

Sermon

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One of the most powerful things that I can do as a Rabbi is to hold another human being in mind. Some people think that the role of a Rabbi is to lead services, officiate at life events or be an inspirational teacher. While all those things are true, possibly an even greater impact someone can have on another's life is to send a short message, "I am thinking of you." Whether it is following an operation and checking on recovery, after a holiday and seeing whether the required level of relaxation was reached or simply knowing that someone has been facing a challenging time (as we all do) and seeing how today is going – this is the mark of a pastoral leader.

We do not have to look far within the Torah to see an example of this. Indeed, it is an account that fills the section of our Rosh Hashana prayers concerned with G-d's Zichronos – literally translated as, "Memory", referring to G-d holding someone else in mind. The person involved is Noah.

Put yourself in Mr and Mrs Noah's shoes for a moment. They had put themselves at odds with the society around them; holding onto ethics and values that the rest of the world had cast aside. With Divine guidance they had built an ark, gathered the animals two by two (or seven by seven) and been cast upon the open floodwaters. For 40 days and nights the sky was darkened with clouds and the little ark was hurled across the deep. Time passed, the rains stopped but still the waters remained and G-d did not offer an olive branch of hope. Mr and Mrs Noah may have felt lost, low and lonely. They may have felt helpless and hopeless. Then something happens:

וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נֹחַ וְאֶת־כָּל־
הַחַיָּה וְאֶת־כָּל־הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר־
אִתּוֹ בַּתֵּיבָה וַיַּעֲבֵר אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ־
עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשְׁכַּח הַמַּיִם:

Genesis 8:1

G-d remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and G-d caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided.

The first thing that happens is that G-d remembers Noah. He is no longer alone.

What causes loneliness? (adapted from Mind)

Loneliness has many different causes, which vary from person to person. We don't always understand what it is about an experience that makes us feel lonely.

For some people, certain life events may mean they feel lonely, such as:

- experiencing a bereavement
- going through a relationship break-up
- retiring and losing the social contact you had at work
- changing jobs and feeling isolated from your co-workers
- starting at university
- moving to a new area or country without family, friends or community networks

Other people find they feel lonely at certain times of the year, such as around Rosh Hashana or Pesach.

The relationship between loneliness and mental health (adapted from executive summary)

In 2022, a government department commissioned an in-depth report into better understanding loneliness. It looked at the experiences of loneliness among those who had experienced a mental health condition.

Participants did not always describe themselves as feeling “lonely”. Instead they talked about feeling isolated, alone, or being a loner. Other ways in which participants talked about the lack of connection they felt in their lives was to describe not having anyone they could turn to for emotional support, or feeling like a burden on those they had existing connections with.

Across the sample there was a spectrum of experiences of loneliness. Those who were most lonely described feeling isolated, with no close friends or supportive others. Participants in this group tended to have depression and be in the middle-aged or retired life stages. At the other end of the spectrum, the least lonely people were those with a wider social network, including close connections who provided emotional support. Participants in this group tended to have experienced anxiety and depression and were found across all life stages. For this group, periods of loneliness correlated with poor mental health. In between these groups were people with a few close connections, and a small number of supportive others. However, these social connections were not always able to provide the level of support participants needed.

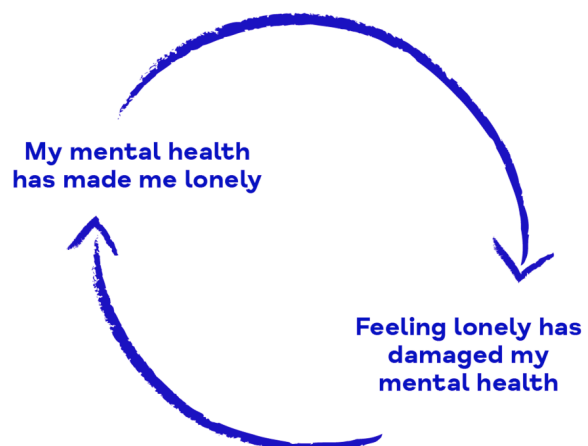
The relationship between loneliness and mental health was bidirectional and cyclical. Participants described the following ways in which mental health issues could lead to greater feelings of loneliness:

Mental health conditions reduced capacity for social interaction. Low mood could lead to feeling disconnected from others or simply feeling too exhausted to engage with others. Public spaces for socialising could also feel overwhelming.

Negative perceptions about themselves or others could lead to withdrawal. Mental health conditions were associated with feelings of low self-esteem and participants worried about the stigma they might experience if they revealed their mental health issues.

Not being able to share that they were struggling with others, and feeling the need to hide mental health symptoms for fear of being seen as a “downer” could also lead to feelings of loneliness. Maintaining a pretence of being fine when around others was exhausting and unsustainable for participants, leading to them withdrawing from social contact instead.

On the other side, loneliness could also lead to a decline in mental health. This happened where participants had more time alone to ruminate on negative thoughts; where they lost confidence in their ability to socialise, leading to low self-esteem; and where not talking about their feelings led to them feeling even more overwhelmed.



Loneliness can be hard, whether we are experiencing a mental health condition or not.

Rashi on the verse we mentioned earlier gives us a powerful insight into the feelings that Noah was experiencing. The typical way to read the verse is that G-d remembers Noah, holds him in mind, and so causes a wind (ruach) to blow that somehow dries the waters. However, this word can also mean 'spirit', not just wind. And that is the explanation that Rashi chooses:

וַיַּעֲבֵר אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ. רוּחַ תְּנַחֲמוּמִיו וְהִנְחָה עֲבָרָה לְפָנָיו

AND G-D MADE A WIND (or SPIRIT) TO PASS —
A spirit of comfort and relief passed before Him.

G-d did not simply remember Noah. G-d cheered Noah up. He sent a spirit comfort. The Gur Aryeh explains that Rashi had to interpret the verse like this. If the translation was 'wind' and referred to an attempt to dry the waters, it would not work very well. Blowing at water simply causes it to spread from one place to the other. It does not make it dry. Therefore, Rashi had to understand a deeper message in this verse, that G-d came to cheer Noah from his low-mood and loneliness. It is a gentle and inspiring message.

Over the past few years, so many of us have felt lonely. The social isolation of Covid has hurt. Let's take a leaf out of G-d's book and resolve to do *one* thing this week differently. Let's resolve to pick up the phone to somebody that might need it and say, "I'm thinking of you".