



## 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 to someone who is dead. Who is this person mourning? The afflicted is mourning himself.

This stark association with death, writes Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz in his book *Mishkan*, is not made by the Sages because of the immense physical anguish experienced by the afflicted. 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 *Mishkan*, 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. According to the Sages, was a punishment for evil speech. As a consequence of antagonistic social

behavior, the afflicted 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 isolation, and the Torah says: "He shall dwell alone" (Lev. 13:46). The punishment fits the crime. In Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg's formulation, he "enacts his own toxic relationship with the world" (Lev. 13:46). 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 *Moreh Nevuchim* to the essentiality of solitude for encountering God. This behavior, known as *hitpa'arut* - withdrawing into one's own company and contemplation - was accentuated by Jewish mystics as fundamental for cultivating an inner spiritual life.

The afflicted is afforded the opportunity to self-

