

*“Let me serve You through love and service to my fellow human being.”*

# YACHAD

**How a painting came to represent unity during these challenging times.**

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I work at a retirement community as a part-time rabbi and chaplain. The painting pictured here, a recent acquisition, hangs in our TV lounge, adding an air of eloquence. I love this painting. Each time I look at it, I see something new, and in this time of COVID-19, this is refreshing.

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**Beefsteak:** *Continued from page 39*

There are no Beef Brisket Bananas or Rump Roast Radishes. Only the tomato suffers the indignity of identity-challenging names.

Regardless of cause, to rig the system, as it were, I purchased a mature Fourth of July tomato plant. More than two feet tall, it was already bearing fruit. Not surprising since its name pertains to early yields, usually by Independence Day. But within five days, my July 4<sup>th</sup> tomato plant had the look of December 4<sup>th</sup>.

Unwilling to concede defeat in June, I phoned a local nursery for advice. I learned, to my shock, the plant was in shock. A common problem, I was told, with tomato plants incurred during transfer from pot to ground. Should I elevate its roots, I wondered? Loosen restrictive mulch? Attempt mouth-to-blossom resuscitation?

One week later, already a month into the Northeast growing season, I was in search of a new tomato plant. A quick fix was in order. No more fooling around. Desperate, I placed ego aside and purchased a Topsy Turvy Upside Down Tomato Planter.

Any reservations I had in buying it compounded after hanging it.

Instead of a garden, I had a tomato plant gallows. Suspended by its ball root from a green plastic bag, it looked as if I were torturing it — imagine the Spanish Inquisition meets *Better Homes & Gardens* — trying to coerce admission to whether it was fruit or vegetable while sending a strong-armed message to the other plants: Grow or else.

The Topsy Turvy experiment lasted three days. The mere sight of it, dangling from underneath a house eave looking like a piñata for vegetarians, burdened me with guilt for demeaning the art of gardening. Plus, I feared it was causing birds at an adjacent feeder vertigo.

I replanted the rescued Roma tomato plant in a bed occupied with a mix of wild flowers and annuals, creating the look of a garden orphanage. It would eventually produce four tomatoes, enough to sustain two salads and a turkey sandwich. Come August, however, I hoisted the

white flag on my this-is-the-year hope when its leaves, as if on cue, withered yellow.

Rather than totter in shame, I backtracked to earlier considerations and, as a compromise of sorts, weighed the chances of convincing Ruth Bader Ginsburg to read me *Ulysses* before the season's first frost warning. If only I had homegrown tomatoes to offer as enticement. Next year perhaps. ♦



**YACHAD:** *Continued from page 40*

I've been working through the pandemic. In the early days, it was hard to get used to the required protective measures: spraying and wiping down door handles, desk and phone; wearing a mask, sometimes gloves, a gown, and a plastic face shield; and keeping a six-foot distance from other staff and residents. Now, it has become second nature, almost. Not quite.

It's hard for me to undo my way of being in the world. I still find it hard to remember to physically distance, especially when the person I am sitting with is sharing a personal concern or someone walks toward me with open arms ready to hug. It takes so much energy to hold back that by the end of the day I'm exhausted from withholding.

Things are different from a distance. Things are different behind a mask. We talk about looking into someone's eyes and how the eyes are a window to a person's soul. Yet, I have come to understand the importance of the entire face. Not being able to see a person's nose, lips, smile, pout and other facial expressions, the eyes feel like less of a window to the soul.

I was talking recently with a woman about a difficult issue she was confronting. During our conversation, she said to me, "I'm so glad we're meeting and sitting together. It makes me feel so much better talking to you."

I responded, "Yes, but it's frustrating not being able to sit closer together, to hug."

She didn't miss a beat, saying, "No! This is like a hug!"

We continued to talk.

Not a minute passed when this woman said to me, "This is so frustrating. To sit far away. To not be able to hug."

That's it, I thought. This is our challenge: How do we maintain a six-foot distance, knowing that as human beings we need physical connection, that closer physical connection often brings deeper spiritual connection, and that closer physical connection will not be possible for a while?

A few thoughts. First, from the Baal Shem Tov, Jewish healer, mystic, and founder of Hassidism, who, in teaching about loving our neighbors as ourselves, said that we are to love the person we are with at that moment that we are with them. (Buxbaum, 1990)

Second, from the Talmud, when a person welcomes another human being, it's as if that person is welcoming the divine presence. (Talmud, Yerushalmi Erubin 5:1)

Third, from a Hasidic text: "When you greet anyone or speak with anyone, bow the least bit (or even bow in your imagination) toward that person and say to yourself, 'My God in Heaven, I bow before this Your Image. Let me serve You through love and service to my fellow human being.'" (Buxbaum, 1990)

If we direct our hearts, actions and intentions into loving the people we are with at the moment we are with them, if we receive others as if we're

welcoming the divine presence, and if we bow (a namaste... yes, it is part of Jewish tradition too), perhaps a deeper sense of love, care and appreciation will find its way into our connection even with our physical distancing.

I must return to the painting mentioned earlier. I love this painting for yet another reason. I love this painting because it was created by residents and staff in the retirement community where I work. It was the brainchild of Sonya, a member of our life enrichment team, who scheduled residents and staff to toss paint onto the large canvas on the floor of our Activity Center.

"Choose a color that resonates with you," Sonya joyfully instructed all who entered. "Take a brush, and shake the paint onto the canvas."

Joy, laughter and creativity filled the hearts of each individual who entered.

When this painting was hung, Sonya asked residents and staff for their input on a name. The title chosen was *Yachad*, which means united or together. This painting symbolizes the togetherness we strive for as a community, and that is: to be present to one another, to see the divine in each other, and to lean toward one another with respect and love. ♦

**Read more:** Buxbaum, Yitzhak. (1990). *Jewish Spiritual Practices*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc.

**BRAIN GAMES ANSWERS / From Page 20**

**Answers to Crossword Puzzle**

B	R	A	A	D	A	R	T	A	R	T		
R	U	N	R	A	T	E	W	H	E	R	E	
A	T	T	A	C	H	E	S	I	O	D	I	D
T	H	E	R	E			P	O	N	Y	P	E
	L	T	D		D	I	P		I	S	N	O
A	M	O	S		V	E	R	T	I	G	O	
V	I	P		S	I	N	E		N	O	W	I
I	N	E	P	T	L		G	L	E	A	M	E
V	I	S	I	O	N		A	L	E	S		M
			E	P	A	U	L	E	T		H	O
S	A	S		A	B	E		S	O	D		
E	L	L		F	L	E	A		T	H	E	R
A	P	O	L	L	O		N	E	U	R	O	S
		S	T	E	I	N		I	S	N	O	T
			H	O	P	E		A	T	O	P	Y
												E

**Answers to Sudoku**

9	6	5	3	2	7	4	8	1
1	8	3	6	4	5	7	2	9
4	7	2	1	9	8	3	6	5
7	3	9	2	6	1	5	4	8
8	4	6	7	5	9	2	1	3
5	2	1	4	8	3	6	9	7
6	9	7	5	1	4	8	3	2
3	1	4	8	7	2	9	5	6
2	5	8	9	3	6	1	7	4