

I want to bring you into something I have been considering for some time. To me, this particular time in history feels harder than others, but it should not be. The United States is not at war, nor is Israel. There are large issues in the world: polarization, antisemitism, climate change, but we live in the first world and at least most of us are fortunate to have food, shelter, great comforts and yet, there is something off, something has changed in the last decade or more. Maybe it is the quick rate of change itself. In 2016, already 7 years ago, Thomas Friedman published the book, *“Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations.”* He wrote that “our lives are being transformed in so many realms at once—it’s dizzying.” “We’re in the middle of 3 accelerations; the market, mother nature, and Moore’s law. (They) are transforming the workplace, geopolitics, and community.” In 2019 McKinsey Global Institute began its forum with, “we live in an era of disruption in which powerful forces are changing how we live and work.”<sup>1</sup> I cannot completely put my finger on it, but here are some symptoms of what feels different to me. Don’t worry, I would never leave you on a negative note on Rosh Hashana.

In a New York Times piece Maureen Dowd noted that “Billie Eilish’s song in the “Barbie” movie called “What Was I Made For?” has become the anthem of an extraordinary number of anxious and depressed young women”.<sup>2</sup> It should not surprise any of us that it is not only teen girls. In May, Gallup reported that “U.S. Depression Rates have Reached New All-Time Highs”<sup>3</sup>.

On a related note, this year Dr. Vivek Murthy, the Surgeon General report called “The Current Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in our Country.”<sup>4</sup> It is not short.

Aetna reports that 61 percent of young adults report feeling lonely almost all the time. Even in a room full of people one can be lonely, because it is not only about being with people, it is about being with “your” people, feeling seen, understood, and part of something.

There is more. The Wall Street Journal<sup>5</sup> reports that “quiet quitting”, a concept born during the pandemic, remains very much alive. “Quiet quitting” is putting in the minimum effort. A recent Gallup poll reports that “Employee engagement, involvement and enthusiasm at work declined for the second year in a row. There is a growing share of the workforce that is disengaged, or resentful.”

People are struggling. If you are not, you probably know someone who is either grappling with the rate of change, work life balance, loneliness, a general malaise, or mental illness. Some

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/innovation-and-growth/navigating-a-world-of-disruption>

<sup>2</sup> Maureen Dowd, Sept on Barbie Movie, NYT, 9/2/23).

<sup>3</sup> Gallup, May 17, 2023

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> (WSJ, 8/21/23)

think this is tied to the pandemic; I believe the pandemic only accelerated these trends. It is the rate of change in the world, it is loneliness, but it is much more:

Over a decade ago David Brooks wrote a piece in the Times about college graduation speeches that continues to resonate: Grads were told to “Follow *your* passion, chart *your* own course, march to the beat of *your* own drummer.... He wrote, “this is the litany of expressive individualism, which is still the dominant note in American culture.” There is a malaise in society in the age of the “selfie” because we are too focused on the self, and not on something larger.

Western Liberal culture has two commandments: Go find yourself and then actualize yourself. It is important to discern and nurture our gifts. But to do so without deeply belonging and mattering to something much larger can’t possibly be good for us, or for the world. Brooks then says something so shockingly true from a Jewish perspective: **The purpose of life is not to find yourself; it is to lose yourself.** <sup>6</sup>

**The purpose of our lives is to lose ourselves in something bigger, deeper and more enduring than ourselves. Judaism is bigger than us. It is enduring. Our collective past, the weaving together of our lives and our obligations to the future bring us meaning. Our Jewish Community needs your involvement. And we all need to lose ourselves in something bigger than we are.**

In the book *The WEIRDest people in the World: How the West became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*, Joseph Heinrich describes WEIRD, basically us, as Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic. There is much good in these values; but this way of living also has challenges:

When WEIRD folks, that’s us, are asked who we are, we may respond with our profession, I’m a writer, a lawyer, or a character trait, I’m an introvert, I’m an extrovert. When non-WEIRD folks are asked “Who are you” they respond, I am the sister of, the child of, the parent of, I belong to this tribe or community. For them, it’s about the importance of relationships and belonging. Judaism grew up as a non-WEIRD culture; we care that you are part of our community, about how we are connected and bound to each other.

What if we could be better at both: if we could be our authentic selves, while also losing ourselves in the commitments of our Tradition. Being deeply connected and tightly interwoven into the fabric of a community, a tribe, The Jewish Center, might be a bit counter cultural because it involves two difficult, Jewish concepts: obligation and sacrifice.

Western civilization law is built around rights, but Judaism is built around obligations. The continuity of our people stems from the obligations that we take on. In Deuteronomy, God says, “I will make this covenant, this brit, not with you alone, but with those who are standing here this day, and those who are not with us this day.” Here is the image. God reveals God-self

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<sup>6</sup> (NYT May 30, 2011, David Brooks, It’s Not About You)

to Moses and the entire Jewish People, at Mt. Sinai, only you are there as well. Each one of us here today was there as well.

It is difficult for contemporary Jews to come to Jewish involvement from a place of obligation as opposed to what feels good. Robert Cover, z"l, former Yale Law professor, suggested that we see our obligations as rising from our sense of privilege. We are obligated to live a vibrant, joyful, Judaism because we have been given this gift of our sacred Tradition. It is our past, which begs us to make it compelling for our present and future.

Judaism asks us, how can my involvement in the life of a community help others? We have created structures for living, for tzedakah, for acts of kindness, for supporting those who are ill or bereaved, for celebrating a birth, a wedding, and b'nai mitzvah. We need ten for a minyan. And a simcha is not the province of one family; it is for all of us. How do I know this? When we have a simcha, a good event, we sing: "*Siman Tov, u'Mazal tov*. The next words are *y'hay lanu o'lchol Yisrael* – it is good, and good luck for all of us, and for the entire People of Israel. At the start of 5784, let's consider how we can make our commitments to Jewish life deeper and richer; how we can lose ourselves in something bigger.

Today we celebrate the birthday of the world, but our Torah readings are not about creation, they are about Abraham and Isaac. Earlier in the Torah, in *parashat Lech Lecha Avram* is asked to make a big sacrifice, to give up everything. Go and leave your home, go to the land that I will show you, leave your father's home, land and culture. In essence, *sacrifice your past for a future, where I will make you a great nation*, says God. In today's reading Abraham learns that this nation will be through the line of Sarah's son Isaac. And even in that moment, he realizes that he is sacrificing something with another child of his.

This summer at Hartman Dr. Micah Goodman taught that there is a second Lech Lecha, a go forth and sacrifice moment, that comes in tomorrow's reading: God searches for Abraham, and Avraham responds, Henei, Here I am. Then God says to him, sacrifice *the thing* that you built your life for: Isaac. Abraham and Isaac quietly go to bring a sacrifice to God, only Isaac is potentially the intended sacrifice. We can get stuck on the horrifying details of the story, don't. Avraham did not sacrifice his son, nor do I think our loving God would have allowed this. If anything, the story is a polemic against child sacrifice from that time period. God provided the ram for the sacrifice. The story, our Jewish story, is that community demands a willingness to show up and to respond, *Hneni*, Here I am, and even to make some sacrifices.

This is a foundational story: The story of the Binding of Isaac can inspire can us to live our lives with the *willingness* to make sacrifices for something greater than we are. It's a story that encourages us to identify relationships, ideals, and communities we are capable of making sacrifices for. Avraham heard the call to serve God and responded with the words; *Hneni*, Here I am, ready, able to serve you.

As Jews we are asked to make sacrifices. Sacrifice in traditional language means giving of something that is important to us. We are asked to be there for others, for the community, for

the collective and for God. We are expected to say, *heneni*— here I am. Here I am, ready, fully present in this community, at TJC. The story is not about Isaac, or about Avraham. It is about you and me. And how we live our Judaism. *Heneni* is I am all in and I can lose myself in Judaism, which is bigger than me.

How will you say *Heneni* - I am here, ready, and willing to serve the Jewish People in the coming year?

I know you are all committed to Jewish life. That is why you choose to be a member of this community. I am asking at the start of this year for each of us to lean into our community in deeper ways, and to view our involvement in terms of sacred obligation and sacrifice. To ask not what the shul can do for me, but what I as member of this sacred tribe, this loving shul family, can do to create a place that continues to grow in vibrancy, joy, and spirit. Why? People who lean into something bigger than themselves experience a sense of belonging, joy, centeredness, fulfillment, and dare I say, happiness.

What can you do?

Make a commitment to help us build a vibrant Shabbat community. Come here on Fridays or Saturdays.

Host Shabbat meals in your home, or Shabbat Under the stars.

Help make holidays here joyous by being part of our creative team.

Bring your gifts to the community by volunteering to help those in need- with minyan, in our garden, at a blood drive, with refugees, in any number of social justice projects.

Take ownership of a project here because you, the people, are this shul.

Commit to Jewish learning. Come to classes. Teach a class.

Be a *hesed* hero, a hero of lovingkindness: Provide meals for shivas, the ill, or even for simchas.

Or come and create the next thing that will make our community vibrant, joyous, fun.

Equally important: tell our Jewish and TJC story to others, that we are a warm, caring, vibrant place. That we are a place where you want to weave yourself into the fabric of this community.

In a deeply woven Jewish community your simcha is mine as well; your sadness is partly mine. It might be the difference between saying or asking what I get out of a program, service or class, versus how I help others by taking part in our activities. It is choosing to come to morning minyan or to Shabbat services because the community needs you: someone needs to say kaddish; someone needs you to honor their simcha. Being part of the community means jumping in and using your gifts to help create a sense of a tight-knit shul.

Your involvement can bring people meaning, comfort, and that sense of being part of something that is large and transcendent.

A father brought his son to see the rabbi after his son's bar mitzva to have a chat because the dad wanted his son to love Judaism. As they are leaving the rabbi asks the boy, do you like

baseball? Yes, rabbi, I do. We just went to a game last week, but we left in the 6<sup>th</sup> inning because our team was losing bad. Oh, said the rabbi. She asked, did the players leave as well? The boy said, of course not, that is not how it works, there are players, and there are fans. Only the players have to stay. Hmm said the rabbi, Like in Judaism: we need you – be the player, show up. Then the rabbi thought about it for a second and asked the boy – don't you think the fans are needed for support? Isn't it different for the players to play when the stadium is filled with spirited fans? Yes, it is.

Come fill this community – as fan, player or coach – we need all of you.

Jewish life calls us to be obligated to a collective past and a shared future. Obligation is a hard concept for moderns, especially when we value freedom, human autonomy, and independence. Jewish life calls us to be obligated to each other. Look around, we are each other's tribe in the very best sense. We are family. We are part of a bigger story – come here and create that story with your presence. Come say *Hneni* – Here I am- ready to serve. **Come lose yourself, and when you do, you find yourself rooted in our past and our future.**