



Strategic Solitude • Parshat Tazria

In *Parshat Tazria*, we read about the physically and psychologically painful skin disease known as *tzara'at*. While afflicted, the person's "clothes are to be torn, his hair disheveled, his upper lip is to be covered, and he is to call out, 'impure, impure'" (Lev. 13:45). This is in addition to needing to "dwell alone; outside of the camp is his dwelling place" (Lev. 13:46). The Sages, perhaps noticing the parallel to mourning rituals, likened someone afflicted with *tzara'at*, a *metzora*, to someone who is dead. Who is this person mourning? The *metzora* is mourning himself.

This stark association with death, writes Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz in his *Sichot Mussar*, is not made by the Sages because of the immense physical anguish experienced by the *metzora*. Rather it reflects the social isolation incurred while afflicted. The separation signifies a sense of social death.

As is evident from the medical literature, and as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks elaborated on in his first chapter of *Morality*, prolonged loneliness can be hazardous; it has negative ramifications for anxiety, depression, cardiovascular disease, and other serious illnesses. As social beings, we need meaningful connections to others for our psychological and physical health.

Yet, mere social associations on their own are not inherently beneficial. Toxic relationships can be just as harmful as isolation. *Tzara'at*, according to the Sages, was a punishment for *lashon hara*, evil speech. As a consequence of antagonistic social

behavior, the *metzora* is separated from social activity. "He separated between husband and wife and between one person and another" through his evil speech, "therefore he is punished with *tzara'at*, and the Torah says: "He shall dwell alone" (*Arkhin* 16b). The punishment fits the crime. In Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg's formulation, he "enacts his own toxic relationship with the world" (*The Hidden Order of Intimacy*). He stigmatized others, so he is, in turn, stigmatized. He used language to denigrate and label others, so his condition is reduced to one word: "impure."

This punishment does not just reflect a measure for measure enactment of Divine justice, but also entails restorative aspects, encouraging a process of penitence. While isolation and loneliness can be harmful, there are potential benefits to being alone. In their article "Leave Well Enough Alone? The Costs and Benefits of Solitude," Robert Coplan, John Zelenski, and Julie Bowker review the literature and identify self-reflection, self-exploration, self-renewal, stress reduction, and creativity as positive outcomes that emerge from solitude. There are spiritual benefits as well. Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam dedicates the thirteenth and final chapter of his *Guide to Serving God* to the essentiality of solitude for encountering God. This behavior, known as *hitbodedut* – withdrawing into one's own company and contemplation - was accentuated by Jewish mystics as fundamental for cultivating an inner spiritual life.

The *metzora* is afforded the opportunity to self-

reflect, introspect, and ultimately restore a positive attitude towards others. It was the task of the *metzora* to capitalize on the solitude for repentance and self-transformation. He needed to uncover his character flaws and abandon his hostile and antisocial view of others. Through his loneliness and isolation, he will hopefully long for a second chance to foster caring and compassionate relationships.

A determinative factor, according to a recent study by Netta Weinstein and colleagues, as to whether solitude is psychologically beneficial or harmful, is if it is autonomously chosen (“Balance Between Solitude and Socializing”). Deliberate decisions to disconnect from the social world allow us to

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benefit positively. Perhaps before contracting *tzara’at*, the *metzora* would have benefited from autonomously choosing strategic solitude. If only he would have taken a step back from his growingly unhealthy social interactions to reflect before they turned toxic, he could have avoided the social harm he instigated.

From this perspective, solitude is both the punishment and the prophylactic strategy to avoid the punishment. If we proactively choose restorative solitude to reflect on our spiritual and social values, we will be able to cultivate and maintain more healthy, supportive, and nurturing relationships.

Character Challenge: Dedicate some time alone for strategic solitude in order to reflect on your relationships. Think about how you can positively enhance your connection to others and to God.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “I believe that isolation contains, within it, spiritual possibilities. We can use it to deepen our spirituality. We can read the book of Psalms, re-engaging with some of the greatest religious poetry the world has ever known. We can pray more deeply from the heart. And we can find solace in the stories of Moses and others who had moments of despair but who came through them, their faith strengthened by their intense encounter with the Divine. It is when we feel most alone that we discover that we are not alone, ‘for You are with me’” (“Loneliness and Faith”, *Covenant & Conversation*).