

Westchester Reform Temple
Rosh Ha-Shanah Morning 5777
The New Loneliness
Rabbi Jonathan Blake

In 1978, Rabbi Jack Stern delivered a sermon from our *bimah* called “Loneliness.” He said: “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. So 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.”¹

Rabbi Stern went on to quote Thomas Wolfe, who, a generation earlier, wrote in an essay also entitled “Loneliness,” “that far from being a rare and curious phenomenon,”

¹Stern, Jack. “Loneliness,” *The Right Not to Remain Silent: Living Morally in a Complex World*. New York: iUniverse, 2006. p. 79.

loneliness “is the central and inevitable fact of human existence.”²

So it was. So it is. So, perhaps, it ever shall be.

Still, the subject of loneliness seems more timely than ever.

How ironic that the the more crowded the world gets, the lonelier we feel. How ironic that the more technologically advanced we become—the more sophisticated, fast, and far-reaching our tools of communication, transportation, and transaction—the more we experience disconnection, alienation, separation. How ironic that here, with every seat filled, many of us feel isolated: the sea of unfamiliar faces; the empty chair once occupied by a loved one; the longing for what once was and no more will be.

This is not solitude. Solitude is coffee and a newspaper, a bath and a glass of wine. Solitude is a walk in the morning

² *Ibid*, citing Wolfe, Thomas. “God’s Lonely Man,” *The Thomas Wolfe Reader*, ed. Holman. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962. p. 676. Essay originally appears in Wolfe, Thomas. *The Hills Beyond*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941.

breeze, a beach chair at sunset. Solitude is alone with a meandering thought, a silent prayer, a daydream, a remembered melody. Solitude is a stolen hour writing in a diary, practicing guitar, listening to Miles Davis. Solitude is contentedly sitting on a couch, watching football, or so I'm told.

Solitude is alone by choice. Lonely is alone not by choice.

Or is it? Many of our choices now seem to favor loneliness. We hide behind digital screens: standing in line at the store, in the doctor's waiting room, at intermission, the minute the plane lands, sitting across from each other in a dim restaurant, our faces illuminated by the light of an iPhone.

“How is this a life?” asks Jamie Varon, a thirty-something blogger. “It's not a life, actually. We cannot spend our days hunched over a screen forging a sense of human interaction. This is not what we were made for. I can guarantee all your best memories live within the moments with others.”

“When you look back on your life,” she asks, “will you be happy by how much Netflix you’ve watched? Will you be happy about the graveyard of plans you let fall by the wayside? Will you be happy when you’re surrounded by no one because we’ve all pushed each other away?”³

That’s an excerpt from her essay entitled “This is the New Loneliness.” A New Loneliness has seized a new generation. And maybe, when we go offline for a moment, when we stop the solitary scrolling and clicking, the ceaseless surfing and searching, the posting and the liking, we might wonder: for what? Does anyone get up from a laptop feeling more energized, valued, loved, or understood? What’s this all about?

Even online dating—a seemingly endless array of eligible people all craving human connection—has, for some, only exacerbated the loneliness.

³ Varon, Jamie. “This is the New Loneliness,” published on www.thoughtcatalog.com, April 8, 2015. <http://www.thoughtcatalog.com/jamie-varon/2015/04/this-is-the-new-loneliness/>

In a recent *New York Times* “Modern Love” column, Sarah Moses recounts a run of hapless first dates after which she reports, “While dating does make me feel crazy at times... I keep at it in hopes that one day the outcome will be different.

“At the same time, I also try hard to accept that it may never happen for me. I tell myself that I don’t need a partner to lead a happy and fulfilling life. Then one morning, I’m on the Q train, across from a cute couple....

“He says something funny to her, and she laughs, then puts her head on his shoulder. When they get up to leave, he holds her hand and they just look so stinking happy.

“I want to cry, feeling creepy for staring at these strangers and also envious that they seem to have what I want.”⁴

In truth, the New Loneliness has been a long time in the making and has as much to do with the collapse of American civic engagement among Baby Boomers and Gen-X’ers as it

⁴ Moses, Sarah. “Single Woman Seeking Manwich,” published on www.nytimes.com on May 13, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/fashion/modern-love-dating-single-okcupid.html>

does with round-the-clock internet use among Millennials. In his landmark 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, sociologist Robert Putnam analogizes the decline in bowling leagues to the increasing alienation of Americans from their families and communities. One crucial factor leading to social isolation is television. Says Putnam, “People watch *Friends* on TV — they don’t have them.”⁵

But perhaps I have already lost some of you. Those of you who remember Jack Stern’s “Loneliness” sermon belong to a generation less beguiled by the internet, more likely to have joined a bridge club or rotary club. And some of you are probably thinking: “But wait, Rabbi, I’m 85 and I’m lonely too!”

Okay. So you can be 85 and lonely too. There’s nothing new about that. What’s new is that, increasingly, loneliness is

⁵ Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. p. 108.

being viewed as a public health issue “deserving of public funds and national attention,” as reported last month in the *New York Times*, noting that “[r]esearchers have found mounting evidence linking loneliness to physical illness and to functional and cognitive decline. As a predictor of early death, loneliness eclipses obesity.”⁶ It’s universal, timeless.

Twice, and only twice, the Torah reports that something is *Lo Tov*, “not good,” and both have to do with loneliness. The first refers to Adam in the Garden of Eden, of whom the Torah says, “*Lo tov lihyot adam l’vado*, It is not good for a human being to be alone,”⁷ and so God creates Eve. The second time, Moses’s father-in-law Jethro counsels him not to take on the burden of leadership alone. Seeing Moses toil from dawn ’til dusk, ministering to every Israelite’s needs, he admonishes him: “*Lo tov ha-davar asher ata oseh*: The thing you are doing is

⁶ Hafner, Katie. “Researchers Confront an Epidemic of Loneliness,” *The New York Times*, September 5th, 2016, as published at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/health/loneliness-aging-health-effects.html>.

⁷ Genesis 2:18.

not good.”⁸ It is not good to live alone and it is not good to lead alone. Our ancient tradition really gets loneliness.

Robert Frost got it too. He wrote:

I have been one acquainted with the night.

I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.

I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.⁹

At one time or another, we *all* become acquainted with the night.

Every human story goes like this: From the moment we emerge from the womb, we are learning to breathe alone. By the time we breathe our last, we realize that we must also leave

⁸ Exodus 18:17.

⁹ Frost, Robert. “Acquainted with the Night,” *West-Running Brook*. New York: Henry Holt, 1928. Poem cited in the e-book version at <http://www.gutenberg.ca/ebooks/frostr-westrunningbrook/frostr-westrunningbrook-00-h-dir/frostr-westrunningbrook-00-h.html#night>.

this world alone, unable to take anything—much less anyone—
with us.

And yet, in our lifetime, we never stop craving human connection. Is there any desire more primal, more persistent, than to feel loved, to feel protected, to feel understood by another?

I think that the *Binding of Isaac* may be the loneliest story of all, don't you? Twice today's Scripture mentions that father and son walk together: first, when Abraham and Isaac set out on their three days' trek, and again, once they have outwalked the furthest city light and reached the mountain. "*Vayelchu shneihem yachdav,*" it says. "The two of them walked on together."¹⁰

But then comes a trauma, when the father, standing over his helpless boy, takes a knife to his throat. It matters little that God intervenes and stops him from actually killing his

¹⁰ Genesis 22:6, Genesis 22:8.

son. The damage is done. When Abraham leaves the mountain, he walks alone. At the end of the story, Isaac slips away without mention. It is almost as if he has vanished from the scene. But in the following chapters we discover that while alive and well, Isaac will never speak to his father again.

I was talking with Kelly about this story, about how sad I find it, about the abject loneliness I see in Abraham and Isaac—and Kelly said, “Of course they’re both lonely. Both of them feel abandoned by their father. Isaac by Abraham, and Abraham by God. And not only that,” she added, “their experience lays bare the most profound kind of loneliness of all: to feel that no one else could possibly understand what you’ve been through.”

It’s an ancient story about an ancient loneliness, but it could have been written yesterday about so many of us suffering a family estrangement, a rupture between parent and child or sibling and sibling, an old trauma whose pain does not

heal but rather hardens with the passage of time. An abandonment when we needed someone most. A trust betrayed. A promise broken. A friendship sundered.

There is so much loneliness in our present-day Abrahams and Isaacs, to say nothing of the unmentioned Sarah, the Jewish mother biting her nails back in the tent as she frets over what has become of her son, not to mention her husband.

Which brings us to another kind of ancient loneliness: “in some marriages a far-reaching loneliness of two people who once reached out to each other in love but no more,” as Rabbi Stern described it. “Or there can be, as there is in most marriages, a little bit of loneliness with two people still in love, still reaching out to each other, but not always at exactly the same time.”¹¹ Look no further than Abraham and Sarah, who together withstood famine, migration, kidnapping, war, infertility, and the heartbreaking episode of their foreign maidservant Hagar whom they use as a surrogate to give birth

¹¹ Stern, 81.

to a son, Ishmael, only to turn on them in a fit of jealousy, consigning them to the desert.

Yes, Abraham and Sarah's marriage had its long, lonely stretches.

By the time we finish the binding of Isaac, when Abraham and Isaac walk off, each one alone, we can understand why the next verse of the Torah reports that Sarah has died.

Oh, the singular loneliness of grief. In the past year alone we have laid to rest 25 congregants and 87 members of our extended WRT family, including 5 members of WRT's founding generation. There's a special loneliness known only to those who have buried relative and friend in steady succession for years on end. I tend to bump into many of these same congregants at funeral after funeral, and our conversation has become a kind of shorthand for the unspoken language of mourners, exchanging little more than a hug and a knowing

look and maybe one sentence like, “We have to stop meeting like this.”

What to do when what we want most in the world is to pick up the phone and talk about the kids’ soccer game or report card, the trip to Nantucket, the amazing dinner we just had—but now there’s no one on the other end? The loneliness of grief is the loneliest of all.

Aren’t we all lonely, to one degree or another?

And yet if we leave this place and this moment resigned to remain this way forever—too afraid, too stubborn, or too disheartened to change—then the beautiful promise of Rosh Ha-Shanah will have passed us by.

For loneliness is not some sad city lane leading endlessly into the darkness. It is, rather, for most of us, a temporary, if recurring, part of life, a street we pass along from time to time.

For those walking the lonely road of an injured relationship, Rosh Ha-Shanah and these ten Days of Awe have much to teach us about the power of *teshuvah*, the word that we translate “repentance” but which really means “return,” to return to the relationships that have been stressed and strained and even severed.

Teshuvah also asks us to examine ourselves honestly. It asks: how much loneliness have I brought upon myself? To what extent is my loneliness a result of my obstinateness, my narcissism, my lack of self-awareness? Was I abandoned, or did I withdraw? Did I contribute to others’ loneliness? Have I shunned others in my need to be right, to be recognized, to be strong or independent? Our tradition teaches us to care for the widow, the stranger, the orphan. Have I failed to show up for those in my family, my community, who bear the burden of a loneliness they never chose?

What healing power resides in simply showing up, in putting your arms around someone else, in setting aside your own loneliness for an hour by performing a *mitzvah* for someone else! Anyone who spends an hour making a *shiva* call, serving guests at a homeless shelter, tutoring disadvantaged kids, volunteering at a hospital, reading for the blind, knows this. When we reach out for another, the hand of God reaches out and takes away a little of our loneliness—at least for an hour.

A Hasidic parable related by the Israeli author S.Y.

Agnon:

A man had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing the way out. Suddenly he saw a man approaching him in the distance. His heart was filled with joy. “Now I shall certainly find out which is the right way,” he thought to himself.

When they neared each other, he asked the man,

“Brother, I have been wandering about in this forest for days. Can you tell me which is the right way out?”

Said the other to him, “Brother, I do not know the way out either. For I, too, have been wandering about in here for many days. But... come, let us look for the way out together.”¹²

It’s easier to find our way if we’re willing to stop and ask for directions. And whenever we take the hand of another, we find part of ourselves.

But first we need to see the person next to us.

On a sunny day this past June in New York City with an hour to kill, I parked myself on a bench at the Shakespeare Book Shop on the Upper East Side and started to write a

¹² Agnon, S.Y. *Days of Awe*. New York: Schocken Books, 1995. p. 22. Parable attributed to Rabbi Hayyim [Halberstam] of Zans (1793-1876).

sermon. A lovely woman in her late 60s sat down next to me and asked for the WiFi password. (It happens to be “Shakespeare.”)

We passed the hour in silence, absorbed in our work. As I was getting up to leave my eye spotted a newsflash on my laptop about the presidential race and I must have either grunted or moaned or signaled indigestion, and the nice lady to my left said, “everything okay?” I said, “Oh sure, just politics.” She said, “*Nu*, what country are *you* moving to?” And I said, “Oh, I couldn’t leave, but I guess if I had to, it’d have to be Israel.” My impromptu companion replied, “Yes, I guess it’s good to go with our people,” and I said, “*L’chayim* to that.”

Then she asked, “So how come you couldn’t leave?” and I said, “Well, I’m the rabbi of a big synagogue in Scarsdale.”

Long pause.

She pierced me with her gaze. “Is your father a doctor?” she asked. I said, “Yes, he is.” Then she said, “Is your mother Margie?” I said, “Yes, and who, by the way, are *you*?” The stranger replied, “I’m your cousin Flora. Your great grandmother Chanah was my great-aunt.”

And for the next long while, this woman, whom I had never met, and to whom my mom had last spoken 35 years ago, when I was 7, proceeded to tell me how she and my mom grew up in New Jersey, spending every weekend together; how she had followed my life and career; how she knew from our cousin Bruce that I had a congregation in Scarsdale.

I inadvertently reached out for a stranger and found my family. You can call that whatever you like. I’m comfortable talking about the hand of God.

So. There you go.

I wonder what would happen if we tried this here at WRT. Most of us wouldn’t need to look farther than one aisle

away to find a stranger who could use an outstretched hand.

We might even discover our family.

From time to time we are all Abraham and Isaac, walking together, falling apart.

From time to time we are all acquainted with the night.

From time to time we are all lost and lonely.

But, come—come, let us look for the way out together.