“Hi, what’s your name?”

This was always my opening question whenever I wanted to meet a new friend on the playground when I was a kid. I was never shy but I remember that I always had to build up the chutzpah to approach another child. But it worked every time! The kid I approached would respond with his or her name, and then ask my name. Before I knew it, we would be playing in a sandbox, going together on the slide or swaying on a seesaw. And of course, when our moms would say that it is time to go home, we would beg to stay longer and have time to play more. Just like that, the new friendships would form.

To be honest, I have continued to meet people throughout my life, using the same successful method as I did when I was six years old. I meet people on a plane, in supermarkets, subways, gyms – or any place at all - you name it. Most recently, I met a unique artist from Russia while on a walking tour in Paris. I asked her name, we chatted and then, since Tony was tired and wanted to go back to the hotel, she and I spent the rest of the day walking the streets of Paris and telling each other our life stories.

I love meeting new people! For me, this is an exciting opportunity to form new relationships and to learn something unique about each person.

As humans, we are social creatures. We yearn for the company of others. And all the research emphasizes the critical role that meaningful relationships lay, bringing happiness into our lives.

Think of the story of creation. God created Adam and then realized that he was lonely. So He created various beasts and had Adam name them. But we are told that Adam “didn’t find helpmate opposite him.” (Bereisheet 2:20) This tells us thatAdam continued to be lonely. So God created an equal playmate for Adam out of his own rib - Eve.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are reminded of the joy of connecting with new people through the story of creation. Three times throughout the service on Rosh Hashanah we recite a prayer: “Hayom Harat Olam”, meaning “Today is the day of the world’s creation”. We mention the world’s Creation to remind ourselves that Rosh Hashanah is a day of renewal and new beginnings.

New beginnings can be scary and exciting at the same time. Scary because entering a new phase in life means we have to make change, which can put us out of our comfort zone. Exciting - because new beginnings bring new possibilities, which potentially can improve our life and enhance it. For example, starting a new job, moving to a different state, joining a new club or becoming a member of a synagogue. All of the new beginnings listed above have one thing in common - meeting new people and forming new relationships.

To succeed in something new, we need to approach it with an open mind. Similarly, when we meet new people, we should also be open minded and recognize that every person is different.

We read in Genesis: “And God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (1:27). But, if according to our belief, God has no human physical features, then what image did God use?

Rabbis comment that it is not in the physical sense of likeness to God that He created people but in the spiritual sense. It refers to our potential to do good.

Think about what qualities we value most in each other. Is it ability to be efficient? Is it a place the person has in society? Is it his or her title? No, it is none of the above. We value warmth, kindnessand thoughtfulness. When we are gone, we will be judged by how we treated people during our life, and not by how much success we achieved in life or how much money we earned.

By being good to others we continue the work of creation. As it is said in the prayer Yotzer Or, preceding Shema: “Hamechadeish be chol yom tamid ma’aseh bereisheet.”, which means “The force that renews creation each day, every day.” In other words, once God created the world, God did not stop improving. We should learn to do the same.

This reminder also relates to our relationships with people. It is to emphasize that we should always treat others in the way we want to be treated.

The renowned Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague (16c.) stated: “Love of all creatures is also the love of God; for whoever loves The One, loves all the works that He made. When one loves God, it is impossible not to love His creatures. The opposite is also true. If one hates the creatures, it is impossible to (truly) love God who created them” (Netivot Olam, ahavat hare’a, 1)

And the great Rabbi and kabbalist Isaiah Horowitz, echoed this message, explaining that, “the love of God and our fellow human beings is ultimately the same thing, as God is One and all is from Him”; and he added that precisely because the human being is created with the Divine spark in him or her (the kabbalistic concept of the Divine Image) the love of one’s fellow is literally the love of God. (Shnei Luhot Habrit 44b-45b)

In Judaism, there is a significant emphasis on forming relationships within the community. From ancient times, the synagogue, Beit Knesset, was established with a clear purpose not only as a place to gather for prayer, but also as a place for social gathering.

It was the same centuries later when joining a synagogue in 1950s and 1960s also presented an opportunity for the families that moved to the suburbs to meet other Jewish families and form new relationships. I love hearing the stories from old-time members about how they would spend time together, go on vacations and especially how their children, who attended religious school from young age together, still maintain their friendships. I see many of you, who shared these stories with me, are here today.

In our day and age, sadly, people are reverting to virtual relationships – in both professional and personal circumstances. Even the synagogue communities are not exceptions. And COVID, of course, didn’t help.

Today, fewer and fewer couples meet at parties, bars or events. I would say that ninety-five percent of the couples whose weddings I officiate at have met on line. One Israeli standup comedian was joking that one day he would tell his grandchildren about the “romantic” way he and their granny met: “Well, I was browsing tinder and noticed that your grandmother had zero followers, so I decided to give it a chance…”

Speaking of our preoccupation with on line connections, have you noticed that it is harder to get people to talk to you in person because they are busy chatting virtually with someone else?

Will our need for in-person connections eventually dissipate? I don’t think so. I believe that a real hug, handshake, and a welcoming smile are very powerful.

The proof to support my belief can be seen in our recent rise in membership. In this past year we have had more than twenty families join Temple Shalom! What does this tell us? Yes, of course it means that our membership committee is doing a terrific job. But it also means that people need people. We want to be with each other, we want to socialize, create new friendships and make strong bonds.

These bonds, like the sounding of the shofar, will resonate through time, connecting us to the past and to the future.

Friends, I want to challenge you. By the end of this Holy Day season, I want you to meet at least one new person, or a whole new family, here at Temple Shalom. Let us continue to make our temple a vibrant place, a place of worship, of learning and fun, and most importantly, a welcoming community of kind and caring people.

Just as we dip apples in honey, symbolizing the sweetness of new beginnings, let us embrace the sweetness that new friendships bring to our lives.

L’shanah tovah um’tukah.