

We all know we've got a drug problem in America. We hear about the epidemic of opioid use and the overcrowding of our prisons as a result of mandatory minimum sentencing. The states are pushing back against the federal drug laws on the administration of marijuana and we're spending \$76,000,000,000 (Billion!) on fighting the war on drugs every year¹ – not to mention the costs to our healthcare system and the strain on our social services. But, I want to tell you a bit about the drug problem in Portugal.

Johann Hari tells the story well: “Nearly fifteen years ago,” he says, “Portugal had one of the worst drug problems in Europe, with 1 in every 100 people addicted to heroin. They'd tried a drug war, and the problem just kept getting worse. So they decided to do something radically different. They resolved to decriminalize all drugs, and transfer all the money they used to spend on arresting and jailing drug addicts, and spend it instead on reconnecting them -- to their own feelings and to the wider society. The most crucial step is to get them secure housing, and subsidized jobs so they have a purpose in life, and something to get out of bed for.” Hari says, “I watched as they are helped, in warm and welcoming clinics, to learn how to reconnect with their feelings, after years of trauma and stunning them into silence with drugs.”² Since the beginning of the experiment, addiction in Portugal has fallen sharply and injection drug use is down by 50%!

¹ Admin. [The Annual Cost of the War on Drugs](https://elevationshealth.com/annual-cost-war-on-drugs/). Sept 19, 2017. <https://elevationshealth.com/annual-cost-war-on-drugs/>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/the-real-cause-of-addicti_b_6506936.html

Professor Peter Cohen³ argues that the explanation is that human beings have a deep need to bond and form connections. If we can't connect with each other, we will connect with anything we can find -- the whir of a roulette wheel or the prick of a syringe. He says we should stop talking about 'addiction' altogether, and instead call it 'bonding.' A heroin addict has bonded with heroin because she could not bond as fully with anything else.

12 Step programs for recovery from addiction operationalize this: By introducing oneself, at the beginning of a meeting saying, “Hi, my name is Joe Schmoe and I’m an alcoholic” and then having the remainder of the attendees respond with “Hi, Joe” – they establish the sense that the individual is suddenly not alone in their struggle - they’re a part of a community. The same thing can be observed in populations other than addicts.

Studies suggest that young Somali Americans suffer the distinction of being the most radicalized population of American Muslims and they have received the greatest attention from the FBI as a result. But, the all-important answer to the question of “why” is not: the Quran. These young men are predominantly non-religious. Rather, the answer comes from social psychologists who point to the dangerously high levels of disconnectedness within that community.⁴

In explaining why this might be so, the author uses bullying as an example. We know that the effects of bullying on a child can be devastating. The psychologists have demonstrated that teens who are bullied experience adult depression at 7 times the rate of non-bullied kids – this is the bad news. The really bad news is that that they are 4 times more likely to commit suicide. There is no good news. Following the latest mass casualty event in the news, we’ve grown too accustomed to the character evaluations of the perpetrator – we have come to expect a description of someone who was isolated

³ *ibid.*

⁴http://www.salon.com/2015/12/20/can_brain_science_tell_us_more_than_the_quran_about_why_young_non_religious_somali_americans_would_want_to_kill_and_die_in_syria_for_isis/?source=newsletter

from their student body or from their co-workers. We chalk it up to mental illness – but sometimes, that illness is caused by environmental factors like the loneliness of being bullied.

The writer, Paul Escott asks, “What is bullying if not the explicit effort of one individual or group to sever the ties of another with the rest of the population?”⁵ When we hear about the latest attack against innocent bystanders, we are not surprised to learn that the perpetrator was a disgruntled co-worker, a bullied student or a traumatized veteran who could not reconnect upon return from deployment. Bullying and isolating individuals is the diametric opposite message the Torah. We know that we are commanded to consider the most vulnerable and the most isolated when it says, repeatedly, we are to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. We have an astounding number of mechanisms for ostracizing individuals and groups *from* our society with relatively few systems devoted to bringing them *in*. The Somali Americans have been denied a portion of the American Dream and Escott tells us that these Americans are just looking for connections with those who do will not diminish their worth – even if it is ISIS who provide it.

What I find also fascinating is work performed by neuroscience on the malady of loneliness. Clinical studies have shown that loneliness and isolation can actually be somewhat assuaged by taking an aspirin - proving that there is a physiological element here. In other words, the pain of being lonely is real pain just like a stiff back or a headache.

The evolutionary element is a significant premise of the best-selling book, Sapiens.⁶ The author, Yuval Harari demonstrates that humans leapt ahead of other species not because of our physical or genetic advantages. Rather, it is because of our

⁵http://www.salon.com/2015/12/20/can_brain_science_tell_us_more_than_the_quran_about_why_young_non_religious_somali_americans_would_want_to_kill_and_die_in_syria_for_isis/?source=newsletter

⁶ Harari, Yuval Noah. Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind. Harper, NY, 2015.

strong social order and our ability to work together. The human animal can keep approximately 150 other people in our close attention – this is according to our brain capacity. This number, which is much higher than other species, is how we succeeded – over 10’s of thousands of years – at maintaining tribes that were functional and raising ourselves to the apex of the Animal Kingdom. The individual caveman understood his place in the community and gleaned a strong sense of value. Today, our tribes are far more complicated and it is more difficult to understand our place and our purpose.

Many of you are familiar with my favorite story about the congregant who is a regular at shul. After a couple of weeks of absence the rabbi decides to come check in on him. He trudges through the snow and knocks on the congregant’s front door. When he opens it and sees who is there, he knows why the rabbi has come. Wordlessly, the congregant steps aside indicating the rabbi is welcome to enter. They silently sit down in two over-stuffed chairs near the fireplace and, after a time, the rabbi stands and, using the fireplace poker, pushes a glowing coal away from the center of the fire. In isolation, that small ember continues to glow orange for a bit longer but then rapidly cools and then fades in radiance. After it has turned into a lump of black charcoal, the rabbi stands once more and pushes it back into the center of the roaring fire. It returns almost instantly to its previous power and he leaves – having no need to speak a single word. The congregant understood the rabbi’s message – he returned to make the minyan the next Shabbat.

I spoke to you last week about Sacred Community and how important it is to have a place in which we matter. I reminded you that honoring the other is the best way to elevate our own spirituality. I’m going to let you in on a little secret: I usually print out too few copies of whatever materials I plan to use. I often arrange for too few chairs to be setup to accommodate the crowd I’m expecting. I do this because it is meaningful for one of you who already has a copy or who is already seated to become aware that the newcomers lack what they need. At that point, you realize that it is *your* job to get

up share your copy or to find additional chairs. It is a minor example of how we transform from being “users” of the community into its “owners”. The mystics teach that our behavior in this world – our generosity towards others – is not about what **they** need materially but about what **we** need **spiritually**. We all know that, when we give to others, we receive far more in return.⁷

I’m pretty clear about what can help us accomplish this and I’m also quite confident that I know what cannot. I don’t think Facebook is the answer. 382 birthday wishes feels pretty good for a couple of minutes. And, I suppose it **is** nice that people I hadn’t heard from or thought about (sometimes for decades) were taking 17 seconds out of their day to wish me a Happy Birthday. But, I’ve sort of stopped paying attention to those Facebook Birthday wishes. Sure, I go down the list of those couple hundred folks and I click “like” next to each wish but I prefer the inevitable early morning phone call from my parents, who take the time to pick up the phone to sing a terribly off-key rendition of “Happy Birthday” and then quickly hang up before I can even say “thank you”. I still look forward to the predictable card that will arrive from our longest-term friend from California. I even appreciate the brief note that my insurance agent from Colorado still sends via Snail Mail! Have I grown into a social snob? Perhaps, but it seems that even Mark Zuckerberg agrees with me.

He delivered the commencement address to the graduating class of Harvard this year. In it, he urges these graduates to find a community for themselves in which they can identify meaningful purpose. “Whether our communities are...sports teams, churches or music groups, they give us that sense we are part of something bigger, that we are not alone; they give us the strength to expand our horizons.”⁸ Hear that clearly – the founder of Facebook preaches that Facebook is insufficient as a replacement for in-person engagement with other humans. In that same address, Zuckerberg references

⁷ Citation Needed – check commentary on Noah – Leave the Ark

⁸ Commencement Address to Harvard graduates, 2017. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/05/mark-zuckerbergs-speech-as-written-for-harvards-class-of-2017/>

the well-known story of President John Kennedy touring a facility at NASA as we made our effort to get to the moon. He saw a janitor in the hallway and, for some reason asked him what he was doing. The man's response: I'm helping put a man on the moon, Mr. President! That janitor had a sense that he was connected to the other 1000's of people working toward the same goal – he had purpose.

Here is the antidote to loneliness – don't be alone. Some of us are isolated in our busy-ness and others are isolated through our boredom. I'm sorry to say, that going to work every day or getting the kids out the door, to their sports practices and fed every night (which will leave you more busy than a full-time job!) is probably not quite enough to provide most people a sense of purpose. Yes, there is value in caring for the people in your innermost circle. But, once we do all that, we are left with both the capacity and the need for more meaning. This is about focusing on and caring for somebody or some cause beyond yourself. Find a place and a group of people who share your values or your interests and make those people into something more than just acquaintances.

When the rabbi visited that man in the story, it was to communicate two truths: first, the congregation mattered to the man – when removed from the fire, the individual coal suffered. But, second, the man mattered to the congregation – his regular presence as an “owner” meant that his absence was noticed. And here comes the real shocker in my sermon - I think Temple Sinai is a pretty good answer to the crisis of loneliness.

We try – not always successfully but diligently – to create a family in which individuals matter. I don't think we have the monopoly on the creation of קהילה קדושה – Holy Community but I do think that, if you're sitting here, there is something that connects you to me and to everyone else in the room in ways that the bowling league cannot match. Two years ago, I did my best to tally the number of volunteer hours contributed by Temple Sinai members in and around the congregation and the Stamford

community. The outcomes were inaccurate because volunteers tend to underestimate how much time they give and because there were plenty more people that I didn't even know to ask. My most accurate guess was something in the neighborhood of 12,000 volunteer hours that year. Those people were making meaning in their lives through sacred service and by choosing Sinai as their starting point they were sanctifying the role that the Jewish community plays for them.

On Rosh Hashanah, Marc Friedman asked for 100% participation in our annual appeal and efforts toward building our new Chapel and Library this year. I'm going to pitch my own kind of appeal - I, too, want 100% participation - that means you. I want you to take responsibility for imbuing your life with even greater meaning; I want you to increase the mental and spiritual health of your life by cultivating deeper connections to more people than are currently in your circles; I'm asking you to grant Temple Sinai a place of greater centrality in your life than it already occupies. I'm asking you to be a sacred member of our *Kehillah Kedoshah* this year in ways you haven't explored yet. With all gratitude to Sheryl Sandberg for introducing us to the expression – Lean In to your relationship with your congregation. Then, when you've taken on a new learning practice or adopted a new volunteer commitment or stepped in to a new leadership role or cultivated a new friendship - drop me a note and tell me. I'd like to let you know how proud of you I am and to help you see how, in the process of enriching your own life, you're creating something sacred for others at the same time.

Thanks to the long-term, generous gift of one of our congregant families, we have been able to create a new, part-time position at Temple Sinai we call the Membership Director. Larry Stoogenke you would join me here for a moment? A member for the last several years, Larry was easily and unanimously selected as the ideal person to fill this role. He will be involved in nearly all aspects of programming at the Temple. He'll be reaching out to new members and long-term members to understand how Temple Sinai can help fill some of this need for connection in your

lives. He might invite you to an event or might tell you about someone who volunteers in the same activities that you do. I asked Larry up to both congratulate him and to allow you the chance to see him. When he comes up to shake your hand at the BBQs, or the festival services or the concert events of the Temple, you'll know he's on "Official Business". He is not focused on drumming up new membership – his mission is to engage you – our current membership.

The dangers of isolation are familiar, to some degree, to all of us. They do not manifest in their most extreme forms for most of us. Thank God, you are likely not going to become the cause of the next heartbreaking violent headline in the news. And, you might not be a heroin addict who is contemplating suicide, again, Thank You, God. But, just because you're managing life pretty well doesn't mean you're not suffering. If you occasionally find yourself surprised at the rapidly flipping pages of the calendar, thinking to yourself, "time is relentlessly marching ahead, is there more to it?" The answer is – yes, there is more but it is only available to those who reach out to take it.