Yom Kippur Morning 2024
Rabbi Megan Brumer

In the fall of 2017, the Tubbs fire raged throughout California, burning down homes, forests, and whatever else stood in its way, including URJ Camp Newman. Many of my friends had gone there and I'd visited a few times. After the devastation, the camp community gathered at local synagogues and in homes to talk. Even though they didn't have their physical space, they came together to comfort each other in their time of loss.

Campers, staff, alumni, and others reflected on social media, via Zoom calls, and in person about the strength of the people and the magic and power of camp. One alumnus wrote, "Camp proves that places have emotional energy. … It is the people who create that energy, and who will move forward despite physical destruction, to rebuild and make that energy stronger than ever. Here's to the forever touch of camp." Another wrote that though the physical camp had been destroyed, camp still existed in thousands of homes across the country. It continues in memories and traditions, beyond its gates, wherever the people go.

After the sadness came hope. It was announced that camp would be held at a college campus the following summer. Branded "Newman by the Bay," summer 2018 arrived with the same activities and programs as before, and even the addition of a few new ones. Campers still made lasting memories, hung out with their friends, and cried at the end of the summer. In other words, it was still camp.

We were reminded that the *chadar ochel* (dining hall), cabins, tower, *beit t'fillah*, and other camp buildings were special and held memories, but the community was always the most important part.

Our Jewish values teach us that wherever we are—in camp, in synagogue, or even around the Shabbat table—the people are irreplaceable. Our tradition tells us that it is good to need people; in fact, community is a prerequisite in times of both joy and sorrow. For example, that's why we pray together in a minyan. Judaism is not meant to be practiced in a vacuum; we are meant to support each other. When we learn, we are taught to study in *chevruta*, in partnership.

Today, we come together on the holiest day of the year to recognize that each of us has sinned. But we are not alone. That's why the Ashamnu prayer, our Vidui, is offered in the plural. We say, "We have sinned," not "I have sinned". We offer this prayer in the collective to remember that when one of us falls, we all fall, when one of us fails, we all fail.

In his essay, "Our Sins? They're Not All Mine!," Rabbi David Teutsch gives three additional reasons why Ashamnu is written in the plural.

First, people could not honestly confess using the word "I" if they have not committed each of the listed sins. He writes that saying "I" instead of "we" might discourage people from reciting the prayer at all. By confessing as a group, people can acknowledge their sins before dismissing them.

Second, each community member is held accountable for the sins of every other member. Rabbi Teutsch argues that "the culture of a group shapes its members' values and behavior." Therefore, everyone is responsible for each other's sins unless they "have been fighting to change the culture." He adds, "We confess in the plural to remind us that we are partly responsible for the transgressions of everyone whom we share a community [with]."

Lastly, he explains that we confess in the plural so that everyone knows what behaviors the community considers unacceptable, thereby sharing expectations with others and affirming the standards of the community together.

Rabbi Teutsch concludes by saying "We first draw strength from acknowledging collective wrongdoing; only then do we turn to our individual confession."[1]

The Vidui is a time when we say we are sorry, we admit that we were wrong and need to repent. It is a time to look inward and reflect. This is not always an easy task; it's hard to say "I'm sorry." I think the rabbis, who spent a lot of time together studying, arguing, and probably eating, instinctively knew the power of community. They knew it is always easier to do something difficult with help.

While asking for help may be hard, and to some might seem like a sign of weakness, I see it as a sign of strength. Rather than ignoring our needs, we do something about them. The action isn't easy, but the results can be so rewarding. It's not good to do everything ourselves, it can make us feel isolated. Even with friends and family around us, many of us suffer from loneliness.

In his op-ed in *The New York Times,* Surgeon General Dr. Murthy writes that loneliness is an epidemic. He shares, "Loneliness—like depression, with which it can be associated—can chip away at your self-esteem and erode your sense of who you are."

Everyone experiences loneliness at some point in their lives, but it isn't always visible. Millions of people feel isolated right now, but we can't see it. We don't know that they're lonely because often they are ashamed to talk about their feelings, they don't want to admit that they are lonely or don't feel entitled to be sad. During Covid, we were often secluded in our homes; and even though we are out of Covid isolation, many of us are lonely because of it.

Loneliness and isolation affect not just the person suffering, but entire communities, as well. Dr. Murthy explains, "When we are less invested in one another, we are more susceptible to polarization and less able to pull together to face the challenges that we cannot solve alone."

He offers these steps to address loneliness:

First, strengthen community programs that help teach people healthy relationship building. Support schools that teach about healthy relationships and organizations that help build community.

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[1] Rabbi David Teutsch, "Our Sins? They're Not All Mine!" In *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism—Ashamnu and Al Chet*, pp. 134–138

Second, reassess our relationship with technology. We need to put down our phones and speak to someone face-to-face. And, when we are on social media, beware of online dialogues that amplify judgment and hate rather than understanding and love. Technology can be a tool, but it can also be a burden.

Third, we need to be the ones to take action and rebuild our relationships, even in small ways. There is evidence that connection is good for our health and is the biggest antidote to loneliness.[2]

I understand where Dr. Murthy is coming from. I moved across the country, away from my friends and family, and although I interact with all of you here at TBE, there are times when I feel bouts of loneliness.

This past summer, my goal was to focus on my social life. I wanted to take Dr. Murthy's advice and be the one to take action. After living here for a year, I wanted to make at least one new friend; and I am proud to say that I have achieved my goal. I now have a mah-jongg group! I found a group of women my age who play, and we try to get together for a game twice a month.

Saying I needed help, then taking action and focusing on connection, wasn't easy. It took me almost a month to build up the courage and energy to make it a priority. I hope we can take Dr. Murthy's suggestions and do more to prioritize relationships, both with the people who mean so much to us and with someone new. Maybe this is the year you make a new friend—or even two!

Jewish history has shown that even when the four walls around us come crashing down, we survive. Our religion has lasted thousands of years, even as our physical spaces have changed. Community and peoplehood are at the core of Judaism. Wherever we pray—in houses, temples, churches, or rented spaces—we know that it's the people who make it special.

We are the core of Temple Beth-El, and we will continue to grow and thrive no matter what comes next. We have created a sacred community here in our building, and this summer at Steppingstone Park and Firefighters Park. We will always have the power of community with us, wherever we choose to be. As we continue this journey of transition, remember that the heart of TBE is you, our people, and if we stick together, we can make it through anything. You are not alone.

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/30/opinion/loneliness-epidemic-america.html?unlocked_article_code=1.JU4.7Z7I.U4WM-AZpN3LC&smid=em-share