

SERMON

Rabbi Shalom Morris, Bevis Marks S & P Synagogue

Among the plagues there was one that was fundamentally different than the rest. While in most of the plagues something happened, in only one of them did nothing seemingly occur. The plague of darkness wasn't so much an active plague, as it was simply the absence of light. So what was the plague? The Torah states that during the plague a person could not even see their friend for three days (Exodus 10:23). According to Ibn Ezra, people did not leave their homes. In other words, it was a plague of loneliness, where people became isolated from one another.

No doubt, this describes many people's experience during the pandemic, either when people were obligated to isolate during lockdown, or even voluntarily afterwards out of fear of getting sick. Many couldn't gain strength from the company of others, but instead were left to cope on their own. It was during this time that phone calls, text messages, and Zoom classes became people's lifelines, as a way to connect with friends, family and community. In many respects this remains the case.

Of course, we know that many people can experience this sense of isolation even when we aren't in a pandemic. They aren't necessarily isolated physically, but experience loneliness when compelled to cope with life's challenges in silence, without the support of those who care for them. Sadly, when we most need friends and family, we can often turn inwards out of an unnecessary sense of shame or pride. This becomes a self inflicted plague.

The plague of darkness reminds us that going it alone is a form of suffering. In one instance Maimonides councils a person to live alone, when the alternative is the negative influence of others (Mishne Torah, Deot 6:1). But it is clear that he only does so as a matter of last recourse. We are social creatures and require the company of others to live our best selves. The Torah states, 'It is not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18).' We all need friendship, companionship, and community.

Joining with others isn't a sign of weakness, but a show of strength. When we are with others, not only do we benefit, but so does everyone else around us, as we lift each other up.

In the Jewish tradition a house of worship is called a "Bet Keneset," which literally means a house of gathering. Jewish prayer is meant to be conducted in a group (minyan), not alone. When we go to synagogue we are meant to join with others in prayer, lifting each other's spirits heavenward. God is 'glorified in multitudes' in the words of King Solomon (Proverbs 14:28). The Jewish spiritual ideal isn't the life of the hermit, but the friend, the member of society. As the Talmud says, 'O' Chavruta O' Mituta,' friendship or death (bTalmud Ta'anit 23a).

While one would never call the pandemic a blessing, it is the Jewish way to always look for lessons from life's experiences and challenges. For many people Covid taught them how important connection is to their well-being. More than Covid has weakened people's bonds with synagogue, I believe it has strengthened their appreciation of it and how it is a place where we share life's ups and downs with our community, and gain strength or consolation through participation in it.

It has also reinforced our shared social responsibility towards each other, reminding us to make sure to check in with those who might be struggling or living in isolation. More so, it's taught us to care for each other's mental health and wellbeing, as we all now know how difficult it is to cope with life's challenges when we are on our own, or keeping feelings hidden.

That being said, when we are in need it is important that we don't wait for someone to call us, but to take the initiative to reach out to others to let them know we need help. There is no shame in needing the support of others, we all do. If we didn't realise that before, we all know that now. So let's all grasp this moment in time to deepen our connections with each other and with our communities, for all of our benefit and care.