

I woke again. I had not closed the curtains and light was coming in, moonlight. The word connotes romance. I took one of my hands in the other, tried to imagine what it would feel like if it was another person's hand holding mine. There have been times when I felt that I might die of loneliness. People sometimes say they might die of boredom, that they're dying for a cup of tea, but for me, dying of loneliness is not hyperbole. When I feel that, my head drops and my shoulders slump and I ache, I physically ache, for human contact - I truly feel that I might tumble to the ground and pass away if someone doesn't hold me, touch me. I don't mean a lover - this recent madness aside, I had long since given up on any notion that another person might love me that way - but simply as a human being. The scalp massage at the hairdressers, the flu jab I had last winter - the only time I experience touch is from people whom I am paying, and they are almost always wearing disposable gloves at the time. I'm merely stating the facts. People don't like these facts, but I can't help that. If someone asks how you are, you are meant to say FINE. You are not meant to say that you cried yourself to sleep last night because you hadn't spoken to another person for two consecutive days. FINE is what you say.¹

This passage is from the novel *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman. I read the book back in July on vacation, and this passage tore at my heart. It was the inspiration for this morning's sermon.

¹ *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman, [copyright Penguin Books, New York, NY. 2018], pgs. 226-227.

The High Holy Days are normally a time for togetherness, a time when we reconnect with ourselves and with others in our lives. Whether that is through sending greeting cards, picking up the phone after too long of a break or running into those we care about at services. Holidays are a time for togetherness and this year our togetherness looks very different. It is painful to read the words of our service, to sing the words of our liturgy in our sanctuary without you here with me. Painful because I cannot see your faces, hear your voices, or reach out a hand in friendship, compassion, or joy.

Our tradition, our faith, believes that people should be together in community. The tradition of a minyan, ten Jewish adults, a requirement for many prayers is just one example. The requirements of caring for the sick, celebrating at weddings, and seeking out a teacher for ourselves - for even learning should not be done alone - are others.

When I mentioned to some colleagues that I wanted to speak about loneliness, I was unsurprised that others were thinking about the topic too. Article after article, story after story, since March have drawn our attention to the impact loneliness has on our lives. But, this is not something new, rather it is something we as people have been struggling with for generations.

In his book, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the 19th Surgeon General of the United States, summarizes some of the newest research on loneliness in America and around the world.

According to a 2018 report by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 22 percent of all adults in the US say they often or always feel lonely or socially isolated. That's well over fifty-five million people - far more than the number of adult cigarette smokers and nearly double the number of people who have diabetes. A 2018 AARP study using the rigorously validated UCLA loneliness scale found that one in three American adults over the age of forty-five are lonely. And in a 2018 national survey by the US health insurer Cigna, one-fifth of respondents said they rarely or never feel close to people.²

I see these statistics every single day. They are not just numbers but individuals in our congregation, in our community, and in our world. Loneliness is dangerous, and as a congregation we have a responsibility to those both in our congregation and in our larger community.

One of the ways I chose to get involved when I came to TBI was to accept the invitation to join the Board at Friendship Village. For those who do not know, Friendship Village is a Senior Living Community - everything from independent living to memory care, as well as a rehabilitation facility. Being on their Board has given me an insider's point of view on many things, but it has truly been eye opening during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because, just like so many other senior living communities, Friendship Village had to lockdown their campus. Residents were confined to their living quarters, the dining hall, salon, recreation centers, all were shut down. The staff talked constantly, as many have across the country, that the residents were depressed, sick, and lonely. These are many of the reasons that the staff have worked

² *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* by Vivek H. Murthy, MD [copyright HarperCollins, New York, NY. 2020], pg 10.

closely with both local and State health officials to find safe ways of reopening some of the previously closed areas - including appointments to browse the on-site library. The loneliness felt by those in senior living facilities, is unsurprising, it is a clear example of the importance of social connection in our lives. Our mental and physical wellbeing is connected, we struggle if one or the other is not being cared for properly.

Our tradition knows this, for we are taught as early as Genesis 2:18 “And Adonai said: 'It is not good that the *adam*, person, should be alone; I will make the *adam*, person, a partner.” As early as our creation, God saw that we were not meant to be alone, that we were meant to have partners, family, friends, in our lives.

Jewish tradition is concerned with the health and well-being of the mind too. The great scholar, teacher, and physician, Maimonides, who lived in the twelfth century, wrote:

“When one is overpowered by imagination, prolonged meditation and avoidance of social contact, which he never exhibited before, or when one avoids pleasant experiences which were in him before, the physician should do nothing before he improves the soul by removing the extreme emotions.”

A physician needs to care for a patient’s mental well being and physical well being. Our prayer for healing, *Mi SHEbeirach*, also acknowledges this with the inclusion of the words *r’fuat hanefesh ur’fuat haguf*, a healing of the soul and the body. Indeed, Judaism acknowledges a distinction between mental and physical health, but our tradition treats them on an equal plane,

recognizing that both a healthy body and a healthy mind are necessary for human beings to be complete.³

It is important during a discussion about mental well being and loneliness to clarify the difference between loneliness and solitude. Solitude is the act of being alone. Loneliness is the negative state, marked by a feeling of isolation.

Murthy writes in *Together*: “When we feel lonely, we’re unhappy and long to escape the emotional pain. Solitude, by contrast, is a state of peaceful aloneness or voluntary isolation.”⁴ Many of us enjoy solitude, those minutes or hours where we can just be - sometimes in nature, sometimes with a good book. Many introverts feel a need for solitude in order to recharge their batteries, the opposite of extroverts who desire the energy of others to recharge themselves.

Loneliness, isolation, is a state where there is no returning to others. No one to call with the good news, no one to help with the bad. Loneliness is viewed as a major cause in the deaths of so many Black Americans in Chicago in 1995 during the heatwave, while Latinx citizens, in the same or worse socio-economic conditions did not. Research showed that the Black citizens had been forgotten, people did not know their neighbors, they did not know who to look out for. While the Latinx citizens all knew one another and looked out for each other. This led to less death because people cared.⁵

³ <https://rac.org/jewish-values-and-mental-health>

⁴ *Together*, pg 9.

⁵ *Together*, pg. 239

The paradox of loneliness is that just when we should be reaching out, we close ourselves off even more because we worry about the pain of rejection. We worry about being a burden. We worry that people will not care. Why would a stranger care? Why would a family member across the country care? Why would our neighbor care? We care because we are human. A research study conducted by University of Chicago psychologist Dr. Nicholas Epley and his associate Dr. Juliana Schroeder selected three groups of people who commuted on public transportation. One group was instructed to talk to a stranger on their commute, another group was instructed to not talk to anyone, and the third group were given no instructions. Though we believe strangers, especially, do not want to be bothered the study showed the opposite. Murthy discussing the research summarized as follows: “Compared to the silent group and the one that got no instructions, the conversation group enjoyed their commute *more*. What’s more, extroverts and introverts alike enjoyed their conversations with strangers.”⁶

As an introvert I can say that speaking to strangers is generally uncomfortable for me but at the same time I find hearing people’s stories to be incredibly interesting. I am Facebook friends with a member of the US military who I met on a plane and had a great conversation with. One of my best friends in the world, and a prior roommate, and I only met because we had to find a roommate in order to afford rent in Jerusalem. Each one of you, who have welcomed me into this community, into your homes, and into your lives have done so with open arms. It is hard to be the stranger, and our tradition teaches us to treat the stranger as one of us.

Though loneliness is an epidemic, and it is growing because of COVID-19, I want you to know that your TBI community is here for you. We want you to be involved in whatever way speaks to

⁶ *Together*, pg. 237

you. Services on Fridays and Saturdays, Schmooze time, Getting out in nature, Book Club - and anything else you might be inclined to start. Movie club? TV club? Do you have a hobby that you'd like to share? I'm always looking for new things of interest to speak and teach about. I taught about beer and Judaism last year because a congregant asked me why we always have wine for ritual occasions and not beer. Do you have a question about our tradition? I would love to hear it. We might not be able to gather in groups in person easily, but there are still ways to bring our community together and to help one another keep loneliness at bay.

This Rosh Hashanah, this new year, may each of us be inscribed in the Book of Life for a year of health, togetherness and peace.