

Rabbi Ethan Prosnit
5779 RHAM 2nd Day

It is Not Good for Humanity to be Alone

It was a masterpiece. The sounds, the lights, the colors, all the elements of the work of art had come together perfectly. Just five days earlier, the artist had begun with a blank canvas. By the end of the sixth day, the artist had created something truly amazing. After each stage of development, the artist, pleased, would gaze upon the masterpiece saying it was “good.” Yet, something didn’t seem quite right when the artist looked at the final creation. Every other part of the work was perfect, the skies were full of stars, the moon, and birds, the oceans teemed with coral of different colors and schools of fish, plants sprouted from each corner of earth, and animals slithered, galloped, and pranced upon the ground. Yet, something was wrong with the most recent addition. When the Creator created the first man, Adam, the artist saw something incorrect with the masterpiece and upon realizing it uttered “lo tov heyot ha’adam l’vado, “It is not good for humanity to be alone.”

What a statement. The first feeling mentioned in the Torah, that we read this morning, is that of loneliness. Not joy, not sadness, not love, not anger but loneliness. There is a midrash, a rabbinic tale, found in Bereshit Rabbah. It says, when God created the world, each of God’s creatures was paraded in pairs in front of Adam for him to name. Two long necked animals walked in front of Adam and he called them Giraffes, then two black and white animals with stripes and he called them Zebras. After all the species walked in front of Adam, he asked God, “What about me, everyone has a partner but I do not?”

So how does God address Adam’s feeling of loneliness, something that was lo tov, not good? God creates Adam’s partner, Eve. In his book “The Heart of Loneliness,” Rabbi Marc Katz writes, “Eve’s creation was meant to replace sorrow with joy, helplessness with support,

unease with peace.... In observing Adam's loneliness, God understood the profound role of others in our lives. Without our fellow human beings, we will never live life to its fullest, deepest, and highest. Turning toward others brings us face-to-face with connection. Their presence in our life is sustaining."ⁱ By creating Eve, God sought to alleviate Adam's loneliness. Before creating Eve, Adam was lonely, but he was not alone. There is a difference.

Rabbi Jack Stern, a former rabbi of this congregation, delivered a Yom Kippur sermon in 1978, titled Loneliness, in which he said, "Both lonely and alone are used to mean "by oneself" but there is a distinction. Being alone is voluntary, alone is by oneself and liking it. Alone is time for books and music and trees and walking on the beach. Alone is for spending time with one's thoughts, for discovering one's resources for praying one's prayers... Alone is what Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav advised when he said that everyone should spend at least one hour a day by himself or herself, for only thus can we achieve union with our God. The other word, the other feeling is lonely, also being by oneself but not out of your choice and not with our own consent. It speaks of times when the need is for contact with other human beings."ⁱⁱ

And the truth is that we can be with other people and still feel lonely. We sit in these pews this morning, surrounded by family, friends, and fellow congregants whom we may or may not know and we may feel isolated and disconnected. We may feel lonely in our marriage, in our home, as the connections between those we love seem so distant. Our loneliness may stem from a recent or not so recent death of a loved one or the ending of a friendship or relationship. Loneliness stems not from being alone but instead from feeling disconnected.

According to Dr. Phillip Cacioppo, the director of the University of Chicago's Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience, loneliness is the "perceived social isolation, or the discrepancy between what you want from your social relationships and your perception of those

relationships.” Through his research, he has seen a steep rise in loneliness in our modern day society. In the 1970s and 1980s, the percentage of Americans over the age of 65 who responded that they regularly or frequently felt lonely was between 11% and 20%. In more recent studies, Dr. Cacioppo found that the number is now closer to 40% to 45%.ⁱⁱⁱ

But, loneliness is not just a phenomenon among older individuals. Recent studies conclude that that older adults are not necessarily the loneliest among us. In fact, the prevalence of loneliness is highest among adolescents and young adults, again in the oldest old.^{iv}

Yet, how can we feel lonely when we are more connected than ever? I have 1,438 friends on Facebook and 141 followers on Instagram. I know where all my “friends” are traveling, the delicious food they are eating, how cute their babies are, and of course all the fun they are having without me. Just last week, a friend from my high school youth group days, thanked her Facebook friends for all the birthday greetings. I’m sure many of you have seen similar “Thank you” posts. But her post stood out to me. After the thanks, she wrote, “10 years ago, on my 25th birthday, I was on my honeymoon- in the days when a vacation meant turning off your phone and being disconnected completely. And I remember thinking that what I would miss the most was how my birthday was the one day of the year where my phone would ring all day, and I would get to talk to so many people I don't usually hear from.... Over the years, my phone rings less and less on my birthday- so a special shout-out for my single birthday call. It honestly means so much. This digital world, which I am admittedly addicted to, sometimes stinks, and is really taking away personal connections.”

Through social media, we are connected to more people from our past and present than ever before, yet true connections remain elusive. No wonder rates of loneliness are rising in our society. So how do we address what some people are calling the epidemic of loneliness?

I believe one way is through a synagogue. One of the wonderful aspects of being a part of a synagogue community is the opportunity to establish meaningful connections that can help alleviate feelings of loneliness. The root of the word synagogue is SYN the Greek prefix that implies togetherness. In Hebrew, a synagogue is a Beit Knesset, a place where people assemble. Or a congregation, where we congregate. The synagogue is a place not just to find God, but for Jews to find each other.

During both joyous and difficult times, our tradition draws us in to our community. To recite certain prayers, we need a minyan, a group of at least 10 Jews. We bury our loved ones in the presence of family and friends, to sign a ketubah, wedding contract, you need two non-blood related witnesses. We welcome our children into the Jewish covenant surrounded by our community. Throughout our life, Judaism asks us to surround ourselves with community.

This year we are excited to announce that our congregational learning initiative is Shleimut, a journey towards wholeness, wellness, and inner wisdom. While we know Temple Emanu-El will not become your Soul Cycle, your barre class, or your weight watcher's meeting, our synagogue leadership believes that Temple Emanu-el should be a place where we can become more whole -- where we can strengthen our mind, body, and spirit, and where we can build those meaningful relationships. This is a congregational wide initiative, from our pre-school students and families, to our high schoolers, to our older congregants, we hope to facilitate experiences that address the isolation that many of us experience at different times in our lives.

I'm proud to say that we already do strive to address loneliness at Temple Emanu-El. We have a group of Bikkur Cholim volunteers, under the organization of Charlotte Gelfand and Terry Kroloff, who visit the same homebound individual each week. At these visits, our

volunteers sit with their friends. Sometimes the conversations are robust, other times there is silence, but I know the visatee appreciates a listening ear, a friendship, a connection to the outside world. As a congregation, we can do even more.

Shleimut activities this year will be varied and many. Look out for the Congregational Learning Booklet for a fuller list of Shleimut activities but to preview: Our congregant Wendy Van-Beisen will lead workshops for those who are affected by cancer. Through these workshops, we hope to build new support communities and new ways to look at life. Our new Shlichah, Danielle will teach Israeli Dance so we can not only work on our muscle tone but also find new friendships and dance partners. And on Erev Sukkot, we will have the opportunity to learn from the Kirtain rabbi and try out communal meditative chanting. We hope to create opportunities for all of us this year to be more mindful and to connect more deeply with one another.

Lastly, I believe one way for us to help reduce loneliness in our community is to think Big about thinking Small. We are one of the largest reform congregations in the state. We are proud that we are a vibrant and large community, but sometimes, because of our size, people feel isolated and alone. We are not the only synagogue in the nation facing this challenge. To address this, congregations across the country are embracing the transformative power of small groups.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Bethie Miller at Larchmont Temple has developed small groups at her congregation she describes what these groups could like. “Small groups are created to foster and strengthen our connections to each other, to Judaism and to this congregation. Imagine joining a small group of mothers and daughters who read novels about growing up Jewish and then meet once a month at someone’s home to talk about what they’ve read and share their own stories about growing up Jewish. Imagine a multigenerational group gathering together to talk about coping with loss. Imagine joining a small group that sets apart the sanctity of

Shabbat by hiking or biking together on Saturday mornings. Or a group of transit riders discussing Jewish perspectives on the latest news. Or a group wine tasting together, or meditating together, or studying together the basics of Judaism in anticipation of their oldest becoming bar or bat mitzvah.”^v If you are interested in helping Temple Emanu-El develop these groups please let me know. I would love to work with you. When a group of people gets together consistently over time, that’s when connections are strengthened, and relationships have the space to grow. We make the connections that Facebook, Instagram, Snap-Chat do not allow.

When God created Adam, God said “lo tov heyot ha’adam l’vado, “It is not good for humanity to be alone.” But perhaps, God had another reason why he created Adam. Perhaps God created Adam because God was alone, God sought a partner. I find great comfort in thinking that God was lonely too. We all experience moments of loneliness, even God. Loneliness is inevitable in our lives, yet as individuals and as community, we can address these moments when we desire true connections. In this year ahead, may we open ourselves to new encounters and to one another, may we connect deeply, and together may we be transformed by what emerges between us. May this be God’s will.

ⁱ Rabbi Marc Katz, “The Heart of Loneliness: How Jewish Wisdom Can Help you Cope and Find Comfort.” p.5

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Jack Stern, “The Right Not to Remain Silent.” p. 59

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://fortune.com/2016/06/22/loneliness-is-a-modern-day-epidemic/>

^{iv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/11/well/mind/how-loneliness-affects-our-health.html>

^v Rabbi Bethie Miller, “To be known, loved, and at home.” High Holy Day Sermon 5776