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Temple Beth El
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Lonely and Alone
Rosh Hashanah – Day 2
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I can still remember the day that I found out I was moving to Boca. I was thrilled. I had landed my dream position, which just so happened to be in paradise. My friends were happy for me but they were also confused. They said, “Mazel Tov! Are you sure you really want to leave here?” They couldn’t understand how anyone would ever want to leave New York City. I told them that there were many things that I loved about New York and it was certainly a great experience to live there. But when I found out I was leaving, I felt relieved. You see, there was something about New York City that never felt quite right to me. Actually, that’s not it. There was something about myself that was never quite right there.

I thought maybe it had to do with the fact that I was a small town Cincinnati girl living in one of the biggest cities in the world. Maybe it was just too overwhelming for me. But having lived here and having become a part of the Temple Beth El community, I now know what was wrong. I was lonely.

Thinking back about it, when I was with Brad or my family and friends, I felt fine. But when I was walking the streets or sitting on the subway, I always felt very lonely. I would think, how can you be lonely when you are living in a city with over eight million people?! How can you be surrounded by people all of the time and feel this way? I had heard people talk about this kind of loneliness but I never quite understood it. It always sounded kind of trite to me. But I have to tell you, it can be real. It was very real to me.

I had thought that you could only feel lonely when you were alone. When my grandfather died, my grandma was extremely lonely. They had been together forever and had done everything together. Now she was living on her own. This was a woman who never had to eat dinner alone or go to a party by herself. And when he died, she didn’t want to do the things that they used to do together. She knew that it would be too lonely.

This type of loneliness makes sense and it’s something that many people in our community have experienced this year. When you have shared your life with another human being and then they are no longer there, it feels very lonesome. But this is not the only type of loneliness. As I found in New York, you *can* be close to others and still feel lonely.

In fact, you can be in a relationship and feel even lonelier than if you were by yourself. It makes me think of an email that a woman wrote to a professor who was conducting research on loneliness. She said, “I am fifty-six and have been divorced for years. When I was still with my husband and told somebody that I

was lonely, they responded with 'but you're married'" (Loneliness, Cacippo & Patrick, 3). These people didn't understand that being in a relationship does not protect us from feeling lonely at times. When we are married, our partner is supposed to know us better than anybody else. So when problems arise and we no longer understand each other, it can feel very lonely. We have lost connection and this is what is so painful and alienating. To not be connected is to be lonely. And this is a difficult thing to come to terms with.

Loneliness is a feeling that we have trouble admitting. To begin with, it's painful. Maybe we don't talk about it because we think if we ignore it, the hurt will just go away on its own. We think that there is something shameful about saying that we feel this way. I know that when there were times in my life that I felt lonely, I felt uncomfortable talking about it. But, why's it so embarrassing to feel lonely? I think that for most of us, it is because we think it is a sign of weakness. We're supposed to be strong, social, well integrated, happy people and loneliness does not fit in with that image.

But it is Rosh Hashanah and today, we are called upon to look within ourselves. We are supposed to contemplate who we are as individuals. We can no longer hide from our loneliness. We must confront it. I am sure that each of us has felt moments of loneliness in our lives. And even if we don't feel it right now or have not felt it in a while, we can be sure that someone in this room has recently. I can't say it better than Ronald Rolheiser who in his book, *The Restless Heart*, says that "No person has ever walked our earth and been free from the pains of loneliness. [We have all] had to face and struggle with its potentially paralyzing grip. It has granted no immunities. To be human is to be lonely [at times]. To be human, however, is also to respond" (Rolheiser 3).

We must respond to our loneliness. We can't seclude ourselves. We must surround ourselves with others. But proximity is not enough. We must also reach out and create meaningful and positive relationships with those around us. But for many of us, this type of connection is difficult to achieve. The idea of letting others into our lives is awkward. Here at the temple, we're committed to creating a caring community so we have a Bikkur Cholim committee. Our goal is to reach out to those members of our congregation who are sick or on the road to recovery. We make phone calls and visits. The interesting thing is that many times our committee members offer to visit and the patient says, "Thanks, but no thanks." The hospital can be a very lonely place, but they would rather be alone than have a stranger come to see them. It could be that they're just not up to it. But I also think it has to do with the way our society has become. We are so private now.

Many of you know my husband, Brad. I can say objectively that he's a pretty friendly guy. When we moved down to Boca, within a week he knew all of our neighbors. He knew their names and numbers and who would be willing to help us with our hurricane shutters. I thought it was weird. In New York, I

would see my neighbors all of the time but we would never talk. Living near each other did not mean that we were connected. This is probably true in many of the communities that we live in. As a society, we have become very individualistic and tend to stick to ourselves. I don't argue that there are times when we need to be alone. I like to go for a walk and read a book as much as the next person. And sometimes, choosing to be alone is the safest option. We don't have to risk opening ourselves up to another human being who has the power to affect us, and maybe even hurt us. But in some ways, I think that we have taken it too far.

We don't want anyone but the people in our closest circles to know anything about us. In our world, we have to walk on eggshells. We can't talk to anyone about anything: not religion or politics or children, for fear that we might offend somebody. So many topics are off limits. Technology has also made the problem worse. While the Internet has allowed us to meet new people and find old friends, in many ways it has been harmful to our relationships. I have a friend that I used to talk to all of the time but I can't remember the last time we had a real conversation. Now we only talk in the form of emails and text messages. These modes of communication are not very personal. Receiving a text message that says "xoxo" is not exactly the same thing as hearing the words, "I love you" or actually being hugged and kissed. We no longer get the delight of hearing a friend's laugh. All we get are three little letters – "LOL." It's hard to tell what another person means or how they feel when you can't hear their voice. It makes it hard to connect and this can make us feel lonely.

But even though it's difficult, we need start moving back towards the ideas of community and connection. We need to extend ourselves and make an effort to reach out to others so that we can reduce the loneliness in our lives. This is something our tradition has encouraged us to do from the beginning of time. In fact, in the Book of Genesis, we read that when God created the world, God planted some of the very first trees in the Garden of Eden. And then God created a man so that someone could take care of these trees. But then God realized that this was too big of a job for one person and that it might get lonely. So, God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a helper for him." God created a companion for Adam. The idea was not that they would just be two people in the same place. The hope was that these two beings would work together, care for each other, and trust one another. Because this is what it means to connect. Whether it means finding a life partner or a friend, this is how we fight our loneliness.

Here at the temple, I have been running a 20's and 30's group. We celebrate Shabbat and other Jewish holidays together. But for most of the people who come to our events, their goal is simple. They are single and they want to meet somebody. They are lonely and when something great happens they want someone to share it with. When something upsets them, they want to discuss it, but they have not found that special person. So these young adults come to our events. And even if they don't meet the man or

woman of their dreams, at least they are meeting new friends, mingling, and become a part of our community.

I believe those who feel the pain of loneliness must try to find connection, but it is also our congregation's responsibility to reach out the lonely in our midst. It doesn't mean that we have to become glorified matchmakers...although that is a nice Jewish thing to do 😊. It means that it's our duty to bring people together and create a sense of community.

After having had an unsuccessful marriage, the divorcee that I spoke of before, wondered if she would ever find meaningful connection. At one point, she considered just cutting herself off from the world and no longer socializing with others. She said that you're born alone and you die alone, so what is the point? But that's not true if you're Jewish. Judaism says that we should mark the passages in our lives as a community. We do this when a baby is born, when somebody gets married, when a person dies. The community gathers together. Also, think about when one of the kids of our congregation becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. It's not just a celebration for that child and his or her family. It's a momentous occasion for the entire community. It's exciting for us to see these young men and women commit themselves to living lives filled with Torah. And for the young people, it's important for them to realize that they are a part of something larger - so that when they feel lonely, as young people often do, they will realize that they are not alone. By sharing the most pivotal moments of our lives with our community, we are able to connect in a deep and very real way.

We here at Temple Beth El, are at an advantage. We are part of a tradition and congregation that values connection and believes that what the Bible says is true. It is not good for us to be alone. It's not good for us to be disconnected. So today, we will rise together and pray together, but that is not enough. We must also reach out to one another with love and kindness. We must deepen the ties that bind us together and repair the links that have been broken. So that as this New Year begins, we will not face it alone. We will enter it together, strengthened as individuals and as a community.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be God's will.