

How to Never Be Lonely

Category: Emor, Vayikra

Loneliness seems to be a growing epidemic. What is the Torah's cure?

The Power of a Minyan

Good Shabbos!

Loneliness has been the subject of quite a few studies in recent years, and recently, yet another U.S. study came out on the subject.

This study, which involved some 20,000 survey respondents, found that close to 50 percent of U.S. citizens feel lonely all or most of the time.

According to several leader experts, loneliness is the plague of the generation. As a general rule, loneliness is stereotyped as only affecting seniors who live by themselves.

But what this study found is that loneliness is now an epidemic among young people—that people between the ages of 18 and 22 are now suffering loneliness at highest-ever numbers, and that seniors above 72 are actually enjoying the lowest-ever percentages of loneliness.

Doctors claim that the loneliness epidemic is not just a social illness but one that is affecting the physical health of these people in a serious way. They say that loneliness is as bad for physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day! And they say that it's even worse than obesity because when the mind creates loneliness, the immune system weakens as a result.

What's more, research several years ago found that loneliness is actually contagious—the risk of feeling lonely rises by 50 percent if you're connected to someone who also feels lonely.

But do not fear, my friends! For the solution to loneliness is right there in the Torah. And that takes us straight to this week's Torah portion.

This week's Parshah of Emor is divided into two sections. The first section

discusses the Kohein rules—who a Kohein can become impure from and who a Kohein cannot become impure from. The second section discusses the Jewish holy days: Shabbos, Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos.

But we find a very important single verse tucked away between these two sections. Vayikra 22:32 tells us, “I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel.”

Now, what does it mean that G-d wants to be “sanctified amidst the children of Israel”? So the Talmud (Tractate Brachos 21b) says: “Rav Ada Bar Ahava said, ‘From where do we know a solitary individual does not recite the Kedushah prayer? From the verse that states, “I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel”—every matter of holiness shall not be [comprised of] less than ten [participants].”

So here, the Talmud is teaching us that every “matter of holiness,” such as saying Kaddish, reciting the Kedushah or Borchu prayers, etc. require a quorum of ten Jewish men. If a person wants to say Kaddish for his father or mother, he cannot do so at home—rather, he must go to synagogue and join a minyan where he can say Kaddish. Why is this so? Because, as the verse states, “I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel”—to make His Name holy, to praise the Name of G-d, is something that happens in the ears of all the other participants, who hear it and then express their agreement by saying, “Amen!” Indeed, the entire concept of group prayer is based on this very verse from our Parshah.

So the solution to the problem of loneliness is group prayer—a Jew who comes to synagogue on a regular basis will never be lonely. He’ll always have friends and loved ones who will worry for him—in fact, quite a bit of research has shown that people who regularly go to shul live longer. And one of the primary reasons for that is because regular shul-goers are never lonely.

Taking Responsibility

What’s more, Judaism bequeathed to us the value of “mutual guarantorship,” in which one is responsible for the other—and this concept of mutual guarantorship, says the Rebbe, is mentioned in the Torah three times.

So let’s take a look in reverse order.

The last time this concept is mentioned in the Torah is on Moshe Rabbeinu's last day on earth.

He assembles the entire nation and says to them, "You are all standing here... every man of Israel... that you may enter the covenant of the L-rd, your G-d..." He enacts a treaty with the entire Jewish Nation.

Now, what is in this treaty that wasn't in the first treaty that was enacted at the Stand at Mt. Sinai? So the Midrash (Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishmael, Parshas Bo, Piska 16) answers, "You are all areivim [responsible] for one another." After all, it was at Arvos Moav ["Arvos" means "Plains," but the word is rooted in areiv, or guarantor] that Moshe bound them by a treaty about "arvus," or responsibility—the concept that each one is responsible for the other.

The Midrash goes on and says, "Even if there is one tzaddik among you, you all stand in his merit—and not just you but the whole world in its entirety, as the verse states, 'And the righteous is the foundation of the world'; and when one sins, the entire generation is flogged."

What that means is that the behavior of each individual Jew among us can, and does, influence the entire Jewish Nation and the entire world. Therefore, no one can say that what the other guy is doing is none of my business—because if the other guy is not doing the right thing, it affects everyone. And so we take responsibility for the behavior of every Jew, regardless of who he or she may be.

The second time we learn from the Torah that we have responsibility for one another, even if it doesn't quite fall into the category of "responsibility," is in the Book of Vayikra. Practically right in the middle of the Torah, in the Parshah of Kedoshim, the Torah issues the famous commandment, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18). And Chasidic philosophy teaches us that we need to care for the other "literally" the way we care about ourselves.

And the first time that this concept is mentioned in the Torah is at the start, in the Parshah of Vayeira in the Book of Bereishis. There, the Torah tells us about the three angels who came to visit Avraham to inform him that his wife Sarah would give birth to Yitzchak.

So after their visit with Avraham, the Torah states: "And the men arose from there, and they looked upon Sodom... And the L-rd said, 'Shall I conceal from

Avraham what I am doing?’”

Now, why does G-d here feel a need to reveal to Avraham what He intends to do to Sodom? So the Torah herself reveals the answer to us: “For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the L-rd to perform righteousness and justice” (Bereishis 18:19).

So there, the Torah reveals to us the secret of G-d’s love for Avraham. “For I have known him,” comments Rashi, “is a term of endearment... and why ‘have I known him’? Because he ‘commands his sons’ about Me, to keep My way... He commands his children: ‘Keep the way of G-d!’”

Now, there were good people before Avraham, too. But Avraham was the first who was not satisfied with just doing G-d’s Will but rather, who saw to it that his household followed that path, too—so that the next generation, those who would come after him, would continue the Jewish tradition (Sichas 20 Av, 5732, Sichos Kodesh Vol. II, pg. 453).

Now, “emes” (truth) is one of the most well-known words among Jews, even those who otherwise do not speak a bit of Hebrew. And “emes” is comprised of three letters: aleph, mem and sof—and aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, mem is the middle letter, and sof is the last. Thus, “emes” represents unchanging fact—something that is true beginning, middle and end. Similarly, the secret of mutual responsibility, of tending to the spiritual needs of the other, appears in the Torah in various forms in the beginning, middle and end.

So for anyone who has a sense of “mutual responsibility,” it’s not just a slogan or motto but a full way of life. Such a person will never be lonely because when a person helps and is worried about others, he feels that his life has a purpose, and he’ll never be alone.

And therefore, my friends, the first bit of advice for the lonely person is: Come to shul!

And if for whatever reason you can’t come to shul, the Torah gives us a second way to not be lonely: Take responsibility for others—you won’t be lonely then!

But here, my friends, is something even deeper.

The famed scholar Rabbi Adin Even-Yisrael once visited the Rebbe. Among other

things, the Rebbe expressed interest in how Rabbi Steinsaltz's wife was doing. Rabbi Steinsaltz replied that she was fine, adding that he was here (in the United States) alone.

To that, the Rebbe smiled and asked, "What do you mean, you're here alone? G-d is here with you!"

And so, my friends, a person who believes in G-d knows that he or she will never be alone— wherever he or she may be, G-d is there with him or her. So the true cure for the illness of loneliness in the world is another measure of faith—the believer is never lonely.

And the best place to get inspired and motivated with that faith is in shul.

Good Shabbos!