

Rosh Hashanah 5777: From Small Talk to Tall Talk
By Rabbi Megan Brudney

Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say?
Why?

If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what
would it be?

Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't
you done it?

How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?

When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?

These are just five of the 36 questions laid out by a psychologist named Dr. Arthur Aron as part of an experiment designed to “create closeness between people in an experimental context.”¹ Dr. Aron works at the SUNY Stony Brook Interpersonal Relationships Lab, which must be an interesting and/or excruciating place to work. You might have read about this particular study in a New York Times column entitled “To Fall in Love With Anyone, Do This.”² To participate, two people take turns answering these 36 increasingly vulnerable and revealing questions—including the ones I just asked. Mandy Len Catron, the author of the New York Times piece, then adds that you must stare into each others' eyes for a soul-searing FOUR minutes. [pause in silence and slowly count to 10] For contrast, that was just ten excruciating seconds, or one twenty-fourth of the recommended time. [or 5 seconds would be 1/48th]

And why do these questions work? The authors of the study note that “one key pattern associated with the development of a close relationship among peers is sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personal self-disclosure.”³ Sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personal self-disclosure. So Dr. Aron's research has scientifically shown that a very important aspect of building a deep connection with another person is that both parties must reveal increasingly intimate things about themselves over time. The study assumes that both people are indeed invested in this goal and provides a script of *big* questions that yield *big* answers.

¹ <http://psp.sagepub.com/content/23/4/363.full.pdf+html>

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/fashion/modern-love-to-fall-in-love-with-anyone-do-this.html> Published January 9, 2015

³ <http://psp.sagepub.com/content/23/4/363.full.pdf+html> Pg. 364

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But over here in real world land, every day we see tens of people, some new and some old...and with no mutually confirmed larger goal of building a relationship, or progressing in a relationship... we turn instead to *small* questions that yield *small* answers—small talk. Weather, traffic, sports scores. Easy, simple stuff that we can discuss with our brains on...or off. On auto-pilot! We bring no investment, no **intention** to these conversations.

And here we can take a page from the hallowed playbook of our Jewish tradition—which is full of customs and laws that **demand intention** to be fulfilled properly. One particularly topical example that I also personally LOVE is our shofar, which we'll sound in this very room tomorrow. In the context of halacha, of Jewish law, fulfilling the commandment of hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a very serious matter. What's even more serious, it becomes clear, is the INTENTION around sounding and hearing the shofar⁴. So there's two parties involved in hearing the shofar, the sounder of the shofar and the hearer. But, for example—if a person was practicing sounding the shofar, WITHOUT intending to fulfill the commandment, but someone else heard it...then the obligation isn't met for the person sounding it **or** the person hearing it—even if the person hearing it was listening with intention! Conversely, even if the person sounding the shofar DID intend to fulfill the obligation, but the listener did not, NEITHER one has fulfilled his or her obligation to hear the sound of the shofar. Even though in both cases the proper sound waves emerged from the shofar, and in both cases, someone absorbed those sound waves with their ears—unless BOTH have the proper intention, neither can say that they have fulfilled the commandment to hear the shofar. They both must be fully invested in that moment together or the event is rendered moot.

What an incredible framework to apply to our conversations. Unless both speaker and listener are present and committed, the conversation has not or cannot fulfill any meaningful role for **either** party. Think of the times a friend or family members has called you out for not actually paying attention to a conversation in progress, or when you've been offended by someone not paying attention to you. When I first started working in an office—I know, I might look like this is my first grown woman job, but it is actually not—because I bet I'm at least THISMUCH older than you think I am—when I first started working in an office I had a really great supervisor BUT we clashed repeatedly on one specific issue. I'd come into his office and he'd be working on his computer but invite me in to chat, signaling that it was a good time. I'd ask a question and yet he'd stay staring at that computer—but whenever he sensed my reticence or frustration he'd encourage

⁴ Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 589:8

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me on by saying “go on, I’m listening”—while still staring at his screen. I would try to continue but felt viscerally awful the whole time. By the fourth or fifth time of this happening, I finally decided to call him out, and I said—I know that you CLAIM TO BE paying attention to what I’m saying, but the fact is that **I** can’t pay attention when it doesn’t feel like you’re actually listening to me. With only one side bringing the intention, the conversation fell apart. Without the visual cue that my supervisor was listening with intention, I couldn’t even go through with the conversation, let alone feel any mutuality in it.

I would argue that all too often autopilot small talk echoes this same phenomenon, just on a smaller scale—and instead of one person paying attention, NEITHER person is paying attention. Which, to be clear, in plenty of circumstances, is in fact fine. It’s not that there’s not any ROOM for small talk—even in Jewish law, I’ll have you know, there is a specific section in our halacha on prayer that outlines when in the prayer service you can pause to greet someone, and to whom you may or may not respond at what point⁵. Even Jewish law has allowances for small talk, and even in the face of as weighty of an obligation as prayer.

But if we’re trying to build to something bigger—and according to my understanding of Temple Beth El, we certainly ARE—we want to be a place of meeting and a place of meaning. This demands more than auto-pilot small talk. We have to raise our small talk to tall talk.

And YOU, each one of you, has the power to move the needle. Because although the *goal* is mutuality, it doesn’t START with mutuality—it starts with YOU and the YOU you choose to bring at any given moment. Eminent twentieth century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber describes how all relationships can be placed into just two categories: I-thou and I-it. We exist most of the time in a transactional, small talk, I-it space where we see other people as objects. Our everyday mode. The I-thou, in contrast, is when we enter into relationship and find ourselves completely absorbed in the moment with another person. It’s those times when we’re so engrossed in the human standing before us that by the time we think “wow, this is an amazing conversation” it is TOO LATE and the moment has passed since by even thinking, by even realizing that this is an amazing thing, we have stepped back and are no longer fully present in the encounter. THIS is what can be if we choose to pursue it.

⁵ Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 66:1

But it's not about just waiting for one of these transcendent moments to take us by surprise. WE, each one of us, has the power, and the agency, to set the proper conditions. For Buber, the **I** of an "I-thou" relationship is inherently different from the **I** of an "I-it" relationship⁶. There is no essential I standing in isolation—you can't just be an **I** by yourself. You are EITHER the I of an I-thou relationship OR the I of an I-it relationship. And at any given moment, we get to **choose** which of those two attitudes we want to embody in this world. Buber does not minimize the value or utility of the small talk I-it: he readily admits that "without It [of the I-it] a human being cannot live." Sometimes we need to exist in a transactional way. "But," he continues, "whoever lives only with that, [just with the I-it, and without the I-thou], **is not human.**"⁷ We are NOT FULLY HUMAN if we don't ever think bigger than ourselves and our needs; we are NOT FULLY HUMAN if we don't acknowledge the essence and depth of other people as well. It's only through these moments of breakthrough, of connection, of being in true relationship, that we're most in touch with our authentic human selves.

And when we are separated, when we are divorced from our humanity, when we are estranged from our humanity...The risk of sticking to small talk is seeing other people exclusively in small, one-dimensional ways. Often—all too often—based on appearance! Perhaps some of you heard about the Ask Her More campaign that started in Hollywood around last year's Oscars. Reese Witherspoon led the charge asking red carpet journalists to stop focusing only on the superficial—the it—when they interview actresses. She kicked off the campaign by posting on Instagram—which if you don't know is a thing, it's on your phone, if you're her, millions of people see it, whatever—she made a post on Instagram saying that she loves The Signature red carpet question all actresses get, which is of course...[pause]...WHO ARE YOU WEARING??! But she challenged reporters to also go deeper and, as the campaign says, "Ask Her More." To go beyond the gown, the makeup, the nails, the jewelry and actually look at and *see* these professional, skilled women—to *see* their humanity and to look at them with intention and with seriousness and to ask them questions of more substance. To facilitate this transformation, she suggested sample questions such as "what's the biggest risk you've taken that you feel has paid off?" and "if you could play any character in any movie, who would it be?"⁸ These questions aren't even necessarily that deep or that personal! But they offer *some* movement from I-it to I-thou, some opportunity for both parties to convey some

⁶ Buber 53

⁷ Buber 85

⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/p/zaiCxKihVo/>

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actual intention, and push beyond the total focus on the physical dress and appearance of actresses in particular.

This isn't just a phenomenon for Hollywood's rich and famous though. I would guess that many people in this very room have found themselves pigeonholed in small talk constrained by their own appearance. Maybe it's the tall among us who are constantly told "you're tall!" and called upon to share whether or not they play basketball. Maybe it's someone who "doesn't look Jewish"—note my giant air quotes when I say that, whatever "looking Jewish" means in this day and age—and is repeatedly implicitly told he or she doesn't belong here. Or maybe it's a professional thing, like maybe you're Rabbi Megan Brudney and you're new here at Temple Beth El and you hear and have heard so many times that you don't LOOK like a rabbi. Incidentally, some say it with concern, I think, and some do say it with delight. But please—I want to invite you all, to get to know me as the rabbi that I am instead of the rabbi you think I'm not based on my appearance. For all of these examples I bring—having intention and raising your small talk to tall talk gives everyone the opportunity to simply be their authentic human I-thou selves without having to answer to stereotypes and assumptions.

So I take a moment to bring out my best I-thou self and I ask, again.

Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say?
Why?

If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?

Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?

How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?

When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?

These questions, or the other 31 questions from the study, aren't the answer in themselves—they're the means to access the part of us that craves connection, that yearns to bring the intention of the shofar to our human interactions. But please, take a moment now—take a moment now—I CAN SEE YOU, TAKE A MOMENT—and think of one specific person you think you can build something with. It can be someone you only vaguely know but seemed interesting last time you bumped into them, or it could be a family member, even a spouse, whom you

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spend so much time relating to in the I-it, in the mundane, in the everyday humdrum, and you want to infuse the relationship with some I-thou. Think of that person and think of something you can ask them as a starting point. Maybe one of the questions we've already heard. Something about the past, the present, the future. Hopes, dreams, hobbies, failures, habits, disappointments, rebounds, resurgences. And between now and Yom Kippur, when I can only hope I'll see you all again gathered in this incredible sanctuary—START THE CONVERSATION. You have to be a little brave—I'm asking you to be a little brave—and to take the chance of achieving not the I-it of living, and surviving, but the I-thou of full, aching, stunning, resilient, humanity. Raise your small talk to tall talk and let 5777 be a year of deeper and truer connections with each other, with ourselves, and with God. AMEN