

# Hitbodedut - A Contemplative Practice of Teshuvah

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If we chose a 'word of the year', as the OED does, then Hitbodedut (התבודדות) should be it for 5781. Meaning 'self-seclusion' and drawn from the word for being alone/lonely (בודד), Hitbodedut actually refers not to a feeling (one we've all been forced to experience), but to a practice. To those who are familiar with the concept, they may believe it to be one that is an innovation or creation of the Hassid, R' Naḥman of Breslov, who championed it. However, the history of self-seclusion as a spiritual practice goes much further back, and can provide us with some helpful guidance on how to do *teshuvah* in a world still reeling from plague and pandemic.

While there are plenty of biblical precedents (most notably Yitshak going out to the field, alone, to have a conversation), a distinct practice of Hitbodedut is the product of an unusual and unlikely school of Jewish mystics, known as the Ḥasidé Mitsrayim (Egyptian Pietists). While there's no link to the much later European Hassidism who we know by that name (and whom R' Naḥman represents in part), the Ḥasidé Mitsrayim were a well-established spiritual school of contemplative mysticism, centred almost entirely around the family of Maimonides. It is a surprising notion that arch-rationalist Rambam was followed by his son, grandson, great-grandson, etc in a type of spiritual leadership that had a distinctly mystical flavour. Inspired by dialogue with the Sufi communities around him, Maimonides's son, R' Avraham Maimuni is one of the primary teachers of Hitbodedut.

It is rare to see a Jewish teacher advocating the power of solitude, but it is a common theme in R' Avraham's primary guide to the contemplative life, *Sefer haMaspik leOvdé haShem*:

Solitude is among the most distinguished of the elevated paths. It is moreover the way of the very great saints and by it did the prophets achieve attainment (*wusûl*). Now it may be divided into external solitude and internal solitude, and the aim of external solitude is the attainment of internal solitude which is the ultimate rung of the ladder of attainment— nay it constitutes that very attainment. [Rosenblatt translation, p. 312]

This theological introduction disguises the primary aspect of the practice: complete and utter self-isolation, a spiritual solitude in which one could have a frank conversation with the Divine. R' Avraham suggests that one should retreat to a place of wilderness (mountains, caves, islands), and only when you are completely alone, could you then hear the voice of God. Another Avraham, R' Avraham Abulafia, who lived a few generations later, took it even more seriously, suggesting that the one who wanted to speak with (and hear) God should go to a completely

isolated spot, immerse in the mikveh daily, fast for 72 hours (not recommended by any doctor) and only then begin the process of listening, and speaking.

This might seem extreme – but it is a powerful notion, that utter solitude is essential to spiritual transformation. While there is a tremendous benefit to our custom to gather together on the Yamim Nora'im, confessing in the first-person plural, in penitence and protest – all of that obscures the role that individual solitude may play. This year especially, many of us may choose to eschew conventional services in packed rooms over the High Holy Days. That does not mean that we cannot achieve a spiritually meaningful practice of *teshuvah*. Instead, we can take a cue from the Ḥasidé Mitsrayim and explore how solitude might empower our journey of return.

R' Avraham Maimuni talks about external bodily solitude being a journey, and the first step on that journey being the ability to be 'internally isolated.' This is Hitbodedut. As Jews, we undervalue the role that solitude plays. Perhaps this year we might embrace the idea, finding in it an alternative approach to *teshuvah* with just as much precedent. Try it – find a time to be completely alone. Go out as far as you can, where there is no one else, where you can speak aloud as Yitshak did in the field, having a conversation with God and with yourself. Only in that absence of other people can we often hear the voice of God. Like a weak radio signal suppressed by all the background ambient noise of daily life – it is there for us to hear, if only we're brave enough to be alone, truly alone. There, in the solitude and the silence, there won't be the sound of the Shofar, but there might just be the *kol demamah dakkah* - the 'still, small voice' reaching out across the emptiness.