

Rabbi Scott Goldberg
Togetherness instead of Loneliness

Yom Kippur Morning Family Service D'var Torah 5784 - September 25, 2023

I cannot believe it's already fall. Yom Kippur is here. The school year is back in full-swing. We can already slightly feel the heat lifting. There is so much change going on.

I suppose many of us here have experienced some sort of change in the past year. I want a show of hands: Did anyone here start a new grade at school? Did anyone start at a *new school*? Did anyone move to a new *neighborhood*? How about: do you know someone in the past year, whether a friend or a family member, who moved farther away?

I am seeing that there is a lot of change going on. Change can be exciting: new opportunities to try new things, to meet new people, to make a difference... Change also has the potential to make us lonely sometimes--when change happens, we often spend less time with people we already know and love in place of newness, new friends and new opportunities.

Loneliness, to feel lonely at times, is part of the human experience. The beginning of our Torah tells the story of God's creation of the sun, the moon, the sky, the oceans, plants, animals of all kinds, and the first human. As Rabbi Chasen mentioned last night, something special happens after God creates the first human--God says, "*lo tov heyot ha'adam l'vado*, it is not good for a human to be alone [...]," and so God makes a second human so they can live together.¹ If God needed to intervene, that first human must have felt lonely.

Today, loneliness is all too common. Loneliness can be painful. And, we can address loneliness with ancient Jewish wisdom, with Yom Kippur being the perfect time to do something about it.

A few months ago, Vivek Murthy, the Surgeon General of the United States, published an article in the New York Times exposing just how common loneliness is in our country. When compared to a study from *five* years ago, suggesting that a staggering one out of every three Americans feels lonely,² Murthy provides a scary update: "[...] one out of every *two* Americans is experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. This includes introverts and extroverts, rich and poor, and younger and older Americans."³ Loneliness can be triggered by so many events: a change in school or job, a move within the city, a relocation to a new city altogether, health or

¹ Genesis 2:18

² AARP Study, 2018. <https://www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/info-2018/loneliness-survey.html>

³ Vivek H. Murthy, "Surgeon General: We Have Become a Lonely Nation. It's Time to Fix That.," The New York Times, 2023

financial difficulties, or reverberances from “a once-in-a-century pandemic.”⁴ Loneliness is so common, it’s affecting our entire country as a whole: students are not performing as well in school, adults are less likely to vote, and we are less willing to listen to someone who holds a different opinion, which makes it more difficult to solve problems too big for any of us to solve on our own--like climate change, gun violence, or the LA housing crisis.⁵

Social isolation is more than just widespread--it makes us feel anxious and sad. Even worse, because we don’t often share about their challenges feeling isolated due to shame or embarrassment, loneliness becomes even *further* unaddressed.

Many of us have experienced change in the past year. For us, there may have come a time when we personally have felt distanced from friends. If not us, then the data suggest that maybe the person sitting next to us.

Our Torah teaches how we can combat loneliness through an ancient Yom Kippur ritual: seven days before Yom Kippur, the High Priest is put into isolation until Yom Kippur.⁶ After seven days of solitude, the High Priest travels to the great Temple in the city of Jerusalem and enters the Holy of Holies, the central section of the Temple meant for only the High Priest, still alone. The High Priest brings a sacrifice as commanded by God. The first thing the High Priest sees upon entering? A golden slate to hold the sacrifice, with two *cherubim*, golden animal-like statues, affixed at each end, *facing one another*.⁷ After seven days of utter isolation, the High Priest is staring at two beings that are directly face-to-face, together.

One powerful response to isolation: *togetherness*.

There is so much that we can do to seek togetherness in our daily lives:

- If you are watching a movie, perhaps watch with a friend or family member.
- If you are gaming online, maybe game in-person once a month.
- If you have a phone call, invite a walk instead.

At Leo Baeck Temple, there are many ways we can be together:

- Religious school, community retreats and religious school retreats at Brandeis-Bardin, LBT youth group
- Parents can join a Bubble Up group, do Community Organizing work, attend the Shabbat morning Minyan
- And of course there is Yom Limmud and Yom Limmud Camp and Religious School Shabbats

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mishnah Yoma 1:1

⁷ Adapted from Exodus 25:19, Leviticus 16:1-2, Ezekiel 10:14, and Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra 99a

Today, loneliness is prevalent, and it can feel bad. At the same time, with the guidance of our ancient Yom Kippur ritual, we have the answer to solve it: two golden cherubim, looking into each others' eyes, saying: "we are all united in this world, in this community--and it is our duty to ensure that all of us feel less alone by dwelling together."

As our Talmud blesses us: בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת יוֹשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים
Blessed is Adonai our God, the God of Israel, who dwells between the cherubim.⁸ In this new year of 5784, like the cherubim, may, too, we dwell together.

⁸ Talmud Bavli, Brachot 49b