

High Holy Day Sermon 5775
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The Man In The Mirror

In 1941 during World War II, while fleeing from their family's village in Bosnia, 17 year old Hedija Talic became separated from her 11 year old sister, Tanija Delic. Their parents were killed, while their brother made it safely to the United States. Hedija wound up in an orphanage. At the end of the war, Hedija heard conflicting stories about her family's fate – some told her that her entire family had been killed, while others said they had fled to the United States. Hedija started her own family and she moved to the northeastern town of Tuzla, without knowing she was just over 120 miles away from her sister, Tanija, who was living in a village in northwestern Bosnia. More than 70 years later, with the help of Facebook, Hedija's son found his cousin, Tanija's son, and the two sisters reunited. They now hope to use Facebook to find their brother in the United States. ¹

This story gives me chills, as I am sure it does you. Just fifteen years ago a story like this one was unimaginable. The ravages of war seemed irreversible. The devastation and isolation that lay in their wake felt insurmountable. Now, with the click of a mouse, families have the ability to reunite, to bridge the divide.

Today, October 4th, 2014, there are more ways to connect than ever before. The internet alone has brought us hundreds of social networking sites. There are so many ways to connect, in fact, that the methods of just years ago seem like distant memories. Remember the blogging site Live Journal of the early 1990s? Probably not cool to admit that. Remember Friendster of the early 2000s, followed a year later by Myspace? Please don't raise your hand; they're both completely obsolete in the land of the internet cool. Everyone under the age of 21 is shaking their head right now. I know, I know.

Now there's Facebook and Instagram and Twitter and LinkedIn and Google+ and another 10 websites that are being invented as I give this sermon where you can build networks of friends 1000s of people large. Scoff though some may, 72% of all internet users are on some sort of social media website, which translates to about 1.82 billion social media users worldwide.² There are also the mobile devices we use and the apps that let us connect in real time to the actual people in our networks, you know them – FaceTime, Skype, Google Hangout. Think about how far advances in air travel have come in less than a century; we can hop on a plane or two and be around the world in 24 hours in locations formerly so remote they were untraveled by those not indigenous to the region. We take these things for granted, but they are incredible when we stop to think about how far we have come in so little time.

These technological advances, websites, devices, and apps let us transcend space and time and connect with people we know – and sometimes people we do not know – whether they are

¹ <http://mashable.com/2013/01/07/sisters-meet-facebook/> and <http://www.news.com.au/technology/sisters-reunite-72-years-later-with-the-help-of-facebook/story-e6frfmr-1226548835214>

² <http://www.jeffbullas.com/2014/01/17/20-social-media-facts-and-statistics-you-should-know-in-2014/>

thousands of miles and several time zones away. In a piece in the student newspaper, Columbia University student, Iman Fears, reflected that, now, in her junior year, more than three years later, several of her closest friends on campus are students she met through an online social networking group for incoming first year students.³ Several years ago, I watched a friend who suffered the tragic loss of her infant daughter write about her experiences on her blog and be buoyed by the support of other parents who had suffered similar losses, almost all of whom she did not know and will never meet. They remembered the *yahrzeits* (anniversary of death) of each other's children, offering tender words as the anniversaries approached. They held each other's sorrow – sometimes just echoing an experience and other times offering words of hope that there was light at the other end of the tunnel or suggestions for how to wade through the unimaginable grief. The results of social media and social networking can be incredible; they can bring us together in real and magical ways.

This could be nothing other than a good thing, right? There are those who emphatically say, yes. The Pew Internet Personal Networks and Community survey argues that “when we examine people's full personal networks . . . internet use in general and use of social networking services such as Facebook in particular are associated with more diverse social networks.”⁴ In English? According to this survey, social networking equals more connection and less isolation. However, there are plenty of others who argue that this hyper-connectivity actually only serves to make us feel more isolated and, ultimately, more lonely. According to a 2010 AARP study, 35% of adults said they were lonely, up from 20% in the 1980s.⁵

As New Yorkers, this is something to which we can, perhaps, uniquely relate. Never mind the internet, we live in one of the top ten largest cities in the world. Everywhere we turn there are people – packed into subway cars, rushing down sidewalks, filling museums and sidewalk cafes and theatres. Yet it is easy, even amidst the crush of people, to *feel* alone, to *feel* lonely. Perhaps you remember the episode of *Sex and the City* in which Miranda buys her own apartment, chokes while eating takeout, and has to give herself the Heimlich maneuver on top of a moving box – a quintessentially New York scene. In classic Miranda hyperbolic hysterics, while she initially calms down, Miranda later becomes so worried that she will die a gruesome death alone in her apartment and no one will know that she has a panic attack that sends her to the ER. While initially a bit funny, there is something viscerally real about this scene, even a little terrifying, and definitely relatable. In a letter from 1867, Mark Twain referred to New York as a “splendid desert – a domed and steepled solitude, where a stranger is lonely in the midst of a million of his race. . . . the natural result is . . . the serene indifference of the New Yorker to everybody and everything without the pale of his private and individual circle.”⁶

Surrounded by actual and virtual seas of people and information, we seem to be less truly connected than ever before. Clearly it is not a lack of people to connect with or ways to connect with them that is making us feel lonelier though. It is not even the actual fact of *being* alone. *Feeling* alone – *feeling* lonely – is quite different than *being* alone. New York City ranks high amongst the cities with the top percentages of single person households – with over 33% of all

³ <http://columbiaspectator.com/2013/09/02/it-weird-i-met-most-my-friends-online>

⁴ <http://www.pewinternet.org/2009/11/04/social-isolation-and-new-technology/>

⁵ http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/loneliness_2010.pdf

⁶ Imogene Sara Smith, *In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland: 2011), 24.

households occupied by a single person living alone.⁷ There are plenty of perfectly content people living alone and plenty of people perfectly happy to be left alone – who even crave time alone . . . probably many of us in this room. So what is missing? What is making us feel so much lonelier? Is the internet to blame? The simple answer is no.

After all, we can live in a city surrounded by millions of people and still *FEEL* alone. We can go to work every day and encounter the loveliest of coworkers and still *FEEL* alone. We can have a great partner, wonderful kids, a big family we get along with, and a sizeable network of friends and still *FEEL* alone. We can feel lonely in some of our most intimate relationships. We can sit right here right now, in this synagogue, surrounded by hundreds of fellow congregants, some of whom we have known for a lifetime, some of whom we call our closest friends, and still *FEEL* alone. When we stop feeling able to be vulnerable with the people in our lives, when we stop feeling able to have deep and meaningful conversations about the things that weigh on our minds or the joys we yearn to share, no matter how surrounded by others we may find ourselves, we can still feel so very alone.

During these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, we are told that we must stand alone before God – a daunting task if we already *feel* alone. But what does it truly mean to stand alone before God on this day? Does that moment of standing alone before God have to make us *feel* alone? Are we even truly alone as we stand before God?

Rather than thinking of ourselves as standing before God – *lifnei Adonai* – we can instead think of ourselves as standing *k'neged Adonai* – in relationship with our God. What is the difference? Let's think back to the story of creation. From the first moments of our existence in this world, in the Book of Genesis, God says, "*Lo tov heyot ha'adam l'vado* – it is not good that man should be alone."⁸ Recognizing that an individual human being cannot survive on his own, God responds and says, "*eh'eh'se lo ezer k'negdo* – I will make for him a helpmate."⁹ Ultimately, this helpmate takes the form of a woman. But God's original words are poignant. God says that God will create for man an *ezer k'negdo*. *Ezer* means a helper. *K'negdo* connotes against or opposite, yet still in relationship to, different than but connected. God says, "I will place one being opposite another being but they will face one another, they will help one another; I will place the opportunity for connection between these two human beings."¹⁰ From the outset of creation, there is an acknowledgement that human beings need the ability to connect with one another – to be placed before one another in a substantive way, not merely side by side going about their business separately, unaware of one another's existence, but relating to each other – facing one another as helpmates, responsible to and for one another.

The same can be true when we come to face God during the *Ya'mim Noraim*, the Days of Awe. Rabbi Levine often refers to God as our eternal friend.¹¹ The psalmist famously writes: "God is my shepherd, I shall not want. I know that your goodness and love will be with me all the days of my life and I will live in the house of God forever."¹² This is not always an easy kind of

⁷ <http://chpcny.org/our-projects/single-person-households/>

⁸ Genesis 2:18.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Based on a sermon given by Rabbi Robin Nafshi of Temple Beth Jacob in Concord, NH (<http://www.tbjconcord.org/rabbis-blog-sp-994/item/erev-rosh-hashanah-sermon-5774>).

¹¹ Robert N. Levine, *Where are you when I need you?: Befriending God When Life Hurts* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996).

¹² Psalm 23:1, 6.

relationship to develop or even to maintain once cultivated. How do we come to know God as a friend or trust that God will be our shepherd, our protector and guide? Sometimes we seek out God's presence in our life and we simply cannot feel any connection. We often look for God in all the wrong places. We look for a transcendent, intervening God to reach down from the heavens and remove our hardship and change our fate when, if we turn within, we may find the still small voice that gives us the strength to live through our pain. Some of the people in our lives that we love the most are the very ones who infuriate us the most, who press all of our buttons, who alienate us, who hurt us, and so it sometimes can be in our relationship with God. The Divine relationship has never been easy – it wasn't biblically, and it isn't now. Yet, we persevere. We keep turning and returning. When we trust that there will be someone or something – an energy, a power, a spirit that calls us to higher purpose – there waiting to meet us when we come to account for our actions in the year gone by, when we trust that there is something bigger than us holding us in our time of need and in our darkest moments, then we know that we are not truly alone before God because God is there too, facing us as well – not just during these ten days but every day we seek out a divine presence in our lives. We can develop a spiritual life through meditation or prayer. We can commit ourselves to acts of *chesed* (loving kindness) and *tikkun olam* (repair of the universe/social justice) – whether by volunteering to visit a homebound congregant, serving a meal at St. Xavier's Soup Kitchen, spending a night in the CRS homeless shelter, or packing backpacks with our Backpack Buddies program. I will never stop making these suggestions; they are the core of who we are as Jews and who we are as a Rodeph Sholom community. We can get to know ourselves, get to know the spark of divinity that exists within each of us so that, when we do go to face God, we recognize that it is really ourselves whom we face and it is really ourselves for whom we have to have love and with whom we have to feel a sense of peace. That takes time – the time we are given by this season. Time to ask ourselves who we have been, who we want to become, and what it will take to get there.

These high holy days remind us that we can live a life full of meaning as an individual so long as we seek out a higher purpose and cultivate a relationship with someone or something beyond ourselves. Painful though it may sometimes be, we have to find our way back into community; we are called to find our way back into community. The Torah talks of the Nazirite, the individual who consecrates himself to God by removing himself completely from the community. Rabbinic literature goes back and forth on the merits of such a lifestyle and, in the end, we reject this model completely. A person cannot live a truly holy existence separate and apart from other human beings, we learn. “*Al tifrosh min ha'tzibur* – do not separate yourself from the community” Rabbi Hillel cries in Mishna Avot.¹³ When times are difficult, do not turn away, do not hide, Rabbi Hillel says.

This past spring each of you received a mailing with a magnet bearing the Rodeph Sholom logo and a health care proxy card, which designates another person to make health care decisions on your behalf should you become unable to communicate those wishes. The card also bears Rodeph Sholom's logo, connecting you to this community in case of emergency. Designating a health care proxy is one more way of following Rabbi Hillel's call and binding yourself to others, finding someone who can take care of you in a time of need. As the letter that accompanied the health care proxy card read: “as a congregation, we strive to create a

¹³ Mishnah Avot 2:4.

community where each congregant feels known, valued, and embraced, and where every individual feels connected to the synagogue and to one another.”

In the Reform machzor of Great Britain, Rabbi Jonathan Magonet writes that in this season, we face God “all of us together, each of us alone.”¹⁴ The liturgy and the way we perform the rites and rituals of this season compel us to be in community. Though we each engage in *cheshbon ha'nefesh*, though we each account for our own soul, we do so in the midst of community. Last night, we called out, *Sh'ma Koleinu* – oh God, hear our voice; not my voice but *our* voices, lifted in prayer together. Unlike the individual nature of confession in other faith traditions, Judaism requires the presence of community in order for complete *teshuvah* (repentance) to take place. During the *vidui*, the confessional prayers central to the Yom Kippur liturgy, we each confess for the missteps we have made in the year gone by, and yet we do so as one united voice. We may even confess to misdeeds we did not commit. In so doing, we commit to the idea that all of our actions are linked; each of us is responsible one for another. Each of us has to show up one for another in order for the process of *teshuva* to work. None of us can face God alone without the support of a community of fellow worshippers each coming to do the same.

The responsibility to show up for one another does not end with the High Holy Days. The rabbis of the Talmud teach that all of Israel is responsible one for another – *kol Yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh*.¹⁵ If we understand this teaching in the context of the injunction not to separate ourselves from the community, the latter takes on new meaning. Just as we challenge ourselves not to separate ourselves from the community, we also have the responsibility to ensure that those in our midst do not become separated from the community. *Kol yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh* – all of Israel is responsible one for another. We can practice what Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, calls audacious hospitality. At Shabbat services, when we pause after Kiddush to say hello to those around us, challenge yourself to use the time to introduce yourself to someone you do not know, particularly someone who looks like they could use a hello. When you are in the hallways of this building or in the elevator, introduce yourself to the people you run into. Invite fellow congregants over for a holiday meal. Pick up the phone and call the person you have been meaning to call. Volunteer to help the Caring Community make bereavement calls to those who have lost a loved one after the first week of mourning is complete or to welcome fellow congregants to services as a Shabbat Greeter.

As we heed the call to show up for one another in our own community, we have the opportunity to think beyond the walls of our synagogue and beyond our families and social circles. Each year, at least 80,000 prisoners are placed in solitary confinement or administrative segregation in American prisons, more than any other country in the world. While in solitary, prisoners usually spend 23 hours a day locked in small, often windowless cells with a solid steel door, bed, toilet, and sink without opportunities for significant social interaction. They receive meals through small slots in cell doors. Physical contact with other human beings is often limited to non-existent, as are phone calls and visits by family and loved ones. Research by the ACLU shows that between one-fifth and two-thirds of prisoners being held in solitary have a serious mental illness which was diagnosed or manifested before entering isolation, making prolonged solitary confinement more of a living horror than it already is. Many who enter solitary confinement

¹⁴ <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/jewish-law/holidays/mls/mahzor-kol-nidrei.pdf>

¹⁵ BT Shevuot 39a.

without a history of mental illness develop severe mental illness after even just a few weeks in isolation.¹⁶ Thankfully, earlier this year, both the New York State and New York City prison system agreed to take major steps to reform their policies regarding solitary confinement. In fact, just days after I finished writing this sermon, last week, on September 30th, New York City's Department of Correction announced that they will eliminate the use of solitary confinement for 16 and 17 year old inmates, after months of media scrutiny and a critical U.S. Department of Justice investigation calling on the agency to revamp its treatment of adolescents.¹⁷ There is still much work to be done, though, in our city and state and across the nation, where solitary confinement is often the default intervention for teenagers in lieu of adequate staff training and supervision and mental health services for inmates. As Jews, we have a particular responsibility to lead the charge. We have to be in dialogue with our elected officials on the state and city level to continue to evaluate length of stay, as well as to ensure that those most vulnerable – juveniles and those with mental illness – stay out of solitary confinement altogether. *Lo tov heyot adam l'vado*. It is not good for a human being – any human being – to be alone.

Remember that Sex and the City episode? In the end, what calms Miranda down is the relationship she shares with her dear friend Carrie, who comes to the rescue. Carrie does not just talk Miranda down from her fears, though; Carrie truly shows up – physically and emotionally. When she arrives at the hospital, she agrees to replace Miranda's out-of-town parents as her emergency contact. *Lo tov heyot adam l'vado*. From Carrie we learn that, it is not just that human beings should not be alone – because the fact of the matter is that sometimes we simply *are* alone. Rather, it is not good for human beings to *feel* alone in this world. From our own tradition, we learn that there are so many ways to show up for ourselves and to show up for others. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh* – all of Israel is responsible one for another – we are each responsible to show up for ourselves and for others, not separating ourselves from the community and not letting any one of our flock become separated, lest we miss the opportunity to stand together as one before God and say, “*Sh'ma koleinu* – Oh God, hear **our** voice.”

¹⁶ Taken from <http://www.truah.org/issues/campaigns/torture/solitary-confinement-background.html>.

¹⁷ <https://beta.cironline.org/reports/rikers-island-is-eliminating-juvenile-solitary-confinement-now-what/>