Yom Kippur and Being Connected

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I recently read an article in the Internet based Magazine "Psychology Today". It was written by the Swedish psychologist Guy Winch, who does research about loneliness, that nasty depressing feeling that affects close to an estimated 50% of humanity in a serious way. We all know that feeling lonely affects us emotionally; it makes us sad. But what is less known, research shows, is that it makes us see reality in a more negative light than necessary, including our relationships, our friends and family.

Believe it or not, it also has an impact on our bodies. It lowers our body temperature, we literally feel left in the cold! At the same time, it also raises our blood pressure and our cholesterol, thereby creating a higher risk of cardiovascular disease. Our immune system drops, leaving us more vulnerable to getting sick... In short, loneliness causes considerable psychological AND physical stress, even leading to a risk of early death by 14%, the same level as that of smoking cigarettes.
All this as the result of a lack of feeling connected.

Being connected is a deep need in all of us human beings. That's why the modern ways of communication were adopted all over the world adopted so easily. Through Facebook, Instagram and Skype, people want to be constantly connected to others anywhere on the globe, all the time.

Not that this level of connection is always of a deep and high quality, but the need in itself to feel connected to others, near and far, is innate to us, and to some extent actually healthy and necessary..
The need to feel connected is very easy to see with children. When my children were little, I remember playing hide and seek. I counted down, they would hide, and when I found them, being found for them was the most joyful thing.

This need is not only the case with humans. Animals that are kept alone without attention, become depressed and wither away just the same. They need to feel connected also in order to survive.

Did anyone ever get your goat? We all know what it means. It means that that person made us annoyed, or even angry. What where did the expression come from? There are a few different theories, but most opinions hold that it comes from the world of race horses. A race horse has to be in optimal condition for it to win a race. Horses are kept in their box, and a horse that is alone becomes nervous and anxious, which is of course counterproductive. So in order calm the horse down, they would put a goat with it in the box, to keep it company. If you wanted to undermine the condition of your competitor's horse, you could sneak into the stable and 'get his goat'. An interesting illustration of how horse racers have realized for a long time that loneliness affects animals as well.

But it doesn't stop there. Plants grow better when around other plants. (Some people talk to them, to make them grow better, but I am not sure what Maimonides would say about that).

Even micro-organisms such as bacteria cannot survive on their own. There is no need to fear the invasion of one single harmful bacteria in your body. It simply will not survive without the company of others surrounding it. Very soon it will go into apoptosis; a fancy word for spontaneous self-destruction, in other words suicide. That is what loneliness does. This shows why solitary confinement is actually one of the cruelest punishments imaginable.

This all sounds pretty depressing perhaps, but I believe that knowing this can teach us an important lesson for Yom Kippur. In English we translate Yom Kippur as “Day of Atonement”. Interestingly, in Dutch, it is called 'Grote Verzoendag', which means the “Great Day of Reconciliation”.
This is profound. There is a rift, a separation, between God and man, between people among themselves, which causes a disconnect; loneliness.
And today we are offered a chance for reconciliation, to repair that disconnect.

During our prayers and introspection, we stand next to each other and feel connected. On this day we reach out again to God and our fellow neighbors. Starting today, we should seriously work on just that, bridge the separation, reach out to others, show them, make them feel that they belong, that we all belong to each other.

One last thing: At the end of tonight's prayers, we will hear the Shofar. The significance is extremely powerful.
There have been musical instruments around throughout history, some of them mentioned in our Bible.
But all instruments have been developed and changed throughout the years.
Our harp doesn't sound like David's harp did.
Our lyre is not the ancient the same as the ancient lyre.
We do not know what the Biblical timbrels and cymbals sounded like.

But the Shofar has not been changed.
When we hear the Shofar, we hear the same sound as our people did in the days of Moses. It enters our ears and brains the same way as it did for Samuel and David. That same sound rings timelessly through the ages of the First and Second Temple, the time of Bar Kokhba, the era of Maimonides. It is heard in faraway communities from Amsterdam to Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, Persia, Cochin. Even in Poland and Lithuania! We can hear the same sound that our people heard in every time and land.

The sound of the Shofar, and our prayers, can lift up our souls above our limited time and space and connect us with God and with our entire people, anytime, anywhere.