

The Answer to our Loneliness

Rabbi Philip R. Ohriner
Rosh Hashanah, Day 2, 5775

This summer I toured the Winchester Mystery House for the first time. I know, I don't get out much! This San Jose National landmark was built by the late Sarah Winchester, wife and heir to the Winchester Rifle fortune. After losing her only child in 1866 and her husband in 1881, Sarah Winchester was lost. Feeling that her family was cursed, she sought the advice of a spiritual medium who told her to head West and build a house. But the medium went on. Sarah must never complete it, for if she did, she would die. And Sarah listened. She broke ties with her friends and family in Connecticut and began work on a house that, at the time of her death in 1922, contained 2,000 doors, 10,000 windows, 47 stairways, 13 bathrooms, and 6 kitchens. Sadly, Sarah came to believe that the house was haunted by the spirits she sought to escape by leaving Connecticut. And today, so the website says, visitors come from all over the world to experience its ghoulish eeriness.

For those of you who have visited the house, you know it is quite extraordinary! Walking through the mansion, the guide told us about the construction, Sarah's forward-thinking architectural choices, as well as her eccentric, private nature. And all I kept thinking as I walked through the house was how lonely this poor woman must have been, how devastated she must have been after losing her daughter and her husband, and the loneliness she must have felt during her time in California. 162 original acres of isolation. Seven stories of stultifying solitude. 160 rooms and 47 fireplaces that never welcomed a single guest while Sarah was still living. For more than 40 years, Sarah Winchester incarcerated herself in an expanding project of sorrow, pain, and loneliness that grew with every new staircase to nowhere.

As I walked through the mansion, I felt its eeriness, its coldness, its emptiness, and I came to the same conclusion reached by so many of the mansion's visitors, testified

to be the house's website. The place is haunted, but not by ghosts or goblins. It is haunted by loneliness. And as I exited the house I felt as though I was gasping for air, I felt myself become visible, once again, I felt seen. Somehow, just being in that house, thinking of Sarah Winchester made me feel lonely.

In their groundbreaking work entitled *Loneliness*, John Cacioppo and William Patrick begin with an anecdote of a 56 year-old woman who had been divorced for years and had grappled with loneliness her entire life. She writes that when she was still married she once told a friend that she was lonely. In that moment, her friend responded with three accurate but misguided words "but you're married." Through their research, Cacioppo and Patrick scientifically explain a truth about loneliness that many of us already know through our own life experience. Loneliness is not a physical state of being, but an emotional one. As a rabbi, I spend significant time alone (studying, writing sermons, preparing for classes), and while I don't always look forward to those elements of my work, being an extrovert, I never feel lonely when engaging in them.

Leaving the Winchester Mystery House I felt a loneliness that I have only felt in a handful of moments throughout my life. Thinking of Sarah Winchester and preparing for this sermon helped me realize an important truth. Loneliness isn't about being alone, it is about feeling alone, that intense feeling of isolation, of disconnection, of emptiness, of irrelevance.

Almost everyone experiences pangs of loneliness at certain times in their lives. Sometimes our loneliness is brief and superficial, but our loneliness can also be acute and severe. When a loved one dies, when we fall ill, when we lose our job, these are moments in life in which the pangs of loneliness and isolation can be deep and painful. As I look around our holy community this morning, gathered together with family, friends, and fellow congregants at their side, I know that so many of us

are feeling lonely. In fact, if there there are 800 of us present here today, current research tell us that 160 of us are feeling sufficiently isolated right now for it to be a major source of unhappiness in our lives. And at least some of us feel such an intensity of consistent, existential loneliness that it starts to change everything about us, from our personality to the choices we make day-to-day, the kind of loneliness I imagine Sarah Winchester felt.

Since inception Judaism has made loneliness one of its primary concerns. In fact, loneliness is identified by the Torah as the very first negative by-product of creation. God creates light, land, and seas and deems them “*tov*”, good. Then God creates vegetation, followed by the sun, the moon, and the stars. God populates the seas and sky with fish and birds, and the land with animals, all called, “*tov*”. Finally, God creates humankind and calls humanity “*tov meod*”, very good. But after resting on Shabbat, God notices something about the first human being. Adam is not only alone, but lonely. And God says: “*lo tov heyot ha’adam l’vado*” “It isn’t good for human beings to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Even before humanity has a chance to leave its mark on creation, both for the better and its detriment, God is bothered by the inherent possibility of loneliness.

As it turns out, God’s right to worry about our loneliness. As Cacioppo and Patrick point out, what makes loneliness especially insidious is that it contains a catch-22: Real relief from loneliness requires the cooperation of at least one other person, and yet the more chronic our loneliness becomes, the less equipped we are to entice such cooperation. So we treat the pain through shopping, or burying ourselves at the bottom of a quart of ice cream or a bottle, or engaging in unwise sexual encounters.¹ Even beyond the destructive palliative measures, loneliness itself can put our health at risk. It turns out that loneliness creates a subtle but persistent

¹ Caccioppo, 34.

difference in cardiovascular function and disrupts key cellular processes deep within the body. Lonely adults get less efficient and restorative sleep and experience more divorce, more run-ins with neighbors, and more estrangement from family. In short, loneliness not only makes us miserable, it can also make us sick.²

Which brings us back to Sarah Winchester.

I wonder what would have happened to Sarah if she had invited her remaining family or members of the community to visit her amazing architectural accomplishment. What might have happened if Sarah, a religious woman, had turned to scripture in helping her overcome her loneliness? She wouldn't have to read very far to find God's response to loneliness. Right after identifying the inherent problem, "*lo tov heyot ha'adam l'vado*" (it isn't good for human beings to be alone) God provides the antidote "*E'eseh lo ezer k'negdo*" (I will make for him a helpmate). I'll create another human being so that they can be there for one another. I'll populate a world full of other people who might stand with Adam in his solitude, in the pain that can come through grappling with the vicissitudes of life. I'll provide a partner, a friend, a colleague, a relative, a rabbi, a teacher who will let Adam know through presence and perhaps even word that he's not alone. And because God, in God's infinite wisdom decided that Adam should not be alone, you are not alone and I am not alone. We don't have to be lonely. We were created to live in relationship, to be present for one another, to create community, not just for the sake of the other, but for our own sake, as well.

My colleague, Rabbi Sharon Brous, offers a teaching on a Mishnah I'd like to share with you. In Mishnah Middot, in the midst of a discussion regarding the layout of the

² Cacioppo et al., "Lonely traits and concomitant physiological processes." *Psychology and Aging* 21 (2006):152-164.

Temple Mount in Jerusalem, we find a discussion of the route Israelites would take as they filed into the courtyard of the Temple. Any time you wanted to feel more strongly connected to the Divine Presence you would enter the Temple Mount courtyard and circle from right to left. Think of the Mishnah like a traffic sign. All of those pilgrims trying to cram in. It was prudent to have traffic directions! But then the Mishnah teaches us something extraordinary. “When someone enters to whom something awful happened, that person enters from the same doorway, but she starts to circle in the opposite direction. Instead of circling right to left, she circles from left to right. Every step, against the grain. And every single person who passes her is obligated to stop and ask, ‘Mah lakh’? (What’s going on with you)? And this person, surrounded by people and yet totally alone has to answer:

My mother died. Made it two years longer than anyone expected, but the cancer was just too aggressive.

Another follows behind her a moment later, also walking against the masses of humanity.

I lost my sister, she says. My best friend in the world. Nobody ever understood me like she did. Nobody ever will.

My father is in hospice, says the next. I just want him to be able to live his final days in dignity and without suffering.

My college roommate killed himself. I had no idea he was in so much pain.

My husband left. I had no idea.

Our son is sick. We are so scared.

And those who walk from the right to the left – every single one of them – must stop.

They must make sure that the *avelim* (the mourners) and the *holim* (the sick ones) and the *shvurei lev* (brokenhearted) are all seen. “May God bring you comfort,” they say. “May you feel the presence of this holy community, and know that you are not alone.”

As Rabbi Brous points out, the Rabbis of the mishnah constructed a system of ritual engagement built on a profound psychological insight: when we suffer loss, when our hearts break with worry for someone standing between life and death, when we get the diagnosis, it often feels like the whole world is moving in one direction and we’re moving in another.

And in that moment, when all we want to do is go home and sit in our isolation, we’re called to show up and voice our struggle. And the community is called to see us, and offer comfort.... Why?... Because part of what it means to be awake as a human being is to realize that today you walk from left to right. Tomorrow it’s me. I hold you today; tomorrow you will hold me.”³

Every week at Shabbat morning services I try to remind us all that there are those in our community whose trajectory through life has just been thrown completely off course. Every week there are new names of community members who feel like they are swimming upstream through a sea of people who don’t understand, who don’t know what it feels like. Each week, I try to elevate our consciousness to those who are feeling a depth of loneliness they never knew existed. We seek to remind ourselves of our responsibility to look at the healing list and pick up the phone or make a house call to say “Mah lakh, What’s going on with you?”. Each Shabbat we pray for healing antiphonally, in call-and-response, acknowledging the sacred power within each of us to be present for another in their time of loneliness, as they walk from left to right, against the grain. We seek to remind ourselves of the sacred

³ Rabbi Sharon Brous, “The Amen Effect,” <http://www.ikar-la.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Rabbi-Sharon-Brous-Kol-Nidre-Sermon-the-AMEN-effect-9-13-20131.pdf>

benefit that comes from participating in holy community, the truth forthrightly shared by Rabbi Brous. In a sacred community “I hold you today, tomorrow you will hold me.”

Of course, this only works when we know you are feeling lonely, when you let someone know you are in the hospital, or lost a friend, or when you are at the end of your rope and just need someone to take the kids for two hours so that you can have an adult conversation. Overcoming loneliness entails entering into a sacred space and voicing your need, in being part of community.

It is almost tragically ironic that Sarah Winchester built her memorial of isolation and loneliness in what would become Silicon Valley. Decades ago, Robert Putnam demonstrated that nationally, Silicon Valley is second-to-last when it comes to social connectivity and social capital. We are in woefully short supply of the glue that brings us together and makes us feel a part of something larger than ourselves. In American culture today we are taught to mind our own business. “Live and let live,” a significant component of our American social contract, says that I’ll leave you alone if you leave me alone. That’s why this community and the other communities of faith and civic organizations are so vital to Silicon Valley. We provide a place where you can find an *ezer k’negdo*, another human being who can be there with you in your loneliness, holding your hand, sharing in your tears, or simply sitting by your side when words and gestures could never be enough.

I see it every single day. I read it in emails. I hear it in voicemails left on my phone. Every day I am blessed to witness CBD members relieving each other’s sense of loneliness. Just this year I saw the power of sacred relationship at the funeral of a 90-year-old woman. Her husband was resolute in keeping it together emotionally from the moment his beloved died. Even in sharing her life story and their shared lives with me he shed not a single tear. He was able to maintain his stoicism all

through the funeral intake and the meeting with the mortuary. And then, at the funeral, the husband's CBD pew mate for over 60 years who had also lost his wife walked over and simply put his hand on top of the husband's hand. Even today, I have no words for the sacred power of that moment—the moment when a desperately grieving man, feeling more lonely than he ever imagined possible, allowed someone to reach out, across the grain, and comfort him.

I witnessed it this past month with a congregant who had a complication after giving birth to her third child that precluded her from walking on her own and more importantly, prevented her from carrying any of her three kids for almost a month post-partum. I visited them in the hospital a couple of days after the baby was born and it was clear that she and her amazing husband were feeling alone. How were they going to manage it all? Even with neighbors and bubbe coming for a week, they were going to need weeks of additional support. In that moment as I held her beautiful baby boy and told her that her community would be present for her and her family, that they weren't alone, I watched the tears of concern transform into tears of relief. And for weeks our community provided meals for them. Some of us cooked the meals, others delivered the meals, and all of us assuaged the loneliness of a family in need of support. This strong, recovering mama sent me an email last week: "We wanted to let you know that the CBD community has been so helpful and generous in making food for us. We have received so many meals, and it has meant so much to us. It has really made our lives easier at a difficult time, and having this support from the community has also made us feel like there are people here who care about us."

I could spend the rest of the morning sharing stories from just the past year of 5774 alone. The powerful presence we provide one another at shiva minyanim, and for those saying kaddish at our daily minyan, the friendly visitors from *hiddur zaken* who spend time with our elderly and homebound, the women who sew burial

shrouds for our congregants so that even in death we seek to be present for one another, the beautiful way in which so many of our congregants, many of whom struggle with their own loneliness pangs, keep an eye out on Shabbat morning for that one man or woman who is circling the opposite direction so they can ask them in sincerity and with compassion, “Mah Lakh”? “What’s going on with you?”

I hold you today, tomorrow you’ll hold me. This month I circle against the grain, next month it might be you. None of us can escape loneliness our entire lives and so many of us are experiencing it right now. It seems that science and Judaism agree—loneliness is one of those elements of life that simply make us human. We can’t do it alone. We aren’t designed that way. I wish Sarah Winchester could have realized that. I wish she had spoken to her minister instead of her medium, so that someone might have reached out to her and she, in turn, might have reciprocated. What might Sarah Winchester have accomplished with her immense wealth? Whose loneliness might she have mitigated?

The truth is that the best way to emerge from loneliness, whether it is fleeting or chronic is to follow the advice of Cacioppo and Parker. “What is required” they write, “is to step outside the pain of your own situation long enough to feed others. Real change begins with doing.” In other words, the antidote to our own loneliness lies in seeking to assuage that same feeling in others.

As Jews, when we speak of ourselves as a people who privilege deed before creed, action over belief, mitzvah over theology, this is what we mean. As Rabbi Nancy Flam puts it, Judaism is an “in your face” religion. So, do your own health and well-being a favor, as well as the health and well-being of those sitting next to you and in front of you and fifteen rows back, let 5775 be a year in which we work towards healing each other’s loneliness and our own. *Lo tov heyot ha’adam l’vado* — It isn’t good for human beings to be alone. *E’eseh lo ezer k’negdo*—so God made each of us

to be there for one another. When there is a call to provide meals through chevrat chesed, volunteer. When there is a shivah minyan, show up, even if you didn't know the person! When there is an aufruf, or a baby naming, or a bat mitzvah, make a point of being there. Join us on the second or fourth shabbatot of the month to celebrate your birthday or an anniversary, dance and sing each week at our ruakh rally. Allow yourself to heal and be healed. Join us in the dance of those moving right to left with those moving left to right in the isolation and impoverishment of loneliness. Ask after one another in turn, "mah lakh, what's going on with you". "Mah lakh". It is the question I wish I could have asked Sarah Winchester. It is the question we all need to ask and be asked at one time or another. "Mah lakh" is the answer to our loneliness. Because it isn't good for us to be alone in the world. We need each other.