

Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett
Rosh Hashanah 5781 (2020) -- First Day
Temple Beth Abraham

6 Feet Closer

P-r-o-u-l-x.

How do you pronounce that? P-r-o-u-l-x is a last name, 6 letters that were standing between me and a mitzvah.

It must be French. I took French, I love French. But P-r-o-u-l-x. I can't remember which letters are silent in French all of the time or just in certain combinations.

Mrs. Proulx is a librarian in Hollis who I was supposed to make a thank-you video for, through a brilliant project called 6 Feet Closer.

6 Feet Closer was created this year by Noah Friedman, a young Jewish finance professional from New York City, and a team including some other young Jews like the Sharfs, Ben and Ariella, from the Buffalo suburbs. Noah was struck by the daily New York City tradition at the start of the pandemic. At 7:00 pm New Yorkers would cheer and shout from windows and rooftops as health care workers headed home at the end of a shift.

For Noah what was missing was the personal connection. Who is that down there in the blue scrubs; who is that shouting down at me from the window. So he got people together to make thank-you videos, not for someone *they* knew, but for healthcare workers someone they knew, knew.

People loved doing it, so they went bigger. You go now to 6ftcloser.com and volunteer to make a video for a person you don't know, who someone else you don't know, wants to thank. You can nominate anyone too -- a healthcare worker, a teacher, it doesn't have to be a professional. When you volunteer you get a text

with the name and location and a detail about a person someone else wants to thank. You make a short video, up to 45 seconds -- say your name, the name of stranger-to-you being thanked and what they do that someone appreciates, and any message from your heart. When it's delivered, you find out and the person who commissioned it finds out.

Mrs. P-r-o-u-l-x, my name is Jon and I live in Nashua. You're a librarian in Hollis, just down the road, and someone in your community wants to thank you for helping people explore imaginary worlds or search for knowledge, which are as important now as they have ever been. And I want to thank you too, for doing what you do and still being there to do it when that's not so easy.

6 Feet Closer is a brilliant name -- it takes a phrase that's become part of our lives and totally flips it. It's not a workaround to get back some of what we're missing. 6 Feet Closer says we are going to take the connections we have and use them to actually connect more people.

When I'm appreciating you, 6 Feet Closer brings in a third person, who doesn't know either of us. That person speaks to you by name and notices you, what you are doing at this unbelievable time. Recognizing out loud what you must be going through. And you learn that I want someone else to know how much you are worth knowing, and thanking, for showing up another day during this pandemic.

6 Feet Closer says I'm in this fight to save lives together with Mrs. Proulx, and with all the authors whose words inspire the people she gets books to, and with the people who continue to read them and learn and dream, and with some specific person in Hollis who cares about her.

I got to talk to Noah and Ben through Laura Landerman-Garber, a member of our Jewish community. Their website talks about how they were inspired by Jewish ideas. No, it doesn't! But it could, because ever since I met them I can't shake the phrase 6 Feet Closer. It's a mitzvah-mantra, and it's what I want you to hear in your head whenever you see a sign saying "stand 6 feet apart", and every single

time you come across the term “s---- d----ing”, the cursed term I won’t say out loud. *6 Feet Closer* I will say.

I want you also to have the Hebrew word for close, so that bores into you too -- it’s קרוב *karov*. Say it now, everyone after me, *karov*.

There are things we have been doing as a congregation the past six months in this spirit of *karov*. We didn’t just maintain a version of our daily service -- we added two more services online, on Saturday and Sunday evenings -- and for some it’s been a lifeline just to see people once every day, and talk about Stan’s golf score, especially for those who live alone or who don’t go out much or at all for all the good reasons people don’t. New people have joined and gotten connected, and some people come without turning on their microphone or camera, to get some connection and to give support, quietly but profoundly.

And knitting groups and coffee groups, and even launching new conversations about racial justice with people of different experiences and viewpoints. We’ve been doing some *6 Feet Closer*-style things, and the question is what’s next in that spirit for us.

In the Torah reading today, there is a part about separation and a part about coming a bit closer. Part 1 is pretty dramatic, the split from Hagar and Yishmael. They won’t be back all together soon. Part 2 is more subtle -- two Philistines come to Avraham and Sarah and tell them we can see you are so blessed by God, and we’d like to connect with you a bit more. That’s *6 Feet Closer* on the nose.

The Torah says that in response Avraham planted a tree in Be’er Sheva called an *eshel*. The rabbis in the midrash scratch their heads -- what kind of tree, and why did they do that?

Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Nechemiah say they actually planted a whole orchard at the edge of town with certain magical powers. It could generate any fruit that a person wanted -- figs, pomegranates, grapes, or any species at all. All Sarah and

Avraham had to do was say hi to a person passing by, and say: Ask me what you want and we can get it to you. Anything you think would sweeten your moment or give you a bit of delight just in this moment. I picture a tree version of pickup at the dry cleaner, where the right tree would rotate over, and presto!

And then they would say: If you're heading out of town from here we can walk with you for a bit, because we know it's dangerous out there in the desert. We can help point you in the right direction, and at least for part of your journey you won't be alone. We can talk if you want, or not.

That's how Sarah and Avraham lived in Be'er Sheva. The Torah says they lived there "temporarily for many days" -- like us, they didn't know how long it would be. But someone reached out to them, and they decided in response to create a way to get just 6 Feet Closer to people, making their way in a challenging world.

Just 6 Feet. Here's the thing -- 6 Feet Closer isn't really all that much closer. It's not that demanding. The Talmud says that visiting a sick person takes away 1/60th of their suffering. Maybe reaching out to one person in one 6 Foot way takes away a bit of their isolation.

Maybe 6 Feet Closer opens the door to the next 6 feet, to 12 or 24 -- to a deeper connection, a friendship, a more sustained response to a need.

That's great and important, and it's one kind of thing that should happen in a community. But getting *just 6* Feet Closer in itself is good.

That's I think what happens on Rosh Hashanah. Most of the people we're with aren't our friends per se, but we each come and get our own special fruit from the others. Something sweet or nourishing -- the moments your voice and ours creates something special. And we know that people are here to walk together with us a bit on our life journey, to accompany us, and to let us know: I get why you're here, taking this time, for whatever thoughts and hopes you're bringing

today. Whether or not I in your row or in the Gallery or on your screen am a person you ever talk about them with. I'm walking a bit with you.

We don't have a lot of names for that. That thing between friendship and intense caring, and just being another person out there in the wide world. Call it *karov*. Call it community, a group of people trying to get just 6 Feet Closer.

Today we are defying our separation in that spirit. In a certain literal sense, between any of us in the room, or from your nose to the monitor where my face is, we're physically closer to more members of the Jewish community than any of us have been for half a year.

So how can we keep on in this same 6 Feet Closer way, within this Jewish community at the start of this new year. Who is your next Mrs. P-r-o-u-l-x?

Maybe you see someone here -- or you don't see that person because they are not here -- someone who lives alone, for whom a phone call would be soothing and take away a bit of isolation.

Maybe you can stop by an online shiva or a daily minyan, which can be hard in normal times because it's evening and you might live far away from the synagogue -- but from home you can bring some comfort to a person in mourning separated from family and friends.

Maybe you know in the congregation a grandparent who hasn't hugged their grandchild for months, and you can call from time to time and ask them to tell you a story about their grandchild.

Maybe you see a parent trying to figure out how to juggle online school and helping their kids study or just fill the suddenly large amounts of unstructured time, and there's work -- you could see if there's a time in the week when you could call or Facetime or Zoom, help with the homework or just pass the time in some way.

Maybe you see a parent whose kid or teen doesn't have enough people to watch them perform their music or their drama, or to watch their games, and you could offer somehow to be an online audience.

Maybe there's someone you knew has been on a path of healing, and you know the pandemic disrupts that, and you might not be the confidant but you just want them to know that you know, and you miss them.

Maybe you know a teacher here or someone in medical care or home care or making medical devices or in public health, and you can thank them personally or order up a thank you on 6ftcloser.com.

Maybe even there is someone you've had an interesting political conversation with once, or a disturbing political conversation, and you're curious if they're open to one non-Facebook conversation where you can just tell each other your stories.

We each have a magic orchard like Sarah's and Avraham's. It's already been planted, with some of the fruits that would sweeten another person's day. We each can walk just a bit with someone else as they go along in this world that is unknown and dangerous. We can each take away 1/60th of another person's isolation.

Now is a time to make our connections stronger, and even increase them. To say to all our Mrs. Proulx's -- I recognize what you must be going through these days. And I know, and I want someone else to know how much you are worth knowing right now, and thanking, for showing up another day during this pandemic.

I give the last word on *karov* to Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky from Los Angeles, who said it best back in March when we were all closing. He wrote:

“The very last thing we need right now is a mindset of mutual distancing. We actually need to be thinking in the exact opposite way. Every hand that we don’t shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.

“Let’s stay safe. And let’s draw one another closer in a way that we’ve never done before.”

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova.