

As I look at your faces in their boxes, I feel you there, answering a primal need for the human soul to be with others. But when I glance away from the screen, awareness of this empty room blocks you out, and I am, for a moment, so alone.

Loneliness seems ever present these days.

Many of us have had minimal, or even zero, physical contact with another human being in months. After 24 hours without water, by tomorrow night our bodies will be showing the deprivation. How long can we take the deprivation of human touch?

The isolation is especially hard on children. They are not living alone, of course, but developmentally they need contact with peers. Here is what I saw with my own child. For the first two months of the shelter-in-place, my husband and I were very strict with our family about no contact. But in mid-June we decided to expand our isolation bubble to include a kindergarten classmate of our youngest daughter. When they opened the door to us on that first day of isolating together, the look of ecstasy on the girls' faces is something I will not easily forget. For the next two weeks, it was like they couldn't stop touching each other - hugging, holding hands - their bodies seemed to be responding to a kind of hunger.

I think it is similar to the hunger many who are separated from loved ones are feeling.

Not everyone, by any means. For some of us who are living with those we love most in the world, all the extra time together over the past few months has been a blessing. I caught up with an old friend recently. He's out of work due to the pandemic, his grown son is back at home due to his college dorm closing, and he said to me, "I'm enjoying this a little too much, you know?"

But for many of us living with our families or a partner, all that closeness is too much. Without many of the distractions that we usually crowd our lives with, with other relationships faltering through separation, and with so, so many hours together with our family or partner - all the inadequacies of our core relationships are brought into full relief. With the people we love right there, all the time - we can feel desperately lonely.

Loneliness is a feeling - it's subjective. You can feel lonely in a crowded room. Some psychologists think that loneliness is determined in part by expectations. They find that teenagers tend to feel lonely if they don't have lots of friends, and seniors tend to feel lonely if they don't have one or two really good friends who understand them. Loneliness has been on the rise for years now. The problem is most acute in those two age groups, but it is pervasive across all ages.

What irony! With our cell phones always in our pockets, we are the most connected generation ever, and we are the loneliest. Before we were hit with a viral pandemic, many psychologists were referring to a pandemic of loneliness.

And what cruelty this viral pandemic! A generation already so lonely, now forced into isolation from each other.

And irony upon irony: the main driver of the loneliness pandemic was, quite likely, the constant distraction of our devices - and now those devices have become our lifeline.

But there may be an essential lesson in that. Everything in God's world is created neutral. Only we human beings, with our concepts of good and evil, have the ability to sanctify or profane. Take wine as an example. How many lives have been destroyed by alcohol? All the way back to biblical times -after the great flood, Noah planted a vineyard and got drunk, and his family was permanently broken by what happened when he was in that state. Depending on the body chemistry nature gave you, it may be that for you personally, you must stay entirely dry. But as a principle, Judaism does not shun alcohol. Quite the opposite, we raise our glass every Friday night and toast God - Who created the fruit of the vine.

As with alcohol, our experiences of the isolation of this time vary enormously with our personal circumstance, including body chemistry. It may be impossible to imagine toasting God with our loneliness. But I'd like to share with you tonight the story of a young woman I recently met who seems to have done just that. I am taking inspiration from her.

Her name is Emma Abusch. A few months ago she married Oren Abusch, whose mother, Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder, has been my close friend since before Oren was born. Emma and Oren met doing ROTC training, and they are both officers in the US army now. For the story, it is helpful to know that Emma grew up in a Catholic home, but from the start of their relationship she was curious and open to Judaism.

Emma is tough beyond anything I can imagine. She seems unflappable. On December 20th last year, just several months out of college and a couple of weeks after becoming engaged to Oren, Emma officially reported to her army base in North Carolina. Eleven days later, her battalion got the call. They had 18 hours to deploy to Kuwait: Emma, four other women, and about 600 men.

They arrived to a barren desert landscape. It was 110 degrees. Their homes would be huge army tents - 80 men per tent, or, in Emma's case, 79 men and her. Some of the men resented her presence. It meant they could never fully relax, walk around naked. But as they got to know her, she felt they came to accept her, chatting with her like a friend.

Bathrooms were a complication. The men would just turn around and pee wherever they were. Outside the tent, I presume. Whenever Emma needed to relieve herself, she would walk a mile to the nearest sand dune and hide behind it. She came to look

forward to those moments of solitude behind her sand dune. After taking care of her body, she would linger there, and pray. She imagined the ancient Israelite women during their 40 years of wandering in the desert, and they became her sisters, holding her through her ordeal.

She would need their support, because things were about to get a lot worse.

In March, most of the battalion was redeployed to Iraq. Of the 80 in her tent, just Emma and four other soldiers were left behind. And then-- Covid hit, and they were told they had to quarantine in their tents. They could only leave twice a day to get food from the dining tent and bring it directly back to their bunk.

There they were, five lonely soldiers in a tent big enough for 80, with no mission and few distractions. They felt trapped, desperate. With nothing to look at all day but the drab canvas walls, Emma thinks they experienced some sensory deprivation, too. She herself was no longer allowed the mile walk to her sand dune, but she learned to visualize that place in her mind, consciously calling up positive feelings to replace her depression.

In the meantime, back on US soil, Oren began the tough, elite training to become an Army Ranger, and he was entirely out of contact for over a month. That was hard. Though cell service was spotty, Emma counted on phone calls home to anchor her.

And then came the worst blow. Emma's father called, to tell her that her grandfather had contracted Covid. Emma's grandparents had lived with her family when she was growing up and had been very involved in raising her. Losing her grandfather was like losing a parent. Her father was so overwhelmed with the situation, that she felt she could not burden him with her own sorrow. More than ever, she was alone.

Emma was not Jewish when she stepped on that airplane to Kuwait. But Judaism carried her through. She prayed for her grandfather to recover, and for the army to send her home. She also began to study. Her future mother-in-law, my friend Ruth, sent her books to read about Judaism. Ruth made herself available to Emma every day on the phone - and with Oren out of touch and her own parents distracted, Emma relied on those calls with Ruth. Ruth also connected her with Rabbi Barry Darren, a former army chaplain, and with some of Oren's old friends who had attended the Jewish Community HighSchool of the Bay with him. They would talk about Jewish history and culture. It was all new and wonderful to Emma. She even began to learn Hebrew.

The topic that most interested her was theology. She developed her own understanding of God, one that brought her to stop praying for her grandfather to recover, or even that she should be able to return home to see him before he died. It had become clear that neither of those outcomes was possible, and the Talmud teaches that we do not rely on miracles. Instead - she would pray: "Dear God, I feel sad here. Give me the strength to

feel happy.” She prayed to find peace in her situation, and comfort in her memories of her grandfather. And those prayers were answered.

Emma entered her ordeal of loneliness from the opposite direction of the prophet Jonah, whose story we read every Yom Kippur. Emma sought to serve her country, and she sought out God. Jonah ran away from both God and service. On board a ship tossed about in a storm, a frenzy of activity around him as sailors and passengers fought with sails and buckets to save their lives - Jonah, in the depths of depression - lay curled up, asleep.

God then had Jonah cast into the sea, and made a giant fish swallow him alive. Only from within the darkness and stink of the fish’s belly, in utter isolation, Jonah finally reached out to God. He prayed:

“You cast me into the depths, into the heart of the seas. The current surrounded me. All of Your breakers and waves passed over me...As my life is ebbing away, I remember God. Let my prayer come to You, into your holy Temple”

And Jonah’s prayers, too, were answered. The fish spit him out ashore, and when God called him again to prophecy, this time he was ready.

We don’t usually think of Jewish prayer as a solitary activity. Our tradition of requiring a quorum of ten - a minyan - dates back at least to the mishnah, of 200CE. In ancient times, huge throngs gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the holidays, their focus on the Temple. Anyone who has been to a professional sporting event can imagine the uplift of the crowds of worshipers, shouting together with joy and praise. God’s glory is expressed through communities of people coming together.

But praise is only one form of prayer. The core agenda of Yom Kippur is something else -- supplication. In Hebrew, Tachanun. Cries of despair, of desperate need or desire, or shame - are most readily expressed in solitude. In the times of the ancient Temple, the central ritual of Yom Kippur was a solitary one. The High Priest would prep for days. He would be coached by entire councils of rabbis and priests. On Yom Kippur itself, the masses would stand in the outer courtyard cheering him on, as he would enter the Temple’s inner sanctuary, alone, to pray on behalf of the people.

The High Priest did not choose his role. He inherited it by virtue of birth. He had no voice in shaping the ritual he was required to perform. Every detail was prescribed by tradition. And yet - the fate of his people depended on his ability to find God’s light in the small, dark, lonely space of the Holy of Holies. He would enter that space fearful and trembling.

Some of us are like Jonah right now. Cast into a stormy sea, drawn into a darkness no light can penetrate.

Some of us are like the High Priest, walking into the solitude well prepped, with a crowd rooting for us, but still we are alone and not in control.

And some of us are like Emma, a commanding officer, carrying responsibilities that will not allow us to succumb to loneliness.

None of us would choose this situation. Emma said, she never hopes to go through anything like that again. But like Jonah, she emerged from her ordeal changed. A small light within her grew in the desert of Kuwait, and it is now shining bright. When she completes her military service, she thinks she wants to enroll in rabbinical school, to continue to grow that light.

There is no guarantee that anything positive will come of loneliness. The easiest thing is to remain, like Jonah, curled up on the lower deck of the ship, and then just suffocate inside that fish. To choose otherwise requires great intention and effort. It requires accepting the situation you are in, and adjusting expectations. And then it requires a conscious effort to replace the darkness with light - through prayer, meditation, visualization, study, journaling, drawing, or music. Emma actually used all of these techniques.

Most important, although Emma was isolated, she was not truly alone. She was connected by phone calls, emails, and in her memories, to people who loved her. Her phone calls were constantly disrupted by spotty cell service. She never knew when she would be fortunate enough to have some internet service. And memory is...memory. None of these connections were ever enough to satisfy. But they were essential to her survival, and they were enough to get her through.

None of us is truly alone, either. True this grid of flat images is a clunky alternative to the richness of the CBJ community that we are used to. And when we turn our eyes away from the screen, we are again, like the High Priest, alone in our sanctum. But I am aware of you, and you are aware of each other, and that is a lot.

Knowing we are all here, knowing that we are not utterly alone, can fortify us enough to draw a prayer out of our loneliness. And through that prayer, we may find inside a light that would otherwise have remained hidden, a light that, once exposed, could shine on well past the end of this pandemic.

Ken yehi ratson. May it so be God's will. And let us make it so.

Gmar chatimah tovah.