

## RE-ESTABLISHING OUR CONNECTIONS

Rabbi Todd A. Markley – *Kol Nidrei 5782*

This past spring, I attended one of our monthly Needham Clergy Association meetings. Denise Garlick, Needham's State Representative was in attendance, and she told the following story:

"Over these past months," she shared, "I went to the Chiefs of Police in each of the towns that I serve so that I could learn more about their needs and how I could support their work at the state level. Each one replied with a similar message: 'It's all about mental health right now. That's where we need support.' 'Really?' she replied. 'Really,' each responded. Representative Garlick noted that she had similar conversations with other local agencies in each town and heard the same message at every stop: "People are suffering. It's all about mental health right now." These words continued to echo through my mind for weeks. They still do...because the challenges being expressed by local officials are reflective of larger national trends.

In the first half of 2019, only 11% of American adults reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression. By December of 2020, that number had skyrocketed to 42% of the U.S. adult population. And that's among adults. Distressingly, the research finds that the impact has been even more severe on our youth.<sup>1</sup> "Before the pandemic," wrote Harvard Psychology Professor, Katie McLaughlin, "about 30% of the youths [in my study] had symptoms of anxiety or depression...But by April 2020, and again in fall 2020...[that number] had jumped to above 56%."<sup>2</sup>

To make matters worse, it was reported in July that one in four people who experienced depression or anxiety during the pandemic could not find professional support available to them when they sought it out.<sup>3</sup> Therapeutic practitioners are overwhelmed by a demand they cannot possibly meet...though, that does not relieve those of us who are suffering from the responsibility to keep trying to connect with someone who can help.<sup>4</sup>

Again and again, as I delved further into the mental health crisis that she'd described to our group, the twin pains of "anxiety and depression" continued to surface. Of course, there is a vast array of psychological and emotional disorders from which people suffer...over 150 are enumerated in the American Psychological Association's diagnostic manual...each of them worthy of being brought from the shadows as we strive to rid ourselves of the needlessly hurtful stigmas attached to these conditions for

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<sup>1</sup> "COVID's Mental Health Toll: Scientists Track Surge in Depression," by Alison Abbott, Nature, Vol. 590, February 11, 2021

<sup>2</sup> "Scientists Are Racing to Unravel the Pandemic's Toll on Kids' Brains," by Hannah Furfaro, The Seattle Times, August 25, 2021

<sup>3</sup> "1 in 4 People with Anxiety, Depression Couldn't Get Care During Pandemic," by Robert Preidt, US News, July 7, 2021

<sup>4</sup> "Nobody has Openings': Mental Health Providers Struggle to Meet Demand," by Christina Caron, New York Times, February 17, 2021 and updated on August 23, 2021

far too long. Yet, this pair – anxiety and depression – seem to be spreading through our society at an alarming pace.

Writer and journalist, Johann Hari, sought to explore this very topic – and his own experiences with both – in the book he published just four months before the entire world shut down upon COVID’s arrival. It turns out that the pandemic accelerated and exacerbated trends that had long been headed in an unhealthy direction. In researching the book, he not only learned that anxiety and depression are two sides of the same coin – that everything that prompts an increase in one prompts an increase in the other – he managed to identify a number of scientifically-demonstrable contributors to them.

While genetics and brain chemistry are responsible for some people’s experiences of anxiety and depression, to be sure, Hari sees those as being far less consequential than we are often told. I’ll leave it to professionals with more than the Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology that I possess to debate his stance. I was much more interested in his assertion that depression and anxiety can also be caused by several varieties of – as his book is entitled – lost connections. Even those among us who are not experiencing full-blown symptoms might find that his teachings resonate with us and contribute to the languishing, the malaise, or the general unhappiness that pervades too many of our lives.

For example, Hari argues that many of us have lost our connection to the natural world. His explorations introduced him to Isabel Behncke, a primatologist who researches the behavior of great apes to learn more about their cousins...us! In her extended time living among bonobo chimpanzees, she never once observed any of them experience full-blown chronic depression, but such conditions can be seen all the time when these creatures are kept in zoos.<sup>5</sup> Why? Because they are mammals – primates - being deprived of their natural habitats...as are we when we spend far too many hours cooped up inside classrooms, offices, and our homes and not enough time in the settings our species evolved in for hundreds of millions of years now. We lose our connection to the outdoor world at our own peril. Researchers in Britain studied over 5,000 households, tracking the mental health outcomes of those who moved from cities to leafy green rural areas and vice versa. Those who moved away from green rural areas saw a big increase in depression, and those who moved out into nature experienced a big decrease in it.<sup>6</sup> Even a little green in an urban landscape contributes to better mental health outcomes.

So too, Hari writes, many of us have lost our connection to meaningful values. I’m five years his senior, but when the author reflects on the values with which he was inculcated by society as a child, his story sounds very similar to mine: A very steady diet of TV, chock full of advertisements about all the stuff that I needed to have if I was to be happy. The local shopping mall was a favorite spot for me and my friends, a shrine to the consumer goods we all wanted. I literally had a poster of the cartoon cat, Garfield,

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<sup>5</sup> Hari, Johann. “Disconnection from the Natural World.” *Lost Connections*, Apple iPad Books, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, p. 153

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154

hanging on my childhood bedroom wall in which Garfield stood poolside in front of a mansion, a Lamborghini, and a variety of luxury items. The poster read, “The one who ends up with the most toys wins.” I got that poster from my school’s Scholastic Book Fair.

These junk values that our society fed to me as a child continue to get hurled at us with ever-increasing ferocity. As Hari explains, we are moved as humans both by intrinsic and extrinsic motives. Intrinsic motives are things you do just because you love to do them and for no other reason, like children running through sprinklers, or the musician whose soul is fed by her music. Extrinsic motives, on the other hand, “are the things you do not because you actually want to do them, but because you’ll get something in return – whether it’s money, or admiration...or superior status.” Psychologist and author, Tim Kasser, conducted research to find out – does achieving these extrinsic goals make you happier? Spoiler alert: it doesn’t. Hari summarizes his findings like this: “People who achieved their extrinsic goals didn’t experience *any* increase in day-to-day happiness – none. They spent a huge amount of energy chasing these goals, but when they fulfilled them, they felt the same as they had at the start.”<sup>7</sup> Sound or feel familiar to anyone?

Perhaps most dramatically exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic, are our lost connections to other people. It was already a year ago that Rabbi Julie taught us about the extraordinary toll that loneliness has taken on all of us during our months of quarantined isolation. For many of us, a halting and stilted return to pre-pandemic life has meant that we remain largely disconnected from the rich tapestry of in-person relationships we once enjoyed. But disconnection from other people has been on the rise in our society for decades. Robert Putnam was already teaching us about the disintegration of civic organizations, faith communities, and bowling leagues more than 20 years ago.<sup>8</sup>

As our engagement with such groups has waned, so has the interweaving of our life stories with others’ and the feelings of companionship and belonging that come with that. Our lives have become more individual, more privatized, more secluded, and we feel it.

A neuroscientist named John Cacioppo researched the physical impact of loneliness on our bodies by measuring people’s heart rates and stress levels throughout their days’ experiences. “Becoming acutely lonely, the experiment found, was as stressful as experiencing a physical attack.”<sup>9</sup> This response is baked into our biological origins as well – we are pack animals, meant to live in tribes for survival. In ancient days – and through much of human history – being separated from the pack put you in terrible danger. Our feelings of loneliness are a physiological response telling us to get back to our community as quickly as possible. Our Jewish ancestors understood this keenly. Not only does God declare that it is not good for the human to be alone almost

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 116

<sup>8</sup> Bowling Alone by Robert Putnam, Simon and Schuster, January 1, 2000

<sup>9</sup> Hari, Johann. “Disconnection from the Natural World.” *Lost Connections*, Apple iPad Books, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, p. 90

immediately upon creating the first one of us, but, arguably, the worst punishment one could receive in the Torah was *cherem* – being cast into exile from the tribe.

Hari goes into detail about other forms of disconnection that are contributing to the spikes in anxiety and depression in our world: disconnection from childhood trauma, from meaningful work, from status and respect, and, sadly, from a hopeful or secure future. Taken together, they paint a powerful portrait of our society and of our very lives which ought to stop us in our tracks. Now, you may be thinking to yourselves, “Well, I wasn’t particularly anxious before you started speaking tonight, Rabbi Todd, but I sure as heck am now!” I won’t leave you there, I promise.

Because – while there is not one magical answer to decreasing our nation’s depression, anxiety, or general unhappiness – it turns out that there are a number of steps we can all be taking to mitigate against their presence in our lives. If a variety of profound disconnections are causing the ruptures in our psychological and emotional worlds, it is, perhaps, not surprising, that our paths to healing are through reconnection. As I considered this possibility, it became abundantly clear to me that our Temple Beth Shalom is poised incredibly well to be a catalyst for these reconnections within our community in countless ways.

If our disconnection from the natural world is contributing to our malaise, then let’s mindfully, consciously, and purposefully reconnect with it. It right-sizes our problems when we stare out at a vast landscape. ‘It’s something larger than yourself,’ Isabel Behncke teaches. “There’s something very deeply, animally healthy in that sensation. People love it when it occurs—its brief, fleeting moments.’ And this helps you see the deeper and wider ways in which you are connected to everything around you.”<sup>10</sup>

Our Jewish tradition has intuitively understood that reality ever since the first humans in Genesis were created part and parcel with the rest of the natural world. We have always been inextricably intertwined with it. Perhaps it’s time for our TBS community to explore new ways to engage one another and the great outdoors within and beyond our Garden Club, our Shabbat hikes, Brotherhood, Sisterhood, and teen retreats, our family camp or outdoor learning programs. What better time to experiment with time together outside than during COVID when heading out there brings added safety for everyone involved?

And, if the junk values of only striving to meet our extrinsic needs – seeking approval, status, or stuff in order to impact how others see us – aren’t making us happier, then we can reconnect with our intrinsic values that we know bring us contentment and joy. Hari tells the story of one man who started out giving seminars to teens on finance but wound up leading group discussions for the teens and their parents about how their spending reflected their values. “He asked people to draw up a list of their intrinsic values—the things they thought were important, as an end in themselves and not

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 158

because of what you get out of it. Then he asked: How would you live differently if you acted on these other values?"<sup>11</sup> Well, how would you?

These groups continued to meet regularly, and the participants held one another accountable to the commitments they'd made to live by these highest-order values...and it worked. The researcher realized that there just aren't spaces in society anymore in which people can have these meaningful conversations, clarify their values, and support one another in living them. Why couldn't those conversations be happening here, in our TBS community?

Not only are we already here to support one another, but our community is built upon millennia of Jewish teachings on those intrinsic values that most feed our souls...friendship, honesty, righteousness, lovingkindness, generosity, personal growth, creativity, artistry, family, community, and so many more. Why not speak these values out loud in the place we're already practiced in doing so: the setting where we bless our children, where we bless the memories of our loved ones, and bless one another on our lives' milestones?

And if we are more disconnected from other people than at any time in recent history, why not purposefully make this a year of reconnecting with one another in ways proven to actually life our spirits? Researchers wanted to know what happens if individuals deliberately try to become happier, and they discovered that you can make yourself happier if you live in Russia, Japan, or Taiwan, but not if you live in the United States.

That's because the culture in the US compels us to see the individual over the collective. So, in the U.S. if you want to pursue happiness, you'll likely pursue it for yourself, because that's how we're taught this works...and it won't take. Hari argues, "But if you consciously pursue happiness in Russia or Japan or China, you do something quite different. You try to make things better for your group—for the people around you. That's what you think happiness means, so it seems obvious to you. These are fundamentally conflicting visions of what it means to become happier. And it turns out...our Western version of happiness doesn't actually work—whereas the collectivist vision of happiness does."<sup>12</sup>

Here too, our Jewish tradition has given us a head start...we are an eastern faith situated in the western world, and our ancestors could only envision life lived within a collective that nurtures, guides, corrects, and sustains us. To increase one's own wellbeing is to increase the wellbeing of the group. That's why we need a minyan for prayer services. And that's why – as much as I love that our live-stream technology is allowing us to pray remotely and stay safe from COVID one more year, my most heartfelt prayer this Yom Kippur is that almost all of you are back with us in person for our High Holy Days next year. This is good, but it's not the same. I need to be with you. We need to be together. Because we can't make ourselves fully happy on our own, but we can bring joy back into our lives when we're there with and for others.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 262

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 220

Hari concludes his work by imagining an opportunity to go back and speak to his younger self, at the outset of his own journey through anxiety and depression. “This is what I would want to tell my teenage self,” he writes. “You have to turn now to all the other wounded people around you, and find a way to connect with them, and build a home with these people—a place where you are bonded to one another and find meaning in your lives together. We have been tribe-less and disconnected for so long now. It’s time for us all to come home.”

Home, I hope, in 5782, to renewed joy, to meaningful values, to our natural surroundings, to lives intertwined with others, and home to our Beth – our *Beit Shalom*...our home where – together - we can reconnect and strive to be whole once again.