



April 11, 2024

Dear Friends,

It's day #188 since October 7th.

Last Sunday night, April 7th, was one of the most memorable evenings I've ever experienced. With the assistance of our events and marketing departments and the support of Beren Student Government and an anonymous donor, the Sacks-Herenstein Center and YU's Office of Student Life hosted an incredible night of prayer and unity with Jon and Rachel Goldberg-Polin, whose son Hersh has been held hostage in Gaza since October 7th. We also heard the incredible miracle story of freed hostage Louis Har who was rescued this past February 12; he joined us on stage with some of his family. There were profound emotional highs and lows as we listened, learned and sang together.

Rachel shared some of her thoughts the day after, and I asked her permission to share her observations.

*The program was profoundly powerful and uplifting for us. Your students are exemplary. They are the best of the best of our young Jewish 'gedolim' and 'gedolot' of tomorrow. I felt privileged to be in that room with all those outstandingly committed and compassionate students, teachers and rabbaim. We were beyond impressed with all the students who shared what they have taken upon themselves to do for Israel and the hostages' plight in particular...Please keep davening for Hersh ben Perel Chana to stay strong, survive and to come to us alive and k'heref ayin. May all the hostages come home NOW, and may our brave soldiers return in safety and peace. May*

*we merit to hear bsorot tovot and may this new month bring the yshuot we have been crying out for...tonight.*

We'd like to share two powerful short videos produced for the program and then the recording of the entire event with you here.

- [An Evening of Unity, Solidarity and Song](#) (Full Recording)
- [Bring them Home Now](#)
- [The Miraculous Rescue of Louis Har](#)

We'd also like to invite you to an evening of online learning this coming Tuesday night in preparation for Passover, integrating the thought of Rabbi Sacks with our support of Israel in our Seder conversations. See details below. Next Thursday be on the lookout for a special Haggadah of Hope attachment here and in NYC-area Jewish newspapers with Israel insights for your Seder.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Erica

---

---



## Tazria 5784

### Strategic Solitude

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 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*).

[Click here to subscribe to the Weekly Parsha Email](#)

Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and visit [our site](#).

You are subscribed to receive messages from the Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership.

You can manage your subscription through the [Manage My Subscription form](#).

Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership  
500 West 185th Street  
New York, NY 10033

[Unsubscribe](#)