

500 Floral Arrangements for Margie Reckhard (z"l): In Defiance of Loneliness

“On Thursday, July 13, 1995, Chicagoans awoke to a blistering day in which the temperature would reach 106 degrees. The heat index, which measures how the temperature actually feels on the body, would hit 126 degrees by the time the day was over. Meteorologists had been warning residents about a two-day heat wave, but these temperatures did not end that soon. When the heat wave broke a week later, city streets had buckled; the records for electrical use were shattered; and power grids had failed, leaving residents without electricity for [several days]. And by July 20, [739 human beings] had perished,” Dr. Eric Klineberg writes in his book, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*.

The overwhelming majority of these people died in their homes, alone. Many were African American. Almost all of them lived in poverty. Most were elderly. The heat conspired with a thin social fabric, a society that structured itself in a way that left people so isolated, so alone, so lonely, it literally killed them.

Klineberg also notes that people who lived alone, but had someone check up on them-as little as simply call them once a day-had a significantly higher survival rate.

Loneliness is an epidemic.

A recent study claims that 22% of Millennials report they have no friends.

<https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2019/07/30/loneliness-friendship-new-friends-poll-survey>

According to an AARP survey, more than 42 million Americans over the age of 45 suffer from chronic loneliness.

[\[https://www.governing.com/topics/health-human-services/gov-the-loneliness-epidemic.html\]](https://www.governing.com/topics/health-human-services/gov-the-loneliness-epidemic.html)

In Great Britain, more than a quarter of a million--250,000--senior citizens report that they have verbal contact with no one during the week; more than 2 and ½ million report they speak with fewer than three people per week.

[https://www.studyfinds.org/lonely-lives-alarming-number-of-seniors-go-entire-week-without-talking-to-anyone/?fbclid=IwAR3r\\_r07fuTUxaQi9Lva8H0LxZORHOuNVmH8NjL50eglvGorI-ScMjG8Vw8](https://www.studyfinds.org/lonely-lives-alarming-number-of-seniors-go-entire-week-without-talking-to-anyone/?fbclid=IwAR3r_r07fuTUxaQi9Lva8H0LxZORHOuNVmH8NjL50eglvGorI-ScMjG8Vw8)

Former Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, claims that loneliness is as dangerous to our health as smoking.

Loneliness is an epidemic.

Loneliness is killing us. The World Health Organization predicts that by 2030--a mere decade from now--loneliness and related trauma will be the second leading killer of human beings world wide.

**Seven billion people inhabit this planet. And we humans are *literally* dying from loneliness.**

I get it. I've got a job where I'm around people. I like people. A lot. And, if I'm truly, soulfully honest, there are moments when I, too, feel lonely.

We are more connected by technology than ever before. We have hundreds--if not thousands--of Facebook friends. Airplanes can fly us almost anywhere on the planet at virtually a moment's notice. And yet...

**Seven billion people on planet earth. Humans are dying from loneliness.**

Why are so many people so lonely?

According to Johann Hari in his book *Lost Connections* (pg 83), “**Loneliness isn't the physical absence of other people; it's the sense that you're not sharing anything that matters with anyone else.**”

I'm not a therapist or a psychologist, a pundit or researcher of the human psyche. I am a rabbi—a teacher and student of Torah, a person fascinated by the great questions of the cosmos, of human existence, of the purpose of life and meaning. My teachers are you—our people—and our rabbis, our teachers of Torah.

One of my rabbis, Micah Goodman of the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, claims we suffer from “an existential crisis” that is related to two particular myths that converge together in a powerful force of psychic and communal devastation: The Myth of Individualism and the Myth of Consumerism.

The Western myth of individualism has two central themes coursing through it. The first: Every individual is special and unique; radically so. And the second: Because of our uniqueness, we are called to “find ourselves.” One need only look at one of the “great American novels” of the 20th century—Catcher in the Rye—to see the quest to find one's self is an essential American story. But the challenge, here, with individualism unchecked, is that the individual “alone” becomes the story. It becomes all about us and only about us; and we—contrary to biology and our inherent nature as social creatures—are expected to find ourselves on our own and, like Horatio Alger, “make it” on our own.

**We combine the MYTH OF INDIVIDUALISM with the MYTH OF CONSUMERISM.** Consumerism calls to us: Buy this thing, this product, and then you'll be happy. Watch television at night, you know what I'm talking about—buy this car, you'll be happy! Buy this Ginzu knife, this perfect mattress, this beauty product, this home safety system, this utterly ridiculous contraption to lose weight that you'll never actually use and doesn't ever actually help you lose weight—buy this and then you'll be happy. As if somehow, the purchasing of things—be they cars or household products or jewelry or clothing—buying this thing will make us happy. Capitalism constantly shouts at us: MORE! MORE! MORE. **[Spoiler alert: I've done a lot of funerals; you can't take any of this stuff with you].** When we combine the myths of individualism and consumerism, it is easy to see how loneliness becomes so pervasive. Stuff will never make us happy; finding oneself cannot happen alone.

**The reality of life today is that so many of the social structures we've had to care for one another, to connect with each other, have broken down. As Robert Putnam noted in his book, Bowling Alone, “In the 10 short years between 1985 and 1994, active involvement in community organizations fell by 45% (pg 79).”** The ways we connected and built community—like joining bowling leagues, the rotary club, and other civic organizations—simply no longer exist in many places. Disconnection and dislocation are real for far too many people. And many of the reasons people do not have time to connect is the grotesque economic inequality in our society; that so people today are working more hours to be able to afford basic human needs like housing, childcare, food, and health care. In the last 40 years, we've put individualism and consumerism on steroids and today, much of our social safety net that enables people to connect with one another has been weakened.

**This isn't a new problem.** We know this loneliness, you and I. Many of us—most of us?—experience it personally. And it is our story as Jews. The quest to address human loneliness has been around since the opening verses of Torah: The first thing that God says to Adam in the garden of Eden—**lo tov hayav adam l'vado: It is not good for you, human, to be alone.** As my beloved friend Rabbi Brent Spodek teaches, “It is an odd statement, made so early on in the history of creation. Adam has not complained of his boredom, and in fact, once other people appear on earth, we bring with us destruction, betrayal and murder. Yet in the Garden of Eden, the seat of earthly perfection, God announces that it is not good to be alone. Perfection is incomplete as long as Adam has no companion.”

And yet, loneliness is pervasive throughout Torah: Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Jacob, Leah, Joseph, Dinah, and Moshe all experience deep, existential loneliness. We are taught that slavery in Egypt was painfully lonely; and that loneliness wasn't merely individual. In fact, Pharaoh's evil was separating the Israelites from each other and imposing isolation and loneliness upon them. [Midrash, Rashi on Exodus 38:8]. Pharaoh was so vicious, he separated husbands and wives, and worked them to the point of exhaustion. The Midrash teaches they had no energy for companionship, no strength to make love. The consequence was profound; the Jewish people were dying out. We were destined to be forever lost to history.

But we know it didn't work out that way. The Midrash teaches that the Israelite women, inspired by the Divine, brought mirrors into the fields where their husbands toiled. With these mirrors, they showed their husbands how handsome they were and aroused in them the desire to be intimate. From that intimacy was born the next generation of Israelites. Our people survived.

Humans are social creatures. People need a community, a tribe, like a bee needs a hive. Community, relationships, intimacy were the ultimate resistance to Pharaoh's tyranny. We know that, too. An intimate relationship, an authentic friendship, a deep moment of connection—not mediated by a screen—with another person in prayer, at a protest on the streets, in the quiet of the sanctuary, in the joy of a classroom, on a walk along the creek, in work that is meaningful. These are a balm against loneliness.

Judaism is the counter-narrative to the myths that perpetuate loneliness through consumerism and individualism. How so? **Because we are part of a story of meaning that is bigger than ourselves.**

Our's is a story that begins with Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac. It is the story of a community born into slavery and for whom the story of *Yitziyat Mitzrayim*—the Exodus from Egypt—is our master story. But it isn't merely a really good story; it is a story of profound meaning, a story both about the power of liberation and being in community. It is a story with serious responsibilities to our neighbors. And it is a story with a cautionary tale: You were freed from Egypt: Our job is to care for each other. Don't you dare become Egypt.

Our story of *Yitziyat Mitzrayim* is a story that teaches us meaning comes not from having stuff, not that the world revolves around us—though we are individually important and we do matter—but that true meaning comes from belonging, from being part of something bigger than our lives, having a purpose, making commitments, showing up for each other.

**For the Jewish people, the antidote to loneliness is belonging.** When confronted with strident individualism and hyper-consumerism, community is a radical practice.

But we all know that we need each other. Egypt isn't only a metaphor.

**Loneliness is a feeling and experience of disconnection, that we don't matter, that no one will check in on us during a heat wave or a hurricane or a polar vortex.** But in a wild twist of theological irony, the Jewish antidote to loneliness is the surrender, the admission in a society of hyperindividualism and toxic capitalism, that we cannot and we should not do it all on our own. **We need each other to be fully human.** Judaism's response to the loneliness of existence is belonging with a purpose. Abraham and Sarah birthed the idea of community and belonging into religious practice; it requires 10 of us to make a prayer circle, to form a minyan; and that if one of us is missing, we can not complete our prayers. Without each other, we cannot find God.

In the Jewish moral imagination, everyone here today is invited—compelled—to consider ourselves the 10th person in the minyan. In Jewish life, so much of what matters is showing up.

But Judaism doesn't just say, "belong!" And we'll take care of everything!

Belonging, being in community together, means we are implicated in each other's lives; being the 10th person in the minyan means it matters that I show up. It matters that you show up.

The story of the Exodus, the story of belonging to our people, also contains a cautionary note: The plagues that can save you can destroy you. Don't be Egypt. Don't become like Pharaoh, addicted to cruelty, transfixed by power, immune to the human cry for dignity and compassion. Don't get so dazzled by products, don't become so intoxicated with our own uniqueness, that we become lonely—cut off from a story and a community of meaning and purpose.

Seeing ourselves as the 10th person in the minyan, becomes an act of resistance against despair, against loneliness, and opens the possibility to live lives of purpose and meaning. As the great leader Audre Lorde (z"l) taught, **"Without community, there is no liberation."**

Community, though, is no panacea. There are real limits to being in a covenantal community such as Shir Tikvah and the Jewish people. I know from experience, so many of you know because you've lived these truths, that community doesn't have the power to stop cancer or dementia or prevent the people we love from suffering and dying. God I wish it did!

But community does have the power to make the **suffering sufferable**, to provide the love we need to face the unbearable, and the structures we need to support each other: Home cooked meals when we and our loved ones are sick, visits in the hospital, the practice of saying Kaddish in Minyan, of shouldering grief with other people. That's why congregation's like Shir Tikvah exist: **So we can love each other through the inevitable pain and loneliness of being human and make life not only bearable; together, we make life beautiful.**

I close with a story: On August 3, Margie Reckhard (z"l), was murdered along with 21 other people at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. The murderer, a white nationalist, chose El Paso specifically because it is a border town with Mexico where he could terrorize immigrants.

Margie's widow, Antonio Basco, was heartbroken over the death of his beloved. They had only moved to El Paso a few years earlier; they had no family there and few friends. He was anguished that no one would show up for her funeral. In an act of profound vulnerability and courage, he opened the funeral to the public. He welcomed anyone to attend. <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/17/752006060/el-paso-shooting-hundreds-of-strangers-come-to-mourn-with-widower-at-wifes-funer> [Following text through Perches quote taken from this NPR report].

And something powerfully humane happened: People showed up. Not just a few; hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people. "Jordan Ballard flew in from Los Angeles for a simple reason. 'His story moved me,'" she said to an NPR reporter.

People passed through the chapel, pausing to pay their respects, then moving along to make way for those waiting behind them.

For hours, the line stretched outside for several blocks in the heat of the day.

"Since he opened it to the public, I think it was a way for the community to mourn," said Salvador Perches, owner of Perches Funeral Home, which handled Reckard's burial for free.

When Basco entered the sanctuary, those in the pews rose and applauded.

When he bowed to kiss his wife's casket, it was adorned by flower arrangements sent in from across the world.

"We lost count after 500," Mr. Perches said.

### **500 flower arrangements for Margie Reckhard.**

In El Paso, Texas, following horrific violence, people showed up to honor Margie Reckhard's memory and to comfort Tony Basco. And they showed up for themselves. They showed up in defiance of despair, in defiance of hatred. They showed up as a balm against loneliness and isolation. They showed up to create the world they want to live in: A world of mutuality, respect, compassion, gentleness, and love.

After the shooting at Tree of Life synagogue last October, members of this church--St. Joan of Arc--showed up for Shabbat at Shir Tikvah, candles lit, arms open, to stand with us in solidarity and in love. And this year, they've welcomed us here, to their home, so we can show up together to proclaim our new year of 5780.

Let's not wait for horrific acts of violence to respond with kindness and compassion. Let's show up now, better, together. Let's show up and come together for Shabbat, to work with our Caring Community, to learn Torah, to support our Sanctuary and Immigrant Justice work, our Racial Justice Task Force, our partnership with El Colegio school

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and the Sheridan Project. Let's show up to dance at weddings together and schlep chairs, prune the garden, eat dinner, and pray our hearts out together. And let's continue to show up to shivah to say Kaddish and hold one another in this tumultuous world.

Stop waiting. You: There. You're the 10th person in our minyan. Without you, the geometry of our community is incomplete. We need you. And you need us. We are a people once discarded as slaves, alone to ourselves and the universe. We were liberated from bondage; we need not be lonely. Today, this new year, the story we tell is one of showing up for each other. And ourselves.

We're about to read the *akeidah*, the binding of Isaac. Today, we read especially for those of us tangled up in knots of loneliness: May we be liberated from the loneliness that binds us, so that we lift up our eyes, we show up, and embrace each other with love.

Shanah Tovah.