

**Being Alone and Being Together:
For Our Own Sake and for Our Community's Sake
Rosh Hashanah**

Rabbi Jason Miller

A couple of years ago, I heard the founder of the Starbucks enterprise, Howard Schultz, speak about the philosophy behind Starbucks. He explained how in America, we live in a society where individualism rules the day. The possibility to have it “your way” exists because that is what is demanded by people. The desire and ability of the individual to mix and match the contents of his or her Grande cup translates into the power to choose the way he or she defines personal identity in America. “The individual rules,” is what I understood him to say.

On the one hand, I liked what I was hearing. I like choice. I like hundreds of digital cable channels to choose from. I like walking into Starbucks alone and being able to order the drink that I want, to be made the way that I want it. But I was also concerned about what I was hearing. I was concerned because I was able to translate what I was hearing into Jewish terms. Here I was, I thought, at a Jewish Federation annual event that was to praise the merits of community, of the collective Jewish people, and the keynote speaker was telling us that the answer is to “go it alone.” The individual rules. Personal identity trumps community. But I also realized the issue is more complex than that.

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg writes about Starbucks in his book *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories about the “Great Good Places” at the Heart of Our Communities*. Oldenburg explains that Starbucks offers a “good third place” – that is, a place other than home or work – where an individual finds comfort and company. In other words, Starbucks is community. It is just a community in which individualism is strongly valued.

People get together at these coffeehouses. Not everyone who enters the coffeehouse buys their hot drink and returns to their car in under 60-seconds flat. Many sit and talk. Some play board games with others. Meetings are held there. Sometimes classes are taught there. Yes, you can order exactly what you want – you are the “sovereign self,” an autonomous individual. But there is also the need to be part of something bigger, a community. And that exists there as well.

For communal organizations, like synagogues, to survive in our modern time of unlimited personal choice, we must embrace individualism too. I think this is the reason that the Synaplex program has been so successful around the country. The Synaplex program, that Agudas Achim is now a part of, puts the emphasis on community and the emphasis on the individual and the emphasis on Shabbat – prime time in the synagogue. The idea is that by offering lots of choices to individuals on Shabbat, the outcome will be a stronger, more vibrant community. I’m not going to speak about Synaplex this morning; I’ll save that for next week. However, I do want us to examine the dichotomy between the self and the community.

Is it better to be sovereign and alone with our Judaism, or is it better to be part the greater community, sometimes giving up some of that sovereignty?

Anna Quindlen, a Newsweek columnist recently wrote about being alone. “If you like to be alone,” she writes, “there’s the assumption that you’re a month away from becoming the old woman with the weedy yard and decrepit house.” Quindlen was writing about how she spent part of her summer vacation. Alone, without anyone else around. She continued: “It’s so quiet here. And that’s just fine. I like solitude. I can spend days happily alone, eating Raisin Bran for dinner on the porch instead of bothering with a starch, a stove, and a napkin. Eldest of five, mother of three, veteran of noisy newsrooms: is it any wonder that I like the sound of silence? It has a good beat, and you can dance to it.”

“Why does that sound like the kind of admission you’d make at a 12-step meeting? If you like to be by yourself, there’s the assumption that you’re antisocial, antifamily, a month away from becoming that old woman down the street with the weedy yard and the decrepit house, or the Unabomber.”

Quindlen seems to be saying that being alone is no longer fashionable. But if you read Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*, you will be convinced that it is "joining" that is no longer fashionable. Well, which one is it?

Putnam conclusively shows that people simply do not join organizations as they did in the past. Since the World War II generation, volunteering (which is what we do when we join an organization) has become almost nonexistent. Arnie Eisen and Steven Cohen, co-authors of *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*, agreed with this statement when they wrote in the article "The Sovereign Self: Jewish Identity in Post-Modern America" that earlier generations of Jews felt a need to maintain tight connections as they experienced anti-Semitism, workplace discrimination and other challenges. But unlike Jews in the pre- and post-World War II era, this generation is fully integrated and does not need close communal cohesion in order to survive in a hostile society.

A recent report by ReBoot states it best: [Gen-X and certainly] "Generation Y Jews feel incredibly self-confident about their Jewish identities. They no longer personally experience anti-Semitism or exclusion from the opportunities society has to offer."

People today, and Jewish people in particular, are in fact "bowling alone." Synagogues have suffered significant membership declines, as have other organizations, clubs, and interest groups. What does Judaism have to say about being alone. In Genesis, God creates a helpmate, a partner for Adam, because as the text tells us: *lo tov heyot adam levado* – "It is not good for man to be alone."

If it's not good for individuals to be alone, then the question must be addressed: Why are we bowling alone more than we ever have? Part of this could be that because of societal changes and geographical changes in metropolitan areas, people spend more time alone. What was once a 15-minute commute to work is now 50 minutes for many people. Current lifestyles often require both parents to work, so family time is squeezed into the evenings and very often the children have their own activities. I'm often told by adults that they would come to shul more often but that would take away from family time.

In Pirkei Avot, the sage Hillel teaches *Al tifrosh min hatzibur*. That we should not separate ourselves from the community. I've always liked to read this as a positive dictum rather than a negative. We should jump into the community, pledging our support and activity. Hillel further states, in a famous Mishnah: *im ein ani li mi?* If I am not for me, who will be? If I am for myself alone, what am I?

Should we not be for ourselves alone? Is being alone a bad thing? Community is an important thing we would all agree. Look around us, hundreds of Jewish people sitting in shul on one of the holiest days of the year. We certainly aren't bowling alone right now. But is there something special, something transcendent about being alone? Is Anna Quindlen right? Is solitude tranquil and necessary?

The Hassidic Rebbe Nachman of Breslov believes that it is. He is the founder and teacher of *hitbodedut*, a method of prayer and meditation. *Hitbodedut* is the Hebrew verb meaning to be alone. The method involves talking to God in an intimate, informal manner. The one engaged in *hitbodedut* is meant to seclude herself in either a natural setting, a shul, or at home. Sounds nice doesn't it? Being in a peaceful, reflective, and meditative state sounds like a nice feeling.

But to what extent should we go it alone in Judaism. A colleague in Detroit, Rabbi Herbert Yoskowitz, edited a book a few years ago entitled *The Kaddish Minyan*. I have several copies in my office by the way if anyone would like to borrow one. In *The Kaddish Minyan*, Rabbi Yoskowitz includes several first-person accounts of how coming to shul for minyan to say Kaddish following the death of a relative helped bring comfort and solace to the mourner in grief. The Minyan, Rabbi Yoskowitz explains, becomes a virtual bereavement support group with so many of the minyan attendees being mourners themselves. While I hope that our congregation will not see many deaths in the coming year, I do sincerely hope that those in mourning will come to our daily minyan not only to recite the Mourner's Kaddish, but also to be a part of this community along with other mourners.

Well, after the *Kaddish Minyan* book was published, I decided to use it as a teaching resource while I was working at a shul in New Jersey. Following Shabbat dinner at a congregant's home, we sat in the living room and I passed out copies of *The Kaddish Minyan*. Everyone thought it was a nice book and the personal narratives were quite uplifting and powerful. One congregant in the group, however, threw me a curveball. She told of the difficult time she had following the death of her father a few years prior. She spoke about how reciting *Kaddish Yatom*, the Mourner's Kaddish, did in fact bring her comfort and healing during that time. But she told everyone that she didn't go to shul much more during that period than she normally does. Rather, she would stand alone in her home and recite the Aramaic words of the Mourner's Kaddish by herself with no one around to respond "Amen."

Immediately, I remember thinking, she called the premise of the book into question. The rule is that it requires a minyan of ten Jews to recite the Mourner's Kaddish, but here was this woman who wasn't going to let that deter her from reciting it. And it helped. It didn't bring her to shul. Didn't force her to become a part of a minyan, a community, but it helped her nevertheless. A challenging point, no doubt.

To some extent, this is a case-in-point of the Do-it-Yourself Judaism that has become so prevalent today. She didn't need a rabbi. Didn't need a minyan or a synagogue building. But is it the right way to go?

During rabbinical school, when I lived in New York City, so many Jewish families hired rabbinical students to tutor their children for their bar mitzvah. Foregoing the synagogue's religious school, they embraced a form of Do-It-Yourself Judaism. Why send junior to Hebrew school when everyone else was going. Junior could play soccer or watch TV, and have the tutor come by when it was more convenient. Some families even had the tutor create and produce a bar mitzvah ceremony for the child. Is this the antithesis of community, or is it embracing the culture of individualism?

In a Commentary magazine article published this summer, entitled "Whatever Happened to the Jewish People" by Steven Cohen and Jack Wertheimer, about Jewish people defecting towards individual expressions of Judaism and receding from communal participation, the authors quote the famous Reform theologian Rabbi Eugene Borowitz. Rabbi Borowitz, who is from Columbus by the way, wrote in 1965: "Jewish peoplehood is an indispensable part of Jewish religious thought and Jewish religious practice. A specifically Jewish religious life... means, therefore, life in and with the Jewish people, the Covenant community... When at least ten Jews congregate to pray, they... represent all Israel, past and present, here and everywhere."

Minyan brings us together. Individualism is important, but there is strength in numbers. Together we are stronger. But could it be both? Could it be that there is a time for solitude, a time for being alone as an individual... and a time to be part of something bigger, a member of a communal structure?

As I said yesterday when talking about how Conservative Judaism attempts to transcend the dichotomy of "Tradition" and "Change," it is possible to seek middle ground. Well the same is true with the personal duality that we all feel. We enjoy our time alone – our desire for individuality, yet we long to be part of a group – part of a community – as well.

Prayer in Judaism helps us bridge this gap. Finding the right balance between the private and the communal. Our liturgy, the siddur, prayerbook, strikes the balance for us. The preliminary service is basically individual meditation. In fact *Pesukei D'zimra* used to be done individually at home before arriving at the minyan at shul. This part of the service moves us to a communal consciousness by the time we get to the beginning of the formal morning service with the *Barchu*, for which a minyan is required. Generally speaking, the prayer service allows us, in community, to slip back-and-forth from private to communal prayer. Some sections are done aloud, some are done silently. Some require a minyan, and others do not.

I love davening in a minyan. I think of the quote by Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz who said, "Alone, I cannot lift my voice in song. Then you come near and sing with me. Our prayers fuse and a new voice soars. Our bond is beyond voice and voice. Our bond is one of spirit and spirit." I enjoy the camaraderie of minyan. But that being said, I also like davening *k'yachid* – privately. I have fond memories as a college student,

of waking up (at a time a little later than six a.m.), putting on tallit and tefillin, and enjoying the solitude and meditative tranquility of private prayer in my small small dorm room or small apartment. Thankfully, in Judaism we get both.

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Here we are on Rosh Hashanah and we see the gap between individual and communal being bridged through Teshuvah, atonement, as well. We may sin alone, but we do Teshuvah together. Think about Yom Kippur, when we rise to recite the Vidui: “*ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi...*” We use plural language to confess our sins. We are a community. We come before God as a community.

Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik asks: “Is it personal acquittal bestowed upon each and every person who comes before God, as it is written in the Torah, ‘For on that day shall you be expiated and cleansed, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord,’ where every individual is atoned for separately and taken together from a multitude which comprises the community of Israel? Or is the nature of acquittal afforded by the Day of Atonement not intended for individual as such – for how does an individual enter into the presence of God?—but is rather directed to the totality of Knesset Israel as a collective ‘self,’ a mystical entity in which case the individual enjoys personal acquittal via the pipelines of Knesset Israel. Through our identity with Knesset Israel, into which we have been integrated and smelted together into one body, are we able to benefit from the acquittal granted it.”

This time of year, and indeed, the entirety of the Jewish year, is for individual expression, as well as for communal expression. Maimonides says it best in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, his Laws of Repentance, when he writes: “The Day of Atonement is a time of repentance for all, for individuals and for multitudes, and is the moment of pardon and forgiveness for Israel.”

At Agudas Achim, we will work to create new, exciting sub-groups of our larger community. Through chavurot, social clubs, we will help individuals find the right group for their individual interests. Whether a chavurah group of young-adult singles in their 20’s and 30’s, a chavurah group of empty nesters in their 50’s and 60’s, a chavurah of physicians, or dog walkers, or runners, or preschool parents, or day school families, we will help find the right community for you. And with the Synaplex program, we hope to provide something for everyone. We will embrace the individual needs and desires, but also prioritize and place value on the power of the community. I hope you will take advantage of these initiatives in the coming year. I hope you will find the opportunities for both individual and communal expression, through prayer, through learning, and through social activities.

The next time you walk into a Starbucks, or into your coffeehouse of choice, you should walk in and be grateful for your sovereign self. Embrace your individuality when you order your cup exactly as only you want it. You might even enjoy drinking it alone, in the solitude of your car, home, or office. But I encourage you to also walk in at times, order your cup how you want it, and then sit with friends and talk. Or bring your coffee into the shul to be part of one of the most dynamic, warm, and friendly communities I’ve ever seen. And don’t forget, each morning following minyan, you can have a nice bagel and a hot cup of coffee with your community. We might not offer a “Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam,” but I can assure you that you’ll enjoy the company.

Permit me to conclude with a story. In a mountain village in Europe many years ago, there was a nobleman who was concerned about the legacy he would leave to the people of his town. The man spent a great deal of time contemplating his dilemma, and at last, decided to build a synagogue.

In the course of his planning, he decided no one would see the plans for the building until it was finished. The construction took a long time – much longer than he anticipated. But, finally, the project was completed. The townspeople were excited and curious about what they would find upon entering their new synagogue. When the people came for the first time, they marveled at the synagogue’s magnificence. No one could ever remember so beautiful a synagogue anywhere in the world.

Then, noticing a seemingly obvious flaw in the design, one of the townspeople asked, “Where are the lamps? What will provide the lighting?” The proud nobleman pointed to brackets that were strategically placed all along the walls throughout the synagogue. He then gave each family a lamp as he explained, “Whenever you come to the synagogue, I want you to bring your lamp, and light it. But, each time you are not here,” he said, “a part of the synagogue will be dark. This lamp will remind you that whenever you are absent, some part of God’s house will be dark. Your community is relying on you for light.”

Your community – your shul – is relying upon you for light: the light of Torah, the light of God’s presence, the light of comfort and strength and guidance in time of need, the light of Jewish renewal that serves as a beacon guiding us to our Jewish future. Please... enjoy your individuality. Make choices, and thank God that you have the ability to make those choices according to your will. Enjoy your time alone in solitude, meditate, pray, rest and relax. But don’t forget how important community is. We need you! I hope to see you a lot this year!

Thanks for listening...

and Shanah Tovah!