

**Behukotai**  
**June 4, 2016**  
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Yiddish is a wonderfully expressive language. Yiddish idioms capture whole areas of human experience. There are some things that can be said in Yiddish that are very difficult to translate into English. One of Yiddish's strengths is in the area of cursing. There are few languages that have developed cursing to an art-form as does Yiddish. English is terrible when it comes to curses - it is crude, using foul language to express frustration or anger. Not so in Yiddish. In my class that I teach to our High Schooler's, I teach a session on language. We compare curse words in English and in Yiddish. And we discover that Yiddish is so much more - - well creative! Maurice Samuels' *In Praise of Yiddish* devotes a chapter to Jewish curses. One of my favorites goes like this: "May you be like an electric light bulb- hang by day and burn by night!" Another is: "May you grow like an onion - with your head in the ground!" I love the ones that start out sounding like a blessing: "May you inherit ten shiploads of gold - and may it all be spent on doctors!" Or "May you have a baby named after you...soon!" "I wish for him to be the owner of a very large store... and whatever customers ask for he shouldn't have, and whatever he has – no one should ask for!" And still another: May you have 100 houses, and in them a hundred rooms, and in each of them a hundred beds, and you should toss with fever from bed to bed." And I could go on and on – but you get the idea. Cursing in Yiddish was quite an art. Like all curses, Yiddish ones allowed you to vent your anger and frustration – but they also contained a touch of humor that helped deflate the anger and frustration as well.

But while Yiddish curses were often funny – we have a list of ancient curses found in today's reading of Behukotai – and these curses are not funny, not funny at all. The torah in today's reading caution the people that if they follow the ways of the Lord, good things will happen and their life will be filled with blessing. But if not, well - people will experience fear, persecution, and suffering, disease and invasion, murder and massacre- and there is even one curse I find too frightful to even mention. Very few passages in world literature are more terrifying than the Torah's list of threats and curses. It is no wonder that custom dictates that we read it in an undertone, *soto voce*, almost in a whisper, so as not even to give voice to these words.

The Haftarah too, carries forward the theme of threats and curses, though you might wonder: what is there left to threaten after all the threats that have already been made? But Jeremiah finds one more. He says: "*Arur ha-gever asher yivtach ba-adam*, cursed be the man or woman who puts his trust in his fellow man or woman, cursed is the one who depends upon his/her own might:

He will be like a tree that stands alone in the desert,  
 She will not see when good comes,  
 He will stand-alone in the wilderness,  
 In a barren land where nothing grows." (Jer 17 5-6)

I believe this is one of the most interesting and insightful curses in all of human literature. The prophet is saying that the punishment for evil is loneliness. Be a jerk and ultimately people won't want to have anything to do with you. Be a jerk, and God won't want to have anything to do with you. And then the prophet draws a description of the reward that the righteous will have. Jeremiah says:

*Baruch ha-gever asher yivtach ba-shem*

Blessed is the person who trusts in the Lord...  
 And rests his confidence in Him,  
 He will be like a tree planted by the riverside,  
 Which sends its roots out wide,  
 And need not fear when heat comes,  
 Whose leaves will be many  
 And need not worry in the years of drought,  
 And who will always bear fruit.

If you learn to trust in God you will be strengthened like a tree that grows among many others, bringing forth rich fruit. If the worst punishment the prophet could imagine was isolation and loneliness, then the greatest reward is togetherness and fruitfulness.

I think that Jeremiah was right in adding loneliness to the list of curses. For what good is it if you have everything, but you have no one with whom to share it? And Jeremiah was right when he stated that the greatest blessing is companionship. For one can endure any hardship, survive any sorrow, if you have someone to share it with. To be entirely alone is one of the most dreadful curses that there can be.

I think there is more than a little irony in the fact that never in the history of mankind has there been a generation more “connected” than ours – cell phones, the Internet, Facebook, FaceTime, Twitter, Snapchat – and yet with all this connectedness – never in the history of mankind has there been a generation in which loneliness and isolation has been as problematic as in our own.

There is a whole new genre of American literature that is focusing just on this problem. Jonathan Haidt’s “The Righteous Mind,” where he speaks about “The Facebook Effect” where we tend to follow and interact only with people that are more and more like ourselves. Or Mark Dunkelman’s “The Vanishing Neighbor” or the original work in this field by Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” and more recent works like: “The Fractured Republic” and “Coming Apart.” All focus, in one way or another on the same problem that modernity is increasingly an isolating influence – and as the prophet Jeremiah warned thousands of years ago – this is not a good development for mankind.

Jewish tradition has always been the mechanism by which we counteract loneliness. Jewish tradition seemed to grasp what a dreadful curse loneliness is, and over the generations devised a network of ways by which a person can feel connected, and not feel isolated. Is it any wonder that as Jewish observance decreases, as shul membership diminishes – as the mechanisms that we spent millennia developing to counteract loneliness fall on hard times, that loneliness is on the rise?

So how traditionally did Judaism deal with loneliness? Well the first innovation of Judaism was the discovery by Abraham some 4000 years ago of God. A person who believes in God is never alone. This is what Jeremiah refers to when he says: “blessed be the man who puts his trust in the Lord”. For one who takes God seriously, who senses God everywhere whether it be in the synagogue, in the market place, or at home, such a person is never alone. He or she is

always with God. But we, well, we are too sophisticated for such a belief – Tevye may have talked to God – but which of us would consider such a conversation? And the result is – we are so very alone.

I have noticed an unmistakable pattern emerging over the past few years. Every now and then someone will come to my office to talk to me about God (believe it or not - it does happen occasionally. But, the majority of these people have one thing in common. They are recovering alcoholics. They are struggling with their addiction and they find God as an important element in their recovery. They come to understand that it was loneliness that drove them to drink and as they grapple with living with the loneliness that alcohol helped them escape, God becomes a real and meaningful option. Most of these people are in my office as a direct consequence of the 12-step program which emphasizes the recognition of a “Higher Authority” as a first and fundamental step in the recovery process. I am glad that I have something to help these people who come to me in search of an answer. I am only sorry that it takes this sense of desperation to bring them to my door. Wouldn't it be nice if the rest of my congregation could come to the realization that God is the answer for all kinds of dependency problems - not only alcohol or drugs; and that those who place their trust in the Lord, *Lo Ira Ra* - - Need not fear.

So, if Judaism's first response to loneliness is God, its second is family. Judaism may not have invented the idea of family, but it certainly raised it to an art form. The family has always been the great link between the individual and the world. "Home and family is where you belong, not because you have earned it, not because you have purchased it, but simply because you are you." It is any wonder that in this era of increased loneliness, the family as an institution is also struggling? An exasperated parent recently told me that: “their child had gone too far this time- he had no choice but to cut the child off - he was on his own, I am done with him once and for all!” I responded that there is no such thing as going to far when it comes to a child. I don't know where that custom came from of sitting shiva for a child who intermarries. I find the concept incredibly un-Jewish. We may be disappointed in our children, we may be angry, we may even be disgusted by our children if their behavior is unusually egregious, - and we have a right and a responsibility, as parents, to express our disappointment, our anger and even our disgust - but the bond endures, the relationship continues - it may never be severed. Never. As a Jew you should always be able to turn to your family.

And the third great instrument that Judaism developed to preserve them from loneliness was the Jewish people itself. To be a Jew is never to be alone, to be a Jew means you are always connected. Take this Service – what a brilliant invention. Now some of you are here only because of a Bar-Mitzvah – but traditionally – we Jews hold services three times a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. No matter how bad a day you may have had, no matter how lonely you might feel – on any day, every day – you can walk into this shul and you will find community. You will find friendship and camaraderie. Come to a minyan – any minyan and you will receive a warm welcome – we are thrilled to see you – we *need* you – without ten we can't begin. Listen to the banter before and after Services – “how is your arm? Feeling any better? Did you get your car fixed?” This is community, and it exists for you – for the taking 24/7. We joke about "Jewish Geography" - the game we play when two Jews meet and try and find a third mutual friend based on some form of association of how small and intimate the Jewish world is. I bet everyone sitting here has such stories. I have a theory that all Jews know one another. However some have just not yet met.

This truth - of the importance of connectedness - to God, to family and to our people - explains a number of things. For one, it explains why active membership in the synagogue, and in the various institutions of the Jewish community is so important. It is not the fact that you get to pay dues or get your name on a membership list, or get to receive a monthly bulletin - however exciting these privileges are. Rather it is the feeling that one gains by belonging, of being connected through the Temple to God, to the Jewish community, and to the Jewish people worldwide.

This fact of the importance of connectedness - also explains why recent developments here, and in Israel leave me very concerned. The fractionalization of the Jewish community specifically and the American community in general is in my opinion the single greatest threat to our survival. I mentioned this a few weeks ago – that shul is one of the last places you can mingle with people you disagree with. Republicans and Democrats sit side by side. Blue collar and white collar, college professors and college students, doctors and patients, business owners and their customers - we laugh together and eat together at the Kiddush. And we all come to see that we are not so very different from each other - and certainly what we share is much more important than what separates us. You don't have to agree with the guy sitting next to you, but we do need to find a way to live together – and the emphasis is on the word together. Because as Jeremiah reminds us in today's reading – unless we can find a way to live together we are heading for serious problems.

Today's *parsha* tells of the blessings that will come from walking "bechukotai."

In the Hebrew language there are a few words that have a particular structure. They exist only in the plural form, for which there is no singular. *Mayim* - which means water or waters, is one such example. There is no singular form. And so it is with *hayim*, the word for life. There is simply no way of saying in Hebrew "my life" in the singular; you can only say "my lives". Perhaps this is to teach us that there is no such thing as a life that can be lived in isolation, for loneliness is the worst curse of all. The only way we can live a truly *human* life is in, with, and through relationships with others.

The greatest blessing that we can experience is companionship with God, with family, with the Jewish people, with people. For life is with people.