

Last February while in Washington D.C. participating with our Confirmation class in the LeTaken Social Justice Seminar, put on by the Religious Action Center of the Reform movement, I was joined at the elevator by another chaperone. As I said "Hello," I realized that this was someone that I had seen before. I introduced myself and she did the same. That's when it hit me. "You know," I said, "according to Facebook we should be best friends!" She laughed acknowledging the 75 "friends" we had in common. "Yes," I thought to myself, "but, I have no idea who you are."

If you have spent any time on Facebook you have likely had a similar experience: people who want to be your "friend" or who are suggested to you by Facebook and you have no clue who they are. Clearly Facebook uses the term quite loosely. Acquaintance would probably be better? But, "Someone has requested you as an acquaintance," is just awkward.

So, here is a test to measure your Facebook relationships: How many of your Facebook 'friends' have 'refrigerator rights?' That is to say, how many could come into your home, go directly to your refrigerator and make themselves something to eat? That is refrigerator rights. Think about those people. Excluding family how many do you have. One? Two? Five? Ten? I'll bet the number is nowhere as big as your Facebook 'friends' list. These are people you can go to and discuss practically anything and know you will be hugged, accepted, comforted, or even challenged when necessary.

Dr. Will Miller, to whom I am grateful for the idea of "refrigerator rights," notes his great concern for us both individually and societally due to our shrinking network of such relationships. Our infatuation with social media such as Facebook, he theorises, is, in part, a vain attempt to recreate the 'refrigerator rights' relationships we are missing in our lives. He suggests that technology has become our drug of choice for numbing the pain and dulling the discomfort we may be feeling from that lack of refrigerator rights relationships. Rather than engaging reality, we watch it instead. We live vicariously through all our various screens. We become Facebook voyeurs, peering in on the personal dramas of others we barely know. We get overly emotionally connected

to two dimensional reality show characters as if we have refrigerator rights relationships with these people. Our feelings of personal outrage when our favorite gets booted off would belie the fact that we have no idea who these people really are. And the time we spend in front of a television, or on Facebook, or on a smartphone is time that we could spend developing refrigerator rights with real people -- instead of Snookie, who, I guarantee you, would not let you anywhere near her refrigerator.

Almost weekly I stand outside our school office and watch a gaggle of high school students walk by, each texting on their own phone. I will often comment to them as they pass, "You know, you could put down your phones and actually talk to each other!"

This in miniature is exactly the problem according Dr. Miller: our media attachment is isolating. Research shows that the *real* damaging effect of technology is not the *content*, as miserable as most of it is, but rather, that it limits our social interactions. In turn, those interactions we do have are often angrier and filled with more aggressive interpersonal behavior. (Miller, p.89)

Now, as many of you know, this is the pot calling the kettle black. I adore my technology. I love being able to grab my smart phone and 'google' an answer (although after Rabbi Shawna's Rosh Hashanah message, I will now be wondering what Google is not showing me!) And I certainly have plenty of "al cheyts" to offer today for my own use of technology when I should be focusing instead on the refrigerator rights people sitting in front of me.

But our technology addiction is really just a symptom. What really ails us is an isolation resulting from societal mobility that is a hallmark of contemporary American life.

Let me conduct a very informal and most unscientific poll. Raise your hand if:

- your parents live in a different city than you?
- your siblings live in a different city than you?

- your children live in a different city than you?
- most of your extended family lives in a different city than you?
- you have lost close connections with the friends you grew up with?

If you raised your hand, you could unknowingly be suffering the isolating effects of reduced refrigerator rights relationships.

Mobility, of course, is not a new issue. From the beginning we have moved to the frontier seeking new opportunities and possibilities. It is part of the archetypal myth of the strong, independent frontiersman, striking out on his own, exploring new frontiers and boldly going where no man has gone before! Our own transiency supports the frontier myth for, once we separate from family and community, as a matter of survival, we must become stronger, more independent, more self sufficient and very often, more isolated. Daniel Boone and Johnny Appleseed may be iconic figures of the great American frontiersman, but they also probably didn't have much of a support network. I'll bet they felt quite lonely a great deal of the time and wished that they were surrounded by friends with whom they shared refrigerator rights.

In truth the pioneers heavily relied on each other. Think about the very American idiom we use when someone is in trouble and needs our help and support: we "circle the wagons," It is a saying that derives, of course, from wagon trains, crossing the frontier together - and in times of danger - circling up to offer common support and defense. For those of us who set off on our own pioneering journey to "find ourselves," we often discovered we had left behind those with whom we had refrigerator rights. We also discovered that the kind of support we receive from those with whom we shared those rights is hard to replicate. It takes time, commitment and energy to build a community willing to circle their wagons for you. So, let's be honest the American myth of the strong, independent frontiersman is really just a myth and really not so American.. AND it is also *so not Jewish*. Our's is the story of a pioneering people, who traversed the wilderness together.

It's not that being strong and self-sufficient is a bad thing. It's just that, ultimately, our quest is the pursuit of happiness. That, as Dr. Miller would say, is the 'end game' in human living. [p.81] And for the vast majority of us that involves close attachment to others.

These connections have the benefit of helping us to live not just happier, but also healthier lives. We know that those suffering illness and loss fare much better in the context of a community offering meaningful support and comfort. What is true for those with obvious afflictions is equally true for those of us whose suffering is just as real if more quiet and less obvious. We may be fooled by the myth and think we can do it on our own, but as Dr. Miller writes, "You cannot change yourself by reading a book or watching a tape. Even if you are riveted and inspired by what you read or hear, you won't become different on your own without the ongoing support of other people close at hand." (p.166) The reality is that although we fervently desire to change from the inside out, personal change is actually initiated from the outside in -- by our environment and the input we get from others who have refrigerator rights in our lives. Now, all change also has its associated stress and discomfort. If we are serious about successfully completing the transformation of which we speak on this day, we need the strength and support of those with refrigerator rights.

Beyond the personal challenges of this day are the trials emerging from these incredibly difficult times. In short, horrific economic hardships and a social and political environment that actively seeks our polarization and isolation. There are no solutions to be found in isolation. If we are to succeed, it must be together. Now more than ever, we *all need the refrigerator rights relationships that are at the heart of this community.* So here's the good news: we are the cure! Really! A recent Gallup poll on happiness found that *we* are the happiest religious group in America. Which means that you are sitting in the Happiest Place on Earth! A commentary on this survey pointed out that this may be a result of Judaism's primary focus on the here and now. Our's is a message about what we each can and *must* contribute to the journey we are making together *at this moment.* The Jewish ethic focuses on each of our responsibility

to work towards a better “me” that I might help build a better ‘we’. That is why we pray today not in singular isolation but in the plural: al cheyt shechatanu, for the sin *we* have sinned, avinu malkeynu, *our* parent, *our* sovereign. The promised land we envision is not some otherworldly place, nor is it my place alone, rather it is a vision of the caring community we are trying to build here ... together ... right now!

Now, building that kind of connection takes time and patience. It is not a microwave experience. There are bound to be plenty of ups and downs and lots of just average every day moments in-between. But if you stick with it, at some point you realize that an important and undeniable bond has formed and “this” story has become part of ‘my’ story.

Until Dr. Miller gifted me with the idea of ‘refrigerator rights’ I struggled to find the right words to describe so much of what we experience here at TAS. This is what our president, Lisa Kantor spoke of in her heartfelt Rosh Hashanah message. The passion she expressed for this place was not for the Temple but about her *family, this family*. Family is what the children and parents in our ECEC begin to build as they take their first steps on a journey that will lead them to confirmation. And family is why, for 28 years now, I have taken every opportunity to passionately speak about the importance of Confirmation. At this critical moment in their lives both teens and their parents need the strong, supportive refrigerator rights relationships found here.

And, of course, it is those refrigerator rights relationships that compel us to join together at times of both personal and communal tragedy and joy. We come here to circle the wagons. That kind of relationship is waiting here for anyone willing to put down their iPhone and seek it out..

Are we perfect? Certainly not. Show me the perfect family and I’ll show you another great American myth. But together we keep trying to get better. *That is what this day is about: getting better together.*

Today we are given the gift of time, away from the demands of our work, away from technology, to consider our pursuit of happiness. What does that mean for you? Have you sacrificed your spiritual and emotional fulfillment in the name of product oriented success? Have family, friends, community become only background to your career pursuits? Shouldn't it be the other way around? If you think so, perhaps it is time to truly heed the words of our Torah urging on this day to "Choose life ...that you may *live*." NOT just exist, but *live* a life of real, deep and meaningful refrigerator rights friendships. Our tradition which knew nothing of Facebook or refrigerators, teaches with simple eloquence that together we are stronger than we can ever be on our own: חזק חזק ונתחזק . be strong, be strong, that we might be strengthened. These words encapsulate the foundational message of this day. And they are, as well, my heartfelt prayer, that we will recognize that we need each other and give our hands, our hearts and our strength to the continuing journey of this community towards the Promised Land that we can only reach together.

חזק חזק ונתחזק be strong, be strong, and, without a doubt, together, *we will be stronger*.