

## **On the Same Team with My Brothers**

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This morning, like most mornings, I went to synagogue (“shul”, in the colloquial Yiddish term) to pray the morning prayers. Shul is where Jewish men of all ages gather to pray. I have a seat that I usually take, unless someone else is already in it. Going to shul sometimes presents those of us with a tendency toward SSA with a challenging experience. It takes us away from a situation that otherwise is specifically designed to neutralize sexual feelings (particularly towards the opposite sex by limiting the experience to men only) or other kinds of diversions. But for those of us with tendencies toward SSA, being in shul may invite difficulty and create unintended consequences; our attention may get diverted from the purpose for which we are there: to engage in a personal relationship with G-d through prayer. For those of us with SSA, our relationship to G-d can be distracted by the men we see in shul and to whom we may feel attracted. In that case, going to shul may doubly challenge us. In the best of times, for anyone, concentrating on establishing a personal relationship with G-d is not a simple matter. But we have the added challenge of fighting to maintain our integrity and not be pulled away by attractions to any of the various congregants.

I usually sit in the row next to the last one. After I was settled in my seat, someone came in and sat directly behind me. Usually at that particular prayer time (6:30 AM) it is rare for that seat to be taken. I therefore turned around to see who it was. It turned out to be the son-in-law of a good friend of mine, who had, it seems, spent the night with his in-laws. He is a good-looking fellow, and with whom I have had issues of attraction in the past. It took me a second or two to recognize him because I was seeing him out of context, that is, I had never seen him in that shul before, or if I had, it was certainly not at that hour. We exchanged greetings - we like each other, and were happy to see each other. Then an older man sat down in my row, a retired rabbi who teaches many classes in the neighborhood. (My wife heard him speak the day before). He is a lively fellow, aging, but with a wonderful spirit. He has Parkinson’s disease, and he physically shakes and his voice shakes.

At that moment, rather than feeling challenged as to why I was there or distracted by a man I had in the past been attracted to, I felt a wonderfully different connection to both of my neighbors. “They are my brothers” I said to myself. “Each one has his issues, his challenges, his difficulties with finding G-d, with life, with living. And we are all here together: young, middle-aged, and old. We are brothers together. We are all on the same side of life. We are all on what my dad use to call ‘my team.’ We are all perfect, we are all full of mistakes, and we all have our issues. And it was wonderful to be aware that the possibility of attraction to the man behind me had evaporated. I realized how what may have been a misguided sexual attraction in the past melted

away because true, brother reality [love?] came to the fore. I could feel that the fellow behind me is no different than me, he has nothing I do not have, nothing I am in need of, no secret masculinity that I somehow missed. And I thanked G-d for that feeling, that freedom and that truth. And, at the same time, I realized at that moment how good my personal connection with G-d can be.

What a wonderful way to start the day. Have a great day!