Rosh Hashanah Sermon | September 2021
Rabbi Gregory S. Marx
We are all Part of One Continent

I don’t need to tell you; this High Holy Day is very difficult on us. We are again isolating due to this terrible pandemic. We all know the story. We were getting so close to the end. We were once again travelling, going out to dinner and having services in person without restriction, only to roll it all back. We are again, returning to mask wearing, third booster shots and isolation.

Just this past week, I had the terrible task of working with a young couple planning their wedding. The Bride grew up in the Beth Or community. She had recently lost her father and now had found a wonderful young man. Her wedding, scheduled for a few days ago, had been rescheduled to this summer after waiting so long for the pandemic to subside. Then just weeks before the wedding, it all came to a screeching halt. Imagine the angst of insisting that everyone in the bridal party get a PCR test before the ceremony and insisting that everyone wear a mask during the ceremony. The wedding was wonderful, but not what they imagined.

I have heard so many complain of the loneliness and frustration of this pandemic. We are losing our perspective, our sanity, our rationality and our communal spirit. In this spirit, I would like to address not the political side of Covid, nor the health aspects, but rather the social and spiritual problems arising from this dreaded real disease. I want to talk to you about loneliness. I have spoken on this topic before. You may remember, but this time it is different.

Covid has only revealed what has been going on in our souls for so long. Of course, Covid has driven us away from each other, but our isolation is more complicated than mandated quarantining. We are not just excluding for health purposes; we are isolating ourselves in ways that are frankly new to many of us.

Think for a moment of how our modes of connection have changed. Letters have been replaced by tweets. Phone calls and RSVPs with one word or one sentence responses have replaced visits. Many of us prefer the phone call than to the personal visit. Leaving a message on someone’s machine is easier than having a phone conversation - you can say what you need to say without a response; it’s easier to check in without becoming entangled. Shooting an e-mail or text is easier, still, because we can hide
behind the absence of vocal inflection, and of course there’s no chance of accidentally catching someone. Each step “forward” has made it easier, just a little, to avoid the emotional work of being present, to convey information rather than humanity.”

I have said this before, but it bears repeating. The more we have technology to connect us to others, the more disconnected we become.

All of us have felt loneliness in our lives the first days and months after we move to a new city, starting a new school, beginning a new career, losing a friend or loved one.  Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, “We are ships that pass in the night; and speak to each other in passing. Only a signal shown, and a distant voice in the darkness; so, on the ocean of life, we pass and speak to one another, only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.” More and more of you speak to me about your pervading loneliness. This emotion makes the loudest of noise, and it is what drives us to the most outlandish behavior.” We obnoxiously scream on the streets and it is an obvious call for attention and affection. In our homes, we emotionally hijack family gatherings, because we crave love. At work, we engage in self destructive behavior, yearning to be noticed. Our individual loneliness is having a demoralizing effect on our communities and societies at large. We have felt it most now with this pandemic that has many of us confined to our homes. We belong to fewer organizations, we are involved in fewer communal and civic activities, and, we feel more alone in our lives than ever before.

America and her cities are a lonely place. Many of us have heard of the French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. He wrote a widely quoted and known book entitled, Democracy in America. In his penetrating and comprehensive analysis of American society, read by many in college, including myself, de Tocqueville wrote that Americans have “habits of the heart” that helped to form ‘the American character.’ He singled out the many virtues of life in America that he observed in 1830: family life, our religious traditions, our participation in local politics as helping to create the kind of person who could sustain connections to the larger community and the central institutions of American society. But Tocqueville also noted one area of concern in his observations of American society. He was one of the first to diagnose the “individualism” within American society which he warned could undermine the institutions of freedom in America. Alone, it’s hard to build a noble society.

The Jewish community is a lonely place. A few years ago, Drs Arnold Eisen and Steven Cohen wrote a remarkable book called, The Jew Within. It chronicles our attitudes about everything from community, faith and our existential concerns. But of all their finds, Eisen and Cohen wrote, “The single most important finding of our study is that the pattern of profound individualism. ‘Community’ is a second language, subordinate to the first.” We are not only Bowling alone, we are bar mitzvahing our children alone. We are mourning alone, partying alone, eating alone and yes, praying alone. I hate it
when I hear that a family is hiring a “private rabbi” to have their child bar/bat mitzvahed in their home or country club. What should be a communal celebration, has become a private affair with none of the spiritual or mitzvah components. No wonder our kids are more alone than ever before. More and more, I see Jews no longer sitting shiva. At a time, when we are forced to separate from our loved ones due to death, we choose to go it alone and have a meal of condolence at a restaurant, rather than break our isolation and loneliness by having loved ones over. Socially, economically, politically, religiously...We are going it alone. Ironically, when asked what we want, we all want a more civil, trustworthy, more collectively caring community, but we are lost at how to get there.

Cities, crowded with people are a lonely place. I know of young people living in New York City who are surrounded by millions of people and completely alone. They yearn to reach out to others, but don’t know how, other than tiktok and that is no community. City life is millions of people being lonesome together. One member of this shul told me, “By today’s standards, I am incredibly successful, but I am also miserable. I have never known more people – nor been lonelier.”

Even parties can be a lonely place. We walk into a room yearning to be recognized, but too often we are not. I see too many of our young people in social gatherings, standing off to the side, staring into their phones in order to avoid the awkwardness of having no one to talk to. When I was a kid, people went outside to smoke if they were alone. I didn’t but I saw it all the time. Now, lonely people stare into their phones as if they are working something so important.

There can be loneliness in growing up...the child we have all seen or been, who stands longingly outside the circle where others are friends and they make no room for him. Kids are rejected because they see the world differently, look differently or might just think differently. Mean girls exclude. Bullies drive people into their shells. The drive to succeed drives us away from others. Too many children stand on the outside yearning to belong.

There can be loneliness in growing old. Suzanne Gordon speaks of loneliness in her book Lonely in America. She addresses the feeling of being shut out not because of who one is but because of what one is; the feeling of being treated by those closest to you not as a person who happens to be old but as an old person. Too many are cancelled because of their political views, and so must go it alone. From the board rooms, to the universities, to the aged, shut up in skilled care facilities, we see isolation, desperation, loneliness. And from that springs rage.

There can be loneliness of the single life as so many have described it; people looking for partners but without partnership, looking for lovers but without love.

And there can be loneliness in marriage. In some marriages, couples experience a far-reaching loneliness that arises out of the knowledge that the love has died, but that it’s too difficult to leave. Or
there can be, as 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.

And there is the universal loneliness of those who have loved and lost, whom separation or death has dealt "the most unkind cut of all." There are congregants who reach out across the bed to touch their spouse, and instead find a gaping emptiness...Loneliness. There are those who have been separated from their children, unable to break down the barriers of distrust and hurt. They may be surrounded by friends, and friends help, and surely family helps, but they cannot ease the pain of standing alone on the island, unable to reach across, unable to touch, unable to love. The loneliness of grief is the loneliest of all.

There is loneliness in taking a stand. All in the spirit of social justice, we isolate, condemn and abandon those who have views which we find unacceptable. Rather than engaging in dialogue to better understand and listening to each other we cancel people; we isolate them, paint into a corner and thereby create loneliness.

We approach loneliness the way we used to approach death and dying, before it was almost forced into the public arena---mostly by avoiding it. We have all seen lonely people sitting next to other lonely people on friendless park benches. They are the people 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.

So, a little bit or a lot, we are all lonely. Farther or closer to the shore, we are all on the island. And because it is the High Holy Days, we do not shy away from this painful reality. We confront the distance between island and shore, and before this day is over, we ready ourselves for the journey out of loneliness.

Our tradition recognizes our loneliness, not out of a desire to glorify pain, but out of the need to affirm reality. The Psalmist wrote, "My lovers and my friends stand aloof from me, my family stands far off." Ps. 38:12 Elsewhere he stated, "I looked for someone to take pity, but there was no one." 69:20

Like a bridge over troubled waters, our Beth Or community can help us overcome the abyss of emptiness. We come here to not just to find our faith, our heritage, our values, but each other. As hard as streaming services are, I love to see on Facebook you reaching out to each other and saying hello to each other. It is our effort to break through and build community when we Covid has diminished it. The older I get the more I have come to believe that Judaism is less about belief and more about belonging. There is so much diversity in our theology but what unites us is our community, our need to belong and to contribute to the greater good.
We all know the line from the poem, “No man is an island.” But few know who wrote it and what his point was. It was written by John Donne, who reminds us that even if we exist alone, even if we die alone, we are still part of something greater. He continues, “every one of us is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...any one's death diminishes me, because I am involved, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.” We may be alone, because of emotional tectonics, but we are still part of the continent of humanity.

Beth Or is our continent. We may feel alone in one way or another, but we are still a piece of the larger world. So in that spirit, I would like to introduce you to a brand-new initiative. It may be the most critical programmatic change that we have made in years. Jillian Peskin, our Membership engagement director extraordinaire, Gwen Silverstein, our tireless and energetic president, and Lisa Goldoor a leader in her own right who is a second generation Beth Or leader and I are working hard to give you more doors through which you can enter the Beth Or community and make friends. We are not sure what we will call it. Some Like Beth Or Social Clubs, Clubs for Community (C4C), Beth Or CommUNITY, Beth Or MeetUp Clubs, MeetUp Clubs @ Beth Or or just Beth Or Socials, but whatever we call it, we hope to build a community through sharing our interests together. By that we propose establishing fellowship cohorts where we can socialize together, party together, play golf together, learn together, exercise together and spend time with each other’s kids together. I would love to see cohorts of our members gathering on a regular basis to do pretty much whatever you want to do, but done under the umbrella of our wonderful congregation.

I will long remember a conversation I had with a friend I made here at Beth Or. He told me with love in his heart, that all of his real friends over the last 30 years were made here at Beth Or. I will know we have done a good job, if more people tell me that in years to come. Some of this is already happening. We have a bowling league, a number of baseball teams, we have preschool parents’ gatherings, bingo nights, we have the Beth Or knitters, called the “hookers,” pot clubs and many more, but some of us don’t know how to enter these groups or find our home in one of them and what’s more some of these groups are closed to new people.

Over the next few months, synagogue leaders may approach you with a clip board and ask you what you are looking for. They will ask you if you are looking for social events, to go to theater together, to play mah jong, softball, cards or celebrate the holidays. Please answer them. We truly hope to bring you all together to find your home.

Loneliness is a universal experience and it comes to us all. But it need not be permanent. There is a way out. And it is here where we can be more appreciative of the miracle of love when we find it,
the beauty of relationships with others, and the discovery of the depths of life revealed through our common search for one another.

What we need now more than anything is the realization that we are not alone. We have a God who loves us, a faith that sustains us and community that needs us and has a place for us. See you at the Club.