

Bnei Akiva Svivot 5781: Choveret Chinuchit

Dear Chaverim,

As we enter our third lockdown, we need to remain more connected and inspired than ever. The closure of our schools is hard to bear, and there is no certainty of how long this will continue. These certainly are trying times, but as Jews we are known for our resilience and perseverance, and today is no different.




We know that despite the upheaval, we all still need our fix of BA on Shabbat and are therefore distributing this Choveret Chinuchit (education booklet). These normally go to madrichim and are used to plan Sviva, however for this lockdown, we are urging all of you to become madrichim in your own household Svivot.

We hope that this choveret will help you learn, grown and have fun over Shabbat, and we look forward to seeing you at your virtual Svivot events next week.

Shabbat Shalom,

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In this pack you will find:

-  An idea based on the parasha
-  Discussion Ideas
-  Games and activities

Parashat Bo: The Blessing of Darkness



Aims:

- 📖 **Recognise** how we can be lonely despite being surrounded by others
- 📖 **Learn** about the plague of darkness
- 📖 **Think** about we have the opportunity to make the most of our loneliness

Mental Health Awareness Shabbat 2021

In 2017, JAMI launched the Mental Health Awareness Shabbat (MHAS). This annually falls on Parashat Bo due to the plague of *choshech*, darkness (which has resonance with mental illness) falling in this parasha.

This year, the theme of the MHAS is the impact of the pandemic. Covid-19 has rocked the world to its very core: international travel has all but stopped completely, bustling cities lay silent, schools have been forced to close. On an individual level we have all be impacted as well, in too many ways to count.

Yet, perhaps the biggest way that the pandemic has affected us individually is that we can feel isolated and alone, forbidden from socialising with more than one person face-to-face at any given time, but at the same time we have no escape from different parts of our lives. The boundaries between school, university or work, and leisure time have eroded; we do Zooms from our bedrooms and living rooms causing a 'work-environment' even in the privacy and comfort of our own homes. Social media has become even more all-encompassing as we seek greater social interaction, at the expense of 'down-time' or 'me-time.'



The difficulties of loneliness:

We are, however, in good company regarding this colossal challenge. Rav Soloveitchik wrote in 1965: *"I am lonely. I do not intend to convey to you the impression that I am alone. I, thank G-d, do enjoy the love and friendship of many ... I am surrounded by comrades and acquaintances. And yet, companionship and friendship do not alleviate the passionate experience of loneliness which trails me constantly. I am lonely because at times I feel rejected and thrust away by everybody."* (The Lonely Man of Faith)

This sense of loneliness is nothing new. Rabbi Sacks zt'l comments that this sense of loneliness was shared by many of our greatest Jewish leaders; David haMelech and Eliyahu haNavi, Yonah and Yirmimiyahu. They felt isolated, in spite of being surrounded. Indeed, from the dawn of man, we have regarded solitude as a painful experience; Adam was the prime example that *"It is not good for man to be alone."* (Bereishit 2:18)

Point to Ponder

- Does it make sense to feel lonely, even with plenty of (virtual) company?

Returning to our Parasha, Parashat Bo, we find the ninth plague: "thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was." (Shemot 10:22-23) The Egyptians were isolated, rendered lonely. Perhaps, even, their loneliness was more extreme than ours is. Rav Lamm zt'l explains, "The choshech, or darkness, imposed a rigid and horrifying isolation upon the Egyptians. All communication between a man and his friends ceased. He had no family, friends, no society; he was completely and utterly blacked out of any contact with another human. How lonely!" They had no Facebook or Instagram, they could not communicate with their neighbours, let alone over Zoom or WhatsApp!

What was the source of this darkness?

The Midrash (Shemot Rabba, Bo 14:2) records a fascinating dispute between Rabbi Nechemiah and Rabbi Yehuda over the source of this darkness. Rabbi Nechemiah answered that the source of the darkness (or, as Rav Lamm adds, "the nature and origin of loneliness") was the darkness of Gehenom, the ultimate destination of the wicked according to Chazal. This makes sense - "Loneliness is a curse, hence its origin is the place of punishment" explains Rav Lamm, "It plagued the Egyptians and prevented one from feeling with the other, from sharing his grief and joy, his dreams and fears."

Shockingly, Rabbi Yehuda answers that darkness came from Heaven, for it is written in



Tehillim (18:12), "[Hashem] dwells in secret darkness." According to Rabbi Yehuda, darkness, a plague inflicted upon the Egyptians, can be a blessing! Solitude means privacy, it means the allowance of the precious opportunity of self-reflection and existential contemplation; it is within one's self that we can hear the voice of Hashem, as a young Shmuel, future prophet of Israel, realised.

The difficulty of this for us:

In 1959 Rav Lamm lamented that "Modern life, with its perpetual telephone calls and never-ending blare of television, with its round of constant appointments and business and social duties, represents an intrusion upon the privacy of each of us, a deliberate attack upon the citadel of one's personal liberty." How much more so in 2021! How great is our difficulty to seclude ourselves for just a moment from the outpour of noise from our various devices!

We are fortunate to live in a generation where we can contact friends and family across the world in less than a second; we have the tremendous ability to reach out to others

and communicate despite geographical boundaries. The trade-off of this however, is that we have become accustomed to instant communication and responses at all hours of the day to all issues. We severely struggle to find any 'me-time.'

Our Great Opportunity:

By virtue of lockdown and all the coronavirus restrictions, we have been directly placed into the choshech of loneliness. This is both our biggest challenge and greatest opportunity of living through the pandemic. It is an opportunity to make positive and inspiring the impact of the pandemic. It is critical that we utilise this period to afford ourselves some private time, free from invasive social media, to think and contemplate, to self-reflect. It is no wonder that so many Mussar safarim which seek to guide our self-development both *bein adam l'chavero* (in terms of middot) and *bein adam l'Makom* (in terms of our relationship with Hashem) prioritise the need for '*cheshbon hanefesh*,' (accounting of the soul, or self-reflection).

The potential of this cannot be overstated. Abarbanel, the 15th century Jew who was both treasurer to the King of Portugal and a respected Torah commentator, has a remarkable comment on the first mishna in Pirkei Avot. The mishna begins: "Moshe received the Torah from Sini." Did Moshe not receive it from Hashem? Abarbanel answers that it was due to Moshe's isolation at the top of Har Sini for 40 days and 40 nights that he was able to receive the Torah.

This is, of course, not to say that we should all become hermits for how great are loneliness and isolation. Communication and socialisation are critical, and extremely beneficial, especially when an individual is struggling with something. Rather, we must not fear time away from our phones but embrace it! We must set aside time for ourselves and only ourselves, and engage in self-reflection and contemplation.



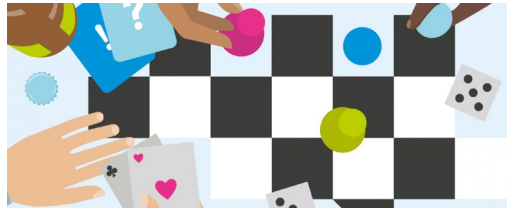
Let us rise to the challenge and ensure the impact of the pandemic is positive and inspiring. Aloh Na'ale!

Discussion Ideas:



- 🗨️ How much truly 'free' time do you have in an average week?
- 🗨️ How has this changed over the last 12 months?
- 🗨️ Beyond Shabbat, do you ever take a sizable break from social media?
- 🗨️ What can we discover about ourselves through self-reflection?

Activity Ideas:



- 🗨️ Try meditation!!
- 🗨️ See how long you can wait after Shabbat to check social media!
- 🗨️ Reach out to your friends and share what you've learnt about yourselves!

For more support and information:

It is extremely important to be aware of the difference mental health and wellbeing. Everyone is an individual and some people may need more intervention than a cup of tea and some down time. We have also included sign postage for outreach for professional help and support.

JAMI - <https://jamiuk.org/get-support/>

Jami is the specialist provider of mental health services in the Jewish community

Mind - <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. We campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding.

Kooth - <https://www.kooth.com/>

Provides online counselling and emotional well-being platform for children and young people, accessible through mobile, tablet and desktop and free at the point of use.



Beat - <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services>

Beat is the UK's leading charity supporting those affected by eating disorders and campaigning on their behalf.

Calm - <https://www.thecalmzone.net/help/get-help/>

Offering support to men in the UK, of any age, who are down or in crisis via our helpline, webchat and website. The Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) is leading a movement against suicide.

Shout- Text Jami to 85258

Shout is a 24/7 free text service for anyone in crisis, if you're struggling to cope or need immediate help.