hardly notice how much we've lost.

Sometimes I wonder how different the world would be if cell phones had been invented earlier. If they had cell phones back in Abraham's day, he wouldn't have heard God's call. If they had iPhones in Isaac Newton's age, he wouldn't have discovered gravity. (A bad "Apple" joke.) And if Moses had a Blackberry while he was out with his sheep, he never would have seen the burning bush. Luckily for us, Moses wasn't texting. He was fully present; able to see the sign and appreciate the moment.

And yet, Moses' response on that day was actually a bit surprising. He seemed a bit underwhelmed by God's call. In fact, he tried to turn God down. When God said go to Egypt and free our people, Moses actually said no. "Why won't you go," God asked. "Because I stutter," Moses said. "I cannot be your spokesman."

When God heard Moses' response He spoke to him with compassion. God said: "Moses, you are a man of honesty, integrity, and justice. These are the qualities that make you worthy. How can you think that a stutter would diminish you in my eyes?" Moses smiled sadly and replied, "I wasn't worried about how I appear to you. You are merciful and kind. But Pharaoh, and even the Israelites, they are the reason I wish to decline this task. They are not as compassionate as you. They will seize upon my imperfection and demean not only me, but you as well. They will say: 'Man who was made in the image of God, does your God stutter as well?' And this would be more than I could bear."

Unfortunately, Moses' concern is true. It's not God's harsh judgment we fear the most; it's our neighbors, our boss, and our "friends." Sometimes it's even our spouse, our parents, or our children. People can be cruel. I believe this is part of the reason that we keep that phone in our hand so often, and run away from relationships, because we're not perfect, and in our world people use imperfections as weapons against us.

We live in a harsh world, where anyone in the public eye is subject to scrutiny. Entertainers, athletes, politicians, their lives are recorded day and night, and anything they do that can be condemned will be found and put on display. Our society pursues these people, searching for flaws. Why? I'm not sure. Are we really any better off knowing what we find? Does knowing the details of the Governor of South

Carolina's affair, for instance, does it make us better people? You'd think so given the amount of time we focused on it.

And even more disheartening than how we treat our celebrities, is the fact that this approach to life has become the norm, and it doesn't only impact adults. Children have to cope with it every day as well. Early in life our children learn that they are constantly evaluated, and not only by their parents and teachers. Actually, the evaluation they fear most is that of their classmates. For girls, it hits its apex around seventh grade. When they want, kids can be sweet as angels. But they can also be cruel and vindictive, especially to each other. We parents often talk about carefree days at school, but our memories tend to leave out the pain we felt when we were there. And that pain, scrutiny and evaluation, many of us still carry those wounds with us today.

But there is an alternative to this judgmental American way of life; there's the Jewish way which teaches that instead of being subjected to a lifetime of evaluation, there should be one day a year on which we're judged; this day, Yom Kippur. For 364 days a year God accepts us, holds us, and loves us despite our flaws. And on one day a year, this day, we judge ourselves. We look into our soul and ask how we're doing. Can we do better? Can we improve? While our culture preaches non-stop scrutiny, evaluation and judgment, Judaism teaches love, opportunity, and hope.

This last year has been very challenging. Many of us have suffered. Some have lost jobs; others have lost a loved one. Some are doing their best to deal with illness, while others are coping with a failing marriage. In addition to these assaults on our ego, many of us still carry ancient wounds, suffered long ago; barbs that afflicted us when we were children, which we never let go of; barbs which our children still face every day.

We live in a world of wounds, and it takes a tremendous amount of *courage* to be true to ourselves and share who we are with others. It takes *strength* to be honest. It requires *trust* to believe that we'll be respected, and a leap of faith to believe that what we share from our hearts will be valued, that others will accept us for who we are, and not use our shortcomings against us.

I say these things because I know them to be true. Like everyone, there are parts of me that I've hidden away and kept inside; old wounds that have left their mark and impact my life even today. I want to share one of those old wounds with you now. It's not remarkable in any way, and yet it opens a door to how I see myself, and provides me with an opportunity for growth in this New Year.

When I was in school, I was one of the youngest boys in my grade. I was also very short and terribly uncoordinated. The part of the day I dreaded the most was gym. It didn't matter what we were doing, I could never do it well. When we played basketball, my shots didn't make it up to the rim. When teams were picked for softball, I was always left out. When positions were assigned, I was told to play deep center. So deep, that by the time I walked in at the end of an inning, my team had already finished batting and was heading back out onto the field.

Now I know that this might not seem like a big deal to you, but as a fifth grader, it was the most embarrassing situation you can imagine. And even though decades have passed, there's part of me that has never outgrown those feelings of doubt and anxiety. When I'm in social situations, part of me still feels like a small, uncoordinated kid who is hoping that no one will notice that he doesn't fit in. We all have our flaws. Moses was a stutterer. I was bad at gym.

As I said before, there's nothing remarkable about this admission. Everyone has experiences that leave them less than whole; things that they don't talk about, aspects of themselves they keep hidden away.

But that's not how life has to be. We don't have to live in a cave and carry all our anxieties and fears inside of us. We can acknowledge our pain, and share it. And if we do, if we have enough trust to share the hidden pieces of ourselves with those we love, with those who love us, the transformation can be remarkable. How do I know? Because I've had that experience as well.

I'm often asked how I became a rabbi. Today I'll share an answer that I've never spoken of before. I don't think I'd be a rabbi if I hadn't participated in a Teen Encounter when I was sixteen.

I remember that weekend well. I was dropped off at a hotel by my parents on a Friday and told that they would be back to get me on Sunday. That was about all I knew about the program. After signing in and getting a roommate, I headed down to a large space where around thirty other teens were gathered. Each of us had a notebook and a pen, and the program began.

Actually, the program was very simple. A topic was introduced and a couple of teens shared their feelings about it. Then we listened to a song about the theme. Afterwards we were given time to write on the topic. When everyone was finished, we were offered a chance to share what we'd written. That was the structure for the whole weekend.

What was strange to me about the program though, was that early in the afternoon on Saturday, people began saying how incredibly blessed they felt, how grateful they were, and how special everyone in the room was. I have to tell you that when this started happening, I had absolutely no idea what they were talking about. I began to think that my parents had sent me to a cult. These powerful testimonials of love made no sense to me at all. They made no sense until I was overcome by the same feelings that they had been describing. And what's remarkable is that three decades later I can still remember what it felt like. It was like being washed over by a wave that left a sense of calm, trust, and joy in its wake; it was the feeling of unconditional love.

It really feels strange to admit this. After all, I had spent less than 24 hours with these people, who had been total strangers to me. But at some point during that day I realized that I could pour my heart out to these people; I could tell them who I was, what I felt, what I believed, and no matter what I said, they would listen and accept me. No matter what I said, I would not be judged.

And the reason that I was able to be so open and honest with them, is because the sharing was reciprocal. *They* were opening up their hearts to me, sharing their hopes, their dreams, their wounds, and I was willing to accept them for who they were. There was no judgment in that room, there was only acceptance.

There's a great power that lies dormant in each of us. This power is awakened through relationships. It comes alive when we open our hearts to others, and they open their hearts to us. It comes when we suspend our sense of judgment and replace it with acceptance. It is a sense of wholeness, peace, and love, that each of us can have. But it requires something of us. It requires that we make time for each other, give others our undivided attention. And it requires us to have the courage to be honest, to share our hopes and dreams, our wants, and desires; to know that when we share these feelings, we will not be judged; we will be embraced for having shared them.

None of us is perfect. We each have our flaws. And today, this day is about being honest enough to admit it to ourselves and to God. I know that I have not tried hard enough to set aside the distractions that overwhelm my life. I know that I rarely give my undivided attention to my wife and children; that I'm torn away from them by events which are serious, but just as often, I allow the trivial to interfere as well. This has left a loss in my life, a loss that cannot be replaced. I've missed out on some experiences

which will never come around again.

Judaism teaches that out of 365 days in a year, only one of them is for judgment. The rest of the year, the other 364 days, are days of acceptance. Days where our challenge is to be present for the people we care for, to put distractions aside, and to listen when they tell us who they are. I know that it's not possible to do this every day; there are not enough hours in a week. That's why we were given Shabbat, a designated time to put aside the distractions of life, and focus on cherishing each other.

Every year, life seems to pass more quickly. The days run together; they fly by. But despite the swift passage of time, each year also contains opportunities for the timeless moments of joy and happiness which can become lifelong memories.

These moments are not few or fleeting. They are always available to us, every hour of every day. To enjoy them requires just two things. We need to set aside distractions, and we need to let go of our sense of judgment and accept our loved ones for who they are.

If we can do this, our lives will be filled with treasures, with laughter and joy, with pleasure and tears; with riches we can carry with us wherever we go. In this New Year, may we each unlock our storehouse of riches and enjoy the beauty and holiness of life which surrounds us. Amen.