

# THE AMEN EFFECT

KOL NIDRE

Recently I shared with a friend that I was sick with worry over a relative who was undergoing a serious medical procedure. My friend looked distressed. "You know, she's really lucky," she finally said. "I don't have anyone in the world who worries like that for me."

Tonight I want to speak about *loneliness* - that supremely prevalent and absurdly painful human condition rooted in a perception of our own invisibility, driven by the sense that we are not understood or worried for or seen - by *anyone*. For many years, loneliness was considered the plight of the single (think of your Grandma, wondering every time she sees you what's taking you so long - "I've got a nice Jewish boy for you!" she'd say. "Grandma," you'd reply, "I'm not interested. I'm only 23, or 33 or 43 - and I'm so busy with work. I don't even have time for a partner!" "I just don't want you to be lonely!" she'd say). Singleness - seen as some kind of contemporary plague destined to leave people in the grips of eternal unhappiness - was perceived to be the root cause of loneliness; the cure - partnering up.

Over the years, our understanding of loneliness has developed and we now know that it's not about being single, it's not even about *being* alone; it's about *feeling* ALONE. In other words, loneliness is not an external reality but an inner state of being. It is a gnawing, persistent feeling of emptiness, of disconnection, of social irrelevance. And would that being married spared people of these feelings. Some of the loneliest people I know are partnered and have children, jobs and friends and - from the outside - very full lives. Even in a room of 1800 people tonight, all united in some way in our desire to bring meaning and purpose to our lives through Jewish ritual, many of us feel completely alone right now. Janis Joplin once said that song of her life would be called "I just made love to 25,000 people, but I'm going home alone." I'll never forget when one of my friends, a brilliant teacher of Torah, called me on his way home from delivering a particularly powerful teaching. "The irony of my life is that I just made 200 people cry," he said. "Now I get to go home alone... to cry. At least they got to cry together."

We all experience loneliness at various times in our lives. For some it's fleeting and relatively superficial, for others it lasts longer and cuts deeper. And for some, there is an acute, relentless, existential loneliness that is sustained over time until it starts to take root in a person's character.

When the Torah begins, God creates light and sees that it is *tov* - good. Then the earth and the seas, the grass, trees and fruits, all good. God creates the sun, moon and stars, and all the birds of the sky and fish in the sea, all of the animals on earth - again, good. Finally, human beings - this time, *tov me'od* - very good. The first thing that happens in the Torah that God finds *lo tov* rather than *tov*, displeasing rather than pleasing: *lo tov heyot ha'adam l'vado*. It's not good for a person to be alone in the world (Gen. 2:18). Before human beings even have a chance to wreak our havoc on God's majestic creation, rendering it worthy of destruction - and this

happens soon enough – before even that moment, God is dissatisfied with the prospect of loneliness, deemed a problem of the highest order.

The irony of loneliness is that it often drives us either to retreat or to self-sabotage, both of which only further alienate us from friends and community. It's loneliness that sends us off on ill-fated, self-destructive missions, like shopping (*retail therapy*, it's sometimes called), eating (especially sugar and fat content) and having (lots of) sex (not the good kind). In his new book on loneliness, Dr. John Cacioppo explains that loneliness chips away at our ability to self-regulate. In an effort to soothe the pain in our hearts, we attempt to fill the pleasure centers of the brain – despite knowing, intellectually, that this behavior will only amplify the very feelings we're trying to eradicate.

But on top of all of that, if the excessive shopping, eating and sex didn't kill us, there is now evidence that loneliness effects physical and cognitive health as well. Here's how it works: loneliness correlates with a weakened immune system and increased inflammation, a combination that makes loneliness twice as dangerous as obesity, and as high a risk as smoking<sup>1</sup> and can exacerbate symptoms of Alzheimer's, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. In other words, there seems to be scientific proof now that chronic loneliness literally hurts our hearts. Or, in Cacioppo's words, loneliness not only makes us miserable, it can also make us sick.<sup>2</sup>

In the Torah, the diagnosis of loneliness comes with its own prescription.

*Lo tov heyot ha'adam l'vado. E'eseh lo ezer k'negdo* - It is not good for a person to be alone; I will make him a partner. (Gen 2:18)

God's response to loneliness – like your grandma's - is partnership. But here let's not be so narrow minded as to believe that partnership must be marriageable or even romantic. What is an *ezer k'negdo*? Someone who helps him (an *ezer*) by standing opposite him (*k'neged lo*) – facing him when no one else will look his way. It's someone who steps into the darkest moments, often without saying even a word, just offering presence. It's a friend, a sister, a partner, a rabbi – someone who can remind you that even though she can't fully understand, *you are not alone* because she is there.

Sometimes the Rabbis of the Talmud would encounter Elijah the prophet while walking down the street and they'd get to ask him to shed light on some of the great mysteries and struggles of the universe. (I happen to think if we encountered Elijah the prophet we'd probably cross to the other side of the street, but that's another sermon.) It once happened that R' Yossi bumped into Elijah and asked him what the Torah really meant when it said *I will make him a partner, a helpmate*. Elijah answered: When a person brings home wheat, can it be eaten raw? If one brings home flax, can it be worn unprocessed? Everybody needs someone to take the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1000316>

<sup>2</sup> Cacioppo, p. 34.

raw material of life and help turn it into something useful. In this way, Elijah said, an *ezer k'negdo* illuminates the world for us – helping us see beyond our own limited perspective and strengthening us when we hit life's inevitable stumbling blocks (Yevamot 63a).

This is one of those areas where science and spirituality intersect.

Research indicates that just as physical pain protects us from physical danger (think of the hand on the stovetop), social pain – loneliness – protects us from the dangers of social isolation.<sup>3</sup> In other words, despite the fact that we too often find ourselves profoundly disconnected, particularly in our culture, our bodies and our spirits are aligned in yearning for connection. This theory is supported by contagious yawn studies, which have convinced neuroscientists that human beings are *hard-wired* to connect with one another, to intuit and mirror back one another's experience.<sup>4</sup> (Some even argue that the correlation between yawning and empathy is so profound that most empathic among us are yawning right now, even just hearing the word said out loud...)

The Jewish tradition also teaches that we are, fundamentally, relational beings. Many years ago I came across a Mishnah (Middot 2:2) that changed my understanding of the human condition (which isn't bad for a 3 line text buried deep in an ancient code of law in a chapter dedicated to the architectural layout of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem). Here's what it teaches: thousands and thousands of people would approach the Temple Mount on pilgrimage, all entering the Courtyard in one seamless mass of humanity, circling to the right around the perimeter. But then one person enters – *mi-she'eiro davar* - *someone to whom something awful happened*, the text says. That person enters from the same doorway, but he starts to circle in the opposite direction. Every step, against the grain. And every single person who passes him is obligated to stop and ask *ma lakh* – what's going on with you? And this person, surrounded by people and yet totally alone, has to answer:

My mother died. Made it two years longer than anyone expected, but the cancer was just too aggressive.

Another follows behind him a moment later, also walking against the masses of humanity.

I lost my sister, she says. My best friend in the world. Nobody ever understood me like she did. Nobody ever will.

My father is in hospice, says the next. I just want him to be able to live his final days in dignity and without suffering.

My college roommate killed himself, the next says. I had no idea he was in so much pain.

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<sup>3</sup> Cacioppo, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> <http://live.wsj.com/video/monkey-see-monkey-yawn-hard-wired-for-empathy/C0764C83-8E03-451F-9226-F1243D71DA48.html#!C0764C83-8E03-451F-9226-F1243D71DA48>

My husband left, says another. I was completely blindsided.

Our son is sick. We are so scared.

And those who walk from the right to the left – every single one of them – must stop. They must make sure that the *avelim* (the mourners) and the *holim* (the sick ones) and the *shvurei lev* (brokenhearted) are all seen. *May God bring you comfort, they say. May you feel the presence of this holy community, and know that you are not alone.*

The Rabbis construct a system of ritual engagement built on a profound psychological insight: when we have suffered loss, when our hearts break with worry for someone we love who stands in limbo between life and death, when we get a diagnosis – and we show up at work or a friends' birthday party or the supermarket, it often feels like the whole world is moving in one direction but we're moving in another.

And in that moment, when all we want to do is go home and sit in our isolation, we're called to show up and voice our struggle. And the community is called to see us, and offer comfort. Why? Because part of what it means to be awake as a human being is to realize that today *you* walk from left to right. Tomorrow it is me. I hold you today; tomorrow you will hold me.

There is a story I love from the Talmud (Brakhot 5b) that offers a beautiful demonstration of this point. Whenever any of Rabbi Yohanan's his friends fell ill, he would go visit. R' Yohanan, who suffered devastating and disproportional loss in his own life, would sit by his friend's side and say: *Give me your hand*. I love that image - he was not afraid to touch someone, even in his deepest pain. The sick person would reach out his hand, and *okmei* – R' Yohanan would raise him up. Would he heal them, physically, or would he lift their spirits? We don't know. But somehow R' Yohanan's presence would lift them up.

One day, R' Yohanan himself became gravely ill. R' Hanina, one of his colleagues, went in to visit him. Give me your hand, R' Hanina said. R' Yohanan gave him his hand and R' Hanina raised him up. But R' Yohanan had healing power – why did he need R' Hanina at all? Couldn't he heal *himself*? The Rabbis explain: *ain havush matir atzmo mibeit ha'asurim* - the prisoner cannot free himself from jail. Even those caring for their sick mothers and struggling friends need someone to care for them sometimes. In the very next story, R' Yohanan is back on his feet and on his way to visit R' Elazar, who has fallen ill, to bring comfort and healing with his presence.

I have spent a lot of time wrestling with Mourner's Kaddish over the past few years, which – I admit - never really made sense to me. Why is it that in our moments of deepest sorrow these words – which seem to have nothing to do with death or loss or comfort - are the words that we are asked to recite? I have read many beautiful interpretations and explanations, but none has ever really touched me.

But this year, I got a new siddur – a prayerbook that lays out the words of Mourner’s Kaddish like a screenplay. And suddenly I understood:

The one with the broken heart starts: *Yitgadal v’yitkadash sh’mei rabbah* – in other words: *I’m hurting* -

And whole community says: *Amen*. We don’t even let her finish her first sentence before we interrupt to say, *We’re here. You are not alone.*

*B’alma divra khirutei v’yamlikh malkhutei*, she goes on... *ba’agalah u’vizman kariv v’imru*:

*Amen. We are still here. And we’re not going anywhere. Even when the shiva is over and the crowd disappears and everyone goes back to their lives, we’ll still remember that you’re hurting, and we’ll be here. We can’t take your pain away, but we sure can bring you dinner. And we can call and check in and invite you to the movies and be very, very patient with you. No matter how much your loss scares us, no matter how vulnerable your story makes us feel, we will not disappear. We’re here.*

*Amen.*

The real power of Mourner’s Kaddish, I realized, is not the words but the dance between mourner and community – precisely at the moment that neither wants to dance. It’s the creation of heart space in the void of a loss. The admission that as much as I feel isolated right now, I know that I am not alone. Jewish life is not lived monologically. Think of it: we can’t even say Mourner’s Kaddish without a minyan. Isn’t that an unfair burden to place on someone who has suffered a loss? Now you have get up early, leave work meetings, run across town to get to a minyan where there are nine other people – some of whom you don’t even know. Can’t I just say Kaddish in my living room, people often ask me. No, says our tradition, you can’t – because of the *Amen Effect*: your living room can’t say amen to your prayer. Can’t hold your silence, can’t hand you a tissue and can’t witness as you struggle and search for and sometimes find comfort through the grieving period, serving as a living testament when it’s all over to how much you have been through. For that, you need to be around other living beings.

I recently read a beautiful article written by a woman who – at her father’s prodding - built a life around the rule: *always go to the funeral*. Showing up for other people even when it’s least convenient, even when it means getting a babysitter, even when you don’t know anyone else there, even when facing a deadline. Showing up for “the small inconveniences that let [us] share in life’s inevitable, occasional calamity,” rather than waiting for some “grand heroic gesture.” The daily battle, she learned, is not good vs. evil. It’s doing good vs. doing nothing.

A few years ago, the author’s father died from cancer on a cold April day. She writes:

His funeral was on a Wednesday, middle of the workweek. I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the

church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful and humbling thing I've ever seen was a church at 3:00 on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral.<sup>5</sup>

I learned this when my rabbi's mother died. He is deeply loved - I imagined him suffocating under the weight of thousands of well-intentioned people wanting to offer condolences. I wrote a sweet note. A very sweet note. But I didn't fly in, and I never picked up the phone. I will not easily forget how he chastised me the next time I saw him. *I don't want excuses*, he said. *You weren't there and I needed you. Next time, err on the side of presence.*

Sometimes, we get it right. A few weeks ago I sat down at a breakfast meeting with a woman who, through tears, shared with me the following story. Her best friend died earlier that week. Devastated, she flew up north to funeral but when she arrived, she found herself completely alone. She recognized a few people from over the years, but sat by herself, sobbing. Here's what happened:

"The next thing I knew a hand was on my shoulder. ...Someone said, 'Are you ok? I saw you sitting over here by yourself. I recognize you from Leah's bat mitzvah. I am... Allen's friend from childhood.' And she hugged me... Somehow this dear, kind, mystically perceptive woman knew to walk up to me and wrap her arms around me. She took in my grief and I took in hers... In that moment, as we held each other, the room stopped spinning and the heaviness of loss began to subside... We had connected, we shared the secret of immeasurable sorrow; this extraordinary woman who reached outside her pain to care for me. This was an act of genuine selflessness, an act of such powerful kindness; although I consider myself a spiritual person I rarely claim to feel the presence of God. But in this moment - I did... The act of receiving comfort from this woman, who I confess felt like an angel, gave me the strength and permission to suffer and struggle, feel rage and confusion and by the end of a long day - smile and laugh.

She was a blessing. I will never forget her kindness."

(And I feel compelled to share that she closed by saying:) "I was not surprised when this angelic woman told me that she was part of a community back in LA called IKAR. *I know IKAR*," she said. *"You can't be around that kind of love and have it not penetrate the heart."*

Doing good vs. doing nothing. Err on the side of presence. Find holiness in shared loss. Use your pain to reach in and lift others out of their darkness. Find the courage to ask, *ma lakh?* What's going on with you? Show up. This is starting to sound to me like an antidote to the great and mighty plague of loneliness.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2005/08/08/4785079/always-go-to-the-funeral>

Something amazing happened this past year. It was Kabbalat Shabbat – one of those crazy, gorgeous sweat-lodge-like Kabbalat Shabbat services we do on the first Friday of every month. And in the midst of Lekha Dodi one of my rabbi fantasies came true. (No, not a day off.) I got something even better. A couple who had met at IKAR a few years earlier was so deeply moved by the spirit of our services that they got engaged *in the middle* of services. Right then and there. They ran over to tell me and I burst into tears. I wanted to share with the whole community, but just as I opened my mouth to speak I noticed in the back corner of the room someone who hadn't been around for a while. He was right in the middle of a rough divorce, really miserable. What should I do? Tone down the celebration of this couple so as not to inadvertently contribute to the hurt of the broken-hearted? Or celebrate them and let the flow of life and death and love and loss stand, starkly, in the middle of our sacred space? But what if he leaves and never comes back – precisely when he needs community most?

I chose to celebrate. A risk. “Dan and Rachel just got engaged!” I announced. People whooped and cheered and started dancing around them and singing. A tallit over their heads like a huppah. I danced, but with trepidation. Then, at one point, I looked up and saw that our friend, in the back, had not only not walked out (thank God). But he had stepped in, closer to all of us in the center. And a moment later, there he was – dancing and singing and celebrating with a couple he didn't know. *I was so moved to see you celebrate, given what you're going through*, I later told him. *Are you kidding me?* he said. *That was so healing for me. They found what we all wish we had – love fulfilled. How could I let them dance alone?*

How do we break out of a self-destructive, paralyzing feeling of loneliness? “What's required,” writes Dr. Cacioppo, “is to step outside the pain of our own situation long enough to ‘feed’ others. Real change begins with doing.” One biomedical scientist calls it *molecular remodeling*.<sup>6</sup> In a Jewish idiom, Rabbeinu Yonah writes: “One is obligated to exert himself to the full depths of his very soul on behalf of another person... This is one of the most crucial and important things that a person is called upon to do in life.”<sup>7</sup> We know this to be true: our lives become infinitely more meaningful when we toil on someone else's behalf, when we share in her joy and work to alleviate his suffering.

*How could I let them dance alone?* This year, let's not let them dance alone. And let's not let them grieve alone.

Next time there's a funeral: show up.

Next time there's a shiva: show up.

Next time someone is going through a divorce: call.

Next time someone gets engaged: get up and celebrate.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.newrepublic.com//article/113176/science-loneliness-how-isolation-can-kill-you>

<sup>7</sup> Shaarei Teshuvah 3:13.

Next time someone has a baby: go to the bris.

Next time someone is sitting alone: go share your presence.

Next time someone whispers *Yitgadal v'yitkadash*: say AMEN.

That's the secret power of holy community.

I said earlier that even in a room of 1,800 people, many of us feel lonely tonight. But there is something that we can do about it. We're going to do an experiment right now. I will not test the yawn contagion theory and ask you to look into someone's eyes and yawn – I'm a sensitive soul and couldn't NOT take that personally. But I am asking you to stand up. Even the curmudgeons. If the scientists are right, just *standing* together will enhance emotional connectedness in this room. And when we *sing* together, we can absolutely alter physical and emotional landscape. Maybe it's the endorphins, maybe it's the oxytocin; what we know is that this stuff is powerful - it's a direct line to the heart.<sup>8</sup>

The answer to our loneliness is one another. *Lo tov heyot ha-adam levado* - it's not good for a person to be alone in the world. This year, take a risk. Show up. Walk against the grain. Let someone hold you, say amen to someone's kaddish. Molecular remodeling, on a communal scale. Let us show that the greatest response to the broken heart and the finest *and healthiest* antidote to loneliness - is the power of presence.

*Amen.*

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<sup>8</sup> <http://ideas.time.com/2013/08/16/singing-changes-your-brain/#ixzz2cORyg1GI>