

What a fraught and difficult time this is! Pandemic fatigue alongside pandemic fears, painful and dangerous political divisions, the gnawing realities of racial injustice, and our climate crisis. Oy, as we view the whole of it, it can seem almost biblical, as in the ancient Noah myth. Now, through our lived experience we know why that mythic story has such staying power in our hearts.

It is difficult but necessary to grasp our shared responsibility for these crises. As we more clearly recognize the roots and causes of our challenges, we can recognize the path ahead to repairing the ills of this time.

And we can. That is the Jewish message; the teachings of our sages speak of empowerment and the call to action. But we can only do this as a community; only in the collective can we complete the task.

That is why my greatest concern of this moment is the divisiveness of this time. As scholars have observed, the trend toward individualism -- from communitarianism -- has roots going back for at least five decades. Still, this moment marks the collision of the “I” with the “We” as we meet these serious challenges all at once.

Over the last 50 years, the values of shared morality, shared purpose and collective responsibility have given way to “autonomy, authenticity, individualism, self-actualization, self-expression, self-esteem.” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes about this in his new book, ***Morality, Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times***.

In addition, the psychological stress of Covid19 isolation fuels our distress. It is often the unconscious music playing in the background of our minds. Among many articles published on this topic, the Mayo Clinic reports,

The COVID-19 pandemic has likely brought many changes to how you live your life, and with it uncertainty, altered daily routines, financial pressures and social isolation. You may worry about getting sick, how long the pandemic will last, whether you'll lose your job, and what the future will bring. Information overload, rumors and misinformation can make your life feel out of control and make it unclear what to do.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, you may experience stress, anxiety, fear, sadness and loneliness. And mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression, can worsen.

But we needn't remain stuck in this difficult place. Among the strategies suggested by the Mayo Clinic are these:

- ***Focus on positive thoughts.*** Choose to focus on the positive things in your life, instead of dwelling on how bad you feel. Consider starting each day by listing things you are thankful for. Maintain a sense of hope, work to accept changes as they occur and try to keep problems in perspective.

- ***Use your moral compass or spiritual life for support.*** *If you draw strength from a belief system, it can bring you comfort during difficult times.*

That's where the power and value of spiritual community resides. Our role is to overcome the grip of an "I" focused worldview. Our gift is community, caring, compassion and moral purpose. It is for us to grasp the vast spiritual tools our tradition offers.

We need to recognize where the fraying fabric of the collective has challenged the bonds of Jewish peoplehood, and even beloved spiritual community. Pandemic-related anxiety and stress is coursing through our society and straining the already-stretched fabric of our culture. Where is the "*we*? Divided. But we can fix that.

The Jewish people have endured unspeakable ills and great challenges throughout our long history. And we endured by holding fast to our shared moral purpose and commitment to collective responsibility. We have weathered divisions in the past, largely, Rabbi Sacks observes, by adhering to the value of *Covenant*. In a covenant, "each respects the dignity and integrity of the other in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes even to share their lives, by pledging their faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither can achieve alone."¹

Our sacred spiritual community is our home for the fulfillment and enjoyment of community, Jewish peoplehood, and collective responsibility. Now, in this New Year, we can transform our isolation into shared commitment to life with purpose. Given the stresses and implicit and explicit messages within our culture, it will take courage and effort to consciously and consistently shift from "*I*" to "*We*." Yet the fruits of that task will be abundantly satisfying and spiritually fulfilling.

~ Rabbi Amy Small

¹ Morality. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. Basic Books. 2020 page 312