

Chevruta O Mituta: A Life Without Partnership Is No Life At All

Rabbi Ari Sunshine, Rabbi Adam Roffman, Rabbi Shira Wallach
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Before he became a great sage and a Torah scholar, Reish Lakish was a bandit, a thief.

He was so large, so muscular, legend tells us, that one day, when his daughter came in and asked him why he was sleeping on the ground and not in a bed, he replied, “My body is my mattress.”

But he was not just strong, he was also cunning, with a mind as sharp as his sword.

Once, he fell into debt and to satisfy his creditors he sold himself to the Roman gladiators, using the money he earned to pay them off. Knowing that combatants were given one wish before they entered the arena so that their blood would be sweetened by their good mood, he asked for a rock and one and a half swings at his new employers. He never made it into the arena, because there was no one left to fight.

Reish Lakish’s teacher and Talmudic sparring partner, Rabbi Yochanan, was so handsome that when the light reflected off his smooth skin, it was almost blinding.

It was said that to increase the number of Torah scholars in the world, he used to sit outside the mikvah where wives would immerse before returning home to their husbands, hoping that he would inspire them to create new sages in his own image.

So how did this Talmudic beauty and beast become master and student?

One day, Rabbi Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan River, when Reish Lakish, spotting him and believing him to be a beautiful maiden, jumped in to pursue him.

Marveling at Reish Lakish’s powerful body, Rabbi Yochanan, who sensed greatness wasting in his bathing companion, challenged him—“Your strength should be for Torah study.”

“And your beauty should be for women,” Reish Lakish replied to his pious companion.

To entice Reish Lakish to join him in the beit midrash, the study hall, Rabbi Yochanan offered him his sister, almost his equal in beauty. Reish Lakish accepted.

Over the course of many years, Rabbi Yochanan taught his pupil all the Torah he knew, until he too earned the title, *rav*, teacher. But having given over the best part of themselves for the sake of their relationship, each man began to grow resentful and jealous of the other.

One fateful day, when their discussion turned to the process of forging metal into weapons, the words exchanged dealt a fatal blow to their relationship.

“A bandit knows the tools of his trade,” Rabbi Yochanan seethed.

“What good have you done me, Yochanan?” Reish Lakish demanded of his former teacher. “For when I *was* a bandit, they called me master. And now that my ability has surpassed yours, here I am the master as well.”

“I have brought you under the wings of the *shechina*, the presence of God,” Rabbi Yochanan screamed, his face turning red and ugly.

Wounded and weak, the once mighty Reish Lakish withdrew from the Beit Midrash, never to be seen there again.

After that day, the two never spoke. And deaf to the calls for reconciliation with the man who, more than anyone else, had become his equal, Rabbi Yochanan allowed Reish Lakish to die of a broken heart.

This tragic tale is often told on Yom Kippur as a reminder of how and why close relationships so often falter.

It seems inevitable—when two strong-willed people seek the same knowledge and the same power, in this case the power to know God’s will through Torah study, how else could the story end?

In our own lives and in our own relationships, we’ve seen the same forces at play—ego, inflexibility, arrogance.

How often have we held people in our lives hostage to the mistakes they’ve made, no matter how much they’ve grown or how infrequently their old habits surface?

How many times have we walked away from a friendship because we were too proud to admit we could have been wrong or that our temper got the best of us?

And too often, whether at work or at home, when those we've mentored and nurtured no longer need our help, or worse, use what we've given them to draw a different conclusion or make a different choice, we feel taken advantage of, or left behind.

The unmistakable message of this story is that partnership is hard.

And it is particularly hard now, in this hyper-polarized age, where every influence on our lives seems to be pushing us further apart, causing us to ask questions once unthinkable.

How could I ever have called someone I can barely speak to a friend?

How can my neighbor call himself an American?

How can my family member call herself a Jew?

But to be sure, more than anything, what doomed Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan's relationship was not the resentment fostered by the title they shared.

It was their inability to see and celebrate how profoundly each of them had changed for the better because they were different.

In the Talmud, in Tractate Bava Metzia where this story is recorded, there is no hopeful sequel or suggestion as to how to avoid such a destructive dynamic. There is only a warning in a similar story in Tractate Ta'anit—*chevruta o mituta*, partnership or death.

But if there is an answer to be found to protect and encourage partnership, surely it is in our tradition's prescription for death's antidote—the creation of life.

When God created the universe, God did so in pairs: God called light and darkness into being, separated out the heavens from the earth and the waters from dry land.

But when God created *us*, Genesis 2 teaches, God created us as a single being. Why? Because unlike the moon or the sun, we know what we are missing when we are alone.

It was out of Adam's yearning for companionship, one that still burns within each of us, that God decided to create Eve, assigning her the role of *ezer k'negdo*. The one who helps him by standing opposite him, by offering him an opposing point of view.

After Reish Lakish's death, Rabbi Yochanan was bereft. To comfort him, his colleagues bring him a new, much more agreeable study partner, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat, in the hope that his companionship would again make Rabbi Yochanan whole. Instead, maybe for the first time, Rabbi Yochanan realizes why, without Reish Lakish, he can never be whole again.

“In my discussions with Reish Lakish,” he tells ben Pedat, “he would raise 24 difficulties against every claim I made in an attempt to disprove him. And, in turn, I would raise 24 objections against him. **Only through our disagreements, could we reveal the truth behind God's word.**”

There's more.

In the first creation story, Genesis 1, the Torah gives an alternate description of how God created humanity. *Zachar u'nekeivah barah otam*. Male and female, God created them.

But the midrash sees this not as the creation of two separate entities, but one. Male *and* female, emphasis on the and.

This fascinating interpretation implies something much more profound than what distinguishes our bodies from one another.

In that first being, God placed *all* of what it meant to be human in one container. The logical next step is that when God separated out this one creature into two, each one contained something the other did not and yet, at the same time, desperately needed in order to be whole.

Chevruta o mituta. Without companionship, without those who challenge and refine us—not because they are in competition with us, but because they love us and because we also complete them—none of us can say that we truly live.

As their relationship progressed, Reish Lakish bested Rabbi Yochanan in his knowledge of Torah, but it was through that process that Rabbi Yochanan truly earned the title he had carried throughout his life, the title of rabbi, of master teacher.

And while Reish Lakish's life became less of a thrilling adventure after he met Rabbi Yochanan, what he gained was something that would sustain him long after his muscles began to atrophy and his nerve gave way to a wizened caution—a loving family and an adoring community.

When we truly commit to each other, when we sacrifice a little of ourselves for the sake of another, we may, indeed, lose something we once treasured, but sometimes, in the losing, we discover something even more precious that we gain.

Tonight, in the Aaron Family Main Sanctuary, Beck Family Sanctuary, and at Beit Aryeh, the three of us wanted to share this joint message with you about the importance of seeking partnership, for several reasons.

First, of course, because it is Yom Kippur and tonight, each of us can and should pledge to do more in our personal relationships to find ways to stick together, to see our differences with our family and friends as opportunities for growth and change.

Second, because, as I'll explain in just a few minutes, we believe that sacrificing just a little of who we are for the sake of a greater good, like community, for example, has been, and must continue to be, a bedrock principle of our success and of our future.

And third, because it's important to us, as your rabbis, that, just as we do, you come to know and take pride in how our relationship with each other has been strengthened by our commitment to stand by and with each other for many years to come.

**VERSION 1 ARI: When I applied for this job at Shearith back in February of 2017, I came into the process with typical expectations of the Senior Rabbi and Assistant or Associate Rabbi dynamic, emerging from the standard model of the last generation or so of the rabbinate. Namely, the working relationship would be largely hierarchical in nature, with me as the Senior Rabbi assigning tasks and

responsibilities to my associate colleagues at my discretion. All of us would be working together to serve Shearith, while I also mentored them in preparation for their inevitable move within a few years to become Senior Rabbis at another congregation, at which point we would go and hire new Assistant Rabbis and start the process all over again.

As someone who was making a move from serving for 11 years as a solo rabbi at a 400 family congregation to serving in a congregation where I would finally have some help to share the exhausting load of rabbinic duties, I was very much looking forward to that aspect of the transition and to working with Rabbi Roffman and Rabbi Wallach.

Those were my expectations as I started my work here in July of 2017. Upon my arrival in town, I stayed with Adam and Shira (and Hannah, this was in the B.R., Before Rebecca, era :) for a couple of weeks while waiting for the closing date for our house. They opened their home to me and pretty much every evening we sat together on their couch and talked about the shul and all of its facets and began to brainstorm and dream together of what this community could yet look like. And thus right out of the gate I—and we—discovered the potential for a partnership that could transcend the normative hierarchical model that all three of us had been expecting, and become something so much more. While in these five years since there have certainly been ample times where I have led the way and Adam and Shira have deferred to me and followed in the path I've been charting, it's also equally true that Adam and Shira have been charting their own paths in their work here at the shul, with my full support. When people ask me how my job at Shearith compares to my previous solo pulpit in Maryland, my standard response is, "I'm a lot busier here, since it's a much bigger congregation with a lot more going on all the time, but I'm considerably less stressed". And the reason for that is because of the dynamic we have here and the support I feel from Rabbi Roffman and Rabbi Wallach in our rabbinic work. There is no situation I would not trust either of them to handle if I were unavailable or out of town, and I am comforted in knowing that their experience, talents and people skills qualifies them to navigate any crisis that might present itself. Our friendship and bond runs deep, and I admire and respect each of them for their unique gifts, such as Adam's energy and talent for producing and directing amazing Purim shows and other synagogue events and his aptitude for all things techy, and Shira's pied-piper-esque ability to simultaneously connect with young children and adults at the same time through the warmth of her teaching and music.

With all that as a backdrop, I was thrilled when in February 2021 Rabbi Roffman and Rabbi Wallach made clear their desire and commitment to stay here at Shearith long-term to continue our community-building journey together. I told them and our lay leadership that Shearith is so much the better with our rabbinic team staying intact, and that the three of us have much more to contribute to writing the next exciting chapter of our congregation's story.

****VERSION 2 ADAM:** When Shira and I told our teachers and advisors that, after we were ordained, we planned to work together in a pulpit position at the same synagogue, they told us we were nuts. One or two even suggested we might end up divorced.

They assumed that spending so much time together as partners, not just in building a home but also in building community, would eventually breed competition, resentment, and conflict that would poison our love for each other. We would be risking not only our marriage, they argued, but also the wellbeing of whatever synagogue was crazy enough to hire us.

Why did we take the risk? Because we believed then, just as we do now, that the basic building blocks of a synagogue are not made of metal and bricks but families and relationships. Do families occasionally disagree and bicker? Yes, they do. And if you ask any of our colleagues here at Shearith, they won't deny that, occasionally, in a staff meeting I've rolled my eyes at Shira and her eyes have darted arrows right back in my direction.

But one of the reasons our marriage is so strong is because we refuse to let those conflicts derail us or deter us from our work—we can't afford to. We've learned to make space for each other, to be patient with each other, and, sometimes, to do the hardest thing of all—to let things go and let the other person be who they are without standing in the way.

Our investment in each other and in our children is made stronger by our commitment to this community.

Our teachers and mentors, well-intentioned as they were, eventually admitted that, perhaps, the advice they gave us, was too focused on what might go wrong instead of all the wonderful things that could go so right.

But here's the thing. It turns out that in thinking that our destiny and our success as rabbis was intertwined exclusively with each other, we weren't exactly right either, were we?

As younger rabbis, when we closed our eyes and dreamt of our future together on the bimah, we imagined ourselves as imah and abbah, the parental models of a larger congregational family. But little by little over the past 5 years, that picture began to change.

When Rabbi Sunshine came to Shearith in 2016, our plan was to help him transition successfully, support him and his vision while continuing to serve this community faithfully, and then, when the time was right, take the next step in our careers by finding another community that would embrace our unique model of rabbinic leadership.

But not long after Ari began his tenure as Senior rabbi, it became quite clear to us that his model was pretty unique on its own terms. As you all know, Ari possesses considerable talent, passion, and drive for building Jewish community. But what you should also know is that as a colleague, Ari approaches every conversation as interested in our ideas and in our perspective as he is eager to share his own. And as our senior colleague, he has most often been our partner, not our superior; our collaborator, not a delegator; and our vocal cheerleader as much as he has been our treasured coach (And they don't even have cheerleaders in baseball!).

Several years ago, if you had asked us what it meant to be a rabbi, we would have told you that a rabbi is someone who possesses the knowledge and wisdom necessary to maintain and grow a kehillah kedoshah, a sacred community. And for a time, Shira and I believed that together, alone, we'd be enough—for each other and our community.

Thanks to Ari, our definition now is much changed.

A rabbi is someone who sees and believes in the value and potential of each and every member of his community.

A rabbi is someone who privileges sacred relationships over all things.

A rabbi is someone who knows that, despite all he's learned and all he's lived, he is never enough, otherwise, what is the point of having community at all.

When Shira and I made the decision to stay here at Shearith, it wasn't because the model we dreamed of wasn't possible, it was because, for us, it was no longer relevant.

**VERSION 3: SHIRA

When Adam and I told our teachers and advisors that, after we were ordained, we planned to work together in a pulpit position at the same synagogue, they told us we were nuts. One or two even suggested we might end up divorced.

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When Rabbi Sunshine agreed to become our senior rabbi five years ago, Adam and I were thrilled. We knew under his leadership, Shearith would be in good hands, and that our job was to set him up for success in transitioning to his next assistant rabbis. For the good of our beloved shul, we offered ourselves as open books, sharing any insight or context we thought would be helpful. Before moving into his new house, Ari spent a couple of weeks living with us, and I started to look forward to the hours-long sessions each night as the three of us sat together, downloading and reflecting and wondering and listening. The questions that Ari asked showed that he was deeply interested in learning from us, that he valued our experience. And when we asked him for his thoughts, they were at once practical and visionary, warm and strategic.

And in the years since then, Adam and I have continued to find a wonderful partner in Ari—someone who both complements us and pushes us to be the best versions of ourselves. We still love having high level conversations about mission and vision, but then all three of us understand how each of our individual talents and skills will be needed to bring our plan to fruition—and we rejoice—that not one of us, or even two of us, contain everything we need.

ALL:

There was a time when communities went out in search of a rabbi who could do everything and anything, and whose identity was synonymous with the institution, where a community would ask itself, “without him, what would we be?”. What we’ve found during these five years working together is that a community with clergy at the center who love and need and rely on each other, who complement and complete each other, is more inspiring and fulfilling than the leadership of any one person could be. This principle of partnership will be guiding us in the next step of our relationship with each other and in our work together. You’ll be hearing more about that later in the fall. But our partnership is also a microcosm of a way

we can approach the importance of relationship in our personal lives, and also what has made our Shearith community as a whole so successful. When we are able to put aside a little of ourselves or maybe even give up something important to us and do some personal *tzimtzum*, contraction, for the sake of maintaining the relationship and strengthening each other, we end up better off. It may seem like we're sacrificing something in order to maintain relationships and stick together, but when we look closer at the result of that *tzimtzum* or those sacrifices, we can see that it was worth giving up a little something because by virtue of preserving the partnership, we have actually gained so much more than we've lost.

What are some examples of ways in which members of our Shearith family have given up something important to them in order to stay together and continue building our community? At various intervals in our past, Shearith has been through some tough times, and people may have had good, and even potentially compelling, reasons to leave Shearith for another synagogue, including: having members of their family belonging to another area shul, geographic distance considerations, or affinity for a specific rabbi who may have moved on to another pulpit. Those who stayed through those difficult times made sacrifices to remain part of the community that they cared about. And even now, amidst a particularly divisive era in our country, when some people may want politics from the pulpit and an affirmation of their specific viewpoints on controversial issues, we have tried to be one of the few places where people can find sanctuary in a real sense from the tension that plagues our society, where we can love sitting next to each other in shul and breaking bread together at kiddush not despite our different beliefs, but sometimes even because of them. Do we paint with too broad a brush? Perhaps, but we would argue it's worth the sacrifice or trade off to keep our community together as one. People could throw up their hands and leave, or they can give up a little piece of themselves and stay because we are enriched by the challenges of healthy, occasionally debate-filled partnership. And we should celebrate how our commitment has given back in dividends: our membership grows across all demographics, our religious school is the largest and most vibrant it's been in years, and our culture of philanthropic giving has soared to places we could never have imagined.

It is YOUR love for Shearith and YOUR desire that we—all of us, we as rabbis and we as a congregation—stick together, that has helped us realize that we are not complete without each other. This desire to stick together through highs and lows, through disagreements and debates, is what has made our community so special. Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish realized too late that their partnership elevated them both in a way that was worth putting a little of themselves aside. We are

grateful to you, our Shearith family, for giving Adam, Shira and me the tremendous gift of allowing us to see how sacred our partnership is with each other and with you. We can't wait to see what yet lies ahead for all of us, and we hope you'll also seek out chevruta—partnership and relationships that nourish our souls and challenge us to grow—as individuals, as Jews, and as members of our community. *Chevruta o mituta?* Partnership or death? We emphatically affirm *chevruta* and say, “*L'chayim!*”, to Shearith Israel's vibrant life and future.

AMEN.