

It Is Not Good for Humans To Be Alone

Kol Nidre 5768

My wife, Michele, could not be more precious to me. She is my life's partner, the foundation of the family that we are creating together, truly the epicenter of my universe. And she has discovered a new trick when she's talking to me. She learned it from a friend whose husband is equally distractible and preoccupied. Assuming that I never hear the first half of what she says to me anyhow, Michele now utters sentences that go something like this: "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, could you please change Mia's diaper?" She's decided to stop wasting actual words on my all-too-often impenetrable ears.

It's not that I'm a particularly insensitive or callous person, at least I hope that I'm not. It is simply that I, like many others, am often lost in thought, attention diverted to the mundane matters at hand – my mind sidetracked by responsibilities back at the office.

But distraction and busy lives surely aren't the only contributors to the walls we erect between ourselves and others. If we are honest, then we must confess that it is sometimes more expeditious and less taxing to avoid meaningful interaction. When we repeatedly opt for small talk over substantive dialogue, we can inadvertently find ourselves in a cocoon made for one. This has prompted some students of human behavior to dub ours a "culture of loneliness." People, people everywhere, and not an ear to listen nor an eye to bear witness.

Ours is not the first generation to face the challenges of interpersonal alienation. The story of our forefather, Joseph, is, in fact, a narrative of estrangement and isolation.

The drama begins: "One day, Joseph went in search of his brothers, who were pasturing the flock in Shechem...When Joseph arrived there, an unknown man found him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, "What are you looking for?" Joseph replied, "I am seeking my brothers."¹

¹ Genesis 37:12-16

Our forefather is a man in personal crisis here. He has been having disturbing dreams, which he attempts to share with his brothers only to discover that they are enraged by his visions. Joseph is an outcast in his own family, and he finds himself alone. Our tradition has always viewed this as an unacceptable state of being.

As God created the world, we read that the end of each day brought a declaration of the goodness of that which had been formed. Everything from the light and seas to the creepy crawly things are all declared to be good.² It is necessarily jarring, then, when we see a dramatic shift from these regular reflections on all that is positive about creation to God's first identification of something which is unpleasant and troubling in our world.

“And God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’”³ Even thousands of years ago, our sacred text recognized one of the fundamental existential realities of being human...in the words of philosopher Marc Gafni, “[We are all driven by] a desire to move from loneliness to connection, from loneliness to loving...Nothing is more important to us than the need to share our lives with another...”⁴

A more contemporary Jewish tale: It was Yom Kippur, and the town's retired rabbi decided that he was taking this year off from the day's solemn observance. He pretended to be ill, sent his family to synagogue and promptly made his way to the golf course three towns over. Putting almost all of his guilt aside, he teed up by himself on the first hole, grabbed the driver from his bag, and prepared to begin his round.

The angels in heaven were aghast at the sight of this spiritual leader playing golf on Yom Kippur. God joined them as they looked on in horror, and with a smile coming across the Divine face, God said, “Watch this.”

The rabbi drew back his club and swung, striking the ball perfectly. With the angels looking on, God grabbed the ball in mid air and

² Genesis Chapter 1

³ Genesis 2:18

⁴ Soul Prints, Marc Gafni, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2001, pp 4-5

guided it directly into the hole on the first green. The angels cried out, "What on earth are you doing?!? You're rewarding him for this awful behavior?" "Just watch," replied God.

The rabbi's face beamed with joy as he raised his hands triumphantly in the air. He turned to the right to share his glorious feat with someone, but only the trees were there. The rabbi turned to the left but found only a water hole and a sand trap. His face became sullen as he realized that he would never be able to tell another soul about this moment.

We have an innate need to communicate our accomplishments and our defeats, our joy and our sorrow, our excitement and our fear, with those who surround us. The opening chapters of Genesis may, in fact, imply that all of God's glorious creation is only good to the extent that we can share in it with one another. "It is not good for humans to be alone."

"What are you looking for?" asks Joseph's mysterious guide. "I am seeking my brothers...[I need my brothers]." We are Joseph, requiring the closeness and attentiveness of friends and loved ones, a smiling face, a listening ear. Yet, as we know, this is not what Joseph finds in the fields of Shechem. Plagued by jealousy and animosity, his brothers cast him into a pit, sell him to traders en route to Egypt, and fake his death for their father. Oh what a painful fate we suffer when, in a time of need, we seek out those close to us only to be ignored or casually dismissed. A piece of the soul does, indeed, experience death in such a moment.

In our own day we have seen the impact of such social rejection resonate powerfully in the lives of our teens. At an age when nothing is as important as one's network of friends, many adolescents find themselves pushed towards the margins, unable to find their niche, and thereby lacking a sense of stability, security, and purpose. Responses to such estrangement can include depression, adopting unhealthy habits, and even violence towards oneself and one's peers. And while we continually seek ways to create safer environments for our teens, we should also recognize that adults do not become magically immune to the pain of social isolation upon turning eighteen

or graduating from college. We too are susceptible to the hurt and the sorrow which stem from profound loneliness.

Joseph makes his way from prison inmate to high official in Pharaoh's court. His brothers unexpectedly appear before him, sent by their father in search of food, for there is a famine in Canaan. "When Joseph saw his brothers," the text teaches, "he acted like a stranger toward them... Though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him."⁵

Having been hurt once before, Joseph is understandably reticent to reveal himself, to open up and make himself vulnerable yet again. So, he "acts like a stranger" toward his brothers. And it works...they do not even recognize him. Like Joseph, we too may forgo genuine human interaction in order to avoid the vulnerability that comes with opening up to another. We've all been there...trying to put on an air of strength in the face of financial troubles, illness, or loss. "Fine," we reply, when others ask how we are. It's easier to act like a stranger.

In the language of the great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, the brothers and Joseph are relating in an I-It manner. Our relationships, according to Buber, can take one of two forms...I-It, or I-Thou. We have an I-It relationship with our toaster ovens...it's an object to be used, to make food warm, or in my case to be forgotten about until my bagel morphs into a charcoal briquette. We can have I-It relationships with humans as well, though. The person bagging our groceries, or serving us at a restaurant, or sometimes even our co-workers and family...people with whom we are interacting but with whom there is no real openness, sharing, or true recognition.

Buber highlights the benefits of I-Thou interactions between people...those moments when we can share more fully of ourselves, and experience another with truly open ears, eyes, minds, and hearts. In such exchanges, argues Buber, we not only transcend our all-too-natural state of loneliness, but we also encounter the Divine.

Our present-day world, however, does not always lend itself to the I-Thou mode of relating with one another. Counterintuitively, the

⁵ Genesis 42:6-8

bursting populations of urban and suburban centers often leave us feeling anonymous and secluded. Even within our own homes, the good morning “grunt” at the breakfast table or the perfunctory, “How was your day? Fine. And yours? Fine” exchange before bed hardly qualifies as the holy communication that Buber encourages.

Harvard sociology professor, Robert Putnam, documented our nation’s cultural shift towards a more solitary existence in his book entitled, Bowling Alone. In this bestseller, Putnam argues that social capital, the value added by friendships and connections between members of a group, improves the health and vibrancy of the whole. The overarching premise of the book is that social capital has been on the decline in the United States for several decades now. Some key indicators: the last 25 years have seen a 58% drop in attendance at club or organizational meetings, a 35% drop in having friends over to the house, and a 43% drop in the frequency of family dinners. The contributing factors to these trends? Putnam points to television, two-career families, suburban sprawl, and generational changes in values. And the detrimental effects on our society? Putnam uncovered correlating declines in educational performance, involvement in our democracy, in everyday honesty, and even in our own health and happiness.⁶ Many of us, it would seem, are striving to go it on our own, and yet the voices of Torah, and present-day reality resonate in our ears... “It is not good for humans to be alone.”

I would add the rise in impersonal cyber-communication to Putnam’s list of social capital detractors. Just today, Fiber Optic cable was installed at our house to ensure that we connect to the cyber-world around us as quickly as possible. Heaven forbid my I-Tunes downloads should take a single second longer than necessary. And while I am both excited and fascinated by the technological access at our fingertips, I am aware that no matter how fast our connection is, it is always virtual at best. E-mail is efficient and useful, to be sure. Yet we know that something critical is lost when we are unable to hear another’s voice, to see the other’s body language, to look into someone’s eyes and behold a soul. “Colon” – “Hyphen” – “Close Parenthesis” may depict a smile when typed into an e-correspondence, but it cannot compare to the healing power of an

⁶ Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2000, p. 367

actual smile. The Torah teaches that God spoke to Moses *panim el panim*, face to face, as one speaks with a friend.⁷ This is the ideal held up for us...the possibility of engaging another and thereby encountering God.

The world wide web which links so many may deceive us into thinking that we are more connected than we actually are. Social networking utilities like Facebook, are bursting at the seams with users looking to establish contact with friends old and new. There is surely value to such online tools, evidenced by their rapidly growing subscriber rates...as of August, one million new people a week were opening Facebook accounts.⁸ And while many benefit from these connections, having hundreds of peripheral “cyber friends” does not always translate into meaningful, substantive, and enriching companionship. It’s hard to avoid the I-It mode of relationship when my only experience of you is filtered through a keyboard and a flatscreen monitor.

The opportunity to experience the I-Thou with another is, quite possibly, the greatest benefit of being an active part of any group or civic organization, and especially a *kehilah kedoshah*, a sacred community such as ours. At Shabbat services, we speak aloud the names of those who need healing, so that we all have an opportunity to reach out both to the person who is ailing, and to the speaker who is concerned for that loved-one. We share those parts of our lives for which we are thankful ALOUD, because as members of a covenantal community, we want to celebrate alongside one another in moments of joy. We stand for the mourner’s kaddish in groups: those who have lost a loved one in the past 7 days, the past 30 days, the past year, and those observing a yahrtzeit, not to single out or isolate people who are grieving. Just the opposite! Doing so allows the rest of us in the room an opportunity to reach out, to place a hand on a shoulder, to stay to talk for a few moments when services conclude.

The result of such moments, and hundreds of similar interactions which regularly occur here, is an increase in the Beth Shalom family’s social capital. We know that the smile, the listening ear, or the words

⁷ Exodus 33:11

⁸ “Facebook Grows Up,” by Steven Levy, Newsweek, August 20, 2007

of comfort extended today will come back to us many times over in the years ahead. In the words of famed Jewish psychoanalyst, Theodore Reik, “To connect one’s life in thoughts and deeds with others is the only way to make it worth living.”

And so, after days of keeping his distance, of putting on airs and pretending to be that which he was not, Joseph reached out once again. Confident that he could now trust his brothers, and sobbing aloud, he “said to them, ‘I am Joseph...Come towards me.’ And when they came forward, he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph...’”⁹ Only when he was once again ready to be vulnerable, to be human, could Joseph reveal his true self, his whole identity. And only then could his brothers recognize him, reach back towards him, and embrace him.

This couldn’t have been easy for our forefather. Even in our own day, societal norms often tell us that needing others, desiring support, and longing for connection, are signs of weakness. Many idolize the strength of the solitary individual who can go it alone, the real life action hero who requires no other. The Baal Shem Tov, founder of modern Hasidism, knew better. He taught that “There are two ways to serve God. One is to separate yourself from people and from the world’s affairs, and to devote yourself wholly to a study of religious books. This is the safe way. The other way is to mingle with people, to engage in [the lives of others], and, at the same time, to try to be an example of godliness. This way has its dangers, but it is far more worthy.”

On this day of Yom Kippur, when we speak of *teshuvah*, repentance, and *shuvah*, turning and returning towards God, let us be blessed with the true strength required to turn towards one another with openness, with honesty, with a listening ear, and a caring heart. To encounter one another *panim el panim*, face to face, and to thereby encounter God as well.

Amen.

⁹ Genesis 45:1-4