



JEWISH COMMENTARY

Sermons in Solitude: Jews of Faith Are Never Alone

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

ON THURSDAY, March 13, my synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City, announced it would not be holding services on Shabbat. To refrain from praying in a community is a traumatic moment for any house of worship. But for my community, the suspension of our communal Sabbath prayer due to the pandemic echoed down through history. Shearith Israel is the oldest Jewish congregation in America; tracing its origins to 23 souls that had landed in New Amsterdam, with a public synagogue first built in 1730, its members had joined one another in sanctifying the Sabbath for centuries. The last time Shearith Israel's sanctuary had been abandoned by its congregants was 1776, when the patriot members of the congregation had fled in advance of the British taking Manhattan. But the very same Jews formed a minyan in Philadelphia, and the public rituals continued apace.

Now, however, it was the minyan itself that had been rendered impossible.

I delivered a sermon on Friday afternoon—by

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conference call. What, I asked, does it mean to be joined, as a Jew, to others, precisely when we are forbidden from engaging with others? In my words to my community, I noted that on the Internet, many had been mentioning breakthroughs achieved by men of genius in solitude to suggest that forced aloneness might have unexpected advantages. After all, the argument went, Isaac Newton discovered the rules of calculus while in quarantine. But what interested me more, I said, was what I had learned about another insight achieved by Newton while in a period of solitude created by a plague: his conceptualization of gravity. A student described Newton's eureka moment:

In the year he retired again from Cambridge on account of the plague to his mother in Lincolnshire & whilst he was musing in a garden it came into his thought that the same power of gravity (which made an apple fall from the tree to the ground) was not limited to a certain distance from the earth but must extend much farther than was usually thought – Why not as high as the Moon said he to himself & if so that must influence her motion & perhaps retain her in her orbit...

In his solitude, Newton conceived of a gravitational bond that could exert its power over long distances—that could even span heaven and earth. It is, I suggested, a spiritual form of just such a bond that we now must discover, one that binds us to others and indeed binds those in Heaven and those on Earth. The Hebrew term for synagogue is *Beit Kneset*, a house of gathering, and it is called so because, in the rabbinic tradition, the phrase *Kneset Yisrael* refers to the mysterious bonds that connect Jews to one another. A synagogue is not merely a physical gathering of individuals, but rather, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explained, it reflects “an invisible *Kneset Yisrael*, which embraces not only contemporaries, but every Jew who has ever lived.”

The synagogue is meant to embody this bond, this connection to all Jews past and present. But there are other ways to experience it, and those other ways can have a singular power of their own. Anatoly Sharansky concludes his prison memoir by reflecting that at times, in the solitude of his cell, he felt more connected to his people than in the prosaic bustle of his newfound freedoms:

How to enjoy the vivid colors of freedom without losing the existential depth I felt in prison? How to absorb the many sounds of freedom without allowing them to jam the stirring call of the shofar that I heard so clearly in the punishment cell? And, most important, how, in all these thousands of meetings, handshakes, interviews, and speeches, to retain that unique feeling of the interconnection of human souls which I discovered in the Gulag?

Our challenge, I said, was to attempt a Newtonian insight, to find what Sharansky had felt: to ponder the meaning of relationships, and our bond as Jews with one another, until we were able to see each other in synagogue once again.

SEVERAL DAYS after my first sermon from solitude, I delivered a lecture on video about Rabbi Soloveitchik’s seminal work, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, from inside Shearith Israel. I had spoken there nearly every Shabbat for the prior seven years and on

many other occasions as well—only now I had no one physically in front of me. It is difficult to describe how disconcerting this was. The rabbinic speaker draws energy from his audience; in Orthodox communities, where electricity on Shabbat is eschewed, only people generate the electricity in the room.

I explained my great-uncle’s thesis, one I have previously outlined in these pages. The book of Genesis presents us in its first two chapters with two very different biblical accounts of the creation of man. In Genesis 1, humanity is created in the image of God, man

and woman and at the same time.

In contrast, in Genesis 2, Adam is created alone, from the finite dust of the earth, and has to sacrifice, to give of his own body, to provide for the creation of his companion. In Genesis 1, both man and woman are instructed by the Almighty to “fill the world and subdue it,” whereas in the second chapter, man is told to stay with God in the Garden of Eden.

We are, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested, both Adam 1 and 2. Created in the image of God, we seek dignified inventive existence. “Man of old,” he writes, “who could not fight disease and succumbed in multitudes to yellow fever or any other plague with degrading helplessness, could not lay claim to dignity. Only the man who builds hospitals, discovers therapeutic techniques, and saves lives is blessed with dignity.”

This, I noted, was very much at the heart of our endeavor in the age of the coronavirus. Yet like Adam and Eve in Genesis 2, we find true fellowship, true communion, with God and with others. And precisely because these very same scientists now tell us that part of the fight against this disease involves acts of isolating ourselves—including, quite often, from those we love—we find ourselves in a moment where we must ponder the nature of solitude.

Loneliness and aloneness, Rabbi Soloveitchik explained, are different phenomena. Contemporary Western man, Adam 1, is physically surrounded by people. But that does not mean that he has covenantal communion *with* people. Contemporary man goes to parties, bars, coffee shops, stores; he tweets with like-minded political partisans or Facebooks to his many thousands of “friends.” He is not alone. But he lacks true spiritual communion. And so, lonely he remains.

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Consider Starbucks. Its longtime CEO, Howard Schultz, explains in his autobiography that the company conducted focus groups to understand Starbucks's success. The groups all responded that "we go to Starbucks stores because of a social feeling." In other words, there appeared to be an esprit de corps to the entire café, allowing everyone to feel less alone, more together. But Schultz reports with puzzlement that "fewer than 10 percent of the people they observed in our stores at any given time actually ever talked to anybody. Most customers waited silently in line and spoke only to the cashier to order a drink."

Human beings have an innate need to be among others, but now we are seeing a kind of antisocial social mixing, when we are constantly in the general vicinity of people with whom we have no bond.

The only true remedy to loneliness is in a covenant, not only the covenant of marriage, but the larger covenant of faith. There, Rav Soloveitchik writes, "not only hands are joined, but experiences as well... one lonely soul finds another soul tormented by loneliness and solitude yet unqualifiedly committed."

Adam 2 finds Eve only because he is brought to her by God. In the utilitarian world of Adam 1, he concludes, "we may find collegiality, neighborliness, civility, or courtesy—but not friendship, which is the exclusive experience awarded by God to covenantal man, who is thus redeemed from his agonizing solitude."

Here is where the thesis gets deeper. If God is at the heart of human relationship, then because God is beyond human time, covenantal community extends across time as well. "Time, for the Jew," Rabbi Soloveitchik explained, "does not simply consist of fleeting, imperceptible moments. The Jew walks alongside Maimonides, listens to R. Akiva, senses the presence of [the Talmudic sages] Abaye and Raba. He rejoices with them, and shares in their sorrow....Both past and future become, in such circumstances, ever present realities." For us today, in a secular age, in a non-covenantal culture, this may be hard to imagine, but there are great individuals from our own lifetime who were sustained by this feeling of covenantal bonds that cut across space and time.

I made mention of my hero, Menachem Begin.

While in prison in his native Soviet Union in 1940, Begin was subjected to an extreme form of isolation by his Communist torturers in the secret-police division called the NKVD: He was forced to stare at a wall for 60 hours. Begin was so very alone; but even then he was not truly lonely. Through covenantal connection, he was transported to the most beloved moments in his life, as well as moments that were yet to come:

Even a point on a wall can conjure up again pictures that one has forgotten and that help one to forget. Even a point on a wall can tell of

home; of the hot tears that fall from a child's eyes because of a bad mark he has received from the teacher, not because he had not learnt or did not know his lessons, but because he did not want to write in a Gentile school on the Sabbath, and wanted to say in the face of the humiliation and the contempt for his people: "Yes, I am a Jew and I am proud of it."...As you sit and stare, a miracle occurs....The reality imposed upon you disappears entirely, and the reality for which your soul yearns, and upon which even the NKVD cannot impose its will, appears in all its splendor.

As I read Begin's words aloud, facing the camera, the oddity of my own environment began to alter itself. Begin's description of covenantal connection suddenly be-

came, for me, a primal experience. The vast emptiness of my synagogue's magnificent 1897 sanctuary seemed to bespeak the generations of Jews who had prayed there, whose births, bar mitzvahs, and weddings had been celebrated there, whose deaths had been mourned there—and whose presence now remained there all the same.

And rightly understood, how could it be otherwise? After all, Shearith Israel had originated in a group of Israelites who found themselves quite literally the only Jews on the continent, and with the vastness of the Atlantic between them and their mother community. To feel disconnected, to disappear, would have been so easy; to maintain one's Jewishness could have been achieved only by a profound bond to the Jewish people from whom they seemed to be cut off.

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We love to tell the joke of the Jewish Robinson Crusoe, who built two synagogues on a desert island so that there could be one that he did *not* attend. But these early American Jews felt instead a bond to others: to those they had left behind in Europe, and to the traditions they maintained because they saw themselves as joined in *Knesset Israel* to past and posterity.

Is this not a Newtonian achievement, a Jewish gravitational pull, all its own? And if it could be felt by a few Jews alone on the other side of an ocean, can it not be felt in solitude of our own homes?

IN AN ADDRESS at his son's high-school graduation, Antonin Scalia once warned the audience to ignore the platitude most commonly spouted at commencement that "we live in unprecedented times." The statement, he argued, is not only untrue, but dangerous, because it leads us to conclude that the past has no wisdom to offer us as we face our current challenges. In these past several weeks, we have been told, over and over, that we live in unprecedented times, but in my own sermons online and by phone I have attempted to communicate the opposite. We are not the first human beings to be challenged by disease, and we are not the first Jews to confront, and seek to overcome, our solitude.

The isolation we face is not that of being in prison; our trial is not akin to Begin's or Sharansky's. But it is a trial. It is physical isolation from many we love, often precisely in order to safeguard the well-being of those we love. At these times, our moments of separation, and distance, we are inspired to think of the relationships that we have taken for granted and whether those relationships are truly covenantal; whether we have placed God at their center; whether we have thereby allowed these encounters to be part of a great covenantal union that is our people.

Throughout these weeks, my Friday-afternoon sermons from solitude have continued, and every week I speak of precedents: of Jews in the past who have embodied the covenantal connection that times have challenged us to discover. Bidding my congregants a Shabbat Shalom, and entering the Orthodox Sabbath shut off from the world, I find that my sermons are reified: The message has become the medium. I am a political aficionado, but I have thought less and less of politics, and more of covenant. The world

of the Talmud has been more real than that of the Twittersphere. As I walk the stairs of my own home, I do so with Maimonides and Rabbi Akiva, with Abbaye and Rava, who sit with my family at the Sabbath table. And I wonder, like Sharansky, whether I will feel their presence as profoundly when life goes back to normal.

As Passover approached, the role models and precedents to whom I homiletically turned were American Jewish chaplains, who throughout the centuries had to mark the holiday with soldiers separated from their families. I cited a Rabbi Max Braude, who, while traveling across Europe in 1945, had attempted to publish a Haggadah for the soldiers. In a letter home to his wife he described what went awry: "Yours truly ingeniously decided to photostat the haggadah portion of the abridged prayer book except that there was no one to do offset printing and so... the Hebrew Text is UPSIDE DOWN—yet I think—in fact I am almost certain that it represents the first Hebrew Printing on the Continent since its liberation." Writing this letter on a Friday afternoon in the days before Passover, Braude faced a challenge that now confronts us all—entering Shabbat often shut off from those we care about. Yet the timelessness of the Haggadah seemed to offer him a source of solace, and so he concluded:

I don't know where I will be for the Sedarim—but wherever I will be it will be with you—keep a little space beside you for me—just as I shall for you—and pray for me as I will for you—above all, my dear, pray as I do that this will be our last Seder apart; and let's make the next one the biggest best that ever was anywhere. So long, my sweet—and Good Shabbat to you, Love, Max

And now, as I compose this article prior to Passover, and prepare to write and deliver my pre-holiday sermons on conference call, I am convinced that my own eloquence cannot exceed this simple letter, for every Pesach involves an inversion—not of Hebrew, but of space and time, one that connects us beyond the reaches of gravity itself. "In every generation and generation," we read, "one is obligated to see one's self as if he left Egypt." It is this bond that will sustain us, until this year's seder in solitude is replaced by next year's in Jerusalem. 📖➡️