

A Response to Loneliness: Celebrating CBE Small Groups

Parashat Vayikra

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Shabbat Shalom! Increasingly, when I am describing our community here at CBE, or my work as a rabbi in this community, I find myself using the word countercultural. It's not a description that I have always thought about using, but I think, in our current times, it's appropriate. Counterculture, by definition, is a culture operating in opposition to the mainstream of society. And in our mainstream society, we are fractured, isolated, separated, disconnected, and lonely. In 2023, United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, declared that this country was suffering from the effects of a loneliness epidemic. Throughout American society, we are increasingly finding ourselves socially disconnected, isolated from others in our communities, and lonely.

The sociologist Robert Putnam studied this trend in his seminal book, *Bowling Alone*, documenting the ways in which, beginning in the 1960s, we have slowly separated ourselves from our communities. Increasingly, we are choosing to bowl alone, as opposed to joining bowling leagues, as an example. Although this trend began decades ago, we have, according to Surgeon General Murthy, reached a breaking point. From 2003 to 2019, social isolation, measured by time spent alone, increased almost 24 hours per month. That's an entire extra day each month that many of us are spending by ourselves, as opposed to being in the company of others. Related to our purposes here tonight, gathering in prayer, in 1999, 70% of Americans were involved with a house of worship; in 2023, that number was only 49%. Perhaps most shockingly, the Surgeon General's report notes the ways in which loneliness impacts our physical health; according to the report, "lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day."¹ When we feel lonely and separated from others, it impacts our bodies, our minds, our spirits. Now, it's important to say that feelings of isolation, disconnection, or loneliness are all natural feelings, and each of us, in this community, and people in communities throughout this country and world, feel them regularly throughout our lives. We all do, of course. And, for our society, loneliness is becoming a cultural norm that is having detrimental effects on us all.

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

And so, when I describe our community here, how we gather together, across generations, professions, identities, and backgrounds; how we learn and discover together, pray and sing together; how we are united by Judaism, but practice that Judaism in all different ways and appreciate that about one another; all of these pieces of our community that we cherish so deeply, they are experiences that many people, regardless of connection to religion, aren't regularly experiencing in their lives. Our gathering tonight, introducing ourselves to each other in the lobby, celebrating members of our community getting married in a couple of weeks, participating in prayer, ritual, and song together, these are all ways in which this community is choosing connection and relationship; you, each of you are choosing connection and relationship. They are ways in which this community is increasingly countercultural to our increasingly disconnected, lonely society.

And yet, our community, just like so many other communities, knows that it's not always easy to find your place here. I speak with members of this community every week who are trying to connect with others, to find their path through the numerous different opportunities we provide here. Which brings me to our Small Groups, who we are honoring and celebrating tonight. But before I speak about them and their exciting programming and amazing connections and ways of creating relationships within this very large community, I want to say a word about connection and community within our tradition. In the beginning, after God created Adam, the first human being, God declares: לֹא־טוֹב הֵיְתִיב הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ, "It is not good for the Human to be alone."² And so God surrounds Adam with animals of all kinds, and also with a partner so that they may accompany each other through life. Fast forward to Exodus, the story we will read in just a couple of weeks during Passover. As the Israelites are making their way to freedom and liberation, we read that it was an עַרְב־רַב, a mixed multitude, that escaped Egypt with them.³ Rashi, our commentator from 11th century France, notes that this was a "mingling of various nations."⁴ Already, as we cross the Red Sea and make our way to Mount Sinai, we have diversity among our people, but still with the same shared purpose.

² Genesis 2:18

³ Exodus 12:38

⁴ Rashi on Exodus 12:38

Which brings us to this week's Torah portion, Vayikra, the beginning of the Book of Leviticus. Some of you may only think of Leviticus as the book of Torah with a bunch of gruesome, gruelly sacrifices; and...you would be correct. However, as it relates to our conversation tonight, Leviticus also provides us with two different words for community, and with that, two different ways of thinking about community amongst the Israelites. The first word for community is קהלה or קהל. The root of this word is connected with gathering or assembling. In Torah, the קהל is usually referring to the entire Israelite community, everyone gathered together without differentiating between individuals or groups. The second word for community is עדה. In our Torah portion this week, עדה is used to refer to the Sanhedrin, the group of people designated to make decisions for the people. But more broadly, עדה is a small group of people with a shared interest or purpose. The root of עדה is עד, which means witness. Being part of an עדה, being part of a small group of people, is about serving as a witness, seeing others as their full selves, with all of their joys and heartaches, gifts and challenges. And, we learn from our ancestors, that each עדה, each small group, is instrumental to maintaining and strengthening the larger community.

And so now let me return to our CBE Small Groups, our own 21st century **תודע**, our small groups of witness, relationship, and connection. There are many of you here tonight who are involved with a small group, but let me paint the picture: Across interest, identity, or life experience, dozens of small groups bring together hundreds of members of this community to engage with one another, to witness each other's lives, and to enrich their connection to Judaism and Jewish community. Whether it is on Zoom, in-person at CBE or someone's home, or out and about in our great city, you can find our small groups everywhere. Our small groups gather to create, to play, to learn, to grow, to care, to reflect, to support, to connect, to explore, to listen, to remember, and so much more. In a society that is increasingly lonely and disconnected, our small groups are insisting on relationship and connection, choosing to have people witness one another as their full selves, and build community. And it's important to say that each small group began as just an idea and then grew from there, so we encourage you to keep imagining new interests, identities, or life experiences that could bring even more connection and meaning to this community. Just like our ancestors in Torah, it is through the relationship and connection of small groups that makes the larger community even more beautiful, powerful, and special.

At this time, I'd like to forward anyone who is a leader of a CBE Small Group to join me on the bimah. (Give time for people to come forward and then ask for people to share which groups are represented) Mi Shebeirach avoteinu v'imoteinu, may the one who blessed our ancestors bless each of you as you lead our small groups in their work of relationship building. On this Shabbat, as we reflect upon connection and community, may you continue to be strengthened by the relationships you create, the experiences you craft, the community you build. This work is not easy. I pray that everyone reads and responds to your emails, there are no issues with food or material deliveries, and that your sign-ups are plentiful. As we are living in our increasingly disconnected and isolated world, your work is countercultural, bold, and necessary for us to live with connection and community. May you be strengthened in your building of community in this moment and into the future. And let us all say, amen! Yasher koach!