

## **No Man Is An Island**

Nikki Pusin

In the movie "Cast Away," Tom Hanks plays the sole survivor of a plane crash in the Pacific. He is washed up on a tiny island and he lives there for about four years. For the entire time he is on the island, his only companion is a volleyball on which he draws a face with his own blood, and which he names Wilson. He carries on conversations with Wilson, argues with him. When Wilson is eventually lost, the man is utterly bereft. BTW, replicas of Wilson are available for purchase on Amazon for \$21.95. Of course.

Our word "isolated" comes from the French *isolé*, which apparently reflects the practice of placing someone on an island. While the use of islands for punishment is not that common in these parts, punitive isolation is quite common. As of about 5 years ago, on any given day in the US, an estimated 55,000 to 62,500 people had spent the previous 15 days in solitary confinement. The United Nations considers solitary confinement to be torture when used for more than 15 consecutive days, so all those 55,000 to 62,500 people were being tortured. In fact, thousands of people in the US are confined in solitary for years or even decades at a time.

The Constitution forbids cruel and unusual punishment, so this solitary torture apparently counts as kind and usual punishment. People in solitary confinement comprise only 6 to 8 percent of the total prison population, but they account for half of those who die by suicide in prison.

Most of us will probably live out our lives without being placed in solitary confinement, or being cast away on a desert island, but many of us will experience loneliness. The very first comment that God makes concerning the strange creature God created on Friday afternoon is *Lo tov heyot ha-Adam levado*, It is not good for the human to be alone. This was not merely an aesthetic judgment but an observation of human nature: we humans do not thrive when we are alone.

[Quoting from NYT, Dana J. Smith, May 9 - 13, 2024] Humans evolved to be social creatures probably because, for our ancient ancestors, being alone could be dangerous and reduce the odds of survival. Experts think loneliness may have emerged as a unique type of stress signal to prompt us to seek companionship. [But] [w]ith chronic loneliness, that stress response gets stuck . . . .

In an essay published last year in the Times, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy describes what he sees as an epidemic of loneliness and isolation in our day:

At any moment, about one out of every two Americans is experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. This includes introverts and extroverts, rich and poor, and younger and older Americans. Sometimes loneliness is set off by the loss of a loved one or a job, a move to a new city, or health or financial difficulties — or a once-in-a-century pandemic.

Ezra Klein, also writing in the Times (April 7, 2024), describes the elusiveness of community through social media: The social networks made it easy for anyone we've ever met, and plenty of people we never met, to friend and follow us. We could communicate with them all at once without communing with them individually at all. Or so we were told. The idea that we could have so much community with so little effort was an illusion. We are digitally connected to more people than ever and terribly lonely nevertheless. Closeness requires time, and time has not fallen in cost or risen in quantity. Dr. Murthy states that loneliness, "like depression, . . . can chip away at your self-esteem and erode your sense of who you are." Describing his own loneliness following his (temporary) retirement from public office, he continues:

Loneliness is more than just a bad feeling. When people are socially disconnected, their risk of anxiety and depression increases. So does their risk of heart disease (29 percent), dementia (50 percent), and stroke (32 percent). The increased risk of premature death associated with social disconnection is comparable to [the risk from] smoking . . . .

Loneliness and isolation hurt whole communities. Social disconnection is associated with reduced productivity in the workplace, worse performance in school, and diminished civic engagement. When we are less invested in one another, we are more susceptible to polarization and less able to pull together to face the challenges that we cannot solve alone — from climate change and gun violence to economic inequality and future pandemics. As it has built for decades, the epidemic of loneliness and isolation has fueled other problems that are killing us and threaten[ing] to rip our country apart.

How fortunate we all are to be here at Kol Rina, combating loneliness. together on these High Holy Days. Our Jewish tradition is inherently anti-loneliness. In Pirkei Avot, Hillel said *Al tifrosh min ha-tzibbur*—Don't separate yourself from the community. Jewish tradition discourages withdrawal from society, promotes family life and hospitality, commands us to visit the sick and the grieving, and requires a minimum of ten adults to be present for many of our observances. And on Yom Kippur, we confess in unison, using the grammatical "we" form, to sins we may not personally have committed— because *Kol Israel arevim ze be-ze*: all Jews are bound up in each other. We are all implicated in the deeds and misdeeds of the entire community; we are all a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Our mentality of togetherness forms a societal structure that makes loneliness less likely to occur, and less severe. And this is true even during times of crisis for the Jews, like the present, when some of us are tempted to feel that God has abandoned us—an existential loneliness. At such times of crisis, the whole of the Jewish community pulls together.

There is no question that this Jewish tendency to elevate togetherness, to promote the interests of the community, pulls against the modern secular value, or some might say the myth, of individualism. Submerging yourself in the collective is not at all the prevailing ethos in this time and place in history. At the schools where I teach— Jewish schools— the children's tee-shirts are emblazoned with self-affirming statements ("I am enough"), and not only the children, but also the adults, are far more likely to recite "Believe in yourself" (or "You do you") than "Sacrifice your individuality and your independence for the good of the community." That's a hard sell, in our secular world (and hard to fit on a tee-shirt). But I think most of us would concede that some kind of balance is needed.

When we allow the claims of others on our time, our emotions, our efforts, we trade some of our independence and individuality for a chance to evade loneliness and to live in a healthier, more supportive and more cohesive society. We earn the right to speak as "we," and our loneliness is the less. As Ma Bell used to say: Reach out and touch someone.  
G'mar hatima tova to all.

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Kol Nidrei, 5785