

The Faith to be Alone and not Lonely

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I celebrated my 50th birthday by being alone.

After the family celebration and the joy of community, I took some time by myself. I went on a solo cycling trip last November, two months after my birthday.

I had never done anything like it.

In the airport on the way I found a book to read *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway. I had first read it thirty years earlier, before marriage, before kids, before being a rabbi. It was as if it were meant to be.

For five days, I biked during the day under the sun and, at night, read Hemingway whose protagonist was always in the rain. I reflected on my life, the clear skies and the storms, and the passage of time.

I was grateful. I felt privileged to have that time alone and thankful for my life, my family, and my community.

Four months later, a lifetime later, in March of this year, the word alone meant something completely different. Quarantine caused so many to be alone not by choice. But it was not a new challenge; it just became epidemic. So many people have not just been alone but lonely for many years.

Alone is a mathematical number. Loneliness is existential. And it is serious.

At the very beginning, in Genesis, God says: לֹא־טוֹב הָיְוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ “It is not good for us to be alone.” (Gen 2:18)

The ultimate story in the Talmud about loneliness concerns a man called Choni HaMaagal, Choni the Circlemaker. The Talmud tells us that Choni fell asleep one night and did not wake up for 70 years. When he did and looked around, he discovered that everyone he had ever known was gone. He was utterly abandoned. His pain is so intense that he prays for death to escape his intolerable loneliness. He says: “*O chevruta, o metuta*: Give me companionship or give me death.”

COVID has upturned everything in our lives, but it is not the first time we have faced what many call the most pervasive public health issue of our time, loneliness. I remember being a teenager when my rabbi John Friedman spoke about loneliness on the High Holy Days and I didn't understand why this would be a topic of an entire sermon. Now I do.

Standing here alone I am haunted by the Beatles' lyrics:

Father McKenzie

Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear

No one comes near...

Eleanor Rigby
Died in the church and was buried along with her name
Nobody came...

All the lonely people. Where do they all come from?

Just a couple years ago, the United Kingdom appointed a governmental Minister of Loneliness to address the issue¹.

Tracey Crouch was that Minister of Loneliness. She said: “Nobody should feel alone or be left with no one to turn to. Loneliness is a serious issue that affects people of all ages and backgrounds, and it is right that we tackle it head on. Our Strategy sets out a powerful vision for addressing this generational challenge. By bringing together health services, businesses, local authorities, charities and community groups we will raise awareness of loneliness and help people build connections to lead happier and healthier lives.”

On our side of the pond, America’s Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy went on a listening tour around the country after he left office in 2017. What he heard as the number one issue that plagued people across socio-economic status and across race, gender, and age, was loneliness. His book, published this Spring, was prescient. It is called: “Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World”. Dr. Murthy said in an interview in May: “We have the opportunity to use this moment to recenter our lives on people. And if we do that, then I believe we can come out of this pandemic more connected, more fulfilled and more resilient than before the pandemic began.”² To be clear: this is not only about people living on their own. Loneliness is not necessarily about isolation.

It is a subjective feeling that one does not have the social connections needed³. That can be any one of us. It means missing community. Our need for other people is very individual and related to how introverted or extroverted we happen to be among many factors. What is universal is that we don’t often talk about whether we are lonely even after the death of a spouse, even if never married. Many feel ashamed to admit it.

Like any book that names something people are longing to discuss, Dr. Murthy has opened the floodgates. On a radio program, one caller talked about her daughter just home from college. Her quivering voice struggled to hold back the tears. Her daughter loved being with friends, but she started realizing that all her relationships were one sided.

No one asked about her and she confided to her mom that she was lonely and didn’t know what to do. The next caller was a middle-aged man whose best friend had died from cancer ten years before and he hadn’t talked to anyone about how hard it was to find a good male friend. Some callers talked about the loneliness that came after a painful loss. Others talked about how

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy#:~:text=Minister%20for%20Loneliness%2C%20Tracey%20Crouch,for%20addressing%20this%20generational%20challenge>

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/11/853308193/in-together-former-surgeon-general-writes-about-importance-of-human-connection>

³ “Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World,” p. 8.

Loneliness caused further pain through substance misuse and addiction. Many reflected that loneliness was sometimes hard to recognize in loved ones. Loneliness can masquerade as anger, sadness, or alienation. All talked about how it affects physical health.

This is where we come in. The word congregation comes from the Latin for a place where people gather. Same with the Greek word synagogue and the Hebrew Bet Kneset. Synagogues came to be not so much for people to find God who is everywhere, but for Jews to find each other. לֹא־טוֹב הַיּוֹת הָאֲדָמָה לְבַדָּהּ “It is not good for us to be alone.” (Gen 2:18)

During the pandemic we have tried our best to counter physical distancing with social connection, but we need to redouble our efforts to reach out to anyone feeling lonely. This outreach cannot only be by clergy, nor by a select group of congregants or staff, but by each one of us as one caring community.

And for ourselves, we need to try to counter our loneliness by finding strength even when alone.

The Rabbi of Sassov urged: A human being who does not have an hour for oneself each day is not a human being. When we are alone, we can discover our inner strength. We can deepen our spirit. We can reflect, evaluate, meditate, and be renewed.

Some of the most important moments in the Torah occur in solitude. Hagar cries out to God alone in her despair and saves her son and an entire people.

Jacob prays alone on his journey to his family’s homeland and then wrestles with an angel after the text says, “Jacob was left alone.” Joseph matures in his solitude in the pit and in the dungeon. Moses, by himself in the Sinai Desert, discovers God. *Kol Dimama Dakah* – A still, small voice – alone strengthened and fortified Elijah. One voice representing all of us.

This is the ideal. Taking alone time to strengthen our spirit. We may need help from others when it is not one hour alone but all the hours. We also, no matter who we are, need our faith. Faith is not certainty about the future. It is the courage to live with uncertainty. It takes humility, not blind hope, to recognize that some things, perhaps many things, are out of our hands and we never know what change may be for the good.

When you lean into that awareness, that is *bitachon*, trust.

Bitachon is a mindset shift that pulls you away from ego and reliance on your efforts and recognizes that you are part of something much larger. This may be uncomfortable according to Rabbi David Jaffe. He writes, “In our modern, secular society, *bitachon* is a strange...concept,” It calls for giving up control and having faith in something outside of ourselves. In our ego-driven, can-do culture, *bitachon* can seem like a cop-out. But it is hardly that. Our efforts are absolutely needed. We need to reach out to people who are lonely and if we are lonely to do what we can to feel connected. And we need to know our limits and to trust it will be ok. In this coming year, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks counsels that *bitachon*, trust, is the most important trait each of us, whether alone or with others, needs to develop.

On Rosh Hashanah I said that our courage, *ometz lev*, is needed now to act in significant ways. These ten days since have only underscored that need. At the same time, there is a balance with trust, that it is not all up to us. *Bitachon* is the confidence that comes from knowing you can rely on something that is not completely in your control.

I find that having a mantra, something I repeat to myself, reminds me of what is important and what is in my control and what is beyond my control, what I need the heart-strength to do and what I need the faith and trust to accept. One example is that whenever you feel loneliness or fear or anxiety rising in you, recite to yourself the phrase, "I am in good hands." See what that can do for your spirit even if you don't feel it. It is a leap of faith, *bitachon*, that can have a centering effect.

It could also be a biblical verse. One congregant is focusing on Isaiah 30:15: "In returning and rest, *b'shuvah v'nachat*, you shall be saved, in quietness and in trust, your strength will come into being."

Last Kol Nidre I spoke of Ecclesiastes, Kohelet, and his embrace of *simcha*, of joy, despite the futilities of life. Joy is different from happiness. It is an embrace of a moment that is possible even when it seems improbable and for sure challenging. Kohelet also speaks about loneliness in practical ways: "Two are better off than one and a threefold cord is not readily broken!" (Kohelet 4:9;12). He echoes Genesis that it is not good for us to be alone.

We need each other.

We need community.

We need to know that even when it is just our voice in our room that we hear, there are other voices in invisible lines of connection that are real and there for us.

We need the trust, the *bitachon*, to hear it.

Sermon anthem: One Voice, by the Wailin' Jennings

This is the sound of one voice
One spirit, one voice
The sound of one who makes a choice
This is the sound of one voice

This is the sound of voices two
The sound of me singing with you
Helping each other to make it through
This is the sound of voices two

This is the sound of voices three
Singing together in harmony
Surrendering to the mystery
This is the sound of voices three

This is the sound of all of us
Singing with love and the will to trust
Leave the rest behind it will turn to dust
This is the sound of all of us

This is the sound of one voice
One people, one voice
A song for every one of us
This is the sound of one voice
This is the sound of one voice