

Kol Nidre 2023/5784 Rabbi Chai Levy

Give Me Your Hand: The Epidemic of Loneliness and the Healing power of Human Connection

Something that most of you don't know about me is that

When I was 30 years old,

I was hospitalized with a rare neurological disease.

I was living my normal life in New York City,

finishing up my last semester of rabbinical school,

and one day I woke up with double vision.

Over the next few hours, I lost all sense of balance and

an extreme weakness took over my body.

I called a friend to help me stumble down from my 5th floor apartment to 122nd

Street where I slumped down on the curb while she hailed a taxi to take us to the hospital.

By the time I got to there, I was so weak, I couldn't walk,

so they wheeled me in on gurney to the Emergency Room for the doctors to try to figure out what was wrong with me.

Needless to say, it was a terrifying experience,

and it took the doctors several days, multiple tests, and

a painful spinal tap to figure out what was going on.

Fortunately, it turned out not to be any of the devastating or life-threatening possibilities that were at first suspected,

But instead was a very rare auto-immune disease called Miller-Fisher syndrome, in which the immune system attacks the nervous system, causing temporary weakness and paralysis.

It's a variant of Guillain-Barre, which you may have heard of.

Thank God, I was out of the hospital in a week and

all my symptoms resolved within 3 months.

The thing that I remember most about my time in the hospital -

Was how my friends showed up for me.

They arranged a schedule so that I was never alone in the hospital, taking shifts, sleeping overnight in the room with me,

keeping me clean and comfortable,

and holding my hand when I was scared or needed support.

It was a life changing experience, and I felt through the supportive hands of my friends, the power of human connection and, the comforting and healing presence of the Divine. That is what I want to talk to you about this evening: the holy and healing power of human connection.

That experience was for me like Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur has been described as a dress rehearsal for death. It's a day of feeling our vulnerability and the precariousness of life. The book of life is open, and we pray that we are written in it. Our prayers ask: Who shall live and who shall die? We never know, so we take stock of lives, ask for forgiveness, and make amends while we still have the chance.

You might notice that all the prayers and confessions of Yom Kippur are said in the plural.

Al Het Shehatanu lifanecha... WE have sinned against you.

We relate to ourselves as part of a collective.

We show up as individuals – whether in person or on Zoom – to do our most solitary introspection, but we aren't in it alone.

Ashamnu, Bagadnu, WE have erred.

Several times on Yom Kippur, we open the ark and say *Shema Koleinu*. That whole section of our service is a collection of verses from Psalms, begging God to hear our voice, accept our prayers, not to abandon us. The psalmist cried out these words for himself in the *singular*, but the authors of the prayer book changed the language to the *plural*. Instead of "don't cast *me* away in my old age," as it says in Psalms (71), Our prayer is changed to "don't cast US away in OUR old age" and so on.

Why did the compilers of our machzor change the biblical verses? It's kind of a chutzpadik thing to do, to intentionally change the bible. Perhaps they felt, as we do, That when we feel our vulnerability, our fragility, and our regret for how badly we've screwed up, as we confront the book of life and our own mortality,

We need each other, we need to feel not alone in it.

Our human connection with each other can
get us through the most frightening and difficult moments.
As it did for me in my hospital room,
having my own personal Yom Kippur –
In that time of: who shall live and who shall die? –
I was held by the people around me.
And it not only made the terror of my sudden illness bearable,
it made the experience somehow even holy.

We humans need connection, but the thing is:
There is an epidemic of loneliness in our country.
We are suffering as individuals and as a society
for our *lack* of human connection.

The Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murthy,
has written about the impact of isolation in our country.¹
Loneliness is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia,
stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death.
The mortality impact of loneliness is similar to that caused by smoking 15
cigarettes a day!
The majority of Americans report experiencing loneliness.
Some countries, Britain, Japan, Sweden, have even appointed ministers of
loneliness to address the societal problems –
illness, addiction, suicide - caused by this epidemic of isolation.

Our Jewish tradition has understood loneliness from the beginning.
In the Torah's telling of the creation of the world,
God proclaims each day's creation "good."
The Earth was good, the seas were good, the trees were good.
Va'yar Elohim Ki Tov! God saw it was good.
But what was the first thing in creation that was NOT good?
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא-טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ
God said: *Lo Tov heyot Ha'adam levado.*
It's NOT good for the human to be alone. (Gen 2:18)

¹ See: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf> and
<https://www.vivekmurthy.com/together-book> and [NYT piece by Nicholas Kristof](#)

So God created human companionship.

So why have people become so lonely?

More than 20 years ago already, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam sounded the alarm that the community institutions that used to connect people were in decline.

In his book, Bowling Alone, Putnam explains that our “social capital” has diminished as American participation in clubs, civic organizations, PTAs, and yes, religious groups, have diminished.

He found that more people than ever were bowling, for example, but instead of taking part in Bowling Leagues, as we once did, we started “Bowling Alone.”

And this decline of social capital not only leads to loneliness, But it’s bad for civil society and democracy.

It’s only gotten worse with social media, and online everything that keeps us apart, not to mention Covid which increased our isolation.

The rabbis turned our prayers from the singular to the plural

Because they understood how much we need each other,

But we’ve turned our lives into i-phone, i-pad, “I” this and “I” that.

But as it’s written, “it’s not good for the human to be alone.”

We need each other, and as the world gets harder to live in,

With the impacts of climate change and everything else that is destabilizing our world, we need each other all the more so.

There’s a famous story in the Talmud (Brachot 5b²) about the healing power of human connection.

Rabbi Hiyya is ill, and Rabbi Yochanan goes to visit him.

Rabbi Yochanan says to Rabbi Hiyya, “Give me your hand,”

Which he does, and Rabbi Hiyya is healed.

But then another time, Rabbi Yochanan becomes ill, and

Another Rabbi, Rabbi Hanina, visits him, says “Give me your hand,”

And Rabbi Yochanan is healed.

The Talmud asks, why did Rabbi Yochanan need Rabbi Hanina to heal him?

² <https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.5b.11?lang=bi>

After all, Rabbi Yochanan clearly had healing powers when *he* held the hand of Rabbi Hiyya. Why couldn't Rabbi Yochanan heal himself?

The Talmud answers: "A prisoner cannot free himself from prison."

In other words, we need another. We need each other.

Rabbi Yochanan didn't have some special healing powers, rather,

It was the power of human connection,

of having your hand held by another, that was healing.

See, there is actually a solution to this epidemic of loneliness.

There's a new documentary film about Putnam's work on Bowling Alone – it's called "Join or Die."³

It sounds like a good slogan for a synagogue membership committee!

It's actually the same message that the rabbis imparted in the Talmud:⁴

"*o-hevruta o-mitituta*" they said – friendship or death!

Chavruta- literally a study partner - or death! Those are the choices.

Not having companionship, it turns out,

according to the surgeon general, CAN actually kill you.

Putnam's similar message in the film "Join or Die" is clear –

We need to be part of community,

and *society* is healthier when we join,

whether it's a bowling league, a community organization,

Or, yes, even a synagogue.

Our tradition understands that community is essential for living.

That's why a minyan is needed for the basic functions of Jewish life – reading Torah, saying Kaddish, a wedding.

We need community for the hard things like illness and mourning,

But also for joy and celebration.

A psychology professor at Cal, Dacher Keltner,

in his new book about the science of awe⁵

shares research that what's known as "collective effervescence" transforms our brains and bodies, making us healthier and stronger.

³ <https://putnamdoc.com/#see>

⁴ Taanit 23a

⁵ <https://www.dacherkeltner.com/>

“Collective effervescence” is that electric, oceanic feeling we get when we are moving together with a group of people.

It’s the exalted feeling that people share at a Taylor Swift concert, or cheering their team at a sporting event, or dancing together at Burning Man.

But guess what?

You don’t need to schlep out to the dust and mud at Burning Man!

We experience collective effervescence right here in shul! [*Avinu Malkenu...*]

These moments of collective effervescence transform us –

We encounter the sense of mystery, transcendence, interconnection that increases our joy and decreases our anxiety.

Being in community is medicine for today’s loneliness epidemic.

The Torah said: “it’s not good for the human to be alone,”

The rabbis said: “give me your hand,”

and Judaism has developed centuries of traditions to give us experiences of collective effervescence – because we humans need it.

But sadly, fulfilling this basic human need to connect with each other has become almost counter-cultural in today’s world!

I had an eye-opening experience of this recently when a neighbor’s cat was hit by a car on my street and died.

I didn’t know the neighbor, but I had seen the cat around on the street and had a guess which house the cat belonged to,

way down at the end of the block.

I wrote a simple condolence note and left it at the house, addressed “dear neighbor.”

Being a cat person myself, the note was heartfelt –

I was really sorry for their loss - but nothing so out of the ordinary –

it’s just what we - who understand community – do:

we try to offer comfort and support.

The next day I received the most beautiful response,

a long, handwritten note from a young woman,

that was essentially a eulogy for her kitty.

It seemed she needed to express her grief to someone who would witness her pain. She needed to be understood by another.

She even said that the death of her cat made her lose faith,
but that my condolence note had given her hope.

I was touched, but it also made me realize how special and counter-cultural it is to
have a sacred community like ours,
where it's just a given that if you're a part of community,
people show up for you when you're grieving or sick.
Everyone needs that, but not everyone has that.
Being in community means that in moments of despair and loss,
people show up and hold your hand,
and that restores a sense of faith, hope, and connection.

That's why I always teach at shiva minyanim when we say
HaMakom Yenachem etchem –
That the name of God we use when we comfort the mourners is
HaMakom, “the Place,” because I truly believe that the place
where we show up to support each other is the DIVINE.
The Holy One is expressed through us –
When we are there to be the hand of God
holding the hand of the one who is suffering.
Or when we are *here*, together, as we say our prayers in the plural
on this day of feeling our vulnerability.

How can we strengthen the healing power of human connection,
In this epidemic of loneliness?
How can our shul dispense more of the medicine that our Surgeon General is
prescribing?
How can we be the hands of God for each other?

First, we show up for each other when there is a need.
You get an email from me when there is shiva for a mourner
or a meal train for a new baby. (there are a lot of new babies due soon!)
We have a Gemilut Chesed platform called Lotsa Helping Hands –
You can sign up for that to get a notification when someone needs a ride to the
doctor or help after surgery.
Sign up by emailing gemilut@netivotshalom.org
[f you forget, you can find that on our website]

And there's a sign in our lobby with a link and even a QR code to get on Lotsa Helping Hands.

Secondly, I encourage you to take the chance to get to know people – Say hello to someone new at a Shabbat kiddush or in the Zoom breakout rooms. Sign up for Sukkot Sukkan matching or Pesach seder matching – especially to host.

Invite new people over for Shabbat dinner,
or come to the Shabbat dinners at the shul.

Come to the synagogue retreat, which is taking place this May.

Help make our shul like the theme song from Cheers:

“sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name...”

Wear your name tag! Say hello to people. Introduce yourself.

Notice who isn't here. Step upstairs and see who is on Zoom.

Maybe they aren't here in person because they are dealing with health issues and are feeling isolated – give them a call.

[Hi to everyone on Zoom. We're glad you are joining us from home.

We miss you and are thinking of you!]

Third, I'm excited to announce a new initiative that we are launching this year called “Beyond Small Talk 2.0”

You might recall that for years, Karen Bovarnick organized Sunday brunches where people from our shul would give talks.

Well this is an updated version,
designed for us to connect with each other.

The idea is: We're going to offer a variety of short-term chavurot for all different interests and configurations –

some for adults, some for families with kids, or a mixture.

Each group will be small enough to create a sense of connection
for 4-6 meetings around a shared interest:

Whether it's people who want to volunteer together at the Food Bank,
or meet up on Sundays for ice cream and ping pong.

It will be a fun way to create a more connected community.

Last year, Linda Blachman created something similar with the Life Story Circles, and along with Judy Breakstone and their whole team, they brought together dozens of people for deep sharing with each other.

This is how we create connection that is so needed in our world, where community is the antidote to the epidemic of loneliness⁶.

Throughout this holy day of personal introspection,
Whether we are here in person or on Zoom,
We will say all of our prayers in the plural.
Even in our most solitary moments of reflection and confession,
We remember that we aren't alone,
that we are part of a community, together –
experiencing the vulnerability and fragility of being human, together,
in this precarious world with all of its challenges
and all of our challenges, we are in it together.

Human connection is healing. I felt this powerfully when nearly two hundred of us came together on Zoom last month to pray for Joel Siegel, who was critically ill, on life support in the ICU, and now he is miraculously doing better, out of the hospital and recovering in rehab.

I felt this when I was in the hospital, and my community showed up for me to hold my hand and I felt the healing presence of the Divine.

We all come to this Yom Kippur with our individual struggles, but I pray that we can find in these communal prayers in the plural, that we aren't alone in our struggles.

I pray that we can be a community that offers each other the healing power of connection as an antidote to the epidemic of loneliness.

I pray that those who need support will let us know they need support,
And that those who can offer support will be there,

⁶ See <http://drronwolfson.com/books/relational-judaism/>

as we all take turns, like Rabbi Yochanan:
Sometimes being the one to hold someone's hand,
And sometimes being the one to have our hand held.

The Torah says: It's not good for a human to be alone,
And the rabbis said: Give me your hand,
for a prisoner cannot free themselves from prison,
And we have doctor's orders from
the Surgeon General of the United States.
So, let us be that much needed healing medicine of
connection and community for each other.

Gmar Hatima Tova.