

Be a Bridge

Sixteen hundred years ago, a few rabbis of the Talmud argued about what was the most important verse in the Torah. Today, I want to give my answer.

The verse I'll share, and the themes that emerge from it, will inform the direction of three of my high holiday sermons this year. The verse itself is from the book of Genesis, chapter 1 verse 26. God's just finished creating the world; it's day six, and there's already water and fish, trees and fruit. There are birds and beasts and animals of all kind. Viewing it all, God states, *ki tov*. This creation is *good. It's sufficient*. Then, as though following up on this realization that the world is good, God declares, "***Let's make the human in our image, after our likeness.***"

To me, that's the most important verse in the Torah. Humans are modeled after God! It's such an important realization, that I believe all the other laws in the Torah flow out of how we must behave to make that statement a reality.

Let's imagine together: "What would it really mean if we were made in God's image, in God's likeness? What would it feel like to live in that kind of world where we understood that a bit of God's residue lives in each of us? That not only do we all have a bit of star dust in our make up, but a bit of God dust also? What would our society look like?"

I imagine that we would treat ourselves better, and those around us also. I bet we'd even look at oceans, rats and dandelions with a new found appreciation. Now picture that appreciation which we'd extend to ourselves and others being returned to us! Wouldn't we all feel seen and known and acknowledged in a way that rarely happens in our busy world of transactions?

Just ten days ago, I was speaking with one of my dearest friends whom I met in freshman year of college. He asked how my high holiday preparations and sermons were going, and then wistfully added, "David, you get to talk, and people listen...I have to hire a shrink." There are huge numbers of people who don't really feel heard anymore, don't you agree?

We've created a world where we are a bit deaf, dumb and blind to the spiritual and material abundance that is our birthright. As a consequence, we are too rushed to connect. We've become coarsened, and our relationships have become coarsened as well. Created in God's image? What's the rabbi been smoking?

I get it. Imagining the world in a profoundly different way is a hard sell in this day and age. We remember the failed movements that tried to shift the needle. Communism and fascism.

Believing it's possible is a hard sell, because some of us don't believe in God, some are unsure, and still others aren't really clear of how or if God acts in the world. It's a hard sell because more and more people imagine that we are just sophisticated machines without souls.

It's a hard sell, because when we look out at the world, and the life of nations and our nation; when we see all the strife and rage that fill our airways and our elections, and our more personal struggles on the homefront; when we view ourselves in the cold light of self-reflection, it seems hopelessly naive to believe that a world actually defined by care, respect and abundance for all is possible.

Finally, and most importantly, it is a hard sell because we live in a world that can best be described by two words: **alienation and loneliness**.

It's taken a long time for this to happen, and things that happen slowly tend to be invisible. We just don't notice. It's like the frog in the pot of slowly heating water. Yet here we are suffering from a plague of **alienation and loneliness of biblical proportions**.

Don't believe me?

The British Government recently began a Campaign to End Loneliness. 13% of the English are chronically lonely, and 92% believe that people are scared to admit that they are lonely. Admitting you're lonely has become taboo.

In the USA, loneliness figures are far worse; in one study, chronic loneliness was pegged at 20%, and another at a whopping 40%! That's doubled over the last 30 years. As many as 1 in 3 people in this country is struggling with persistent loneliness. That dwarfs the people impacted by gun violence or terror, though these acts also are radical and misinformed attempts to answer the terrible alienation so many suffer.

In fact, death caused by loneliness occurs at far higher levels than many other health and social problems that are better reported. So look around this sanctuary. Many of us are living with hidden pain. Some fill that void with shopping and spending beyond their means; others with persistent electronic distractions that soak up their precious time.

For still others, this pain is so intense, that they'll do anything to numb themselves. New synthetic drugs such as Flakka and Spice and Spike are flooding the market. One in twenty high school seniors have tried methamphetamines such as crystal meth at least once. When we were still in Cleveland, the richest suburban high school also had the worst drug abuse.

This summer, many of us were shocked and saddened to learn that Prince died from an opioid overdose. Part of our disbelief was how carefully he constructed his persona as an individual who lived a clean and healthy life free of substances. Most of his closest friends had no idea that he was struggling. Makes you ask, if your closest friends don't know what's going on with you, are they really even friends at all?

In America, drug overdose levels are 2-7 times the murder death rate and 3-10 times the number of gun deaths. Prince is the visible face to an epidemic of prescription and illicit drug abuse. But he's not the only one. Did you hear the horrible story of a woman in a Family Dollar store? She passed out on the floor while her two year old kept pulling at her arm telling mommy to wake up. Tragic.

Suicide, meanwhile, remains on the top ten list of causes of death in America. Over the last decade¹, suicide rates in this country increased 30%. If you are LGBTQ, that rate will be three times higher than the national average. There are other groups where it's far higher. *The pain and loneliness of being different and feeling unseen or undervalued should never be underestimated.*

Our military veterans are twice as likely to commit suicide as the general population. Recent research by Sebastian Junger also shows that they suffer PTSD at extremely high rates, Strikingly, it is not war that primarily causes trauma, *but the alienation and loneliness that soldiers feel on their return to civilian society.*

¹ In the decade from 1999-2010.

In fact, based on his studies, Junger concludes that:

Humans don't mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it; what they mind is not feeling necessary. Modern society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary. It's time for that to end.²

This societal plague of alienation as we know extends to the polarization we are witnessing throughout the body politic. And while it has become convenient to blame politicians for their gridlock, the truth is that we've lost the ability to connect and to converse in meaningful ways, and our leaders look a lot like us. They are us.

I bet that everyone in this sanctuary has experienced being on the outs at moments. Have you ever been ostracized? Felt shut down? Excluded? Misunderstood? Let's take a few moments now to reflect on our own experiences of alienation. If you want to make eye contact with someone to let them know you see them, that is ok also. I'd just ask that we stay silent for a few short moments.

It sounds so dismal and yet--**I believe there is a way out**. I believe there is a way that we can return to the vision implied in God's statement, "***Let's make the human in our image, after our likeness.***" Because if we can track the decline over the past thirty years or more, it reminds us that it wasn't always this way. As Rabbi Nahman said, if you believe in breaking, believe in fixing. It's incumbent on our community at Neveh Shalom to dedicate ourselves to that effort.

In a wonderful turn of events, the insight to finding a way out came from my younger son. As an aside, it is a special joy when your child teaches you something.

Last year, his grade at PJA had a unit on the bridges of Portland. He learned their names, when they were built. He knows a bit of their history. Me? I'm only familiar with the poster, the famous antiqued one in which the bridges are stacked vertically. And if you're a local, maybe that's no big deal. But it got me thinking.

Bridges, you see are beautiful and essential and deep pieces of architecture. They connect this place, spanning the Willamette repeatedly from north to south so that we can go east and west. Each bridge touches land in a different part of town, with different neighbors and vibes. Bridges let me go to the east side, where my very wise barber

² <http://warontherocks.com/2016/06/veterans-and-the-alienated-society/>

works, and where my voice coach teaches and where my friends who need an urban buzz live. And for an east coast boy, the east side looks a bit more like the diverse town I grew up in. Plus there's some great ethnic food on the other side of those bridges.

You know, in an age of terror, there are people who are paid to think about the what ifs-- *what if all our bridges were taken out. Maybe not at one time, but slowly, one by one.* We already complain about the traffic. Now imagine a city cut off from itself, unable to span and connect. Here at Neveh Shalom, 11% of our extended congregational family live on the east side. On a day like this, we all gather together--to pray, to meet, to reflect and even to celebrate this new year. Without those bridges and roads and paths, though, we couldn't all be here. We couldn't gather to be together. We'd be alone, you and I.

Over the last thirty years, the social and psychic bridges that connect us have been crumbling. That's what's caused this plague. London bridge and every other bridge. They've been falling down.

This is a plague. There's no other word for it. When we are confronted with a plague, we are called upon to act swiftly and with vigor. We all have to scale up our efforts.

So here's the ask. I'm asking all of us to help rebuild the bridges that span the abyss of alienation and loneliness. I'm asking us to make it a priority to rebuild the bridges of compassion, and tolerance that lead us to understand other people's values. The bridges of listening, and the bridges of presence, perseverance and resilience. The bridges that allow us to tell our story and feel that it is heard. The bridges that let us know we are not alone.

The bridges that change everything.

I'm challenging all of us to become a light unto the nations by forming connections, and tolerance and empathy with those who are different.

I'm inviting every one of us to be a bridge--to the elderly and frail, to children at risk, to those whose skin or politics looks different, or whose checkbook is larger or smaller than our own.

In fact, come November, a good number of us are going to begin distributing sandwiches to the homeless one Saturday night a month so that we can connect with

the homeless of our city. As a community, we'll be celebrating Thanksgiving with an interfaith service of Muslims, Christians and Jews.

I am beseeching you. The world needs us, and Neveh Shalom can make a real difference. We are a community of 2000 souls. If we all do more than we have, we can move the needle. Please partner with me.

This year, be a bridge. Let's step up our efforts to reach out to people who don't think like us, or dress like us or look like us. Engage people who earn a lot less than us...or a lot more. Gemilut Hasidim, the kindness of connection, the rabbis tell us, is greater than tzedekah, because everyone needs more human kindness.

Speak to those who have mental illness. Converse with those contemplating suicide, or visit the comments section of on line news sites where people normally spill their poisonous vitriol, and pour out your loss and compassion instead. You can dispel some loneliness and alienation from the world. That's my charge to all of us this year.

As you leave today, the ushers will have placed boxes of sheets for you on the tables outside. On each sheet you'll find a colorful game board loaded with activities. Each time you complete one of these steps, you'll be a bridge. When you complete the sheet, you are invited to submit a written or video reflection about your experience as a bridge.

I'm going to invite those who participate to a community party. Depending on many contributions we get, it will either be at "Chateau Kosak" or another locale if hundreds of us get involved. Together, we really can change the world.

Two hundred years ago, a Jewish master by the name of Nahman of Bratslav taught us that: *kol ha'olam kulo, gesher tza'ar me'od, gesher tza'ar me'od. v'ha'ikar...v'ha'ikar...lo l'fached klal.*

All the world is a narrow bridge, overflowing with loneliness and alienation.

But the main thing is not to fear. This past year, Portland got its newest bridge. Its full name is the Tillikum Bridge of the People. This year, let's build our own bridge of the people, everyone of us.

Join me now if you know the song...