

On Loneliness & The Importance Of Creating Sacred Connections

The following is a story told in Reader's Digest sixty years ago, in a different time, when everyone used their phones for only one thing: talking. It is called "The Black Telephone,"¹ and it goes like this.

When I was a young boy, my father had one of the first telephones in our neighborhood. I remember the polished, old case fastened to the wall...I was too little to reach the telephone, but used to listen with fascination when my mother talked to it.

Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person. Her name was "Information Please," and she knew everything! Information Please could supply anyone's number and the correct time.

My personal experience with Information Please...[started] one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the tool bench in the basement, I accidentally whacked my finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, but there...was no one home to hear me cry!

I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger, before I finally spotted the telephone! Quickly, I ran for a footstool and dragged it under the phone. Climbing up, I unhooked the receiver and held it to my ear.

"Information, please," I said into the mouthpiece just above my head.

After a click or two, a small, clear voice spoke into my ear.

"Information."

"I hurt my finger..." I wailed into the phone; the tears came readily enough now that I had an audience.

¹ Adapted from Paul Villard, "Information, Please," Reader's Digest, June 1966, 62-65

"Isn't your mother home?" the voice asked.

"Nobody's home but me," I blubbered.

"Are you bleeding?" the voice asked.

"No, "I replied. "I hit my finger with the hammer, and it hurts."

"Can you open the icebox?" she asked.

I said I could.

"Then chip off a little bit of ice and hold it to your finger," the voice said.

After that, I called "Information Please" for everything. I asked her for help with my geography, and she told me where Philadelphia was...I told her about the chipmunk that I caught in the park, and she told me I could feed him fruit and nuts.

Another day I was on the telephone, "Information Please."

"Information," I heard in the now-familiar voice. "How do I spell fix?" I asked.

When Petey, our pet canary, died, I called, "Information Please," and told her the sad story. She listened, and then said typical things grown-ups say to soothe a child. But I was not consoled. I asked her, "Why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers on the bottom of a cage?"

She must have sensed my deep concern, for she said quietly, " Always remember that there are other worlds to sing in."

Somehow I felt better.

This all took place in a small town in the Pacific Northwest, but when I was nine years old, we moved across the country to Boston, and I no longer had access to the phone that contained "Information Please." I never

thought to try the shiny new phone that sat on the table in our hallway in Boston. I missed "Information Please" very much, but never forgot our conversations.

Many years later, I had a half-hour layover in an airport close to my childhood home. As I walked between the gates, I passed a payphone and, for some reason, spontaneously decided to stop and dial my hometown operator (by now I had figured out my childhood home phone was not the only way to reach her). I said, "Information Please?"

Somehow, miraculously, I heard the small, clear voice I knew so well. "Information."

I hadn't planned this, but I heard myself saying, "Could you please tell me how to spell fix?"

There was a long pause. Then came the soft-spoken answer, "I guess your finger must have healed by now."

I laughed. "So it's really you!" I said. "I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me when I was little?"

"I wonder," she said, "if you know how much your call meant to me. I never had any children, and I always used to look forward to your calls."

I told her how often I had thought of her over the years, introduced myself properly, and asked if I could call her the next time I passed through town.

"Please do," she said. "Just ask for Sally."

Three months later I was back in the area, and I called the same old number. But this time a different voice answered, "Information."

I asked for Sally.

"Are you a friend?" the voice on the phone said.

"Yes, a very old friend," I answered.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she said. "Sally had been working part time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago."

Before I could hang up, she said,

"Wait a minute, is your name by any chance Paul?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down in case you called. Let me read it to you."

She read: "Tell him there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean."

I thanked her and hung up. I knew what Sally meant.

This is a story about the impact of small interactions that endure longer than we might ever imagine. But ultimately, I think it is about more than that. It is a story about connection and *loneliness*. About two people who found each other, and enjoyed one of the most precious gifts that can be shared between human beings: *presence and time*.

We gather together this morning on the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur. What I just said is so obvious that we don't really ever stop to think about it. We gather **together**. Throughout the year, some people come to services regularly; others come to social events at the synagogue (more regularly), but on Yom Kippur, it seems almost everyone shows up! Why is that?

Perhaps something deep within us understands the importance of being physically together on this most sacred day. We are, of course, delighted to offer community members who cannot make it to the building a chance to join our services on livestream. But there is something about the simple act of “gathering” that we know, deep in our souls, to be an essential part of the Yom Kippur experience.

Just six years ago, our Yom Kippur services were held “virtually” because we couldn't yet gather safely. The COVID pandemic was terrible, for so many reasons, and I'm not sure we have yet grieved fully for the many losses of that time. While it was relatively recent, I know for many of us it feels like a different lifetime. But I can tell you one thing I will never forget: standing on this bima alone, “pretending” you were all here as we recorded services. It was terribly sad. It was an incredibly lonely experience. I was privileged, as your rabbi, to have the opportunity to serve the community in this way, but being alone, in this room, all by myself, pretending that you were here— I hated it.

It is true that part of Yom Kippur is meant to be a private, personal, individual experience of seeking to connect with the Divine. After we have done the important interpersonal work of teshuvah, seeking forgiveness from those we

have harmed, Yom Kippur is when we turn our attention to our very personal relationship with God (whether it be strained, strong, or somewhere in between).

And yet we still gather **together**. Why? Because even though we cannot do another person's individual spiritual work, we can support one another as we go through it. Being here together reminds us that, unlike those COVID days, no one here is alone. We are here, with our family members, our friends, and our extended synagogue family, just as we should be.

Even our *tefilot*, our prayers, highlight the importance of togetherness. We are constantly referring to God in the plural (*Avinu*, **our** parent; *Ashamnu*, **we** have sinned; *Eloheynu*, **our** God). The idea that we gather as a community is baked into our holiday observance, which is a good thing, especially at a time when people seem to be increasingly lonely and isolated.

To be clear, I am not saying that spending time alone is inherently negative. Quiet meditation is one of my favorite pastimes. But there is a difference between spending time alone and feeling lonely. And I think this loneliness is one of the biggest ailments facing our society, perhaps even in our own community.

This is not a new phenomenon. Twenty-five years ago, author and sociologist Robert Putnam brought this to our attention in his book *Bowling Alone*, describing how Americans had become increasingly disconnected from civic institutions and, as a result, increasingly disconnected from one another. And the trend has continued. According to Dr. Tara Narula, in her book on Resilience that I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah: *Data from a 2024 National Poll on Healthy Aging*²...found that **one-third** of adults ages 50-80 reported feeling lonely some of the time or often during the previous year...And another post-pandemic study entitled “The Loneliness Epidemic Persists,” found that “**79 percent of adults aged eighteen to twenty-four [across the country] report feeling lonely.**”

We all know, even if we're not always happy to admit it, that our phones are not helping. Unlike the story I began with, recalling a time when phones were used to call and talk to other people, today our phones are used for everything under the sun, with phone conversations only playing a tiny role!

Dr. Narula's book cited another 2024 report that the average screen time for American adults has increased by 60 percent since the outbreak of COVID. Every year, the time we spend on our phones grows, and the time we spend interacting with one another goes down. One study tracked smartphone use in

² Published in JAMA

over three hundred participants for one week and found that the more people used their smartphones, the less connected they felt to other people. Which then led them to use their smartphones even more.³

As social animals who need physical connection in our lives, our phones and the addictive habits that come along with them are creating serious challenges to our overall well-being.

We know this, of course. We know what it's like to get sucked into mindless scrolling, swiping, or surfing, and I'm sure almost everyone here has, at some point, looked up from their phone only to realize that much more time had passed than they thought. Where did this time go? How did we just lose all of that time doing something mindless?

Another book I read this summer, called Eat Your Ice Cream, by Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, explored habits of healthy living. In this book, Dr. Emanuel cited several long-term studies that followed hundreds of thousands of people from diverse backgrounds to figure out what contributes to a "long, vigorous, and fulfilling life." In one specific "Health and Retirement Study," involving more than 20,000 Americans older than 50, researchers examined each participant's number of friends, how often they contacted them, and the quality of those

³ (Narula, 153)

contacts. Through repeated interviews over 8 years, the researchers found that **friendships** are strongly associated with wellness and longevity: a 24% reduced risk of dying during the study period, a 17% lower risk of depression, and a 99% increase in physical activity.

Again and again, researchers found a strong association between social activities and longevity. And, while socializing improves cognitive functioning and overall health, the opposite is also true. According to Dr. Emanuel, “loneliness and social isolation can be as bad for your health as 15 cigarettes a day!”⁴

Jewish tradition and teachings have understood this for a very long time. Right from the beginning of the Torah, in Genesis, it says: “*lo tov adam heyot le'vado.*”⁵ It is not good; it is not healthy for human beings to dwell alone. Indeed up until this point, everything God created had been described as *tov*, “good.” The first thing to be described as “*lo tov*,” is being alone. Or what about the description of this very holiday, Yom Kippur, a day where we are reminded that God will forgive us if we spend the day practicing a type of self-denial.

וְיָגִי כָּל-הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תֵעָנֶה בְּעֶצְמָהּ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וְנִכְרְתָה מֵעַמִּיהָ

⁴ Emanuel, 58-59

⁵ Genesis 2:8

⁶But if we do not, the consequence is being “cut off from our people.” Isolation was considered among the most severe punishments. Perhaps the ancient sage Rava, who lived around the 4th century C.E., put it most starkly when he said life was a choice between “either friendship or death,” suggesting that a life without friends is detrimental to one’s very existence.⁷

Unfortunately, when it comes to social connection in American society today, we are going in the wrong direction. We are becoming more isolated and have fewer friends. In 1990, 63% of Americans had 5 or more close friends; today, only 38% do.⁸ The opportunities for face-to-face social interaction with actual people have become a major casualty of all this screen time.

We are distracted, and we have less ability to pay attention than ever. Dr. Emanuel pointed out in his book that “over the last two decades the average attention span has dropped from about 150 seconds to under 50 seconds. We are less attentive and more distractible.” These distractions, and our related shortened attention spans, are dramatically interfering with our ability to create meaningful, significant connections with other people.

⁶ Leviticus 23:29

⁷ Taanit 23b

⁸ Emanuel, 62

We all struggle with this, including me. Anxiety or FOMO (fear of missing out) convinces us that we “need our phone, just in case!” But do we really? The truth? Not usually. Yes, some people are medical professionals on call expecting urgent contact from patients, or caregivers with children or elderly adults relying on you alone. But for most people, most of the time, we really don’t “need” constant access to our phones. There are some specific times, like when someone we love is gravely ill, when we “need” the phone more than others. But most of the time, couldn’t we just go into that restaurant, that meeting, that movie, or even *Yom Kippur services*, leave our phones in the car, and be present and together?

Perhaps this is the year we should try. As we gather on Yom Kippur to consider our less-than-positive habits and do some final *cheshbon hanefesh* (introspection), it’s worth considering how we can each be less distracted and more present this year. Perhaps this could be the year that we prioritize strengthening old relationships and seeking out new ones, in an effort to actively and intentionally combat the plague of loneliness that threatens to envelop us all.

Of course, it’s not just about our phones. We can also strengthen our social connections by being intentional with all of our choices. Ask yourselves: when

was the last time you went for a walk with someone else, said hello to a stranger in the grocery store or coffee shop, or made dinner and shared a relaxed meal with a friend or family member? When was the last time you went with a friend to a museum, to a concert, or to the city for the day, just to be together? When was the last time that you fully focused on time outside – in a park, on the boardwalk, or at the beach (something even easier now that all of our guests have left us until next season!)? When was the last time that you made an actual phone call with your phone? Who have you been meaning to be in touch with? What's stopping you from picking up the phone and cold-calling an old friend for no reason other than to talk? Maybe it feels awkward, but just tell them that your rabbi gave you a Yom Kippur assignment and break the ice that way!

Let's talk about the synagogue for a moment. When was the last time that you came here, to the synagogue, not to passively sit in services or listen to me and others talk, but to actively engage with members of the community? The synagogue is an ideal place to practice the skills of presence and being together, instead of the more typical mode of being passively present when you're with other people. Synagogues can be described as a house of prayer (*beit tefilah*) and a house of study (*beit midrash*), but the primary Hebrew term for synagogue is *beit kneset*- a house **of gathering**.

The *beit kneset* can, and should, be an easily accessible antidote for anyone looking to feel a bit less lonely, anyone seeking ways to connect, or re-connect, to their tribe of origin. Here at Congregation Torat El, we strive to help people feel valued by facilitating connections with tradition AND with one another on a regular basis. We work to create opportunities for people to get to know one another, to learn from one another, to share in life's experiences together, and to rejoice and support one another.

One of the most sacred moments in this congregation happens each week, both during and after Shabbat services. I am not talking about the prayers or the sermon. For those who may not have joined a Saturday morning service recently, I am talking about a moment each Shabbat when we take time to share "good news," good things that have happened in the lives of our community members over the last week. Anyone who feels comfortable is invited to share their good news, whether it's big news like a new job or the arrival of a new grandchild, or smaller joys like passing an exam or seeing a great Broadway show. It's quick and simple, and in five minutes we are able to create a shared sense of community and a deeper sense of connection. Each Shabbat morning we also take time to pray for those in need of healing, and everyone in the congregation is invited to share the names of those people in their lives who are ill or suffering. And then we always end with kiddush, and a few minutes to do the ultimate Jewish activities: have a nosh and shmooze with

one another in a more informal way! While there are many reasons people come to Shabbat services – maybe to say kaddish on the anniversary of a death, or to witness a young person becoming a bar or bat mitzvah, or to just spend some focused time praying and reflecting. But these moments of connection with one another, during and after services, are essential to deepening and strengthening our communal bonds. Each of these moments is intentional and reminds everyone gathered that we are **not alone**: in our joy, in our sorrow, and in the regular ups and downs of weekly living. We have each other, thank God.

But the synagogue as an antidote to loneliness isn't all about the social connections. There is a reason that we pray **together**. And there is a reason that we are taught to study in pairs (chevruta) or in larger groups, **together**. Jewish tradition is clear: we need people; we need connection; we need each other.

Please remember, as we find ourselves back at the beginning of the Jewish year: if you find yourself struggling with feelings of loneliness, our synagogue is a place where you can come to be present with others. It is a place where you can come for spiritual strength, emotional comfort, and social camaraderie from a range of sources: whether in classes or concerts; from each collective “kaddish,” to every communal “kiddush”; on ordinary days and extraordinary

days. We do not always do it perfectly. But the more that you join us, the more likely it is you will find and feel connections, both to your Jewish identity and to members of the greater synagogue family.

If you are already a “regular” or “semi-regular” attendee, I want to challenge you as well. Look out for the people whom you don’t “recognize.” Say hello, invite them to sit with you at your table during kiddush, strike up a conversation, and work to make everyone here feel “included.” It is not always so easy to walk into a synagogue, even one that you have been a member of for decades. You never know what someone else is going through. You never know how lonely they might be feeling. You may find yourself sitting at a table, or in an aisle, right now with someone going through a very challenging moment in life. They may feel really alone, and you may have no idea. Imagine what a friendly face, a simple hello, or an invitation into conversation might mean to them. Let that be another challenge to each of us this year as we try our best to lift one another up, making one another feel more welcome and less lonely in the year to come. It is good for them, and it is good for us.

We spend a lot of time on Yom Kippur striking our hearts with our hands, going over the many mistakes and missteps we’ve made this past year. As I have shared before, and as was taught by Jewish Renewal movement leader Reb

Zalman Shachter Shalomi, let's try to redirect our energy – less on striking ourselves as a punishment, but more on gently knocking on our hearts in an attempt to open them up a bit. We knock on our hearts in order to make ourselves more vulnerable, more sensitive, more open to change, to growth, to the presence of the divine, and, of course, to one another.

Today, as we gently tap on our hearts throughout the service, may we look around and remember that we are all in this experience called life, together. We all have things to work on. We all have so many blessings to celebrate. We all have challenges to overcome. We all have good days and bad days. And while each one of us may feel lonely and isolated from time to time, let us look around, on this most sacred day, and realize, blessedly, that none of us are actually alone. Gmar Hatimah Tovah.