

Yom Kippur 5787

A sleek BMW pulls into the gravel driveway of a newly built, modernist home. In the car are three of the most popular girls at the most elite private school in Miami, Florida. It's an ordinary 9th grade morning, and they're here on the last stop of carpool. The door of the house opens and out comes a fourth girl, who shyly gets into the back seat. After a brief greeting, the first three girls continue catching up on all the gossip about boys and any girls who were seen wearing clothing or purses that were nerdy or gross – the 1980's version of cringe. The fourth girl sits, as she has in these carpool rides over the last few years, as close as possible to the door, looking out the window, immersed in the familiar feeling of an impossible gulf between her and everyone else.

You might have guessed correctly – that girl was me. This scene is one of my earliest memories of loneliness. I was different. Younger, an athlete, not boy crazy, not at all interested in clothing, purses, jewelry, makeup, hair. Never ostracized or bullied, in a life full of privilege, yet feeling that there must be something wrong with me. Something fundamentally alien. Wondering, doubting whether there would ever be a place with people I understood, whether I'd ever feel like I belonged.

Many people speak about the loneliness epidemic, and it is real and dangerous, but tonight I want to start by acknowledging loneliness as a normal and inevitable part of being human. We are born into the world inherently in relationship and inherently alone. We start out within someone else's body. We would not exist or survive if not for relationships among human beings. But even the most loving parents cannot know what it is like to be us, what it is like inside of us. Nor can anyone we meet or love for the rest of our lives fully know the unique experience of being the particular person we are. That's why moments of shared understanding and laughter feel so good – it's the feeling that maybe we're not separate after all.

So we all have times – some of us more, some less – of feeling different, alien and maybe also alienated from others – it could be the people around us, it could even be the people closest to us, it could be society as a whole.

Though loneliness can come upon us when we are alone, it also can come upon us in a crowd, at a party, in a family. As a person who loves solitude, who traveled for six months mostly alone, who lives mostly alone, I worry that our fear of loneliness – particularly as it is widely understood to be an epidemic – will prevent us from embracing aloneness, which is not the same thing. Periods of aloneness can be a balm. Solitude can be a respite from the noise of the world, a respite in which we come to

know ourselves. Time alone allows us to see the many parts of ourselves, not only the parts we show to others. It allows us to see what needs to change – which is the work of these days – and to make peace with the person who is right here, maybe to forgive, maybe to accept, maybe even to love that person in all of their imperfections. That is also the work of these days. Such work is possible in the company of others – look at us here – but in my experience it also requires time alone.

Fear of loneliness can be an obstacle to granting ourselves time alone. What I have found is that loneliness comes, and it hurts. It is painful, physically painful, but if it is not resisted or rejected, if it is allowed to be felt in its fullness, the pain soon recedes. I know this isn't true for everyone, but loneliness can be followed by a sweetness, by a bloom of joy, a sense of wellbeing that is deeper and more enduring than the loneliness that preceded it.

In the wake of loneliness, I tend to remember that the feeling of being separate is both real and an illusion. After I feel lonely, I tend to remember that we are all part of a great Oneness, whether we call that life on earth, or the vast universe, or G-d. With only a little reflection, every single breath shows us that we are not separate. We are literally made of the stuff of the earth, temporary manifestations of this living system, interconnected and interdependent with life, with being, within a great Oneness. The ultimate belonging.

We are a social species. Therefore, knowing that we're interdependent with all life doesn't necessarily relieve a feeling of distance from other humans. Even if we are blissfully in touch with the great Oneness, loneliness still happens and still hurts. But I don't think I could have learned these things if I didn't know loneliness so well. If I hadn't gone through the pain I would never have made friends with it. Loneliness is complicated. It's not only bad. Sometimes it's important.

And, it can be bad. For some, maybe for you, loneliness can be so frequent and lasting that it feels inescapable. When we chronically crave closeness to other humans but don't feel it, that chasm can set in and self-reinforce, distancing us farther and farther from other people. Loneliness grows from isolation, and it exacerbates isolation. As has been well reported, 21st century America is characterized by conditions that cause loneliness.

As bad as things are now, loneliness and isolation are not new. In Baba Metzia 59b, we have perhaps the most studied sugya in the Babylonian Talmud. The story known as the *oven of akhnai* centers on a rabbi named Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who was extraordinary by all accounts. One day, the Rabbis were arguing about an oven, whether it was pure

or impure. All of the Rabbis agreed that the oven was impure, except for Eliezer. The text says that Rabbi Eliezer gave all of the answers in the world to support his position, but the other Rabbis continued to see it differently. After he couldn't convince them with logic he started to use miracles. He said, "if I'm right, if the halakha is with me, that carob tree is going to prove it." And the tree uprooted and moved, some say 100 cubits some 400 cubits (that's 150 to 600 feet). Unimpressed, the other Rabbis said "carob trees don't prove anything." Eliezer said, OK, if I'm right, this stream is going to prove it. And the stream started flowing backward. The other Rabbis responded, "you can't cite proof from a stream." Escalating his tactics, Eliezer said, if the halakha is with me, the walls of our study hall will prove it. And the walls around where they were sitting began to tilt inward and fall over their heads. Rabbi Yehoshua got up and told the walls to mind their own business, which saved their lives, but clearly at this point emotions were running high. Finally, Eliezer said, if the halakha is in accordance with me, Heaven is going to prove it. And the Talmud says that a Divine voice sounded from Heaven, saying "why are you arguing with Eliezer, the halakha is always with him." At that moment, speaking on behalf of all of the other Rabbis, Yehoshua stood up and addressed Heaven, quoting Torah to say that Torah is not in Heaven but is decided by the majority.

This text is usually taught to illustrate the chutzpah of the Rabbis. It goes on to relate that G-d smiled in response, saying "My children have defeated Me." In other words, G-d was pleased that the Rabbis claimed the authority to overrule even G-d.

It's a radical text every Jew should know as we seek to adapt our tradition to meet the needs of our time. But there's something else happening in this story. Rabbi Eliezer is becoming alienated from his colleagues and friends, from his peers, who are his world. He was right, and they didn't care. They would not or could not hear him, even though G-d was with him. They all ganged up against him.

The story continues. That very day the Sages took every object that Eliezer had ever deemed pure and burned them in a fire. The text says, "they reached a consensus about him and ostracized him." Upon hearing of his excommunication, Eliezer tore his garments, removed his shoes, and sat on the ground, entering a state of mourning. The Talmud relates that he shed tears and everywhere his tears fell "the world was afflicted by his pain." The olive, wheat, and barley crops were reduced by one-third. In addition to tears, the Talmud says "there was great anger on that day, and anywhere he looked would burst into flames." In the end, Eliezer poured out his grievance in prayer to G-d, and Rabban Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin, the leader of the Rabbinic court, died as a result.

In this text we see the tragic story of one particularly extraordinary Rabbi who did not fit in, and we also see a larger lesson about the consequences of exclusion, the excruciating pain of loneliness, and its dangers for society.

There's no one in our time whose prayers can kill, but there are a lot of people in our time who are going through the kind of pain Eliezer felt. Who feel cut off from others, rejected, excluded, or maybe just different. This sugya so vividly evokes that experience of feeling misunderstood, unheard, unloved, of feeling like you have no one.

Even if lonely people can't burn down the world with their eyes or destroy crops with their tears, the world is afflicted by their pain. The grief and anger of mass loneliness do destroy the world. Loneliness can lead to rage, to a desire for revenge, that we see in everything from mass shootings to destructive choices at the ballot box. Hannah Arendt taught that loneliness is an essential ingredient in a society's slide toward authoritarianism.

Most lonely people do not take out their feelings on others. Most turn those feelings of grief and anger inward, becoming depressed. Many people suffer this in silence. And I worry that the more our society talks about it as an epidemic, the more stigmatized it becomes, leading to fear and shame on top of everything else.

If you are experiencing chronic loneliness, or even temporary loneliness, choosing to come to a place like CBE takes so much strength and so much courage. You are working hard to be in community. You are doing exactly what you need to do to eventually feel better, and you are wanted here.

There are fewer and fewer places like this in America, places that foster real relationships with a circle bigger than one's family – across generations, across worldviews. Many people have come to meet with me to ask: if I don't agree with you, do I still have a place here? If you are wondering this, I want to say as clearly and strongly as I possibly can: you belong here. No matter how you feel different, you belong here. In fact, you are helping us be who we need to be: the widest tent and most inclusive community we can be. We do not have to be like one another to belong to one another. You belong here.

Every class we teach is an opportunity for connection, every Friday night and Saturday morning service an opportunity to create belonging. Through Chesed, anyone can volunteer to care for other members who are sick or in need. Through the Tikkun Alliance, anyone can volunteer to care for people outside our walls. Sometimes caring for others is the best medicine when we feel lonely.

I decided to talk about loneliness tonight not only to care for each of us as individuals. That's important. But also to care for us as a people. For many Jews, this is a lonely time to be Jewish. Eliezer's feelings of grief, of anger, of not belonging anywhere apply to us as a group.

Many Jews feel alienated from the most visible Jewish leaders in the world. Some are so alienated they're wondering whether to check out of the Jewish people altogether, to say "I am not that." Many other Jews feel excluded and ostracized as Jews. And many feel both at once.

This year, our local elementary school, PS 321, decided to no longer hold its graduation ceremony here in our sanctuary. The official reason was that a public school shouldn't hold graduation in a religious building, which is legitimate, but upon inquiry the principal told me that the desire to change venues stemmed from discomfort about Israel, and therefore about us. Despite a relationship in which we provided afterschool care for PS 321 students for 50 years and hosted graduation for 20 years, despite the fact that hundreds of our families are also 321 families, this decision was made without anyone at the school reaching out to us as neighbors to talk about their concerns, to see whether their assumptions about us were right, or to even tell us that they were severing this tie. That made many of us feel lonely and misunderstood. PS 321 is a beloved neighborhood institution, and I am hopeful that we will continue the conversation and break down assumptions.

We probably all know about the Park Slope Food Coop boycott, and though our community has a diverse range of perspectives on that vote, many members of our congregation felt it as painful exclusion and ostracism. I am someone who went to jail for protesting the war in Gaza in front of the Israeli consulate, and I felt that what happened at the Coop was wrong. You may know that I publicly resigned.

That moment felt lonely. Many of us felt misunderstood and alienated. When I resigned I wrote on the coop resignation form, "I do not feel that I belong here anymore."

I don't miss the work shifts, and I'm happy with my CSA, but I now believe my decision to resign was not the right decision. Not because I suddenly have a new opinion about the Global BDS movement. I do not. But because no one gets to make me feel that I don't belong. No one gets to make you feel that you don't belong. We belong. We belong to our neighborhood grocery store. We belong to our neighborhood public school. We belong to Brooklyn. To New York City. To America. To the human family.

We cannot control how other people treat us, or what they think of us. But we do have agency over how we identify. We decide which story we tell. These days, many of us are doing what I did at the Park Slope Food Coop. We're walking away. We're identifying with otherness.

Our people have been defining ourselves as other from the beginning. Sometimes we've identified not just as other but better – chosen. We've often told a story in which we are perpetual outsiders, forever and always misunderstood and disliked. There clearly are grounds for that story, but it's not the only possible story to tell. It's also true that local, regional and global events have been our events. Floods, wars, famines, empires. Conditions that affected everyone affected us. And it's also true that we've often had neighbors who were our friends. Who we traded with or grew up with or were taken in by or loved by or made families with or worked with or marched with. We could equally tell a story that we have belonged to our neighborhood, our local region, the human family.

When I was a kid in that carpool and at that school, I came to identify with not belonging. I see now that it was a defense mechanism. It frightened me to feel so different. I'm not proud of this, but sometimes I told myself that I was better. I looked down on their obsession with purses and jewelry and makeup. But again and again, I'd come back to feeling that there must be something wrong with me. The truth is, I wasn't superior or inferior. I was just different.

Still today, if you were to ask me about high school I would say I had no friends. But it's not true. I did have friends who were good and kind people. I was so caught up in seeing myself as other that I wasn't able to see another story. Yes, I was different, but I wish I could go back now and show that teenager how everyone was different in some way. I wish I could have seen that I belonged.

We can do that now. And I think we should. I love our differences from the rest of humanity, the things that make us us. Let me be clear: I would never suggest that we give them up or mute them or hide them or play them down to fit in. Never. They are what make us amazing. This place is dedicated to celebrating and teaching those very things. But we can be the fullest expression of us and still know we belong with the rest of humanity.

After all, 99.9 percent of the human genome is shared. Only .1% varies. So if you're someone who feels lonely sometimes, or most of the time, you are not the only one. You're just like all the other lonely people who make up our world.

We live in a time of alienation. Like the members of our congregation who've come here tonight despite their loneliness, we can decide to find the courage and the strength to assert, to believe, to know that we belong. We belong to the great Oneness that is within and beyond all things. And we belong to the human family. Even when we feel hurt or misunderstood, we still belong. Just like everyone else.

G'mar Chatima Tova.