

**Rosh Hashanah 5781**  
**Rabbi Julie Bressler**  
**Temple Beth Shalom**  
**Combating Loneliness in Quarantine**

I love hugs. A hug provides me with connection, comfort in challenging times, and a sense of belonging. One of the ways I knew that TBS was the right synagogue for me during my interview 18 months ago was just how natural it felt to give and receive hugs from so many of you. I can relate to Olaf, the joyful snowman from the movie *Frozen*, who declares, “Hi, I’m Olaf and I like warm hugs!”

Between March and June, I went 100 days without giving or receiving a hug.

On June 3, I wore three levels of PPE to fly across the country to see my family in California. When I arrived at the airport, my parents threw me the keys to drive a separate car home. Once there, I threw my clothes in the laundry, showered twice, and put on clothes stored in California.

Then, FINALLY, I hugged my mom and dad. [PAUSE] And I cried. [PAUSE] We cried. A HUG - and the emotional weight of the past three months began to lift off my shoulders. It was a physically and emotionally overwhelming moment that I will never forget. I had a similar experience two weeks later, when, after negative COVID tests, I hugged my beloved nephews and niece underwater in their pool. I felt my soul fill up. While not everyone loves hugs or physical contact, it makes sense that my body reacted so significantly when I received that first hug. Oxytocin, the hormone released through social connection and touch, can lower levels of cortisol, the body’s primary stress hormone. Cortisol negatively impacts our sleep and dampens our moods. When we are deprived of human connection, our stress and depression levels rise. Our bodies mirror what we experience emotionally. That hug mattered.

And now, it’s been six months. Six months since we heard the words COVID-19 for the first time. Six months of news conferences, rising death tolls, conflicting information, and loss. So

much loss. Loss of loved ones, loss of in-person connection, loss of school and camp and jobs and goodbyes. Six months that changed our world forever.

I can hear it in your voices. The toll of six months. And while we may not always admit it, many of us are lonely. Those of us who live alone notice the intense quiet after our programs or work end for the day. Seniors in assisted living and patients in hospitals are alone, cruelly separated from loving family and friends when they need them most. Even those of us who live in houses filled with other voices and the chaos of navigating being a parent and teacher and professional and cook and activity creator and cleaner and on and on, we miss those moments of one on one human connection. We miss the ease of coming to Temple for a service or striking up a casual conversation in the store or at the baseball game or in the park or at the gym. In the era of COVID-19, social interactions, outside of our bubbles, must be planned. And when we meet one another, it's at a distance and through a mask, a mask that hides so much of our humanity, one from the other.

We are — for the most part — bearing our loneliness with strength and grace, but it is not easy.

In many ways, life during COVID has pushed us all, reluctantly, to the bottom rungs of Psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow delineates five tiers of human needs, from the bottom to the top of a pyramid. According to Maslow, we must address the lower rungs, the physiological ones, first: food, water, shelter; safety, security and health. ONLY once these basics are satisfied, can we move onto the higher rungs: love and belonging; esteem; and self-actualization.

Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, we focused on the basics in ways we took for granted before - remember those first nervous visits to the grocery store? Masks became the hottest commodity we hadn't known we needed. And most of us are the lucky ones - we have the funds and space to bulk purchase food and our houses are equipped for us to work and learn from home, even if it's messy. But many are not so lucky, including members of our own

community and families— those who still today struggle to find safe harbor and face a bleak future.

Yet, even with our many blessings, the higher rungs of the ladder, the ones that optimize human connection and mitigate loneliness, often have to wait for another day.

Last Rosh Hashanah, when Rabbi Perlman spoke about the national phenomenon of loneliness, we could not have predicted what would happen just six months later - a whole new reality of being separate from one another and fearful of encounters. In January 2020, when Cigna released its annual Loneliness Index, it found that 61% of Americans reported feeling some level of loneliness throughout 2019, a 7% increase from the year before. Unsurprisingly, these trends increased as the pandemic spread and the weeks and months stretched on - overall loneliness nearly tripled between March and June. The statistics highlight that trends are similar across generations and demographics - no group is immune to the emotional impacts of shelter-in-place. But who needs statistics or surveys to describe what we feel? We know our hearts hurt. We feel our souls ache. We long for family, friends, and even an abundance of friendly strangers to fill us with their presence, their touch, their conversations, their greetings.

On Rosh Hashanah we declare, Hayom Harat Olam! Today the world is created anew. In the first creation, when God saw the sun and the moon, the stars in the sky, the creatures of the land and sea, God said, “Tov! These are good.” But what was the first thing God declared to be Lo Tov? Not good? **That was loneliness.** We read in Genesis 2:18 - Lo Tov Heyot Ha-Adam L’vado - it is not good for a person to be alone.

Through the millennia, Jews have affirmed and celebrated the goodness and strength of being together. Whenever possible, we pray in a minyan, a quorum of ten, a team of fellow worshippers. We welcome new life together, surround B Mitzvah with love, dance at weddings and accompany beloved ones to their final rest. **Being Jewish means being together.**

Hayom Harat Olam. The world is created anew. And that's what we did. Over these past six months, you beautiful souls of Temple Beth Shalom created an amazing and new world of togetherness. We prayed together during the week and on Friday nights and for Havdalah to bring in and say goodbye to Shabbat - not alone, but together. We brought Shabbat into our lives, giving a comforting rhythm to weeks when we often lost track of which day it was. We came together virtually for so many other important moments in our lives as well, ways that we could not have imagined back in March. We put on dressy clothes - well from the waist up - to toast wedding couples and watch them dance together on Zoom. We kvelled as B Mitzvah chanted from Torah scrolls lovingly placed on dining room tables and later from our sanctuary. Friends and family from around the world could be there for one another in a way not possible before when a loved one died. Some of the most moving Shiva services I've ever been a part of took place during this time. They were virtual, sure, but every feeling was real, every tear authentic. Every word of comfort drew us into a tighter circle of love.

And so, Hayom Harat Olam. The world has been created anew. In this new world, in this new year, I feel your presence, here, in our beloved sanctuary, as I send these words on wings of love to each of you. We have zoomed and vimeo-ed into each other's homes, offices, and backyards for many months now. Each time, we have somehow bridged the distance between us. It is truly nothing short of a miracle that we have lived a rich life of Jewish community, a spirited, authentic, Temple Beth Shalom life, even when we had to squint, scroll, mute, unmute, log-on, freeze, log-on again, and on and on. But we were together. Truly together.

These months of Covid have taught us that Jewish community cannot be contained by the walls of any space. There is holiness to be found wherever people connect with one another. Whether the place is a sanctuary, a home, a backyard, a mountain trail, or a Zoom room. As Martin Buber wrote, "When two people relate to each other, authentically and humanly, God is in the electricity that surges between them."

**God shows up when we show up for one another.**

God is here in the groceries delivered to a congregant who cannot go to the store.

God is here as preschool children dance together while wearing masks.

God is here when our teens bake babka together on Zoom.

God is here amongst the sea of fifty people learning and debating during Torah study.

God is here when we chat with one another during livestream Shabbat services.

God is here during the thousands of check in phone calls.

And God is here when we stand six feet apart and bury our loved ones.

Hayom Harat Olam - this will be a new year where we build on the miracles of the last six months. With continued strength and resilience, and by helping each other, surely we will continue to discover new ways to feel God's presence surge between us in electric, uplifting connections. How might you want to connect in the new year? What program or committee or Temple offering do you wish to engage with? Lookout for new and familiar opportunities to engage this upcoming year as we deepen our community connections in our ever-changing realities.

And, finally, I invite you to think, right now, of three people you want to call in the next ten days to re-connect. Conversation is one of the best cures for loneliness. Perhaps one of those people is waiting for an apology, and here's the new year's opportunity to mend a broken relationship. Think about how you felt in your loneliest moments. How welcome it was to hear from a friend or be invited to a backyard or Zoom get-together. In this new year, be the one who offers the invitations. Take care of yourself, and take care of one another.

We pray this plague will end, that in this new year we will once again meet safely and easily in person. But until that moment arrives, let us navigate this world with compassion for each other and for ourselves. Let us acknowledge the pain of loneliness and let us try to relieve it for each other. Let us celebrate with the beloved members of our dynamic, adaptive synagogue, creating and re-creating what it means to be a warm, inviting, enveloping community.

And yes, when it's completely safe, I cannot wait to give you a hug.