

“Individual and Community, Loneliness and Belonging”

Any Monty Python fans out there will recall that in the 1979 satire film “Life of Brian”, there’s a scene in which the protagonist, Brian Cohen, who was born the same day as Jesus, in the stable next to where Jesus was born, and is subsequently mistaken for the Messiah, addresses an enormous crowd assembled outside his house. The crowd believes that he is their saviour, but he knows he’s just an ordinary guy. Brian appears in the window and tries to convince the crowd that he is *not* in fact who they think he is. He tells them, “You’ve got it all wrong. You don’t need to follow me. You don’t need to follow *anybody*. You’ve got to think for yourselves. You are all individuals.” And the crowd replies in unison: “Yes, we are all individuals.” Brian says: “You are all different.” And the crowd replies, as one: “Yes, we are all different.” And then one guy out of that whole crowd sheepishly pipes up, “I’m not.”

The film is a satire of course, but like most satires it points to some pretty serious issues and today I want to speak with you about the individual, about the community, and I also want to speak with you about loneliness. Loneliness is a topic that has been much on our minds in the wake of Covid, and the isolation it precipitated. Life is now in many ways back to something approaching normal, but we are still facing in our time an epidemic of loneliness, and I don’t see ChatGBT as having the solution to this one. I see so much of it in my work. People of all ages – children, teens, adults, seniors, and all walks of life – single, married, working, unemployed, retired. We’ve all I imagine experienced it ourselves at times, and we all know people who feel so alone. Some literally isolated, others surrounded by many people but still feeling, in their kishkes, alone. Loneliness in turn feeds despair, addiction, anxiety, depression, poor physical health, and so many other ills facing our society. Loneliness is a complex phenomenon, but feeding that epidemic, I believe, is the emphasis which contemporary culture puts on the primacy of the individual and the need for individual authenticity and fulfillment. At this turn of a new year, I’m asking you to consider, and keeping that silly scene from the movie in mind: where is the place in our lives for us to express our own unique individuality, and where is the place if any, where our individuality needs to bend to the obligations of tradition and community? How can we be both our authentic individual selves, and at the same time be a covenanted member of the collective Jewish people? The movie spoofs one side, the collective, but I’m going to suggest that many people in our time have gone off kilter the other way and finding a balance between the two is at least part of the answer to the crisis of loneliness which afflicts so many. So stay with me, we’re going to go on a journey – the individual. The group. Loneliness. Community. Judaism. All in the next 20 minutes or so, I’m going to tie it all together.

That scene in “Life of Brian” works because we well know the human propensity to crave being part of a mass group of people who all believe and profess the same thing. It feels so good to belong, to be part of something bigger, something meaningful. It makes us feel less alone. When it’s an evil cause (think of newsreels showing crowds of Germans attending Hitler rallies in the 30s), we know how malignant that crowd mentality can be and we recoil, and we wonder, like Brian, where are the individuals who are thinking for themselves? Where are the individuals who will say “I’m not” -- because using their own hearts and minds they understand that what is going on around them isn’t right, is in fact a vicious lie?

When it's a religious group which enforces this kind of uniformity in its members through the means of a controlling and charismatic leader, we call that a cult. Again, we ask, where are the people in the group who are thinking for themselves, who are seeing the hypocrisy and the corruption and the abuse that others on the outside so readily observe? Many of you may have read the Miriam Toews novel *Women Talking* or saw the movie this year – the heroes in that story are the women who begin to think for themselves and reject the communal authorities who have allowed them to be abused so horrifically. Or we think of the Jim Jones cult or the Moonies, and we can't imagine ever falling prey ourselves to such obvious manipulation.

On the other hand, while it's easy to judge others for going along with the group, we ourselves know the almost intoxicating feeling of being part of something bigger, something meaningful that transports us and inspires us and relieves the loneliness that all of us sometimes feel. Whether it's a political protest for a cause we believe to be righteous, like the ones I participated in for democracy this summer in Israel during which I and thousands of other people chanted דמוקרטיה, or a concert performed by a favourite singer (Taylor Swift anyone? You choose your artist, I myself had an ecstatic crowd experience at a Leonard Cohen concert a couple of years before he died), or a playoff game where your team is vying for the championship, that feeling of being part of a group which shares a common cause or a common passion, is so intense, even transcendent. You feel so connected to all the people around you. Of course, a concert or a game with screaming fans is a much more benign phenomenon than a totalitarian populist political movement or a religious cult – but I believe they all reflect a fundamental human need to feel a part of a group, to belong, to be swept up by something bigger than our own individual lives. That need can be dangerous, and I've cited a couple of examples where it has led to some very dark places. But that need is also very human, very important, and very necessary, if it can be channeled in a healthy way.

As a rabbi I am in the very business of strengthening a group, a community, a congregation, the Jewish people. Not to become a cult -- because in everything I do I strive to be of support to individuals in their own journey. But rather to foster in the individuals I'm working with a feeling of being part of something bigger than just themselves. While no one would mistake the service here at the JCC for a rock concert, or a political rally, and no one is going to try to whip you up into a frenzy here, that's not exactly our style, I do hope as leader of a congregation, perhaps a little bit contra Brian, that in various ways being part of our community will help each of us transcend our individuality, just a little bit. We all share a very human need to belong, to fit in, to feel supported and lifted up by others, to feel that our presence and our participation really matters, that we matter.

Nothing can be more crushing than the feeling that we don't fit in. I've experienced it in my life, I imagine many of you have as well. As Brian said, we are all individuals, we are all different. And yet with all these very real individual differences, the premise of these High Holy days is that we can still come together and, in some way become something bigger -- as we together welcome the new Jewish year in roughly the same way that Jews have been doing for centuries. My admittedly lofty goal as rabbi is that every individual present at services that I conduct will be able to say, in this place, on these days, and hopefully around the year as well, "I belong here." That's the balance that I'm reflecting on in this sermon – how do we retain our individuality,

while still feed in a healthy way, our need to belong to the group, in this case the Jewish group, the Jewish people? And can Jewish community help to relieve the problem of loneliness and isolation that is taking a toll on so many in our time?

We've acquired a wonderful new machzor for our use here in the JCC this year, Machzor Lev Shalem. I hope you're enjoying it. I believe it points toward a healthy balance between individual and community. The Lev Shalem has many inspiring kavannot, readings and poetry in the margins, some ancient, some medieval, some very contemporary, which can help us understand the history and the meaning of the prayers in ways that work and help make connections for contemporary Jews, help us make connections to our lives. I hope you'll spend part of your time here over these holidays reading selections from the margins of the Lev Shalem machzor from time to time and in so doing deepen and enrich your individual prayer experience. That's what they're there for. But the prayers themselves in the middle of the pages of Lev Shalem are traditional, and they are intended to be recited by everyone whatever their situation in life, the same prayers – by the new bridegroom; by the woman who has just lost her husband after 50 years of marriage; by the teen who is struggling with anorexia and by the captain of the football team and by the CEO addicted to alcohol or painkillers; by the millionaire in his mansion and by the pensioner who struggles to make rent and pay for medications each month; by the Holocaust survivor whose devout faith sustained them through the horrific losses they suffered, by the cancer patient who is finding it hard to believe in a God who is good; by leftists, rightists, lifelong Zionists, anti-Zionists, people who love this Israeli government, people who hate this Israeli government, straight people, LGBT people, people who know Hebrew, people who don't know an aleph from a bet, people born in different places in the world -- the same prayers, being recited by all of us together, again - not as a cult -- but as a community, that transcends all those differences and which transcends even time -- because these prayers connect us so deeply both to our ancestors who recited them in so many different times and places in the past, and to our descendants who, *im yirtzeh hashem*, please God, will do so in the future as well – *l'dor vador*.

Every individual present at services feeling like they belong, that they're a part of this amazing Jewish story, that they are an *important* part of this story -- that's my goal. It's an ambitious one, I know I'm dreaming big. And I also know we've got a long way to go, because some people feel alienated from Jewish community, perhaps present here today physically for whatever combination of family reasons, nostalgia, guilt, whatever – but unable to connect, unable to feel a part, unable to feel that they truly belong, feeling that they are an observer and not a participant, alone in the midst of a crowd of hundreds of people.

I get that. I've felt it at times in my life as well. We all have. Some of the responsibility when that happens lies up here for sure. We up here who lead the services – we do our best, but no one gets it all right and no one service leader is everybody's cup of tea, and so sometimes the feeling of alienation has to do with what's going on, or not going on, up here. Style and length of services, choice of tunes, the arrangement of the chairs, political sermons vs. apolitical sermons, the balance of Hebrew and English not to mention the content and the ideas of so much of the traditional liturgy, the sometimes small touches that make an environment feel welcoming, or not, and to mention something that's not always considered so polite to mention

– ticket prices and the need for tickets altogether -- so many things that are the responsibility of the leaders and the organizers can really impact the experience that attendees have one way or another, and affect whether individuals actually do feel a part of the community, that they do belong – or not.

But it's not all about what the leaders and organizers do. Sometimes when alienation occurs, some of the explanation rests with the individual as well. Every person enters this space with baggage that has nothing to do with decisions made by the leaders. A bad experience in Hebrew school long ago or a wonderful Hebrew school teacher who really inspired. Conflict in our family of origin that cast a pall during our childhoods, or a loving grandparent whose Yiddishkeit casts a warm glow over every Jewish experience we have to this day. We've had a good year materially or health-wise or in our families, with lots to celebrate; we've had a lousy year with lots of turmoil and stress or health challenges or loneliness. This week was a good week or a bad week at work. We see someone here that we really like and are excited to catch up with; we see someone here that we don't like at all and that brings up all kinds of associations that put us in a bad mood. We each walk into this space with lots of baggage that has nothing to do with decisions made by the leaders but definitely affects how the experience lands for us. Sometimes we bring so much "baggage" that it doesn't actually fit into the overhead compartment of our lives, or under the seat in front of us and we just don't know where to put it. Sometimes what we come in with leads us to being super-receptive to what is being offered, and sometimes it leads us to alienation or boredom-- we check out: physically, or mentally, or spiritually. When it works, it works so well. It just clicks. When it doesn't, for whatever combination of reasons, it can be really dispiriting.

If you're feeling open, and ripe, and that this is really where you belong, my goal is to help you soar with the community on these High Holy Days. If you're feeling alienated, my goal as your rabbi is to work together with you in all your individuality to overcome or chip away at that alienation. I want to hear about it if you're prepared to share. Call me. I want to know what's wrong, and I want to help if I can. Because I do believe that community, in our case Jewish community, is "good for the Jews" but it's also good for individuals and it is at least part of the answer to the epidemic of loneliness.

The US surgeon general Vivek Murthy has said that loneliness is as bad for your physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness is a greater risk to one's health than obesity, excessive alcohol consumption, and lack of exercise<sup>1</sup>. Psychologically, it's even more devastating, and we know how extensive the epidemic of despondency and despair has become in our society.

One answer to the problem of loneliness, as I have said, lies in community. Not goose-stepping, saluting, stifling, exploitative community like the kind Monty Python was spoofing in that movie but rather warm, nourishing, affirming community where we don't submit to authority, but we do surrender, just a little bit, of our own autonomy to the norms and standards and

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<sup>1</sup> Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World, Harper Collins 2020, p.13.

expectations of the group.<sup>2</sup> I know that's counter-cultural in our time, but in Jewish language, that surrender of autonomy is called *mitzvah*, "commandment". Some of the mitzvot that we've inherited from Jewish tradition we understand and appreciate and love naturally. Maybe Friday night candle lighting is on your list, maybe the Passover seder, maybe Tikkun Olam. And some of the things that we've inherited from Jewish tradition we don't understand and they make us really uncomfortable because they seem weird or highly inconvenient or even objectionable. Dietary laws anyone? Shabbat laws? Waving a lulav on Sukkot? Putting on tefillin? Coming to shul regularly? Factoring in Jewish affiliation and connection when we make very personal decisions about dating and marriage and where we live? Daily prayer? This is hard stuff. But there's that moment, if we can get there, that we do those mitzvot anyway, or at least some of them -- because we are commanded, because we are part of something bigger than ourselves, a community called bnei Yisrael, the Jewish people, and we realize what an amazing gift that is. That willingness to surrender some of our individual autonomy in the name of that gift, is the wellspring of community. And a reinvigoration of strong community ties is, I believe, the key thing that's going to get us out of this loneliness epidemic.

Community does require a structure, as annoying as that structure might be at times. If we let it, that structure can come to feel not restrictive but rewarding, especially in our day -- if you haven't seen Tiffany Shlain's book 24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day a Week<sup>3</sup>, please have a look. It's one great example of an ancient structure, Shabbat, with very contemporary application, especially in addressing the problem of loneliness which is so exacerbated by our addiction to our screens.

I've been thinking a lot about structures lately. I think you all know that Narayever rebuilt its shul on Brunswick Avenue over the last three years. I'm so excited that we're back home and even though obviously we're not there today because we can't accommodate a High Holiday size crowd in our still-intimate and heimish building, redoing our structure has been the biggest thing Narayever has done together as a community certainly in my time with the shul over the last 23 years, and maybe ever. I hope that if you haven't seen our new shul yet, you'll come by for a visit -- I'd be happy to show you around. One of the spiritual lessons I learned from being part of this renovation project is that you work within the parameters and the limits that you've got. You can't just do whatever you fancy. The moment we decided to stay at 187 Brunswick, the project was limited by the parameters of that tight plot of land, just 32 feet wide and 134 feet deep. That's the lot. And we had so much we wanted to do with that building! So we had to be creative: we dug down in the basement and we added a story -- but we couldn't go super-high because we're on a residential street. And we were limited by the materials that were available, by the budget, by the supply chain, by all kinds of things that were outside our control. Working within our limits, surrendering to those limits, we -- meaning the architects and the contractors and the volunteer building committee and the congregation -- produced an accessible shul building which I believe is beautiful and creative and serves our community's needs, preserving what we chose to preserve and changing things that we needed to change. We could do this not despite all the limits that we operated under, but precisely *because of*

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Leon Morris, "In Defense of Surrender in Jewish Life" Sources Spring 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Gallery Books, 2019.

those limits.<sup>4</sup> The limits set the necessary outside boundaries of the project but within the boundaries there were so many choices, and so many options and so much room for creativity and imagination.

Well, as with building projects, many parts of our lives impose limits on our individual freedom, on our individual autonomy, on our ability to “follow our passion” or “march to the beat of our own drummer”. Our families certainly impose limits -- our babies<sup>5</sup>, our parents, our siblings – all come with obligations. They all tie us down. Our workplaces often limit what we can do with our time. Sometimes our families and our workplaces make us miserable, I know. Yet many people find that it is the family context or the work context, the pieces of our lives which limit us the most, which become the most rewarding parts of our lives because the commitments they entail are sacred<sup>6</sup>.

Well, our Judaism presents us with sacred structural limits as well, that’s those darned mitzvot, and it’s also the communal context in which we enact those mitzvot. Participation in our Jewish tradition and community can be so very rewarding and meaningful if we open ourselves to it, make room for it, yield some of our autonomy to it, allow it to help us grow. That growth, and the feeling of communal belonging piece that comes along with it, does require an investment of time and effort, likely more than just coming on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Everyone is at a different point on the derekh, on the path, but what’s important is that it is precisely the limits in Judaism, which provide the environment for our individuality to flourish. It is the precisely the commonality of the mitzvot which apply to all of us, no matter our life circumstance, which fosters the community we so desperately need. The goal is to find a balance point between the undesirable extremes of a cult on the one side and lonely isolated individualism on the other, a balance point in which we do surrender some of our personal autonomy in the name of belonging to the larger Jewish structure – inside of which we can then play in all kinds of creative ways that affirm our individuality. That’s the goal, and I know it’s *lo pashut*, it’s not simple to achieve.

I ask this Rosh Hashanah; can we renew our quest to find that balance point in our Jewish lives? A point where being part of the community, being commanded, actually empowers us, strengthens us, helps us feel that we truly belong -- while still allowing us to hold on to our unique individual selves? I look out at the Jewish world today and I see one part of the Jewish people barricaded in the most constricted aspects of our tradition, while another part of the Jewish people is so open to the rest of the world, and so committed to the pursuit of individual fulfillment and so resistant to communal obligation, that it risks fading out of the Jewish story altogether.<sup>7</sup>

There’s got to be another way. That’s certainly my fervent hope as a rabbi; in fact, it is the existence of that third way that is the premise of my entire rabbinate. So that’s what I’m asking you to consider this Rosh Hashanah. I don’t aspire to being a cult leader (you’ll be relieved to

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<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris “In Defense of Surrender in Jewish Life” Sources Spring 2023 p.28

<sup>5</sup> Mara Benjamin, The Obligated Self.

<sup>6</sup> “It’s Not About You”, David Brooks NYT May 30, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Yossi Klein Halevi.

hear 😊). I don't fantasize about having hasidim, disciples who submit to my instructions about what to wear, whom to vote for, how many children to have, etc. That's the kind of authoritarian community that Life of Brian was satirizing. I do aspire to be a leader who challenges the many wonderful and varied individuals in his community to be open to the commanding voice of our tradition, a voice which transcends our own individuality and subjectivity, and our own existential loneliness.

I know that's not simple. We so desperately want to be happy. The classic religious myth of happiness is that my job is to find out what God wants of me, and then I should do it, and then I'll be happy. אשרי איש שישמע למצוותך "Happy is the one who heeds God's commandments"<sup>8</sup>. Never mind what I want, I just need to submit to what God wants, and the leader will tell me exactly what that is. Modern day individualism turns that myth upside down: my job is to find out what I want, who I am, and then I should do that in full authenticity without regard for externally imposed obligation, and then I'll be happy. But in my experience neither myth quite delivers.<sup>9</sup> Maybe we can find a way to balance both?

Maimonides in the Mishneh Torah writes about what he calls Keter Torah, the crown of Torah, which he says is מנח ועומד ומוכן לכל ישראל – it is "set aside, waiting, and ready for each Jew." כל מי שירצה יבוא ויטל – "whoever desires may come and take it."<sup>10</sup> It's up to us, as individuals, to decide whether to take this *keter*. Crowns adorn our heads, they exalt us, they can also weigh us down, they can sometimes get in the way. Like of any of our sacred commitments – to a spouse, to a community, to a baby, to a calling<sup>11</sup>, to a team, to a task like caring for an elderly or sick loved one – the crown of Torah can tie us down, it can infringe on our autonomy. Sometimes it's so heavy it makes us feel that our self is dissolving under its weight, and that can be scary. But the alternative – a life without sacred commitments, a life of complete individual freedom, is also scary --because it is so very lonely. We are all individuals -- each with our own mind, each with our own heart, each with our own strengths, each with our own failings, each with our own story, each with our own precious *neshama*. But we're also so much more than that. We're Jews. We belong. We are not alone.

Shanah Tovah.

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<sup>8</sup> Liturgy: אמת ויציב

<sup>9</sup> Micah Goodman lecture, Hartman RTS Summer 2023

<sup>10</sup> Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:1

<sup>11</sup> Brooks.