

Senses of loneliness
Talk to Congregation of Shir Libeynu
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Shanah Tovah.

In 1937 the composer, Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), wrote a little essay with the enigmatic title, “How one becomes lonely.” His style of taking things apart for new arrangements, and his mingling of chutzpah to create a world not yet with the sounding of lament for a world no longer¹ came to mind when Cantor Wunch invited me to give a talk on Rosh Hashanah. When asked about my topic, I said I would like to speak to senses of loneliness.

Cantor Wunch said, ‘in full disclosure’ my talk would be pre-recorded. I could only agree. In ‘full disclosure,’ I have spent the last 18 months and most of my days talking with others and listening to the talk of others on electronic platforms. I have held my private psychotherapeutic practice on zoom and phone. So too with my teaching, conference talks, consults with colleagues, dissertation exams and university work. I have even had arguments with others on zoom. There were also birthday parties, funerals, dinners, retirement parties, concerts, and the practice of worship.

These engagements, as meaningful as they are, could not protect me from feeling the force of a fundamental fact of the human condition, namely loneliness. Of course, so much life has been missed and lost over our time of the global pandemic. And as we begin Rosh Hashanah the questions I would like to bring forward are these: How do we learn to live with

¹ Arnold Schoenberg, “How one becomes lonely, 1937” In Stein, Leonard, Ed. *Style, and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*. Trans. Leo Black. Berkeley: University of Calif. Press, 1975.

loss and with feelings of disappointment and still speak to each other of our need for care, love, hope, and interdependency? What does loneliness ask of us?

In a radio interview, the novelist Kazuo Ishiguro clarified for me a central paradox². Loneliness is both our human condition and a situation that separates each of us from one another. As odd as it seems, loneliness carries with it the complications of our inner world. It is a world of churning emotions, anxieties, phantasies, lost causes, and returns of memories. Our inner life is where we ponder fragments of incomplete experience. Loneliness becomes like our personal lost and found department. There, thoughts are given free rein to rummage through what has and has not happened and loneliness takes residence. Ishiguro said that because we are complicated in our humanness and in our plurality, we have difficulty trying to build a bridge from each of our personal lives to the wider public world. And yet, we are affected by the world, even when lonely.

I want to focus on the back-and-forth experience of being affected by the world and feelings of loneliness. I'll do so with reflections on the generation of Jewish refugees who, in the middle of their lives and after accomplishing so much in their mother country, created new ways to express their senses of loneliness with new beginnings. I'll speak of the composer Arnold Schoenberg, and the psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and Hans Loewald. In taking this turn, my thoughts are not far from my grandparents and great grandmother. They, too, were refugees who faced endings in one country, due to pogroms, persecution, poverty, and antisemitism and began their lives again in another country and in a different language. While they did not speak of their past lives, they told me of their beginnings in the new world. I was lucky to know them.

² Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro by Mat Galloway, CBC Radio One 2021:
<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-63/clip/15827329>

Rosh [Beginning]

At the turn of the 20th century, in 1899, that same year that Sigmund Freud in Vienna inaugurated a novel method for understanding the psychical mind with his book, *Interpretation of Dreams*, Schoenberg in Vienna composed a romantic, lush, melodic dreamwork in the form of a string sextet. *Verklärte Nacht*, [Transfigured Night]. The composition is a tone poem of plot, tension, and resolution. The music reflects wide ranging emotions that express the broad strokes of love and passion, hope and fear, life and death, anxiety and regret, and then loss and change. It would be Schoenberg's goodbye to late romanticism.

Just as Freud introduced the spectacle of the conflicted mind, where conscious thoughts and unconscious drives would be at odds, about ten years later Schoenberg would go on to invent his most radical rules of composition, the 12-tone method of music. His method is sometimes known as a-tonal, a psychoanalysis of sound. Meaning would be taken apart and reassembled to make room for new thoughts and experiences. Schoenberg would call that modernism. But at the time when his compositions were performed, and perhaps even today, some heard the twelve-tone method for composing music as highly conceptual, objective, heartless, ugly, dissonant, and difficult. Its reception was dismissed and indeed, this was one of the sources for Schoenberg's 1937 essay, 'How One Becomes Lonely.'

Freud's reception had a similar fate: he would be dismissed but also seen as heartless, objective, and difficult. His new method of dream interpretation was Talmudic. Dreams were something to instruct and learn from with the proviso that the dreamer interpret it as a piece of affected psychology.

By 1933, the Nazi's burned Freud's books and too declared Schoenberg's music as degenerate. That same year Schoenberg and his family fled Vienna for Paris.

Freud stayed in his Vienna home until 1938, leaving only after his daughter, Anna Freud was arrested by the Gestapo and released. Freud and his immediate family fled as refugees and to live in London. His three elderly sisters remained in Vienna. They perished in Auschwitz and their terrible fate would only be learned after the War.

In 1939, in his 87th year, on Yom Kipper, Freud passed away. His daughter, Anna Freud would rebuild the Freudian psychoanalytic movement from London. She would also inherit conflicts within the psychoanalytic community, starting with her long history of arguments with Melanie Klein. I can see our existential dilemmas today hiding in the question they left us to answer: as we count the days of our lives, how we can listen to suffering?

Galut [Exile]

Schoenberg was one of the many Jewish artists, writers, composers, and intellectuals who escaped Austria and Germany during the rise of National Socialism. In 1934 he came with his wife to the United States, and as a refugee, landed of all places, in the city of Hollywood, California. He was not alone. All told, of the 104,098 German and Austrian Jews who entered the United States between 1933-1941, about 15,000 landed in Southern California (Marcus 2018, 1). By 1938, and speaking of psychoanalysts who fled Europe, Anna Freud³ would call this great European dispersal and settlement of Jewish artists, intellectuals, children, and psychoanalysts, as “a new kind of diaspora.”

Schoenberg would spend the rest of his life in California. There he would continue to compose music that stands as document to his times and vision. To support himself and his

³ Riccardo Steiner. (2000). *It is a new kind of diaspora: Explorations in the sociopolitical and cultural context of psychoanalysis*. Karnac Books.

family, Schoenberg took commissions to write music and taught at universities. He developed a new pedagogy for learning and composing. The Historian Kenneth Marcus (2018) in his wonderful book, *Schoenberg and Hollywood Modernism*, has documented with poignant restraint the tensions and conflicts of the mostly Jewish refugee artists.

For Schoenberg, how one becomes lonely had to do with losing the listening public. It was not due to losing love and adoration, which in many ways he did. The anguish had to do with the public turning their back on his work. People walked out of his concerts. He was accused of ruining music. Schoenberg may have felt he was losing recognition of the singular value of his imagination and talent. And still, he continued to compose.

In 1938, a year after Schoenberg wrote his essay on how one becomes lonely, the Society for Jewish Culture, a reform Los Angeles synagogue known as the Fairfax Temple, whose spiritual leader, Rabbi Sonderling, also a refugee from Germany, commissioned Schoenberg to compose a setting for the *Kol Nidre* prayer⁴ with speaker, chorus, and orchestra. Rabbi Sonderling had a hand in writing the narrative and this would be the only composition Schoenberg would write with a Rabbi but not the only Jewish music Schoenberg would compose⁵.

The Kol Nidre prayer, spoken in English, began:

The Kabbalah tells a legend: At the beginning God said: "LET THERE BE LIGHT."

Out of space a flame burst out.

God crushed that light to atoms.

Myriads of sparks are hidden in our world, but not all of us behold them.

⁴ <https://youtu.be/9TrUOLJZ15g>

A video of a performance of Schoenberg's composition for Kol Nidre prayer, [Synagogue, and year unknown?].

⁵ Other Jewish music composed by Schoenberg include: "A Survivor from Warsaw op.46" (1947) and the gigantic, unfinished opera, "Moses und Aron" (dated back to 1928 and left unfinished in 1951).

The composition was only performed once in Schoenberg's lifetime. It was not well received, and the historian Marcus (2018) writes: "Other than the problems inherent to the prayer, Schoenberg's version was simply too reformed for even the Reform Jews" (169). Marcus further suggests what Schoenberg met in composing: "It represented a formidable challenge: to adapt a religious text in a foreign tongue to a musical language that must express searching, affirmation, and forgiveness" (170).

Tikkun Olam [Repair the world]

Anna Freud and Melanie Klein proposed another facet of loneliness, more personal and less fraught but nonetheless poignant and laced with feelings of loss and mourning for times no longer. They were both in contact with the incoherent and the incompleteness of life. Klein's great contribution was with her theory of the composition of infantile life. She thought that even in our earliest life, we feel the wordless urge for reparation for wrongdoings and that gratitude follows from repair. Klein did not directly reference *Tikkun olam* or repair of the world, except that she built her theory of human development on our capacity for gratitude, reparation, forgiveness, and love. At least in our earliest lives, *Tikkun olam*, is our world. It is a world made from earliest our love for our mother and then for family life. As we become separate beings in growth, interests, and attachments, it is the world we hope will welcome us.

Another Jewish analyst also in exile was Hans Loewald. He spoke from another side of the life cycle. Loewald described mature relations of love through our desire for atonement, or what he thought of as "at one," where guilt and responsibility soften with atonement⁶. Loewald wrote, "The self, in its autonomy, is an atonement structure, a structure of reconciliation, and as such a supreme achievement" (394). If I follow Loewald, I can say that

⁶ Hans Loewald. "The waning of the Oedipus Complex (1978). *The Essential Loewald: Collected Papers and Monographs*. 384-404.

the self, because of its separateness and autonomy, is a structure of loneliness. And for this reason, we seek atonement.

Klein's last paper, written in 1963, turned to old age, and titled, "On the Sense of loneliness"⁷. She described loneliness as depressive anxiety, or her term for feelings of loss, remorse, and the pain of incompleteness. Klein wrote, "I have often referred to the fact that early emotional life is characterized by the recurrent experiences of losing and regaining" (304). But even when we feel more unified, there are traces of loneliness and worries of how good feelings can last. Paradoxically, Klein proposes the idea of a measure of resignation and taking pleasure from what remains. She wrote, "Resignation is bound up with tolerance and with the feeling that destructive impulses will not overwhelm love. . ." (310). Part of the tolerance involves acceptance of difficult feelings without recourse to harsh judgements and severe demands on the self and others.

Anna Freud cast her lot with the postwar world and her feelings of survival when she wrote "About losing and being lost" in 1953⁸. The paper was written after a breakdown she suffered at the end of World War II. Miss Freud was mourning the loss of her father, the deaths of many of her analyst friends, and the deaths of her three aunts, her father's elderly sisters who perished in Europe's concentration camps. Her own feelings of being lost may have also been mourning the loss of her country and her mother tongue.

Miss Freud mentions folklore when she turns to the topic of being haunted by ghosts and the figure of the nebbish, or lost soul. These are questions of presence and absence and losing and being lost also represent our own emotional impoverishment we feel when left

⁷ Melanie Klein. "On the Sense of Loneliness (1963). In *Envy and Gratitude and other works 1946-1963, vol. 4.* 300-313. London: Hogarth, 1975.

⁸ Anna Freud. "About losing and being lost (1953/1967). In *The Writings of Anna Freud, Vol. IV 1945-1956: Indications for Child Analysis and other papers.* 302-316. NY: International Universities Press.1973.

behind. Anna Freud describes their strange affectations with the figure of the chronic loser or the perpetual nebbish who cannot hold onto their possessions and who unconsciously act out, in their relation to their belongings, feelings of abandonment, then hostility, then guilt, and then sadness. The heart of her paper is on the work of mourning and how it is that we are affected by the losses of others near and far. The past when it can become history, Anna Freud wrote, gains significance in our memories. And we are not so far away from our Jewish commitment to remember, even remember loneliness and do so to permit our memory to sensitize our involvement in the world.

Hineni [I am here]

When I was preparing my talk on loneliness, a friend asked, “Are you lonely?” I suddenly became shy. I thought, there is so much loneliness wherever I look. Who am I to claim my loneliness? And while I could count all my activities, take pleasure with my deep relationships with my loving partner, and contact with my family far away, I could not explain my loneliness. It came to me that we do not need a reason for joining the human condition and feeling both far away from the world of others and close to how we hold the fragility our ties.

It could be that our loneliness is driven to announce our need for the care and love of others. It could be that this very human emotion can help us recognize the lives of others suffering from mass displacement, of closing of borders, of loss of human rights, and broken land treaties. We can recognize what stands before us now amplified by the dangers and tragedies of COVID pandemic. We can, perhaps, better understand the complexities of relations between war, inequalities, autocracy, racism, and anti-Semitism not only as the breakdown of civility and humanity. We can also acknowledge the violence of hatred through their effects on depression, anxiety, fear, anger, and loneliness.

Still, let us admit that the High Holidays bring great poignancy to themes of loneliness, for even as we are charged to be with one another and to publicly pray and confess, we are also obligated to be alone, reflect on our souls, and count our days with our memories. Even as the season brings us into new beginnings and asks that we begin once again, we are also called upon to turn back and recall our anger, our hostility, and our failings. One step toward the unknown, the other step back to what is too known but hardly admitted or ignored. And we need each other to do this work to make our days Jewish and to tell our stories of loss, remorse, repentance, forgiveness, atonement, reparation, and change.

As we mark the Jewish New Year we can reflect more deeply on the questions of our time: how do we listen to suffering? How do we receive the other? How do we listen to what is expressed but not yet understood? And how do we seek from those we know and do not know, new beginnings oriented to forgiveness, reparation, reconciliation, atonement, and the work of mourning?

Shanah Tovah and I wish you and yours a sweet New Year.