LONELINESS
KOL NIDREI 5780
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A girl was sitting on a park bench; crying into her phone, "I know, I know, I know," over and over.

What did she know? Had she done something wrong? Was she being comforted?

And then she said, "mama, I know" and her tears streamed down even harder.

Witnessing such a moment, what would we do? What should we do?

Do we get involved? Do we run over to ask what is wrong? or, do we ignore her and mind our own business? Because it's easier to scroll through FB on our cell phone or put our earbuds in and listen to music than to deal with our discomfort.

I wonder what was her mother telling her? Never to stay out all night again? That everyone fails? Was it a real phone call or was she rehearsing a conversation yet to take place? Was she alone in the world? Did she need support? What do we do?

"Mama, I know," she said, and hung up, placing her phone on her lap; and the tears and the sobbing came harder and heavier.

I did not hear this conversation. The writer, Jonathan Safran Foer did. In a beautiful essay in the New York Times that I clipped and stuck in a file 6 years ago because I thought one day, we might need its message.

Now I think I'm six years too late.

The essay was entitled "How Not to Be Alone,"." Foer tells the story to demonstrate how technology, which promotes our connectedness, can actually encourage isolation and retreat.

Foer writes, "It is harder to intervene than not to, but it is vastly harder to choose to do either than to retreat into the scrolling names of one's contact list, or whatever one's favorite iDistraction happens to be. Technology celebrates connectedness but encourages retreat."

"The phone didn't make me avoid the human connection, but it did make ignoring her easier in that moment, and more likely, by comfortably encouraging me to forget my choice to do so. My daily use of technological communication has been shaping me into

someone more likely to forget others. The flow of water carves rock, a little bit at a time. And our personhood is carved, too, by the flow of our habits."

Maybe you have noticed as Safran Foer did that a funny thing has happened.

We have begun to prefer the diminished substitutes for human contact and connection that technology provides over human interaction.

It's easier to make a phone call than to schlep to see someone in person.

Even still it's easier to send a text then to make a phone call and have to engage in all the pleasantries of a conversation.

Firing off an e-mail is maybe the easiest because we don't have to communicate in real time, no risk of having a conversation at all

Technology that was created to improve human interaction, making it possible to reach someone when they could not otherwise be reached has become a substitute for human interaction.

I speak from personal experience

Last month I turned 49 years old. No one not directly related to me called me on my birthday.

I have 5,000 friends on Facebook, there are 800+ families in this congregation; hundreds sent emojis and mostly canned 'Happy Birthday" comments. I got a few text messages; from friends who were clearly holding a phone capable of calling me at the time they thumb typed their text. But no phone calls

I'm not blaming any of them, or any of you, we have enough guilt on Yom Kippur. But I do think we are all responsible, not for missing my birthday, but for all of us just missing out again and again on the human connection that we all so desperately need and crave. As Torah tells us, "Lo Tov haiyot ha-adam lavad – it is not good for us to be alone."

All new technologies cause alarm in their early days, think of the horse drawn carriage or the electric light bulb. I am sure even indoor plumbing had its detractors. And maybe in time we will look back at these concerns as quaint ruminations of a bygone era; but it seems that each technological step we take as a society we make it easier, just a little, to avoid the emotional work of being present, to convey information rather than express that we care.

The closer the world gets to our fingertips the further it gets from our hearts.

When I turned 29 there was no way to wish someone Happy Birthday without calling them, visiting them or sending an actual letter.

Even when we are out alone, we engage in behaviour that almost ensures that we will remain that way.

Next time you're on the Skytrain or a bus (which based on last week's sermon I hope we are all now riding more) look around and see all the people self-isolating on their phones; ear buds planted so firmly in their ears they block out even the simple social conventions of, "is this seat taken?" "do you know the time?" let alone possible conversation starters and connection makers like, "Did you see the game last night?" or "Where did you get those shoes?"

Henry David Thoreau wrote that, "city life is millions of people being lonesome together."

We are missing out on our most elemental need as humans: connection and feeling as though we belong.

As we are aging, we are finding ourselves in a peculiar society where it's harder to meet people, harder to have success at dating, harder to actually enter into spontaneous human connection even though we have more tools available to do that than ever before.

We look at our teens and adult children and puzzle at how they can spend hours on their phones or devices texting each other but never being with each other. Even when they are in the same room.

And here's the truly scary thing: Many are just giving up, having less sex, having fewer long-term relationships, meeting less — a steady decrease in face to face interaction.

Harvard Sociologist Robert Putnam, in his classic work, "Bowling Alone" laments that we feel vaguely and uncomfortably disconnected – we have changed our environment more quickly than we know how to change ourselves – we want to live in a more civil, trustworthy, more collectively caring community – but we are lost at how to get there.

Loneliness is a state of mind. It causes people to feel empty, alone and unwanted. Isn't it ironic that loneliness leads us to crave human contact, the state of mind often makes it more difficult to form connections with other people.

This is not a surprise to most of the people in this room. I think we've all noticed the dilemma that's been created in the last few years.

We have a hunch that something is not quite right in our relationship with the universe. In our place in society, it doesn't feel quite as rooted or meaningful as we feel it should, but we are not sure why.

1:5 Canadians feels lonely, 1:4 in Vancouver according to a Vancouver Foundation report published in 2017, 1:3 seniors.

Fully half of Vancouverites find it hard to make new friends.

The same study found that social loneliness and social isolation impact our physical and mental health. Some research suggests that chronic loneliness may shorten life expectancy even more than being overweight or sedentary, and just as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Why are we so lonely? One reason is the changing nature of work. Work is one of the key sources of friendship and community. Think of your own relationships; surely many of your closest friendships — perhaps even your relationship with your spouse — started in the workplace. Yet the connectedness of the workplace is rapidly diminishing, as people hop from job to job, and from city to city, as steady work becomes harder to find and the "gig" economy grows.

My brother used to work in an office with two dozen people. His company sold the office and now he works at home in his basement, same job, even many of the same people, but none of them in the same place.

Lo Tov haiyot ha-adam lavad

"It is not good for us to be alone." (Gen 2:18)

The Talmud tells the story of a rabbi who was a faith healer. All he had to do was lay his hands on someone and they were cured. Then he fell ill and called for a friend to come and heal him. "Why couldn't he cure himself?" asks the Talmud. And answers: "Because a prisoner cannot release themselves from prison." Sometimes when all you see most of the day is the glowing screen in front of you it can feel like solitary confinement.

We are the most social beings on the planet we need human touch, the word of another. People not pixels.

That's why a "real" community instead of "virtual" is so important, one that keeps us tied together no matter what. A place and people we can count on. It's where we meet face to face and give each other strength. It's where people know who we are and miss us when we're not there.

If the theme song from Cheers is playing in your head right now, it is in mine too. Sometimes you want to go, “where everybody knows your name.”

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes, “Community is society with a human face. It's the redemption of our solitude.”

The root of the word synagogue is ‘syn.’ No, not that kind of sin. S-Y-N is the Greek prefix that implies togetherness. In Hebrew a synagogue is a Bet Knesset, a place where people assemble. A ‘congregation’ is where they congregate. Synagogues came to be not so much for people to find God, but for Jews to find each other.

Why do we have the concept of the minyan? Because we want Jews to get together to say their prayers. Because most often, the answer to our most heart-felt prayer, the prayer for relief from loneliness, comes not from God but from our fellow Jews.

Our tradition here of shabbat lunch and oneg kiddush together every week not only nourishes our bodies, it feeds our souls.

Over bagels and egg salad we have the opportunity to sit with others, sometimes people we haven’t met before, and we get to know them. To hear their story and hold it as sacred to us as they do ours.

The essential is getting together “Panim el panim,” the phrase that describes God’s contact with Moses, “face to face,” not Facebook to Facebook.

How can you know what’s really going on with someone if you can’t look into their eyes and truly see them?

Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan; the founder of the Jewish Community Center idea, the JCC movement, was perhaps the most influential American rabbi of the early 20th century. He said that the primary purpose of a synagogue is “to combat loneliness and to weld Jews who live in the neighborhood into a conscious community.”

Note that he talks about a neighborhood. That concept in many places is becoming extinct. I once counted 83 different postal code prefixes on our membership list.

This means that the function of the congregation today as a unifying element is far more important than it was in Kaplan’s day, especially here in Vancouver where we don’t have twenty shuls to choose from.

Community is essential to Jewish existence. It is an essential protection against loneliness.

We've come to know each other pretty well over these last 6 years that I have been privileged to be your rabbi, I mean few called on my birthday, but I didn't manage to call most of you – so we'll call it even.

You know by now that my sermons often have a call to action in them, something that we are challenged to work on or accomplish in the New Year. I mean last week I asked you to help each other save the planet, so I know your To Do List is a bit full right now; but I would like to add one more item.

Let's have coffee.

A synagogue can accomplish many things, but perhaps what we are best at is connecting people to each other and fostering meaningful relationships.

We are going to use technology to connect us in real life.

The email that you'll get after the holiday will have a simple form. Fill in a few details and we will match you with a member of the congregation and then you'll find a time to enjoy a cup of coffee together.

Once you've done one you can sign up for another. We will even give you some suggested topics of conversation.

It's as simple as that. But I have one condition, you have to leave your phone in your pocket or purse until the conversation is done.

We are going to turn this technology-inflicted loneliness on its head and with a human touch, a human heart, use it to get to know each other better.

In all the days of creation there was only one element that was deemed not good, lo Tov. Human loneliness.

Lo Tov haiyot ha-adam lavad

"It is not good for us to be alone." (Gen 2:18)

If the synagogue is the house of God then we have a responsibility to do all we can to honour the message of this commandment, to combat and confront the loneliness that is so pervasive in our modern world.

A story is told of a mother who sent her young daughter to the corner store for some milk. After a half hour had passed and the child had not returned, the mother began to worry. After an hour, she grew frantic.

In an effort to allay her fears, she got into the car and set out to search for her daughter. Almost as soon as she pulled away from the house, however, she saw her daughter coming towards her. At the sight of her, the mother dashed from the car and scooped the small girl into her arms.

“Where were you?” the mother pleaded. “Didn’t you know that I’d be worried sick about you? It’s been an hour. What were you doing all this time?”

“My friend’s doll was run over by a car; It got broke and I was helping her fix it.”

“Were you able to fix her doll?” her mother asked.

“No... so instead I helped her to cry.”

In human relationships, in a synagogue community we help each other cry.

We celebrate life’s joys and oys.

We see and greet each other panim al panim, face to face.

In a room filled with 1,000 people tonight too many of us are lonely and feel alone.

Lo Tov haiyot ha-adam lavad – it is not good for human beings to be alone.

Each one of us can do something about that, we don’t need to feel lonely.

In an age of loneliness, the synagogue, which is all of us, is an answer if not the answer.

We are the voice that answers when another soul calls out for companionship and we answer;: Hineni – Here I am.