

It’s Thanksgiving weekend. 2019. I’m in a 7-11, laughing.

Not just any 7-11. Or, I should say, not just any *American* 7-11. This 7-11 is in Tokyo. Anthony and I have just landed, a trip to celebrate his birthday.

If you’ve ever been to Japan, you know that a Japanese 7-11 is not like an American 7-11. *It’s so much better.* You can get amazing things in a Japanese 7-11. Gourmet-quality pastries? Yup. *Onigiri* rice balls? Sure — what filling? Kabuki theater tickets? You betcha.

So why am I laughing? One aisle over from the pastries is an enormous display of facemasks. *So many* facemasks. Simple facemasks, sporty facemasks, stylish facemasks, Louis Vuitton facemasks. I’m not kidding. *We saw them.*

When we leave that 7-11, on the streets, in shrines and subways stations and in parks, we see people — *a good amount* of people — with face coverings. People just going about their day, wearing masks.

Later, I’ll have to allow that bias, or perhaps just plain racism, affected my interpretation of what I was seeing. But in my pre-Covid obliviousness, I assumed I was looking at paranoid mask-wearers, afraid of catching a cold.

Of course, I had it backwards.

The main reason many Japanese folks wear facemasks is to prevent the spread of illness to *other* people. It’s a practice that increased rapidly in Japan following 1918 flu pandemic.

Since then, the importance of prevention has been taught at an early age, that it’s always essential to wear a mask if you’re feeling sick. It reflects a culture of mutual care and respect.

In other words, you could say it’s very Japanese. Or, if you’re a rabbi, you would say it’s very Jewish.

These high holidays, I’ve been talking about core Jewish values. Tonight, I want to focus on one value, in particular, related to this idea of mutual care. That value, in Hebrew, is *Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh ba’zeh*.

In English, “All Jews are responsible for each other.”

Depending on who you are, and how you were raised, this might sound like a no-brainer. Maybe even a cliché. Look out for each other. Hold hands while crossing the street. *Yadda, yadda*.

In the last year and a half, unfortunately, we’ve learned that it’s not obvious. Thinking of the group, the collective, makes some people mad. Furious even.

But it’s an idea — a Jewish idea — worth fighting for.

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Of course, the idea that we as Jews would be responsible for each other depends on the notion of a “we” in the first place. Part of being an American is believing in the ethos of the rugged individual. Entrepreneurs create inventions, start businesses. Artists and musicians express themselves in innovative ways, create new genres. Activists speak out, reject injustices they see around them.

Judaism too has its iconoclastic heroes. There’s no Judaism at all if not for Abraham heeding God’s call to strike out on a new path. We would still be slaves in Egypt if a solitary Moses hadn’t turned to look at that bush. And there would never have *been* a Moses if his mother Yocheved hadn’t defied Pharaoh’s genocidal edict, sending her boy down the Nile in a basket.

But Judaism has always recognized that there is awesome power in the group. On these high holidays, as we review and recount and renew, our prayers are not in the singular, but in the plural. Notice the Hebrew ending *nu* that shows up throughout the liturgy: *avinu malkeinu*, addressing God as “*our* parent, *our* ruler.”

Which makes us all siblings — whether we like all the family members or not!

And, lest you think I am excluding non-Jews in this, please know that this family includes *all* of us, especially those non-Jews who help to support and uplift this community — all of us a family of shared destiny, *always* interconnected, intertwined with each other in elemental ways.

The entrepreneur’s invention is useless without workers to build it, without customers to use it. Artists need accompanists, galleries, audiences. Activists need co-conspirators, fellow organizers, community members. We need each other. To deny that is to live in a world of illusion, idolizing our own powers, pretending that each individual can go it alone.

The Torah warns us about the temptation of that illusion. On the verge of entering the Promised Land, Moses cautions the people that they might be tempted to say *kochi v’otzem yadi asah li et-ha’chayil ha’zeh*.

“*My* strength and the might of *my* hand made me this wealth.”<sup>1</sup>

If anything, Covid has only taught us just how foolish that is, making plain that what I do *here* can affect you over *there* — and vice versa — because *there* and *here* aren’t as far apart as we thought.

This idea, that we’re all interrelated, is threatening to some people. They try to avoid it at all costs. The delusion of invulnerability sometimes leads to profound silliness, like hoarding toilet paper. At its most extreme, it curdles into the paranoid fever dreams of the survivalist, holed up in a solitary cabin with MREs and rifles.

Our Jewish teachings, conversely, teach us that our fear of *mutual vulnerability* can be relieved by a commitment to *mutual responsibility*.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 8:17

It’s an idea that was keenly understood by the *chalutzim*, the pioneers who built this shul, who saw that — no matter how many family menorahs or seder plates you buy — you can’t be a Jew in isolation.

That’s why these months have been so hard. What I’ve heard, repeatedly, in talking to you, is that the worst part of Covid-time hasn’t been the mask requirements, or the canceled theater tickers, or even the worry of getting sick, but the isolation. One of the blessings of this community is that we’ve held and supported each other, reached out and made connections, despite the physical barriers.

It’s how we survive, as individuals and as a people.

There’s a part of the Passover Haggadah you might be familiar with. It’s in the section about the four kids, one who’s called a *rasha* — the “bad one.” Which can make us uncomfortable. *Bad? Really?*

The *rasha* looks around, sees everyone scurrying to arrange the intricacies of the holiday and asks, “What’s this work, this service, to all of you?”

The *first* part of the question is great. “Hey — what’s the point of all these rituals?” Any self-respecting Jewish community should have no problem with kids — and adults — who ask why.

The problem is the *second* part of the question — “what’s it *to you?*” As the Haggadah explains, *to you* means not *to him*. He takes himself out of the equation. In doing so, the Haggadah says, *kafar b’ikar*. “He rejects the essence.”

What is this *ikar*, this “essence”? The essence of what?

An essential element, *a core part*, of being a Jew is being part of a people. When I say I’m responsible for other Jews, I make a declaration, both to myself and to the world. Judaism the *religion* cannot exist without the Jewish *people*. Some religious traditions ask people if they’ve been “saved,” on an individual basis. For Jews, any conception of salvation outside of community is inconceivable.

The Haggadah instructs us to tell the *rasha* that, had he been there, he wouldn’t have been saved. *Not* because his question was rude. We can handle a little rudeness. He wouldn’t have been saved because he would’ve been isolated, vulnerable, alone.

God forbid.

On these days, we pray for God to inscribe us *b’Sefer Chayim*, “in the Book of Life.” The prayer ends *anachnu, b’chol am’cha beit Yisrael*. Not just us, here in this community, but *am’cha* — “all Your people.”

The *ikar*, the essence that the *rasha* misses in the Passover Haggadah, is that peoplehood. We were oppressed *together*. We were saved *together*. We received Torah *together*. Today, we build shuls together, and study with partners, and make minyans together — even on Zoom — we sit shiva together, celebrate our b’nai mitzvah and rejoice in babies and feed the poor and march for justice and pray for the sick and make latkes and study and laugh and weep and sing — together.

Always in community, always as one. *Am echad*, “one people,” our mirror image of *Adonai echad*, the “One God”

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But maintaining that togetherness isn’t so easy. The other day, Anthony and I stumbled onto a YouTube video of some old commercials from the 80s. The outrageous hairdos and cheesy music threw into high relief just how much flattery goes into marketing. Commercials tell us that we — *individually* — are the most important person in the world. In the words of the old Burger King ad, “have it your way.” Our motto is *the customer is always right*. I demand service, and not *just* service. Service with a smile.

Let me be honest here — I am not immune. Back in 2010, when I got my Mustang, I knew exactly what I wanted. I wanted a convertible, with a manual transmission, a particular trim package, and I wanted it in silver. I ordered it just like that from the factory.

But a couple of years later, I found out there was an updated model, and it had — wait for it — a telescoping steering wheel. How great is that! It would be so much more comfortable to tailor my driving position to my exact preferences.

Don’t I deserve a telescoping steering wheel??

Remember, I had ordered *exactly* the car I wanted. But in my mind, I’d been cheated. What a travesty! An outrage!

I genuinely thought about trading it in.

Thank God, you’ll be relieved to know, I pulled myself together.

Sometimes we can’t help but bring that consumerist mindset to Jewish community. And so rather than seeing myself as a *community member*, or a *congregant*, or even a *Jew*, my primary identity becomes *consumer*. That identity tells me: your every request and desire must be accommodated.

It tells me: insist you get your way – or walk.

I’m not saying Jewish communities shouldn’t look out for the needs of marginalized groups, or individuals. God forbid. Too many Jews of color have been excluded, too many trans Jew feels have been disrespected, too many non-Jewish members of Jewish families have been disregarded. These are wrongs that must be righted.

But that individual-first ethos whispers in our ear, “You’re being cheated. Don’t compromise.”

*The shul didn’t accommodate our scheduling needs for Hebrew school — so we’re having a private bar mitzvah.*

*I didn’t like what the rabbi said, or didn’t say, about the governor, or Israel/Palestine, or climate change — so we’re leaving.*

*The ritual policy didn’t match our version of kashrut or Shabbat — so we’re quitting.*

Of course, this attitude doesn’t affect only synagogues.

Political movements, nonprofits, friend groups and families, often splinter when their members demand ideological purity. *I can’t vote for her, I can’t spend time with him, I can’t visit them — I can’t look at them — because they don’t check all the requisite boxes.*

When we say that all Jews are responsible for one another, we don’t qualify it by saying, “but only when we’re in full agreement.” Being in community means I don’t always get my way. But love and mutual respect — and shared values — means I support the community I love, even when I *don’t* get my way.

Because I know the sustenance and support within community is worth looking for the values we *do* share.

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Of course, proclaiming that you’re part of the Jewish people can be scary. Some of us would prefer not to be so public about our Jewishness. It can feel safer to hide. In those moments, we wear a different kind of mask. Not a protective facemask like the colorful ones I saw in Japan, like the ones we wear to keep our community safe, but a mask hiding our Jewishness.

Kerri Garbis bravely talked about wearing that kind of mask in her amazing *drash* on Rosh HaShanah — which, if you missed it, you should go read. Kerri spoke about (once upon a time) letting others believe she was Greek or Italian because it was easier than admitting she was Jewish.

Wearing that kind of mask might feel safer in the moment, but it comes with a cost. It blunts the joy and blessing of being who we are, proud of who we are, a part of this remarkable people. The American mythos of the rugged individual beckons us to strike out on our own, but it also numbs us, lures us into forgetting. “Forget where you came from,” it tempts us. “Forget the people you’re part of.” And, like in that old Twilight Zone episode, the mask I wear becomes my actual face.

It isn’t just a loss for us as individuals. If our tradition is right, if all Jews truly are responsible for each other, to hide from my Jewishness means we also let down our community, Jews who are counting on us.

Jews like, for instance, our kids. The kids I work with, our b’nai mitzvah kids and our teens, who continue to tell me that their schools are plagued with swastikas, and other racist and antisemitic slurs and graffiti. When we don’t come to their assistance, they are forced to navigate this terrain on their own — a shameful abdication of our responsibility to them.

It is up to us to speak up when Jews are threatened. To ask our kids what is happening in their schools, and to *listen to the answer*. To be alarmed when Jews are attacked, no matter if they’re here or in Europe, whether they dress like this or they dress in *chasidische* black hats. And to be concerned when they are endangered in Israel — no matter what we think of the Israeli government, even if you think they are completely wrong, even if you’re not a Zionist.

Because there is no excuse, no political or cultural calculation that excuses our indifference to that suffering. In the words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, we are one body — when one Jew is injured, the rest of us cannot help but feel the pain.<sup>2</sup>

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This may sound like tribalism to you. Does this mean we care only about Jewish lives, Jewish safety? What if we’re deeply troubled by the actions of our fellow Jews? If their actions violate the values we share in ugly or even shameful ways?

When we hear of a Bernie Madoff, swindling the vulnerable; a Harvey Weinstein, assaulting and tormenting women; a Stephen Miller, enabling the foulest urges of American xenophobia; when we see the literal erasure of images of women in some ultra-Orthodox newspapers and magazines,

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<sup>2</sup> *Mechilta deRabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, on Exodus 19:5

or rightwing Israeli twentysomethings marauding in the streets shouting, *mavet la'aravim*. "Death to Arabs." —

What then?

There's never any virtue in giving a pass to such shameful acts. Certainly not because they were committed by Jews. In fact, just the opposite.

*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba'zeh* means all Jews are responsible for caring for each other and protecting each other. And it also means reminding each other, if necessary, what it means to be a Jew.

You may wonder the source of the phrase *Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh ba'zeh*. It comes from Talmud, in a section called *Shevuot*. Not *Shavuot*, the holiday, but *Shevuot*, "vows." When we're afraid to speak on behalf of our values, when don't hold each other to the highest standards of ethical behavior, *we fail in keeping our vow to do what is right*. The Talmud quotes Leviticus, warning that we "stumble over each other."<sup>3</sup> On this Kol Nidrei, this night acknowledging our failure to fulfill our vows, the text teaches that some of our *biggest* failures are not in what we said to other Jews, but what we didn't say.

In the words of Talmud, in those moments when *yesh b'yadam limchot*, "it was in our power to protest [the unethical behavior of other Jews], and [we] didn't."<sup>4</sup>

Like *Avinu Malkeinu*, the confessions we make on Yom Kippur are also collective. *Ashamnu, bagadhu, gazalhu*. "We are guilty, we've betrayed, we've robbed..." We take responsibility for our mistakes as a group. If one of us has failed, we all own responsibility for a community that failed to uphold what was most important to us.

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 26:37

<sup>4</sup> Talmud, *Shevuot* 39a-b

To be a Jew is to strive tirelessly to make the world better, to make *Jews* a better and fairer people. To insist that we live up to our highest values. All Jews are responsible to each other to insist that we do.

*Ashamnu*, we say, together. We hold each other up as we hold each other accountable. It's such a powerful moment. Can we remember the power in that unified force tomorrow, and the next day, and the next? To see that, if we want this broken world to heal, there's deep and profound untapped power in what we can do, in unity, as one?

I giggled at a bunch of folks in Japan wearing masks — when I should have realized they were looking out for me. When I should have been listening to the lesson they were teaching me. A lesson that's part of our Jewish wisdom.

Which brings us all the way from a 7-11 in Tokyo back here, to this place, in this moment.

In a broken world, my first instinct might be to ask, *what can I do?* It's a beautiful instinct. But this year, as a Jewish community, can we also ask — *What can we do?*

Whether you're in the building, or on Zoom, look to your left. Look to your right. Next to you, you'll find partners, a community, all of us capable, all of us responsible, stronger and bolder and more courageous than we could ever have been on our own, resolute in our insistence that the world needs bold justice and audacious love.

And maybe one day, soon, we'll all laugh together. Not in mockery, but in the knowledge that we were the ones who realized that beautiful vision. Because we did it — together.