

## **From Lonely to Connected; Unhappy to Satisfied**

Rabbi Amy Joy Small

During this past year, have your hearts' yearnings been fulfilled? If you would say yes, you are probably in the minority. The isolation and fears and suffering of these many months of pandemic have gotten to us. Our souls are wounded, and tonight is a time for healing.

During this past year, especially in the months since we have been getting vaccinated, I have responded to now countless interactions with a reflection on our collective mental health. It has felt to me that we – all of us – have the background “music” playing in our minds, often unconsciously, of stress and woe. It's surely worse when we aren't aware of how much this background noise is impacting how we react to challenges and interact with each other. There is a heightened level of tension that we are just beginning to diagnose as we chart our path to a new beginning in the New Year.

Psychologist Adam M. Grant, writing in the NYTimes last April<sup>1</sup> in a column entitled, *“There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing; The neglected middle child of mental health can dull your motivation and focus – and it may be the dominant emotion of 2021.”* He aptly recognizes that we are all showing symptoms of being off course: difficulty concentrating, lack of excitement about the coming year.

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<sup>1</sup> *“There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing”*, Adam Grant, NY Times, April 19, 2021

In one way or another, we have all been there. We had trouble concentrating. We binge-watched movies, sometimes over and over again, settling into the zone with Netflix and such. Wasn't it virtuous when the series were Israeli, I rationalized? I finished *Unorthodox*, *Shitsel*, and *Srugim* and grieved when there were no more episodes.

Our usual schedules and rhythms were forgotten – if you're not going anywhere, does it matter if you don't wake up early? Dr. Grant, recalled, "... instead of bouncing out of bed at 6 a.m., I was lying there until 7, playing *Words with Friends*."

"It wasn't burnout – we still had energy. It wasn't depression – we didn't feel hopeless. We just felt somewhat joyless and aimless." This is ***languishing***.

"Languishing is a sense of stagnation and emptiness. It feels as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield. And it might be the dominant emotion of 2021."

We have heard of cases of "long-haul Covid," with lingering illness for weeks or months. Maybe some of you, or family members or friends have suffered with this syndrome. But that is not all of it. "Many people are struggling with the emotional long-haul of the pandemic." Even as the initial fear and high alert brought on by the reality of pandemic living began to settle down, the chronic upset of Covid settled in. As "the pandemic has

dragged on, and the acute state of anguish has given way to a chronic condition of *languish*,” Grant observes.

What is *languishing*? It’s not the same as depression, “the valley of ill-being: You feel despondent, drained and worthless”, and it’s obviously not the same as flourishing, “the peak of well-being when we feel a strong sense of meaning, mastery and mattering to others.”

In-between those two poles, languishing feels harder to name. Grant says, “It’s the void between depression and flourishing — the absence of well-being.”

Maybe you are just feeling blah; maybe not functioning at full capacity. “*Languishing dulls your motivation, disrupts your ability to focus, and triples the odds that you’ll cut back on work.*”

When you are experiencing languishing, you might not even notice the emotional dulling it causes. From a mental health perspective, Grant comments, “when you can’t see your own suffering, you don’t seek help or even do much to help yourself.”

So many otherwise easily resolved challenges melt into emotional reactions far exceeding our typical selves. This feels to me like the languishing Dr. Grant helps us to understand.

What can we do about this “*languishing?*” First, we can name it, sharing with each other how this is a common experience, now more than ever. Imagine you ask a friend how they are, and they reply by saying, “Honestly, I’m languishing.” Say it out loud; a refreshing way to beat the cultural pressure to be upbeat and happy all the time.

And after more than a year and half of pandemic stress, don’t we need that release?

Grant offers an antidote to languishing, called, “*flow.*” Imagine being so absorbed in a meaningful project or experience that you are – for the time being – not even aware of time and place? This is what is called “*flow.*”

Those of us who remained happy during our pandemic isolation were the ones who remained grounded by finding emotional “*flow.*”

But it is very difficult to find “*flow*” if our attention is fragmented. Grant advises, “*Give yourself some uninterrupted time -- That means we need to set boundaries. We now know that the most important factor in daily joy and motivation is a sense of progress.*” Make time for friends, for family, for community. When we join for prayer, song and dance, we give our hearts breathing room for expression.

We can overcome languishing first, by “focusing on a small goal,” something that “stretches your skills and heightens your resolve.” A word game, a new recipe – a focused activity for part of your day that absorbs you and gives you a sense of accomplishment. A number of our artistic OZ

members have shared their poetry and art during this time. *Flow*. Focusing on a challenge that matters can help us to rediscover some of the energy and enthusiasm we missed during all our months of stress and pandemic isolation.

Even more so, if we find time to connect with others, we can help each other to find our way out of *languishing*. By voicing our yucky feelings and hearing each other, the human connection offers what Dr. Grant called “a voice to quiet despair and lighting a path out of the void.”

Of course, that void brought about by the pandemic is not the only source of our stress in these many months. “Climate change-driven catastrophic events have left many of us feeling helpless to convince politicians to do what is necessary to put the brakes on the devastating trends. Political upheaval and conflict feels worse than any of us can remember. The world is a mess.”

Even as we notice the background noise of a world in trouble, let’s remember that we, as human community, and we, as a Jewish people, have endured tremendous difficulties and frighteningly huge challenges and we have emerged into new eras of repair and renewal. We have the capacity for great resilience. But we can’t do it alone – we need human connection to nourish our strength. This is perhaps the greatest challenge of this moment in time. “As a nation, a culture, we are too alone, too lonely, and too

disconnected. This, perhaps more than anything else, is where we need to direct our prayerful energies, while we redirect our lives.”

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy’s addresses this issue in his recent book, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*.<sup>2</sup> Murthy offers solutions to our epidemic of loneliness: “Humans are social creatures.” ***We need community; it is part of our wiring, our very evolution.***

On Yom Kippur we read the account of high priest in Jerusalem making expiation for the entire community. The height of tension in the story unfolds when the High Priest approaches the Holy of Holies, alone risking death if he had not properly atoned and purified himself. It’s scary in its aloneness. While he takes these steps toward this holy place, he leaves the enveloping presence of the huge crowd outside. The pilgrims, with all the attendants of the Holy Temple, have come together to seek atonement for their sins and the sins of the people. The power of connection is what gives the priest the fuel for the lonely journey to meet the Holy One on behalf of the entire people.

This ancient story of collective confession and expiation is repeated again and again in the generations that have followed. President Dwight D.

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<sup>2</sup> Why Now? *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. Vivek Murthy. p96

Eisenhower, in his “Farewell Address to the Nation,” reflected, “This world of ours... must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be, instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.”

But this year, it felt like the challenge of community inched up a notch. Worrying about our current state of connection, Dr. Murthy observes,

“The experience of loneliness may be as old as humanity, but the current moment feels like an important inflection point. Two decades ago, in his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam famously described the erosion of social networks and social norms in the US that began in the latter third of the twentieth century. His research found that various measures of social engagement had declined precipitously—including religious participation, membership in community organizations, and the frequency with which people were inviting friends to their homes. According to Putnam, many of these trends have only worsened in the years since his seminal publication.”

What is most important, most valuable in life? Most of us will say it is family and friends. Some of us are fortunate to live close to extended family, living in sync with each other. But many of us live far apart from family. And distance is just one part of it. We are disconnected from each other by the way we organize and conduct our lives. There is so much in competition for our attention— the 21<sup>st</sup> century has changed us. “We try to stay afloat... Meanwhile, the relationships we claim to prize often get neglected in the chase.”

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc, all claim to connect us. But do they? These platforms are designed to manipulate us. If the service is free, we are the product, not the customer!

What is the psychological cost of the hours we spend on social media? Our tech tools and toys have come to consume our lives, while we are feeling more alone and disconnected. Even when we gather, we may be looking at our phones. Are we really paying attention when we are tethered to our devices?

During our pandemic isolation, an emerging trend that became a new way of life for many was this: groceries and meals delivered to our doors, movies streamed online, and anything we needed or wanted to buy could be found on the internet and arrive at our homes within days. Wifi and computers enabled working from home -- alone.

As we are enjoying the take-out meal while watching a video, where is the human connection? Without the meandering experience of shopping and grabbing a meal, socializing with friends and acquaintances along the way, schmoozing with shopkeepers, enjoying spontaneously social interactions, we are sealing our aloneness around us. We are stifling our hearts. Our social systems are in trouble.

Dr. Sherry Turkle says, "We're losing the raw, human part of being with each other." It is human to desire connection. We need to share life experiences.



During the pandemic, I have heard stories from many of you sharing delight for your family visits and experiences with social pods. And, I have heard the isolation and sadness of so many of you who didn't have those opportunities or a way to create them. In my personal experience, the pandemic has gotten me out into my neighborhood far more than I'd ever had time to enjoy. But now, I really needed it. Now I know my neighbors and enjoy chatting with them on daily walks, helping each other, supporting one another, laughing and sharing. It made all the difference during this past year and a half.

Adam Grant talks about how emotions are inherently social: They're woven through our interactions.<sup>3</sup> Think about recent times when you have enjoyed a good laugh with others, and how healing and joyous that feels. Grant reports that "people laugh five times as often when they're with others as when they're alone." Joy can be sparked from the most mundane exchanges with strangers. True, some of us find joy in watching a great movie, or even a lousy TV show.

I remember the last major event we enjoyed together before the pandemic—Cantor Steve's installation. As the band regaled us with beautiful, uplifting music, some of us were inspired to get up and dance. One of our beloved preschoolers came up front from the back row, eyes wide with wonder, wanting to be close to us and the music. Think of the hora at a wedding, joy radiating through everyone with the shared music

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<sup>3</sup> "There's a Specific Kind of Joy We've Been Missing." Adam Grant July 2021

and dance. Psychologists called this *collective effervescence*, moments of shared bliss; a peak religious experience though we don't often call it religious.

Dr. Grant observed that, "Collective effervescence is the synchrony you feel when you slide into rhythm with strangers on a dance floor, colleagues in a brainstorming session, come together in a group around a shared purpose – it gives us energy. And during this pandemic, it's been largely absent from our lives."

Emotions are like contagious diseases: They can spread from person to person. The best part of emotional contagion is "when we are literally infected with other people and we don't even realize it's happening."

As psychologists are studying the effects of pandemic isolation, some posit that emotional contagion can in part explain so-called "Zoom fatigue." Perhaps this happens because we are sitting still, staring at each other's faces, feeling self-conscious about how we look, and reacting internally to the challenge of reading each other's facial expressions, or our own. The negative emotions we feel from such an abundance of video-calls could be "partially driven by hours of communicating with people who are also sad, stressed, lonely or tired."

"Psychologists find that in cultures where people pursue happiness individually, they may actually become lonelier. But in cultures where

they pursue happiness **socially** — through connecting, caring and contributing — people appear to be more likely to gain well-being.”<sup>4</sup>

This is where our beloved Ohavi Zedek community enters the story. It has been so difficult to be physically separated from each other. We have a lot to be proud of for our innovations and ability to pivot to new formats and structures for a virtual world. Still, we know that it wasn't enough. Some of you had trouble with the use of a digital platform, some just didn't find it prayerful for them. We miss you!

But more, the digital experience, no matter how well we have been able to master it, is just not the same as being together, in person. As we put our heads together and assembled our best in-house tech talent to create the opportunity for hybrid services, we have aimed to bring everyone together. Great gratitude to our tech team, who set up this complicated system for us and continue to help the Cantor and I to use it effectively, with a great team of other wonderful OZ'ers who are there to help for each service!

Streaming, Zooming, or in-person, we are committed to giving everyone a way to be with us, together. While we are doing that, it is our hope that we can gather as a community with as many of you as possible for every experience we share – the collective effervescence comes to life when we share space and energy, and heart. With voices and people-energy in the

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<sup>4</sup> Adam Grant

room, those on their screens at home can also feel a more powerful experience, drawn into our sanctuary with us. What a difference it makes when we can be together, *hineh mah tov u'mah na'im shevet achim v'achayot gam yachad!* How good and how lovely it is when we are together as brothers and sisters!

Now as we are starting, in fits and starts, to be present with each other sometime, it feels like a *yetziat Mitzrayim* moment, like when our ancestors left Egypt -- Freedom! Togetherness. Hearing each other's voices, it feels like a New Year!

Our first High Holiday event in the lead-up to Rosh Hashanah was our annual women's mikveh, thanks to Judy Danzig's generous hosting at her home. Like many things, we missed it last year. This year, as our circle of women shared our kavannot/spiritual intentions in the waters of Lake Champlain, it felt more powerful than any time before. It was *Collective effervescence*; together, as one holy community. I pray that we will build on this throughout this year of 5782.

Difficult as it has been, the pandemic gave us a gift – to realize what is most important for our thriving and happiness, and indeed our whole health. Now we can commit to that in the days ahead. Community matters – and we are blessed with a wonderful community – may we share our joys and sorrows, our hearts open to one another in sharing and healing, and may we flourish together this year!

*Gemar Chatimah Tovah*, May you be sealed in the book of life for good.