

Rabbi Hayyim of Sanz once shared the story of a man who had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which way out was the right one. Suddenly, he saw a man approaching him. His heart was filled with joy. "Now I shall certainly find out which is the right way," he thought to himself.

When they neared one another, he asked the man: "Brother, tell me which is the right way. I have been wandering about in this forest for several days." Said the other to him: "Brother, I do not know the way out either. I, too, have been wandering about here for many days. But this I can tell you: Do not take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray. And now let us look for a new way out together."

What it means to be a human is often determined by our status in connection with others—or a lack thereof. When there is a lack of connection, we call this loneliness—one of the most oppressive sentiments in the vocabulary of sadness. And yet, we all experience loneliness—in fact, our current times are often called the age of loneliness despite our tremendous ability to connect with others through social media.

The Lonely Crowd is a 1950 sociological analysis by David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney. It is considered a landmark study of American character and was a bestseller at the time of its release. One publisher remarked that despite its academic nature, The Lonely Crowd was such a popular book simply based on its title. People thought it could help solve the pain that plagues modern human beings.

Is it true? Are we members of a lonely crowd? Thoreau defined city life as millions of people being lonesome together. Could this problem of loneliness be one of the inevitable facts of life?

When we consider these questions, we may believe that only we feel like this. But the truth is that to live is to experience loneliness, and we are far from the first generation to wrestle in this way.

The Bible spoke of isolation, singleness, and aloneness in all potential moments - both sorrowful and celebratory. The author of Proverbs identified the core of our problem when he wrote:

"The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy."

Whether we like it or not, the creator has sentenced each of us at birth to some inevitable sentence of solitude in life's ultimate journey.

So what should we do? What can we do to mitigate it, to reduce it, and to soften it? Are there companions to our loneliness?

One of the conversations that I have been engaged in over the past months since October 7th has been about the way we feel as Jews in the crowded arena of people calling for the destruction of the state of Israel, an end to Zionism, and the proliferation of extremely dangerous antisemitism. We can often feel alone in a world full of people.

Lonesomeness is one of the most difficult burdens to bear. One of the earliest descriptions of human beings is how *not* good it is for humans to be alone. According to the Book of Genesis, God says: "*Lo tov heyiot ha'Adam livado* - it is not good for human to be alone." Thus, God ensured that Adam would never be alone as he would be joined by Eve.

Given the small number of Jews in the world—approximately .2% of the world's population—it is expected to feel alone as a Jew. I grew up in a small town outside of Philadelphia in the woods of Southern New Jersey, where there were only a few Jewish families, including us and our next-door neighbors. That is not a foreign experience for many Jews in this country and around the world, which is why it is essential to envision the future of our community and the ways we can serve the Jewish people as a whole.

Imagine walking into this space and feeling truly seen, valued, and safe. That's belonging. And belonging is not just a warm and fuzzy feeling—it's the outcome of how people treat each other and has a massive impact on life.

Belonging is not a feeling alone; it is a catalyst for change. When you feel like you belong, everything changes. You're more likely to speak up and out, share your gifts, and contribute to the community.

When people feel disconnected, they are less likely to participate and connect in the most meaningful ways.

When people feel they belong, they elevate one another and the entire community.

Rabbi Sharon Brous writes in *The Amen Effect*: "It may not surprise you that the data show that people who regularly participate in faith communities are likely to live years longer than those who do not. People connected to communities of shared purpose are less lonely, more motivated, hopeful, and more fulfilled. "

Creating a sense of belonging is not just the job of a community's leadership; it's a collective effort. Every single person can make a difference. Small actions, like warmly greeting a fellow community member or asking for someone's opinion, can significantly impact.

Our vision for the community is grand but achievable. How does it feel when you arrive, are greeted by name, wished a sincere Shabbat shalom, and are invited to sit together at kiddush? Chances are that would make you feel connected, which is incredibly powerful.

*Hibur—Connection* in a community goes far beyond just knowing one another's names. It's about truly understanding who we are as people: the shared experiences, the inside jokes, the knowledge of one another's lives, the celebration of or mourning with.

This sense of connection does more than just make our time together more enjoyable. It has tangible benefits—improving mental health, fostering a sense of security, and enhancing personal growth. It makes

you feel valued as a person, not just a stranger. This kind of connection can significantly impact contentment and meaning.

The level of connection each person needs or wants can vary. Some might love sharing details about their lives, while others are more private. The key is to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable being themselves and getting to know one another.

### *Need to Need*

We need to need each other in a community—that's why there is a minyan for our prayer services.

When we experience the heartache of loss, our tradition encourages us to recite a public prayer that offers classic illustrations of God's extraordinary nature, the Mourner's Kaddish. As the mourner recites these ancient words, the community responds with one of the most powerful words in the Hebrew lexicon, "Amen." Five times throughout the Mourner's Kaddish, the minyan responds with this word, which conveys an essential sentiment. Namely, we are here with you - you do not stand alone.

Standing in sorrow and reciting these words, identifying the person as having lost a dear one, evokes a sense of vulnerability. The community assures the mourner that their very rawness is respected and embraces them with words and sentiments. This leads to deeper and more meaningful relationships.

The words of the Kaddish Yatom also express a need for comfort and partnership in loss. We accompany the mourners' prayers and, hopefully, their hearts.

Our communal needs extend far beyond the word "amen." The way to forge and develop positive, deep, and meaningful relationships is to be vulnerable and tell another when you need something. Relationships are not built on smiles alone; we need to be known.

Proverbs 27:17 says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." We need to allow another to help us sharpen ourselves. Here in the community, we can each find those with wisdom to speak into our lives.

### *Kavod*

Respect is not just about politeness or courtesy. It is about genuinely valuing each person for who they are and what they offer. Respect also extends to recognizing the whole person, not just the Shabbat or holiday attendee. It is about understanding and valuing another's life, through which we feel a more profound sense of belonging to our community.

However, respect is not only about big gestures. Often, the small, everyday actions make the most significant difference. It could be fellow community members asking for your opinion, one of our leadership trusting you to make an essential decision for the community, or someone acknowledging your contribution to a successful outcome.

BHBE has embarked on a significant project of preparing to enter a new era of congregational life by moving physical locations. Many within the community contributed to this process, ultimately decided on by the community through a vote. The foremost goal was to conduct this process with respect, transparency, and communication.

Respect fosters open communication. When you feel honored, you're more likely to share your thoughts and engage deeper, which leads to the success of our community through more innovative ideas and problem-solving.

Respect is a two-way street. By listening to others' ideas, acknowledging their contributions, and valuing them and their time, we build a culture of respect that benefits everyone. Without it, the consequences are significant. We might hold back, feel less motivated to participate, or even consider leaving the community. This affects the individual and the community's success.

So, how do we foster kavod in our community?

Start by recognizing and appreciating one another's contributions to BHBE, such as leading prayer services, reading Torah, organizing mah jong, serving in synagogue leadership, instructing a class, or being present. These are a few virtually innumerable ways members contribute to BHBE.

Seek out and value diverse perspectives, showing interest in one another's growth. Supporting decisions that are different from the norm and treat everyone equally.

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם

“Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? The one who learns from every person.”

By cultivating kavod, we improve our spiritual and communal experiences and contribute to a positive, productive environment where everyone can thrive and feel valued for their unique skills and perspectives.

*Shamor - guarding one another*

Just like we guard the Sabbath by participating in the day with observance and connection, we can guard one another. Guarding goes beyond physical safety, as essential as that is for us. It is about social, emotional, and psychological well-being, too. It creates an environment where we can thrive even when we feel vulnerable.

Rabbi Yonah of Girona, a 13th-century Spanish rabbi, wrote: "One of the most crucial and important things a person is called to do in life is exert himself to the full depths of his very soul on behalf of another person."

To guard one another is to create a culture where everyone looks out for each other despite disagreements and differences.

Feeling guarded and protected is not a luxury; it is a necessity. When we feel this way, we can give and live so much more—it is a Jewish obligation. We can start by treating each other with respect and kindness, mindful of each other's responsibilities, and creating an atmosphere where everyone feels safe to be themselves.

No matter where we may be physically, either in this building or our next home, at our retreat in Wisconsin, at *tashlich* at the park, or celebrating our holy holiday of Sukkot in the sukkah, we work tirelessly to help one another get so excited about being here.

That's the energy of belonging in action, and it is a powerful force. It is a tangible power that drives engagement, creativity, and belonging, where we bring the best of ourselves.

As Brene Brown puts it: "We are psychologically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually hard-wired for connection, love, and belonging... [These] are irreducible needs of all [people]... It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. The absence of love, belonging, and connection always leads to suffering."

The energy of belonging is created through countless small, daily interactions, not necessarily the grand, over-the-top gestures, as crucial as those are. It is the fellow community member who asks how we are doing and truly means it.

I was recently with a colleague who serves as a rabbi in Israel, and I asked her how she was doing. She replied, "Thank God, I am doing well." I respectfully inquired again, "How are you really?" This opened the door to a challenging but essential conversation about what life was like in Israel—especially in the north of Israel, where she lives—and what we in the US can do to help support communities like hers.

Fostering a sense of belonging does emerge from BHBE's leadership, but everyone can contribute to it. By making others feel connected, respected, and guarded, we're adding to the holiness of our community.

Let us start by reaching out to one another, whether long-time members or new to the community, showing genuine interest in one another's lives, ideas, and experiences. We can recognize and appreciate their contributions. Help guard one another. These small actions create a ripple effect, transforming our community into one where everyone feels like they belong.

The most isolating form of loneliness is not being apart from people; it is being apathetic, indifferent, or unrelated to them. It is not enough to be in contact with people; we must feel concerned about them.

When we are self-centered and selfish, we build sequestering walls from those around us - from their trials and triumphs. We must break free from this container of aloneness, out of self-imposed solitary confinement. Instead, we must understand that we have the capacity to relate to others through love - to care sincerely. And we are loved in direct proportion to how we love. We receive as we give.

Holmes wisely said: "There is no better exercise for the heart than reaching down and lifting someone up."

As Jews, we have a unique companionship. In addition to *ahavat briyot* - a love of the human family - we are blessed with *ahavat Yisrael* - a love of the people Israel. The Jewish people have an intimate, unique, and mystical connection. We have a shared fate. In one another's destinies, we are directly involved. Without compromising our love for all humanity, we also can love the Jewish people with warm, overflowing dedication. In return, we are sheltered from the stormy seas of loneliness. After all, how can we consider ourselves lonely when we share the house of Israel?

I have been singing a Jewish children's song for over two decades, titled "Wherever You Go." The lyrics are: "Wherever you go, there's always someone Jewish, you're never alone when you say you're a Jew, so when you're not home, and you're somewhere kind of newish, the odds are, don't look far, because they're Jewish too."

When Hillel counseled us, "Separate not yourself from the community," he was speaking not only for the sake of the community but also for the sake of the individual. This love is one of the Jewish time-honored companionships to protect us.

Each person is a complicated, multifaceted, wounded, and beautiful individual, each one essential to the greater whole. We can be alone, but we need never be lonely. As we wander this world through the darkest times imaginable, let us carry our lamps together and walk toward a promised land. Perhaps we can find our way out, but more importantly, our way in.

L'Shanah Tovah