

YK 5780 - The World is Built with Love

Introduction - Sharing happiness, meaning, and/or purpose

<<Have everyone take a few moments of meeting someone new, and sharing with them something that a) gives them joy and happiness b) gives them meaning and/or c) purpose>>

Loneliness is a public health crises

There is a public health crisis that affects 47% of Americans. The ailment is not smoking, opioids, obesity, or hunger. This ailment is estimated to shorten life by 15 years, equivalent to obesity or smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The ailment is loneliness.¹

Back in 2000, Harvard Professor of Public Policy Robert Putnam published “Bowling Alone” about the declining social capital in America. He found that there had been a 58% drop in attending club meetings, a 43% drop in family dinners. He also found that joining and participating in one group activity, club or regular family dinner cuts in half your odds of dying next year. A lack of social connection is a cause of depression, eating disorders, drug abuse, suicide.² *Mi Yichyeh Umi Yamut - who will live and who will die?*

Putnam argued that as terrible as the statistics looked for civic society, we could reinvent ourselves and turn the tide on social capital. But if you think about the last 18 years since the book was published, have we moved in the right direction?

We’ve certainly tried. We invented more tools to connect to one another than we ever had before. In 2000, there was no twitter, no facebook or

¹ <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/loneliness-is-harmful-to-our-nations-health/>

² <http://bowlingalone.com/>

instagram. In 2000 there were no smartphones. My AOL instant messenger screen name was “guitari321.” We invented these tools to create an ever more connected world. But have we actually improved human connections?

JSwipe is a Jewish dating app that connects people who both “swipe” in an approving direction. This app was created to help Jewish singles find love. Just this past week, they published a study on love where they surveyed 4000 of its’ users.³ The survey was mostly 25-34 year olds. When asked what the users were looking for in dating, 71% said marriage or monogamous relationship. The desire for long term companionship is absolutely present.

JSwipe asked a “check all that apply” question about the trends of modern dating. The most checked answer by a large margin was the box labeled “challenges of dating apps.” Even users of these apps feel that the apps themselves are barriers to connection.

Study after study shows that the tools we’re creating aren’t working to fight loneliness

The Field of Positive Psychology Offers Pathways to Authentic Happiness

Studies are not only proving that loneliness is a public health crisis, but that we can study and measure meaning and happiness in life through the less than 20 year old field of positive psychology.

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d8a2beb297c3262d231149c/t/5d93db699ce86b0c4f16e434/1569971057704/JSwipeLoveStudy2019.pdf>

There are 3 different pathways of what the founder of the field, Martin Seligman calls “authentic happiness”⁴ The first is the “Pleasant Life,” dedicated to maximizing positive experiences and feelings. This way of life is perhaps the most transient.

The second way of life is what Seligman calls, “The Good Life.” This life is defined by a person doing whatever she is good at, whatever she can “flow in.” When someone compliments me for the service “flowing well” that’s the result of the state of mind that becomes second nature for those of us who labor in preparation of this day that we all benefit from. It’s not altogether different than a lawyer exceptionally good at taking depositions, or a mother who knows exactly how to guide her children to their best selves, or a line cook in the flow of flipping perfectly grilled burgers. A good life is defined by a person matching their strengths to their activity.

The third path Seligman articulates is the meaningful life, or life of affiliation. This is primarily defined by being part of something bigger than themselves. What unites all three is that positive relationships are essential in fueling pleasant, good and meaningful lives.

Meaningful relationships involve obligations and commitments

A few minutes ago, I asked you to turn to someone you didn’t know and share something in your life that truly gives you meaning.

I’m guessing you shared something about your family, or your professional life. Maybe you shared something from Judaism, or a hobby you take seriously. Perhaps you shared about an organization you’re passionate about and volunteer with, or perhaps a cause bigger than yourself that you’re committed to.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positive_psychology

Then you shared something that brings you happiness. Perhaps it was the same thing, perhaps something different. I'm guessing though, that if you were able to find an answer that was meaningful to you

Whatever you said, they were obligations, commitments, something or someone that needs you. We need to be needed. Meaningful lives are lives full of commitments.

Relationships of Trust are About Obligations to One Another

A little more than a year ago, a very talented and diverse group committed their time to help us think big about the future of Shearith Israel. We heard from a huge percentage of the congregation, through surveys, small group conversations and task forces. One of the products of this process was adopting a new mission statement. "Shearith Israel connects people to meaningful living through Judaism." We created a Venn Diagram of the way we work to connect people to meaningful living, and came to the intuitive truth that "relationships are at the center of everything we do." Were the word "love" not so complicated in our lexicon, perhaps we could have said "love relationships are at the center of everything we do." Perhaps a solution to our loneliness is to better understand "love."

Judaism has old spiritual technology to encourage us to trust and love. We call this technology "*Mitzvot*." For generations, the Jewish community has not adequately explained this concept. It's my experience that most Jewish people translate the word *mitzvah* as "good deed." But that translation misses the essence of what a *mitzvah* really is. *Mitzvot* are NOT simply "good deeds." *Mitzvot* are the content of our love relationship with God. They are the sacred obligations that bind us together, guiding us to live with meaning and purpose. *Mitzvot* bring us into relationship with one another and with ideals worth pursuing. *Mitzvot* are phenomenal for fighting

loneliness, and creating the bonds of community that create meaning and purpose.

Mitzvot are a counter-cultural technology. We tend to think of technology as a way to make our lives easier, to reduce work and increase leisure. But *Mitzvot* do not exist to make our lives easier, they don't reduce work or increase leisure, however *mitzvot* do increase love and meaning in life.

Kashrut, Shabbat, and Tefillah are examples of how living with serious commitments can add meaning to life

Last night we spoke of three *Mitzvot* that we categorized under the heading *Ahavat Chinam* baseless love; *teshuva* - repentance, *tefillah* - prayer, and *tzedakkah* - righteous giving as an act of justice. We've connected these high values to concrete opportunities to address the challenges around the issues of criminal justice, asylum seekers, and food insecurity in our schools. Working on these projects through Shearith is a doorway into meaningful living through Judaism.

That JSwipe survey focused a third of its efforts on "The State of Jewish." Three of the main questions they asked were about prayer, kashrut and shabbat. Of the Jewish singles surveyed only 16% never go to synagogue, many go occasionally or weekly, and a good percentage comes just for the high holidays. 51% do not keep Kosher in any way, and there's a big spectrum of what the remaining 48% say about their dietary practice. 68% celebrate Shabbat in some form or another, whether it's lighting Shabbat candles, refraining from technology, or observing the rabbinic understanding of guarding Shabbat.

All *mitzvot* are important, but these three *mitzvot* in particular, of *Tefillot*, *Kashrut and Shabbat* are the sociological markers of Jewish communities. When a person sometimes with a shade of guilt tells me they are not

observant of Judaism, all they are saying is they aren't observant of these three particular mitzvot. I get it, these mitzvot are not intuitively additive to meaning and purpose. They greatly limit our choices and our time. They seem antiquated, part of another time and another world.

But I fear the non-Orthodox Jewish community, in a race towards progress and technology forgotten, let go of something incredibly profound. The entire world of *mitzvot* are a proven and still relevant spiritual technology for combating loneliness. And we as a Jewish community have *teshuva* to do around this idea.

I'd like to take a few minutes to share the way these three *mitzvot* are worthy obligations to pursue, and have the potential to reduce loneliness, adding meaning, purpose and love in all our lives.

Tefillah - the mitzvah of checking in

Since today is Yom Kippur, I'm going to confess one of my greatest regrets. This was a difficult year for my family. At the beginning of 5779, I was still blessed with four healthy grandparents in this world. Today, I'm blessed with my remaining Grandfather who moved to Atlanta right after shiva for his wife, my Grandma Estelle, and during our shiva for my Grandma Beverly who passed the day after we buried Grandma Estelle.

Those who were here for Yizkor heard how much love and blessings I received from all my grandparents. Having their regular presence in my life was one of the main reasons I sought work in St. Louis and Atlanta, so my children could experience the blessings I did.

I know my grandparents knew how much I loved them, but I missed so many opportunities to talk to them. *Al Chet SheChatati* - for the sin that I sinned before you in saying I was busy when I could have made the time. I could have called just to say hello. We could have had a routine where we said the same things every time, just to hear each other's voices. If I had

taken that small obligation on, I would have had even more of their blessing in my life. I can't go back in time, but I ask their *selicha* their forgiveness for the missed opportunities. Today, my children and I see Grandpa Ira just about every single week. It's time we all cherish.

A regular *tefillah* practice, ideally with a *minyan*, is a great way to "check in" with God. If that's a challenging concept theologically, having 35 minutes of quiet meditation is widely proven to be good for your health in all kinds of ways. To be able to have this quiet time with at least 9 other Jewish people who share your story and your community is to have a daily group of people who care that you're there, even for a short time. *Minyan* is a spiritual technology that creates instant community, anywhere you go. As our *minyan* community knows, those precious moments of routine don't have to be earth-shattering to be meaningful. To the contrary, having people in your life daily, weekly, or even monthly for the practice of *tefillah* is immensely gratifying. *Minyan* calls us with purpose out of isolation into each other's presence and the presence of the divine.

We should never be too busy to check in for simple connection. It's these connections that are the backbone of love.

Kashrut - Eating as an expression of love

Another foundational component of love relationships is food. It is a common saying, "you are what you eat". But in so many ways this is a deep truth. Our identities are inextricably bound up with our diets.

The choice to have a kashrut practice means choosing at every bite to put Jewish identity first.

On a deeper level, Kashrut is about an extra awareness of all life. A vegan diet is what God offered in the garden of eden. Vegan diets are also essentially a stricter version of Kashrut. God gave Adam and Chava all the

seed bearing trees to eat from, except for that tree of knowledge of good and evil. . However Humans go on to corrupt the earth, and disregard God's intended diet. After the flood God gives permission to humanity to eat meat, perhaps as a sign of accepting our nature for self-gratification. But when God gave humans permission to eat other living creatures, God also gave us the obligation to not eat the animal in the same way other omnivores and carnivores eat animals. Rather, we are to drain the blood from the animals first. Later, we're given further restrictions like which animals we can and cannot eat, the taboo of mixing the infant's life giving food of milk with the flesh of a dead animal, and the rabbinic mind's concern for ethical slaughter.

Today's industrial animal farming, even for most Kosher meat products, is very far from what I imagine God intended for the way we satisfy our desire for affordable meat. The animals raised on these farms live terrible, pain filled lives before their slaughter. The amount of pasture land and grain it takes to get them to ever larger "yields" for our burgers and steaks create a huge environmental impact.

There's a company called KOL Foods that produces 100% Kosher, organic, grass fed beef and ethically raised animal products. A pound of ground beef at Trader Joe's costs about \$6.00. At Kol Foods it's \$12.50. On their FAQ, one of the top questions is, "Why is your meat so expensive?" Their answer is, "Why is other meat so cheap?"

I enjoy eating meat. I love grilling hamburgers. One of the sins that I imagine sticks out for a lot of us is *Al Chet Shechatanu B'ma'achal U'vemishteh* - We have sinned against You in our eating and drinking. I'm far from my ideal diet, one that takes into account the impact of my food choices not only on my body, but on my community, the producers of the food, and the planet itself.

Food is social, and having the strength to make food choices that are pro-social brings us into a healthier community, and perhaps less loneliness. Kashrut is a technology to help us recognize the obligations beyond ourselves when we are choosing from the abundance that sustains our bodies.

Shabbat to combat the work/connectivity culture

I think y'all are getting my point, I don't need to do much to show Shabbat adds meaning to life. Shabbat sells itself just fine.

Every Friday night, a dinner with candles, wine, a beautifully set table, and great company. Every Saturday morning, a diverse community of people who come together to pray, learn, and socialize. Every Saturday afternoon, a ready excuse to free yourself from the world of work, emails, and technology. Curling up with a good book, a good friend, or a good nap. Closing the time in-between one week and the next with a ritual of light, smell, taste, and sound.

Here's where I think we can all do better, where we have some teshuva to do. We can all get better about inviting each other over for Shabbat meals. I dream of a Shearith Israel where every Friday night we're over at one another's homes, enjoying the warmth of Shabbat food and the companionship of friends. I dream of a Shearith Israel where we have to decline invitations because we're already going to a Shabbat dinner somewhere. I dream of a Shearith Israel where nobody ever feels lonely, because there's a culture of eating meals together, even if they aren't vegan or Kosher - yet. If you're with me on this vision of how we fight loneliness, I hope you know I won't be able to make this one happen alone. This is really going to take all of us, and maybe someone special to help do some coordinating at the beginning. Maybe one of you right now is

thinking how nice that culture would be. It'll be a big obligation, but hey, that's how the *mitzvot* add meaning, purpose, and love into our lives.

Mitzvot are the content of our Love relationship with God

Each morning when we pray. The paragraph immediately preceding the Shema reads *Ahavah Rabah Ahavtanu* - You have loved us with a great love... *Va-telamdin chukei chaim* - You taught our ancestors the laws of life, *ken t'chaneinu u-telamdeinu*, so too be gracious and teach us.. *V'tein B'libeinu l'havin, u-l'haskil, lishmoa lil-mod u'li'lamed, lishmor v'la'asot ul'kayeim et kol divrei Toratecha B'ahava*. Place in our hearts to understand, to discern, to hear, to learn and teach, to observe, act, and fulfill all the words of Your Torah with **love**.

The next paragraph following the Shema is *V'ahavta et Adonai Eloehcha B'chol Levavcha U'vechol Nafshecha, U'vechol M'odecha*. **Love Adonai Your God with all your heart, with all your soul with all your might.**

Mitzvot are the content of our love relationship with God. They are the sacred obligations that bind us together, guiding us to live with meaning and purpose.

Unite Our Hearts in Love and Fear of Your Name

On Rosh Hashanah, I shared the idea that Fear of Heaven means the fear of not living up to our highest values.

The Psalm for the season of repentance, one we say starting over a month ago up through Hoshanah Rabbah begins with the concept of fear.

Adonai Ori V'yishi Mi-mi efchad - Adonai is my light and my strength, who shall I fear?

But then, The Psalmist continues with the request of a love relationship that will never fail.

Achat Sha'alti Me'eit Adonai Ota Avakesh, Shivti B'veit Adonai Kol Yimei Chayai- One thing I ask of Adonai, to be in the house of Adonai, all the days of my life

Ki Avi V'Imi Azavuni, V'adonai Ya'asfeini - For my father and mother leave me, and Adonai gathers me in.

Kaveh El Adonai, Chazak V'yametz Libecha V'Kaveh El Adonai
Place your hope in Adonai, be strong and of courageous heart and hope in Adonai

Love relationships are the antidote to loneliness. They are not hard to achieve, but they take time and energy to maintain. The time and energy spent on love relationships is the point of them, and the antidote to loneliness.

Our highest values are learned through mitzvot, the performance of which is the content of our eternal, constant, and unbreakable love relationship with God.

As we prepare our hearts to be strong and courageous as we enter the Musaf service, I'll conclude my words with the line from the morning liturgy that is guiding me through this holiday season and year. *V'yached L'vaveinu L'ahava U'l-yirah et shmecha* - Unite our hearts in love and fear of Your Name.

May fear and love unite us to one another, unite us with our best selves, and motivate us to live up to our highest expectations.