

Solitary but Never Alone
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Rabbi Debra J. Robbins
Temple Emanu-El Dallas, TX

Shanah Tovah! When everything is new this Rosh Hashanah why not read a new Torah portion too? Genesis 1, with its refrain of *ki tov*, “it’s good,” is a perfect choice. It is so life affirming for the start of this pandemic New Year. Seven times in 30 verses, the same word, *tov*. It is unequivocal in its assertion. This world we live in, is good, despite a tornado tearing through our city, hate and blood spilling in the streets of our country, Covid19 spreading around the globe.

Today on the birthday of the world, Rosh Hashanah 5781, we affirm, as my friend Larry Dressler says, the world is, “beautiful and broken”. It is hard to hold both truths at the same time, but the creation story affirms this eternal reality. In Chapter 2 of Genesis God declares the first “not good” thing in the world. “*Lo tov* it is NOT GOOD, *hayot ha’adam l’vado*, it is NOT good for the human to be *l’vado*.¹ *L’vado* is most often translated as “alone” with the connotation of loneliness. But from these months of forced isolation we know, it’s not so simple. For introverts, quarantine has been a bit of a blessing. For extroverts, lock down has been more of a curse. For couples, and families with kids of all ages, together 24/7, all anyone wants is, “alone time”. For those living alone, even in big buildings filled with other people, the isolation has been intensely painful.

There was an epidemic of loneliness, before there was a pandemic. Now, more of us are suffering from being physically distant, feeling socially, emotionally and spiritually distant from family, friends, community, even from God. In 2018 22% of adults in the United States (55 million people) reported they often or always feel lonely. That’s double the number of people who have diabetes.² *Lo Tov*. Not Good. A similar study found people who are lonely have a life expectancy similar to those smoking 15 cigarettes a day.³ *Lo Tov*. Not Good.

This is the season when we choose life, pray to be renewed for life, and we know, God was right. *L’vado*, when understood as loneliness, is *lo tov*, complicated, and not good. Our efforts to address this **epidemic** as a congregation have intensified during the past seven months. Volunteers checked in with 2600 households and the connections continue. Support group meetings went on uninterrupted as participants nimbly moved on-line. Small groups are figuring out how to thrive in zoom chat rooms. You are telling us it’s a lifeline to see others and be seen on-line. More people are coming to shabbat services, baking challah, lighting candles, in sanctuaries at home. Even with all this, our work is only beginning. Now is the time to commit--to tell our stories honestly, listen with compassion, and walk together, to lift spirits, revive souls and save lives in the loneliness epidemic.⁴

The verse in Genesis begins, “It is not good for the human to be *l’vado*...” and then God says, “I will make an *ezer k’negdo*.”⁵ God creates the second human, upon whom the first human bestows the name, *Eishah*. It is an extension of his own name, *Eish*, making them one, with each other and with their creator. *Eishah*, the woman, the *ezer k’negdo*, is as Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi writes, “...not a cure for loneliness...”⁶ She is, as the rabbis of the Talmud teach, a special kind of partner, created to, “bring light to the eyes of the other and put the human back

on their feet.”⁷We are all built to be *ezer-k’negdo*, partners, friends, family, communities and congregations. We have learned to be quite innovative at it. A face on a zoom screen at a shiva minyan brings light to our eyes. A baby held aloft outside a grandparent’s window assures the future. A parade of cars honking horns brings joy to a birthday. A voice on the phone raises hope and puts us on our feet (even if we don’t put on shoes!).

There’s another way too, which is counterintuitive, which I often find myself resisting. It is to embrace the opportunity to be *l’vado*, not alone, but as Rabbi Laura Geller teaches, solitary. We can be better at relationships, with others, ourselves and God, when we are aware of what William Wordsworth called, “the bliss of solitude.”⁸ For these unprecedented High Holy Days we created our own sanctuaries to experience this kind of bliss, the blessings of solitude. Listen to how Franz Kafka describes it.

You do not have to leave the room.
Remain standing at your table and listen.
Do not even listen, simply wait.
Do not even wait.
Be quite still and solitary.

The world will freely offer itself to you.
To be unmasked.
It has no choice.
It will roll in ecstasy at your feet.⁹

How we long for an unmasked world, where we don’t have to wear face coverings to protect others and ourselves. These High Holy Days are about a different sort of un-masking. Even more than the tear stained cheeks or glowing smiles we are desperate to see, we yearn for the goodness of the world, the holiness of our own souls, maybe even the Presence of God, to be revealed, to roll at our feet and into our lives. In a pandemic, with an epidemic of loneliness embedded in it, solitude is essential to our mental wellbeing, integral to a meaningful Jewish life. Rosh Hashanah is noisy with 100 shofar blasts. Yom Kippur invites us into a quieter place. The Day of Atonement reminds us, as Dr. Vivek Murty concludes in his book, “solitude can be a sacred state...[and], paradoxically, protects against loneliness.”¹⁰

In the ancient ritual of Yom Kippur, the high priest enters the Holy of Holies and stands, still and solitary. The Presence of the Holy One fills the room,¹¹ as it fills the world, and the heart. We stand with him as he: trembles with fear and awe at God’s Presence, is warmed by God’s Light, senses Ruach Elohim, the spirit of God, wrapped around him, experiences joyous relief having fulfilled his responsibilities to a God he calls Father and King. It is this sanctuary we seek to create, a holy place where we can be *l’vado*, solitary, yet paradoxically, not alone.

In the Bible, transformational things happen when people are *l’vado*, not only in God’s Temple but outside in God’s House, our world. Rebecca falls in love in an open field.¹² Jacob becomes Israel on the riverbank.¹³ Miriam heals outside the camp.¹⁴ King David composes the psalms looking out the window.¹⁵ Their experiences illustrate the words of the poet, David Whyte, “aloneness...culminates [with] the slow knitting together of an inner life, now exposed to air and

light.”¹⁶ The soul grows, broken pieces of our essence are knit together, when exposed to air and light, the building blocks of creation, which are very good. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, knew how to feed the soul with air and light. I love his prayer:

Grant me the ability to be alone;
may it be my custom to go outdoors each day
among the trees and grass--among all growing things
and here may I be alone, and enter into prayer,
to talk with the One to whom I belong...¹⁷

It's true for many of us, being outdoors or even looking through the window, we can, “talk to the One to whom we belong...” I don't always know how to begin that talk. But this Rosh Hashanah, words of Psalm 27 get me started. *Achat Shaalti...* God, I have one thing to ask You...¹⁸ Did you recognize being alone wasn't good because You were lonely? Did You realize everything else You created was made with a pair, and the One had none?¹⁹ Is this why You called to Adam and Eve, *aiyecha*, where are you?²⁰ Is it why You call each of us to enter into a covenant with You, a loving trusting partnership, with Torah and mitzvot to connect us?²¹

I'm not alone in asking these four questions which are really one. The rabbis of the Zohar find an answer when they re-vocalize a single word from the book of Isaiah. Instead of reading, “I place My words in your mouth...[and say] *AMI*, you are MY people”²² they read, I place My words in your mouth...[and say] *IMMI*, you are WITH me.²³ Be with me, God says, I need you. Even though I am One, Unique and Solitary, I can't endure in OUR world alone. I like to imagine God hearing the words of Yehudah Halevi, words some of us sang in his homeland of Spain last fall. Maybe God felt, as the poet felt, not so isolated in a dark and challenging medieval world, like *Eish* and *Eishah* in the Garden of Eden, like us in 2020.

“*Ya anah emtzaacha...*
God, where shall I find You?
...And where shall I not find You?...
...when I went out toward You,
I found You coming toward me...”²⁴

I found You, God, coming toward me. You God, are *l'vado*, Exemplar of Being Solitary, eternally working to end loneliness, and counting on me, on us, to do the same. It is a new responsibility at dawn of this New Year to go with everything else that is new. What is not new are the ancient words of Torah to illuminate the path. Rosh Hashanah 5781 offers us: Invitations to sit in sanctuaries of our own creating, to affirm many are *l'vado*, but none need be lonely. Encouragement to walk in The Garden that is our world, to be the best *ezer k'negdo*, human partner we can be. A reminder to stand in the Presence of the Solitary One to glimpse the Image of Holiness that is our lives. Blessings to share with the world on its birthday: Gratitude for air and light to nourish our souls, abiding and abundant hope that healing will come to all the world, and with it, wholeness and peace.

Shanah Tovah!

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- ¹ Genesis 2:18
- ² *Together* by Vivek Murthy, Page 10
- ³ *Together* by Vivek Murthy, Page 13
- ⁴ Thanks to Rabbi Mark Katz, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/eli-talks/loneliness-the-existential-jewish-problem/>
- ⁵ Genesis 2:18
- ⁶ *Women's Torah Commentary* page 12.
- ⁷ BT Yevamot 63a
- ⁸ William Wordsworth, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45521/i-wandered-lonely-as-a-cloud>
- ⁹ Franz Kafka, as quoted in *The Blue Guide to the Here and Hereafter*, page 28 (from Ruth Lurie) perhaps originally from his Blue Octavio Notebooks 1917-1919.
- ¹⁰ *Together* by Vivek H. Murthy, Page 9
- ¹¹ Leviticus 16
- ¹² Genesis 24:64-65
- ¹³ Genesis 32:25
- ¹⁴ Numbers 12:15
- ¹⁵ BT Sanhedrin 16a (section 19 Sefaria)
- ¹⁶ David Whyte, *Consolations* p.3
- ¹⁷ Nachman of Bratzlav (need to find citation)
- ¹⁸ Psalm 27:4
- ¹⁹ Deuteronomy Rabbah 2;2?
- ²⁰ Genesis....
- ²¹ Deuteronomy 29:9-4
- ²² Isaiah 51:16
- ²³ S'fat Emet, Bereishit 1:5 in *The Language of Truth* (page 5)
- ²⁴ Lord, Where Shall I Find You by Yehudah HaLevi as translated in *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* by T. Carmi (note it is different than the Hoffman translation in *Mishkan T'filah* page 53.)