

Lonely in Red Sox Nation  
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Last summer my friend Emily and I traveled to Iceland together to belatedly celebrate our mutual milestone birthdays. One day we booked a glacier hike, which was a gorgeous and awe inspiring experience. But this morning we aren't going to talk about the heavenly purity of the glacial water or the majesty of the blinding white formation; we are going to talk about the Red Sox fans I encountered at the end of our hike. Both of the stories I'm going to tell you today are true.

As we descended from the glacier I spotted a hiker coming up the trail wearing a Red Sox hat, so I waved and shouted, "Nice hat! Go Red Sox!" The guy looked at me totally bewildered. So I pointed to my own hat, and said again, "I like your hat! Go Red Sox!" The guy still stared. His buddy elbowed him and said something in a language I didn't recognize. Emily shrugged and said to me, "looks like he doesn't speak English." I had no idea the Red Sox were so popular with international fans.

We boarded the bus and traveled to a rest stop, where we planned to buy donuts and hot chocolate to end our day. As we pulled in, a group of tourists stepped into the street right in front of our bus, and the driver beeped. One tourist stopped, turned around, and threw up his hands, as if it

were our driver's fault. Sure enough, this guy was wearing a Red Sox cap. Only a Bostonian, right?! When we stepped off the bus and purchased our snacks I saw the same guy sitting at a table. So I waved and pointed to my hat and said "nice hat! Go Red Sox!"

"Huh?"

"You're wearing a Red Sox hat. Are you a fan?"

"Oh, yeah. Right."

What kind of a response is that, "oh yeah, right?!" Are you a fan or aren't you?! How about a little enthusiasm?! Or at least some good natured commiseration about the lousy season we were having. Something was very much **not** right in Red Sox Nation. Twice in one day I had tried to connect with fellow fans, and twice I had been rebuffed. Rather than reflecting on my own actions and considering myself strange for assuming a kinship with strangers, I grew indignant. If you are going to run around in Red Sox swag, you have to be prepared to represent! You must return the greetings of your fellow fans!

What I expected from those Red Sox fans is what I expect and often experience from fellow Jews. In fact, I had a similar experience with some Jewish travelers on the very same trip. The day after our glacier hike, Emily and I went on an excursion that took us to a remote town to learn about the

traditional method of baking Icelandic rye bread with geothermal heat. It is as delicious as it sounds. After the class we sat around eating our bread, I overheard two couples at the table next to us. Their accents were unmistakable, so I turned to them and said, “excuse me, where in Chicago are you from?”

They smiled and said “Oh we’re from Skokie!”

So I raised my eyebrows and asked, “Where do you go to shul?”

“We go to Skokie Valley!” They exclaimed.

“No way!” I replied. “My aunt just joined there. She really likes the new rabbi.” We spent a few minutes chatting about whether any of my cousins had gone to school with any of their children, and whether we preferred hot dogs from the Hungarian or Romanian deli.

What can we learn from these two experiences? That Chicagoans are friendlier than Bostonians? Maybe. That Red Sox fans are not as talkative as Jews? Perhaps. But the question I really want to focus on is: What do we owe, and what can we expect, from fellow members of our community? What I wanted from those Red Sox fans, and what I got from the Jewish couples from Skokie, was a connection.

Connection isn’t just a nice feeling, it is a human necessity, and lately it has been in short supply. According to Surgeon General Vivek Murthy,

America is facing an epidemic of loneliness that affects people of all ages, genders, and socioeconomic classes, leading to severe physical health consequences. His research reveals that loneliness and social isolation can be as detrimental to physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The consequences include a 29% increase in the risk of heart disease, a 32% increase in stroke rates, and a 50% increase in the risk of dementia among older adults. A lack of social relationships is an enormous risk factor for death, increasing the likelihood of mortality by 26 percent.<sup>1</sup>

The repercussions of loneliness extend beyond the individual to impact the community at large. Hannah Arendt famously identified widespread loneliness as an underlying condition for totalitarianism,<sup>2</sup> and her words are holding true as we see an increase in violence today. Professor Scott Galloway of NYU cites a distressing statistic that only 30% of American men between the ages of 18 and 30 have had an intimate romantic interaction within the last year, and he suggests that these individuals struggling with loneliness are at significantly greater risk of violent radicalization because they lack the social connections to keep them

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<sup>1</sup> [US Department of Health and Human Services](#)

<sup>2</sup> What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience ... *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) by Hannah Arendt

connected to reality.<sup>3</sup> Loneliness can have tragic consequences on the lonely individual and on those around them.

Yet it is hard to believe that such a pandemic can even exist, given that we share the planet with almost 8 billion people. The internet and 24 hour news cycle connect people constantly. We never have to be alone, if we don't want to be. Sadly, though, we can be lonely without being alone.

Loneliness, as defined by mental health professionals, is a gap between the level of connectedness that you want and the level of connectedness that you have,<sup>4</sup> and this experience is extremely common. The surgeon general writes, "You can feel lonely even if you have a lot of people around you, because loneliness is about the quality of your connections."<sup>5</sup> But despite the commonality of this phenomenon, participants in a study run by the British Minister of Loneliness reported a belief that they are the only ones who are lonely.

This, to me, is the saddest part of the Loneliness Pandemic; the fact that so many of us are experiencing it yet for some reason many of us are experiencing it alone. The loneliness of loneliness seems so unnecessary! Fortunately, these same studies make several suggestions about how we, as

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<sup>3</sup> [Bill Maher, "Why are Men in Crisis?"](#)

<sup>4</sup> [John Leland "How Loneliness is Damaging Our Health." New York Times August 20, 2022](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Juana Summers. "America Has A Loneliness Epidemic." NPR. May 2, 2023.](#)

a society, can combat this epidemic. Both reports stress the importance of communal and/or societal change, rather than the responsibility on the part of the individual to overcome their own plight.

The Surgeon General's report outlines six pillars to address loneliness, the sixth of which is "**Cultivating a culture of connection.**" Experts agree that the key to fostering connection is Third Spaces. "The term [third space] was coined by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg in the 1980s, and essentially refers to a physical location other than work or home where there's little to no financial barrier to entry, and where conversation is the primary activity."<sup>6</sup> A third space is also, importantly, a place where you are not required to create or consume; it is not work or school or a store, you don't have to earn or spend money in order to be there. The British Ministry of Loneliness reports similar findings about the importance of casual community gathering places. "Experts like McDaid believe the best ways to tackle loneliness "[is] not provided by the central government" but through "informal or formal community activities."<sup>7</sup> Libraries and playgrounds are classic examples in the articles trending at

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<sup>6</sup> [Allie Conti. "Do yourself a favor and find yourself a Third Space." The Atlantic. April 4, 2022.](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Tara John. "How the World's First Loneliness Minister will Tackle the Sad REality of Modern Life." Time. April 25th, 2018.](#)

the moment, but one third space that is widely overlooked is the house of worship.

After all, what community organization is better positioned to provide an antidote to loneliness than our synagogue? As a recent Atlantic article so beautifully articulated: “what is more needed in our time than a community marked by sincere love, sharing what they have? Perhaps more important, a healthy (synagogue) reminds people their identity is not in their job or in how much money they make: they are all children of God, loved and protected and infinitely valuable.”<sup>8</sup>

Such a community requires a healthy and committed body of volunteers who prioritize the emotional well being of every member and share a sense of mutual responsibility. This kind of community is hard to find, in part because it is profoundly counter-cultural. Surgeon General Murthy reports that “the values that dominate modern culture elevate the narrative of the rugged individualist and the pursuit of self determination” and professional cultures that promote self-reliance as a virtue exacerbate feelings of shame associated with loneliness.<sup>9</sup> That is to say: in twenty-first century America, especially among the educated elite, we applaud people

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<sup>8</sup> [Jake Meador. “The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church.” The Atlantic. July 29th 2023.](#)

<sup>9</sup> Murthy, Vivek. “Together” xvii

who appear to be able to take care of themselves, by themselves. We treat institutions the same way: we want them to be there for us when we need and we are willing to pay for what we take, but we want them to basically be able to run on their own. That attitude works for a corporation but not for a community, and that difference is what makes third space communities like ours so important in combating loneliness.

Lucky for us, the rugged individualism the surgeon General describes as harmful to millions of Americans is **NOT** the Jewish ideal. As Jews, our relationship with one another is inseparable from our relationship to HaShem, we cannot have one without the other. We learn of this mutual responsibility in several sacred texts. First, the Talmud teaches us “שכל ישראל ערבים זה בזה, all of Israel are responsible for one another.”<sup>10</sup> As each others’ spiritual guarantors, it is incumbent upon each Jew to ensure that our neighbors are welcomed and able to participate in our community. We also read in Pirkei Avot that Rabbi Hillel declares “אל תפָּרַשׁ מִן הַצְּבוּר, do not distance yourself from the community.” Rabbi Josh Kulp explains that Hillel’s injunction is there specifically to remind us “...that a person should join the community for both its celebrations and for its trials and tribulations.”<sup>11</sup> Finally, as Eliezer Berkovits writes, “The Jew never stands

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<sup>10</sup> Talmud Shevuot 39a

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Josh Kulp. Sefaria Commentary on Pirkei Avot.



before God alone, but always within the communal reality of the Jewish people, its teaching, experience, and historic continuity.”<sup>12</sup>

While the pressures of our consumer capitalist lifestyle and the values of post-enlightenment autonomy condition us to ignore others, we have a 3,000 year old tradition helping us counteract that conditioning and reach out to others even when it does not incur any reward for us personally. This value of mutual responsibility, in celebration and in need, mandates that Jewish communities, including ours, to combat the loneliness pandemic that plagues us all. Lucky for us, our tradition and our communities empower us to meet this challenge with strength.

**Temple Beth Sholom is a community of connection for everyone physically and virtually in this room this morning.**

Look, for example, at our thriving weekday evening minyan, which is regularly attended by over 20 people, including several families who gather virtually each evening to say kaddish together from miles away. Over the last six months, we’ve had several new people learn to lead minyan and commit to regularly leading on zoom and/or at a shiva minyan. In this holiday season, I believe almost everyone in this room received a phone call from the Caring Volunteers, extending New Years greetings and information. Over the past two weeks, we had dozens of volunteers

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<sup>12</sup> Berkowitz, Eliezer. Unity in Judaism. 1986

distributing machzors, building the sukkah, and baking high holiday treats to take to congregants who are unable to come celebrate with us in person. I've been approached by one congregant who wants to resume cooking and delivering meals, which sounds absolutely delicious! This is what a community is made of - people who come to participate not just in rituals, but who also come to care for each other.

We are going strong, and we can grow even stronger. Post COVID, we have become, in some ways, complacent, by accepting distance and disconnection as the new normal post COVID. This loneliness pandemic existed before the COVID pandemic, but in some ways the germs made us more accepting of the sadness. Now is the time to renew our commitment to connection and to participation.

You know that I am not the kind of rabbi who takes attendance and keeps track of who comes to events at shul...but I am the kind of rabbi who genuinely wants you to be here! We have so much coming up at TBS. Next week we will celebrate Sukkot, a holiday whose mitzvot explicitly include welcoming guests. If everyone in this room or zoom joins us for just **one** event over Sukkot, or maybe even **one more event than you originally planned**, we will be packed! What would be really special, is if everyone in this room not only comes to celebrate Sukkot, but also invites a friend to

join. Folks at TBS are particularly good at this. Just two weeks ago I met a new friend at Shabbat evening services, who had been invited and brought to services by a neighbor.

As we grow more and more excited, and add more and more programming to the calendar, we do also often need more volunteers. The thing about a congregation this size is that **everyone is a volunteer**. I am deeply grateful to everyone who took that charge so seriously during this holiday season, and I am asking you now to keep that energy high as we go into a year packed full of SholomPlex programming, adult ed, programs from sisterhood and a renewed brotherhood, and more. This place can be as hip-happenin as we make it!

And in addition to all the fun connections, bringing a friend or volunteering for a program, we need to keep going strong on some of the un-fun connections, too. During COVID we got out of the habit of paying condolence calls and populating a shiva minyan, but we really do need to turn up to a house of mourning. I am so proud of the caring volunteers who make connections with everyone, and I would love to hear more stories about TBS members calling one another to check in, especially when we know someone is ill. I know that there are people who truly cannot come in person, and that zoom has made our programming accessible to those who

cannot drive or who have compromised immune systems or who live far away. But if you're not in those categories...I'd love to see you here in person more often.

I know that some of these tasks are easier said than done. But the phrase is "it takes a village" because the things we need the village to do are HARD. Fortunately we, the Jewish people, have been running a great village for a really long time, and we are running our one little village in a really fabulous city here in Framingham. One of the things I am most excited about this fall is the series "Facing Loneliness and Creating Community" that we are hosting together with Open Spirit, Framingham Interfaith Clergy Association, and Greater Framingham Community Church. We've invited leaders from around the city to share with us all the resources and programs they are running, and the way we as People of Faith and Houses of Worship can bring our connection skills to the table. I hope you'll join us for the first meeting of that series, which will meet in our Sukkah on the Thursday evening during Sukkot. I hope to see you there!

I look forward to a wonderful year learning, connecting, and celebrating in our community with you in the new year.

