

Two siblings, Sarah and Josh, 8 and 10 years old, were causing so much trouble in Hebrew school that the rabbi was asked to intervene. The rabbi decided to talk to the siblings individually, so she first called in Sarah and said she would speak to her older brother, Josh, later.

Sarah came into the rabbi's study and sat down in a huge leather chair across from the rabbi. For two minutes they just sat staring at each other. Finally, the Rabbi pointed her finger at Sarah and asked, "Where is God?" Sarah said nothing.

Again, in a louder tone, the Rabbi pointed at the 8-year-old and asked, "Where is God?" Again, Sarah said nothing.

Then the Rabbi leaned across her desk, came right up to Sarah, and in a stronger voice implored, "For the third time, Sarah, where is God?"

Panicked by the vehemence of the rabbi, Sarah bolted up out of her seat and ran all the way home. She went straight up to her brother Josh's room and said, "We are in big trouble, Josh."

"What do you mean, big trouble?" said Josh. Sarah cried, "God is missing... and I'm sure they think we did it."

Joking aside there are numerous *Hasidic* stories and teachings that speak of God being so apart from us that, in essence, that God is "missing" – that God is alone. One particularly audacious interpretation comes from a rabbi known as *Degel Machaneh Ephraim*. Reading the verse in Psalms where it says, "I am a stranger in the land, do not hide Your *mitzvot* from me" (Psalm 119:19), he says that what is particularly hard for a stranger is that they have no one with whom they can connect, no confidant to share their joys and sorrows. A stranger (גר תושב *ger toshav* in Hebrew) is deeply and fully *alone*. Here is where *Degel Machaneh* makes his radical claim – specifically, that the ultimate גר תושב, the loneliest "stranger" in the world is ... God. Why? Because God can never fully connect with another. God is אחד *echad* – not just "one" but implying unique, singular and is, therefore, lonely.

Degel Machaneh does not, of course, know this about God, but he offers a profoundly empathetic understanding of God that mirrors the deep aloneness, and sometimes, loneliness, of the human condition.

In his beautiful and tragic essay "God's Lonely Man", the novelist Thomas Wolfe writes, "The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and to a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence." One of the central themes of existentialist philosophy of the past 150 years has been, in fact, the awareness that loneliness is an unavoidable condition of our humanity. No matter how passionate our relationship with a lover, regardless of how close the bonds are we make with a parent, or child, or friend, in truth no one can understand us fully or completely (as if we can even understand all aspects of our own selves!?). And we all face death – even if surrounded by loved ones – alone.

Last year Noreena Hertz published a book titled, "The Lonely Century." In her research Hertz found that loneliness – a deep disconnect between people has grown in recent decades. More and more, people are less likely to keep in touch with family and friends but more disconnected from the larger society. This growing loneliness and social isolation leads, to a growing inability to connect with those of a different point of view. Caught in echo-chambers of our own making, Hertz argues, inevitably has people gravitate towards populist, authoritarian leaders, who claim that they are the only ones really "there" for those who are forgotten, left-behind or excluded, the lonely and alone.

The pandemic of the past 2 ½ years, and the greater reliance on the internet, Zoom and social media, has only made things worse. A growing number of people feel more distant and detached than ever because they are not interacting with others *in person*. In North America, and elsewhere, studies show that more than half of all people are expressing greater loneliness, with attendant problems of sleep disorders, weight problems or substance abuse.¹ Given all this is no surprise that people say they are more anxious and depressed, that suicide is rampant (over 45,000 people in the US every year!), and that people are over-medicating and seeking more mental health support than ever. In fact, just last week a government-

¹ [The Loneliness Epidemic: A Post-Pandemic Look at the State of Loneliness among U.S. adults](#)"

backed panel said that every American under the age of 65 should be screened for anxiety disorders out of a concern that this loneliness is running rampant.²

Rosh Hashanah offers us, however, a way to help us deal with the loneliness that ever whispers to our hearts, reminding us that God's loneliness has a cure – alluded to in Psalm 27, which we traditionally read the whole month before this new year day. In that Psalm God calls out, **בקשו פני** *bakshu fa'nai* - "seek My face."

Related to this verse, a story is told of the 18th century the *Hasidic* rabbi, Dov Baer (also known as the Maggid, or storyteller) of Mezeritch, who once found his grandson crying.

"Why are you weeping," the rabbi asked.

"I was playing hide and seek," the little boy said, "but when I opened my eyes after counting, all my friends ran away and left me alone."

With tears in his eyes, Dov Baer turned to God and said, "You have hidden Yourself from us because You want us to seek you. But we have tired of the game and have run off."

All of this implies that just as God seeks to be "found", so do each of us yearn to be seen, to bond. We have a deep, innate yearning for connection; a need to be with other people.

This summer I was blessed to be at a wedding where the brother of the groom spoke exactly to this need. Seeking to give the newly married couple advice, he turned his favorite TV shows – "Survivor." You likely know the premise of the series. A group of contestants deliberately marooned in an isolated location, where compete in challenges to survive the tests given, and immunity from elimination. This young man said that he found that there are three ways people tend to get to win in "Survivor." The first is through manipulation, seeking to turn fellow contestants on one another. Second, there are some who succeed because they are so kind and thoughtful that no one else wants to vote them "off the island." The third way, he offered as being the most successful. It is when two people collaborate, not denying their own interests but moving forward because they are together.

² ["Most Adults Should Be Screened for Anxiety, U.S. Panel Recommends"](#). *Wall Street Journal* (September 20, 2022)

This wedding speech brilliantly described the classic human means for dealing with loneliness. One way is to be selfish, narcissistic, and conniving, doing whatever we can to game the system, unconcerned about the harm it causes others to get ahead. A second is to be saintly and pious, so generous in spirit that our life is a paradigm of dignity, service and selflessness. Most of us, however, are neither so self-centered or selfless – and so the best way to live a meaningful life and for dealing with our existential aloneness, and not just survive but thrive, is be lonely *together* with others in shared purpose.

Indeed, that is what happens in the Torah portion we read this morning, where we, that Abraham and Isaac walked together – וילכו שניהם יחדו *v'yailchu shnaihem yachdav*. Torah says this, however, not just once, but twice. 1000 years ago, the great Torah commentator, Rashi, taught we should not read Abraham's answer to Isaac's question, "where is the sheep to offer?" as "God will see the offering, my son" but as "God will see to the offering ... my son." In other words, Abraham told his son that hard times lay ahead – and yet still Isaac walked with him.

So it is for all of us in our loneliness. We cannot end the suffering in life. We cannot stay the coming of our end. But we can live bound to others. 2000 years ago, the Mishnah explains an ingenious method our ancestors used to help the community learn how to be lonely together. In those days, everyone was to come into the Temple precincts through one gate, turn to the right, walk around the perimeter, and go out the same entrance. But some people would turn left rather than right and walk against the flow. Who were they? Those to whom something awful had happened.

When a person who entered turning right encountered someone who turned left, they would ask, "What happened?" The person would then say something like, "I just lost my mother; I have cancer; my child died; my husband just left; I am all alone."

Hearing this everyone who asked would truly see the pain of the other and offer consolation.³

This custom has much to teach us – about seeing those who walk a different path not as obstacles, but as fellow human beings we ought to do better to understand;

³ Mishnah, *Middot* 2:2

about looking into the eyes of others in *their* loneliness and realizing how much we may have in common; and how the best way to help one who is shattered and alone, is to bring them into the presence of a *kehila k'dosha*, a holy community.

"Seek My face," says the God who plays hide and seek with each of us. Come find Me. Perhaps God's plea is not to be strangers to ourselves. For as the Psalmist pleads to God, "I seek Your face, but do not hide ..."4. Too often we hide ourselves off from a connection with others, a bond that not only can help *them* but heal ourselves. Let us be lonely together. And as Abraham and Isaac discovered, it isn't always doing what is hard that matters (seeking to ascend the mountain), but simply taking the journey together - וילכו שניהם יחדו - that is the source of the good we seek this (and every) year.

לשנה טובה *L'shana tova*.

4 Psalm 27:9