

Two Kinds of Solitude

Yom Kippur 1994

There are two kinds of solitude. The first solitude is the fundamental, inescapable fact of our human condition. Every single human being, no matter how cramped and crowded their life is with brothers, sisters, parents, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, grandchildren, friends, animals... every single human being lives alone inside themselves. And when we come to die, even if we are surrounded by a loving family, nevertheless, all of us face the moment of our death alone. This is the first kind of solitude.

The second solitude is a loneliness which we create, which results from decisions we make, decisions which disconnect us and distance us from the people in our lives.

Yom Kippur, this Day of Atonement, is about both kinds of solitude. On this day we **reject** the loneliness which we create. We resolve and act to reach out across the distance which **we** have set between ourselves and the people of our lives.

And on this Day of Atonement, we **embrace** the **first** solitude - the aloneness which is at the heart of being human.

This evening, I would like to discuss both kinds of solitude, sharing some of our tradition's wisdom about living life together with other human beings, and also reflecting on what it might mean to stand alone before God tonight and tomorrow. Each of us, surrounded by a sea of humanity, standing alone before God.

Many are the ways in which we detach from each other; and many of those ways are so pervasive, so widely accepted in modern society, that we do not even recognize them as **decisions** or **choices** that we make, and actually **might** make differently, and which have profound consequences for our lives.

The most obvious, and my personal *bête noire*, is television. A friend who grew up in Israel in the 1960's, once told me that Israeli society underwent a sudden transformation in June 1967 that is rarely if ever acknowledged. Before that time, on any given evening, Israelis were likely to be out visiting with their friends or family. Few households had television. Then in June of 1967, during the Six Day War, most Israeli men were called to the army and Israeli TV news was broadcast from the battle front. **Everyone** bought a television. Since that time, on a typical evening, Israelis have stayed in and watched TV.

America had no comparable turning point; the transformation here was more gradual, but it is infinitely more widespread here than it is even today in Israel. We Americans do not visit each other in the evenings; we watch TV. Let me add that I **love** TV! My childhood was filled with Rocky and Bullwinkle, Get Smart, the Avengers...Star Trek. And in this new dawn, with the imminent arrival of 100 channels, there will **always** be something great available. That is the real danger... not that it will all be junk, but that the selection will be wonderful. irresistible. Because I firmly believe that when we bring the television

into our home, and every time we turn it on, we increase the loneliness in our life. The television fills a space in our world that used to be occupied

by human connection. And while the TV may entertain and stimulate us, it can **never** give or receive love or friendship.

Another way in which we separate ourselves from each other, and this is another habit which we acquire early in life, is in conceiving of life as a **race** in which we will end either a winner or a loser. I can speak for myself. I read hungrily through my college class alumni notes to see who has already become famous. Or rich. Or both. I keep tabs on my rabbinic school classmates, who were at one time my best friends, primarily in order to hear how they are doing in their jobs. And while I love my work, and feel incredibly lucky to have **this** job... I do die, a small death, when one of my classmates is chosen to serve a large congregation. When I go to the Hillel national staff conference, and enjoy the company of those few in the world doing the same work I am, my mind is constantly calculating a quiet comparison. Whose Hillel is more successful? Who is doing better? And I suffer a pang of worry that I, who was voted most likely to succeed in the ninth grade class at Bay Trail Junior High School, might somehow be slipping behind in the race.

What a way to live. What a way to think about one's friends and colleagues. How lonely. Indeed, it is lonely to run a race in which there are only winners and losers. Perhaps this outlook afflicts men more in our society than it does women. But I think that perhaps women also make their own comparisons. And this is another way in which we disconnect from each other.

And there are other ways. When we walk down the street, in Santa Barbara, or even in Isla Vista, chances are that we will encounter a person in rags, unwashed, with all their belongings in the world bundled into plastic bags. Sometimes they are elderly. They could not and would not hurt us. And we walk by. If we are feeling particularly strong and outgoing, we may try to drop them an encouraging look, maybe give them a quarter or 50 cents, and **then** walk by. And our thoughts turn to our own business, or the merchandise in the next window, and unless we are quite unusual, that sad encounter doesn't make a huge impression on us. We don't let it, because to go through life **fully feeling** all the suffering around us... not to mention all the additional suffering we can tap into instantly through the television...to fully feel all that suffering would immobilize us. It might very well **distract** us; it might **weaken** us in the race we are running. And so we allow a toughened membrane to grow over our hearts, protecting us from all that suffering, and allowing us to function and to stay **positive** and **upbeat** But we do lose the ability to feel each others' suffering. And in this way, also, we disconnect from other human beings.

Finally, and of course this is not the end of the list, we modern Americans lead such busy, varied, stimulating lives that we just don't have a lot of time left over **for each other**. Even for our partner and our children, let alone for our friends and extended family.

We are working so hard to make the most of our lives -- to listen to good music, to see good films, to hear good lectures, to learn another language, to cook great food, to

have beautiful homes and gardens, to have healthy bodies...at least healthy-**looking** bodies.. .we are working so hard at all this that we don't see much of each other. How often do you see your **good** friends? Once or twice a week? Once or twice a **month** Except for the people we work with, **none** of us sees much of anyone else.

Do we choose to live this way? Is this the way we **want** to live? Yom Kippur calls us to examine these decisions by which we create the loneliness of our own lives.

The fact is, our tradition commands us -- and especially on this day -- to **reject** life in isolation. I would like to share with you a wonderful passage from the Talmud, which is traditionally recited every single morning, as part of the morning prayers. It's a list of fundamental **mitzvot** of commandments, and we read it at the beginning of each day to remind ourselves how we are supposed to live. There are 10 in this list, but only the first one is among the list we usually call the 10 Commandments.

From the Talmud, tractate Shabbat, p. 1 27a, here's the list:

1. Honoring Father and Mother; 2. the practice of kindness; 3 rising early to go to the house of study; 4. welcoming guests; 5. visiting the sick; 6. bringing in a bride; 7. attending the dead; 8. devotion in prayer; 9. bringing peace between a person and their neighbor; 10. and the study of Torah above them all.

This passage deserves extensive study, but I offer it briefly tonight specifically as a possible way out from some of our modern habits of life in isolation. Can we imagine reorganizing our lives around **these** ten commandments? **Each** of them is **precisely** about overcoming human separation. Let me touch on a few.

#1. Honoring father and mother. The Torah observes, after Adam and Eve first wake up and find each other, "therefore a person leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh." We do, we must, separate from our parents as we enter adulthood. But that separation is mitigated by the great commandment to honor our father and mother. Which means much more than think good thoughts about them. My own understanding of this commandment is: When you leave your parents, do not abandon them. Separate, and then overcome that separation.

#3 Rising early to attend the house of study. Notice that the mitzvah is not "get up early to **study**". Nor is it "get up early to go to the library." Rabbi Danny Gordis has pointed out the wonderful contrast between the **silence** of the secular library and the **noise** of a traditional Jewish house of study. Because Jewish learning is done **out loud** between two partners wrestling together over the text. At the house of study, more important even than the text itself, we meet **each other. Noisily**

#5. Bikur Kholim - Visiting the sick. Again, it is helpful to notice the choice of language. It's not **caring** for the sick or **healing** the sick, both of which are also important. The **mitzvah** the obligation which tradition places on every Jew, is simply to **visit** the sick.

Because in the eyes of the tradition, perhaps the worst thing about illness is that the sick person is **isolated**. Illness removes us from the community... and so the Torah insists that the community rise up and overcome the separation. Visit the sick.

#s 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 - Welcoming guests, attending a funeral, bringing in the bride, practice of kindness, praying together, bringing peace between a person and their neighbor.... According to **this** particular text, these are the fundamental commandments of Judaism. Every one of them, without exception, sets us in relationship with each other. They all seem **designed specifically** to create and promote human connection. This list offers us a vision of human beings living **with** each other, **visiting** each other, learning together, caring for each other.

It is an **alternative** vision, **radically** different from the fragmentation and isolation of modern society. And Yom Kippur lifts this vision up before us and says simply: **This** is the way we are meant to live. Visiting each other is better than watching television. Learning together is better than endlessly striving to **out do** each other. Practicing kindness, visiting the sick and comforting the mourner are better than protecting ourselves from suffering. Praying together is better than frantically trying to experience as many of the Santa Barbara Independent's Best Bets as possible.

We make many decisions in our life which increase our loneliness; Yom Kippur is a **re-pudiation** of this type of isolation.

There is another type of solitude, though, which on Yom Kippur we embrace. In fact, the bonds of love which exist in family and community make it **possible** to face the necessary solitude, the sacred solitude at the heart of human life.

The Yom Kippur liturgy employs an image that was once wonderfully familiar, and extremely evocative, but which is now remote from our experience. The text is originally from the Mishnah, where it is written: "On this day, all those who come into the world pass before God like sheep before the shepherd." This verse never meant much to me; after all, how often does one see sheep and shepherd in Goleta? But then, last year, we lived for a year in sheep farming country in England's Lake District. Now I **know** the way sheep pass before the shepherd! And then last week I came across 15th century commentator Obadiah of Bertinora's commentary on this image: "That is," says Bertinora, "like sheep which the farmer causes to pass through a narrow gate, one after another, to examine them. And two cannot pass through together."

The **mishnah's** image of sheep being made to pass through a narrow gate, before the shepherd, one at a time, was set down 1800 years ago. I now know that it's the only way to get sheep to hold still long enough to get a good look at them. Sheep farmers in the Lake District are still examining their sheep in the very same way.

So the crux of the image is that the sheep are passing through one at a time. Two cannot squeeze through together. We may come to services tonight with our friends, our partners, our parents or children, but we pass through the gate, pass before the

shepherd **one at a time** We come before God alone.

It is a foreshadowing, quite explicitly, of the moment of our death. For what is the gate through which everyone who comes into the world passes, and through which two cannot pass together? That gate is death. I only remember being near that gate once in my life. It was about twelve years ago, I was back in my home town of Rochester, New York, it was mid-winter, and I went cross country skiing one afternoon out in the countryside. After following other ski tracks for a couple of hours, I turned to go back to my car and realized that the tracks were confused and I was lost in woods I didn't recognize.

As it grew darker and colder, I became frightened.. .wondering what it would mean to spend the night out in the woods, without food, shelter, or fire. I wondered whether I might actually freeze to death, and I vividly remember that I prayed. I prayed with **devotion**.

Well, I got lucky (or perhaps my prayers were answered). I reached a road, and I took a guess and followed in the right direction, and eventually I did find my way back. Or was led back. (Do I need to choose?) That experience will stay with me, because it was a time of profound loneliness, in which I looked at death, and found myself praying.

Yom Kippur challenges us to face that solitude at the gateway between life and death, once a year. It is a rehearsal, once a year, for the moment of our own death. How lucky, that we get a chance to practice! For on the day of our death, we will all be asked the same question: So, how did you spend your allowance? Your time? Your money? Your energy? And the voice asking that question will not be the least bit interested in how everyone **else** was spending **their** time, money and energy. Like those sheep trying to squeeze through the gate, each of us passes through the gate **alone**. This is the sacred solitude of Yom Kippur.

It was described particularly beautifully by Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Pzhysha, one of the great Hasidic teachers of the nineteenth century. Rabbi Bunem remarked:

“When I look at the world, it sometimes seems to me that each person is a solitary tree in the wilderness, and that God has no one in the world but that person, and that person has no one to turn to save God.” On Yom Kippur, each of us is that solitary tree.

This is **not** the way we are meant to live our **daily** lives. As I discussed in the first half of this sermon, Judaism urges us, even **commands** us, to live life **with** each other. In relationship. In family. In community. But then, having come together in love and friendship, there is a time to close our eyes and turn inward. To draw away from each other, and to feel the quiet solitude that leads us to God. We touch this place whenever we pray, but on Yom Kippur, once a year, we **spend** an entire day exploring the lonely, unlit corners of our soul. We come together for this purpose, because this journey takes courage, and there is wonderful comfort and strength to be found in each others' voices and physical presence. But the journey is an inward one, and each of us makes it alone.

I wish for all of us a night and day of honesty, of courage, of opening to God, and ultimately, .. .of a renewed commitment to life with each other. Amen. Ken y'hi ratson.