



*On Being Alone*

*Rabbi David Haber*

First of all, I want to tell you how much I miss you. It's still weird talking to you only through a screen - even though I'm so grateful that we have this way of connecting.

With what limited means we have, we've taken care of each other this year, haven't we? For me, the primary points of contact with this community have been online teaching and phone calls - and I've always found, in those settings, that the healing power of human connection flows both ways. I threw myself into teaching this year, thinking that was the best way I could contribute, but I found myself nourished by a community of learners - your insights, your passion, your sensitivity.

And when I called you, I thought perhaps I could offer some comfort and support - but I always left the calls feeling comforted myself - by your honesty, by your humanity. And by your compassion - here I was, calling to check in on you, and inevitably, at some point, you would stop me and say, "And you, rabbi? How are you doing?" You were so kind.

And then some of you would venture to ask, "And how is... I mean... I know you're all alone. That must be difficult. How has that been?" And I'd usually brush it off, "Oh, I'm fine! Managing just fine, thanks, all things considered!"

But I want to tell you, today, a little bit about what it has been like being alone, living alone during this pseudo-quarantine, and spending most of my time, for half a year now, alone in my house.

I want to talk about it in part because I know there are a lot of you out there who have been alone during this time, and I want to lift up this experience of ours - a shout of solidarity to my brothers and sisters in solitude!

But I also want to talk about it because I learned things from that solitude, and because I think there's something important about being alone that matters for us all.

Because the answer, to the question, "How has it been, being alone during this time?" is that it's been hard. In many ways, yes, it's been really hard. But then, I heard from so many of you how hard it was to be in a house full of people, how hard it was to parent 24/7, or to be in a one-on-one relationship without any space. This time has been hard for all of us, in different ways.

But the answer to the question "How has it been, being alone during this time?" is also that it's been good. It's been really good, it's been surprising in lots of ways, and ultimately it's been transformative. And there, too, I know that all of our altered realities, in all their configurations, had profound lessons to teach us.

Because whatever home situation you found yourself in during this lockdown, boy, you were really in it! You were confronting it face-to-face. For some of you it was, “I am in this relationship - okay, yes, I am all the way in it.” For some of you, it was, I am raising children, that is what I am doing, all the time.” And for me, and for many of us, it was a stark and profound awareness, that, “I am alone. Here I am, all by myself. For a long time. What is *this* going to be like?”

And you know, at first, for me, it wasn't so bad at all. Coming straight from the increasing sense of panic that preceded our decision to go inside - that anxious wondering, every time we went out, not yet really knowing how to protect ourselves - when I finally bunkered down, it was a relief. I did my requisite 11pm catastrophe-shopping spree, so I had a freezer full of microwave meals, and a closet full of toilet paper. I was lucky to be able to work from home, so I set up my little work station in my dining room.

And so there I was, all alone with nowhere to go. I looked up at my bookshelf, and I realized suddenly that I had tons of time to read all those things I'd been meaning to read. I found some great classes online that I could use to work out from home. I had my Netflix and my Hulu to keep me company at night. And I was really okay... for a while.

And then, eventually... I just got lonely. In the beginning, we didn't know what the rules were so I wasn't even seeing my family outside (which I found ways to do later). And it's just hard not seeing *any other people*. Not just hard, it feels... unnatural. Contrary to our basic human nature.

And our Torah is very clear on this. Her central statement on aloneness comes right in the very beginning of Genesis, second chapter. God has just made the first human, from dirt and divine breath, and places this new being in the Garden of Eden, “to work the earth and take care of it.” And then God, as if regarding this creature for the first time and immediately understanding something fundamental, says:

**לא טוב היות האדם לבדו**

It's not good for a person to be alone.

And so, according to our sages, God splits that first person in two, so that each half has a companion.

It's not good for a person to be alone.

The great Spanish medieval commentator, the Ibn Ezra connects this verse to another one in Ecclesiastes that says, with a kind of startling simplicity:

**טובים השניים מן האחד**

Two are better than one.



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*Reddit: David Haider*

But my favorite commentary, the *Kli Yakar*, of 17th -century Prague, puts it more profoundly. It's not good for a person to be alone, he says:

Because a human being, by its very nature, has a greater need for Love and Togetherness (אהבה ואחדות) than any other living creature.

And I felt that need for love and togetherness, sharply, so many times over these last months. I felt lonely in a general way - I wanted to be together with other people, just hanging out - but I also felt that particular loneliness that comes with the awareness that I am not, at this moment, sharing my life with a partner, an עזר כנגדו. And honestly, I'm really okay with that, most of the time. Of course, there's all this social pressure to couple up, and Lord knows it's especially intense in the Jewish community... but I don't really care. I'm happy. I have this wonderful life, and I just haven't met someone I want to share it with yet.

But all alone, in my home for weeks and then months on end, yeah, I could really start to see how that would be awfully nice - someone to cook meals with, someone to watch Netflix with, someone to love.

It's not good for a person to be alone.

But then, of course, not all the challenges of solitude are tied to longing. Sometimes being alone is just boring. Oh, it's me again, doing the same things I always do. Going for another walk. Reading another book. There's only so much you can do to entertain yourself alone. No one person's company is endlessly interesting - and that includes your own.

And sometimes being alone was terrifying. When the protests began in the city, they started right near my house, I could hear them, and I wasn't sure what was going to happen. And then the President started talking about bringing Law and Order to this country, and sent the military to patrol the streets. And I was terrified that we were on the brink of a society unraveling. And I was all by myself.

In these moments I felt trapped, like I was in a cage. Couldn't leave the house. No one in here but me! And I felt that way again in these last two weeks, when the smoke from wildfires caused by climate change have kept us all trapped inside. When it feels like the world is falling apart outside, and you're all alone at home, it can be a real challenge to maintain sanity.

לא טוב היות האדם לבדו

It's not good for a person to be alone, לבדו

Not for too long, anyway. In some fundamental way, the Torah's right - it's just not good for a person to be alone.

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But it's not all bad, either. And that we learn from another classic moment of aloneness in the Book of Genesis, another לבדו.

ויותר יעקב לבדו

And Jacob remained alone...

Jacob is returning home, after twenty years, and to get there, he must confront his brother Esav, who once wished to kill him. Now, Jacob has not been alone much since he left home all those years ago. He had four wives, and twelve children at this point, and they lived in his father-in-law's house. And they all raised cows and donkeys and sheep and goats. Imagine that quarantine house!

But as he prepares for the encounter with Esav, he breaks down camp in the middle of the night and takes his family and everything they own across a river, and once he secures them, the Torah says, rather mysteriously:

ויותר יעקב לבדו, ויבק איש עמו עד עלות השחר

And Jacob remained alone, and a man wrestled with him, until the break of dawn.

A man? What man? Where did he come from? By tradition, we have come to call this figure an angel. Jacob wrestled with an angel, all night long, and was injured, but never defeated. The angel finally gives up and wants to go, but Jacob says, "I will not let you go until you bless me." And the angel says, "What is your name?" "Jacob." And the angel says this:

"Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel

**יִשְׂרָאֵל: כִּי שָׂרִית עִם אֱלֹהִים וְעִם אָנָשִׁים, וְתוֹכַל**

Israel - for you have struggled with God and with humanity, and you have prevailed."

Jacob, who had been surrounded by people for decades, was finally left alone, there in the night - and it was a long, hard night. He struggled; he wrestled with something difficult - something that wounded him even, but he made it, he prevailed, and he emerged with a new name.

Now a name is a big deal in the Torah. A name is meant to communicate the essence of a **thing**. And that was true for Jacob, called *Ya'akov* because he came out grabbing his brother's heel, the *Ekev*. And so Jacob was always a grabber - a cunning, scrappy man who went around acquiring, through sometimes devious schemes. And that man took him just so far. But that man cannot save him on this night.



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*Rebbitz Dvora Kasher*

And so, through his struggle, he finds a new name, a deeper understanding of his essence, of who he is meant to be in the world. *And to get to that understanding, he had to be alone*, to leave the self that everyone knew him by, and to see who he was all alone, in the dark of the night.

And I will tell you, that is the greatest gift that has come from being alone during this quarantine. I think I have come to know myself in a deeper way than I ever did before. These last 6 months have been, for many of us, the most intense period of self-discovery that we have ever experienced.

And yes, it has sometimes been lonely, and scary, and hard. But it has also been quiet, blissfully quiet. And in that quiet we have heard thoughts inside of us that we'd never detected before. We discovered parts of ourselves that we never knew existed.

Some of those discoveries were rather prosaic. So this is what I eat when I have to cook all my own meals. So this is when I nap when I have complete control of my time. So this is what my beard looks like when I no longer have to groom myself for the public square.

And then some discoveries have been more profound. So this is how I pray when I mostly pray alone, and when I really have things to pray for. So this is the amount of exercise I need every day or else I start to get anxious, or depressed. So these are the friends I really rely on, the ones I call when I just need to hear a voice I can trust.

But the greatest discoveries of all, I must admit, are ones that I cannot fully articulate. Something along the lines of: So this is how I feel. So this is what really matters to me. So this is who I am.

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Earlier this summer, I took a little vacation. It was much-needed, but...where do you go? It didn't seem wise to travel by plane, unless you had to. You can't just stay with friends. Everything is closed, shut down.

But one of the great treasures in my family is that back in the 60's, my grandfather built a cabin up in Mendocino county, an A-Frame in the middle of the woods. It's beautiful up there, that kind of raw, majestic Northern Californian beauty. Usually, though, you want to go with someone, someone to share it with. But I figured this was the best vacation plan I could come up with, so I decided to just go by myself.

And if I was alone in my house here in LA, I was going to be even more alone up there - remote, isolated. And you know, when I described it to friends, I always made it sound so nice: "A little cabin, nestled in the forest. Oh I can't wait!" But the truth was, I was a little anxious heading up

there. “What am I doing? Am I really going to just be by myself in the middle of a dark forest, night after night?” There’s something scary about being all alone.

But I finally got there, and I settled in, and soon enough I fell into a rhythm. I thought I was going to be so productive, get a lot of writing done, think deep thoughts. But I did nothing of the sort. I did nothing very much at all, really. Every morning, I got up, made some coffee, ate some cereal. Prayed, did a little yoga, read some books, went for a walk in the woods. In the evening I built a fire, made dinner, had some whiskey, maybe watched a movie I’d brought up - and went to bed.

And after a few days of that - just that - a simple thought began to emerge and take form in my brain. And I found myself saying it out loud, almost involuntarily, starting to repeat to myself like a kind of a mantra: “*This is who you are. This is who you are. This is who you are.*” You are enjoying this coffee. This is who you are. You are cold right now. This is who you are. You are walking here, between these trees, hearing the forest crunch beneath your feet. This is you. This is what your soul loves. This is who you are.

And for a week or so there, nothing else mattered, nothing else really existed. Not my status or my skills or my history, whether people loved me or hated me, what I was going to do with my life. It was just me up there. And that was okay. That was enough. It was actually wonderful just to be alone with myself.

And then, eventually, I started to miss you, to miss people. And so I came back out of the forest and began to head home. Because it’s not good for a person to be alone, for too long.

But it *is* good for a person to be alone, sometimes. I might even say necessary. Because there is some part of us, some deep part of us, that we can only come to know when we are left alone with ourselves.

Who was it that Jacob wrestled with that night? Most say it was an angel, a messenger from God. Some say it was a representation of his brother, a kind of spiritual prelude to the physical encounter he would have to face the next day. But my favorite midrash on this, in *Bereshit Rabbah* says the following:

Rabbi Chunya said: He appeared to Jacob in the image of a shepherd. He had sheep, just like Jacob had sheep. He had camels, just like Jacob had camels. He said to Jacob, “You pass over yours and then I’ll pass over mine.” (73:2)

רבי חוניא אמר נדמה לו בדמות רועה, לזה צאן ולזה צאן, לזה גמלים ולזה גמלים, אמר לו העבר את שלך ואחר כך אני מעביר את שלי.

The man was a shepherd, just like Jacob. The man had exactly what Jacob had. The man was getting ready to do exactly what Jacob was doing.

In other words, the man was Jacob himself. ויותר יעקב לבדו “*And Jacob remained, there alone.*” And he wrestled with himself until the break of dawn. And he struggled with parts of himself, and it hurt. But he made it through.

And that would mean that Jacob gave *himself* his new name. That would mean that Jacob, all alone in the middle of the night, suddenly understood something deep and true about who he was, who he’d always been, but had never been able to articulate until just this moment.

This is who you are. This is who you are.

And I think that this story is here for us in the Torah because this is a night we will all have to go through, sooner or later, if we are left alone with ourselves. This struggle - with God, with people, and most of all, with ourselves - this is a struggle we must go through if we are to know, to truly know, who we are, and how to name that self within.

And that is a big part of what we are doing here, what we are up to, during this sacred time of reflection. During these holidays, we are called on to take what is called a *Cheshbon HaNefesh* - an Accounting of the Self. And that is not just about making a list of our sins and our accomplishments, and then beating ourselves on the chest or patting ourselves on the back when appropriate. This is a time set aside for us to take *account* of ourselves, to come to know ourselves in a deeper way. To ask the question, who are you, really? What is your name? Not just the name that everyone calls you, but the name that comes up from within, the essence of yourself.

To hear that name, you will have to be alone. And it may not be alone in your cabin in the woods, or alone in your house, or even alone in the room. But over the course of these Ten Days of Awe, you are being invited to go by yourself, inside yourself, to be alone in the room of your mind, the room of your heart. To struggle with what you find, and to ask the question, “*Who is this in here? Who am I?*”

And in the quiet night of the soul, in that blessed forest of solitude, perhaps you will hear something you’ve never heard before, but something that you recognize as yourself. And you will call out your own name, your deepest truth.

And then you will spend the rest of the year, maybe the rest of your life, trying to figure out how to live that truth, back out there in the world, together again with the people you love.

Shana Tova.