Loneliness as a Spiritual Crisis

Rabbi Mychal Springer

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Mychal received her BA in Judaic Studies and Religious Studies from Yale College magna cum laude. She was ordained a Conservative rabbi and received her Master’s in Judaic Studies and a Doctor of Divinity at JTS. Mychal is a certified Jewish chaplain in Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains.
Lamentations 1:1-3

(1) Alas!
Lonely sits the city
Once great with people!
She that was great among nations
Is become like a widow;
The princess among states
Is become a thrall. (2) Bitterly she weeps in the night,
Her cheek wet with tears.
There is none to comfort her
Of all her friends.
All her allies have betrayed her;
They have become her foes. (3) Judah has gone into exile
Because of misery and harsh oppression;
When she settled among the nations,
She found no rest;
All her pursuers overtook her
In the narrow places.\textsuperscript{b}
“The Loneliness One Dare Not Sound,” by Emily Dickinson
1830 (Amherst) – 1886 (Amherst)

The Loneliness One dare not sound—
And would as soon surmise
As in its Grave go plumbing
To ascertain the size—

The Loneliness whose worst alarm
Is lest itself should see—
And perish from before itself
For just a scrutiny—

The Horror not to be surveyed—
But skirted in the Dark—
With Consciousness suspended—
And Being under Lock—

I fear me this—is Loneliness—
The Maker of the soul
Its Caverns and its Corridors
Illuminate—or seal—
Psalms 13

(1) For the leader. A psalm of David.
(2) How long, O LORD; will You ignore me forever?
       How long will You hide Your face from me?
(3) How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day?
       How long will my enemy have the upper hand?
(4) Look at me, answer me, O LORD, my God!
       Restore the luster to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death;
       lest my enemy say, "I have overcome him," my foes exult when I totter.
(5) But I trust in Your faithfulness, my heart will exult in Your deliverance.
       I will sing to the LORD, for He has been good to me.

Psalms 88

(1) A song. A psalm of the Korahites. For the leader; on mahalath leannoth. - A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.
(2) O LORD, God of my deliverance, when I cry out in the night before You,
       let my prayer reach You; incline Your ear to my cry.
(3) For I am sated with misfortune; I am at the brink of Sheol.
       I am numbered with those who go down to the Pit;
       I am a helpless man abandoned among the dead,
like bodies lying in the grave of whom You are mindful no more,
and who are cut off from Your care. (7) You have put me at the bottom of the Pit, in the darkest places, in the depths. (8) Your fury lies heavy upon me; You afflict me with all Your breakers. Selah.

(9) You make my companions shun me; You make me abhorrent to them; I am shut in and do not go out. (10) My eyes pine away from affliction; I call to You, O LORD, each day; I stretch out my hands to You.

(11) Do You work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise to praise You? Selah. (12) Is Your faithful care recounted in the grave, Your constancy in the place of perdition? (13) Are Your wonders made known in the netherworld, Your beneficent deeds in the land of oblivion?

(14) As for me, I cry out to You, O LORD; each morning my prayer greets You. (15) Why, O LORD, do You reject me, do You hide Your face from me? (16) From my youth I have been afflicted and near death; I suffer Your terrors wherever I turn. (17) Your fury overwhelms me; Your terrors destroy me. (18) They swirl about me like water all day long; they encircle me on every side. (19) You have put friend and neighbor far from me and my companions out of my sight.
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Do I Belong?
Alienation - Lonely
Abandoned - Isolated

Genesis 2:18-25

(18) God said, “It is not good for the Human to be alone; I will make a fitting counterpart for him.” (19) And God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the Human to see what he would call them; and whatever the Human called each living creature, that would be its name. (20) And the Human gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but no fitting counterpart for a human being was found. (21) So God cast a deep sleep upon the Human; and, while he slept, [God] took one of his sides and closed up the flesh at that site. (22) And God fashioned the side that had been taken from the Human into a woman, bringing her to the Human. (23) Then the Human said, “This one at last is bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh.
This one shall be called Woman,
For from a Human was she taken.” (24) Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh. (25) The two of them were naked, the Human and his wife, yet they felt no shame.
Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

(7) And I have noted this further futility under the sun: (8) the case of the man who is alone, with no companion, who has neither son nor brother; yet he amasses wealth without limit, and his eye is never sated with riches. For whom, now, is he amassing it while denying himself enjoyment? That too is a futility and an unhappy business. (9) Two are better off than one, in that they have greater benefit from their earnings. (10) For should they fall, one can raise the other; but woe betide him who is alone and falls with no companion to raise him! (11) Further, when two lie together they are warm; but how can he who is alone get warm? (12) Also, if one attacks, two can stand up to him. A threefold cord is not readily broken!

Psalms 71:9

(9) Do not cast me off in old age; when my strength fails, do not forsake me!
Zelda (Shneurson Mishkowsky), “Cast Me Not Away” (Zelda was born in 1914 in Chernigoff, the Ukraine, and died at the age of 70 in Jerusalem.)

Cast Me Not Away

She leaned toward my soul

to touch the cry in my throat,

ever-dwelling-

Her touch tears me to pieces.

Darknesses and words

are difficult

for the heart that is lost-

Cast me not away from Your presence.

And when I wake from my dream,

surrounded by darkness,

the old furniture making

its thin creaking sounds-

אל תשליכיני מלפניך

היא גחנה אל נפשי

לנגע בכי שבגרוני,

שוכן עז-

נגעתה עונה ב-

קריעים קוצרים.

קשה ללב אובד

עמ חשקות

ועםמילím-

ואל תשליכני ملفניך

וכאשר אקיח מחלומי.

ותשלך ייח סברי

ורחיטי שליחים ישמעו.

קולהות נפמ דקים-

אל תסתיר פניך ממני.

וכאשר אקיח לחרור.

המשקה כל-ך הספורים.
Do not hide Your face from me.

When I wake, wondering
if the stories of my senses
are really so sweet to my soul-
(Are stories my fortress?)
Oh, at a mournful, smoldering hour
even the tender beauty of a flower
has touched me with the harshness of flattery.

When I wake, weeping-
if only I might know
where heaven is leading
my life.

from The Spectacular Difference:
Selected Poems of Zelda, translated by
Marcia Falk

Lamentations 3:25-33

(25) The LORD is good to those who trust in Him,
To the one who seeks Him; (26) It is good to wait patiently
Till rescue comes from the LORD. (27) It is good for a man, when young,
To bear a yoke; (28) Let him sit alone
and be patient,
When He has laid it upon him. (29) Let him put his mouth to the dust—
There may yet be hope. (30) Let him offer his cheek to the smiter;
Let him be surfeited with mockery. (31)
For the Lord does not Reject forever, (32) But first afflicts, then pardons
In His abundant kindness. (33) For He does not willfully bring grief
Or affliction to man,

"Loneliness," by Mary Oliver (1935-2019)

I too have known loneliness.
I too have known what it is to feel misunderstood,
rejected, and suddenly not at all beautiful.
Oh, mother earth,
your comfort is great, your arms never withhold.
It has saved my life to know this.
Your rivers flowing, your roses opening in the morning.
Oh, motions of tenderness!
Psalms 30

(1) A psalm of David. A song for the dedication of the House.
(2) I extol You, O LORD, for You have lifted me up, and not let my enemies rejoice over me. (3) O LORD, my God, I cried out to You, and You healed me. (4) O LORD, You brought me up from Sheol, preserved me from going down into the Pit. (5) O you faithful of the LORD, sing to Him, and praise His holy name. (6) For He is angry but a moment, and when He is pleased there is life. One may lie down weeping at nightfall; but at dawn there are shouts of joy.
(7) When I was untroubled, I thought, “I shall never be shaken,” (8) for You, O LORD, when You were pleased, made [me] firm as a mighty mountain. When You hid Your face, I was terrified. (9) I called to You, O LORD; to my Lord I made appeal, (10) “What is to be gained from my death, from my descent into the Pit? Can dust praise You? Can it declare Your faithfulness? (11) Hear, O LORD, and have mercy on me; O LORD, be my help!”
(12) You turned my lament into dancing, you undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy, (13) that [my] whole being might sing hymns to You endlessly; O LORD my God, I will praise You forever.