

Friends, before and after “friending”
(1 Samuel 20; Ruth 1)

It was my first Friday as a freshman. Our small women’s college held afternoon tea in each dorm. As I came down the stairs, curious about this new ritual, I saw a blue-eyed blonde girl who was wearing...orange pants! She couldn’t be missed. An intense New Yorker and a breezy Midwesterner, we were each exotic to the other. We started to talk, got lost discovering Boston together, discussed the books we were reading, and began a friendship that now has spanned more than 4 decades, two countries and at times, multiple continents. I just returned from our annual summer trip, marveling at how blessed I am to have a friend with whom I have laughed, cried, confessed my greatest embarrassments and confided my most profound aspirations.

So it is no surprise that I have been ruminating on enduring friendship.

Friends can change our lives forever. For two childhood friends, Micki and Sunny, those changes were dramatic and life-saving. As kids, Micki and Sunny sealed their friendship with that universal childhood ritual—the mingling the bloods of their fingers to become “blood sisters”. At ten, they were inseparable. At eleven, Micki’s family moved out of state; geography severed that precious bond of inseparability. Twenty years later, their lives had diverged even more dramatically--Micki was a respected filmmaker. Sunny was in prison convicted of a highly publicized double murder of police officers.

But there are moments of connection, moments of remembrance, moments of attention that change our lives forever. Like God remembering Sarah and freeing her from the prison of her barrenness, Micki remembered the Sunny of her childhood and felt moved to write to her friend. Six months later, their friendship rekindled through letters and phone calls, Micki asked Sunny about the crime. What she heard--and believed--was that Sunny was innocent. Micki flew across the country to see her friend in prison. She insisted that Sunny go over the details on the morning of the murders.

Sunny was sitting with her two children in the rear of a green Camaro. Her common law husband was in the front with his friend who was driving them north. They had car trouble, so they pulled off the interstate and fell asleep. Two police officers stopped to investigate, saw a gun at the driver’s

feet, woke them up and began questioning them. The police officer learned on his radio that the driver was on parole for armed robbery. He ordered the men out of the car. Sunny saw an argument and a scuffle. One of the officers drew his gun, warning everyone not to move. Shots rang out. Sunny flung her body over her children. There was silence. The police officers lay dead on the ground. The driver, flailing his gun, directed Sunny and her children into the police car. He then sped away, only to crash into a police roadblock. Sunny's relief at seeing the police turned to horror when she realized that she was not being rescued. She was being arrested.

Her friend Micki was determined to pursue justice. She pored over transcripts from the trial, sought out witnesses, employed her knowledge as a filmmaker to try to recreate the scene. She developed computer generated diagrams dramatizing the action of that morning. She insisted upon having the driver's lie detector test reviewed. Her careful, trained eye and her belief in her friend exposed a miscarriage of justice. Sunny was declared innocent. Sunny walked out of prison seventeen years after she'd entered it.¹ All because of a moment of reconnection. All because of the faith, tenacity and attention of a childhood friend.

The Talmud teaches, "He who saves one life, it is as though he has saved an entire world." Most of us don't have dramatic opportunities to be life savers. Most of us don't happen by someone drowning in the river, or pinned under a collapsing building. Most of us don't uncover miscarriages of justice involving our childhood friends. But we do have moments of connection, moments of remembrance, moments of attention that can save another person's life. It may not be dramatic, but sometimes, to be a friend is to save a life. To be a friend is to change a life.

The Chassidic teacher Rabbi Levi of Berdichev said that he learned the true meaning of friendship and love from a drunken peasant. One day Rabbi Levi came to a tavern where two peasants were sitting and drinking. Suddenly Ivan turned to Peter and said, "Tell me Peter, what hurts me?" Peter answered, "How can I know what hurts you?" And Ivan said, "If you don't know what hurts me, how can you say you love me?"

Recent psychological research has shown that people who have a best friend live longer than people who don't. Friends do indeed save lives. Friends preserve dreams. The Bible describes two heroic friendships--the friendship of Jonathan and David and the friendship of Ruth and Naomi.

David and Jonathan were young friends who were destined to be torn asunder by the harsh realities and intrigues of political leadership. But their love for one another never faltered. When Jonathan's father, King Saul, turned against David, Jonathan was forced to choose between his father and his friend. Although David would ascend to the throne that Saul wanted to preserve for his son Jonathan, Jonathan pleaded on behalf of his friend David, with his father, to no avail. Saul was determined to kill David. So Jonathan risked his own life to warn David. Jonathan said a final goodbye to his dear friend and after he died, David took Jonathan's son into his household.

The world of king-making would have David and Jonathan be rivals, but their friendship created a different reality. Their friendship modeled the possibility of men who placed love and concern for another before love and concern for oneself. They lived their friendship out of an image of what might be instead of what was. Their bond was bigger than the limitations of mortal kings.

Ruth, too, forges a friendship with Naomi in that most unlikely of relationships—between a daughter in law and mother in law. The stuff of too many jokes, for these women the connection between them grew as they faced together the loss of the men they loved. Naomi, the despairing mother in law calls for her daughter in law to stay with the familiar and the known. But Ruth insists upon returning to Bethlehem with Naomi. Ruth insists upon providing food for Naomi. Ruth insists upon embracing Naomi's God although Naomi has lost faith --and by her very insistence, by her tenacity, by her devotion to Naomi, slowly walks Naomi back from the pit of despair.

Ruth says, "Do not ask me to leave you, and to return from following after you. For where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people. And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there will I be buried. Not even death can come between us. Not even death will part you and me."

Ruth asserts what dear friends live, "You can't drive me away by your pain." And while physically Ruth is following Naomi to Bethlehem, emotionally, Ruth is leading Naomi back to God, back to hope, back to life. Friends can give us the gift of seeing the possibilities that we may be blind to in a given moment. Their connection, attention, and remembrance can change our lives.

The Talmud teaches, “He who saves one life, it is as though he has saved an entire world.” But friendship is not only shared pain. Friends also share discovery and joy and celebration. With friends we break bread, dance at weddings, drink coffee or a few beers, and learn more clearly who we are and what we value. With friends we often reinvent ourselves and blossom into our best selves. We experiment with who we would like to become and our friends, unlike our relatives, are often able to see us without an immutable image of what we once were. With friends, we become whole. But we don’t always pay attention to the blessing of friendship.

Lillian Rubin was a sociologist and psychotherapist intrigued by the place of friendship in our lives. When she attended the wedding of her best friend’s son, she noticed the rituals that telegraphed the special status of blood relatives. Although she and her friend had shared the mundane details of everyday life and the extraordinary moments which punctuate life, although she and her friend were like sisters only closer, although she and her friend had deep and complex relationships with one another’s families, when it came to marking a family event, she was “just a friend”ⁱⁱ. There was no public expression of her place in her friend’s family. Friendships are not events. They often have no beginning, they become, they grow and develop, wax and wane and even end without ceremony or ritual to give evidence of their existence. Kinship is clear. Friendship is murky. Kin we are attached to forever. Friends come and go as we grow.

This is why as children so many of us pricked our fingers and mingled our blood. We wanted to convey that this friendship would endure. This treasured person was not “just a friend” but a sister or a brother--with an eternal and valued place in our lives and our bodies. We want to honor those who have saved our lives, those who have celebrated our successes, those who have supported us through our defeats. We want to acknowledge what we feel--that friends help us become greater than ourselves, that friends are our mirrors, our cheering squads, our refuge when we lick our wounds.

Although friending has entered our vocabulary and our experience, we know that there is a difference between being friended and being a friend. Jewish tradition has fostered a particular kind of friendship involving shared religious text study. *Pirke Avot*, the Chapters of the Ancestors, teaches, “Make for yourself a teacher. Acquire for yourself a friend.” When two study together they share physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual intimacy. They invite God’s presence. “When two sit and study Torah together, the *Shechinah*, God’s feminine image presence, dwells among them.” The

friendship is based on something larger than either person. The root ch-b-r, *chaver*, is to be joined together at the boundaries. *Chaverim*, study partners are not fragmented beings, but whole and connected. They argue with one another, push one another, question one another, struggle with one another, rebuke one another and find insight through one another. Their connection is as deep as brothers because it is filled with God's words, God's teaching and God's presence.

This is a powerful model for valuing friendship. This is the kind of friend I hope to be-- To remember that in the mundane is the sacred--that God, and friendship is in the details. To criticize with love and to hear criticism with grace. To be founded on what is larger than the smallness that too often limits us. I want to my friends to know that I am richer, more confident, more willing to risk, more humble because of them. I want my friends to recognize and feel that this bond is a covenant blessed by God.

Before we are ready to stand before God on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, Jews are asked to make amends *bein adam l'chavero*, between a person and his friend. Who have we forgotten to acknowledge? What friends do we need to reconcile with? Who needs that reassuring phone call or a dinner invitation? Who have we let make all the initiatives in getting together? Who have we been less than honest with? Who have we left out of our celebrations? Who do we need to hug with gratitude for saving our sanity? In which friendships have we neglected to make room for inspiration, for aspiration, for the sacred?

The Chassidic tradition teaches that friends are bound by a slender, silken thread, invisible to the eye, but stronger than the thickest rope. No one can sever the thread except the person at either end, through a betrayal of trust, a promise unkept, absence in a time of need. But if a break occurs, it need not mean the end of the relationship. The friends can reconcile, ask forgiveness, and when they do, they tie a knot in the silken thread. The thread with the knot, is now shorter. The friends are now closer together."

Just as silk is precious yet strong, so may be the tie that binds us to those we love. Let us pay homage to Jonathan and David, Ruth and Naomi, Sunny and Micki and our own friendships that have sustained us through the years. As another friend wrote in the forward to a cookbook she published, "What I wish for you then are wonderful friends to cook for. And don't ever think for a moment that the most important part of the meal is the food."

May your friendships nourish you. May your explorations enliven you.
May your lives be richer for those who journey with you. Amen.

ⁱ Clare Safran, "Blood Sisters," *Reform Judaism*, Fall 1996

ⁱⁱ Lillian Rubin, *Just Friends: The Role of Friendship in our Lives*