

## Loneliness and the Jewish Response

Rabbi Mari Chernow, Kol Nidre 5782

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik begins one of his enduring philosophical works with these words, “I will speak so that I may find relief...<sup>1</sup> for there is a redemptive quality for an agitated mind in the spoken word, and a tormented soul finds peace in confessing...The nature of [my] dilemma can be stated in a three-word sentence. I am lonely.”<sup>2</sup>

His book is called *Lonely Man of Faith*. I’m taking the liberty of updating his concepts because they apply not only to men and not only to people who define themselves by faith. My read on his thesis - if you are a seeking, searching person you will sometimes find this world to be a very lonely place.

Soloveitchik grounds his teaching in the book of Genesis, which tells two different stories of the creation of humanity. He reads those if they are two separate narratives altogether, one of Adam the first and the other of Adam the second. And he sees in them introductions to two types of human existence, two ways of being in the world. Adam the first, in this reading, is intelligent, capable and driven to achieve. Placed in the garden of Eden to “fill the earth and conquer it” he sees a wild, messy world and wants to put it to use. “How does the cosmos function?” he asks, so that he can understand it and harness it for good. Adam the first’s drive that brings us science, technology, human innovation, even the arts and literature. All areas of productivity. A few years back columnist David Brooks put his own gloss on this concept - Adam the first lives to build what he calls “resume virtues.” Think for a moment about the adjectives you would most like to come through on your resume? Smart. Motivated. Adept. Decisive. Passionate. Thorough. Creative. And so on.

The mandate of Adam the second, on the other hand is to “cultivate the garden and protect it.” He approaches the world with humility, awe and admiration. He wants to know, “*why* does the cosmos exist?” What am I doing in it? What purpose am I here to serve? He is

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<sup>1</sup> Quoting Elisha, son of Berachel of old.

<sup>2</sup> From the conclusion of his introduction and the opening of the essay itself. Soloveitchik, Joseph B., *The Lonely Man of Faith*.

interested in matters of the soul. In David Brooks' terms, Adam the second is working, all the time, on what he calls "eulogy virtues." Now consider what character traits you most hope people share about you when you are not around to hear it? Ethical. Generous. Insightful. Brave. Forgiving. Compassionate. Gracious.

A major difference between two Adams is their approach to relationships. Adam the first is not cold or callous but there is a pragmatic side to his relationships. He has read the social science on how much more we can accomplish when we have partners and co-creators. And he is all in on that. Adam the second longs for something deeper. He seeks redemption through relationships. It is only in the second creation account that we read, "It is not good for the human being to be alone." Soloveitchik describes the inner life of the seeker as "a wondrous, unique and incommunicable reality." We struggle to figure out how to share that with anyone else. It is only in the existential community, says Soloveitchik, that we will hear, "not only the rhythmic sound of the production line, but also the rhythmic beat of hearts starved for existential companionship."

Existential companionship – I think that is one of the great Jewish projects. Ensuring that we meet soul-to-soul whenever possible. Personal growth has to be just that – personal. No one else can do it for us. But we encounter others along the way and we share something truly extraordinary with them when we enter the world of Adam the second.

I want to talk about three ways that the Jewish tradition facilitates and deepens our existential companionship. First, one of the roots of Adam the second's loneliness is "his tragic role as a temporal being." For all of us that is also known as the awareness that we only exist for a brief moment in time. Our mortality is a central message of this day and it is a difficult reality. But, says our tradition, **Don't limit companionship to this narrow window of time.** Reach into the past and the future. Find teachers who lived long ago. Their stories are all over our texts. Find one who mastered a quality you admire but can't quite get the hang of. Find another one who made the very same mistake that you just made yesterday. Find a fading picture of your great grandfather. Or a love letter he wrote. Read it like a sacred text. That's what it is. Tap into the community of existential seekers who came before you and feel the

presence of those who are yet to come. Our physical lives are bound by limits in time but our spiritual lives are not.

I'll never forget the time when Melila was an infant. I can picture the exact spot on the couch where I was leaning back and she was asleep on my chest. That sweet baby breathing. In and out. In and out. Our chests rising and falling as one. I suddenly felt this overwhelming sense of "generations." My grandmother and great grandmother and great great grandmother and so on. I'm telling you – it's like they were in the room. The two of us just took our place in line. And felt their love and blessing. Another moment I'll never forget was when Kara and I signed our wills. We walked from the lawyer's office into the hot Arizona courtyard and I was surprised by a feeling of... joy. I was elated to have taken care of something that I will not see manifest. I couldn't believe how good that felt. For split seconds here and there, we get to touch the future and the past. Think big, says our tradition, and think past the limits of your own lifespan. Look back and look forward. There is existential companionship waiting for you.

Second, make a point of needing each other. One of *my* rabbis once said to me, "there is great spiritual value in asking for help." And from the other side I will tell you about the time that new colleague moved into town. She is really smart and really capable and I was threatened by that. Until she sent me an email asking for my help. I was disarmed in seconds and we have been friends ever since.

Sebastian Junger writes, "humans don't mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it; **what they mind is not feeling necessary**. Modern society has perfected the art of making people feel unnecessary." Or in the words of Marge Piercy, "The pitcher cries for water to carry, and a person for work that is real." We have this irrepressible urge to help. We have this irrepressible urge to matter. In the midst of the pandemic and last year's very tense election, an elementary school teacher in New York established a hotline called "Just Scream." Mr. Gollmar listened to every single one of the over 120,000 calls. People called in to scream and vent and sometimes sing. Fascinating isn't it that they had a need to express something that would be witnessed by a total stranger. And then, you know what happened? People started leaving messages of hope, support and love. "You're going to be OK....Take care of yourself...You are beautiful..." There was no one on the other end of the line who was in need but people couldn't help

themselves. They had something to give and they wanted to give it. In the Talmud's words, "more than the calf wants to suckle, the cow wants to nurse." That's not about physiology. That's about being valued and making a meaningful contribution. That's the reason that Judaism's mitzvot – our commandments – endure. We'll talk theology and levels of religious observance another time but the idea is that we have serious responsibilities toward others in our community. Have you ever gotten a call to be the tenth person at a minyan so someone can say kaddish? It's very powerful to know that someone else can't pray. Someone else can't mourn unless I show up. Visiting the sick, celebrating couples getting married, burying those who have died. These are not just good ideas. They are good ideas but in our tradition, they are nonnegotiable obligations. And when we show up for each other, especially in these moments that are real and transformative, we can't help but forge existential companionship.

And finally, radical acceptance of our flawed human selves. Come with me on a brief detour through the central ritual in tonight's service: Kol Nidre. The text of Kol Nidre releases us from any vows we will make between tonight and next Yom Kippur. Which makes it seem like it's about making promises we don't plan to keep and letting ourselves off the hook before we even try. But that's only the surface reading. Many great writers and thinkers have wrested deeper meaning out of Kol Nidre. My favorite is a poem written by Merle Feld. The relief we seek, she says, is not from vows we make to one another. Rather it is from public persona we work so hard to maintain. This is the one space where we can finally let down that guard. Her poem, *Kol Nidre* reads:

I am grateful for this; a moment of truth,  
grateful to stand before You in judgment.

You know me as a liar and I am flooded with relief  
to have my darkest self exposed at last.

Every day I break my vows—  
to be the dutiful child, selfless parent, caring friend, responsible citizen of the world.

No one sees, no one knows, how often I take the easy way,  
I let myself off the hook, give myself the benefit of the doubt—  
every day, every day.

On this day, this one day, I stand before You naked,  
without disguise, without embellishment, [naked, shivering ridiculous.]

I implore You—let me try again.

The third strategy for existential companionship is based in forgiveness. Which is what we are here to do. Merle Feld uses this night to acknowledge that we all have parts of ourselves we shove away to a deep dark corner. And she is brave enough to nudge the switch just enough to let in some light. What if God? What if those who are on the journey with us saw what is in there and nonetheless accepted and embraced us? That's why we put ourselves through this every year. So that even as we strive to improve, we can be seen exactly as we are. And be loved nonetheless.

We are – all of us - lonely people of faith. Or certainly, lonely people in search of meaning. We are all on the road to character. We are all developing our resumes and trying to become the people we would like described in our eulogies. Let's see if we can find each other out there. Let's see if we can meet soul to soul in sacred companionship.

Gmar Chatimah Tova