

# Train Yourself to Always Show Up: Guest Essay

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A somewhat obscure text, about 2,000 years old, has been my unlikely teacher and guide for the past many years, and my north star these last several months, as so many of us have felt as if we've been drowning in an ocean of sorrow and helplessness.

Buried deep within the Mishnah, a Jewish legal compendium from around the third century, is an ancient practice reflecting a deep understanding of the human psyche and spirit: When your heart is broken, when the specter of death visits your family, when you feel lost and alone and inclined to retreat, you show up. You entrust your pain to the community.

The text, Middot 2:2, describes a pilgrimage ritual from the time of the Second Temple. Several times each year, hundreds of thousands of Jews would ascend to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religious and political life. They would climb the steps of the Temple Mount and enter its enormous plaza, turning to the right en masse, circling counterclockwise.

Meanwhile, the brokenhearted, the mourners (and here I would also include the lonely and the sick), would make this same ritual walk but they would turn to the left and circle in the opposite direction: every step against the current.

And each person who encountered someone in pain would look into that person's eyes and inquire: "What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?"

"My father died," a person might say. "There are so many things I never got to say to him." Or perhaps: "My partner left. I was completely blindsided." Or: "My child is sick. We're awaiting the test results."

Those who walked from the right would offer a blessing: "May the Holy One comfort you," they would say. "You are not alone." And then they would continue to walk until the next person approached.

This timeless wisdom speaks to what it means to be human in a world of pain. This year, you walk the path of the anguished. Perhaps next year, it will be me. I hold your broken heart knowing that one day you will hold mine.

I read in this text many profound lessons, two particularly pertinent in our time, when so many of us feel that we are breaking. First, do not take your broken heart and go home. Don't isolate. Step toward those whom you know will hold you tenderly.

And on your good days — the days when you can breathe — show up then, too. Because the very fact of seeing those who are walking against the current, people who can barely hold on, and asking, with an open heart, “Tell me about your sorrow,” may be the deepest affirmation of our humanity, even in terribly inhumane times.

It is an expression of both love and sacred responsibility to turn to another person in her moment of deepest anguish and say: “Your sorrow may scare me, it may unsettle me. But I will not abandon you. I will meet your grief with relentless love.”

We cannot magically fix one another's broken hearts. But we can find each other in our most vulnerable moments and wrap each other up in a circle of care. We can humbly promise each other, “I can't take your pain away, but I can promise you won't have to hold it alone.”

Showing up for one another doesn't require heroic gestures. It means training ourselves to approach, even when our instinct tells us to withdraw. It means picking up the phone and calling our friend or colleague who is suffering. It means going to the funeral and to the house of mourning. It also means going to the wedding and to the birthday dinner. Reach out in your strength, step forward in your vulnerability. Err on the side of presence.

Small, tender gestures remind us that we are not helpless, even in the face of grave human suffering. We maintain the ability, even in the dark of night, to find our way to one another. We need this, especially now.

Here's the second lesson from that ancient text. Humans naturally incline toward the known. Our tribes can uplift us, order our lives, give them meaning and purpose, direction and pride. But the tribal instinct can also be perilous. The more closely we identify with our tribe, the more likely we are to dismiss or even feel hostility toward those outside it.

One of the great casualties of tribalism is curiosity. And when we are no longer curious, when we don't try to imagine or understand what another person is

thinking or feeling or where her pain comes from, our hearts begin to narrow. We become less compassionate and more entrenched in our own worldviews.

Trauma exacerbates this trend. It reinforces an instinct to turn away from one another, rather than make ourselves even more vulnerable.

There is another important lesson from that ancient text. On pilgrimage, those who enter the sacred circle and turn left when nearly everyone else turns right are grieving or unwell. But the text offers that there is another who turns to the left: the person sentenced to ostracization — in Hebrew, the *menudeh*.

Ostracization was a punishment used sparingly in ancient times. It only applied to people who were believed to have brought serious harm to the social fabric of the community. The ostracized were essentially temporarily excommunicated. They had to distance themselves from their colleagues and loved ones, they were not counted in a prayer quorum, and they were prohibited from engaging in most social interactions. And incredibly, they, too, entered the sacred space, where they, too, were asked: “Tell me, what happened to you? What’s your story?” And they, too, were blessed.

This is breathtaking. The ancient rabbis ask us to imagine a society in which no person is disposable. Even those who have hurt us, even those with views antithetical to ours must be seen in their humanity and held with curiosity and care.

We desperately need a spiritual rewiring in our time. Imagine a society in which we learn to see one another in our pain, to ask one another, “What happened to you?” Imagine that we hear one another’s stories, say amen to one another’s pain, and even pray for one another’s healing. I call this the amen effect: sincere, tender encounters that help us forge new spiritual and neural pathways by reminding us that our lives and our destinies are entwined. Because, ultimately, it is only by finding our way to one another that we will begin to heal.

*Sharon Brous is the founding and senior rabbi of Ikar, a Jewish community based in Los Angeles, and the author of “The Amen Effect,” from which this essay was adapted.*