

*“Togetherness depends on authentic aloneness.”*

## Alone, with Others

Joshua Boettiger



### WATERING THE ROOT

**T**HE SOLITARY JEW lives with the cyclical reasoning that the world was created for her sake,<sup>1</sup> yet her task in the world—it is made abundantly clear elsewhere—is to serve others. Ben Azzai says in the Talmud that it is prohibited for a man to not take a wife,<sup>2</sup> but oddly enough, he was never married himself, saying in his defense: “What can I do? My soul is bound up with the Torah.” The tension between alone and together is a creative tension. As human beings we balance our longing to belong to another, or to the collective, with our desire to be true to our individual paths.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai



Judaism is well known as a tradition that insists on community. It does not privilege asceticism, there is no concept of individual salvation, and sacred texts are preferably studied in tandem with someone else, reading out loud. Jews pray most often in the first person plural, and in order to remember the dead, sanctify God’s Name, or hear Torah read, one needs to pray with nine others. We remember God reasoning in Genesis, “It is not good for man to be alone,” and so we deduce from all this that Judaism does not value being alone. Yet if we follow

this line of thinking, we misunderstand the invitation within the tradition.

Togetherness depends on authentic aloneness. Let’s offer a parallel: Jews are the people of the book, a people to whom words are particularly sacred. Yet the word would mean nothing if it did not arise from a developed and disciplined silence. To whatever degree we could hope to hear the word, we must cultivate the silence.

So it is with the vision of community. A community that does not value the necessity of the aloneness of each of its

*Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, Gustav Doré, 1855





adherents and that does not trust what arises out of that aloneness will be an autocratic community, one held together by gravity and habit but not by the living God.

What Judaism insists upon is that the one who is alone return from her inner work and, to paraphrase Bunny Wailer, “water the root; not just taste the fruit.” The root is the evolving tradition of the communal, collective body. The one who goes up the mountain or into the desert for forty days is honor-bound to return to share what she has received, and in addition, to know that the integration within the collective of what has been received will involve compromise—since this is the cost of belonging. We water the root when we return, and attempt to put into form what we have formlessly received.

### LEVADOH

JUDAISM’S INSISTENCE on togetherness has sometimes caused its adherents to

lose sight of the necessary inward journey that ultimately makes togetherness possible. Perhaps in the naming of the primacy of community, the invitation to go up the mountain or into the desert has been largely lost. Yet it is there—we can see its imprint everywhere.

**J**ACOB WAS ALONE, in Hebrew *levadoh*, when the angel found him by the banks of the Jabbok River and wrestled with him till dawn, bestowing upon him the name *Israel*, one who wrestles with God. This wrestling, this naming would never have happened without the *levadoh* that preceded it. In another well-trod tale, Moses comes down off the mountain, where he has been alone receiving the Torah.

He comes down despite the pain and misunderstanding that he knows await him below should he try to bring back the teachings to the collective. But it’s not just that Moses *should* come down the mountain—the very *reason* Moses is on the mountain is in order to come down again. The act of prophecy itself is predicated on the experience of going into the place of aloneness and returning again. We learn from the experience of the classical prophets that to be alone is code for being alone with God. That is what is implied. And it is only when we are irrevocably alone that we realize we are not alone. This is the leap of faith we take when we risk aloneness.

### RABBI SHIMON AND THE CAVE

THE STORY OF RABBI SHIMON bar Yochai and his son is a great example of the journey between retreat and return.<sup>3</sup> Father and son are forced to seclude themselves in a cave for twelve years to hide from the Romans. They

study Torah all day and are magically sated by a carob tree and a stream that appear in the cave next to them. They attempt to return when they are told the threat has passed, only to have their zealotry get them into immediate trouble. When they see a man plowing and sowing his field on the Sabbath, they are enraged—everything they set their eyes on catches fire because of the intensity of their judgment. God sends them back to the cave with a fierce rebuke: “Have you emerged to destroy my world? Return to your cave!” They stay in the cave for another twelve months, presumably until they are ready to endure the costs of belonging and compromise. As Moses learned when he came down the mountain, Torah is only Torah when it functions in the marketplace: in real-time, in real relationship, in imperfect togetherness.

The story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son is a cautionary tale, and in the way of cautionary tales, it belies an invitation. Go into the cave to save yourself. Return when you are ready to save another.

### REINTERPRETING LEVADOH

WE ARE TALKING here about re-embracing aloneness. But we should also talk about re-interpreting aloneness. Perhaps part of the confusion here is that we misunderstand the experience of aloneness. We take it too literally, and we associate it only with literal separation, retreat, and physical isolation. Another way to understand aloneness is how Leonard Cohen described his monastic routine with his fellow monks on Mount Baldy: “There was no private space and virtually no private time, we were all working shoulder to shoulder. There is a

Zen saying: ‘Like pebbles in a bag, the monks polish one another.’”

True togetherness allows us to feel that we are alone with ourselves *while* we are with others. We can enter this realm in different ways. On meditation retreat, purportedly an experience of being alone, I have experienced powerful togetherness—a silent community supporting each other’s aloneness. On the other hand, while davenning with many worshippers in a synagogue—purportedly an experience of being together—I have felt profound aloneness, being held by the community and its intention, and being free to go towards my own experience. In the presence of such moments, it is clear that we don’t need to choose between being alone and being with others. An authentic experience of each leads us towards the other.

We can also enter this alone/together realm with one other person, a witness, a lover, a true companion. Someone who loves us is someone who sees us in our aloneness, and as Rilke wrote, stands guard over our solitude. Not only can we be aware of our solitude in another’s presence, but we can also help another be aware of their own solitude. This is not the same as being “lonely” in another’s presence. In some ways, it is the opposite of that. It is through feeling our aloneness that we can then feel truly *with* another.

Judaism reminds us that the spiritual encounter is not always on the mountaintop or in the desert. The Zohar, the mystical commentary on the Torah, does not describe individuals on mountain tops as much as it does a group of merry pranksters traipsing around the Galilee, with much weeping and rejoicing. Even though Moses was the one who ended up



being up on the mountain—alone with God—receiving the Torah, the original intention was that the entire community would be up there. Aloneness, most of the time, happens with others.

### BACK TO THE INSISTENCE

WHY THE JEWISH insistence on community? The reasons for this are many, and are multifaceted. But let's look at it for the corrective it offers in our contemporary “spiritual marketplace,” where we most often speak about the spiritual path as one that begins and ends with the fulfillment of the individual seeker. Maybe an insistence on community can help balance the cult of the individual seeker, and the idolatry and narcissism that this search can sometimes foster. It compels us to ask the question, either on our way into the cave or on our way back out: What have you learned that

you can give? Community gives a shape and larger purpose to the solo journey. And while our contemporary model of search contains pitfalls, it also has the potential to enrich the collective beyond measure. The collective, in fact, depends on this kind of seeking.

Mordechai Kaplan named an ancient tenet of Judaism when he asserted that belonging is more important than believing. Something happens, is made possible, in the human heart when we are told we belong. It is something underneath language, something embodied. Belonging to a tribe teaches us how to belong to all humanity, to all creation.

But it is not so easy to belong. Because it involves a deep compromise, and we can feel that it corrupts the “purity” of our aloneness, we resist belonging. Yet this is the way of the world. We belong—to our people, to all life—whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not.

### THE DANCE OF VITALITY

THIS MOVEMENT between alone and together is a dance of vitality. The one returning from her authentic aloneness, bringing the fruit of that to the community, and the one setting out again into the wilderness—both are necessary to have a community that is transformative. Think of the community like a mikvah, the ritual bath that Jews immerse in to mark various transitions. In order for a mikvah to be kosher, it must have water flowing in and water flowing out. In order for a community to be kosher, it must have people flowing in and people flowing out. Any tradition needs to cultivate this alone/together dance to experience vitality.

In our synagogue in Vermont a verse from the book of Exodus is inscribed over the doorway: “God led the people by way of the wilderness.”<sup>4</sup> The wilderness is the place of being alone. The word *midbar*, in Hebrew, includes the root d-v-r, the root for “word,” or “thing.” It is in the wilderness of our solitude that we encounter the word, the thing, that will connect us to God. It is only through that being alone in the wilderness that one can merit becoming part of a people. The ideal is that we each will go into our wildernesses from time to time, that the community will make room for this and affirm this, and that it will receive us back again. ¶

<sup>1</sup> Mishnah, *SANHEDRIN* 4:5

<sup>2</sup> B. Talmud *YEVAMOT* 63b

<sup>3</sup> B. Talmud *SHABBAT* 33b

<sup>4</sup> *EXODUS* 13:18

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