**The Antidote to Loneliness**

Early in the morning on December 27, 1878, a female chimpanzee at the Philadelphia Zoological Garden died of complications from a cold. The monkey, whose nickname was Miss Chimpanzee, died while in the company of her male companion—whose nickname was, you guessed it, Mr. Chimpanzee. Both chimps had been born near the Gabon River, in West Africa; they had arrived in Philadelphia together in April of that year.

At the time the chimps arrived, they were two of only four chimpanzees in the United States. The Philadelphia Zoological Garden was the first zoo ever to open in this country. It had been open only four years when the chimps arrived, and the female chimp had lived in the zoo only eight months before her sudden illness and death.

The superintendent of the Zoo at the time, a man named Arthur E. Brown, explained that the apes could only be captured while young. Were they allowed to grow into maturity in Africa, they would have been living together in small groups of between six and eight chimps, where they would take on individualized roles to ensure group survival. They would not have survived without at least six other chimps had they been brought to this country even a year later.

But in Philadelphia, in the monkey house where they lived, it was just the two of them. Brown published an article that he entitled “Grief in the Chimpanzee” to describe the crushing blow the death of his companion had on the male chimp: “They had become accustomed to sleep at night in each other’s arms on a blanket on the floor, clutching each other, desperately, achingly, through the long, cold night.” Upon the death of Miss Chimpanzee, Mr. Chimpanzee “went into a frenzy of grief.” The bereaved chimpanzee began to pull out the hair from his head. He wailed, making a sound the zookeeper had never heard before: *Hah-ah-ah-ah-ah*. “His cries were heard over the entire garden. He dashed himself against the bars of the cage and butted his head upon the hard-wood bottom, and when this burst of grief was ended, he poked his head under the straw in one corner and moaned as if his heart would break.”

At the time, nearly 150 years ago, nothing quite like this had ever been recorded. Long after the death of the female, Brown reported, the male “invariably slept on a cross-beam at the top of the cage, returning to his inherited habit, and showing that the apprehension of unseen dangers has been heightened by his sense of loneliness.”

We human beings, like our fellow primates, hunger for friendship, companionship and intimacy. We wither without it. And yet, long before the Covid pandemic, with its forced isolation and social distancing, we humans had begun building our own monkey houses, living our lives increasingly isolated from one another.

This past May, the Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murthy issued a report that he entitled: “The Epidemic of Loneliness.” The report contained the following warning: “Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation has been an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health. Our relationships are a source of healing and well-being hiding in plain sight, and they can help us live healthier, more fulfilled, and more productive lives*.* Given the significant health consequences of loneliness and isolation, we must prioritize building **social connections** the same way we have prioritized other critical public health issues such as tobacco, obesity, and substance use disorders. Together, we can build a country that’s healthier, more resilient, less lonely, and more connected.”

According to the Surgeon General’s report, the **physical** health consequences of poor or insufficient connection include a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults. Additionally, lacking social connection increases risk of premature death by more than 60%.

In addition to our physical health, loneliness and isolation contribute substantially to **mental** health challenges. For adults, the risk of developing depression more than doubles among people who report feeling lonely than it is for those who rarely or never feel lonely. For children, loneliness and social isolation increase the risk of depression and anxiety both immediately and often through adulthood.

According to a 2021 poll, more than half of Americans describe themselves as experiencing loneliness. And here is another startling finding from our Surgeon General: **Young adults** are almost twice as likely to report feeling lonely as those over age 65. In the new advisory, Dr. Murthy calls on the nation to strengthen its social fabric and to prioritize meaningful relationships.

At the start of a New Year on the Jewish calendar, I want to suggest that one place that we can start to address the epidemic of loneliness in this country is right here in this synagogue. The Jewish people has always understood that our destiny is a collective one. We **cannot** exist as Jews without meaningful and regular forms of social interaction. Our religious life is predicated on the concept of community and mutual obligation. We need a *minyan* in order to say *Kaddish.* The vast majority of the prayers that we will say throughout these Days of Awe are written in the first-person plural: On Yom Kippur, our confession of sins will be in the plural. We came into being as a nation of slaves that left Egypt, and our Redemption will be a **collective** one. Jewish life, at its core, cannot be lived in isolation. Our destiny is as much a **communal** one as it is a result of our **individual** actions.

It is for this reason that **what** we Jews **believe** has always been secondary to the fact that we **belong** to this collective enterprise. This crucial idea is at the heart of the thinking of one of the 20th Century’s most important Jewish theologians: Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan. Kaplan believed that the key to Jewish survival and our ability to flourish over the centuries was a result of our tradition’s ability to create that sense of **tribe**—that deep sense of **belonging**.

Kaplan was well-known for illustrating this point using an analogy from grammar and distinguishing between **dependent** and **independent** nouns. **Independent** nouns don’t need anything else to be what they are. A blade of grass is just a blade of grass; it is not defined by any other blade of grass surrounding it. And a table is just a table; it might sit in a kitchen or a dining room or a cafeteria. But it is still a table. A fence can just be a fence.

But a **dependent** noun only exists in relationship to something else. A daughter cannot be just a daughter in general. A daughter is the daughter of a particular parent or parents—adopted or biological. A President cannot just be a President. A congregational President—like Ruth Lefton—is the President of something—in this case, of Beth Sholom Congregation. A teacher is not a teacher unless that teacher has students.

Rabbi Kaplan taught that at our very essence, we human beings are **dependent nouns**. We might be able to **exist** simply by eating, drinking, holding a job and providing for our basic needs in the way that most animals provide for themselves. But to experience the fullness of our humanity, we can **only** do so while we are in relationship to others. We become fully human only by virtue of families and friendships, and through the ways that we interact with one another in a meaningful way. Our humanity is expressed when we experience the uniqueness of each other's souls. We **need** each other—and we **depend** upon one another—to be fully human.

That truth is echoed in the cycle of festivals that are described in the Torah in the Book of Leviticus. Our cycle of holy days begins with Shabbat and continues through the yearly cycle of festivals beginning with Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Festivals were times of communal gathering. In biblical times, those living in proximity to Jerusalem would make a pilgrimage to offer sacrifices and to observe the holiday together.

And yet, at any given moment, at any given Festival, not every individual would be in the **mood** to celebrate. Then, as now, life happens, and only **some** would have hearts frilled with joy. Others might be filled with sorrow and pain. With tremendous insight, our Sages recognized that not everyone would be in an emotional space to observe the holiday like everyone else. Personal calamities could **not** be timed around the holidays.

The Mishnah describes our Sages understanding of this truth by the way our ancestors would enter the Temple Mount to begin a festival gathering. Most Jews would enter and turn **right**, walking counter-clockwise atop the Temple Mount. Other Jews though would turn left and walk clockwise. What was the difference between who made a left turn and those who turned right?

According to one source, the people who turned left and walked counter-clockwise would include the mourner, the excommunicated person, one who had a sick person in their home, or someone who had lost a personally significant object. According to another source, the group consisted of any person who had had a significant life event occur over the course of the past year. It could include either a joyous event like the birth of a baby or the wedding or it could include a painful event like the death of a family member. As those walking counter-clockwise encountered those walking clockwise, here’s what the latter group would ask the former: מַה לְּךָ מַקִּיף לִשְׂמֹאל, why are you walking from the left?

The respondent would offer an explanation: “because I am a mourner;” or perhaps, “because someone in my household is sick.” Or the person walking left might say: “Because I have experienced the joy of becoming a parent;” or “because I recently married my *beshert*.” The right walking individual would then respond with an appropriate blessing. To the mourner, for example, one would say: “May the One who dwells in **this** house comfort you.” To a new bride or groom, one would say: “May you build a *bayit ne’eman b’Yisrael—*May you build a faithful home among the Jewish people.”

During our festival season, our tradition built into the very rituals of the day conditions for those whose hearts were overflowing with joy, **as well as** those whose hearts needed to be comforted and consoled. As my colleague Rabbi Naomi Kalish writes about this ritual: “The encounter began with those who wished to offer care looking into the eyes of those who might need care—or who might have joy to share—who were literally walking against the mainstream.” The encounter was open, and it began with a question. It was an opportunity for sharing and ultimately, for feeling the nurture and comfort of being held within a community.

In other words, it was a communal ritual intended to be the antidote to **loneliness and isolation** that can occur in the course of a lifetime. 2,000 years ago, our Sages realized that we needed each other’s care and concern in order to thrive. That insight is perhaps even more true for us today than it was for them when it first originated.

And that is part of the promise of being part of a synagogue community. Here at Beth Sholom Congregation, we offer a myriad of ways for our members to place their individual gifts in the service of something larger—and in doing so, to create opportunities to build loving and supportive community. Consider coming to morning minyan if you haven’t done so in a while and have breakfast afterwards with our minyaniares. Or help make sure we have an evening minyan on Zoom. See the unbelievable musical gifts that so many of our members share as part of our musical Kabbalat Shabbat services. Or taste the delicious food that our Fabulous 4—four amazing women volunteers from the congregation—cook up for us for Shabbat Kiddush lunch. Consider coming to a congregational Shabbat dinner this year. Or take one of Carol Nemeroff’s Mindfulness Meditation classes through our Center for Spiritual Well-Being. Check out our amazing Men’s Club and Sisterhood programs. Or share your love of Israel through our Israel Engagement Committee. Do acts of service and *Hesed* through Mitzby—our Social Action group—whether it is staffing our Merow Family Mitzvah Food Pantry, joining Cook for a Friend, or helping with our blood drives. Join us for one of our young family social events, be part of our Preschool PTO, or our Etgar school committee. Be part of our new Grandparent’s group or our new Gardening Group, or new Nexters group for younger Boomers, or our new ROMEO group for retired guys. Come sing with the Cantor in our choir, or study Jewish texts with me. And while I am sure I have left many things off this list (with apologies in advance for doing so), remember that here, your gifts are valued. That here, **you** are valued. And that together, we can ease the loneliness that is so pervasive—because indeed, we truly need one another in order to thrive.

I want to conclude with a story that shows the power of a single act of inter-dependence. It is a story that was told by the late Rabbi Gerald Wolpe (z”l), the former Senior Rabbi of Har Zion Temple. The story illustrates how a relationship that emerges from a place of communal responsibility has the power to change a life—and therefore, to change the world.

The story takes place during Wolpe’s boyhood; he was just 11 years-old when his father died, and he wanted to honor his father’s memory by saying *Kaddish—*even though at the age of 11, he was not obligated to do so according to Jewish law. Every morning, he got up at 5:30 to say Kaddish at the synagogue before going to school. One morning, during the second week, a man appeared at his front door just as he left his house. Gerald recognized him as Mr. Einstein from the morning minyan. Mr. Einstein explained, “Your home is on my way to the synagogue. I thought it might be nice to have some company. That way, I don’t have to walk alone.”

Each morning, he was there. Mr. Einstein held young Gerald’s hand as they crossed busy intersections, as they trekked through snow, rain, sunshine, through all the seasons of the year of his mourning. Wolpe remembered treasuring those times and how much he looked forward to walking to *minyan* each day with Mr. Einstein.

Years later, Rabbi Wolpe came back to his hometown with his wife and new baby, and called Mr. Einstein, who invited them to visit. Rabbi Wolpe describes what happened next: “I drove in tears as I realized what [Mr. Einstein] had done. My home was not on the path to the synagogue; it was completely out of his way. He had walked for an hour to my house so that I would not have to be alone each morning. He took a frightened child by the hand and led him with confidence and faith back into life. [Ever since then, wherever I have gone], Mr. Einstein has been holding my hand.”

Like Rabbi Wolpe when he was a boy, there’s someone out there who could use a hand. Right now, it could be you. Sooner or later, it is going to be me. And God’s presence will be found—and God’s gamble on having created us on the first place—will be vindicated when we reach out and grasp that hand—and help that other person to know that he or she, too, belongs.

May each of us find many hands to grasp in the coming weeks and months, so that ours will be a community of belonging, as we help to ease the loneliness that is so pervasive…*Kein yi’he ratzon.* So may it be. *Shana Tova Tikateivu*—May we all merit being inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life.