

Rabbi's Message May 2023

Dear Friends, It was at the height of our societal fear, confusion, and anxiety over COVID-19 in October of 2020, that 950 Americans answered questions for a Harvard University sponsored survey (<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america>) on the subject of loneliness, the results of which revealed that an alarming “36% of all Americans—including 61% of young adults and 51% of mothers with young children—[were feeling] ‘serious loneliness.’” Fortunately, the 2023 Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/473057/loneliness-subsides-pandemic-high.aspx>) reveals that today, almost three-and-a-half years later, such outrageous rates of loneliness have diminished by more than 50%.

Under normal circumstances, improvement by more than 50% would be cause for wild celebration, and I suppose it is, but still, how satisfied can we really be when 17% of us remain captive by the scourge of loneliness? Surely we can do better. Surely we can nurture more connectedness, more belonging, and more support. Surely we can make it so that fewer than one out of six of us (17%) will feel left out, invisible, or unwanted.

There is, of course, no single answer to the question of why so many feel lonely. For some it is lack of family nearby. For others it is the repercussions of a social media reality that is anything but real. For some it is the pressure of too much work being demanded from us at our jobs, and for others it is because as we get older, we've been losing the friends and loved ones who had always kept us going. There are so many different reasons that it's impossible to list them all. But one thing we can say with confidence is that when we lack the time or ability to create meaningful personal connections, the resulting isolation most often leads us into a state of painful loneliness.

So what we can do about this, if that is, we can do anything at all? There are many things, I imagine, but perhaps it would be most helpful to begin with the Talmudic dictum that *כל (בזה זה ערבים) ישראלי* (Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh), that “Every Jew is responsible for each other”. (Shevuot 39a). To be clear, I am not suggesting we should take from this that we have no responsibility to those who are not Jewish, because we certainly do, but rather that when it comes to our own family, our own community of Jews, the responsibility runs even deeper, and the benefits become even clearer. Fortunately, as heirs to three millennia of Jewish wisdom – not to mention 75 years of developing our own love for each other at the JCNWJ – we at 115 Youmans Avenue already understand and appreciate the value and responsibility that come with community. We know the benefits that result from “loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.” (Leviticus 19:18) We are entirely reluctant to “forsake our friend or the friend of our father,” (Proverbs 27:10) because we realize that when we prioritize our relationships, we build support systems that enable us to navigate difficult times and keep from loneliness. We get why Shimon the Righteous equate acts of loving-kindness with the holiness of Torah and prayer (Pirkei Avot 1:2), because we have all seen members of our own JCNWJ family reach out to others with kindness and compassion when others have been in need. For that matter, so too have many of us have been grateful to receive help when circumstances have been particularly difficult for us.

In short, we at the JCNWJ know that when we take responsibility for the wellbeing of others, we develop relationships. And when we are in a relationship, we connect, and we become connected. We support, and we become supported. Ultimately, by making conscious choices to engage with others, we create a more connected, vibrant, and inviting reality for everyone involved.

Times are hard. We get it. COVID threw us out of whack. Growing antisemitism has forced us to look over our shoulders all too often. Rising costs of living make us think twice before going out to social gatherings. The loss of loved ones leaves us feeling more alone than we want to be. And the list goes on. If we feel lonely, it certainly makes sense.

Let us help. Even if you are unable to attend in person, even if Zoom is the only way it will work for you, please join us for some (or all) of what we do at JCNWJ. Whether it be Shabbat, Sunday School, Sisterhood, Torah Study, or anything else we do, please join us. I promise that if you take advantage of what we have to offer, if you choose to be with us for worship, for study, for works of tikkun olam (repairing the world), for purely social events, or for anything else, I promise that you will indeed feel a sense of connectedness, and that any loneliness you may be feeling will be lessened. Even better, I promise that you will wind up helping others who might be experiencing loneliness themselves to feel more connected and more valued.

And so I conclude with an invitation: If the difficulties of loneliness, whether it be your own or someone else's, is of concern to you, please join us for our next Shabbat service (Friday, May 12), when my sermon will address the topic of what Jewish wisdom can do to help us conquer the challenges of loneliness.

L'Shalom,

Rabbi Dubin