

A little-known fact about Rosh ha-Shanah: we're all aware that Rosh ha-Shanah is the Jewish New Year, marks the Creation of the world. But the Torah teaches, of course, that God created the world over the course of six days – so which day of Creation, then, does Rosh ha-Shanah correspond with? The obvious answer would be day one – when God begins Creation with the famous declaration, “Let there be light.” However, after some debate in the Talmud, the ancient Rabbis ultimately conclude that Rosh ha-Shanah corresponds with the *sixth* day of Creation, when God creates human beings.

There are many ramifications to the Rabbis' contention that Rosh ha-Shanah celebrates the creation of mankind, with the most obvious implication of this remarkable conclusion being that human beings are the focal point of God's purpose for Creation. And so perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that, after the rest of Creation is settled and attended to, God is concerned that something is still lacking for this prize creation, Adam, alone in the Garden of Eden.

And so, reflecting God's deep concern and care for humanity, the Torah offers a curious moment of reflection on God's part: “*Lo tov heyot ha-adam levado* – it is not good for man to be alone.” As we know, God creates Eve as a partner for Adam – the Hebrew phrase is an “*ezer k'negdo* – a fitting counterpart” – and so human beings are called into this world not to be alone, not to be solitary, but to exist in and as part of relationships with others.

I was thinking about this story not long ago when I came across a report by the Surgeon General of the United States, Vivek Murthy; perhaps you've come across it as well, since it's been getting a lot of attention lately. Dr. Murthy, in his capacity as the chief public health officer of this country, writes about an epidemic that is sweeping this country. Not the epidemics that might more readily spring to mind – an epidemic of obesity, or gun violence, or mental health issues, or addiction; although in some ways this epidemic might be a root cause of all the other ones I just mentioned. The issue that Dr. Murthy identified and singled out for urgent attention is an epidemic of loneliness which is taking an enormous toll on our physical, emotional, and spiritual lives and is wreaking havoc on our society as a whole.

If this isn't something you've heard before, it may sound strange: loneliness potentially sounds minor and even benign enough that we wouldn't imagine it would have the kind of impact Dr. Murthy describes. But he has the numbers to back it up, and they are truly alarming. One out of two American adults reports they are struggling with loneliness, and those numbers are even higher for teens. One-third of people are so disconnected from the people living around them that they don't even know their neighbors' names, and one in five Americans report they don't have anyone in their lives – *not a single person* – with whom they feel they could discuss a serious issue that's weighing on their minds. These trends were already underway before the pandemic, and have only been exacerbated since. The public health consequences of these numbers are enormous – an official government report states that loneliness “is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety” – in other words an increase in nearly every metric of mortality. And a Harvard study recently reported that “strong relationships are the biggest predictor of [overall] well-being.” The New York Times cites one researcher who tells his medical students that “one of the best indicators of how well an elderly patient will be faring in six months is to ask him “how many friends or family he's seen in the last week.”

With eye-popping figures like this, the problem of loneliness has been garnering a lot of attention, and so it's important to be clear what we're talking about. Social scientists are careful to point out that loneliness is not the same as solitude. Someone could have only a small number of social interactions but not be lonely because they enjoy being on their own and the interactions they do have fulfill their needs. And at the same time, someone could be surrounded by lots of people but still feel crushingly lonely, because they feel alienated or disconnected from those people around them. Put most simply, loneliness is generally defined as a discrepancy between one's desired and achieved levels of social relations. In other words, loneliness is subjective: if we feel like the number of connections or the kinds of connections we have don't fulfill our needs, we will most likely feel lonely.

Some of this loneliness has to do with technology – we increasingly interact with one another through screens instead of 'IRL' – the ironic texting shorthand for 'in real life.' We follow other people's lives from afar on social media, but posting a comment or clicking 'like' about someone's vacation photos is no substitute for interacting with them. We do our shopping online and our lunch orders through an app – and our purchases show up at our door without so much as talking with another human being. If we *do* go to the grocery store instead of ordering through Fresh Direct, we fill up our carts and then scan our items ourselves at self-service check-out kiosks: again, no human interaction required. These frictionless transactions definitely offer a high degree of convenience – who wants to wait in the checkout line while the cashier rings up your items – but also rob us of even the most perfunctory of exchanges that force us to acknowledge there's another human being sharing space with us. They connect us with the goods and services we desire while disconnecting us from the people who make them possible.

This isn't the way that human beings lived for most of human history, and it's not the way we were meant to interact. Humans are social creatures – evolutionary biologists like Yuval Noah Harari point out that social connections were a vital evolutionary adaptation designed to keep us safe within a group or clan. Loneliness, they suggest, is a biological response much like hunger or thirst – a warning from our brain that something necessary for our survival is lacking and we're supposed to go and do something about it.

The problem is: What? With hunger and thirst the answer is easy – we eat or we drink, assuming we have the means to acquire the sustenance we need. In theory, the response to loneliness should be just as simple – to reach out and to connect with other people, but in practice it often doesn't work this way. Loneliness can make us feel unloved, like other people don't want to be with us; and so as the Surgeon General notes we preemptively seal ourselves off from even greater potential feelings of rejection by turning inward, isolating and keeping to ourselves in a Catch-22 of alienation. Truth to tell, breaking down the walls of isolation isn't as simple and straightforward as knocking on someone's door and inviting yourself in for a chat, because this kind of behavior would be perceived as outlandish, so outside of the norm that we'd likely be treated as some kind of a misfit, and that will only deepen the problem.

Sociologists speculate that part of the reason loneliness and a sense of disconnection have become so endemic in the United States is a growing distrust in institutions, and an erosion of the sense of the shared traditions and values that have historically held us together. The norms that create a cohesive society have been fading, leaving us increasingly suspicious of and alienated from one another.

The truth is, the sense of shared culture and society that used to exist in the US still holds sway in many parts of the world. In Israel, for example, there's a closeness and a solidarity that grows out of a sense of everyone being in it together, a sense that only deepened after the October 7 attacks. I heard a story recently that blew my mind, about a fender bender that took place in Israel. One of the drivers was clearly at fault, but neither of them felt a need to go through insurance since it was just some dings that were easier to settle up on their own. The drivers exchanged information and agreed to meet the next day at a garage where the person whose car was hit could get an estimate and the driver who was at fault could make out a check.

The next day, the one driver comes to the garage but the other one, the one who was at fault, doesn't show. In the US this might not surprise us – in fact, it might strike us as stunningly naive that the person at fault would voluntarily come and pay up – but there's a different level of trust, there's a different level of *connection* in Israel – and the woman who was stood up was both genuinely surprised and affronted. She wrote an angry text to the other driver, and when he didn't answer, followed up with another one the next day. That second day he wrote back very apologetically – his son Shaul had just fallen in combat in Gaza, and the man was sitting shiva. He couldn't repay the woman just then, but would do it as soon as shiva was over. The woman was, of course, horror stricken. She went to pay a shiva call to express her condolences and while she was there told this father that she had actually been at his son's funeral the day before – not because she knew him, but because she, like literally thousands of other people, flocked to the funeral out of a deep-seated need to be there to express her grief and support. When shiva was done the father contacted the woman again so he could repay her for the damage he had caused her car, but she refused. In fact, she explained, it wasn't even necessary because when the owner of the garage learned that the person who had hit her car had just lost a son in Gaza, he fixed it for her at no charge.

This story exemplifies the opposite of that anonymous, frictionless society of people ordering and interacting through apps. And it's not just because Israelis are nosier and pushier – which they are – but also because there's a sense of a shared fabric, a shared culture, a shared sense of connection that binds them together and keeps people from being isolated individuals.

I don't mean to say we're all isolated individuals here in this country – although given the Surgeon General's numbers there's a reasonable chance that some of us are; and if you do feel that way I want to encourage you in the strongest terms to reach out to me so we can set up a time to connect. No, most of us, God willing, have families and friends – often close friends – that we can celebrate and share good times and hard times with. But I want to suggest this story about the drivers in Israel highlights a degree of relationships and connection that is an indispensable complement to friendship – and that is community.

Friends, of course, are people we know and like – perhaps even love. But our connection with them is based on our shared affection: if we like someone we might be friends with them, but if we don't then we won't be. This is in contrast to community, including a community like Beth Rishon. Presumably there are people here you like, hopefully a lot of them. But in its ideal form, our connection to community isn't governed or driven solely by our personal affection or affinity for the individuals who are part of it. Community, after all, is a group of people who come together around a shared sense of purpose, identity, and values.

We so often use the term 'community' loosely to describe people with a common interest or identity – Swifties, for example, or triathletes or labradoodle owners.

And the truth is, it can be powerful when a group of people comes together for a shared activity – say audience members at a Billy Joel concert or fans sitting in the bleachers at Yankee Stadium. The connection we feel with the crowd can be intense – we might find ourselves singing and swaying rapturously with our neighbors to Piano Man or high fiving complete strangers when Judge or Soto hits a home run – but our interactions are organized around and limited to that particular activity: that does not a community make. Even a book group or spinning class or something recurring where we might see the same people on a weekly or monthly basis doesn't constitute community because the connection begins and ends with activity. Communities in the true sense of the word involve a sense of mutual commitment and obligation: a sense of belonging that transcends the purpose that brings people together or even the specific individuals who are present, and instead centers on a sense of being a part of something larger that both supports us and lays a claim on us.

In the context of Jewish community, in the context of synagogue, that might mean attending services of course. But it also might mean showing up to pay a shiva visit for someone in the congregation you don't personally know, but who is part of our shared community and is experiencing pain and loss. It might mean signing up to bring a meal to someone homebound through the caring committee and it might mean celebrating at the bat mitzvah of a young woman whose family you don't know but with whom you can still rejoice because she is part of your community and is marking a beautiful and meaningful life passage into Jewish adulthood. It might mean attending an adult ed program, or a men or women's club event, or our readers circle or a day of service through our Social Action committee – not just because you're drawn to the topic or activity itself, but because it's a chance to be together with other people with whom you share a common set of interests and values, who recognize that taking part in these sorts of activities and building these kinds of relationships is different through a synagogue than it is through a Y or the library or senior center because you're helping to strengthen your connection to Jewish life at the same time and building up this critical Jewish presence in Wyckoff. In other words, because it helps you be a *part* of something, and that makes all the difference.

The Book of Ecclesiastes says, "*Tovim ha-sh'nyaim min he-echad* – it is better for two people to be together than for one to be alone." This verse echoes that sentiment God expresses at the beginning of Genesis, "*Lo tov heyot ha-adam levado* – it is not good for man to be alone." We are social creatures, and as a general rule we do better in the company of others. There's something challenging about this sentiment, however, because Jewish tradition generally understands this verse from Ecclesiastes as a statement that it is better to be married than it is to be single. And while some people find deep and fulfilling marital relationships with life partners, others do not – perhaps they never meet the right person or just don't feel the need for a partner, or they do form an intimate relationship but it leads to strife and ends in separation or divorce. Or perhaps a person's partner dies. The statement "it is better for two people to be together than for one to be alone" could feel oppressive if we understand it as saying one must have an intimate or romantic partner in order to be fulfilled.

And that's why a couple of verses later Ecclesiastes underscores the importance of living in relationship with others with the statement: "*Chut ha-meshulash lo vimheirah yenatek* – a

threefold cord is not easily severed.” The threefold cord envisioned here takes the idea of connection out of the context of intimate relationships and one-on-one interactions, and emphasizes that our connections grow stronger and deeper and richer the more people who are a part of them. Yes we have friends, yes we have family and these are critical – but so is community, because it is the surest guarantor of lasting and enduring relationships that are grounded in values and a shared sense of purpose.

On this Rosh ha-Shanah, let us truly be here *together* as one community. Let us reaffirm and recommit to our shared purpose of celebrating the beauty of Jewish ritual and tradition, the wisdom of Jewish values and learning, the pride of taking the time away from whatever else we might ordinarily be doing with our Friday to say we are a part of something larger, something that has a hold on us, places a claim on us, uplifts, enriches, and ennobles us. Let us remind ourselves on this anniversary of Creation that we are part of a glorious and precious world, and that how we behave in it and how we thrive in it matters deeply to God. Let us reach out to live fully into the Divine image in ourselves and those around us, and build and strengthen those relationships that give us the resilience, courage, and hope to enter this New Year *together*, as one sacred community.