Putting Aside the Study of Individualism

TOBIN BELZER

For four years now, I've received an email on *erev* Rosh Hashanah from 10Q: Reflect. React. Renew. This is a national project sponsored by Reboot that asks individuals to respond to one question per day during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In addition to the questions, the email included my reflections from the previous year, which had been held in a "digital vault." I also had the opportunity to interact with some of my reflective compatriots at one of five live 10Q events held around the country during the late summer and early fall. Over the course of the exercise, I became aware that I was one of tens of thousands of Jews and non-Jews thinking about the same big ideas. That experience was both profoundly individualistic and complexly communal.

Questions about American individualism have animated the collective imagination of Jews and non-Jews alike for decades. One of the most popular books of the early 1970s was a polemic against individualism: sociologist Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point,* which sold half a million copies. In it, Slater analyzes the social upheaval of the 1960s to explain why most middle-class Americans are dissatisfied, despite their widespread prosperity. He draws on psychoanalytic concepts to explain how individualism, which is "rooted in the attempt to deny the reality of human interdependence," is contributing to the breakdown of American culture. He describes a broad range of topics — including gender roles, war, consumerism, child rearing, sex, economic inequality, and generational differences — to illustrate the pernicious effects of America's collective obsession with the success of the individual. He also warns that the growing popularity of technology is reducing occasions for interaction and contributing to "the pursuit of unrealistic fantasies of self-sufficiency."

The fascination with increasing American individualism continues. From Christopher Lasch's 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* to Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* in 1985, scholars have been examining how individuals make meaning in their private and public lives. Thirty years after Slater's book was published, Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, warned about the dangers of individualism, asserting that Americans' ever-increasing use of technology was resulting in the individualization of leisure time and a widespread decline in civic participation.

At the beginning of the 21st century, social scientists of American Jewry similarly focused on how increasing individualism affected the nature of Jewish identity and community. In *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (2000), Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen described how American Jewish identity among "moderately affiliated" Jews is most fundamentally guided by a search for personal meaning. They note that increasingly individualized and privatized modes of Jewish expression have ultimately led to the "contraction, decline, and marginality of the public dimension of American Jewish life."

As a post-baby boomer, I wonder if the appeal of analyzing sociopsychological developments through the lens of ever-increasing individualism will continue much beyond the present. The topic does not seem to ignite post-baby boomers' imagination with quite the same fervor. And the early concerns about the perils of technology on society have hardly been passed on to subsequent generations. Rather than leading to a sense of isolation, as Slater argued, technology has become the primary tool to organize communities and connect individuals; technology has also helped to facilitate complex identifications by allowing for multiple social, political, spiritual, and communal allegiances. As a result, post-baby boomers are likely to leave behind the focus on individualism in favor of seeking to understand how new modes of connection have transformed and reconfigured methods of communication, altered notions of privacy, and changed the nature of community and identity.

As a sociologist of American Jewry, I am eager to explore how these significant shifts in lifestyle and attitude shape our understanding of what it means to be Jewish and influence the growing complexity of the relationship between individuals and community. For example, it has been well documented that post-baby boomers *continued on next page*

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What Jewish conversation would you like to have? Send suggestions for future *Sh'ma* topics to SBerrin@shma.com.

are choosing to identify in ever more individualistic and cosmopolitan ways — finding and creating Jewish subcultures such as independent *minyanim*, Moishe House Philadelphia, East Side Jews in Los Angeles, and Lab/Shul in New York. From my perspective, it would be more interesting to explore the interplay of individualism and collectivity that is breeding dynamic new organizations and allegiances.

While the narrative of increasing individualism has been a useful frame for studying behavior for the past decades, it's time to veer off that well-trodden path. We need to utilize ethnographically grounded qualitative research that enables us to locate how Jews create meaning. It is time to tap into the burgeoning field of innovative research methodologies that can provide a wealth of tools, such as: the use of art and aesthetics; storytelling; photo-elicitation techniques; and "go-alongs," a technique used to explore subjects' understandings of their experiences as they move through, and interact with, their social environment. To add richness to current understandings of contemporary American Jewry, we must ask different questions in new ways that will, in turn, require us to look beyond the tired dichotomy of individual and community.

Circles of Connection

N A A V A   F R A N K

When Gavin's grandparents came to pick him up from preschool at the Goddard School in Reading, Mass., on the day of the Boston Marathon bombing, they told his teachers that they feared something was wrong with Gavin's dad, Marc Fucarile. They could not reach him via phone, and they did not know where he was. Soon enough, Sarah Blumenstick Girrell, owner/leader of the school, heard that Fucarile had been hurt and that he was likely going to lose a leg. What did she do?

Most of us live in clusters — in concentric circles of connections: the inner circle of close ties, the middle circle of weaker ties, and the circle of people we connect with more remotely, through some thread of shared identity. *New York Times* business writer Charles Duhigg, in *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Business,* uses this schema to describe how connections are solidified when habits move through these circles of connection.

The inner circle consists of "friendship and strong ties between close acquaintances" — people who are mutually invested in each other's wellbeing. When a tragedy hits, the people in our inner circle are activated, and the closer we are to the tragedy, the more intense our reactions are likely to be (although individuals will react differently based on their personal history).

Girrell had a close connection with Fucarile, who had always been a devoted volunteer for the school. She sent a note out to the school's families to tell them that a parent had been injured. As soon as the message was received, parents — even those who did not know Fucarile — stopped by her office to ask how to help. The school-based community rallied around the family. The school's parents engaged others in their neighborhoods and the circle of support grew.

Duhigg describes community as "the weak ties that hold neighborhoods and clans together." We participate and live in many kinds of communities — geographic, religious, school-based, professional, values-based, and hobbyist, for example — and these communities are made up of micro-communities. When an influential leader in a community sets a standard, peer pressure activates weak ties via the establishment of communal expectations. "If you ignore the social obligations of your neighborhood … you risk losing your social standing. You endanger your access to many of the social benefits that come from joining." Duhigg notes, "[W]hen the strong ties of friendship and the weak ties of peer pressure merge, they create incredible momentum." As the news spread, new communities with weak ties to Girrell and Fucarile were mobilized.

Beyond our immediate communities, we connect to a larger group — a profession, a city, a country, or a religious group. In the case of Fucarile, who was a professional roofer from Stoneham, his local community, along with the roofers union, mobilized their own campaigns for him, his family, and other local victims. The ties of friendship and the wave of peer pressure to be helpful, along with the citywide Boston group identity that was activated, created a powerful surge toward spontaneous acts of solidarity and support after the Boston tragedy.

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