

## Tazria-Metzora, Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener

Loneliness is not only painful -- it's dangerous. A good deal of scientific literature has detailed the various physical maladies that can result from a prolonged sense of loneliness, not to mention the deleterious mental health effects. As both a general kindness as well as a potential life saving intervention, Jews have an obligation to proactively reach out to their neighbors in order to mitigate the isolation of others. And yet, despite our best communal efforts, we will inevitably fall short, and many of us continue to face the pain of existential loneliness, much in the way the quarantined Metzora may have felt.

The Torah's depiction of the state of the Metzora is interesting. After the Metzora is banished from the Jewish camp, the Torah describes (Vayikra 13:46) that he must sit "Badad" -- "alone" in isolation. Although the term "Badad" is rarely used in the Torah, it is noteworthy that the very same term appears at the end of the Torah in a starkly different fashion (Devarim 32:2): "Hashem Badad Yanchenu V'ein Imo El Neichar" -- "Hashem alone leads them (the Jewish people), and there is no foreign power involved." Here, as opposed to denoting the despondency of loneliness, "Badad" affectionately describes the intimate closeness of Hashem and His people, as He leads them "alone" through the wilderness, without the intrusion of anyone or anything else. Perhaps this strikingly different usage of the same term serves to highlight the fact that isolation can be experienced in two very different ways. When a person experiences isolation in a G-dless world, the loneliness can become devastating and debilitating. But when a person or nation feels G-d's constant loving presence in his or her life, isolation has the potential to serve as an opportunity for Divine intimacy and love.

One of the most important goals of Judaism is to maintain a constant sense of living in the presence of a truly loving G-d. Such an awareness can change everything in a person's life. It is perhaps for this reason that Rabbi Moshe Isserles (the "Rama") introduces his magnum opus commentary on the Code of Jewish Law, Shulchan Aruch, (OC 1:1) identifying the verse from Tehillim (Psalm 16) "I set Hashem before me always" as "a major principle of Torah," implying that a central goal of our Halachic observance is to cultivate awareness of the imminent presence of G-d constantly. One hundred times each day, we proclaim "Baruch Attah Hashem...", "Blessed are *You* Hashem" in second person direct address, to reawaken our attention to the foundational truth that You are right here with me. Too often, our Berachot become acts of rote chanting as opposed to experiences of loving connection and interaction.

King David, who experienced unspeakable pain and loss in his life, sang (Psalm 23) "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." His ability to endure and persevere was only possible due to his constant awareness that "You are with me" -- literally. Not just at the joyous events and celebrations, but also -- perhaps even more directly -- during the times of loneliness and despair. Indeed, our tradition teaches that Hashem is actually most palpably present among those who are in pain, sharing in their pain with them, as the Talmud teaches (Shabbat 12) that the Divine Presence rests above the head of a sick person. This is consistent with Hashem's statement in Tehillim (Psalm 91) that "Imo Anochi B'Tzarah" -- "I am with him (even) in his suffering," or Isaiah's simile of Hashem to a

mother comforting her child who is in pain (66:13), among countless others. While there may be many moments in life when one cannot understand Hashem's ways, we know He is always here.

And so, the "hitbodedut" of the Metzora and the "hitbodedut" of Hashem with the Jewish people remind us that although isolation can breed loneliness, it can also provide an opportunity to more deeply experience Divine love and closeness without distraction. During the ongoing loneliness that many of us feel, perhaps we can find some moments of comfort by returning to this most sacred of truths. Whether we are reciting Berachot, singing alone at yet another Shabbat table set for one, or lying awake in bed at three in the morning, let us try to truly experience the awareness that we are never actually alone, and to recall just how deeply beloved we will always be.