

Sermon

Balancing communal life with personal creativity

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In marking Jami's Mental Health Awareness Shabbat, I've been asked to write about the theme of community. This theme plays a key role in the important work that Jami does and in the essential services that it provides our community. In this article, I will explore the importance of communal affiliation but also the importance of cultivating a developed sense of self-as-individual.

Punctuating the rhythm of a Jewish lifestyle is the regular affiliation and attendance to community life. Daily minyanim, weekly shiurim and simchas/social programmes become an important influence in the shaping of our religious experience and sense of self.

Unusual times are an opportunity to learn something new about oneself. During the pandemic, when our daily routines were forcibly interrupted, we had to consider afresh how we would achieve important goals in new ways. Things couldn't just go on as normal.

With shuls locked, we had to redefine the moments and experiences that defined our Jewishness. The results, for many, were surprising. I recall one senior Rabbi noting that, whilst it was at first extremely disturbing to *daven* alone after so many years of punctilious daily *minyan* attendance, his *avodas Hashem* was now taking a new shape. Without the requirement to keep march with the *baal tefillah* leading the services, this Rav had rediscovered a new, more personal mode for his *avodah*. His flexibility and openness to adapting to new scenarios revealed a new dimension of connection for him. And yet, he yearned to return to shul and this sentiment was

expressed ubiquitously in not a few contemporaneous articles, Jewish-themed Covid songs and wistful comments between friends.

The complex mix of emotions experienced by this Rav typify a general tension between our deep affinity with communal Jewish experience on the one hand and the benefits of individualism and personal creativity in our *avodas Hashem* on the other. And that's nothing new. Jewish heroes of the Torah almost always expressed their dedication alone. Avraham in his most challenging trial at the *Akeidah* demonstrates his obedience and devotion to G-d, not in the presence of his followers but in solitude. Moshe experienced his unparalleled Divine revelation upon Mount Sinai with no other person present (although the nation does "perceive" G-d in lesser intensity). Yosef found himself confronted with the huge challenge of maintaining fidelity when there was "no-one else in the house," and it is only when Yaakov was "left alone" that he struggles with the angel. Finally, in what would become a paradigm of Divine service, the Kohen Gadol entered the Kodesh Hakedoshim once a year accompanied by no one; not even the angels: "No person shall be in the Tent when the Kohen Gadol approaches to achieve absolution amidst holiness." There seems to be great value in the religious experience of the lone man of faith.

Corroborating this point, Rav Shlomo Volbe, a master of *mussar* and the human psyche, notes that a good arbiter of the authenticity of one's religious experience is their ability to be at ease when they are alone. A person who can't tolerate occasional moments of silence and solitude is likely lacking depth in their journey of personal growth and spiritual connection. The truly religious person is able to be entirely comfortable with the peaceful silence of solitude that affords

them moments of personal reflection and devotion. But most of us aren't like that. How often do we find ourselves reaching for our phone at a quiet moment when there's nothing else to occupy us? Or worse, at a time that could be a moment of deep connection and bonding with G-d (think: a beautiful sunset) or our family (think: a meaningful encounter), do we find ourselves feeling the need to snap a selfie?

From a mental health perspective, cultivating a sound and independent sense of self that is not contingent on the opinions and influences of others is of huge benefit. This allows for authenticity and mitigates our dependency on others for our self-worth.

Moreover, the obligation to pray is learnt from the activities of our *Avos*, all of whom – we can only assume – prayed alone. When Yitzchak ventured “out into the field” to daven Mincha, there is no indication that he was met by a party of workers and farmers to make up the minyan. Moreover, warns the *Sefer Chovos Ha'levavos*, a person must remain ever-vigilant when praying with the community lest their devotion become a selfish and superficial public demonstration of self-righteousness.

And yet, we mustn't think that the ideal religious paradigm of devotion is reserved for those who reside in hermitic reclusion upon some isolated mountain. With the cessation of prophetic revelation (around 2,000 years ago), explains Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, isolated asceticism became off limits. On the contrary, true righteousness is to be found only within a life where we engage responsibly in positive social interactions by building a life amongst others as part of the wider community and family. Here too, the benefits of communal living on our mental health are huge, granting individuals a shared purpose which leads to a sense of self which is far more meaningful than possible for the isolated individual.

Despite the attractive comforts of home-based prayer, *davening in a minyan* is an absolute and non-negotiable duty and that's not withstanding the fact that the individual may find an enhanced religious experience in solitude without the distractions, social

comparisons and frictions that can arise in a community environment. If our sages mandated this form of *tefillah*, it must be possible to reach the most desirable method of connection possible by doing so. Jewish life is wholesome and most beneficial when lived as part of the community: “Do not separate yourself from the community,” (*Avos* 2:4) Chazal teach us.

Hence the apparent dichotomy; authentic devotion is personal and takes place in the inner recesses of the heart and yet we are expected to be part of the bustling polity of Jewish community. How does one resolve these conflicting aspirations?

The answer to this tension lies in the words of the *Chovos Ha'levavos*, mentioned earlier. He writes that the pious individual is one who is able to experience “solitude amongst a society of people,” i.e. to maintain one's personal and individual religious identity even whilst being situated within a thriving and active communal experience. As *Shemonah Esrei* starts, the pious individual knows how to *daven* in the packed shul whilst deepening their own personal and individual relationship with their Maker. As he gathers with the community to encircle the Bimah during *hakafos* and lifts his voice to the powerful *niggun* of a beautiful Hallel, he joins those around him from a place of inner authenticity and independent development. He knows through personal experience the insightful observation of a philosopher that “it is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”

Community is a powerful and huge asset to our wellbeing on so many levels. We cannot, however, abdicate the depth and sophistication of our religious experience to influential tide of the social standards around us. Rather, we are challenged to develop our independent relationship with G-d within the supportive atmosphere of the Kehillah. When we do this, our *Teffilah B'tizbbur* becomes deeper and more impactful and our relationship to Judaism and its *halochos* so much more meaningful.