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It was not until my third year of observing the mitzvoth that I read Rav Soloveitchik's seminal essay "The Lonely Man of Faith," and it was not until I read this essay that I had ever articulated why I had become a religious Jew. The Rav writes, in the first few sentences of his piece:

"I am lonely. Let me emphasize, however, that by stating "I am lonely" I do not intend to convey to you the impression that I am alone. I, thank God, do enjoy the love and friendship of many. I meet people, talk, preach, argue, reason; I am surrounded by comrades and acquaintances. And yet, companionship and friendship do not alleviate the passional experience of loneliness which trails me constantly."

To these very personal words, I can only say: Rebbi, I relate. I was an only child until I was 15, the golden (I am blond) immigrant daughter of immigrant parents (my parents and I arrived in the United States from the Soviet Union in 1989). I was a child raised on the nutritious stew of the American Dream and the delicacies of daily conversations about philosophy, politics, and the meaning of life. Armed with introspection and the desire to fit into my new country—young enough to be completely American, yet old enough to remember being different—how could I NOT be lonely?

And so this loneliness carried me through my entire life. I was always gregarious, outgoing, and had many friends. I liked to go out to cultural events, attend parties, and play sports. I see now, and probably had some sense of this before, that these were what I now call loneliness—diversions. It is not that my many life-filling activities didn't have value in and of themselves. I love my friends dearly, and the discipline I learned from being an athlete has helped me immeasurably in my life. However, at the depths of my soul, I perpetually wanted to connect, to remove from myself the feeling of "other," to meld my existence into another existence so that I could alleviate the constant reminder that I was in some way not "unified."

As a philosophy major at Stanford, my favorite philosophers were not the modern philosophers of mind, linguistics, and logic, but rather the old-school Continental philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and other Existentialists. I sought philosophers with whom I could share my loneliness—and who had figured out ways to alleviate it. In my studies of philosophy, I sought out a prescription for understanding my purpose rather than a precise description of the world.

It was in college that my loneliness grew. My solution: I had to ramp up my loneliness-diversion tactics. I joined a sorority, went out several nights a week (with, of course, ample amounts of distilled liquors), competed as an NCAA athlete, and threw myself into the amazing extracurricular life that Stanford had to offer. Moreover, I turned with more vigor to the great philosophical minds in my academic work and tried to connect with my professors to see if they

could help resolve the loneliness dilemma. But the loneliness persisted, hungry from a lack of nutrition; what I was feeding it with my diversion tactics was merely junk food.

In my senior year of college, I took a wonderful class called “Jewish Philosophy” with the now Dean of Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), Arnie Eisen. In his class, we read Buber, Rosenzweig, Rav Kook, Mordechai Kaplan, Derrida, and, of course, the Rav. As I read through these thinkers, I began to feel that many of these Jewish thinkers experienced my same loneliness, and their works were written as manifestos of the struggle to understand it. Buber’s *I and Thou* was a poignant and succinct expression of the human search for connection and relationship. Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* created an empowered space for the searching Jew in a world where he is outnumbered.

When I graduated, I decided to go to Israel. I wanted to learn more about Judaism because I wanted to know I was not alone in my loneliness, and that the loneliness had a purpose. I did not want to be an Orthodox Jew (having met almost none in my 22 years of life); rather, I wanted to learn Truth; I wanted a Guide. I wanted an end to relativity, which after four years of a liberal arts education, only left me lonelier.

I spent nearly two months in Israel trying to find clarity, first at a Conservative yeshiva in Jerusalem, then at Pardes, and finally at Aish HaTorah.

It was only at Aish HaTorah that I felt some sense of satisfaction. Aish gave me answers. They were simple, entirely not nuanced, and very philosophically biased toward their own view of Judaism. I did not know that then, and taking what they taught as gospel (quite literally), I was able to form a coherent picture of why I was here and what my purpose in life ought to be. I understood my loneliness as a sense of existential purposelessness; somehow I had always known that becoming a lawyer, epicure, intellect, and even wife, mother, and friend, was not enough. No one had ever explained to me that there could be more (see, for example, Sartre, who explained that existence precedes essence, and the essence is what you make of it; but what do I make of it?).

I saw from Aish’s “power hour” lectures that Judaism solved all of my most pressing existential questions. My life’s purpose is to connect to God, and to do so, I must learn His Word and do the deeds He has commanded me to do. Life now centered around connection (with God and with others) and its purpose was perfecting the self. The reframing of life in this manner somewhat alleviated my loneliness. I was not alone; God was there with me. It also gave me a sense of purpose and control, and the knowledge of what my convictions were, so that I may have the joy of standing up for them. (And that these convictions were rooted in something immutable and perfect.)

Very quickly I realized that the one-size-fits-all form of Judaism presented at Aish HaTorah became anathema to both my personality and my essence. Nonetheless, the underlying principles of belief in God and a relationship with him built through deed remained as an anchor when I began to explore my own place in Judaism.

This is when I read the Rav. Amidst the references to “loneliness” (he understands me!) was also a view of a human being as the empowered creator, given gifts to change both one’s self and the surrounding world, and the right to find joy in using those gifts (rather than seeing them as some form of necessary evil in order to get back to the “spiritual” stuff in life). To this I related! I am lonely, yes, in my quest for connection to God and to others and in finding my own role in contributing to this world. But I can rejoice in the relationships I’ve acquired and take pride in my achievements, and take solace in that my loneliness is shared by others and softened by God’s love.

To say I no longer feel lonely would be to say that I drank the Kool-Aid offered by some *kiruv* organizations. Nonetheless, I now have a relationship with an entity that is always there and is filled with love. And I am busied out of my loneliness by the community I must care for, and the world (and self) that I must change.