

785 Erev RH

Shana tova

As many of you may know, this is my 10th year as the rabbi of Michigan Hillel. It's a weirdly long time to be in college....

No year has been the same. I feel like this is the 5th year in a row I have said - this year is so different.... Sometimes that was for terrible and painful and scary reasons, and some for beautiful and joyful reasons. This is one of those harder reasons.

The new moon is meant to remind us of the year that is open to possibilities we don't yet know.. This year I am searching for the possibilities of hope, for a year with more peace, and the opportunities for connection and joy in as many moments as possible.

Most years, in my opening welcome, I have said some kind of version of this: Look around! We are joining together in a new community- this community hasn't existed in the past, and by next year, we will have had to say goodbye to those who graduate and hello to our newest members.

And you all took the step to create this community by being here tonight and I look forward to signing and eating and praying and being together as we begin this year. Everyone's participation matters, and I thank you for being here.

Well, 10 years in now, I think that maybe I was wrong. Not about the part that everyone's presence and participation matters

But the part about this community not existing before and after this year, and the need to "make it happen" in this moment in order to feel connected to one another. Over the last many months I, and maybe you too, have questioned what it means to be in community, and have felt concerned about where we all sit in this particular moment in Jewish history.

And I think it doesn't help us to consider this community as brand new... because, well, it feels...too hard. Starting a community from scratch is an incredibly daunting task.

And also its just not true. We have a container that, while the contents do change year to year, is never completely empty.

Rosh Hashanah is our only holiday that happens at the very beginning of the Hebrew month. Its an extremely fragile time if you think about it. The moon is hardly visible. The sky is the darkest it can be... And if you imagine only having daylight to mark time, that can feel thrilling, maybe, or scary.... And also maybe a little lonely.

College is a time of finding, re-evaluating, and re-affirming who you are, and what's important to you. Its also a time of incredible upheaval and change, pretty much the whole way through. To be fair, that's what these 10 days are also about. Generally, we all try very hard to act like we have it figured out VERY quickly. You don't have much time here! But, lets be honest, because this is the time for honesty - there is very little about this world that is easy to figure out.

There are many studies that show major life transitions, including physically moving away from your previous living space and immediate family, or the people in your life who you normally are with, are one of the most significant moments of increased loneliness in people's lives. So, if anyone has moved recently, and is perhaps far away from the people and spaces they are most familiar with, loneliness might be a prime experience in your mind. In addition, there may be multiple reasons why the people in the closest physical proximity to you are not necessarily the people who you would choose, or the people who you feel see you and can know you the best. So if you're feeling lonely... I think its important to just note that you are not alone.

Over recent years, there has been a lot of talk about loneliness as an epidemic in our society. Public Health Expert Dr. Jeremy Nobel argues in his book, "Project Unlonely: Healing our Crisis of Disconnection," there are three types of loneliness: psychological, social and existential.

Psychological loneliness happens when we don't feel seen for who we really are, by enough of the people in our lives.

Societal loneliness is a lack of a sense of belonging, feeling left out. This can be situational or systemic- situational like starting a new school or being excluded from friend groups. Systemic means its baked into the fabric of our world - all forms of prejudice, bias, and discrimination based on some part of one's identity. So for example, if you encountered antisemitism, or some kind of tension or hurt based on your Jewish identity. ... Let alone having multiple marginalized identities. I can't tell you how many people who have shared experiences with me in the last year have said it left them with an uneasy feeling that is hard to describe. Perhaps that's this type of loneliness.

Existential loneliness - sometimes called spiritual loneliness -leads to questions of purpose - of asking who we are and why we are here and what matters? Its a moment of recognizing we are small compared to the whole of humanity. I would add for this moment - even smaller compared to the Infinite that is also sometimes called God.

Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of the world, the beginning of everything, if we can imagine it. And if I may, I think God experiences loneliness too. Because when God created the first human on the 6th day of creation,, already in the next chapter, God says: lo tov
It is not good for Adam - a person, any one of us - to be alone.

Rabbi Sharon Brous, in her book the Amen Effect, notes that not only does God immediately worry about humanity being alone, but that it is juxtaposed with this emphatic language- stated at the end of each day of creation - God looks back and says - it is good. And famously, the 6th day, when humans are created, it is Tov Meod - VERY good.

Our ancient sages emphasize the urgency with which God wants to make sure Adam is not alone, by saying that Chava ve was created by the end of first day that Adam had been placed in the Garden. When the sun was setting, Adam became worried about what was happening as darkness began to set in..

God wouldn't stop the sun from setting, but that didn't mean Adam had to be alone to face his fears.

So when God worries that Adam cannot be alone in the world, God says they need an Ezer K'negdo. - often translated as a helpmate -, an An equal, who is of help

- Robert Alter's even more precise definition says it is less of a helper, and more like life saver. Or life strengthener.

A lot of times this idea is attributed to a life partner or romantic relationship, but it can't only be that. I would argue it can't only be one person in our lives - friendships see us through all parts of our lives.

In a sermon about relationships, Rabbi Lisa Kingston quotes the book, The Friendship Fix - in which author Psychologist Andrea Bonior says it is common for adults to feel like they are in need of friendships at every new turn. She also acknowledges that there are not many official friendship courting rituals, and that navigating the friendship building process can be downright confusing.... I love to teach this quote when I teach about friendship - because I think it just normalizes how weird it is that after age 12 or so, no one asks you - have you made any new friends lately?

I was delighted to come across another text in the Amen Effect that I love to teach on friendship- in my senior seminar

The Rambam is telling us about the kinds of relationships we need in our lives. There are three categories he illuminates and I hope you have or will get a chance to learn this together with me and your peers, to dive into the full text. But the last kind of relationship, also clearly the best, the most rewarding in the mind of the Rambam, is the relationship of shared purpose, or mutual concern.

Brous notes, like I did earlier, that this is not only about romantic relationships. Mutual responsibility is a beautiful concept when we also feel we have shared purpose. But when we fundamentally can't see eye to eye, how painful it can be to know we are still responsible to one another.

There is one other time in Torah we are warned that being alone is not good -

And its in the Book of Exodus after all the individual family stories turn into the story of a people Rabbi Brous describes it as: The complex narrative arc that unfolds over the next many generations - through fratricide and deception, enslavement and war -there is only one other thing in all the 5 Books of Moses this is explicitly rendered "Not good"

It is when Mose's father in law Yitro criticizes him for taking on too much of the responsibility for leadership. - Lo tov hadavar hazeh asher atah oseh- Its not good, what you're doing." Moses in that moment is imposing a loneliness on himself that is unnecessary.

We can't do it all alone. Lest we think that combating loneliness is only about our closest relationships, about feeling seen as individuals, we learn that also in leadership, being alone is not good.

Our lives are so saturated with statements and articles - things we think we have to respond to our attach ourselves to, we can't even get to the deeper complexity of one issue or one person.

"If I think people don't understand what Jewish identity can be to someone, and how Israel or Zionism connects to that for me, how am I going to feel like I can trust someone enough to feel connected to them at this moment? "

"Why do I have to make sure people know I care about innocent lives lost in Gaza, which I AM devastated about, in order to have room to grieve and worry for my people?"

"I don't want to talk about the war just because someone found out I am Jewish... "

These are just some of the things I have heard from so many people in the last year. And almost always:" Why don't I hear or read or see the things that I feel really represent me?"

So there's the isolation of feeling very afraid of trying to connect with people, lest you find out a painful mismatch of opinions or values, and so you stay 'in community' with SOME people but at a lonely reserve. And there's the isolation of actually going there, and finding that there are things we really don't see about each other, and that hurts as well.

Dr Nobel also says the most difficult thing about loneliness is that it creates behaviors within us that perpetuate loneliness - we begin to mistrust when we feel lonely.

And we, after the year we have weathered, like this new moon, are all a bit... fragile.

Psychologist and Harvard Lecturer Richard Weissbourd gave a talk this spring about mitigating loneliness. He offers religious community as one model

He says : "I'm not suggesting that we should become more religious, but I want to just suggest to you that religious communities are a place where people engage in big moral questions, where there's a sense that you have obligations to your ancestors and to your descendants, where there is a structure for dealing with grief and loss,"

Brous also quotes data that shows people who participate in religious life live longer. People connected to communities of shared purpose are less lonely, more motivated, more hopeful and more fulfilled. ... Communities that have this quality, she says: invest in people as complicated, multifaceted , wounded, beautiful individuals , each one essential to the greater whole. It invests in the creation of sacred space that fosters not inclusion but belonging, intimacy and authenticity, love and accountability.

This community has brought a lot of comfort and strength and joy over the last year, for which I am so grateful. Some of us have deepend close relationships in the past year, which has

strengthened us. From where I stand, most people's social circle has shrunk, or at least come into question. And many of us have lost more friends than makes sense for a year.

My teacher Yavilah McCoy, an educator, activist, and multicultural community builder taught me that when we want to do cross-cultural work, build understanding, learn from each other by speaking across difference, both parties have to want each other. But if you can't find that common ground at the moment, you can still do your own inner work, to better understand yourself. This was about inter and intra-faith communities, but it is true for individuals. And its maybe the safest place to start right now. In some ways, loneliness is also a result of not giving ourselves the time, the honest reflection, and the courage to know ourselves first. Knowing yourself, and knowing who you are at your best and at your worst, is the first step. I think this past year has been particularly challenging to have the space and capacity for deep personal reflection... We are just trying to get through each day.

But today, over the next 10 days, lets give ourselves the opportunity to be vulnerable enough even internally for deep personal reflection - to be brave enough to reach out to someone else, and to allow ourselves to be seen by one another.

As a Jewish community, we are a community of shared purpose, regardless of whether or not we agree on everything.

Because here we are - all of us- choosing to be in this community. Each of us - complicated, multifaceted, wounded, beautiful individuals. Throughout this year I hope we can invest in creating sacred space that fosters authenticity, love, and accountability.

One of the most beautiful things about Jewish prayer is that we pray together in community- sometimes we can ONLY pray in community. And yet, we have moments where we are saying our prayers individually, but doing it next to each other. That helps me feel less lonely. So even if thats all we can do together this Rosh Hashana, I am glad to be doing it here, with you. And I am grateful to you all for being here so that we can say whatever we need to ourselves, to God - to pray alone, but to be together.

Shana Tova - may this year be sweeter.