Mesilat Yesharim – The Path of the Just
by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto in his famous Mussar work, Path of the Just, speaks about seclusion as being very helpful in the acquisition of separateness and righteousness [chassidut]. This seclusion is physical and aims to serve as a means of withdrawal into inner concentration. We explore in this reading the value of removing one self from community for the purpose of middot development and at what point, that removal poses a hurdle to spiritual growth.

From Chapter 16: The Dialogue Version

The Elements of Separateness

Separateness in [social] conduct consists in seclusion [hitbodedut] and separation from civil society in order to direct one’s heart to Divine service and the proper understanding of same; provided that one does not carry this matter to the utmost extreme. For as our Rabbis, may their memory be blessed, said, “A person’s disposition towards people should always be congenial” (Ketubot 17a). They also said, “A sword upon the liars [baddim – the simple translation of baddim is liars, but the Sages also saw it as meaning ‘alone’],” and they shall become fools” (Yirmiyahu 50:36) - a sword upon the enemies of Torah scholars [a euphemism for Torah scholars themselves]” who sit separately” [don't share ideas] and study Torah” (Berakhot 63b). Rather, one should associate with the worthy for whatever time “is necessary for his livelihood or studies. Afterwards, he should seclude himself in order to conjoin with G-d and attain the ways of righteousness and true service.

Included under this rubric are: being sparing in one's speech, avoiding idle talk, not gazing outside one’s “four cubits,” and any similar practices to which one can habituate himself so that they become second nature to him.

From Chapter Seventeen: The Dialogue Version

How to Acquire Separateness

Dearer than all else is seclusion [hitbodedut]. For when a person removes worldly matters from before his eyes, he also removes the desire for them from his heart. King David, peace be on him, had already spoken in praise of seclusion when he said, “O that I had the wings of a dove! [I would fly away and find rest. Surely, I would wonder far off, and lodge in the wilderness]” (Psalm 55:7-8). As we find that the Prophets Elijah (Kings I 19:8) and Elisha [his prishut is also mentioned in Duties of the Heart, Ch. 6] designated a place for themselves in the mountains because of their [practice of] seclusion. And the ancient, pious Sages, may their memory be blessed, followed in their footsteps. For they found seclusion to be the most effective means of acquiring the perfect form of separateness, so that the vanities of their fellow men would not lure them into the same vain pursuits. While in the process of acquiring [the trait of] separateness, a person must be heedful not to leap and jump to the far extreme all at once, for he will certainly not succeed. Rather he should gradually proceed in
separateness, acquiring a small amount today and a bit more tomorrow, until he is so completely accustomed to it that it becomes second nature to him.