SHEMOT > Trumah > Do You Feel Lonely? February 2, 2011

THE LONELY GOD

ABSTRACT

Do you ever feel lonesome? Utterly alone? With no one to turn to and no one able to understand you?

Poets and singers capture the feelings of isolation that resonates with so many of us. Their solution however often makes us feel more lonely than ever. Billy Joel sings: “They’re sharing a drink they call loneliness. But it’s better than drinkin’ alone.” And if that’s not enough, Leonard Cohen, in his inimitable depressing manner, puts it this way: “Ah baby, let’s get married, we’ve been alone too long. Let’s be alone together.”

Loneliness – existential loneliness – is one of the most difficult challenges in life? But join the club. Discover the surprising company that loneliness shares. And what you can do to find comfort in a desolate world.

In this week’s Torah reading, God instructs Moses to tell the Israelites: “Build for Me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell among them.”

Until this command was issued from above, we would never have thought that God needed a home, a place of belonging, a place of rest. Houses/shelters are for mortals. Why would an infinite God need such a thing?

Simply put, God wanted a home so that He could stay among people! Until the Sanctuary was built, God was (in effect) homeless and lonely!

How we can say that God is lonely? This sermons takes us the subject of God’s loneliness and what it can teach us about our own.

**THE LONELY GOD**

1. **Children’s Questions for God (Humor)**

A father was at the beach with his children when the four-year-old son ran up to him, grabbed his hand, and led him to the shore, where a seagull lay dead in the sand.

-“Daddy, what happened to him?” the son asked.
-“He died and went to heaven,” the father replied.
-The boy thought a moment and then said, “Did God throw him back down?”

Children have so many questions about God – what He does, how He thinks. One first grade teacher encouraged her students to write out their questions to God. Here are a few examples:

Dear God: Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don’t You just keep the ones You have?

Dear God: In school they told us what You do. Who does it when You’re on vacation?

Dear God: Did You mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?

Dear God: Are You really invisible or is it just a trick?

Out of the mouths of babes, right?

Children in their innocence can teach us a lot, and I will return to this theme before we are through, but right now I’d like to consider some questions that adults have about God.

1. **Who is God?**

[Many, many theories have been posited about God and even more questions:]

* Does God care or does He not care about mankind and earthly matters?
* If God is all-good, how can He allow evil in the world?
* Does God share in our pain and suffering?
* Is God a He or a She, neither or both?
* Why does God hide from us? Why can’t we see Him?
* What is God like – angry, loving or detached?
* Does God govern every detail of our lives?
* Why did God create the universe … and us?
* Does God gain anything from our existence?

These questions arise because God manifests Himself to us in so many different ways, even contrary ones. Indeed, the mystics explain that every possible human “mood” and “state of mind” originates from a divine source. So though God in His essence transcends all definitions and anthropomorphic characteristics, at the same time He is the source of every possible type of experience.

Today, I would like to explore an unexpected dimension of God – a “vulnerable” one, so to speak – and one that I believe can offer us great comfort.

1. **A Home for God**

In this week’s Torah reading God instructs Moses to tell the Israelites: “Build for Me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell among them.”[[1]](#footnote-0)

Simply put, God wanted a home so that He could stay among people! Until the Sanctuary was built, God was (in effect) homeless and lonely!

Until this command was issued from above, we would never have thought that God needed a home, a place of belonging, a place of rest. Houses/shelters are for mortals. Why would an infinite God need such a thing?

At first glance, we may be inclined to believe that the Sanctuary was not really built for God, but for us humans, a holy place where we mortals can experience the Divine. All of our lives are spent in the mundane struggle for survival, and *we need* a holy place as sanctuary from mortal toil. *We need* a sacred environment where we can rest our weary souls and find some heavenly consolation. *We* need… not God.

But listen closely, “Build *for* *Me* a Sanctuary and I will dwell among them.” From this, it is very obvious that the Sanctuary is not just a place for us to meet God, but also a place for God to meet us and dwell among us.

This point is amplified in the conversation between God and King Solomon, the builder of the first Temple in Jerusalem. King Solomon asked God, “Will You really dwell on earth? Heaven, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You. How much less this house I have built!”[[2]](#footnote-1) And God responded: “I consecrate this house which you have built, and I set my name there forever. My eyes and My heart shall ever be there.”[[3]](#footnote-2)

So, however you explain it, God clearly did not feel at home in the infinite cosmos – despite all its grand and magnificent glory. Until the Sanctuary was built on Planet Earth, God did not have a place where He belonged.

1. **In Search of Company**

Loneliness, it appears, is not merely a mortal concern. The Almighty Himself is in search of company.

I find this thought both disturbing and comforting.

At times, we all experience moments of existential loneliness. Despite our families and our loved ones, despite all our accomplishments and accolades, deep (or not so deep) down, there is a part of us that always remain very much alone. We may distract ourselves, party away, get carried off by all types of entertainment, but at the end of the day, that lonely core reminds us from within: “You are alone.”

Indeed, the deeper you travel into your innermost recesses, the less anyone can enter that space. And the harder it is to express yourself, the more alone you are. At your most intimate core, you are all alone.

A sad verse in the Book of Ecclesiastes captures this sentiment: “I have noted this further futility under the sun – the case of the man who is alone with no companion, who has neither son nor brother…”[[4]](#footnote-3) Perhaps this is the verse that inspired the famous Leonard Cohen poem:

I had a friend:

he lived and died in mighty silence

and with dignity,
left no book son or lover to mourn…[[5]](#footnote-4)

Or perhaps it inspired the Woody Allen quip: “Life is full of misery and loneliness … and it’s over much too soon.”

1. **Finding Comfort**

Since we all feel so alone, we should find it comforting to know that we really are not alone in our loneliness.

God, too, is very lonely, in His core and essence.

This loneliness derives from strength, not weakness. It derives from the fact that God is absolutely unique, “He is one, and there is none like Him.” And the same is true of our core. Our most lonely place – our essence – is a reflection of our profound individuality and uniqueness.

We feel alone in that intimate place not because we are excluded or hated – we are alone at the core because we, each one of us, are utterly unique, in a way that no one else can really understand.

Our core essence is quiet and still – it does not have the party element that accompanies our social interactions. When we are involved with more outer, superficial levels, we can celebrate and share these moments with others. But our essence we experience alone precisely because it is our unique center.

1. **Sanctuary on Earth**

And yet, there is something else about our unique center that we learn from God – it doesn’t want to dwell alone.

As special as His divine essence may be, God wanted company – He wanted to find a home in which He could dwell among human beings. Divine *revelation* manifests in the “heaven and the highest heaven,” but God *Himself* feels at home only on earth – in the Sanctuary that we build for Him.

We mirror this feeling. Just like God, we are not satisfied living inside our selves, isolated and apart from others. We need to build a space that we can call home – a sanctuary where we find respite, an environment where we can finally rest our lonely souls.

So the next time you feel all alone, remember two things:

1. Every essence is fundamentally alone, but your *loneliness* is shared by every soul and by God Himself (so in that respect you are not alone).
2. If you build a sanctuary out of your material life, if you sanctify the money and belongings you were blessed with, then that will provide your lonely essence – and the essence of the lonely God – with a warm home in which to rest in comfort.

This is the only sure antidote to loneliness – to connect with God and in so doing with the unity of oneness. Because when we connect with Him, we connect with all existence, all that there is, and in that place of unity, it is impossible to feel lonely. [May we arrive there quickly, in our days. Amen.]

1. **Between the Cherubim (Optional)**

Before I close, I would like to bring to your attention one more point:

When the Israelites had finally built the Sanctuary as instructed by God, the Cloud of Glory descended over the Holy of Holies.[[6]](#footnote-5) This was the sign that God’s presence had come to rest among them.

There, in the inner sanctum, God would speak with Moses as He had promised:

“I will commune with you there, speaking to you from above the ark cover. From between the two cherubim that are on the Ark of the Covenant, and I will give you instructions for the Children of Israel.”[[7]](#footnote-6)

Who were these cherubim, and why were they such an important part of God’s home on earth?

The cherubim were children – one male, one female – who were carved out of gold atop the ark cover. They represented, according to Kabbalah, the union of God’s masculine and feminine energies. Note that these energies were not represented in the form of a patriarchal grandfather with a long white beard and his matronly counterpart. The form chosen by God was specifically that of two *children!*

This symbolically communicated God’s great love of children, and especially His beloved Children of Israel, as He declared through the Prophet Hosea: “For Israel is a child, and I love him.”[[8]](#footnote-7)

But the very fact that the figures of two children were placed in such a prominent location in God’s home indicates something even more profound.

We tend to believe that childhood represents an early stage of life, one to be outgrown as we mature and develop intellectually. We are expected to shed our childishness and move on into adulthood.  But the covering of the ark sends a very different message.  What is placed above the ark, as a shield, protection and as means of communication between God and His people?  The child.  So childhood, in God’s perspective, represents an extremely holy stage of life.

Why is it that as adults, we no longer have the same free abandon as we did as children?  How is it that we don’t have the child’s innocence and sense of adventure?  We no longer enjoy childish delights. A child relishes the journey, we have no patience until we arrive there. Have we gained a new awareness, or have we lost a special gift?

The answer is a combination of the two.

As we grow and mature, we gain an intellectual awareness. Our horizons are broadened and we find interest in more sophisticated objectives than childish games. We also develop our transcendental needs, seeking to discover our purpose, and trying to understand how things must be utilized for a higher end. Yet our very sophistication causes us to lose touch with that innocent, essential divine side of our nature.

Our awareness of the darker sides of life, of our disappointments and difficulties, causes us to split ourselves into two – the inner and the outer. We are one person (the child) inside, and another (the adult) outside, dressed in our defensive armor. A dichotomy takes over our thinking. In our perception, the outer/physical and the inner/spiritual represent two antithetical worlds. And from this grows our existential loneliness – our awareness that our inner spiritual core dwells alone in a selfish and hostile world out there.

However, in an integrated, harmonious world, no such fragmentation exists. All of existence is a reflection of one unified truth. Thus, our most intimate self can be easily expressed on an outer level. Children don’t have the dichotomy of adults. Their lives and drives are seamless – what you see is what you get. Because they have not yet developed complex defense mechanisms to protect themselves in an insecure world, their free spirit shines all the time. Children, therefore, don’t feel alone; they don’t suffer from existential loneliness.

Imagine all your drives and desires finding fulfillment in one unified purpose.  Imagine being able to actualize your inner potential with no conflict from any outer or internal source. Imagine feeling less lonely.

In such a world, eating a pleasurable food and appreciating the divine benevolence that brought this food into being would be no less sublime than meditating on the deepest mysteries of creation. And this awareness is what every child essentially has from birth. The child may not know it – the knowledge comes through education. But the child’s ability to revel unabashedly in the delights and pleasures of this world are actually an indication of a lofty spiritual status, where the physical does not threaten or negate the spiritual.

It’s time to take a new look at childhood.  Let’s try to suffuse our worldly needs and indulgences with an awareness of the Divine. Remember that the ultimate is being able to synthesize all the components of our personality, from the most base to the most sublime, into a harmonious unit.[[9]](#footnote-8)

So skip the guilt.  God is not looking accusingly at you over your shoulder.

Skip the lonely-hearts routine. God is with you all the way.

Imagine, instead, the Divine Presence hovering lovingly and protectively above the cherubim. Imagine the Father of us all, the God who is smiling benignly down at all His children, for indeed, “Israel is a child, and I love him.” Amen.

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1. Exodus 25:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. I Kings 8:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. I Kings 9:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Ecclesiastes 4:7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. “There Are Some Men” from *The Spice-Box of Earth* by Leonard Cohen. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Exodus 40:34. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Exodus 25:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Hosea 11:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. XXVI, pp. 175-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)