

You Will Be Found

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Community Synagogue of Rye

Good Yontif. Once upon a time, a man named Honi was walking down the street when he met an old man planting a carob tree. “How long will it take that tree to bear fruit?” asked Honi. “Seventy years,” replied the man. “Seventy Years!? Why on earth would you plant a tree that you may never eat from!?” asked Honi. And the old man’s reply? “I was born into a world with Carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted trees for me, so too will I plant them for my children.”

Honi then eats a meal and, like our local Rip van Winkle, falls asleep for decades. Upon awakening, Honi sees what appears to be the same old man planting a tree. “Are you still at it? How long does it take you to plant a tree?” The old man looks quizzically at Honi. “Do I know you?” “You’re the old man whose been planting the carob tree for his children.” “Oh,” says the old man, “you’re talking about THAT tree over there. That tree was planted by my grandfather. I’m planting this tree for my children and grandchildren.” At that moment, Honi realizes he’s slept for 70 years.

This story is often told around the holiday of Tu B’Shevat, the Jewish New Year for the Trees. It teaches about environmental stewardship, humility and our responsibility for future generations. In fundraising circles, it reminds potential donors how we are the beneficiaries of

those who came before us and our obligation to future generations. But I begin with the story of Honi today, not for those lessons (although they are important and compelling ones) but for the lesson that emerges at its end. Like many stories, we often include the part that suits our agenda while leaving off the parts that don't. It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned how the story of Honi ended.

Upon realizing how long he's been asleep, to be sure that he hasn't been completely forgotten, Honi begins looking for someone or something to connect him to his past. He wanders into town. There he learns that people assumed he was dead. In the 70 years before his lengthy slumber, his son has also passed away. His oldest remaining relative is his grandson.

When he tries to tell the villagers that he is indeed Honi, no one believes him. Feeling rejected, Honi goes to the place where he felt most at home - the *beit midrash*, the communal study hall. It just so happens that at that moment they are studying his teachings. I imagine Honi jumping up and down, making a spectacle of himself, trying desperately to get everyone's attention. "I'm Honi! I'm Honi!" When Honi is finally able to do this, nobody believes him. Would you?

At that moment Honi feels invisible, alienated, isolated. He prays to God for mercy. God hears his prayers and takes his life. Reflecting back a few generations after Honi, a rabbi known as Rava sums up his life in two words: "O'Chevrutah O'Metutah - Either companionship or death.¹"

In one simple phrase, Rava summarizes one of the greatest plights of human existence: loneliness. Nearly everyone who has ever lived has experienced some moments of loneliness. It

¹ Babylonian Talmud, tractate Ta'anit, page 23a

is a feeling many of us know all too well. It is an existential longing for another, for feeling loved, accepted, wanted, needed, noticed. Loneliness is a deep desire for connection where there is none. To be lonely is to be spiritually and emotionally isolated. Loneliness is raw, human and painful. O'chevrutah o'metutah - either companionship or death.

A generation ago, Rabbi Jack Stern of Westchester Reform Temple delivered a sermon on this very topic. "The way we usually approach the subject of loneliness is the way we used to approach death and dying before it was almost forced into the public arena: mostly by avoiding it, because we have all seen lonely people sitting next to other lonely people on lonely park benches, and they are the people that we would least like to be." Eric Carmen may have sung "All by myself," the Beatles may have sung "Eleanor Rigby" and Elvis may have sung, "Are you lonesome tonight," but us? We shy away from the subject altogether, because in our idealized, packaged version of healthy adjustment, there is no room for loneliness, not even a little bit.

A generation before Rabbi Stern, Thomas Wolfe wrote an essay entitled, "Loneliness." In it he noted, "that far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, loneliness is the central and inevitable fact of human existence." O Chevrutah O Metutah - either companionship or death. That seems to be the choice. And if it is, how might we, as individuals and as a community help bend the arc towards chevrutah, towards companionship and away from metutah, away from death, a death of the soul, a death of the spirit.

This past January, citing a study declaring that over 9 million adults in Britain are often or always lonely, Theresa May's government appointed its first, "Minister for Loneliness." Last September, Vivek Murthy, the former U.S. surgeon general set forth an argument in the Harvard Business Review that loneliness and social depression are associated with a greater risk of

cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression and anxiety leading to a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day².

A recent survey of 20,000 adults in the U.S. found that nearly 50% of those surveyed suffer from feelings of loneliness. Digging down, the survey found that only 53% of those surveyed say they have meaningful daily face-to-face social interactions, including an extended conversation with a friend or spending quality time with family. Members of Generation Z, adults aged 18-22 say they are the loneliest generation. Gen. X'er's, my generation, are struggling to keep up with a loss of wealth and income since the Great Recession, and have less time to spend with family and friends. 30% of households in America are households comprised of one person, making it the second most common household type after married couples without children. More than half of all meals are eaten alone and 1/3 of Americans spend dinner time alone³. Those born between 1995 and 2012 comprise a generation shaped by the smartphone. They often have Instagram accounts before they start high school. The good news is that because they are spending more time on their phones, more time in their rooms, more time alone, they are consuming less alcohol, are less sexually active and are getting into fewer auto accidents. However, their levels of distress, their fear of missing out and the feelings of loneliness have increased tremendously.⁴ Sadly, these feelings, coupled with the after effects of the great recession and the opioid epidemic have resulted in suicide rates rising in nearly every state of the union between 1999 and 2016 with it being the second leading cause of death among those ages 15-34⁵. (The most common method used across all groups was firearms).

² Vivek Murthy, Harvard Business Review, September 2017; U.K. appoints A Minister For Lonliness, NY Times, January 17, 2018

³ "Why loneliness in America is a public-health problem," by Quentin Fottrell, Marketwatch, August 15, 2018

⁴ Jean Twenge "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" The Atlantic, September 2017 Edition. Online at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

⁵ "Suicide rates rise sharply across the United States, new report shows." Washington Post, June 7, 2018.

This public health problem is not one only visiting the young. A 2012 University of California, San Francisco study found 43% of older adults felt lonely, even though only 18% lived alone - which raises questions about the quality of institutional and community care. In Britain, government research found that about 200,000 older people had not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month. Loneliness does not discriminate. The feelings that can come with social isolation affect all of us. Problem is, it has only gotten worse with each passing generation.

In a landmark book published at the turn of the century, Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam analogizes the decline in bowling leagues to the increasing alienation of Americans from their families and communities. That book, *Bowling Alone*, is so named because, as Putnam observes, “Once Americans bowled in leagues, now they bowl alone.” One crucial factor leading to social isolation in the 20th century was television. “People watch *Friends* on TV - they just don’t have them,” he wrote. *Bowling Alone* was published in 2000. It is based on an essay published in 1995 - twelve years before the release of the first iPhone, ten years before Facebook was founded, and seventeen years before Amazon became a competitor to Netflix’s streaming service.. See a pattern?

I am concerned about the generation of seniors who suffer a sense of isolation - which is why I’m so happy that our congregation is so committed to our SAJE program. I worry about the aging boomers who, finding it too expensive to live in these zip codes once kids finish college, move to new communities with little or no social network - which is why when we hear of someone moving, we try to put them in touch with a local Reform congregation. I worry about those Gen x’ers who are still making up for the lost income and opportunity from the great

recession- which is why we are doing more and more to lower the barriers to synagogue affiliation but, to be honest, it's concern about the millennials and and those who are part of iGen that keep me up at night. Maybe it's because those are the ages of my kids. Or maybe it's because these kids are our future.

Our tradition is well aware of the pain associated with loneliness and isolation. It also provides wisdom to break through the pain. Six days God creates the universe, ending each day by calling it *tov*, good. It is only with us, with the creation of human beings that a bug enters the system. "*Lo tov l'hiyot adam levado* - it is not good for a human to be alone."⁶ God can't seem to understand. Like a parent who says to their child, "You have a house full of toys," we are told that God takes Adam around the garden saying, "Look at My works! See how beautiful they are - how excellent! For your sake I created them all."⁷

Even with the entire Garden before him, Adam isn't content. So God, the first helicopter parent, parades all the animals in pairs before Adam. Two by two these creatures walk before him. Adam names each animal; yet, no sooner does he finish his task than Adam turns to God and declares (you can almost hear him whine), "Everyone has a partner, but I have none!"⁸ And God learns. It is not good for a person to be alone. People require companionship. O Chevrutah O Metutah - Either Companionship or Death.

Through Eve's creation, Adam grew in a number of ways. With her by her side, our rabbis teach that Adam found many things: goodness, help, joy, blessing atonement, and peace.⁹ As my colleague Rabbi Marc Katz comments, "These are precisely the things that are missing in

⁶ Genesis 2:18

⁷ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:3

⁸ Genesis Rabbah 17:4

⁹ Genesis Rabbah 17:2

the absence of all powerful relationships like family, friends, coworkers, and community.

Adam's loneliness made it impossible for him to achieve many of the foundational virtues of an actualized life. Without others in his life, Adam was empty. Without another to share his inner world, Adam is described by the Rabbis as simply 'flesh and blood.'¹⁰ We need others to help us discover what is below the surface, to challenge us when we slip inward, and to probe our depths alongside us. If we are going to be joyful, if we are going to be at peace, if we are going to grow at all, we can't do it alone¹¹.

Just as our tradition is well aware of the pain associated with loneliness, it gives us tools and resources to move to places of healing and wholeness. Allow me to suggest three: helping yourself, sharing your vulnerability, and repurposing your pain.

Rabbi Nachman of Horodenka once told this story: A man washed up at the foot of a great city after his ship ran aground. As he approached the gates, all the townspeople rushed out to meet him, he learned that he was to be crowned king. He was dressed in royal garb, given the royal crown and placed on the royal throne. Soon, his excitement turned to trepidation. He learned that the city chose a new king once every year. After his term was up, the king would be stripped of his royal robe and exiled to an island to live alone. He would be doomed to a life of misery and isolation, the foil of his year in power.

Seeking advice, the king developed a plan. While the rules of the kingdom dictated that at the moment of exile the king must leave all his wealth and power behind, he could send provisions and workers well ahead before his term was up. During his year in power he would plant the seeds to ensure that his remaining days on the island would not be defined by loneliness

¹⁰ Pirke D'Rebbe Eliezer 12

¹¹ Katz, Marc. "The Heart of Loneliness."

and poverty. When the year was finished and he was deposed, he retired to the island. But because of his advance planning, he found there were ample supplies and numerous people waiting for him. His foresight ensured he would live out his days in peace.¹²

The lesson of this story is to create a life for yourself so that when you do end up in a place of desolation and alienation, you will already have resources to help. These could include activities that bring you joy and that give you a sense of purpose - music, art, craft to add beauty to the world; actions that serve your community - feeding the poor, supporting the sick, comforting the bereaved, advocating for political change. Or it could even be prayer, study and the practice of mitzvot as a way of serving God. As 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once put it, “He who has a Why to live can bear almost any How.”

Creating a life for yourself includes strengthening your soul, strengthening the mind. Our cardiologists remind us to workout to strengthen our bodies and to strengthen our hearts. Why then don't we spend time strengthening our mind? Our heart will keep the blood flowing. A clear mind can keep everything in flow.

Strengthening the mind, developing an inner life helps to prepare us for the inevitable - for moments of loneliness, moments of sadness, moments of loss. Things like meditation, yoga, mussar, and a little known practice called *hitbodedut* that some of us got to experience on the second day of Rosh Hashanah strengthen the mind. These practices teach us to embrace aloneness, not to fear solitude. Developing a mindfulness practice can help us from feeling alone in the world to feeling like we belong to the world.¹³ It can allow us to experience JOMO, the joy of missing out, instead of succumbing to FOMO, the fear of missing out.¹⁴ Standing in a

¹² As told in Marc Katz, “the Heart of Loneliness,” Jewish Lights. p. 145

¹³ “Mindful Meditation helps recovering addict with a criminal past turn his life around,” [CNN.com](#), August 29, 2018.

¹⁴ “How to Make This the Summer of Missing Out,” [Hayley Phelan](#), New York Times, July 12, 2018.

place of non-judgement allows us to become kind, tolerant, compassionate and forgiving to this person (point to self) who is a child of and made in the image of God.

The second thing we can do is to be bold, to be vulnerable, to speak about our loneliness with others, not as a victim but as a champion, as one who wants to be different than they are today.

On Rosh Hashanah we blew the shofar. When this day ends we will blow a single long blast. Our ancestors loved to imagine metaphors for the sounding of the shofar (which means we can create new ones). For some it was meant to be a call to war; for others, an alarm for the soul. In her plaintive wail, the great sage Maimonides heard tears. The long blast, the *t'kiah* is meant to remind us of someone moaning. The three shortened blasts of *sh'va'rim* are meant to remind us of the deep sobbing of someone who is heavily burdened. *T'ruah*, nine very quick bursts in rapid succession are meant to sound like intense wailing.

Atem Netzavim says our Torah - you stand here, all of you this day, to enter into a covenant with God. And why all of us? Because when one cries out, saturating the air like the sound of a shofar, when one chooses to un-bottle his sadness and his loneliness, something powerful happens, others stand with you, others support you.

Atem Netzavim - you stand here this day. Why does it say "stand," as opposed to sit or gather? Because being in a community means standing up for others. It means giving others something to lean upon. Standing for others when they are in pain is a way of saying, "*Hineini* - Here I am. I am here for you.

Atem Netzavim - you stand here this day. These words are inscribed on the back of our new ark at 200 Forest Ave. In renovating our sanctuary we built something beautiful, something

unique. Behind the ark is a spiritual passageway. It is a place for solitude. In that place you will be able to be with your thoughts. In that place you will be able to bring your loneliness to God. In that place you might just find yourself. And hopefully, in that place, you will be found.

The third thing we can do is to repurpose our experience to be a light to others.

In the book of Numbers, we meet a man named Korach who challenges Moses to a biblical version of a dual. Each - along with his supporters - bring their fire pans to the school yard, or wherever ancient rumbles used to take place. They make offerings to God. God chooses Moses (of course). Korach and his band are eviscerated by God but the fire-pans remain. Eleazar the priest is then commanded to collect the fire-pans and to hammer them into plates to cover the sacred altar. In addition to serving as a warning for future generations, these plates, now part of the holy tabernacle become holy themselves. That which threatened now protects.

For the Israelites, these fire pans were scars, reminders of the pain of rebellion. Hammered to the exterior of the altar, they couldn't hide from them but they could do something else. They could take a painful past and use it to educate in the present.

Many of us have felt overwhelmed by loneliness, and many of us have survived. Like the Israelites, we too carry scars with us. Like them, we can repurpose the pain. We can take our story and use it as a way to heal others. We can embrace others as we wish we were embraced. We can use our suffering to practice empathy and compassion. We can use our past to better the present lives of others.

Robert Frost told us how acquainted he was with the night and Emily Dickinson responded, "If I can stop one heart from breaking, I shall not live in vain,"

“We don’t have to suffer for naught. Though our loneliness seems purposeless, we can it endow it with purpose. We can hammer our heartache into a covering for another’s soul.”¹⁵ O Chevrotah O Metutah - Either companionship or death. On this day when we pray to be sealed in for life, I choose Chevrotah, I choose companionship and being there for others.

Our synagogue mission is a clear one: we are a caring community that adds meaning and purpose to your life. When you come here you will find caring. You can come here and feel safe. You can come here and make yourself vulnerable. You can come here and unburden yourself. You can come here to speak your truth. And when you do, I make a promise to you - when you come here and tell another, “this is what is going on for me. Please listen. Please do not let me suffer alone.” I promise you.... I promise you.... I promise you.... you will be found.

Teen choir comes out singing, “You will be found...” from Dear Evan Hansen

Based on this recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFZmT-LRMBM>

¹⁵ Katz, Marc, “Heart of Loneliness,”