

Alone
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Rabbi Leslie Gordon
Temple Aliyah, Needham, MA

Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, of blessed memory, used to say that every rabbi has only one sermon and preaches it his or her entire life. When I was younger it was all about community. Now I would boil that message down further and just say don't be alone.

Don't be alone.

It's in our liturgy. It's in our rituals, it's in our primal text and it's in the DNA of our Jewish souls.

Why for instance do we insist that Mourner's Kaddish must be recited in a minyan? In part it's because any Kaddish praises God, and we can only truly praise God in public, in community. When a mourner, still reeling from a loss, stands and proclaims, yitgadal v'yitkadash shmei raba – God's holy Name is magnified and sanctified – he/she is saying I will speak God's praise even in the face of my sorrow, even in the face of my rage. And we as a community cannot help but be moved by such devotion, and so God's Name is indeed sanctified.



But you know there's more to it than that. There's a message we give the mourner, without saying a word: Come be with us as you recover from your loss. Don't lock yourself away. Don't think you can grieve in a dark room by yourself. No matter how fervently you pray you will bring no honor to G. that way, and more than that -- you will find no healing. Bring your sorrow and your rage to us, and we will comfort you. We insist, we drag you back to your community. For only in community can you praise God authentically. Only among others can you find healing. So don't be alone.

It pains me to say this, but you don't need a rabbi for a wedding. Someone (typically the groom) must give a gift of modest value. Someone must accept that gift, understanding its significance. You need a ketubah and you need a minyan to witness the event. The actual marriage is an agreement contracted in the presence of the minyan. The rabbi just moves things along.

Those of us who have been married for a few years understand that a new household is created in community and thrives in community. It is not by accident that the huppah is open on all sides. This is a marriage between two people, we convey to the bride and groom; but the healthiest marriages allow you to draw from the community, to include your friends and neighbors in both your celebrations and your struggles. (By the way, the nicest weddings do in fact have a rabbi.)

Do not be alone.

We see it in Creation itself: every day something else was created, and every day it was good: Sun and stars, water and dry land, birds and fish and trees and it was all good. Some days it was good twice. Life began with an explosion of creation and innovation and it was full of energy and excitement and it was all good. And with the final act of creation, of adam ha-rishon, it was very good. But then: Lo tov heyot ha-adam l'vado: It was not good for adam to be alone. That first human had no partner and suddenly all the good and hopeful and promising was in danger. Our very design requires an ezer k'negdo – a helper, a partner, an other. We were not created to be alone.

You may have read Victor Frankl's masterful work *Man's Search for Meaning*. When I was in college it was required reading for every psych major but was popular across all disciplines. I was asked to re-read it this summer, and this time I found the most compelling image that of the group of inmates being herded from one place to another. "Just like sheep that crowd timidly into the center of a herd, each of us tried to get into the middle of our formations. That gave one a better chance of avoiding the blows of the guards who were marching on either side of our column.... It was, therefore, in an attempt to save one's own skin that one literally tried to submerge into the crowd." (Certainly, reason enough) But think of where you would want to be in a moment of terror: Not on the periphery,

but on the very inside. Our impulse is to huddle close when in danger physical or spiritual. We feel safer surrounded by others. Think of the fears we can face down when we know someone stands with us.

Here's an example I wish I had not needed to learn: It was ten years ago this season of the year. But I remember as clearly as if I were watching a movie: Every three weeks my mother sits in a big recliner and steels herself for the next six hours. Drop by drop the chemicals enter her body and take up the fight for her life. I sit in the chair next to her. There's nothing I can do for her. I can't kill the bad cells. I can't lighten her burden by sharing her discomfort. But I cannot leave her sitting alone. So, I sit with her in the chemo room. We chat but her mind is elsewhere. I flip through a magazine while she dozes. My sisters and I take turns, each returning to our family and work and then coming back to sit with her again. In real time I recall feeling a sense of satisfaction that my sisters and I did everything we could for our mother. (after all) We did not know any tricks to make treatment more bearable. What we did know was that the worst cruelty in any illness is feeling alone with the suffering. And that, we believed we were able to spare her. But looking back at those weeks and months I wish I had been with her more deeply. I wish I had not just sat with her but instead traveled the road of fear she traveled. Between visits I was here, in a synagogue singing about who will live and who will die. I wondered how real those questions felt for her. I

wondered what she wondered. But I never asked her. It might have stirred up her anxiety, I figured. But now I realize, it might have stirred up my anxiety. So I did not ask her are you afraid, do you wonder what will happen? Do you have anything you need to do or say to prepare yourself for what comes next? And so she was alone with that mystery and that fear. I should not have let her be alone.

For many of us the most powerful moment of this entire holy day is the very first: the chanting of Kol Nidrei. (Is it the melody? The realization that we are beginning the final leg of the journey of these days of awe? The sense of defeat that some of us will be asking forgiveness for the same sins we atoned for last year?) And one verse is by far the most mysterious and the most compelling:

בישיבה של מעלה ובישיבה של מטה על דעת המקום ועל דעת הקהל אנו מתירין להתפלל עם

העבריינים.

“By authority of the court on high and by authority of the court below, with divine consent and with the consent of this congregation, we grant permission to pray with the avaryonim.” *Avaryonim* is typically translated as sinners, those who have transgressed. So before we even began our actual service, we declared, it is permitted to pray with sinners.

Who are these avaryonim – these transgressors? Well history is instructive, and even historical inaccuracies can teach us something. Avaryonim have been associated with Iberians; those Jews who lived in Spain and Portugal from Roman

times until their expulsion in 1492. To be sure, we now know that Kol Nidrei came into being long before the Iberian Jews were expelled from their homelands. But the association between Kol Nidrei and the Jews of Spain and Portugal has remained – in part because of the similar sounding words Iberian and Avaryon, and partly because of what Rabbi Ed Feinstein suggests is the existential lesson for human life in general that we may draw from that association.

You may recall the history of the Iberian Jews, who flourished in the 10th to 12th centuries until the forced conversions that marked the Spanish Inquisition. Untold numbers of Jews became conversos, those who converted to Christianity in name only, continuing to practice their Judaism in secret. Exiled from Spain and Portugal, Jews found their way to existing communities throughout central Europe. Imagine, Rabbi Feinstein continues, what these Ashkenazi Jews might have felt. Unable to tell one Iberian Jew from another they must have suspected them all of leaving Judaism for convenience's sake. So the rabbis declared, *matirin l'hitpalel im ha avaryonim*. We are permitted to pray with these Iberians.

And here, writes Rabbi Feinstein, is the Yom Kippur lesson from the tale, even if it is not historical: We are all Iberians – we are all hiding something. We all have secrets. We have all failed at something, betrayed some ideal. We have all found ourselves far from where we planned to be in life. We arrive at Kol Nidrei seeking

a second chance, a second chance to come home, to join the community, to seek G.'s forgiveness and a new beginning. We are all eiver; we are all avaryonim.

And so we convene a bet din at the beginning of the evening, before we even begin to pray. And that bet din declares: There is no such thing as a morally unblemished human being. There are only avaryonim – only the imperfect and the incomplete – so not only are we permitted to pray with them, we are required to. Pray we must, writes Rabbi Alan Lew, and there is simply no one else to pray with. And besides (he continues) it is precisely because we are avaryonim that we need each other so. Since each of us is imperfect, incomplete by nature, it is only in community that we begin to find a sense of wholeness, a sense of completion. So not only is it permissible and not only is it required for us to pray with avaryonim we have a desperate need to do so. In praying with them we begin to find the answer to our own imperfection.

So my message tonight and tomorrow and maybe the one message I have is come in, come all the way in; don't stay at the periphery. Don't linger in the doorway wondering if you have a place here; you do. It's safe here and you are wanted. We might not be able to protect you from the cruelties of the enemies all around. But the worst cruelty is being alone, and that we can spare you. Don't feel burdened by your aveirah, the sin that makes you an avaryon; we all carry that. Don't be alone.

There's one final lesson from the avaryonim of Kol Nidrei. Torah scholar Erica Brown teaches: "...this permission to pray with sinners is no mere license for us to pray with them. *I* am the one who is the sinner. *You* are permitted to pray next to *me*. *Please* pray next to me. If you can stand by me when I should have known better but wronged others anyway I may just possibly hope to be able to do what is right and good. With you and the others next to me, I may be humbled into appropriate vulnerability. I need you. Even though I have hurt you, you have come. My community gathered around me becomes an insurance policy for the goodness that I cannot accomplish alone.

I will conclude w/ story of 11-year-old finally allowed to go alone to the corner market to bring her mother a quart of milk. Really just around the corner, so when she did not return in 15 minutes her mother started to worry. (You can tell this is an old story; kids were allowed to go to the store alone and they didn't have cell phones.) When she finally showed up her mother was beside herself. "Where were you? Don't you know how worried I was about you?" I'm sorry, Mom. I met a kid on the way there and he was just crying and crying cause his bike was broken. I had to help him." "Help him? But honey what do you know about fixing a broken bicycle?" "Nothing.... I helped him cry."

No one should cry alone.

