

Wherever You Go There's Always Someone Jewish: The Jewish Superpower of Community

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A Jew was shipwrecked alone on a desert island for years and years. When he was finally rescued, the ship's crew discovered that in his time on the island, he had built a life for himself – a beautiful house, cultivated fields of food, and not one, but two synagogues. “The puzzled rescuers asked him: “If you're alone here, why do you need two synagogues?” “Simple,” he answered. “This one is where I pray. And that one is the one *I would never set foot in.*”

Thank you for making this the synagogue you set foot in! This story is of course a cynical joke about why Jews don't get along, but Rabbi Micah Streiffer reads it differently. “I'm amazed that the Jew on the desert island built synagogues to begin with! Alone on an island for years, and all the time he was creating communal prayer spaces. He must have been absolutely starved for community.”¹

We are all starved for community. Americans are famously individualistic, regularly prizing personal achievement over the common good. More than possibly any other nation, the United States stresses the value of individual freedom and choice. From the rugged cowboy on the frontier to the lone inventor in the lab, we glorify individual effort and encourage young people to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.”²

While this individualism can push us to fulfill our personal dreams, it also can lead to loneliness and isolation. You may have seen the Surgeon General, Vivek Murphy, just named loneliness as a national epidemic. The *New York Times Magazine* recently ran an article entitled, “Why is loneliness so hard to cure?” Researchers believe that the pandemic exposed and worsened the problem of loneliness. In March of 2021, a quarter of adults reported they felt lonely for “a lot” of the day. The numbers have dropped since then, but the American Psychiatric Association says that 25 percent of adults are lonelier than they were before the pandemic.³

¹ Rabbi Micah Streiffer, “Desert Island Judaism?” (January 22, 2017), https://www.kolami.ca/media-galleries/rabbis-messages?post_id=177332.

² **Richard Weissbourd** and **Chris Murphy** Richard Weissbourd and Chris Murphy, “We have put Individualism Ahead of the Common Good for Too Long,” *Time Magazine* (April 11, 2013), <https://time.com/6269091/individualism-ahead-of-the-common-good-for-too-long/>; Abigail Marsh, “Everyone Thinks Americans are Selfish. They're Wrong.” *The New York Times* (May 26, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/26/opinion/individualism-united-states-altruism.html>.

³ Matthew Shaer, “Why is the Loneliness Epidemic so Hard to Cure?” *The New York Times* (August 28, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/27/magazine/loneliness-epidemic-cure.html>.

I'm sure many of us have felt lonely or isolated in the last few years. What can we do about it? Psychologist and Harvard lecturer Richard Weissbourd has studied loneliness extensively and concludes that one answer is religious community. He writes, "I want to just suggest to you that religious communities are a place where adults engage kids, stand for moral values, engage kids in big moral questions, where there's a fusion of a moral life and a spiritual life.." [There's] "A sense that you have obligations to your ancestors and to your descendants,...there is a structure for dealing with grief and loss."⁴ Weissbourd suggests that we must figure out how to reproduce the qualities found in a religious community in secular life, rather than going for the more obvious idea to have more people become religious or reconnect with their religious communities. Lucky for us, we already *have* a religious community where we engage with people of different generations, where we feel an obligation to others, and where we support one another in difficult times. This is exactly what Emily talked about earlier this evening, and I know many of you have similar experiences in the TBE community.

As I hope that you read in the newsletter, this year I am sharing four pieces of Jewish wisdom, tradition, or practice that can help us through difficult and uncertain times—and can be useful even when times are good! It's been a hard several years and one antidote to these difficult times is community.

It comes as no surprise to many of us that community is central to who we are as Jews. In fact, our very name expresses this truth. In Hebrew we are not called *yehudim*, Jews, or *da'at Yisrael*, the religion of Israel. We are called *am Yisrael*, the people of Israel. Our name is communal. Rabbi Jill Jacobs teaches, "The central experience of Jewish history—the only event that demands an annual retelling—is the exodus from Egypt. Though wrapped up in an encounter with divinity, the exodus was primarily an experience of national liberation, rather than a moment of religious awakening."⁵ That Jew on the desert island, while physically alone, was connected to Jews all over the world. He knew the same stories, celebrated the same holidays, and was a part of the larger whole. Rabbi Larry Milder, who served as rabbi in Bangor for many years, wrote a song that encapsulates this idea:

Wherever you go, there's always someone Jewish
You're never alone, when you say you're a Jew
So when you're not home, and you're somewhere kind of..."new-ish"
The odds are, don't look far, 'cause they're Jewish too.⁶

Many of you are probably familiar with the less catchy litany of Jewish texts that talk about the importance of community. We need a *minyan*, a group of ten people, to say certain

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "The Importance of the Community (Kehilla) in Judaism," *My Jewish Learning*, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/community-focused/>

⁶ "Like the Time I Wrote Wherever You Go, There's Always Someone Jewish," *Campfires and Color Wars*, April 16, 2020, <https://campfiresandcolorwars.com/2020/04/16/ep-68-like-the-time-i-wrote-wherever-you-go-theres-always-someone-jewish/>.

prayers or read the Torah. We aren't just responsible for ourselves, we have an obligation to help others in our community, particularly those who are most vulnerable. During these holidays we recite our sins in the plural because when one of us misses the mark, the whole community is affected. The idea of community is so much a part of who we are as Jews, that we might not even notice how present it is.

This communal aspect of Judaism can offer us an antidote to loneliness. On this day when we remember the creation of the world, we also recall the creation of humans. At first, only one person, *adam*, was created. But God said, “
לאִטּוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבִדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ
It is not fitting for a person to be alone; I will make for the person an *ezer k'negdo*, a helper corresponding to *adam*; an equal who will keep *adam* company. God made all the animals of the land and the birds of the sky, but *adam* did not find an equal. Undeterred by the apparent failure of these creations, God tried again, and this time succeeded.⁷ Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto, writing in 19th-century Italy, teaches that God did not change God's mind, rather, God wanted *adam* to experience life without someone else in order to appreciate what it is to be in community.⁸ We were created as communal beings and missing that community can make us appreciate it even more.

But community doesn't happen automatically. We have to work at creating a community that can support us through difficult times and celebrate with us in times of joy. We have to work at creating the community that Emily mentioned, one where we notice when someone has been gone for a bit. We have to make intentional connections with one another in order to counteract the chaos and difficulty in the world around us.

Building and sustaining the community requires that we show up. We need to be present. This year one of the goals of our board is entitled #youbettacome. Our leadership realizes that our community depends on your presence. I know showing up is hard. It's hard to make the time. It's hard to prioritize TBE when there are so many things going on. It's hard to make the drive—we have folks who live 45 minutes and even an hour or more away. Who is in that camp? We can always find a reason not to come. But there are so many reasons to come. And one of the most important reasons is that by showing up, by talking to new people, by seeing one another face to face, you are helping to build and sustain our community. Your presence matters and I'm guessing that you are glad when you come.

But just showing up isn't enough. We have reach out to new people in addition to connecting with old friends. How many of you have friends you met at TBE, or friends whom you see only at TBE? And how many of those are people you would not have met were it not for this community? Let's expand that circle. This year, we'll plan our gatherings to give you the chance to talk with one another. That means not only a check in during Shabbat services, but some time in small groups at Torah study. We will bring back our occasional

⁷ Genesis 2:18-24.

⁸ This is a paraphrase. Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto (Shadal) uses this to talk about marriage, but I think the lesson is larger.

Shabbat dinners after our children's services and before adult services as a way to let us connect across generations. We'll also continue game night and fiber arts and do a communal Havdalah. We have a gathering next week on October 9th called SPACE at the synagogue, for anyone who needs some community. There will be coloring, games, tea, coffee and a chance to hang out. For those introverts out there, don't worry, we won't make you spend all your time talking to someone you don't know. However, we *will* give you opportunities to connect more deeply with one another so we can experience all the benefits of being in community. I encourage you to start tonight and tomorrow by meeting someone new and sharing something real with one another.

A story:

There was once a man walking in the forest and he lost his way. He did not know how to get out. Frightened and scared he looked around, hoping someone would come along to help. He walked as far as he could and then sat down on a log, exhausted. In the distance, he saw someone approaching him. He greeted the stranger saying, "I am lost. Can you help me find my way out?" She answered him, "I, too, am lost, but I know this much, do not go the way I came. Let us walk on together and we will find the way out."

Too often in these past few years we have felt like we were lost in the forest and we didn't know our way out. We have no idea what this next year will bring, and I imagine some of us are entering it with more than a little trepidation. There is no doubt that there will be tough times ahead, both events we might anticipate and those we can't even imagine. But whatever happens, we will be stronger when we have this community. So, let's spend this next year showing up, reconnecting with old friends, and meeting new people. Let's take advantage of the Jewish superpower of community.