



A Momentum Publication

THE ART AND PRACTICE
OF LIVING
WONDROUSLY

Edited by Dr. Ronit Ziv-Kreger

Momentum's Director of Education

With articles by thirty-seven incredible contributors

Hebrew calligraphy by Avshalom Eshel



The Art and Practice of Living Wondrously
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For our parents, who always reminded us
that “we are not Russian, we are Jewish.”

Thank you for teaching us that
“we are a gift from God.”

Love,
Helen and David Zalik

There's no single playbook for a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, intensity, and ambiguity, but that doesn't mean we are without options or collective wisdom to guide us forward. *The Art and Practice of Living Wondrously* offers present-day reflections, questions, and practices from revered spiritual, organizational, and communal leaders to help us create more positive, productive, and hopeful futures.

— **Lisa Kay Solomon, Futurist in Residence at the Stanford d.school, best-selling author, and award-winning civic innovator**

This book is for anyone seeking to live Jewishly with joy and pride. Its articles, introductions, and practices are gems, offering accessible wisdom to elevate your daily life.

— **R. David Aaron, best-selling author of *Living a Joyous Life: The True Spirit of Jewish Practice* and *Endless Light: The Ancient Path of Kabbalah***

This transformative work illuminates a path toward rediscovering life's purpose, showing us how to move from disconnection to wonder, from fear to openness. For anyone seeking to live fully awake to life's possibilities, this book is an essential companion for the journey.

— **Sarah Waxman, CEO and Founder of At The Well Project**

This inspired collection by leading Jewish voices will guide you to realize that, rather than searching for miracles, you and your life are the greatest miracle of all.

— **Dr. Zohar Raviv, International Vice President of Education Strategy for Taglit-Birthright Israel**

Dr. Ronit Ziv-Kreger has put together the ultimate book to support your quest for a fulfilling life. This is a book that you will have occasion to turn to again and again.

— **R. Joseph Telushkin, author of *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History*; *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History*; and *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How the Words You Choose Shape Your Destiny***

In our business we are dedicated to promoting holistic well-being and empowering people to lead healthier, happier lives. *Living Wondrously* deepens our understanding of well-being and revives the art of finding wonder in our everyday lives.

— **Sammy Rubin, Founder and CEO of YuLife**

In an era of uncertainty and complexity, this book illuminates our path, inviting us on a journey of spiritual renewal and connection to eternal Jewish values, offering practical tools for a life of meaning.

— **Dr. Aliza Lavie, former Member of Knesset, social entrepreneur, and best-selling author of the National Jewish Book Award winner *Iconic Jewish Women: A Jewish Women's Prayer Book***

You, me, and our entire generation of Jews need this book. We all know there is great wisdom in Judaism, but it takes vision and skill to bring it to bear on issues that are of real concern to people today. This book does just that, and you will find yourself tapping it time and again as a rich handbook for becoming a better parent, friend, student, and leader — Jewishly!!

— **Alan Morinis, Founder of The Mussar Institute; author of *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar***

The Art and Practice of Living Wondrously is an extraordinary collection of life wisdom. This is a book to be read slowly, discussed with a partner, and shared with those you care about or would like to care about.

— **R. Dr. Zvi Grumet, author of *Genesis: From Creation to Covenant* and co-author of the commentary in *The Koren Lev Ladaat Humash***

Through its masterful weaving of ancient Jewish wisdom and contemporary insights, this book provides a refreshing and profoundly practical road map for transforming everyday experiences into opportunities for meaning and connection.

— **Joanna Landau, Founder and President of Vibe Israel and co-author of *Ethical Tribing: Connecting the Next Generation to Israel in the Digital Era***

This book is a feast of the best of Jewish and general wisdom about the most important issues in life. What a gift!

— **R. David Jaffe, Founder and Director of Kirva and author of the National Jewish Book Award winner *Changing the World from the Inside Out: A Jewish Approach to Personal and Social Change***

It's not our struggles that give us wisdom — it is rather our tradition's wisdom that lifts us through the struggles to joy. Each time you struggle, this book will invigorate you with that wisdom, told through a tapestry of insights and stories, so you can rise through pain and confusion to find wonder.

— **Deborah Gilboa, MD, author of *From Stressed to Resilient: The Guide to Handle More and Feel It Less***

The greatest asset we will ever have is ourselves. This fantastic book takes us on a journey through relationships, challenges, and hope — three of the most important areas of our lives. Embrace *The Art and Practice of Living Wondrously*, for through it you will embrace life, with all the incredible goodness it has to offer, and you will find life embracing you in return!

— **R. Dr. Benji Levy, CEO of Share**

Who knew that Judaism is bursting with wisdom for every aspect of our life? Every author in this book knew; what a joy that each shared a precious treasure with us all.

— **Lori Palatnik, author and Founding Director of Momentum**

For anyone seeking the chutzpah to live authentically and intentionally, this book is your road map. *The Art and Practice of Living Wondrously* fuses timeless Jewish teachings with practical guidance, transforming everyday challenges into moments of wonder and profound connection.

— **Julie Silverstein and Tami Schlossberg Pruwer, co-authors of the bestselling book *Chutzpah Girls: 100 Tales of Daring Jewish Women***

Teaching our teens the “art and practice of living wondrously” is a legacy parents can bestow upon their children. It is a forever gift.

— **Dr. Bruce Powell, Head Emeritus of de Toledo High School and author of *Raising A+ Human Beings: Creating a Jewish School Culture of Academic Excellence and AP Kindness***

These pages pulse with a vision of vibrant Jewish living that is truly transformative. The writings are deep and yet accessible. They are presented in an interactive framework that encourages the reader to personalize and integrate the wisdom directly into their daily lives. Read and be transformed!

— **Chaya Lester, psychotherapist, co-director of the Shalev Center for Jewish Personal Growth, and author of *Ink from Ash: Healing & Empowerment from the Oct. 7th War, Lit: Poems to Ignite Your Jewish Holidays*, and *Babel's Daughters: From the Bible Belt to the Holy Land***

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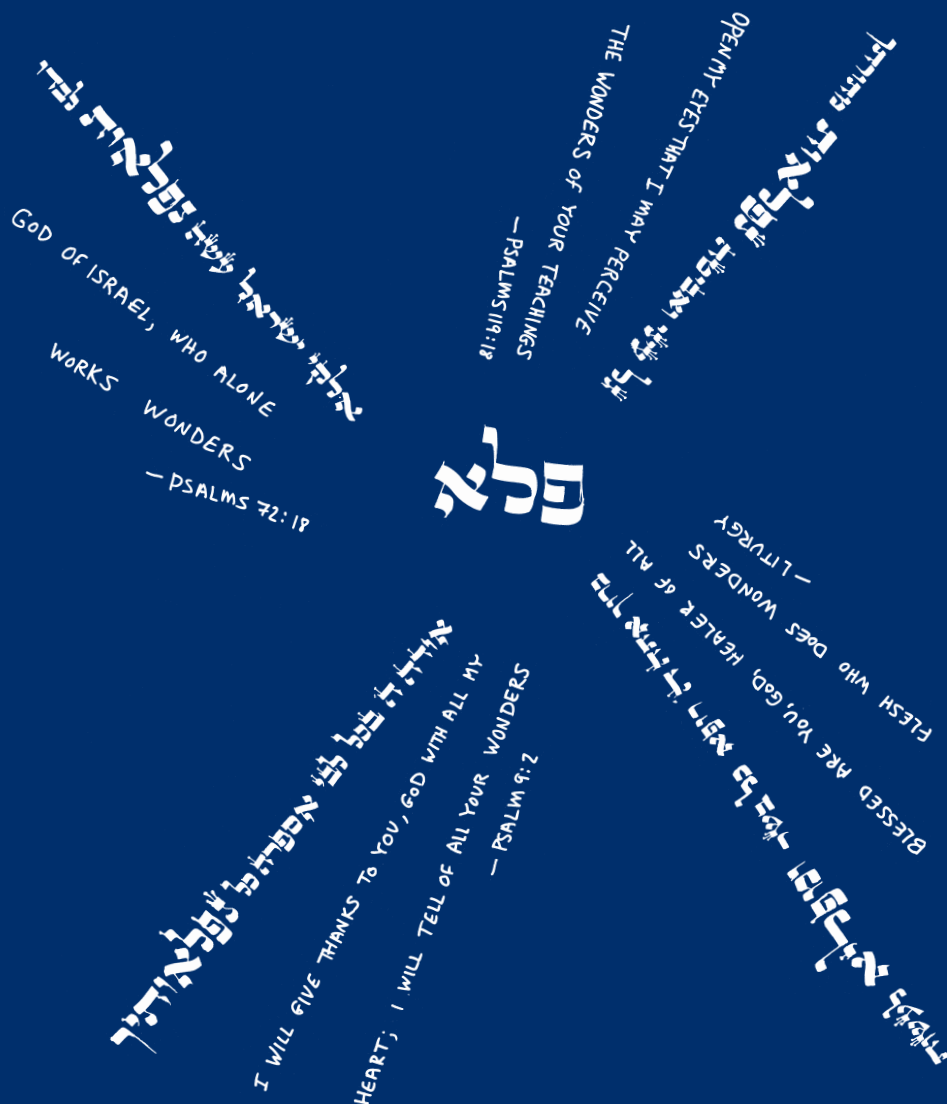
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THE ART AND
PRACTICE OF LIVING
WONDROUSLY



Introduction

What Is Living Wondrously?

This book invites readers to open themselves up to a new way of living, one in which they greet the world and welcome the wonder they find in it. In living wondrously, we add an extra portion of vitality, connection, and purpose to our existence. It is a mindset that is about embracing life and uncovering pathways to wisdom and wholeness.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote poignantly about wonder and the Creator: “Who lit the wonder *before* our eyes and the wonder *of* our eyes?”¹ The magnificence in creation is not necessarily what we regularly see before us; in order to see it we must open our eyes and look. Our ability to do so is itself a magnificent gift.

Not all types of sight expose wonder. In looking at the world around us (or the news about it), people often see a dark and dim reality — and miss a deeper, concealed beauty. The Hebrew language seems to acknowledge this. The letters for the Hebrew word for dark or dim, *afel* (אפל), spell the word for wonder when put in a different order: *peleh* (פלא).

Further, the Hebrew word for world, *olam* (עולם), is related to the word hidden, *alum* (עלום). It hints to an essential fact of living: Precious gems are often concealed. We are sometimes oblivious to unseen wonder and beauty that lie below the surface.

The Hasidic master Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbits teaches that this is the message embedded in the biblical story of the twelve scouts² whom Moses sent to tour the Land of Israel.³ The trouble didn’t begin when ten of the twelve scouts returned with a scathing report. It began with their outlook. He asserts: “Moses instructed the scouts to gaze into the inward depths, telling them to ‘tour [the land].’ Had they done so, they would have seen that in the depth the land

1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951, p. 75.

2 Also known as spies.

3 Numbers 13–14.



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is filled with goodness, but they only looked at the externalities and saw it as a 'land that consumes its inhabitants.'"⁴

Rabbi Leiner is aware that perceiving wonder is not simple. He laments that the scouts didn't call for help as King David did: "Open my eyes, that I may perceive the wonders of Your teaching."⁵

Living wondrously begins with your outlook, with seeing yourself, the people in your life, and the world around you in a deeper manner. You can uncover wonder anywhere and everywhere. It is near you, even *in* you. There is wonder in how your body functions, in parts of you that you do not usually appreciate. You can find nobility beneath foibles and struggle when you offer a patient gaze of caring to yourself and the people around you. Wonder can be discovered by tuning in to the most minute aspects of your immediate environment, such as the intricacy of a leaf or an insect under a magnifying glass. But it can also be sensed when looking at the night sky, a majestic view, or towering architecture.

In everyday life, we find ourselves needing to attend to concrete and practical reality. Should we relegate searching for wonder to vacation or weekends? Recent research has shown that frequently encountering awe and wonder, even for brief moments, is beneficial for mind, body, and overall well-being.⁶ The search for wonder should not be curbed to special occasions but intentionally incorporated into daily living.

In fact, research has shown that experiencing awe and wonder reduces stress and inflammation, bolstering long-term health.⁷ Regularly experiencing awe in nature alleviates symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and aids healing.⁸ Wonder helps people feel more connected to one another and promotes pro-

4 Mei HaShiloach, Torah portion Shelach..

5 Psalm 119:18.

6 Barbara L. Fredrickson, "The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions," *American Psychologist*, 2001, 56(3), p. 218–226.

7 Jennifer E. Stellar, Neha John-Henderson, Craig L. Anderson, Amie M. Gordon, Galen D. McNeil, Dachner Keltner, and David DeSteno, "Positive Affect and Markers of Inflammation: Discrete Positive Emotions Predict Lower Levels of Inflammatory Cytokines," *Emotion*, 2015, 15(2), p. 129–133.

8 Craig L. Anderson, Maria Monroy, and Dacher Keltner, "Awe in Nature Heals: Evidence from Military Veterans, at-Risk Youth, and College Students," *Emotion*, 2018, 18(8), p. 1195–1202.



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social behavior.⁹ Awe has been shown to foster curiosity, problem-solving, and creativity.¹⁰ And, by shifting attention away from the self toward something greater, wonder encourages us to prioritize the well-being of others, leading to more ethical behavior.¹¹

Acclaimed researcher Dr. Dacher Keltner explains, “How does awe transform us? By quieting the nagging, self-critical, overbearing, status-conscious voice of our self, or ego, and empowering us to collaborate, to open our minds to wonder, and to see the deep patterns of life.”¹²

This book is designed to guide you as you bring wonder and awe into your life in ways that resonate with what is important to you. The book’s first section is about fostering connection and belonging in relationships. Its second section relates to perceiving hidden nobility in the challenges we face. And its third and final section explains how we can become agents of hope, fortifying the world and the people who surround us.

How to Use This Book

Each chapter in this anthology explores an aspect of daily life as an invitation for inquiry into living wondrously. This book is meant to provide practical insights and offer guidance into practices for cultivating awe and well-being.

Each chapter has articles from three or four authors of different backgrounds who collectively bring personal stories, valuable insights from social science research and Jewish wisdom to provide different pathways into personal and spiritual growth.

To make the most of what this book can offer you, rather than read passively and intellectually, engage with the insights. Consider reading with a pencil and mark what strikes you, argue with the ideas, weigh them against other ideas and

9 Paul K. Piff, Pia Dietze, Matthew Feinberg, Daniel M. Stancato, and Dacher Keltner, “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2015, 108(6), p. 883–899.

10 Yang Bai, Laura A. Maruskin, Serena Chen, Amie M. Gordon, Jennifer E. Stellar, Galen D. McNeil, Kaiping Peng, and Dacher Keltner, “Awe, the Diminished Self, and Collective Engagement: Universals and Cultural Variations in the Small Self,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2017, 113(2), p. 185–209.

11 Melanie Rudd, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Jennifer Aaker, “Awe Expands People’s Perception of Time, Alters Decision Making, and Enhances Well-Being,” *Psychological Science*, 2012, 23(10), p. 1130–1136.

12 Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, New York: Penguin Press, 2023, p. xix.



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your own experience, discuss them with your friends. Let the process stir your emotions and challenge your current mindset and habits. Find something in every chapter to grab on to. Consider the practices I have added to each article. You can also craft your own practices to find steady steps toward bringing your chosen insights into your life.¹³

Give yourself time to integrate what is meaningful to you before moving on to the next article or chapter. The goal is not to rush through the book but to grow through engaging with the book; to allow for a richer and more meaningful process of discovery. The chapters and articles need not be read in order. Allow yourself the freedom to explore what captures your interest in areas of life where you seek to draw in more wonder.

Momentum and the Backstory of This Book

Momentum is committed to making Jewish living and learning accessible for parents around the world in ways that are most relevant to them. Past-president of the board Helen Zalik and her husband, David Zalik, envisioned an accessible and inspiring gateway to the treasure trove of Jewish wisdom — namely, a book not categorized by traditional themes such as holidays or Torah portions, but by what people care about most in their day-to-day lives. We surveyed thousands of past alumna of Momentum programs, asking what topics would be most helpful to them. The ten chapters of this book are the top ten topics they selected from three dozen options.

In the face of rising antisemitism, deepening our knowledge of beautiful and applicable Jewish teachings helps foster pride and identity. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks aptly said, “The best response to antisemitism is to strengthen Jewish identity, to live our values, to build communities strong enough to stay true to their faith while contributing to the common good.”¹⁴

Wonder As a Lifeline

The work on this book has spanned two intense and painful experiences — the COVID pandemic and the horrific trauma of October 7, 2023, and its aftermath. Our world has changed. In the face of the devastation, we’ve witnessed

13 This paragraph is adapted from the introduction to *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* by Alan Morinis.

14 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, New York: Schocken Books, 2015, p. 259.



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heroes and heroines stepping forward in extraordinary ways, especially in Israel and also around the world. Momentum alumni not only took action but mobilized others for communal action in wondrous feats. Pausing to take notice of such heroism and moral beauty is especially important at these times. The sagacious, Holocaust survivor, psychologist, and author Dr. Edith Eger described it this way in an interview: “In the face of trauma and despair, wonder becomes a lifeline. It reminds us that beauty exists, even in the darkest of places. When we cultivate a sense of wonder, we shift our focus from what we have lost to what is still possible. Wonder invites us to look beyond our pain and opens our hearts to the beauty of connection and community. It teaches us that hope is not just a feeling but an active choice we can make each day.”¹⁵

May this book offer you pathways to living wondrously or, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously suggested, “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.”

Ronit Ziv-Kreger

Director of Education and Evaluation, Momentum

15 Dr. Edith Eger, interviewed by Dr. Ronit Ziv-Kreger, January 2021.

I WILL SING TO MY BELOVED, A SONG OF MY DEAREST ABOUT HIS VINEYARD — ISMAI'ELS: I
 A LOVER OF GOD WILL DWELL SECURELY WITH GOD — DEUT. 33: 12
 לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ

NURTURING
RELATIONSHIPS

It is no secret that the foundation of a fulfilling life — far more than wealth or accomplishments — are strong relationships.¹⁶

Nurturing relationships, however, isn't always easy. In fact, loneliness is so pervasive that the U.K. government went so far as to establish a Ministry of Loneliness.¹⁷ No kidding.

Research has indicated that warm relationships keep bodies physically stronger and minds sharper as people age. Data shows that those with good friendships are less likely to be depressed or to develop diabetes or heart disease, that they regulate stress more effectively, and that they recover faster from illness.¹⁸ The converse is also true. “Loneliness has a physical effect on the body. It can render people more sensitive to pain, suppress their immune system, diminish brain function, and disrupt sleep, which in turn can make an already lonely person even more tired and irritable.”¹⁹

The challenge of nurturing relationships is an inherent part of the human experience. Drawing on centuries of insights, Jewish guidance for living²⁰ abounds with examples of what it means to nurture relationships.

The narratives about our matriarchs' and patriarchs' interpersonal relationships serve as both examples and as warnings. Through their interactions with God and with one another, we learn profound lessons about parenting, marriage, friendships, and our responsibilities vis-à-vis our own parents.

Nor are these marginal topics in Jewish teachings; relationships take center stage even in rabbinic literature. The great sage Rabbi Akiva, in fact, asserted that the guiding principle of the Torah is the

16 https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_the_secret_to_a_happy_life_lessons_from_8_decades_of_research.

17 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2yzhfv4DvqVp5nZyxBD8G23/who-feels-lonely-the-results-of-the-world-s-largest-loneliness-study>.

18 https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_the_secret_to_a_happy_life_lessons_from_8_decades_of_research.

19 Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, “What the Longest Study on Human Happiness Found Is the Key to a Good Life,” *The Atlantic*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/01/harvard-happiness-study-relationships/672753/>.

20 Written and Oral Torah.

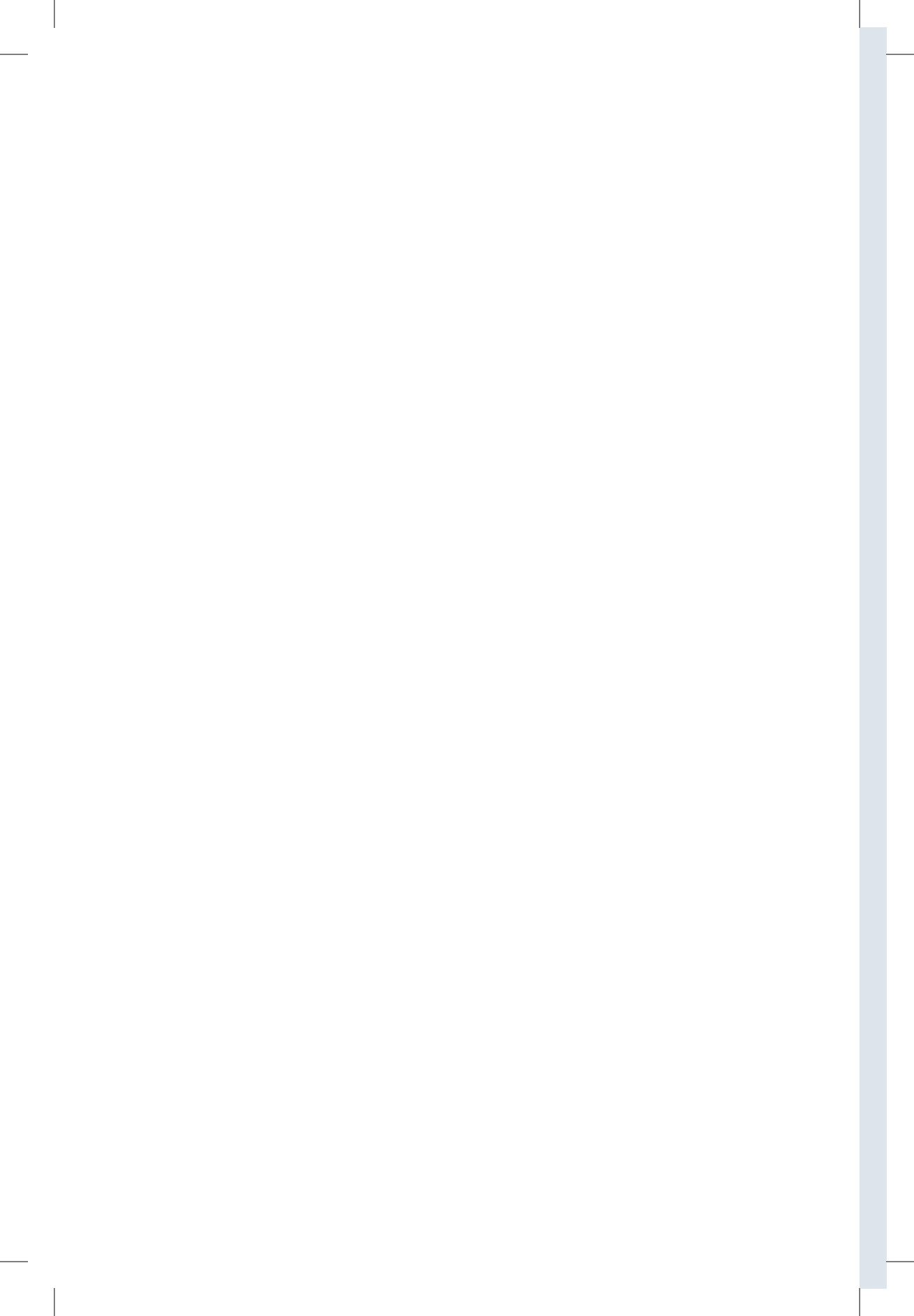
Golden Rule — the reminder to “love your neighbor as yourself.”²¹

The first chapter in this section focuses on fostering and maintaining our friendships, including with life partners and adult children. The next chapter addresses raising resilient and spiritual children — because our parenting has a significant influence on their ability to develop healthy relationships. The third chapter delves into caring for parents, a pivotal moment in our lives that may call on us to grow, serve as role models for our own children, and ease what can be the loneliest times for those we love.

As you dive into this section remember the words of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who taught us: “If you believe that you can destroy, believe that you can repair.”²² May these chapters help you live wondrously, inspiring you to nurture, and even repair, the relationships in your world.

21 Leviticus 19:18; Bereshit Rabbah 24:7.

22 Meshivat Nefesh #38.





FOSTERING AND MAINTAINING
FRIENDSHIPS



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The story of Creation echoes with the refrain “it was good” — but the Torah also defines things as “not good.” The first negative in the Torah is aloneness. “It is not good for a person to be alone,”²³ God says of Adam. The renowned psychoanalyst and social philosopher Erich Fromm expressed it this way: “The deepest need of man is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness.”²⁴

Friendship and close relationships are where people feel seen, heard, known, and cared for in good times and bad. But these days people spend less time fostering relationships. Between 2010 and 2013 Americans spent an average of six and a half hours per week with friends. But by 2014 time spent with friends began to decline — and by 2022 it had dropped by more than fifty percent to less than three hours a week.²⁵

The authors in this chapter offer skills that are helpful in deepening various relationships — connecting with a friend, a co-worker, or a family member. Adrienne Gold Davis, Momentum’s director of experience and engagement, shares a powerful secret for maintaining respectful relationships and explores one of the most challenging friendships to navigate: the relationship between a parent and their adult child. The founder of Encounter-Centered Couples Therapy, Hedy Shleifer, describes how family relationships, especially an intimate partnership such as a marriage, offers a laboratory for experimentation as she teaches about three connectors that are necessary for a flourishing friendship. Dr. Orit Kent taps into wisdom from the age-old partnership learning mode of Jewish study to help build skills that are relevant to fostering friendships. And Dr. Alan Morinis introduces the art of self-knowledge and personal character development, which fosters traits such as patience, persistence, playfulness, curiosity, humility, and creativity as a path toward establishing and sustaining deeper friendships.

23 Genesis 2:19.

24 Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, New York: Harper & Row, 1956.

25 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/11/23/americans-alone-thanksgiving-friends/>.



Nurturing Relationships

Respect and Reciprocity

Adrienne Gold Davis

Adrienne Gold Davis is the director of experience and engagement for Momentum and an international Jewish educator. She was a Canadian TV personality specializing in fashion, style, and beauty before falling in love with all things Jewish and making a major career pivot. She spent 15 years as a senior lecturer and community liaison for the Jewish community before joining the Momentum team. Today she also hosts a top-rated podcast, Rise and Shine with Adrienne Gold Davis, and leads Momentum trips to Israel.

I want to share a most powerful secret for maintaining respectful relationships. It doesn't matter if they are romantic or platonic, with your parents or with your children. At work or at home. With friends or with colleagues. It's a simple two-word formula that ensures the dignity of your fellow and keeps your focus on your own issues. It is simply this: LOOK. AWAY.

Now, this seems to fly in the face of the model of analysis, magnification, and dissection that we currently indulge in. Perhaps we labor under the delusion that when we truly understand the MOTIVATION for someone else's untoward behavior, when we truly SHARE with them what they are doing that is annoying us, when we list and elucidate the *unpleasant* in our view, then we can somehow make it stop. Or make THEM stop. Or control the things that trigger us in any way. But that is all that it is. A delusion. Because fellowship and friendship, love and intimacy, are not based on staring at that which offends or annoys us in the other. Those emotions are best served by looking away.

There is a famous biblical story that became the very prayer we say when we walk into a synagogue. It is the story of a prophet for hire named Bilaam, who was engaged to curse the Jewish people as a nation. When he overlooked our encampment and tried to speak words of curses, what came out instead was this: *Mah tovu, ohalecha Ya'akov, mish'k'no'techa Yisrael.*

Or in English: How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwelling places, O Israel.

What exactly did Bilaam see that made words of praise fall from his lips unintentionally? One of the thoughts we learn is from the biblical commentator Rashi. He tells us that in the Israelite encampment none of the people's tent doors



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faced anyone else's, so no one could peer into their neighbors' tents. The Jewish mandate for privacy, for not looking where you are not invited, is a profoundly healing behavior. And it comes up time and again in our sources.

When I was first married, I thought that to truly know my husband meant that I should know his every thought. His every whereabouts. His every weakness. And I made a point of searching for them. I think I thought that love meant seeing everything and even letting the other know you could see. For their BEST INTEREST. Because YOU CARE. BECAUSE you love them! I have come to learn that the very opposite is true. And if we feel the inclination to do this with our spouses, how much more so do we believe we have the right — the obligation — to do this with our children. But something happened with one of my children that taught me about the value and dignity of looking away in order to spare someone the embarrassment of being seen while not at their best.

I was watching a soccer match when one of my boys was about five. He was very excited to be a legendary goalie in his own mind! He didn't make a move without looking to see if I was watching. He could tell from across the field if I averted my attention for even one moment. One evening during a game, I happened to have a seat right behind the goal and watched a player moving quickly on the net. I knew the kid was good and that he would likely score a goal. And that it would break my son's heart. And he would hate that I saw. So as if by impulse, as the ball went into the net, I swiveled around and pretended to be talking to the woman sitting behind me. I looked away so as not to witness what I knew he would not want me to see in his five-year-old machismo. On the way home that night we went for ice cream after his team's crushing defeat. It was a double scoop on a school night just before bed kind of defeat. As we groaned and waddled back to the car, my little one took my hand and, in a moment of unfettered honesty, said, "Mom, thanks for not seeing me lose the game." I stayed silent. I did not know if even he understood what he was saying but, in that moment, I understood it was an act of love for him that made me turn around. And that it was something I had never done for my husband! It was a revelation. I looked away. I chose to see him only at his best.

Consider a behavior from someone in your close environment for which you would like to experiment with looking away.



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The years pass quickly, as they do, and the stakes grow higher than missing a save in goal. It becomes time to navigate a more challenging relationship with our kids, with new rules of engagement. As those stakes get higher, we tend to forget to look away. We overfocus more than ever because we fear the consequences more viscerally. So, I assert that the most challenging friendship to navigate may be the burgeoning one that is possible between a parent and their adult child. The beauty inherent in that challenge is that it identifies the extent one will go to in order to sustain a relationship when its landscape changes so profoundly; how far the heart will stretch and the mind expand to accommodate those changes. For if the relationship between parent and adult child does not evolve into a form of friendship, then it often cannot sustain its closeness. If the dynamic of power doesn't shift from giver / receiver to a more balanced kind of loving, a young adult may resent and push against the parents' clearly defined role as provider.

We see this necessary shift in dynamic play out in the formation of man and woman after God separates the first human into its separate male and female parts — Adam and Chava. In Genesis we learn of the directive to Adam that “he shall leave his mother and his father and cleave to his wife”! But Adam had no earthly parents. What dynamic is God referring to as He commands this shifting of emotional and behavioral “households”?

Consider the words of Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller: “The normal relationship between parents and children is that parents give and children receive. The love that grows between them is surprisingly unbalanced. *Parents love their children far more than most children love their parents. There is a flaw inherent in the relationship that causes this misbalance. Love is never the result of taking. It is the result of giving. The more we give, the more we love. The more we love, the more we are beloved.*”²⁶

This is reenforced by the great *mussar* giant Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, who, in his epic book *Strive for Truth!*,²⁷ teaches that love and giving always come together. Is the giving a consequence of the love, or is perhaps the reverse true: Is the love a result of the giving? We usually think it is love that causes giving because we observe that a person showers gifts and favors on the beloved. But there is another side to the argument. Giving may bring about love for the same reason a person loves what he has created or nurtured: He recognizes in it part of himself. Whether it is a child he has brought into the world, an animal he has reared, a

26 Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller, “Getting and Giving the Love You Need,” <https://aish.com/48898307/>, emphasis added.

27 Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler, *Michtav Me'Eliyahu (Strive for Truth!)*, Kuntres HaHesed (section on Kindness).



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plant he has tended, or even a thing he has made or a house he has built — a person is bound in love to the work of his hands, for in it he finds himself.

For Adam to love his wife properly he would need to leave behind the childhood model of being exclusively the receiver or the giver. The lines between giver and receiver are blurred as a true oneness of mutual vulnerability and reciprocity is allowed to flourish.

We are not 50/50 but rather 100/100. And that creates the glorious intimate friendship possible between couples.

We have a model for that relationship. It is not encumbered by confusing feelings of lust or even by expectations. It has a chemistry, but not one that is dependent on physical attraction. It is called platonic friendship. It is the thing that causes the Talmud to say, “Either a friend or death”²⁸ and Sefer Hamidot LehaMeiri to say, “A person without a friend is like a left hand without a right one.” Pirkei Avot 1:6 teaches that friendship is so vital we should be willing to pay for it! “Acquire a friend” (even if it costs money!!) — because there are costs involved in sustaining friendships. And while not all those costs are financial, there are investments of time and patience and loyalty and sometimes the discomfort of tolerating the seemingly intolerable. But the cost is worth it. Because friendship is a relationship’s greatest glue.

When our children developmentally need to stop needing us, many parents feel as though their very position is threatened. Their attachment to the position of giver and its inherent emotional rewards feels shaky and tenuous. What does it mean to not be needed? Does it mean I have been successful — or I have failed? Can or will my child love me and want to be near me if they don’t need me?

The fifth commandment tells us to honor our father and mother, and this commandment has no statute of limitations. But note that it does not say “love your parents” or even “enjoy spending time” with them! Closer examination of this commandment gives us guidelines on the standards of treatment and of comportment required regarding our treatment of our parents. What we can and cannot say. What we need or don’t need to provide. It is behaviorally driven, not emotionally driven. It teaches us to act in gratitude for the gift of life we were provided. And it is the bridge we traverse that teaches us how to have gratitude for God!

If one wants a relationship with one’s adult children, then the spirit of friendship must be acquired as well. The work in this is mostly on the parents in the recognition of the autonomy of their child. In the respect and honor afforded their decisions and choices, even when they are in conflict with ours. In a

28 Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 16b.



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celebration — not just a tolerance — of their differences from us. In an acceptance and even admiration of their unique perspectives. In the space between us. In the boundaries required in all respectful relationships. This requires more, not less, looking away.

The love I felt for my children hit me like a freight train. I never imagined I could experience such a depth and breadth of feeling. My desire to give was unbounded. I understood what Rabbi Akiva meant when he said, “More than the calf desires to suck, the mother wishes to suckle.” My desire to “feed” my children spilled over into every aspect of their lives. I wanted to be the font of all wisdom. The source of all love. The place of all nourishment. And then they became teens. I remember the first shut doors — first to the bathroom, then to their bedrooms. I remember the sound of the car door shutting without me behind the wheel. I remember the sound of the door of the dorm building clicking shut behind me (“Don’t let it hit you as you leave, Ma!”). I remember the doors of communications slamming shut. Those doors that I had helped seal with my refusal to relinquish control over their lives. By the magnified looking I could not stop engaging in. And I had plenty of rationalization for my actions: “I am STILL the parent!” “I cannot allow them to DESTROY THEIR OWN LIVES.” “This is still my job!”

In agony I went to my dearest friend. She spoke to me as only she can.

A true friend does not collude with you! They do not defend your feelings at the risk of the truth. She had watched this power struggle unfold before my unseeing eyes and gently helped me understand what needed to occur. She and I are very, very different. We practice different religions. We have different interests. We look different. We think differently. We enjoy different foods and music and even people. But our celebration of one another’s differences has been the fertile ground for my most enduring relationship. She asked the poignant question: Why am I charmed by her differences and not by those of my children? Why do I thrill to our disagreements and yearn to focus on what unites us rather than what divides us? Why do I not worry about her when she does not act like / think like / behave like me? The answer was a painful one to be sure: “Because you are my friend, not my child!” I declared. “Lucky me,” she replied. Ouch.

I would never assume to know what is ultimately right for my best friend. I trust that she will do that work. I know that when she needs to process, sometimes she seeks my opinion and sometimes she seeks my ability to listen. I recognize both our autonomy and our interconnectedness. I respect her boundaries and know her limitations. And she knows mine. I know when to stand back and when to dive in. I know this because, over 40 years, I have learned to watch, wait, and wonder. To read her signals. To tread gently but passionately. To adjust my step to fall into hers.



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Perhaps it was time to make friends with my adult kids!

Friendship is both acquired and bestowed upon us. We can find it by proximity. We can nurture it across miles. It feels so good because it is that unconditional form of love that we crave. It makes us feel seen and heard and understood by someone who has no skin in the game. At a certain point, all parents will need to reach out to their children with a gift of this friendship. It is deeply vulnerable to be needy when you are an adult. Many kids push away all reminders of their dependency — because the cost of showing their vulnerability is to be shoved back into the role of receiver. To be infantilized.

But when we offer friendship to our adult children, we give them permission to need us once again. And we give ourselves permission to enjoy them not as reflections of ourselves, but as the souls we had the gift of nurturing as they made their own personal journeys through this transmigration.

I have had to pull back in order to get closer. And in this seeming dichotomy lies the essence of friendship — a foundation of any relationship, romantic or platonic. I acquired friendship with my adult children by modeling it upon my already mature friendships with peers. And now I have two more friends. Who want to be with me again. Who want my wisdom of years again. Who love me unconditionally again.

It took me analyzing and micromanaging less. And looking away more.

Just look away. You will find yourself closer than you ever thought possible.



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Fostering and Maintaining Intimate Friendship and Love

Hedy Schleifer

Hedy Shleifer, a master couples' therapist, co-founded Encounter-centered Couples Therapy and Encounter-centered Transformation (EcT). Hedy, who speaks seven languages, has taught and provided her approach to relationships in more than 39 countries. Revered by students and clients all over the world, she is the subject of the documentary "Hedy and Yumi Crossing the Bridge," which tells the story of her life's work through the lens of her relationship with her husband and professional partner, Yumi, and won Best Documentary at the 2009 LA Femme Film Festival in Hollywood. Her talk at TEDxTelAviv on The Power of Connection is not to be missed.

Through connection we have the power to transform ourselves. Connection is our essence. It is humanity's superpower. It requires us to share kindness and to develop compassion, generosity of spirit, unconditional patience, respect, and honor — all of which enable us to gradually grow into who we truly are, in all our full, essential humanity. We are conceived in connection and then we spend nine months ensconced within the safety of our mother's wombs. Ideally, we are born into the welcoming embrace of loving parents who — if they know how important it is for us to feel connected — smile at us, soothe us, and sing to us. Their delighted facial expressions convey to us the message: "We are so glad that you came into this world to be with us!" Through this first loving connection with our family, we learn how to stay connected naturally to others — and the art of friendship is born.

Author Elif Shafak wrote, "Every true love is a story of unexpected transformation. If we are the same person before and after we loved, that means we haven't loved enough."²⁹

29 Elif Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love: A Novel of Rumi*, New York: Viking Penguin, 2010.



From Unconscious to Conscious Friendship

The year was 1964. I had just returned to my home town of Antwerp, Belgium, after experiencing a tragic boating accident on the River Parana in the Brazilian jungle, in which I lost my friend Luzzi. Yumi was in Europe on assignment from his American company. Twenty years earlier, on August 9, 1944, he had lost both his sisters when the refugee boat they were on was torpedoed on its way to Palestine, and the survivors machine-gunned. His understanding of the profound grief I felt was visceral. I was born on August 19, 1944, ten days after his sisters were killed. When we met, we felt not only friendship, but a strange kinship, almost like brother and sister.

“What am I to you?” asked Yumi.

“You are my best friend,” I answered.

And so he said, “As your best friend, I recommend you marry me!”

We were married on April 13, 1965, in Tel Aviv, Israel. Unbeknownst to us, we were beginning a journey toward building a living laboratory for a passionately full marriage, in which we would foster and maintain a flourishing friendship. We did not yet know how to successfully combine and balance all the complex elements — friendship, romance, desire, and soulmate-ness — that comprise an intimate relationship. I must honestly say that Yumi and I were, at that time, Olympic champions of unconsciousness. We had no idea that there *was* such a thing as a conscious relationship, within which one makes the shift willingly from automatic reactivity to thoughtful intentionality. Moving from coping in isolation to living in connection.

Our saving grace was that we devised a way to welcome Shabbat in our own special way; a way that allowed us to deeply connect with each other. We made a commitment to never enter the sanctity of Shabbat with angry feelings. Inspired by the idea of water as transformative, as with the ritual of immersing in the *mikvah*, the ritual bath, we would talk things out while soaking in the tub together. It was a serious commitment. So much so that one day we overheard our son Yigal, who was then four years old, say, “No, my parents can’t come to the phone right now. They’re in the bathtub, and they’ll be there for a long time.”

Each week, when we were finally ready to drain the water out of the tub, our promise to each other would be to surrender to peace and forgiveness.

Over the years, Yumi and I became avid students of the power of connection. Our friendship deepened. William Blake wrote, “The bird a nest. The spider a web. Man friendship.” Yes, indeed! Yumi and I learned to land increasingly within the safety and sanctity of true friendship.



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The Three Invisible Connectors in Friendship

Yumi and I developed a core guiding principle, inspired by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. To foster and maintain our flourishing friendship, three invisible connectors had to be embraced within it:

- The relational space between us
- The bridge connecting our worlds
- The encounter of our souls

An idea that comes through Buber's teaching is that our relationship lives in the space between us. It doesn't live in one or the other of us, nor even in our dialogue. Our relationship lives in the space between us, which is sacred.

It was from the space between the two cherubs that God spoke to the Israelites in ancient time. Space is sacred, indeed; one of God's names is *HaMakom*, which means The Place.

Buber explains that "when two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them."³⁰

Yumi and I were influenced by Martin Buber because he based his relational philosophy on the deep and long friendship with his wife, Paula. With Paula, he viscerally and palpably experienced an encounter of souls, which he describes in his book *I and Thou*.

This profound form of encounter is not reserved only for romantic relationships; I also experienced it with my mother. By her nineties she was living in an old-age home outside of Tel Aviv. When I visited her, and looked at her frail and fragile body as she sat in her wheelchair, I was flooded with negative emotions: guilt, anger, resentment, and shame. My mother had been my friend and my hero, the fierce woman who crossed the Alps on foot while pregnant with me after a daring, brilliant escape from Rivesaltes, a Nazi transit camp in Vichy France. The story I grew up with is that, when she reached the Swiss border and found it closed to refugees, she hurled herself over a fenced border, survived, and recovered in a Swiss hospital before being sent to the refugee camp where I was born.

At first, all I could think of was that I could not bear to see my mother this way. But then, suddenly, I had a realization: I wasn't visiting my mother, I was polluting the space between us with my own emotions. I made the conscious decision to leave my own world and the neighborhood of mixed emotions, and to *cross the bridge* that connected our worlds in order to truly *be* with her. Once I made that decision, once I crossed, our eyes met.

30 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 1923.



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She looked at me intently. And then, in Yiddish, she said, “*Di bisst mein tochter*” (“You are my daughter”). It had been months since she had recognized me. But, of course, I hadn’t been with her in months. We both cried together.

The Little Prince, created by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, speaks of being responsible for our friends. Yes! It was my responsibility to *truly* meet my mother, to give her my undivided, loving presence. To quiet the thoughts and chatter in my mind so I could cross over to her reality. Henry David Thoreau wrote, “The language of friendship is not words, but meanings.” When I arrived in my mother’s world, our language was made of the multi-layered meanings of our rich relationship as a mother and a daughter. That experience is the encounter of the souls.

In this encounter, two individuals, with their uniqueness and differences, enter together a dimension of oneness.

Gently close your eyes. Visualize yourself sitting across from a beloved — a partner, a friend, a parent, or a child. With your imagination, see, feel, and sense the quality of the relational space between you both. Imagine a bridge that connects your world to the world of the other person. Let yourself feel invited to cross this bridge to visit the other where they live right now. See how the space between the two of you fills with thankfulness and delight.

Friendship and the Brain

What Martin Buber could not know as a twentieth-century philosopher when he taught about the sacred space between us, and the encounter of the souls, is what the new brain science of the twenty-first century would teach us. The relatively new discipline of interpersonal neurobiology explores brain plasticity (or neuroplasticity) — the ability of our brains to change, adapt, and grow in response to our experiences. It turns out that our friendships and love connections change our brains to be able to respond more consciously and intentionally rather than get hijacked into automatic reactivity. Relationships change our brains — and good, deep relationships change our brains even more.

Amazingly, what interpersonal neurobiologists have discovered is that when we are in close physical proximity with someone we love, and we look into each other’s eyes with soft eyes and we speak to each other in such a way that we feel felt, then our limbic systems, the structures in the brain that deal with emotions and memory, become resonant with each other. Scientists have called this limbic resonance between people in harmony the *brain-bridge*. A further discovery scientists have made is that once the brain-bridge is established between two people, their central nervous systems relax together. It turns out that the brain is



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the only human organ that does not regulate from within, the way, for example, our hearts, lungs, and kidneys do. The brain needs to be attuned to another brain to achieve full relaxation. We cannot regulate as deeply and fully alone as we can when we are together. Because calming down is more effective in relationship to another trusted person, rather than in isolation, it is counterproductive to say to a child who is acting out, “Go to your room until you have calmed down.”

Choose a time to offer a child, spouse, or friend your full attention, with curiosity and openheartedness, without providing any advice, as you listen to them talk about what’s on their mind.

Friends Hold Each Other’s Hands

“He held my hand in a way I didn’t even know a hand could be held.” This is how I begin the story of how my husband, Yumi, gave me support twenty-two years ago when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. We sat together, both terrified. Then Yumi said to me, “Hedy, how long shall we be terrified? Two hours? Three? After that, this is not a problem to be solved. It is an adventure to be lived.” Yumi gave the adventure a name: Rallying around the Boob. Everyone who rallied became a member of the Boob Brigade.

Researcher Dr. James A. Coan, who studies the neuroscience of emotion and social relationships, wondered how the presence of a loved one might alter the brain’s response to a threatening situation. He designed a unique test in which the subject knew there was a twenty percent chance of experiencing a slight electric shock to their ankle. Critically, during the test, some subjects had their hands held by their spouse, a boyfriend or girlfriend, or a stranger. Dr. Coan found that the neural regions of the brain associated with processing threat were significantly less active when someone was holding the participant’s hand. The level of activity was even lower for those subjects whose hands were being held by their loved one.³¹

Even more remarkable were the findings when Dr. Coan decided to adapt the test to introduce the *threat* of the shock to the person holding the subject’s hand. The subject’s brain responded as if they themselves were in danger of

31 Jane Kelly, “‘Shocking’ New Research Finds Friendships Are Key to Good Health,” *UVA Today*, May 26, 2017.



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receiving the shock, to the point that it became impossible to tell which person was actually the recipient of the shock. Dr. Coan realized that we adapt to each other by sending brain signals that essentially say, “I am with you.” Over time, this message transforms into, “I am you and you are me and we are here.” There is a verse in Song of Songs that asserts: “*Ani le dodi ve dodi li*,”³² “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.” Connection to others is not only a survival skill — it gives us our humanity and our ability to flourish.

True Love Is a Story of Unexpected Transformation

Over the years, Yumi and I filled our relational space with treasures and now, in the new phase of life we have entered called Elderhood, we draw from it like a well-stocked bank account. Today, Yumi lives with a changed memory. It is now my turn to hold his hand “the way he didn’t know a hand could be held.” As a wife, I find myself dipping into the rich, fertile, relational soil that Yumi and I cultivated for over fifty-four years. In it I find the generosity of spirit, the calm patience, the openheartedness in which I am able to live every moment with my “new” husband. I call this new Yumi the twenty-ninth version of my husband in our long journey together through life. He has had the courage to transform many times. Over the years, I have decided to choose him as my beloved and best friend again and again. I do miss my previous Yumi, but yet again I welcome my new, transformed man. I realize that this twenty-ninth husband requires of me a new way to love my man. It is a kinder, sweeter, more affectionate, more present love, and an additional lesson in the deep meaning of giving unconditionally. That is why I am calling our new adventure Rallying around the Essence. Our essence is our core potential for full humanity, and it stays intact no matter what occurs. I do not accept the label of *caregiver*. Yumi and I are each other’s *care-partners*. I care for him as deeply as I can, and he cares for me as deeply as he can. This way, our friendship continues to grow and thrive after all these years.

I have just lost my precious best friend and soul sister, Louise. She died on the third Shabbat of April 2020, after suffering progressive supranuclear palsy, an illness that systematically took away her agency. A group of women, good friends of Louise, created a Zoom funeral and a Zoom *shivah* for her. Friends and family gathered to honor our beloved Louise. I was in awe of the power of the stories that were told about her — stories we all had held onto as treasures in our souls. I learned from this experience that our friendships continue to blossom even after our deaths, when our friends share their treasured stories of us.

32 Song of Songs 6:3.



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Martin Buber wrote that all of life is in the encounter. He pointed us toward the relational paradigm. Our Western culture looks at life through the prism of the individual paradigm. In it, our highest aspiration is to become independent, autonomous, and self-governed. The relational paradigm, on the other hand, posits that we are born in connection and that our highest purpose is to live in that connection and interdependence. Albert Einstein has said that our separation is an optical illusion of consciousness. In *I and Thou*, Buber wrote that a human being becomes whole not in virtue of a relation to himself, but rather in virtue of an authentic relation to another human being.

We are one web of humanity. Our friendships gift us with the opportunity to experience our true essence in connection, and through that connection we find our wholeness.