

Expanding our Emotional Eiruv: Balancing our Individual Needs and Community Connections

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The lone adventurer headed toward the horizon. The tech genius pioneering in their garage. The young rebellious poet orating in front of a crowd. Throughout our history, these archetypes have been American heroes, representing the spirit and determination of the individual, the ability of one to assert their ideas and ideals, moving the world forward. In a 2013 Gallup survey, Americans ranked “individual freedom” as the nation’s top virtue.¹ While stories of triumphant individuals do exist, overall the concept of American individualism has been largely a myth, telling us that we can do great things if only we break out of the “prison of conformity” and assert our own path.²

Like all myths, they are flawed, and when taken too far, harmful. The hyper-focus on the individual overlooks the importance of community and often disregards how access to power and advancement is still limited to the few, often reaching upward by pushing others down. We have seen this play out time and again during Jim Crow, Japanese internment, Indigenous genocide, and more, even into modern day. Jewish activist Emma Goldman, who helped drive the early 20th century labor movement, contested, “[American] individualism’ has meant all the ‘individualism’ for the masters, while the people are regimented into a slave caste to serve a handful of self-seeking ‘supermen.’” And now, we see this American myth in our current time, playing out during a global pandemic.

The myth of individualism, that what is good for me and my success is best, while meant to inspire innovation and independence, has stained so much of our culture, and worse yet, as we see in our current day, put so many at risk. I needn’t go into detail about those boasting about individual freedoms rather than giving regard to their community, such as, refusing to wear a mask or receive a lifesaving vaccine that is safe and widely available, while so many, especially children, are still at risk.

It seems like sides have been drawn between individual freedom and communal responsibility, more visibly during this pandemic. Researchers at the University of Virginia collected the data. “The U.S. repeatedly ranks as the most individualistic country in the world, researchers pointed out, and American individualism has been a powerful force driving innovation and economic growth. However, it might also complicate the fight against COVID-19, which urgently requires collective actions – like social distancing or mask-wearing – that sacrifice individual preference in service of a collective goal... We found the same pattern across 83 countries: more individualistic countries are less likely to

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/159716/americans-consider-individual-freedoms-nation-top-virtue.aspx>

² Adapted from <https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2021/03/24/the-pandemic-has-shown-the-flaws-of-american-individualism-column/>

engage in social distancing and have higher infection growths.”³ They even found that charitable donations were lower in places with more individualism. Or tragically, researchers from Israel, America, and Switzerland found that the higher the individualism in society, the more COVID cases and deaths.⁴

For Judaism, in the conflict between individual and community, the priority is clear, and the texts are abundant. In the Talmud, we learn, “When the community is in trouble, a person should not say, ‘I will go into my house and eat and drink and be at peace with myself.’”⁵ Elsewhere in Talmud, we receive the famous dictum, “Kol Yisrael aravim zeh b’zeh – All Jews are responsible for one another.”⁶ The great sage Hillel taught, “Do not separate yourself from the community.”⁷ The Chasidic sage Baruch ben Jehiel of Medzibezh wrote, “The whole of the community is greater than the sum of its parts. Each individual Israelite may be flawed and imperfect, but when all of them join together, the strengths and good qualities of each are reinforced and magnified.” We are a community focused people, living in a culture that prioritizes the individual.

The frustration many of us feel during hard times is real. It may be easy to segment the nation and declare one group selfish and the other virtuous; I know I have. I would contend that the myth of American individualism has been absorbed more deeply than we realize, more than someone shouting at a school board meeting while holding a homemade sign. During this pandemic, we have made choices, often tough choices, about how much we can handle. We have been pushed to our limits, struggled to get by, and what was previously a rote task became a minefield of safety. So what did many do? We isolated ourselves. I do not mean just physically, which clearly many of us are still doing for the safety of our community. But we used phrases like “I need to focus on my family; I can’t do anything else” or “there are so few hours in the day, I have to choose where to put my energy” or “I am so overwhelmed, I have to limit my involvements.”

My worry is we may have gone further still, extrapolating from the very real limit of time and energy to limiting our care and compassion, focusing on ourselves instead of community. Maybe what we may consider to be an important activity or travel may not be what others consider non-essential. Or beyond the pandemic, we may be in situations where we think that we deserve the exception to a policy at work or our children deserve an exception at school. Or deadlines or commitments to be on time may be flexible for us. Or getting our way is more important than it probably should be. We have been preprogrammed by an American myth to think that in order to get ahead, or to give ourselves a break, we must put ourselves in front of others. During this season of vulnerability, deep honesty, and teshuvah – repentance, let us acknowledge that we may have put our personal needs before community at times, even if we did not intend to.

³ <https://news.virginia.edu/content/big-data-analytics-shows-how-americas-individualism-complicates-coronavirus-response>

⁴ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2021.627559/full>

⁵ Ta’anit 11a

⁶ Shavuot 39a

⁷ Pirke Avot 2:4

At this holiday of renewal and rebirth, the arrival into a new year, we can be honest about this failing but committed to adjust our ways. We are called upon, by our Jewish tradition, to reach out to love and support more than our immediate circle. We are needed to be part of a community. We, each of us, are crucial threads, that when removed, leaves a tear in our collective fabric that can unravel. If we have learned anything from the powerful and humbling racial justice and diversity work during the past few years, we know that our lives are far less separated than we may have realized, and our fates more deeply intertwined. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said his letter from a Birmingham jail: "I cannot sit by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Hillel taught us not to separate from the community. But the verb for "separate," *tifrosh*, may be better translated as "turn away" or "keep distance from." Even as our physical efforts and energies may have their limits, we cannot and should not close or further isolate ourselves from community and those who need us. Not only can we give to community, but our community can be a source of strength, comfort, and healing, especially in times when we feel most isolated and overwhelmed. We are not talking about going to more programs or joining more committees; that is not at the core of Beth Am's mission anyway; we seek community to build relationships, create fulfillment, and deepen meaning. I would add my immense gratitude to our staff and lay leadership who have helped us focus so much of our Beth Am community on our mission and values; I encourage you to engage more. Community exists, especially in challenging times, so that we can connect and know that we are not alone; we are not dealing with this stress in isolation; we can lean on others to carry our weary souls. In times when we are prioritizing our individual needs, we need community more than ever.

Yet we may ask, can we really add more to our plate or hours to the clock, especially in such a confusing and trying time? Perhaps, we adjust our perspective. The goal is not more things to do, rather more love and support to give out and let in, especially in time when we are so concerned about distance away. To this, I say the debate between the individual and the communal need is a false dichotomy. We needn't pick and choose between our daily necessities and our Jewish or other values. We can and should have both; we must widen our circle of care.

There is a wonderful precedent for this in our tradition. Jewish law has a reputation for being restrictive and closed, which sometimes can be true. However, many rabbinic rulings are actually clever loopholes. One of my favorites is the *eiruv*. One of the traditional Shabbat prohibitions is no carrying objects from your personal space into the public space. So the rabbis created an *eiruv*, a boundary, which redefined what is personal space, what is, literally, your home. The rabbis drew a line around a city and said, "now this is your personal space; you can carry within it." The legal concept is still used today, right here in Seattle. While a clever legal loophole, what it really did was redefine what we mean by "home." Our home is no longer limited to the walls of our house or apartment, but our home is extended to our loved ones, neighbors, friends, our whole community.

In this time of trial, we mustn't isolate further. In fact, the opposite is needed; we should expand our emotional eiruv. We can build on this Jewish tenet in Beth Am and in our wider community to see how intertwined we are, how connected our fates, and how much we can do for each other, widening our emotional circle, deepening the rock solid foundation of community. If we can donate, or advocate, or create social change, great. But, perhaps what we need now more than ever is the commitment and belief that we do not have to go through this alone. We can expand our heart and find the help we emotionally seek, through connecting, through prayer, through music, through laughter, through being part of a community who loves and cares for us. This is why Beth Am exists, our staff, our leaders, our clergy, each of you – to be there for each other, to secure our emotional eiruv. This is not a call to participate or a call to action; this is an open hand, appropriately sanitized, to connect and emotionally grow.

Hillel also reminded us, “If not now, when?”⁸ As Rabbi Ruth taught us last week on Selichot, this guidance is not just for external action, but also internal. Now is the time to expand, to receive strength and care, for ourselves, from the community around you. Let it rejuvenate you. Let it support you. Let us heal each other.

Humanity relies on collaboration; even the lone adventurer, tech genius in their garage, or young poet, we were all standing on the shoulders of others.⁹ We are not alone; we are stronger and more supportive as a community with our widened emotional eiruv. Beth Am is here, not the institution, but the people who make us a sacred place. We are not an individual just trying to get by but a holy people, a community to lean on each other and hold each other. Scream, cry, vent, ask for help, pray, play, sing, advocate, tell stories, just know that our hearts are open. The only way we get through this; the only way we can take a break and recover; the only way we can support our overburdened workers; the only way we can protect those at-risk; the only way we can overcome is by expanding our hearts and doing it together.

⁸ Pirke Avot 1:14

⁹ Adapted from <https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2021/03/24/the-pandemic-has-shown-the-flaws-of-american-individualism-column/>