

Erev RH 5784 – Shabbat is the Cure! – a Cure for Loneliness

I invite you to close your eyes. Take a breath or two. Now...Imagine if Moses were walking down the street in Ojai today. Imagine what that would be like. What he would be like. What would he see? ...Open your eyes.

I think he'd fit right in. I can just see him walking down the street here. Beard, natural fiber clothing, sandals, with a bit of a tan, beard, and sharp eyes, taking everything in. He'd see people with these rectangular boxes in their hands, staring down at it and tapping it, and holding it to their ears, or holding it out in front of them, and wonder what idols they were praying to.

He might look up and see an occasional shiny metal bird-like thing overhead, and lots of strange iron chariots with no horses, carrying people in them and moving all by themselves. As the sun sets, he'd see lights come on, but not candles or fire. He'd look around and find very few horses and no camels. Looking inside the building we call a grocery store, he would see an abundance of food. He would see what a world of riches with live amongst. Looking further down the street, he would see books and bookstores, and marvel that they are bound and carried in one hand. We'd say, Moses, you don't need to chisel on stone anymore! What would Moses say to all this, all the things we take for granted in this world?

What would Moses say...once he really comprehended it...

What would he say about email and social media. News and television. Technology. Warfare. 24/7 delivery of almost anything right to our doorsteps.

I think Moses would find that in spite of all our clothes, food, cars, technology, wealth, ability to travel and communicate, people are or are at risk for being lonelier than ever. We have so much, but is it of what we really need?

Sometimes its good to take a step back and reflect: What do we want versus what do we really need?

We need food, rest, shelter, safety, health, love, belonging, respect, purpose.¹ When we consider what humans want, that can be a much wider set of things. We work very hard

¹ Loosely informed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

on the things we need, and the things we want. We may even make lists of things we want. Needs are met, and then wants become needs too. Spending the time and energy satisfying the wants can be exhausting.

I wonder, what have we done with all this power at our fingertips.

Instead of nurturing us and making our lives better, some of it is at best, exhausting us, some of it is draining our earth's resources, and some of it is enslaving us, splitting us apart and we are more alone and lonely than ever.

Upon creating Adam, the first human being, God observed the human and said,

לֹא טוֹב הִיּוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ "It is not good for man to be alone..."²

In Psalms, much of it authored by King David, he wrote, as though in the middle of an angst filled, sleepless night, alone, the following: "Out of the depths I have called to You, O God."³ He wrote of one of the greatest existential problems of what it means to be human. Loneliness.

Just to be clear, aloneness and loneliness are different. Aloneness can be meaningful, a source of wholeness and peace. Reb Nachman of Bratzlav always taught that we should go out into nature by ourselves, speak and pour our heart out to God. The practice of going into a place of aloneness, retreat, *hitbodedut*, can be a source of self-reflection, calm, and a source of peace. In Ojai there are many beautiful places to do this. Especially here, when we experience the "Pink Moment," it's especially conducive to a sense of wonder, beauty and peace.

Aloneness and loneliness are different. We can feel lonely. Even in the middle of a room full of people. As the room fills, we can feel even more alone. Being single when others arrive as couples, living with someone who is more like a stranger, and seeing a hundred likes to your post but still feeling alone, being at school or a gathering and not feeling like you belong, receiving a medical diagnosis and feeling that no one understands what you are going through, this is loneliness. ***Loneliness affects all of us.***

² Genesis 2:18

³ Psalm 130

There is an epidemic of loneliness all over the world, and, in the United States. According to an advisory from the US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, lacking connection, loneliness can increase the risk for premature death to levels comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The physical consequences of loneliness can be devastating, including a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults. An interesting find is that researchers discovered that the least affected people in terms of the dramatic effects of the pandemic were the homeless. The pandemic changed very little for them.⁴

Loneliness is about the quality of our connections.

Hunger makes us eat, thirst makes us drink, pain makes us draw ourselves back from the source of pain. Loneliness tells us we need to go back into community, to find a place we belong, where we are accepted, honored, known and loved for who and what we are.

We need, especially today, to attend to the *quality of our connections*. Having a hundred likes on a social media post does not mean the “like” clicks are from quality connections, indeed, it likely means the opposite. Research finds that people, especially younger people, are spending less time with one another than just 20 years ago – and right now young people aged 15-24 have 70% less social interaction with their friends. Social media has become a replacement for in-person relationships, and this means lower-quality connections. It is not surprising that the Covid-19 Pandemic increased loneliness, and remote contact alleviated loneliness to a certain degree for some and worsened it for others.

Recognizing loneliness, in ourselves and others is an important first step. Loneliness can impact people in a variety of ways, so understanding the signs is the first step to addressing it. Dr. Vivek Murthy explains, "Some people react to loneliness by withdrawing and getting quiet. Others react to loneliness by becoming irritable and angry, and they may lash out more," he said. "That's why sometimes it takes a little time to really reflect on what's happening in our life. And sometimes we need somebody else to tell us, 'Hey, you've been withdrawing more' to help us understand that we might actually be dealing with loneliness."⁵

⁴ Based on personal conversation with Dr. Michael Green, UCLA.

⁵ Quote from Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, NPR interview 5/2/2023.

Studies show that loneliness and social isolation are less common among older adults who regularly attend religious services.⁶ *Just because I just made Debe and our JCO Leadership team happy by saying this doesn't mean it's not true! Why? Because loneliness is about the quality of our connections, and attending religious services enables us to develop and nurture quality connections. It's not the only way certainly, but as a Rabbi, I can't help but say it: **If loneliness is the disease, Shabbat is the cure!***

Well, it is at least one cure that is particularly suited to the Jewish community. Going to Shabbat services, and sharing a Shabbat meal afterwards, guarantees that we will see friends on a weekly basis, if not more. It is busy here at JCO, and we develop and nurture connections with one another. We turn off our phones, we gather, talk, even pray together, we sing, discuss Torah and life, we kibbitz, we eat, we get to see our friends. We see one another *in person*.

Coming to Shabbat is a wonderful opportunity for families and children – being together for fun, friendship, learning and cookies! – in person socialization is incredibly important and nearly irreplaceable for us today. And, for our children.

All too often, and I am not immune from this – I see people out in a restaurant at a table together for dinner, and both or all are looking at their phones. Not connecting with one another. A few years ago, Ken and I were at a restaurant and a friend walked by and caught both of us staring down at our phones. In our defense, we were just checking our calendars as we were planning an outing!

Shabbat is a perfect time to gather for dinner, host a shabbat meal, host the *oneg* here, join with others here to have dinner after services. It may feel strange if you don't know everyone, but that's the way we make friends. My husband likes to say, Shabbat is a team sport!

The first chapter of *Pirke Avot, Ethics of the Sages* actually tells us to “acquire for yourself a friend.” **Why acquire?** Because it takes something. Acquire is an active word, not passive. *Pirke Avot* is a 2,000-year-old text, and they knew what they were talking about! You don't get to be called a Sage without speaking truth and teaching wisdom. Why acquire? Because it takes something – a willingness to be open. It doesn't mean you

⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3551208/>

have to share your whole life, but it may mean to share something, and especially to be interested, listen, and be present. Taking that first step, being willing, can feel awkward and even frightening, but that's why it's called "acquiring" a friend.

Torah study on Shabbat mornings is yet another way to meet others and make friends. And not just make friends, but to have meaningful connections. In my own experience, I get to know people rather well in Torah study because we ask the questions and share thoughts and ideas that just don't happen elsewhere.

We have a vibrant Torah study group here at JCO, and you don't need to know Hebrew. Just take a break from whatever else you do, just for a couple hours on Shabbat evening, or Shabbat morning, and just by you being here, you just might make a dent in the epidemic called loneliness. It just might be you who someone else meets, and you make all the difference. A phone call when we don't see a friend at Shabbat or Torah study, or the other synagogue activities that we have, can mean the world to them. What do we need? ...one another.

Loneliness is about the quality of our connections.

When we make quality connections, we strengthen ourselves and our communities, we become more resourceful and resilient, for facing the many challenges in our world, being a community that gathers together to make a difference, to do *Tikkun Olam*, to heal the world. We begin by being present for one's self and others, and by being willing to extend our hands and hold another's.

And when you see Moses, say hi, and invite him and Tziporah to join us!

Shana Tovah u'Metukah v'Shabbat Shalom,

May you have a good and a sweet New Year, and Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Lisa Bock