

KOL NIDREI
5774

Garrison Keilor reminds us that everyone sitting alone at the bar has a story. If he spoke Yiddish he would have said that everyone has a peckel to carry, a load to bear. Some pecklach are heavier than others because in addition to everything else in them they are filled with loneliness. Everyone carries a peckel and all of us can help lighten the load of others. Our Torah commands us to help relieve the burden of another's animal; how much the more so should we be concerned with lightening the load of another human being?

Arnie Eisen, the Chancellor of JTS, reminds us that an important part of a being a congregation is for us to feel sadness, pain and loneliness together and by doing so lighten each other's load. Being at the kiddush after services can be as important as prayer for someone who needs some of that human touch. When anyone provides this human touch it is a holy moment. We should never underestimate ourselves, such moments and the comfort we can bring to another. Think about recent discussions in our local media about how unwelcoming so many native born Cincinnatians are to those who move here and how these so-called newcomers who have jobs and live in nice homes are nevertheless lonely and hungry for deep human connection.

Our Torah tells us that G-d looked and saw that Adam was alone and G-d said that this was not good. Ecclesiastes (4:9-12) teaches that "two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor: for if they fall, the one will lift up the other; but woe to the one who is alone when he/she falls." The Hebrew in this verse is "amal" which literally means labor indicating that interpersonal relationships require work. It is labor for us to temper our egos and contain our self-absorption, it is labor to give more than we take and it is labor to compromise and sacrifice which all genuine relationships require.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachya of the late second Temple period (Avot 1:6) tells us to make for ourselves a rabbi and acquire for ourselves a friend. We generally talk about making friends. Our rabbis talk about acquiring, earning a friend. Friendships require work, sincerity and trust. Although we use the same words today—friend and friendship—many relationships we describe as friendships are simply utilitarian arrangements. They exist because we have determined—

consciously or not—that they meet our needs and give us what we want. Such narcissism is rampant in our society; friendships require altruism. There is a personality disorder called the narcissistic personality where “me, my and I” harmfully trump “us, our and we” and precludes there being real relationships. Most of us do not realize how often, as Martin Buber observed, we turn people into “Its”, objects in our lives, as compared to being “Thou’s,” real, unique, sensitive, vulnerable people.

Sometimes our loneliness leads to behavior that distances people from us. Loneliness can create such a hunger for intimacy that our need leads to behaviors that make it hard for others to feel comfortable with us and want to be with us. We get too anxious, too nervous, to over-the-top with people because understandably, we so much want to be in relationship; we so much want not to be lonely. Relationships require patience, consideration and respect for boundaries.

Rabbi Simon Jacobson in his “Rest for a Weary Traveler” asks “if we ever feel lonesome? Utterly alone? With no one to turn to and no one able to understand us?” There are situational factors and circumstances in our lives that cause loneliness. The death of a loved one, divorce, dear friends moving away are but a few of these. Many who are lonely are surrounded by people. I was saddened to hear Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach’s daughter, Neshamah, say that her father, at the end of his life, was heart-broken and very lonely. Reb Shlomo was surrounded by people and was so loved. How lonely do you think Marilyn Monroe was? How lonely does the President get at times? Being lonely is a part of life.

We know that loneliness can develop over time or overnight because of a trauma. As with free-floating anxiety, there is existential, free floating loneliness; loneliness that does not seem to have a reason; but it does. We live on the outside as if all is alright but on the inside, often beyond our own awareness, we are cut off and detached from ourselves; we are lonely for our own company.

Loneliness is also a strength because it attests to our being totally unique; our loneliness affirms our profound individuality. Just like G-d needed a sanctuary to dwell with us, we need a sanctuary to dwell and feel at home in. It is one thing to find solace in family and friends and it is another “to find a truly comfortable home for the lonely core of our souls within ourselves.” How does it feel on a

bitterly cold winter night, chilled to the bone, to come home to a burning fire? This is how we are to feel being alone and at home with ourselves.

It is very important to be able to be alone, to be still and quiet and to teach our children to do the same. We do not do well being alone, quiet and still, being free of distractions and all of our gadgets. So often we see people walking on nature paths talking on their phones, standing by waterfalls and other beautiful sights, during funerals and symphonies talking incessantly and even during the rabbi's sermon. Can you imagine that?

Next time we feel lonely we should know that we are not alone because our loneliness is shared by every soul. Being unique as each person is means that each of us is fundamentally alone; again, this aloneness is a strength because it allows us to experience our uniqueness. The tragic irony is that many of us spend much time, energy and money externally fighting our loneliness when the place to find the deepest most intimate company is within ourselves: sitting quietly on the porch, in front of the fire, walking in the woods, meditating in synagogue. How many of our children know how to be alone and know that knowing how to be alone is a good thing? Sartre said that "anyone who is lonely when alone is in bad company."

There is a real spiritual loneliness for many because we long to know what the real purpose of our lives is. There is a loneliness from the unanswered questions as to why am I here, why was I born? Technology has only intensified this loneliness. The word "friend" has become a verb and we now have more friends than ever and there is more loneliness than ever. Even those who sing the praises of technology are critical of the difference between connecting and genuine communication, between connecting and real relationships. When we see four people sitting together at a table in a restaurant all on their phones, their connectedness is distant and their communication is non-existent. Someone said that the reason he turns on the television is 10% to watch programs and 90% as background noise to fight his loneliness as he works on his computer.

Whenever a person experiences compassion—from another or for another—this person is not alone or lonely. Human compassion is a mitzvah of immense importance. Kindness and compassion sustain the world and our being part of the world, they sustain us. Human kindness and compassion are the very

foundation of human life. Without them who could live, without them who would want to be alive? Think about neglected and abused children and think about those who come into their lives to care for them and love them.

What can be lonelier than not being able to receive compassion, support and love from our own families? Our rabbis say that G-d created all human beings from one couple—Adam and Eve—to teach us that we are all family. What could make G-d sadder than when we as nuclear families distance ourselves from each other and do not comfort and care for each other? The prophet Malachi tell us that a time will come when the hearts of parents will be turned their children and the hearts of children to their parents? We must extend this turning of our hearts to siblings, cousins, friends and others. When we are not turning our hearts to the people in our lives, we are turning our backs on them.

Rabbi Heschel teaches that our loneliness is what makes us ready to search for a voice of G-d in the world of human beings, a voice of empathy and compassion. We long for that human touch, deep and healing, and we long for our true and ultimate selves; are most lonely for ourselves. Our true selves are crying out in loneliness for us. These High Holy Days are designed to help us retreat from the outside and go inside to dwell within and with ourselves. These holy days are to help us become more aware self-aware and come to know and like ourselves better: our true selves, not ourselves covered up by all the garments and cosmetics we wear.

We imagine when alone in the womb before birth that we are all warm and cozy, nurtured and protected and then we are born into this world of challenge and trauma, of struggling to survive and succeed and we fight a sense of abandonment and loneliness from that moment on. Do we feel, as Rabbi Heschel suggests, “alone in the wilderness of the self, alone in this silent universe of which we are a part and in which we feel at the same time like strangers?”

The American novelist, Gail Godwin, wrote “that no matter how well our kinship systems work, all humans discover solitude as we grow up.” She says that “we are all orphans at one time or another, at least in our hearts.” We need to be concerned about what we are teaching our children about the importance of private time, quiet time and time to be alone. As we thought about on the first

day of Rosh HaShanah, time for our children to dream, be creative, play outdoors, be alone with themselves and be with their imaginary friends.

Rabbi Naomi Remen explains that “perhaps the most important thing we bring another person is the silence in us, not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal; the sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as he or she is. We are all hungry for this other silence. This silence affirms us, embraces us and keeps us in intimate company.” When we are in an “I-Thou” moment with another, when we are allowing ourselves to feel the other person’s being and be fully who he or she is, not only is this person less lonely but so are we.

When we remember moments of inspiration, love, meaning and kindness we are less lonely. There is a loneliness in us that hears. Our loneliness allows us to hear the cry of others, the cry of the universe. What is a moment of empathy like? What is it to feel as much as is humanly possible what another feels? How do such moments make us more compassionate and kinder, how do such moments make others and us less lonely? How do such moments make our lives and our world better?

Our rabbis tell us that when we behave unkindly, insensitively, hurtfully toward others we diminish G-d’s presence in our world. When we embrace another, forgive another, support and help another we increase G-d’s presence in our world. We determine how much or how little of G-d is present in the world; we know that the more G-d there is in our world, the less loneliness there is. Human free will is not only a philosophical concept it is the most powerful tool we have in our hands.

Hillel and Rabbi Akiva taught that the most important mitzvah of all of the Torah and Judaism is to love our neighbors as ourselves. Rabbi Heschel points out that this mitzvah is not at home in us because we are not at home within ourselves. If we are jealous, angry and resentful of others, how can we fulfill this mitzvah? If we are filled with sadness, pain and loneliness, how can we fulfill this mitzvah? If we are self-deprecating and self-abusive, how can we fulfill this mitzvah? Negative self-images create loneliness. Shame-thinking I am a mistake—and guilt—I made mistakes—prevent us from having nurturing relationships. Feeling negative about ourselves deepens our loneliness.

To truly be in relationship we must allow others into our own consciousness of being. Yes, to have meaningful and deep relationships we have to be vulnerable, take risks and have faith that if hurt, disappointed and violated, we can and will heal and recover. The more self-aware we are the more we have to share with others; the more self-aware we are the less lonely we are because we are more with our true selves. Our rabbis taught that the Good Inclination, the Yetzer Tov—is the space within us that is ready to receive the other, to embrace the unique selfhood of the other. The Musar movement of the late 19th century had at its core the concern for the other and how we practice engaging others: do we push others away or do we bring them closer? Musar teaches us to be as empathic as is humanly possible. Just think of the damage that our cliquish behavior causes and how we—younger and older—make others feel when we exclude them. We cannot behave that way when we are empathic and when we are empathic, feeling what another feels, it is impossible to be lonely.

The Kotzker Rebbe taught: “I can only be me if you are you, and you can only be you if I am me, and when I am truly me and you are truly you, we can then be together in true and deep relationship.” Superficiality and externality seriously compromise and limit relationships. When we are not connected genuinely to ourselves, how deep can our relationships with others be? There is a real difference, is there not, between those fake hugs when no one embraces anyone and those air kisses when no one kisses anyone and the real thing?

Those four adult children gave their mother expensive and special gifts—all external and material—but they did not give their mother what she needed: their company, their warmth, their time, their understanding of her loneliness. She ate the parrot thinking it was a chicken and like every meal, she ate alone.

Carl Sagan wrote: “I had an experience I can’t prove, I can’t even explain it, but everything that I know as a human being, everything that I am tells me that it was real. I was part of something wonderful, something that changed me forever; a vision of the Universe that tells us undeniably how tiny, and insignificant, and how rare and precious we all are. A vision that tells us we belong to something that is greater than ourselves. That we are not, that none of us, are alone.

Vincent van Gogh wrote that “one may have a blazing hearth in one’s soul, and yet no one ever comes to sit by it.” In the year we are just beginning let us be sure to sit by each other’s blazing hearth, ignoring no one. Let us also be sure to sit with ourselves by the blazing hearth that burns inside each of us. The less lonely you are, the less lonely I will be. The less lonely you and I are the less lonely our world will be. Let this year be a time when we find ourselves and when we find each other. Let this year be a time when we give our human touch to others who need it and we receive from others the human touch we need.

A MEANINGFUL AND MOVING YOM KIPPUR AND FAST FOR US ALL.