Isolation, Loneliness...a Friendly Chat

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A suggestion for making Jews feel welcome:

create space for them in some Jewish spaces

Police officials and mental health professionals warn that the twin plagues of isolation and loneliness are a growing problem in many countries. They offer many solutions to prevent, minimize and treat the problems.

Here is another one, earmarked for the Jewish community.

But, first …

Are you shy? Are you introverted? When out in public, or in a new setting where you don't know anyone, do you keep to yourself, in silence? Do you find it hard to strike up conversations with strangers?

Now there is a place for you. Actually, several places. Wooden benches.

They're called "chat benches" (or "chatty benches") in public venues, identified, by posted or attached signs, as places for people to engage in conversation, indicating that people ensconced there are "Happy to chat" or that a person can "Sit here if you don't mind someone stopping to say hello!" "Let's chat!" say some signs.

Not a good place for misanthropes or actual loners.

The benches – usually wooden, sometimes made of concrete -- are found mostly in parks and plazas and gardens, hospitals and town squares and university campuses. Suggested: cemeteries. Hospitals would be a good idea.

And one is located on the grounds of a JCC in Europe, a practice that other Jewish institutions would be wise to emulate.

Sometimes the signs, typically arrayed in distinctive, bright colors, are laminated and then mounted on the benches; sometimes the message that conveys an openness to talking are printed in big letters on the bench itself, or engraved there. In any case, anyone positioning him- or herself on one of the benches is saying, without his or her own words, that any by-passer can feel free to start a discourse. Sometimes, the signs are posted on extant benches; sometimes, local organizations provide their own dedicated ones for purposes of conviviality.

Sometimes, volunteers sit nearby, ready to speak with the reticent.

It's a planned – and inexpensive; how much does a homemade, laminated sign cost? -- way to induce spontaneity, giving official, but tacit, permission for palaver to ensue.

The sit-and-talk initiative was introduced in Cardiff, the capital of Wales, in 2019 by Allison Owen-Jones, a retired college professor, as a means to overcome a) the loneliness of people sitting by themselves, and b) the hesitancy of well-meaning folks to approach them. She got the idea after walking her dog in Cardiff's Roath Park, spotting an elderly man who was sitting alone on a bench for 40 minutes; nobody – strollers, joggers, parents pushing baby carriages, teenagers with headphones – stopped to say "hello." Including Owen-Jones; she felt it would look improper if she started talking with someone she did not know. "There was some of that British reserve that made me think he may think me weird if I sat next to him."

"Wouldn't it be nice," she told the BBC, "if there was a simple way to let people know you're open to a chat, I thought."

It would not look weird, she decided, if a sign on a bench conveyed that message. She went home and printed out a placard that stated "Happy to chat bench. Sit here if you don't mind someone stopping to say hello." Then she went back to the park and tied the sign, with a piece of string, to the bench where the old man had been sitting."

Her idea caught on. It "created a buzz," BBC reported. People who saw the sign started talking with each other, often with total strangers – often about the sign itself. Those sitting on the bench no longer sat alone, in silence. Impressed, the Cardiff police supported the innovation, which has the support of many police departments and local governments and mental health organizations.

One drawback of the chat benches in the UK, Owen-Jones says, is winter, when they are “used less … because it’s wet and windy and cold.”

Owen-Jones’ idea quickly spread, in the UK and beyond.

Now you can find chat benches, at latest count, around the world (the signs offered in the local language): in the U.S. and Canada; in Europe: Russia, Ukraine, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Sweden; in Africa: Zimbabwe, Botswana, Kenya, Malawi and Tanzania; and in Jordan, India, Qatar, Singapore, South Korea, Vietnam, New Zealand and Australia.

Poland’s is located in the garden – open to the public – of the Jewish Community Centre (founded by then-Prince Charles of England) in Krakow, a historic city with a small Jewish community, including many Holocaust survivors. For the convenience of the men and women siting there, the sign, in green and gray, is printed in Polish, English and Hebrew.

The JCC set up the bench, the first one in Poland, on its premises, with Owen-Jones giving a TEDx lecture there on her innovation.

“We are happy that the JCC’s garden is now home to Krakow’s first Happy to Chat Bench,” says Jonathan Ornstein, the JCC’s executive director. “After such a long time of separation and social distancing [during Covid], we hope that this project will become another motivation for making new friends in a time when open dialogue is becoming more and more important,”

Israel has something along these community-building and loneliness-reducing lines. In Jaffa, south of Tel Aviv, Inbal Blech, owner of the Salon Jaffa nail salon in the city’s flea market, has established an informal Chat Bench that serves as an informal gathering spot and social hub for coffee and conversation among Jews and Palestinians with Israeli citizenship.

Such chat benches remove the onus of the often-unconventional nature of talking to a stranger … and there’s less chance that the person initiating the conversation will be looked at as someone creepy, with nefarious intentions.

This idea is particularly effective in Great Britain, because the Brits are known, generally, for their reserved nature.

Owen-Jones' son Cllr calls the signs an "opportunity to break down barriers. We are a nation of people who shy away from talking to strangers … British people as a whole, not just Welsh. So [a chat bench provides] that opportunity, that if someone does want to chat, someone will talk to them."

"The sign simply helps to break down the invisible social barriers that exist between strangers who find themselves sharing a common place," Tracey Grobbeler, a police community support officer in Avon, told CNN. "Simply stopping to say 'hello' to someone at the chat bench could make a huge difference to the vulnerable people in our communities and help to make life a little better for them."

They inspire give-and-take; dialogue, not soliloquy; listening as well as speaking. *The message: don't ignore your fellow human being who indicates a desire for connection.* A form of behavior that Jewish law facilitates: according to halacha, it is permitted to interrupt certain central prayers during davening to return a person's greeting, which prioritizes social respect (the other person's need) over formal ritual (your own need).

They transcend cultural barriers, finding a home in far-flung countries. Wherever there are lonely, isolated individuals. Everywhere they appear, according to experts quoted in media reports, the empty benches are apparently filling social – and sociability – needs of isolated people, particularly the elderly. As well as the homeless, and people with autism.

The necessity to reduce feelings of isolation, a constant challenge for architects and city planners, became more pronounced during the forced apartness of the Covid pandemic early in this decade.

Their purpose is not romance … but, anecdotal evidence suggests, those sort of relationships do result. And there are "love benches" in China designed specifically for this purpose.

Many people in the United States find themselves suffering from what U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has called an "epidemic of loneliness and isolation." He warns that personal isolation and poor social connections can lead to anxiety, depression, dementia and even elevated risks for cancer and other diseases. The New York Times reported that studies indicate that people are most lonely in early adulthood and older adulthood.

In addition, elevated levels of social isolation and depression in young adults have been linked to everything from social media to the shuttering of schools during

the COVID-19 pandemic, while older adults are more likely to be isolated due to retirement from work, the loss of a spouse or loved one or their own health issues.

An AARP study found that prolonged social isolation “can have the same risks as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. But unlike other ailments, the symptoms of loneliness can be hard to detect to everyone but the person having them.”

And this phenomenon is exacerbated, everywhere, by the growing ubiquity of hand-held electronics. *Why talk to someone next to you when you can check your feed on your SmartPhone or Facetime with someone you already know?*

Ditto among Jews.

Recent studies in the Jewish community have determined that more than half of Jewish adults (in Greater New York) reported some social isolation, and Jewish young adults were especially subject to loneliness during Covid, causing a high level of emotional and mental health difficulties. Another study, of Jewish seniors in New York City, found a significant correlation between loneliness and depression.

Enter, the chat benches. At least the theory behind them.

Why can’t the Jewish community take the spirit of the chat benches, and incorporate it in a Jewish way, in Jewish settings?

The need is there.

“Loneliness has been a feature of the human condition since the dawn of creation,” Rabbi Marc Katz writes in an essay on the My Jewish Learning website. “Loneliness may never fully go away, but there are ways to alleviate it.”

Rabbi Katz, spiritual leader of Temple Ner Tamid in Bloomfield, N.J., is the author of “The Heart of Loneliness: How Jewish Wisdom Can Help You Cope and Find Comfort” (Turner, 2016).

“There is a story in the Talmud [Berachot 5:a] about a famous healer, Rabbi Yochanan, who is one day healed by his friend Rabbi Chanina,” Rabbi Katz writes. “Hearing the story, the anonymous voice of the Talmud asks why Yochanan couldn’t just heal himself. Responding to its own question, the Talmud answers, ‘A captive cannot release himself from prison.’ So too, we cannot cure our own loneliness. To truly help ourselves, we must provide others with an avenue to see us and a pathway to show us their love.”

The “avenue” I propose is a selective, community-appropriate adaptation of the chat benches.

While they serve a primarily secular purpose, they could be effective, fostered by Jewish beliefs, in Jewish milieus:

- In synagogues, where visitors or newcomers to a congregation may find themselves sitting silently in an unfamiliar setting. Mark off a few rows, probably in the rear of the sanctuary, where people can sit and know that they will be approached by helpful congregants or shul officers.
- In day schools, where first-year students or transfers may feel awkward, having a hard time fitting in or meeting classmates. (Elementary schools in England already have something like this “Buddy Benches” or “Friendship Benches” in playgrounds for lonely students looking for a friend.)
- At summer camps, where cliques of veteran campers can make newbies feel excluded.
- At a family’s Shabbat table, especially when you’re a guest, and the host and hostess don’t have the time, or inclination, to introduce guests and Shabbat regulars to each other.
- In playgrounds in heavily Jewish neighborhoods where the parents and kids who come often, and don’t recognize – or necessarily reach out to – newcomers.
- At kosher supermarkets, or at supermarkets in areas that stock a lot of kosher goods. A new shopper won’t necessarily know what is available, or in what aisle it is located. The store can post a sign: “Ask questions here.” Any shopper can answer.
- Obviously, in Jewish neighborhoods, on streets where kosher restaurants and supermarkets, and Judaica shops are located. Signs on benches, in addition to English, could include words in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian or whatever tongue is common there. One caveat: an obviously-Jewish presence could invite anti-Semitic vandalism – but isn’t that already taking place to a distressing degree in this country?
- Wherever Jews tend to gather, and the introductions can be awkward.

Here’s my idea: a sign that will put people at ease … “Shalom Row.” “Baruch HaBa Table.” “Ask a fellow shopper a question corner.” And so on. Maybe just a symbol, readily identifiable by MOTs, like a stylized menorah (with a smile incorporated into the design) that marks that spot as a let’s-chat or an I-have-a-question area; the code for entrance to the Bikur Cholim rooms in many hospitals is similarly provided in Hebrew letters (i.e., numbers), which reduces the odds of

people who don’t belong there getting in.

“I love that idea,” Rabbi Katz says in an interview. “As long as they [the talking spaces] are clearly marked so people know what they are and they aren't the only seats, so people can opt in and out, then there shouldn't be any discomfort.”

These safe spaces will enable people to go to a Jewish setting for the first time and not feel alone. Or make it possible for someone who goes there often to be able, without feeling conspicuous, to befriend a first-timer.

All of this is better than seeking companionship at a bench, a neutral site, with strangers. In other words, we don’t need to look outside of our own community to make a connection – short-term, for an hour’s conversation; or longer-term, for a lasting friendship, or, at least, to gain or offer some vital information.

It’s the mirror image of biblical Sodom, where reaching out to a stranger risked violent retribution.

In shul, school, a shopping venue, etc., you’re with *amcha.* And if you’re the one who notices someone in need of conversation, it’s a chance to work on your *v’ahavta l’re’acha k’mocha midot*. It means that any congregant, any student, any camper, any shopper – not just the rabbi, the rosh yeshiva, the head counselor, etc. -- has to keep his or her eyes open for someone who needs a friendly face or a “hi!”

This attitude is aligned with the philosophy of the Reform movement’s decade-old “Audacious Hospitality” effort, Chabad’s Friendship Circle chapters, Colel Chabad’s “Gett Chesed” initiative, Jewish Family Services’ “Elder Connections” volunteer-pairing activities and “Project Shalom”: the Jewish Educator Portal’s inter-generational “Better Together” project; Federation-funded Senior Buddy programs, and the Moishe Houses for young adults in many communities.

These are all established, formal programs.

A sign on a synagogue row or at a school table would be less formal – just somewhere to sit or stand and be noticed.

The goal is the same: to bring people together. To establish zones where people can get out of their comfort zones.

Which does not always come naturally.

The idea makes sense, says Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, president of CLAL – The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. “Any opportunity to increase conversation is wild,” and useful, he says – “wherever it takes place.”

“Every tradition we have,” Rabbi Hirschfield says, “started as an innovation.”

Not particularly outgoing by nature, I always make an effort, in shul or at a meal, to engage with people who seem to be newcomers or particularly shy. Several years ago I attended a synagogue dinner in Queens, and, because I am divorced, was seated at a table with a bunch of strangers, also single. One guy at the table had even less social inclination than I do. A young woman at the table introduced herself, and I responded in kind; the other guy sat mute (unless he came only for a piece of chicken, I have no idea why he showed up); if I had not spoken to the young woman, she would likely have been offended by the guy’s silence.

I never saw the young woman again – but she did not feel slighted at the dinner.

That, at minimum, why the chat benches are effective.

That is why the openness offered by a chat bench is a good idea. And why Jewish tradition frowns on excessive silence.

And that is why I want to give the benches idea a Jewish twist.

My suggestions have a firm foundation, if not a direct parallel, in Jewish tradition, which stresses the value of reaching out to others. Greeting people is an outright *mitzvah.* As is showing interest in their welfare. It all begins with “Hello!” Or, in our case, “Shalom!”

While silence, at the correct times, is highly praised by the Sages, it is inappropriate, if not downright harmful, when someone’s feelings can be hurt by being ignored or overlooked. Or if you don’t take the chance to help someone. According to Rabbi Israel Salanter, founder of the Mussar movement, someone who sees someone alone is obligated to combat a person’s “spiritual poverty” – no matter the greeter’s mood at the moment.

According to *chazal,* active, pro-active steps to recognize someone’s need, and to reach out are a fundamental part of Judaism:

- **Isaiah 58** – The prophet, in G-d’s name, admonishes the people “not to ignore your own kin.”
- **Avot 4:15** – “Rabbi Mathia ben Harash said: ‘Upon meeting people, be the first to extend greeting.’”

- **Berachot 6:b** – One who is aware that another person is accustomed to greet him is not only obligated to return his greeting, but he must greet him first.
- **Berachot 17:a** – “They said about Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai that no one ever preceded him in issuing a greeting, not even a non-Jew in the marketplace.”

Why is this level of action needed? To be a mensch. To do a mitzvah. To make someone feel like part of your community … So that the first words that someone hears as a first-timer in a synagogue where he or she has not davened before, and innocently sits in an empty seat, are not “You’re in my seat.” Which has happened to me – and countless other people -- several times. *How welcome did I feel in that shul?*

Offering a welcome to a stranger, especially in a designated area, means that you remain comfortable in the knowledge that a) you’re not usurping someone’s *makom kavuah* territory, b) you’re likely to be approached by someone who can steer you to an unclaimed seat further up, offer you a siddur and Chumash, and, G-d-willing, invite you to a Shabbat meal, and c) you may end the day with a new entrée into an unfamiliar setting.

Ditto for finding somewhere in a school or camp or playground that is set aside for an altruistic purpose. In such a designated venue, there is little chance of embarrassment, because it’s the norm in that row or at that table for someone to ask for help, and for someone to offer it.

It’s as simple as “May I help you?” Or, “Is this your first time here?” Or, “Do you need a siddur or a Chumash?” Maybe, “Would you like a better seat?” Or, simply, “Shalom!”

In other words, just a few words. A “chat” does not have to be long. Just helpful.