

Many of us have the guilty pleasure of reading the Styles section of the the New York Times on Sunday mornings. And why do we do that? To see the weddings of course! Between officiants and brides and grooms, I usually know somebody every couple of months.

One headline caught my eye more than most. Alvin Mann and Gertrude Mokotoff exchanged vows on Aug. 5 before 50 family members and friends at Middletown City Hall in Middletown, N.Y

Gertrude was 98, although she might be 99 by now. Alvin was 94. They met at the gym, where they both work out twice a week. She proposed to him.

Let that sink in.

Why get married at age 98 and 94?

Why not live life as a divorcee or a widow or widower at that point? Why go through the effort of merging homes and stuff?

The answer is biblical, and was spoken by God.

Right at the beginning, while busy creating the world God said:

לֹא-טוֹב הָיְוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ

It is not good for people to be alone.

אֶעֱשֶׂה-לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ:

I will make someone else to be with him.

God wants us to be with other people. God does want us to be alone. That is why Gertude and Alvin got married.

Aside from reading the Wedding section, I also read the obituaries, to make sure I am not listed.

Real tears formed in my eyes when I read about George Shenkman. A Brooklyn boy, he died this past June in Florida at age 102. From his obituary: His beloved wife of 75 years, Florence Littman, died on May 26, 2017. **His spirit to live vanished once his life companion was no longer at his side.**

George understood לֹא-טוֹב הָיְוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ It is not good to be alone.

Samuel David Luzzato (1800 -1865) teaches that when God said that phrase, God wanted to emphasize the importance of having a **partner**. In order to make it known

that it's not good for man to be alone, God made man exist for a moment in time completely alone, without a partner or friend and only then was the second person created. God wanted Adam to experience loneliness so he would understand the importance of a friend, of sharing life with another. This way, when they fought over the small things later-- they would not end the relationship. They would get over it so not to be alone.

A little while before George and Florence and Alvin and Gertrude, God spent a week creating the world. During that first week of Creation, after each day, God said כִּי־טוֹב, and it was good, numerous times. But in the entire Torah we only read about something being לֹא־טוֹב no good, twice.

The phrase לֹא־טוֹב appears only once again in Parshat Yitro, the Torah portion that includes the first utterance of the Ten Commandments.

The parsha begins with a father in law/son in law chat. Yitro observes how his son in law Moses, the leader of the Israelite people, AND the father of his grandsons, is exhausted, and he says to him in Exodus 18:18: לֹא־טוֹב הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹשֶׂה: What you are doing is no good. You can't do everything alone. You need to place others on an advisory council to help you out. You can't go through life alone. Then to push the guilt just a wee bit more, Yitro says

אִם אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה תַעֲשֶׂה וְצִנְרְךָ אֱלֹהִים וְיָכַלְתָּ עָמִיד

And if you listen to me, **and you bring others to be with you**, as God commands you, **then** you will be able to stand and to survive.

Moses is reprimanded by his father in law about his solitary leadership style. He is told very clearly that if he spends all his time alone, even his professional time, he won't last long in this world. Experience taught Yitro that Moses needs to be with other people, even at the top.

And yet, so many of us are alone. One of the most existential problems we face is loneliness. And a lot of us don't manage it well. Not only is it hard to be alone but it is also so difficult to fend off loneliness. We all experience loneliness at different times.

People experience loneliness when a spouse dies.

Loneliness can hit when we are sick, or stuck for weeks in rehab following a procedure. And nobody calls or visits. Or only few people visit.

We feel alone when we are unemployed and not by choice.

Others experience loneliness in a loveless marriage-- sleeping next to a stranger every night.

Single people experience loneliness.

New parents experience loneliness.

It is pervasive.

Loneliness and feeling alone is so hard because we need people. We are not supposed to be alone. That is why Gertrude and Alvin got married and why George died a few weeks after Florence. And it is also why we join clubs or groups or Greek life in college or go to the Senior Center in Holliswood.

Our rabbis pick up on this idea throughout rabbinic literature.

In the Mishna, in Pirkei Avot 1:6 Yehoshua ben Perachia famously says: Make for yourself a Rabbi וְיָקִינָה לְךָ חֵבֵר, and acquire for yourself a friend.

A later commentary, Avot d'Rabbi Natan asks "How does one acquire a friend? A person should acquire a friend for himself by eating and drinking with him, by studying *Torah* and debating with him, by lodging with him, by sharing private thoughts with him-thoughts regarding Torah and life."

We **need** people to talk to and to support us. The author of Avot d'Rabbi Natan is encouraging us to sit around the table with other people and he literally outlined things you need someone else for. A friend. A spouse. A partner. A gym mate. The person next to you in shul. The person you smile at in a class.

While he did not say it directly, if you are an animal person, maybe even having a pet in the house with you will fend off loneliness.

The most famous rabbinic Talmudic teaching about loneliness can be found in tractate Taanit. Rava simply says: **חֲבֵרוּתָא אוּ מִיתוּתָא** **Either friendship or death**. Sadly, as we all know loneliness at its most intense can lead to death by suicide.

To be sure, loneliness is not always bad. Just like hunger reminds us to eat, loneliness can be a trigger to re-engage, to get out of bed, to go to shul, to log on to jdate or jswipe, go to an LGBT center or even to call a friend. But not everyone has that go get 'em approach.

We have all been lonely or felt alone at some point in our lives.

And there are people in the room who feel that way right now and that makes me sad. It should make you sad too.

To try and lessen this epidemic, here are three things we can do to lessen loneliness in this world.

The **first** is something we can all do so others won't feel lonely. The **second** option is something we can do when we feel alone and the **third** is an option that can combat both personal loneliness and the loneliness of others.

Let's focus on the first thing each of us can do to lessen loneliness in the world.

Imagine how different we would be if we touched and hugged other people more.

When children fall down, all they want are hugs from their parents. Not just people, pets too! That feeling never leaves us. Even when we are near loved ones who are in their last moments, we hold onto to their hands to remind them that they are not alone.

When people meet with me for pastoral purposes, and there has been crying or other emoting, I often ask "Do you need a hug?" More often than not people say yes and they feel a little better after.

There are many different types of hugs out there. I am **not** referring to the one handed hug or the quick pat hug. I mean a **real** hug. Psychotherapist Hilary Jacobs Hendel writes: *A therapeutic hug, one designed to calm the nervous system, requires some instruction. A good hug must be wholehearted. You can't do it halfway. Two people, the hugger and the "huggee," face each other and embrace each other with their full bodies touching. Yes, it is intimate. The hugger should be focused on the huggee with purposeful intention to offer comfort.*

It is literally a heart-to-heart experience: The heartbeat of the hugger can regulate the heartbeat of the huggee. Lastly and very important, the hugger must embrace the huggee until the huggee is ready to let go and not a moment before.

When we give someone a good hug, we feel good after, as embracing fills the body with oxytocin, which is also known as the love hormone. Studies show that even a brief touch of the hand from someone who cares can start your oxytocin pumping.¹ The feeling of a hug stays with you. It reminds you how connected you are.

¹ [Suzanne Degges-White Ph.D](#)

Now that we are all turning into huggers, and we are all planning on giving someone a hug (not a hand shake) when we leave services this morning, let's change direction.

If you feel lonely, I encourage and invite you to participate in the **second** action. This is what you can do to combat loneliness.

I invite you to engage or re-engage in Jewish ritual.

Adherents to Judaism have participated in daily, weekly, annual and once in a while rituals for 5778 years. With ritual, we mark sacred times and places. We acknowledge the shifts in our lives. Most ritual is better when it is done in the company of others.

If you spend all of your time at home, or come to synagogue events but don't talk to anyone, try a different approach.

If you come to services but just sit there- try singing or humming along. When you sing with others, your voice will join the chorus and you won't be alone.

Come to one of our monthly Shabbat dinners. Where else in this city can you get a kosher chicken meal for 10 dollars? Two more for fish? And your most obscure dietary restrictions will be catered to. Seriously. Just ask.

Come to ICCJ on Shabbat afternoons. Between davening, eating and havdallah, it is the most intimate communal experiences we have. We, I, welcome more people to this beautiful way to end Shabbat. And then usually after the light of the havdallah candle has been extinguished--the hugs come in!

Sit in the ICCJ sukkah with other people. Come to our Sukkah supper. Buy a lulav and etrog set and come to shul on Sukkos. There will be less people and an outdoor kiddush following services. Come to Simchat Torah! Did you know that all who are eligible are offered the opportunity to have an aliyah? There is tonnes of shmoozing time on that day too. If you like a l'chaim every now and then--Mel Kaufman has that covered for us on Simchat Torah during the morning.

If you sit home all day long, and you don't engage with others, you will be alone.

Come to more ritual based opportunities at ICCJ. People will talk to you. I promise. And when we talk to people, it is only natural that we find commonalities and then we build bonds based on those commonalities.

As a synagogue, ICCJ is a house of worship, study and gathering. Gather to worship and study. Let me help you find community. You are not alone. We are here for you. That is what it means to be part of a synagogue.

To those of you who see a new face--reminder--please be your usual friendly self. Wouldn't it be great if our numbers exploded?

The **third action** is a simple option that can combat both personal loneliness and the loneliness of others.

Listen to these three words.

I hear you.

Now say them with me.

I hear you.

Now add them to your frequently used expressions list.

Two things happens when you are talking to someone and you say I Hear You. The speaker acknowledges the other and validates their thoughts and their opinion. The speaker pauses to let the listener know they are heard.

At the same time, the listener is informed that they are worthy of being heard by another person. Isn't that what we all need? We walk with people when we say I hear you.

Ibn Ezra, a medieval commentator taught טובים השנים מן האחד
Two are better than one.

Two are needed to hug.

Engaging in ritual works better when you have others around you.

Another person is required to say I hear you to.

Whether you are as old as Gertrude and Alvin or as young as the children who come up to the front to wonder at the shofar today, you are not alone.

Take this message with you into 5778. You are not alone.

Shana tova.