

## Caring for Ourselves and Each Other

Rabbi Michael Fel

My first car was a 1991, Fire Red, 4-door, Toyota Corolla. When I inherited the car from my sister, it was already almost ten years old, had over 150,000 miles, lacked air conditioning, power locks, power windows and started shaking once you hit 70 miles per hour. But it was mine. And I loved it. I called her the Felrari.

After years of practicing my driving skills with my parents, some time around the year 2000, they decided it made sense for me to drive to school by myself. So, at 6:45 AM on a sunny and humid Miami morning, I turned the engine, rolled down the windows, and made my way to school. For the first time ever, I was alone in the car. I remember being giddy, almost in disbelief that no one was sitting next to me. I blasted the music, probably either Billy Joel or the Dave Matthews Band, felt the breeze flowing through my then present hair, and relished the experience. I was alone, but really excited.

I had a similar experience when I left to study abroad for a semester at the University of Essex in England. Having never left home for an extended period, my whole family was a little anxious. Before it was time to leave for the airport, my parents called me into the kitchen. We sat together, we talked, and we cried, and then talked some more. And then I got in the car that was going to take me to the airport...with my parents...where we then repeated the same scene again, this time at the security check point.

I remember handing the agent my boarding pass, walking through the doors, looking back at my parents, and for the first time in a while, feeling alone, and again, being ecstatic. Struggling to catch my breath between my tears of sadness and my tears of joy, I skipped down

the gate to the plane where my adventure was to begin. I was alone, really excited, and a little anxious.

I trust that many of us have had similar positive experiences while being alone. Perhaps it happened one day when you woke up earlier than everyone else and saw the beautiful sunrise, or got lost in the woods while on a trail, or maybe, you curled up in your bed while being completely engrossed in a good book.

Admittedly, today, those moments of isolation seem to occur less often. The reality is that we spend most of our lives surrounded by others. We are always within earshot of a nearby cell phone conversation, the honk of a horn, or the sound of a neighbor.

And yet – even while surrounded by thousands of people – there are days when we may still feel very much alone.

Unknown.

Unacknowledged.

Isolated.

We feel that no one really understands or appreciates us.

Perhaps you have felt this way.

Your first day at work, your first day at school, or maybe even your first day here at Temple Emunah.

And that is hard.

These feelings of loneliness occur in various parts throughout the Torah and are highlighted in the Torah and Haftarah readings for the High Holy Days.

Sarah and Hannah struggled with their infertility; Hagar feels uncared for by the father of her child; Jonah feels like the only one in the world wrestling with God.

According to the Torah, only one person in the history of the world has ever truly been alone:

Adam.

Genesis 2:7 begins:

ז וַיִּצְרָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם, עָפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה, וַיִּפֹּחַ בְּאַפָּיו, נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם, לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.

<sup>7</sup>Then the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

טו וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים, אֶת-הָאָדָם; וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגֶן-עֵדֶן, לְעִבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ.

<sup>15</sup>The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.

I can imagine Adam coming home from a hard day's work – the house is empty. He harvests some lettuce, tomatoes, and onions – and makes himself a salad. He stares at the heavens.

Quickly realizing that Adam was unhappy, God provides company. The chapter continues:

<sup>18</sup>The Lord God said, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him.” <sup>19</sup>And the Lord God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name. <sup>20</sup>And the man gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but for Adam no fitting helper was found.

Now, I imagine, Adam comes home after a day in the field, and having, literally, all the cats, dogs, and birds in the world greeting him when he comes in the door. I see hundreds of dogs wagging their tails; one has his shoes, another the newspaper.

While the other animals are happy, Adam is still not content. He needs someone who understands him, who is able to relate to him, someone with whom to speak, someone with whom to communicate.

And so the text continues, God says:

“It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יָם לֹא־טוֹב הֵי הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ:

God fashions Eve.

They meet – they presumably fall in love:

He says: It is as if you were made for me!

She says: I can't imagine being with anyone other than you!

And the rest, for better or worse, is history.

I have to believe, that at different points in our lives, we have all felt like Adam. Finding ourselves in a world in which we feel alone; that no one understands us; that we have no one with whom to sympathize.

And that, too, is hard.

It's hard because we are meant to be social. Science is now empirically demonstrating the biochemical changes that occur in our bodies when we spend time with others. Studies have shown the importance and correlation between happiness and connection with others.

Relationships help us understand who we are and feel part of something larger than ourselves. Researchers also find that people with strong social connections have less stress-related health problems, lower risk of mental illness, and faster recovery from trauma or illness. Friends and family can also encourage and support us in healthy lifestyle habits, such as exercise and moderation (<http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/connecting/connection-happiness>).

And yet – when we face adversity or a new challenge, whether it is a difficult diagnosis, a professional setback, or a family issue, our immediate reaction is often to turn inwards and go away from the community. We seek isolation and privacy when what we need most, whether we know it or not, is the support of others. Part of the reason might be that we are not yet ready to share. We are still coping with accepting and processing the news. And that is okay too.

So what are the problems in our lives that afflict many of us for which we feel that we alone bear the burden? What are the issues that cause us to create our own worlds and feel like Adam, like we are the only ones in the world, dealing with that issue? What are the struggles that we deal with alone?

This Rosh Hashanah, I'd like to discuss three issues that affect many, but are often swept under the rug because we don't feel it is appropriate to discuss them publicly. And I am hoping that by mentioning them today, many of you will not feel like you are alone – but rather supported and cared for by those around you. I would like to speak about Fertility, Mental Illness, and the world of Special Needs.

Shayna and I struggled with infertility. Being part of the Jewish community, one can't help but notice the focus on children and family life. Youth services, Tot Shabbat, parenting classes...but when you don't have a child, or a spouse for that matter, you feel like you are on the outside looking in. Multiple times, people innocently asked me, and I hear them ask others, so when are you planning – what are you waiting for – you know...you're not getting any younger. Comments said in jest, in a loving way, but reminding me, reminding Shayna, of the struggle taking place at home.

We were sad. And we felt lonely.

After a few months of meeting with a specialist, Shayna and I became pregnant. We were filled, as all expectant parents are, with hope and optimism. We dreamed of what the future would be like for us as a new family. That joy and light disappeared during a routine check up when we were unable to hear our baby's heartbeat. We learned Shayna had a miscarriage.

We were sad. And we felt lonely. And Shayna and I really didn't want to talk about it with anyone.

Nowhere in the daily service is that experience acknowledged. It isn't something that just naturally comes up in conversation. No one wants to be the bearer of bad news.

After a long winter, several months later, with the help of fertility specialists, we once again visited the same doctor's office, for the same routine checkup, and heard a heartbeat. Shayna was pregnant and the baby was healthy.

Today, Nadav is a happy, growing, boy who has an even stronger heartbeat and will soon open the Ark because of his participation in the 10 for 10 program.

I don't remember when, but I believe it was when we ran into one of our friends at the fertility specialist's office, that we realized there was no need to face this alone. We were not the first couple to experience a miscarriage. We learned that about 10-20% of known pregnancies end in miscarriage ([http://www.babycenter.com/0\\_understanding-miscarriage\\_252.bc](http://www.babycenter.com/0_understanding-miscarriage_252.bc)). It is something that happens to a lot of woman in our community.

And, it seemed, the more we talked with our peers that many of them had seen a fertility specialist. Today, roughly 12% of couples trying to get pregnant end up seeing a specialist ([http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key\\_statistics/i.htm#infertility](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key_statistics/i.htm#infertility)). And so, all of a sudden speaking about infertility became therapeutic instead of traumatic. The stories of others, both inspirational and sad, gave us the strength to continue.

I am here to tell you, that when the time is right and you want to share, there are many who will empathize and support you. There are resources here at the shul, at Jewish agencies, and outside of the Jewish world that can help. You are not alone.

While some struggle with fertility, others struggle with mental illness and its stigma. A mental illness is a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning. Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life.

Serious mental illnesses include major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and borderline personality disorder. ([http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By\\_Illness](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness)).

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness:

One in four adults experience mental illness in a given year.

One in seventeen adults live with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, major depression, or bipolar disorder.

One in fifteen adults live with major depression.

([http://www.nami.org/factsheets/mentalillness\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www.nami.org/factsheets/mentalillness_factsheet.pdf))

Which means, statistically speaking, there are dozens of members in our shul who are trying to make sense of their condition and need to know that there are others who want to help.

This year, I am sure we were all saddened to hear of the death of Robin Williams. It is reported that he battled with addiction and depression all his life. How could a man who made so many laugh, who had wealth, fame, and success suffer from depression? The answer is that depression is not a matter of having a bad day or feeling grief over a loss. And it isn't a matter

of saying, it's no big deal, just laugh it off. Depression requires treatment, just as one would see a doctor for any other ailment.

I am here to tell you, that when the time is right and you want to share, there are many who will empathize and support you and/or your family member with mental illness. There are resources here at the shul, at Jewish agencies, and outside of the Jewish world that can help. You are not alone.

Lastly, I'd like to focus some time on special needs in our community.

Individuals with disabilities can be affected in so many different ways: medically, psychologically, socially, and intellectually. Types of special needs vary in severity. People with autism, Down syndrome, dyslexia, ADHD, visual impairment, or cystic fibrosis, for example, may be considered to have special needs. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special\\_needs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special_needs))

According to the Center for Disease Control, roughly:

About one in sixty-eight children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

About one in six children in the United States had a developmental disability in 2006-2008, ranging from mild disabilities, such as speech and language impairments, to serious developmental disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, and autism.

(<http://www.cdc.gov/NCBDDD/autism/data.html>)

The diagnosis of a disability brings with it uncertainty with regards to educational and social opportunities, as well as increased anxiety as the child and parents get older.

Where will my child go to school? With whom will he be friends? Where will my child live as an adult? Who will take care of my child when I am no longer here?

I am here to tell you, that when the time is right and you want to share, there are many who will empathize and support you and your family member with disabilities. There are resources here at the shul, at Jewish agencies, and outside of the Jewish world that can help. You are not alone.

These are not statistics about other people. These conditions, diseases, and challenges affect people sitting in this very room in our shul.

As a rabbi, I often hear about people's situations. They come to me and ask – what do we do? What can we do?

A few weeks ago, I was talking with Bill Palant, the son of Barbara and Dan Palant, about the First World problems that we face living here in America. He shared with me a beautiful quote that shed light on the issue: He said, “A problem is anything you can't fix with money.” I'll say it again. “A problem is anything you can't fix with money.” And in response I thought: “And for real problems, there is community.”

We, those of us here in the room, can come to the aide of the others and help them when they face real problems.

We have the sacred obligation to share: our experiences, our struggles, and our successes so that others may draw strength from them.

Realizing the power of community, Temple Emunah, under the auspices of the Hineini Committee led by Jane Aronson and Linda Skolnik, has just created the Hineini Care Team. This team's challenge is to visit members of our community who could use additional support – an extra visit, a chance to talk about the weather, grabbing a bite to eat. I want to be clear, that they are not a substitute for Rabbi Lerner or myself, we will continue to be in touch with all of

you, but through this program we will be better able to support those in our community who need contact.

Additionally, in a world where many doors are shut because of a diagnosis or the need for an accommodation, our shul can become the place that is open and welcoming.

I am pleased to announce that the National Ruderman Foundation has chosen Temple Emunah as a site for its groundbreaking Synagogue Inclusion Project. Friends, this is a very big deal. Because we have opened our doors in the past, because we said yes in a world where the culture has said no, we have been chosen to team with two other synagogues in the Boston area and work together to create a model of inclusion for the rest of the country.

Throughout the year, you will be hearing about some of our Ruderman initiatives and I hope that you are filled with a sense of pride and mission and want to help the inclusion committee in this initiative.

Friends, there is no need to create a world in which we feel alone and unable to cope.

And yet, surrounding ourselves with people who care for us, they form a ladder which does not diminish the objective reality of the challenge. But while resting on their shoulders, we can almost imagine ourselves rising above the challenge.

Please don't be afraid to reach out in the New Year.

Be open to receiving and giving help.

Be a refuge; a sanctuary for someone in need.

I pray that God gives us the strength to share with others the challenges that we face in the New Year. And I pray that we as a community have the strength to respond to the call of others.

Shanah Tovah.