

## Loneliness-KN 2025

I celebrated a milestone birthday this year in July. My husband Andy & I had big plans to go on a Jewish-themed Rhine river cruise in June. But he was ill so I took my 26-year-old son Max instead. It was a wonderful experience. But a month later when my birthday rolled around, I knew my husband didn't have it in him to plan anything. He was still recovering. My sisters offered to do a Sister trip but no one was available until November. I was pretty resigned to just having a quiet birthday with Andy. We figure 61 is just as good to commemorate and we could simultaneously celebrate his clean bill of health!

Little did I know a video I shared with my closest friends caused one of them to reach out to my daughter Sadie. In the video a woman was being celebrated by her family. As they placed a candle on her birthday cake they each shared one wish they had for her that year. I texted my friends, "THIS is what I want for my birthday. Start thinking of your wish for me!" So one of them called Sadie and said "How can we make this happen?" Fast forward to July 17. Sadie invited Andy and I for dinner on my birthday and I was truly shocked to find 16 of my dearest friends there! The surprise was real. The joy was palpable. And I got my wish of 16 friends sharing their fondest hopes for my year ahead.

It turned around my entire day and the weeks after.

We all crave human connection but we ignore our own instincts to ask for it because we feel exposed when we reach out and vulnerable when we admit we really want to be seen and celebrated. So we don't ask. And that can make us feel dejected and unloved.

During the High Holy Days we celebrate another birthday...Hayom Harat Olam...The birthday of humanity. In our story of Creation, with every new act, God declared it TOV, which you may know means Good. God created light and it was TOV. God created the birds and the trees. And it was TOV. Then God created humans and it was...TOV M'OD. Very good.

But the first thing in the Torah God declared NOT good was loneliness.

*"It is not good for man to be alone"* (Genesis 2:18). Lo tov hot haadam l'vado. Even in the perfection of paradise, emotional solitude remains contrary to human nature. Loneliness runs through the stories of our ancestors. Joseph is isolated in Egypt, separated from his family. Moses often leads alone. King David, in Psalms, pours out his heart, saying: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted."

Our former Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, declared a national epidemic of loneliness stating: Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity.

A founder of the field of social neuroscience teaches that loneliness isn't being physically alone: it's the perceived gap between the relationships we want and those we have.

(Repeat)

Science agrees with God. Loneliness is LO TOV.

In his book entitled Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam says statistics show your chances of dying over the next year are cut IN HALF by joining a group. There is real value in your membership at the JCV. If you join one of our many committees or clubs there is the built-in perk of knowing you have just increased your lifespan.

Seeking out others and becoming part of a group is not always easy. It requires that we make ourselves vulnerable, acknowledge our need, and face possible rejection. Yet we cannot always wait for another to find us. There is a story in the Talmud about a famous healer, Rabbi Yochanan, who is one day healed by his friend Rabbi Chanina. Hearing the story, the anonymous voice of the Talmud asks why Yochanan couldn't just heal himself. Responding to its own question, the Talmud answers, "A captive cannot release himself from prison." So too, we cannot cure our own loneliness. To truly help ourselves, we must provide others with an avenue to see us and a pathway to show us their love. Some will fail us, but we must have the tenacity to keep searching.

(This would be an obvious place for me to stop and talk about the hostages who remain in Israel and about the horrific situation in Gaza. As a rabbi, I've had several people come to me and say you need to speak out about this. I just want to address that briefly by saying I have never believed in extremes. I try to be balanced and see both sides. There are many things that I'm quite upset about and there are other things that I've had my mind changed over time. What I haven't changed though, is my belief that the bima is a place for me to share these feelings. I am not here to be a political commentator. I have not taken this role to tell you how to behave and respond to situations. I do try to talk about moral and ethical issues so that you can make up your own mind. But I refuse to stand up here and potentially alienate anybody sitting in this room. I need everyone to feel they could come to me and be heard.) I digress. Now back to our topic of loneliness.

"We need to be intentional about connection, just like we are with exercise and eating healthy foods. The number of people who know they should eat five servings of fruit and vegetables a day is much larger than the number who actually do. The same will likely be true of social fitness.

There are plenty of tips on how you can meet your daily minimum requirements of social interaction. Put some friendships "on auto-pilot" by scheduling a standing monthly or weekly activity, or sticking a Post-it note on your bathroom mirror reminding you to reach out to someone in your life. You can search for jokes online. We know laughter is wonderful medicine and if you memorize the joke, you can laugh twice. Once when you read it. Again when you tell it. And consider what that does for your memory!

Sometimes being with other people is NOT what you need to feel less lonely. Time alone can give you opportunities to grow. There are TEDtalks, audio books that you can download free on CloudLibrary. There are concerts of every type on Youtube. There are free language learning apps. By continuing to have a growth mindset, you enhance your enjoyment of gaining knowledge and have new things to discuss with people when you are in a social situation. And if that sounds interesting, then know that people who socialize more are more resistant to cognitive decline.

One of the arenas that religion excels at is highlighting awe. Experts say that giving oneself permission to experience the beauty of nature and other sources of wonder, diminishes a feeling of being alone. An oft repeated suggestion is volunteering in your community. Many people want to help but have reasons why they can't. But I can think of one thing right now that would make a huge difference to you and another person and requires no physical exertion. Commit to a set number of 10-minute calls each week. If you are the one feeling lonely, imagine the boost you will get by connecting with another person who is seeking connection? Win-win!

Many of you have chosen the JCV as your caring community. Although we cannot be everything to everyone, we can make a difference. Our congregants come in here seeking connections to other Jews, to God, and mostly to connect with some people that will be their people. I have heard there are cliques. But if you consider this is a group of people who have found their people, then you can understand how much they enjoy each other's company. And you too should seek out your people.

There is something Sociologists call social capital. These are the networks of relationships that help us engage in collaborative, interactions and collective efforts.

The leadership here, your Board of Directors and Committee chairs, are always talking about ways to improve the experience for congregants, because they are the congregants. They truly want to make this a thriving and gratifying place.

And because I do not like to bring up a predicament without being part of the solution I am trying a few things myself. Starting in November I will offer a program called Soul Food with Rabbi Marci. Once a month, on the 3rd Wednesday at 11:30-12:30, I invite you to bring a brown bag lunch and join me for conversation and camaraderie.

Also I am hoping we can extend what our tremendous Membership Committee already does in matching new congregants with a buddy.

Our Caring Committee is full of volunteers who want to be of service. If you are lonely and would like a call or visit, let me know. Or let me know you want to be a Call Buddy. I will gladly gather this list and we can put people in touch with each other.

It has been two months since my birthday, yet I still carry many of the wishes I received with me in my heart. One of the most meaningful blessings I received was “May you see yourself as we see you.”

This is my wish for all of you. Know that you are a valued member of our synagogue home. And know that there are safety nets all around. You just might need to ask someone to gather the net around you. We all get caught up in our own worries and illnesses and struggles. But I am an authority on the JCV after 23, almost 24 years here, and I implore you, keep searching for your people. They are out there and even possibly right here, just waiting for you to let them in.

Gut yontif.