

Rosh Hashanah 5773: From Isolation and Loneliness to Community and Connection

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Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden. They lived together, east of Eden, tilling the earth, raising children, and struggling to stay alive. After the many years of struggle, when their children were grown, Adam and Eve decided, before it was too late, to take a journey and see the world that God had created. They journeyed from one corner of the world to the other and explored all of its wonders.

In the course of their journeys, they came to a place that seemed so familiar. It was the entrance to the Garden of Eden. The garden was now guarded by an angel with a flaming sword and it frightened Adam and Eve, who began to flee.

Suddenly, there was a voice, a gentle, imploring voice. God spoke to them: "My children, you have lived in exile these many, many years. Your punishment is complete. Come now and return to My garden. Come home to the garden."

Suddenly the angel disappeared, and the way to the Garden opened "Wait," Adam replied, "it has been so many years. Remind me, what is it like in the garden?"

"The garden is paradise!" God responded. "In the garden there is no work. You never need to struggle or toil again. In the garden there is no pain, no suffering. In the garden there is no death. In the garden, there is no time – no yesterday, no tomorrow, only an endless today. Come My children, return to the garden!"

Adam considered God's words - no work, no struggle, no pain, no death. And no passage of time. An endless life of ease, with no tomorrow and no yesterday. And then he turned and looked at Eve. He looked into the face of the woman with whom he had struggled to make a life, to take bread from the earth, to raise children, to build a home.

And Eve looked back into the face of Adam. She saw all the moments that formed their lives -- moments of jubilant celebration and moments of unbearable pain. She remembered the moments when new life arrived in their world, and the moments when death intruded. She took Adam's hand in hers.

Looking into one another's eyes, Adam shook his head, and responded to God's invitation, "No thank you, that's not for us, not now. We don't need that now. Come on Eve, let's go home." And Adam and Eve turned their backs on God's Paradise and walked home.¹

When God had first created that Paradise, each new creation was accompanied by God's declaration *ki tov*, "it is good". In the creation story, only human loneliness is deemed unworthy of God's support – *lo tov hei'yot lavado* - "It is not good for man to be alone." It did not take long for God to realize that there is no Paradise for those who are isolated, without partnership, companionship, and community. And so Adam and Eve were united, left to spend their days outside the Garden of Eden to share life's joys and tragedies together. The timeline of life, its chronology, is struggle. This struggle through

¹ Feinstein, Ed. Capturing the Moon: Classic and Modern Jewish Tales; Behrman House: 2008, pg 7-8.

the prism of time brings both pain and joy, costs and rewards. It is mediated and softened, however, through human connection and relationship.

There is no escaping struggle. Every *single* person in this room has had some experience or moment when they've struggled with something. The person to your right has struggled. The person to your left has experienced pain and if you *know* that the people on your right and left have struggled or *are* struggling right now, and *they* know that you have struggled as well, than doesn't that unite us? Doesn't that make us responsible for helping each other through that struggle; through that pain? And so the moment Adam and Eve left the Garden for the first time, a foundational concept of Judaism was formed. From that point forward, struggle and success were to be done in the context of community, in the framework of mutual responsibility and support. It is this understanding of community - a group of individuals who come together to care for one another - that has kept us Jews going for thousands of years. And here we are on Rosh Hashanah. We have the opportunity to reconnect with that sense of community once again - to begin the new year with a newfound commitment to finding ways of accessing or building that community.

I didn't realize the power of Jewish community until I went to college. I attended Emory University and majored in Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology, a combination of psychology, anthropology, and biology of the brain. I was fascinated by human nature and took an anthropology class with Professor Melvin Konner in which we explored research about the !Kung San tribe of Botswana. This tribe has lived in the same area of the barren desert for *thousand of years* and studying them has given anthropologists insights into characteristics that allow communities to prosper. !Kung life is so completely egalitarian that there is no chief or headman. All food is shared, access to land is collective, and stinginess is a serious matter, punished by social exclusion². But the !Kung have survived because **no one** is left out, no one is ever alone. As a result, they are still around and thriving after thousands of years.

The Jews must have learned a few things from the !Kung, but we also added an important characteristic - we added sacredness. To be Jewish is not just to be a part of a community, it is to be part of a *sacred* community. A sacred community is one in which the members of that community are directed towards a greater purpose, to connect us and inspire us to accomplish more than we could on our own and to do so in an honorable and meaningful way. The solidarity of the Jewish People is expressed in a concept laid out in the Talmud. It is the concept of *Kol Yisrael arevim ze la-zeh*³ - all Jews are responsible for one another. It is one of the secrets of Jewish survival. In many ways, it is the glue that guarantees our cohesion despite our differences. The concept of "responsibility for one another" means that none of us will ever be alone. And in fact, the idea of being there "for one another" does not disconnect Jews from the rest of the world. It actually does the opposite. It helps us to understand the concept of mutual responsibility that we, as Jews, extend to the rest of the world. *Kol Yisrael arevim ze la-zeh* - we believe that all human

² Cacioppo, John T.; Patrick, William (2008-08-17). Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection (Kindle Locations 1111-1114). Norton. Kindle Edition.

³ BT Shavuot 39B

beings are tied together in an inescapable network of mutuality. We share a collective conscience.

What happens to me affects you and what happens to you affects me.

But before we can create change and improve the world around us, we need to know what our community needs; what struggles the people sitting next to us are facing in their lives. I recently discovered one way to unearth those struggles - Scotch. We had a bottle or two for a gathering of men at a congregant's home earlier this year. Thirteen men, ranging in age from mid-30s to early-70s, many of whom didn't know each other before that evening, came together for what turned out to be a very intense group conversation.

The evening began with the following question – “What is one issue or challenge you're facing that you haven't been able to solve on your own?” One by one, we went around the room and it quickly moved into the realm of men revealing some of the deepest and darkest challenges they are facing in their lives. And it wasn't the scotch that was talking. It was the need for these men to connect; all men I should say, who are involved in the Los Angeles community or synagogue life; all men who can hold their own in a conversation with you, but many with profound underlying conflicts – spending so much time working to support the family that there is no time left to foster friendships or create new relationships; unmarried and wanting to find a life partner but having a really hard time meeting people; marriage on the rocks and trying to deal with all that comes with that⁴.

These were men who almost never have these types of conversations with others, not even their spouses. And as I thought about some of the themes that emerged that evening, I couldn't help but think about the ways in which a Jewish community can support people who are dealing with such issues. The synagogue can provide us with a support system of people with common values who will elevate us by listening and by caring. A sacred community commits to helping every individual through the struggle. That's why we have a Caring Community⁵ and why we hired a social worker to be onsite one day a week⁶.

Do not be alone in your struggle. Each year, when we celebrate Passover, we are supposed to imagine that we, ourselves, are reliving that journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. So, just imagine for a minute that you are on that journey. Soon after your escape from Egypt, you stand on the shores of the Red Sea, exhausted and frightened that this is the end, that soon the approaching Egyptians will be upon you. You look around and you see that everyone else is as scared and bruised as you are. Moses opens up the water and you see the other side. You see the other side of that sea

⁴ If you'd like to attend a future men's gathering or learn more, please contact Rabbi Joel at rabbijoel@templeisiah.com.

⁵ For more info, please contact our Caring Community Chair, Rosalie Roder at rosalieroder@roadrunner.com.

⁶ Marilyn Lazar, a social worker from Jewish Family Services, is at Temple Isaiah on Wednesdays and is available for appointments. Her services are free for members of our community. You can contact her at mlazar@jfsla.org or 310-247-0864 ext. 203.

and it's a place where you know you can be free from enslavement. You want to run through those walls of water and get to the other side as fast as you can. You want that freedom right now! But you can't do that. You're not going to survive that desert on the other side unless you have some help, a support system. Even if you were to use every last ounce of energy to race to that new land and do it all alone, what would be the point? You would have made it to a land of loneliness, not a land of freedom! You look at the people around you and you start walking. But you get tired, dehydrated. And then you hear her soft voice. A little girl calls out, "It's so close. We're almost there. I can see the shore." And a man turns to you and says, "Here, have some water. Want to hold on to my shoulder?" And *together*, you all emerge from that sea. Not alone, not as individuals, but as a community, as a new family. *That's* how you get through to the other side. That's what's going to get you and each one of us to the Promised Land. And that's what's gotten us to the Promised Land for thousands of years.

During the High Holydays, our liturgy reflects our need for connection beyond ourselves. The isolation and loneliness that often envelops us throughout the year has become unbearable; unwieldy. And so we call out, *Shma Koleinu*, Hear **our** voices, oh God! *Al ta'azveinu!* "Do not abandon **us!**" "Rather," we say, "draw **us** near to your Teaching. Show **us** Your ways and teach **us** how to live. Let **us** be open to Your love...cut away the hardness in **our** hearts, so that **we** may turn to You with all our heart's devotion." The key words in this passage are "us, our, we." To address God effectively, we require community.

Prayer has power. *Sh'ma Koleinu*, Hear our voices!, we call out. God, hear me! My spouse or partner, hear me! My friend, hear me! My community, hear me! It's one thing to offer those pleas in silence, in our own minds, hoping someone will telepathically hear us. It's another to say those words out loud, to declare to your community that you're ready for connection.

A sacred community is built on the notion that we must live in connection, not isolation. For example, take lifecycles. We, Jews, know how to do lifecycles. We know how to do birth, death, weddings. We know how to do these things because we do them together. To say certain prayers, you need a minyan of at least ten Jews. We bury our loved ones and say the Mourner's Kaddish in the presence of at least nine other people because we don't mourn alone. If you want to name your baby, you do it with your community around you and when you get married, there must be at least two witnesses who are not blood-related, present to sign the ketubah, or marriage contract. Throughout your life, Judaism asks you to surround yourself with community.

The most significant tragedy in the life of Adam and Eve is when their son, Cain, kills his brother, Abel. When God calls out to Cain and asks, "Where is your brother?" Cain responds, "Am I my brother's keeper?"⁷ That response is one of the first major sins in our tradition and it is because of a long history of responses like Cain's that led Rabbi Hillel in Pirkei Avot, to declare, *al tifrosh min ha-tzibor*, do not separate yourself from the community⁸. Hillel was teaching that the individual should keep in step with the

⁷ Genesis 4:9

⁸ Avot 2:4

community, participate in its efforts, rejoice in its happiness and mourn its tragedies. The problems of the community are as much yours as it is theirs. The rabbis of the Talmud took it a step further. They said, if you are unwilling to participate in your community's sorrows, you cannot expect to share in their joys. Those who are willing to engage in the challenge of being a part of community will reap the rewards⁹.

I joined this community because I believe that our tradition provides a roadmap for us to assist each other in our personal and collective struggles. Each one of us has a role to play. Now is the time to think about yours. If you're here today, it's because in one way or another, you recognize the value of being a part of something larger than yourself. Even if you come once a year, you hopefully find it reassuring to know that the people sitting around you have the potential to become *your* sacred community. That is why we have systems in place to support you when you're in need and that is why there are ways in which you can provide your time and resources to help those who aren't doing as well as you. You can't escape the struggle, but you *can* decide *how* to deal with that struggle and the synagogue can be a part of that solution.

The first night after being exiled from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were terrified. They huddled next to each other and cried as they saw the sun set over the horizon because they didn't know if it would come up again the next morning. Despite his fear, Adam turned to Eve and told her it would be okay. She felt a little better. But then she looked in Adam's eyes and saw how scared he was, so she whispered, "it's going to be okay, my love, the sun will rise again." And this time, Adam was comforted. Back and forth they offered words of consolation and hugs of protection for what felt like an eternity. But then, just as they were both about to lose any sense of composure, they saw a glimmer of light across the horizon and before they knew it, the sun was beating down on their faces. From that point forward, they understood that the brightness of day can lead to the darkness of night. But they also learned that night can give way to day.

Rosh Hashanah is called the 'birthday of the world' because we are supposed to enter the new year with the sense that it can bring a world created anew; that we have the ability to create change around us and within ourselves. A *sacred* community is one in which that change and that growth is expedited through the support and love of others. May this new year be one in which we all witness a move from darkness to light with the support of those on our left and those on our right.

Shana Tova.

⁹ BT Ta'anit 11a - "At a time when the Jewish people are immersed in distress and one of them goes off on his own, refusing to share in their suffering, the two angels who accompany this man come and place their hands on his head and declare, 'Since this man has separated himself from the community in its time of need, let him not see the consolation and cheer of the community.'"