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Confronting Loneliness

The Irish poet and theologian, Pádraig Ó Tuama (PAH-drayg O Twama), writes:

> YEARS AGO, MY FRIEND PAUL was employed as a youth worker. Truth be told, he didn't fit the mold of a youth worker. If a ten-year-old asked him how he was, he was liable to say, "Oh, not so great. I'm sad about my divorce."
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> The other youth workers were aghast at this truthfulness.
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> Once, at a gathering of young people, Paul was asked to talk about friendship. There were thirty children there, as calm as a nest of mice, all energy and kicking heels against plastic chairs.
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> Paul started to talk about friendships.
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> And then he said that he was lonely, even though he had lots of friends.
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> He said he missed his wife.
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> He cried.
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> The children listened.
>
> He did that thing where you try to stop sobbing by gulping down air.
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> Everything was quiet.
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> It was awkward, and truthful, and both inappropriate and appropriate.
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> ("Sam's House," *Image Journal*, Issue 100, https://imagejournal.org/article/sams-house/)

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I'm not sure that pouring out your soul to thirty ten-year-olds is a great coping strategy. I mean, by all means, you could give it a try. But I do imagine that it was awkward, and truthful, and both inappropriate and appropriate.

On Yom Kippur we focus on the people we wish to be. Few of us wish for loneliness, that desperate and bruising and unbearable feeling. We were in the midst of a loneliness epidemic even before Covid, and for most of us the quarantining and social distancing has heightened our experience of loneliness.

Loneliness comes in many varieties. There's *situational* loneliness, that feeling that parents have when a child leaves home for college or that residents of a nursing home have when it

goes into lockdown mode. There's *chronic* loneliness, when we are unable to form meaningful friendships - stuck in an unrelenting cycle. There's *existential* loneliness, like life has no meaning and we realize that we will die alone. And on and on.

Judaism has a lot to say about loneliness. The most obvious example, perhaps, is the second chapter of the book of Genesis. If you remember, God forms Adam from dust and breathes life into him and places him into the Garden of Eden. God decides that it is not good for Adam to be alone, but God cannot find a suitable helper for Adam. So God puts Adam to sleep and takes his rib and creates Eve.

Perhaps this is a lesson in how not to create a good, strong, healthy relationship, as if a woman is going to solve all of Adam's problems and satisfy his every need. As if a relationship built on hierarchy and domination is going to fill a loneliness void.

God's cure for loneliness seems to be to add another human being to the mix so that two people can enjoy companionship. But this is problematic: It assumes that being alone is tantamount to being lonely. As we know from our lived experience, people who are alone are often not lonely, and people who are surrounded by friends or partners or spouses are often terribly lonely.

It's certainly possible that Adam and Eve created a relationship that could sustain them through unimaginable hardship and provide them with hope and love. But I think the basic tenet that we just need another person around us to make us whole is misguided, and sometimes it leads us to hold onto relationships that are disconnected or unhealthy or to place too much energy on the shallowness of social media likes and followers and friends. What we need are meaningful, reciprocated connections to other people.

Far more important than any social media profile is learning to be okay with who we are. Pádraig Ó Tuama writes,

> *Lonely* comes from *alone,* which itself might be a contraction of the words *all one.* Or else from Old English *eall ¯ana.* We are singular; we are not anybody else. We are just one…("Sam's House")

We have to learn to feel comfortable with ourselves – with who we are in a deep sense. The travesty of loneliness is not being alone, but feeling unseen or unloved, or experiencing a rupture in a relationship with another person, or never learning how to create a relationship in the first place.

We also have to learn how to be vulnerable with other people. We have to allow ourselves to be seen for who we are. How often do we pretend to be someone we are not, or to project a particular image that we think others will like? Being vulnerable is being real. And that is hard, and more than a little frightening. Because, of course, if we are real, and someone does not like us, then we feel rejected, and then we are less able to start all over.

It's just not possible, though, to avoid getting hurt. Certainly, we want to be discerning with whom we open ourselves up to, and we can't be vulnerable to all people at all times. We need to insist upon relationships that are based in mutuality and respect and rooted in trust. It's not about dumping all of our feelings onto someone else. It's about building strong connections.

There is danger in protecting ourselves too much – in preventing other people from seeing our true selves. We have to take those risks sometimes with some people. There are no guarantees that an intimate relationship will be forever, a friendship will survive, or a community will never fracture. But we have to be who we are, in a real and imperfect sense. It takes courage and patience and determination.

The Garden of Eden is not the only story in Jewish tradition about loneliness. We might actually be able to relate better to the loneliness of Honi the Circle Maker. Honi is this guy from the Talmud who takes a nap one day and sleeps for seventy years. When he wakes up, he realizes that no one recognizes him. Honi becomes desperately alone and misunderstood, and he experiences such intense loneliness that he prays for his death. The Talmud concludes the story with: "Give me friendship or give me death!"

It's a little dramatic, but it underscores this deep need we have for friendship. We don't want to encircle ourselves with just anyone. We want to be seen and be loved. We want to form relationships that will sustain us and help us to grow. When Honi realizes that his familiar world is gone, and no one believes him when he tells them who he is, his heart breaks.

I think the Rabbis want to startle us by declaring, "Give me friendship or give me death!" But they are onto something. Study after study shows that chronic loneliness can be devastating. It affects one in four or even one in three Americans. It leads to poor health outcomes. It is associated with depression, anxiety, heart disease, substance abuse, and domestic abuse. It correlates to premature death.

Often loneliness is caused by loss. Honi experiences what the psychologist Pauline Boss calls an "ambiguous loss." We often associate loss with the death of a loved one, but loss can come in all forms. One kind is when a loved one is physically missing but psychologically present, like experiencing loss from a divorce or adoption or the crumbling of a friendship. Another kind is when a loved one is physically present but psychologically absent, like experiencing loss from dementia or addiction or depression.

It's hard to process loss when it is ambiguous, when there is a lack of clarity about why we feel so lonely or how it is we can find peace or resolution or what we need to do to simply move on. Ambiguous losses have no closure.

So the question is: How do we break free from loneliness? One last story from the Talmud: Once there was a teacher, Rabbi Yochanan. He makes a visit to his student, Rabbi Hiyya bar Aba, who had become ill. The text says that Rabbi Yochanan takes Rabbi Hiyya's hand in his, and when he holds his students' hand, he cures him of his illness.

Later, Rabbi Yochanan becomes sick. This time Rabbi Hiyya bar Aba visits him, and he takes his hand and cures his teacher of his illness. The Rabbis of the Talmud don't concern themselves with how realistic these scenarios may be. Instead they ask, "If Rabbi Yochanan was able to heal his student, why wasn't he able to heal himself?" Their answer? "A prisoner cannot free himself from prison; he needs another person to help release him from his shackles."

The message is clear: We need each other. We need each other when we move through this world. And we especially need each other when we are ill, when we experience loss, and when we suffer. We need each other when our loneliness is situational, chronic, or existential.

And most importantly, to be there for each other means to reach out, to give someone a hand, to offer a shoulder to cry on or to bring a meal when we know someone who is ill. This is how we create community, how we make our world a little less lonely.

I guess this is the time that I should give a shameless plug for being part of Shaarei Shamayim – for using the congregation as a means for building and sustaining community. It's not an antidote for loneliness, but I have seen over all these years how people use it to form connections with other people. Some people have built life-long friendships at the congregation. Others just participate in a committee meeting or a service or a monthly social group of some kind. Many people volunteer so that they can make a contribution and form connections to others through giving of themselves. It's a place where we can reach out to others, and it's a place where we can receive support in challenging times.

The thing about loneliness is that it's not just about our needs – and if we only focus on our needs we will become self-absorbed. As much as we need support from other people, so too do other people need support from us. We must not forget the sense of mutuality, of sharing, of giving and receiving.

The American Jewish writer, Jonathan Safran Foer, tells a story about a girl he saw on a park bench who was crying. He wondered whether he should reach out to her. He writes:

> Most of the time, most people are not crying in public, but everyone is always in need of something that another person can give, be it undivided attention, a kind word or deep empathy. There is no better use of a life than to be attentive to such needs. There are as many ways to do this as there are kinds of loneliness, but all of them require attentiveness, all of them require the hard work of emotional computation and corporeal compassion. All of them require the human processing of the only animal who risks "getting it wrong" and whose dreams provide shelters and vaccines and words to crying strangers.
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> ...Being attentive to the needs of others might not be the point of life, but it is the work of life. It can be messy, and painful, and almost impossibly difficult. ("How Not to be Alone," *New York Times,* June 8, 2013)

On this Yom Kippur, let us remember that we need each other. That we can create relationships of all kinds, based on mutuality and respect and rooted in trust. Let us remember that to fight loneliness we have to be vulnerable and willing to take risks. That we have to process our losses and reach out to others. That we can embrace community and offer ourselves to others. Let us remember that there is no better use of a life than to be attentive to other people's needs.

Gmar chatimah tovah.