



WOHL LEGACY

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

בהעלותך תש"ף
Beha'alotecha
5780

**Loneliness
and Faith**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Isolation contains spiritual possibilities



PARSHAT BEHA'ALOTECHA IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Beha'alotecha begins with the final preparations for the Israelites' journey from the Sinai desert to the Promised Land. God tells Aharon, the Kohen Gadol, how to light the Menorah in the ceremony for consecrating the Levites into their special role as protectors of everything holy.

Before starting the journey, Bnei Yisrael celebrate Pesach, one year after the Exodus itself. Those who are unable to celebrate it at its proper time are given the chance a month later (Pesach Sheini).

Then the story changes tone. The Israelites set out after their long stay in the Sinai desert, but almost immediately they start to complain. Moshe becomes frustrated and

depressed and prays to die. God tells him to find seventy elders who will help him with the challenges of leadership.

In the last scene of the parsha, Moshe's own sister and brother speak *Lashon Hara* (evil words) about him. Miriam is punished with the disease of *tzara'at*, and must be quarantined until she recovers. Moshe, who is described as the humblest of men, prays on her behalf. After waiting a week for Miriam to recover, the people move on together.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think Miriam's punishment for speaking Lashon Hara was isolation?



THE CORE IDEA

After a lengthy stay in the Sinai desert, the people are about to begin the second part of their journey. They are no longer travelling *from* but travelling *to*. They are no longer escaping from Egypt; they are journeying toward the Promised Land.

The people are counted. They are gathered, tribe by tribe, around the Mishkan, in marching order. Preparations are made to purify the camp. Silver trumpets are made and used to gather together the people and to give them the signal to move on. Finally the journey begins.

Then comes a big anti-climax. The people start complaining. Soon we read: *The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"* (Bamidbar 11:4-6).

The people seem to have forgotten that in Egypt they had been slaves, oppressed, their male children killed, and that they had cried out to be freed by God. They ate the bread of affliction and tasted bitterness, not meat and fish. As for their remark that they ate the food at no cost, it did cost them something: their liberty.

There was something monstrous about this behaviour of the people and it caused Moshe to have a kind of breakdown:

He asked the Lord, "Why have You brought this trouble on Your servant? What have I done to displease You that You put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give birth to them?... I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favour in Your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin." (Bamidbar 11:11-15)

This was the lowest point in Moshe's career. The Torah does not tell us directly what was happening to him, but we can work it out from God's reply. He tells him to appoint seventy elders who would share the burden of leadership. So we must assume that Moshe was suffering from lack of companionship. He had become the "lonely man of faith".

But what we must also remember is that it was this loneliness that allowed Moshe to develop a deeper relationship with God.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why is leadership often lonely?
2. Why can loneliness inspire us to turn to God?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Sometimes, in times of crisis, a sense of helplessness sets in. This feeling ran deep for so many during the COVID-19 pandemic, as millions of people around the globe were forced to isolate themselves in their own homes. Thomas Moore, a 99 year old former British Army officer (popularly known as Captain Tom) was desperate to do something to help, despite being forced into quarantine in his home. So he decided to raise much-needed funds for NHS Charities Together which supports the National Health Service and its heroic medical team who were risking their lives every day to look after the people of Britain. He set up a fundraising page online.

On 6 April 2020, Captain Tom held firmly onto his walking frame and began the challenge of walking 100 laps of his garden, hoping to raise £1,000 by his 100th birthday twenty-four days later. Word spread. The story was shared. Captain Tom could never have imagined how his story would capture the hearts of the British people. In just twenty-four days, he had raised over £32 million, from 1.5 million individual donations!

In honour of this tremendous achievement, and the inspiring model of goodness that he became for the British people and beyond, his 100th birthday was celebrated by the RAF and the British Army with flypasts over his home, and he received more than 150,000 birthday cards from the public. The Queen even honoured him with a knighthood.

The nation will forever remember how Captain Tom became Sir Tom, and proved that everyone can do their part to bring good and hope to the world, even from their own backyard.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Have you felt lonely and helpless during the period of lockdown?
2. How did Captain Tom deal with this?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Moshe was not the only person in Tanach who felt so alone that he prayed to die. So did Eliyahu when Izevel issued a warrant for his arrest and death after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 19:4). So did Yirmiyahu when the people repeatedly failed to heed his warnings (Yir. 20:14-18). So did Yonah when God forgave the people of Nineveh, seemingly making nonsense of his warning that in forty days the city would be destroyed (Yonah 4:1-3). The Prophets felt alone and unheard. They carried a heavy burden of solitude. They felt they could not go on. Few books explore this territory more profoundly than Tehillim. Time and again we hear King David's despair (for example Tehillim 6, 13, 22, and 130).

A similar phenomenon can be seen with leadership in modern times. Rav Kook, when he arrived in Israel, wrote, "There is no one, young or old, with whom I can share my thoughts, who is able to comprehend my viewpoint, and this wearies me greatly." Even more candid was the late Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. Near the beginning of his famous essay *The Lonely Man of Faith*, he writes, starkly: "I am lonely." He continues, "I am lonely because at times I feel rejected and

thrust away by everybody, not excluding my most intimate friends, and the words of the Psalmist, 'My father and my mother have forsaken me,' ring quite often in my ears like the plaintive cooing of the turtledove." This is extraordinary language.

At times of loneliness, I have found great solace in these passages. They told me I was not alone in feeling alone. Other people had been here before me.

Moshe, Eliyahu, Yirmiyahu, Yonah and David HaMelech were among the greatest spiritual leaders who ever lived. Such, though, is the psychological realism of Tanach that we are given a glimpse into their souls. They were outstanding individuals, but they were still human, not superhuman. Judaism consistently avoided one of the greatest temptations of religion: to blur the boundary between heaven and earth, turning heroes into gods or demigods. The most remarkable figures of Judaism's early history did not find their tasks easy. They never lost faith, but sometimes it was strained almost to breaking point. It is the uncompromising honesty of Tanach that makes it so compelling.

The psychological crises they experienced were understandable. They were undertaking almost impossible tasks. Moshe was trying to turn a generation forged in slavery into a free and responsible people. Eliyahu was one of the first Prophets to criticise kings. Yirmiyahu had to tell the people what they did not want to hear. Yonah had to face the fact that Divine forgiveness extends even to Israel's enemies and can overturn prophecies of doom. David had to wrestle with political, military and spiritual challenges as well as an unruly personal life.

By telling us of their strife of the spirit, Tanach is conveying something of immense consequence. In their isolation, loneliness, and deep despair, these figures cried out to God "from the depths," and God answered them. He did not make their lives easier. But He did help them feel they were not alone.

Their very loneliness brought them into an unparalleled closeness to God. In our parsha, in the next chapter, God Himself defended Moshe's honour against the slights of Miriam and Aharon. After wishing to die, Eliyahu encountered God on Mount Chorev in a "still, small voice." Yirmiyahu found the strength to continue to prophesy, and Yonah was given a lesson in compassion by God Himself. Separated from their contemporaries, they were united with God. They discovered the deep spirituality of solitude.

I write these words while most of the world is in a state of almost complete lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic. People are unable to gather. Children cannot go to school. Weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs and funerals are deprived of the crowds that would normally attend them. Synagogues are closed. Mourners are unable to say Kaddish. These are unprecedented times.

Many are feeling lonely, anxious, isolated, deprived of company. To help, Natan Sharansky put out a video describing how he endured his years of loneliness in the Soviet Gulag as a

prisoner of the KGB. From dozens of reports from those who endured it, including the late John McCain, solitary confinement is the most terrifying punishment of all. In the Torah, the first time the words "not good" appear are in the sentence "It is not good for man to be alone" (Bereishit 2:18).

But there are uses of adversity, and consolation in loneliness. When we feel alone, we are not alone, because the great heroes of the human spirit felt this way at times – Moshe, David, Eliyahu and Yonah. So did modern masters like Rav Kook and Rabbi Soloveitchik. It was precisely their loneliness that allowed them to develop a deeper relationship with God. Plumbing the depths, they reached the heights. They met God in the silence of the soul and felt themselves embraced.

This is not to minimise the shock of the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences. Yet we can gain courage from the many individuals, from biblical times through to more modern ones, who felt their isolation deeply but who reached out to God and found God reaching out to them.

I believe that isolation contains, within it, spiritual possibilities. We can use it to deepen our spirituality. We can read the book of Tehillim, 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 Moshe 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 God is with us.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

What is it about isolation that so often leads to spiritual and moral development?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

In our isolation, we have the opportunity to listen to our soul, to our mind, to our heart in a way that we don't have at other times because we are so busy interacting with other people. Perhaps also in our isolation, we can hear God's very quiet call... He is asking us to question, is there someone I should call? Is there someone I should help? Is there someone I should thank? Is there a prayer I should be saying? Is there a text I should be learning? Is there a mitzvah I should be doing?... Sometimes the really difficult times are the times of growth.

They don't seem so at the time. But when we look back, we see they were.

Rabbi Sacks on Vayikra in the age of the coronavirus pandemic



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think the people were so quick to complain, when they had directly experienced God's love, protection, and miracles?
2. Why have so many of our leaders, from Tanach times until today, experienced deep loneliness?
3. What opportunities for spiritual and moral growth have you had while being in lockdown?



IN A NUTSHELL

1. Speaking *Lashon Hara* attacks the core foundation of community – trust. So, for a certain amount of time, the guilty party must separate themselves from the community and go into isolation. They must spend time reflecting on their role in the community, and how they can redeem themselves and contribute positively towards it. This is somewhat connected to the main message of the *Covenant & Conversation* this week, which suggests that time in isolation can lead to spiritual and moral growth.

THE CORE IDEA

1. Leaders sometimes need to go against the popular feeling of the people, when they see that there is room for growth if the people will be pushed from their comfort zone. This can be an unpopular stand to take and can lead to deep loneliness. It is much easier to give the people what they want, even when the leader understands this is not what is best for them. It takes courage to take a stand, and stand alone, and lead. But this takes an emotional toll.
2. When we are alone, and have no one to turn to for comfort and support, the only Being available to provide these basic human needs is God. God is always there if we only look for Him, and look to connect and build a relationship with Him. An isolated, lonely person will find solace in developing a relationship with God. This will lead to spiritual and often moral development and growth.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. It is probable that most of us have felt this at one time or another over the past few weeks and months. Even a child in a vibrant and nurturing family will probably at some point have felt isolated from their friends, or family members they cannot be with. If possible, try and relate this to the loneliness and isolation Moshe must have experienced in the parsha when leading a rebellious and stubborn people on his own.
2. Captain Tom channelled his feelings of frustration and isolation into doing something that made an impact and helped others. So he raised money for the good of the whole country. This helped him feel connected to the rest of the country at a time when we were all separated from each other.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. When you feel alone in the world, isolated from those you love, or from society as a whole, there is no one to turn to. Except God, who is always available, waiting for all of His creation to search for Him. Isolation will often cause humans to turn to God and to develop a relationship with Him. It can also bring about a sense of helplessness which may, as in the case of the story in *It Once Happened*, lead a person to find a way to reach out from their isolation and connect to the rest of society, through activism and good deeds. This kind of positive social action creates moral development and self-growth, as well as inspiring others to give, help, connect and grow.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. It seems that the people very quickly forgot their traumatic past (this may be a psychological self-defence mechanism to protect them from the trauma), and they soon became used to their new reality – the protection of God, and provision of all needs. They took this for granted, and became ungrateful. For example, rather than marvel at the miracle of the manna, and feel blessed and grateful for it, they complained they were bored with it.
2. Each of the leaders given as an example of those who experienced loneliness and isolation had a unique reason for their feelings. However, what they all had in common was they had each taken an unpopular position that went against the common values of the times. Leadership can often be lonely and it takes courage to be a leader at times like this. It is human nature to take the easiest path, and it is the job of the leader to direct us onto the path that will lead to the most growth, even if it is a more difficult one.
3. This is a personal and open-ended question. Contemplating the answer provides a good opportunity to discuss with your family/students the ways in which they have grown over the last few weeks in lockdown. Have they learnt to appreciate the things they have in their life more? Have they tried to do acts of kindness for people they know or for strangers? Have they found more meaning in religious ritual or prayer? Have they found comfort in their faith in these difficult times? Perhaps you can go around the group and ask everyone for an example of a way they have grown during this time.