

Strength in Numbers: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on the Role of Community in Times of Crisis

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The world as we knew it changed on October 7th. While we have unfortunately suffered many terrorist attacks in the past, the scope, brutality, and much of the world's tacit approval of the barbaric murder of innocent Jews has reached levels we haven't seen since the holocaust. "Since the holocaust." I never thought I would have to utter those words to describe an atrocity that occurred in my lifetime.

I find myself feeling anxious about an uncertain future and lonely as much of the world vilifies Israel and the Jewish people. As someone who works primarily within the Jewish community, I have found that these feelings are now the backdrop of many of our lives. While Israelis fight on the battlefields of Gaza, we are all wrestling with the emotional agony of this war. How can we channel our negative emotions in productive ways so that we continue to be stable and even resilient? How do we find spiritual nourishment in these times of suffering? The wisdom of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and contemporary psychological research teach us that one way to contend with our emotional pain is through embracing community.

Rabbi Sacks emphasized the importance of community throughout the corpus of his writings. He even sharply disagreed with one of his role models, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, on its role in religious life. Whereas Rabbi Soloveitchik contended that an essential ontological aspect of the religious persona is characterized as the "lonely man of faith,"¹ Rabbi Sacks believed loneliness was a "defected state associated with sin."² For Rabbi Sacks, *emunah*, the Hebrew word for faith, is about "the redemption of solitude, the antithesis of being alone."³ Community is essential to religious life and the "human expression of Divine love."⁴ It is specifically in the presence of others where we are able to encounter the presence of God.

In addition to enhancing Jewish religious life, according to Rabbi Sacks, communities are integral to overall well-being. In *Morality*, for example, Rabbi Sacks distinguished between a community and a crowd:

¹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Maggid and OU Press, 2011).

² Jonathan Sacks. "Alienation and Faith." *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 13/14 (1973): 137–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23257286>.

³ Jonathan Sacks. *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-first Century* (Schocken Books, 2012), 18.

⁴ Jonathan Sacks. *Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places* (Bloomsbury, 2019), 149.

We are not made to live alone. Not only is the unprecedented atomisation of modern life bad for our health and happiness. It is also dangerous because it makes us vulnerable to the dangers that lie ahead: turbulence, change, unpredictability. When the environment changes, people who are members of strong and diverse groups are at a huge advantage. They contain people with different strengths, variegated knowledge, diverse skills, and by working together they can negotiate their situation with effectiveness and speed.⁵ They have collective resilience. A crowd of disconnected individuals does not have that strength.⁶

A crowd is a mass of disconnected individuals in close proximity to each other but who share little together. A community is the unity of a people with shared values and vision. Community is integral to our health and happiness.

Rabbi Sacks articulated what psychological studies have repeatedly shown. Supportive social relationships are associated with reduced risk of mortality and mental illness,⁷ drug addiction,⁸ and suicide.⁹ Belonging to a community is associated with improved physical and mental health by providing not only a buffer against the adverse effects of isolation and stressful events,¹⁰ but also as a source of positive experiences which cultivate resilience and growth.¹¹

The inverse has also been shown to be true. Loneliness is associated with a myriad of mental and physical health risks. It is estimated that social isolation has the equivalent negative

⁵ In his essay, "Community" (*Tradition* 17:2, Spring 1978), Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik makes a similar point: "The individuals belonging to the community complement one another existentially. Each individual possesses something. unique, rare, which is unknown to others; each individual has a unique message to communicate, a special color to add to the communal spectrum. Hence, when lonely man joins the community he adds a new dimension to the community awareness. He contributes something which no one else could have contributed. He enriches the community existentially; he is irreplaceable. Judaism has always looked upon the individual as if he were a little world (microcosm); with the death of the individual, this little world comes to an end. A vacuum which other individuals cannot fill is left. The saying: Whoever saves one lie, it is as if had saved the entire world."

⁶ Jonathan Sacks. *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), 35.

⁷ Seeman, Teresa E. "Social ties and health: The benefits of social integration." *Annals of epidemiology* 6, no. 5 (1996): 442-451.

⁸ Stone, Andrea L., Linda G. Becker, Alice M. Huber, and Richard F. Catalano. "Review of risk and protective factors of substance use and problem use in emerging adulthood." *Addictive Behaviors* 37, no. 7 (2012): 747-775.

⁹ Christensen, Helen, Philip James Batterham, Andrew J. Mackinnon, Tara Donker, and Andrea Soubelet. "Predictors of the risk factors for suicide identified by the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behaviour." *Psychiatry Research* 219, no. 2 (2014): 290-297.

¹⁰ Cohen, Sheldon, and Thomas A. Wills. "Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis," *Psychological Bulletin* 98.2 (1985): 310.

¹¹ Feeney, Brooke C., and Nancy L. Collins. "A new look at social support: A theoretical perspective on thriving through relationships," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 19, no. 2 (2015): 113-147.

health impact to smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having alcohol use disorder.¹² Sadly, much of the western world is experiencing what researchers have labeled the Loneliness Epidemic.¹³ The statement in Genesis (2:7) that “It is not good for Man to be alone,” has never been felt more acutely than now.

The benefits of community can be understood in light of Social Identity Theory, which suggests that group membership becomes incorporated into one’s sense of identity. When one joins a group, his or her psychological needs, like belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaning, are fulfilled.¹⁴ The group expands an individual’s sense of self and offers a greater reason to live. When an individual becomes part of a community, the community becomes part of the individual as well.

Connecting to a community has even greater significance during times of turmoil. When a person is suffering, the very act of joining a group of empathetic listeners can alleviate individual pain. This is the foundation of group psychotherapy. The sufferer no longer feels isolated, but rather comforted when in the therapeutic presence of individuals on a similar journey.¹⁵ Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, discovered the panacea of what he called “mutuality” when he encountered an irresistible urge to have a drink just months after becoming sober. Before he succumbed to a setback, he thought to himself, “No, I don’t need a drink- I *need* another alcoholic!”¹⁶ In addition to the personal benefit of being part of a group, in Judaism, we believe that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Rabbi Soloveitchik, notwithstanding his belief that loneliness is an essential aspect to the religious persona, acknowledges the cumulative power of community:

In particular, Judaism has stressed the wholeness and the unity of *Knesset Israel*, the Jewish community. The latter is not a conglomerate. It is an autonomous entity, endowed with a life of its own.... However strange such a concept may appear to the

¹² Holt-Lunstad, Julianne, Timothy B. Smith, Mark Baker, Tyler Harris, and David Stephenson. "Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10, no. 2 (2015): 227-237.

¹³ U.S. Public Health Service, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.”

¹⁴ Greenaway, Katharine H., S. Alexander Haslam, Tegan Cruwys, Nyla R. Branscombe, Renate Ysseldyk, and Courtney Heldreth. "From “we” to “me”: Group identification enhances perceived personal control with consequences for health and well-being," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 109, no. 1 (2015): 53.

¹⁵ Irvin D. Yalom & Molly Leszcz. *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* 5th ed (Basic Books, 2005).

¹⁶ Kurtz Ernest and Katherine Ketcham. *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning* (Bantam Books, 1993), 84.

empirical sociologist, it is not at all a strange experience for the Halachist and the mystic, to whom Knesset Israel is a living, loving, and suffering mother.¹⁷

The Jewish community is one living entity. We may be comprised of separate physical bodies, but we are spiritually united. "The people of Israel among the nations is like the heart in the body," writes Rabbi Judah Halevi, the medieval Spanish poet and philosopher. "The heart is sensitive to the slightest trauma [of the limbs]." The Jewish heart is acutely aware of the wellbeing of the rest of the body.

Being part of a community carries responsibility as well. As a family, we must do our utmost to help our brothers and sisters in their times of need. We typically pray in the plural, recognizing that our deepest desires are not limited to ourselves. When one of us is in pain, we all suffer. Paradoxically, a growing body of research suggests that when one gives to the community, one receives a deep sense of meaning in return.¹⁸ Rabbi Sacks echoed this sentiment when he wrote, "[m]eaning involves the acknowledgment of a world beyond the self. An individualistic, I-centered culture will be one in which people struggle to find meaning."¹⁹

Just as we are responsible to the living Jewish community horizontally, we are endowed with the obligation of carrying the torch vertically, from our ancestors downwards to our descendants. By participating in our shared ancient rituals, we keep the fire burning. We not only enjoy its warmth, but through each and every Jewish act we add more fuel to the flame. In the words of Rabbi Sacks, we all play an integral role in the story of the Jewish people:

Every Jew is a letter. Each Jewish family is a word, every community a sentence, and the Jewish people at any one time are a paragraph. The Jewish people through time constitute a story, the strangest and most moving story in the annals of mankind.²⁰

God, too, as it were, has a unique love for Jewish unity. The famed 16th century mystic from Safed, Rabbi Isaac Luria, writes that when friends listen to each other with humility and openness, Divine mercy is aroused.²¹ According to many Hasidic commentators, this was an

¹⁷ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Community," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978)

¹⁸ Baumeister, Roy F., Kathleen D. Vohs, Jennifer L. Aaker, and Emily N. Garbinsky. "Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life." In *Positive Psychology in Search for Meaning*, pp. 49-60. Routledge, 2016.

¹⁹ Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), 251.

²⁰ Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion* (The Free Press), 39.

²¹ *Haggadah Shel Pesach Torat Avot* (Yeshivat Beit Avraham Slonim), 46.

integral aspect of God's decision to redeem the Israelites from their servitude in Egypt.²² Similarly, according to rabbinic tradition, it was only when we united "as one person with one heart"²³ did God deem us worthy of receiving the Torah. God's love of unity is also expressed in His disdain of disunity. The Talmud records that the Second Temple was destroyed on account of "baseless hatred" between one Jew and another.²⁴

Like a parent whose deepest desire is to create a home where the children love each other, God seems to value our comradery above all else. If this was true then, it is sure to be true now. Not only does community improve our physical and mental health, but it is also a prism through which God bestows us with His mercy.

"We can face any future without fear so long as we know that we won't face it alone," wrote Rabbi Sacks.²⁵ When Israel is at war, we must join together. Attend a rally. Pray with others. Join a group packing supplies for our soldiers.

Even when the world seems to be against us, know that you are not alone. Show our brothers and sisters in Israel that they are not alone. When we say there is strength in numbers, we do not only refer to how our message appears to others. We, too, are strengthened when we feel part of a community.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Rashi, Exodus 19:2 based on Mechilta D'Rebbi Yishmael 19:2.

²⁴ Yoma 9b.

²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-QFwhWmC3U>