

The Kohen shall go forth to the outside of the camp; the Kohen shall look, and behold: the tzaraas affliction has been healed from the metzora. (14:3)

The atonement of the *metzora* does not occur overnight. He must spend time in quarantine, away from people, alone with himself, so that he can reflect on his misdeeds. He was better than others – or so he thought. His haughtiness bred contempt for others – because, after all, he was better than they were. Being alone allows him the opportunity to realize how much “better” he really is. As soon as he comes full circle and comes down from his lofty perch, he is ready for atonement. The spiritual healing process has begun. The three-stage process of purification may now begin.

Being alone will affect a person in that manner. There are various forms of loneliness. We fear being alone, but the greatest loneliness is not the loneliness of solitude. There are those who live within the most thriving communities, in the midst of congregations of happy, friendly people, yet they are lonelier than physical or psychological hermits who are at peace dwelling amongst their own thoughts. The physical number of people that we see on a regular basis has little correlation with our loneliness. It is the companion of our thoughts and the warmth of our hearts towards the things and the people with which we come in contact that determines the loneliness that we feel. In other words, it all depends on our perspective on life. Someone who is bitter will remain lonely, regardless of the multitudes of people who surround him. One who is a happy person is never alone. He is surrounded by his thoughts and the warm feelings in his heart.

Some of us thrive on friendship and people – even if, at times, they might be insincere, because, in our minds, it makes us feel important, needed. A brilliant secular poet writes of sailing from Liverpool, England to the United States. Sadly, he had nobody to see him off, so he gave a sixpence to a little urchin boy playing on the docks and asked him that, in return, he was to stand by the dock and wave his kerchief to him until the ship was in midstream. Why did he do this? If he had to pay for the “friendship,” was it not self-defeating?

It was the ache of loneliness. The ship with hundreds of passengers was setting sail. Everyone had someone who cared about him. This poet had no one. So he grabbed the opportunity for mercenary friendship because, ultimately, it was better than nothing. Indeed, he later remarked, “I had my six-penny worth.”

There is loneliness that comes with age. An elderly man once complained to his *rav*, “My children are good to me. I know that they love me, but, after all is said and done, I am a problem to them. I would like to talk intimately to them, share my heart, but when I make the attempt, I can see that they have no clue. They do not understand what I am going through. I have known periods of loneliness throughout my life, but never more keenly than now.”

An elderly man dropped in at a convention. Two younger men were seated at a table having coffee

together. The man walked over to their table and said, "I do not know either of you, and you obviously do not know me either. Will you, nonetheless, allow me to sit at the table with you and join in your conversation? You see, I am so lonely. I am over ninety years old and I know no one, and I want to talk to somebody."

Veritably, man cannot fulfill himself in a lonely existence. Isolation deprives the individual of emotional and even spiritual growth. We must participate in helping and sharing with others. We mature and develop by responding to the needs of others. As we enlarge the scope of our concern, we include others in our circle of caring, thereby adding a new dimension to our lives. When we think only of ourselves, our problems seem to be much larger, as bitterness and depression set in. When a lighthouse keeper on a deserted island was asked whether he was lonesome, he replied, "Not since I saved my first person from drowning." Loneliness is a malaise one overcomes by cultivating caring for – and involvement with – others. Generating and harboring bitterness only magnifies the problem.

In truth, we are never alone. A Jew who has faith in Hashem knows that he is not alone. Indeed, there is no loneliness so great, so absolute, so diminishing, as the loneliness of a person who feels he cannot call out to Hashem. We may be able to surround ourselves with materialism, with friends, with family, but, if when we pray to Hashem we do not have the confidence that we are being heard, we are by far the loneliest people. *Emunah*, faith, is the most soothing balm for the ache of being alone. One who believes knows that he can call on Hashem 24/7. A young man would call his *Bubby* daily to check up on her out of a sense of *achrayus*, responsibility, and love. She was blessed with a large cadre of grandchildren who took turns visiting her and attending to her needs. Therefore, whenever he called, it was another grandchild who usually picked up the phone to answer the call. One day, he called, and his grandmother answered the phone. Startled, he asked, "*Bubby*, are you alone?" She replied, "Dear child, I am never alone." When one feels the companionship of Hashem, he has solved his problem; he has discovered the ultimate response to loneliness.

This is the spiritual metamorphosis that the *metzora* experiences. As he sits alone in quarantine, he realizes that his personal issues led to his arrogance and slander. The bitterness that seethed within him prompted him to lash out at others. His punishment is to be alone, to mull over his predicament, its origins and solution. The solitude allows him to think, to become acquainted with himself – the real "him" and to seek out Hashem. The great *Chassidic* Masters encourage us to apportion a specific amount of time when we can be alone – not lonely – but alone: to think; to contemplate, to learn to enjoy the solitude. While loneliness hurts – solitude helps. We learn to live with ourselves. As the *metzora* learns to live with himself, he will also learn to live with others. Then he has been healed.