

Rabbi Julie Bressler  
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5782  
Peloton and Collective Effervescence

I know it's not Yom Kippur yet, but I have a confession to make - during the pandemic, I bought a Peloton. After years of judging my friends and family members who swore by this admittedly very expensive spin bike, I caved. And when it finally arrived, I jumped in, awkward spinning shoe-clad feet first. I was surprised how much I enjoyed it and how excited I was to try new rides and new instructors. What was it about this experience that felt so invigorating, I wondered? After all, Peloton is *just* a workout bike, and an app of other workout options, but it feels like it provides you with so much more.

First: As our world turns upside down, again, and the constant decisions about our health and safety continue, following someone else's instructions for a period of time feels liberating. Many of us suffer from decision fatigue, and being told what to do lets us turn off that muscle for a little while.

Second, programs like Peloton provide us with infinite choices. Unlike the many life-and-death decisions we made about our health and safety, Peloton can provide you with whatever you were seeking in that moment - a fully curated experience just for you. Do you want to listen to hits from the 2000s while hearing about the latest pop culture news? You have ten options! Would you rather watch the hills of Malibu as you ride - just turn on the virtual ride and find yourself along the beach complete with the sound of crashing waves. You can take a ride live, or you can fit it in while your children nap. From the instructors to the time to the difficulty to the music, Peloton is a completely customizable experience to fit your needs and lifestyle.

Before the pandemic, I firmly believed that I needed people around me to enjoy my workout and push myself to my limit - being witnessed by others made me do that extra rep, add on extra weight, or continue with burpees long after I wished I had quit. And yet, I now find myself pushing myself with no one in the room, just a virtual leaderboard full of people I do not know. Somehow I feel inspired and seen by these instructors leading classes at a completely different time and in a completely different place with a great soundtrack and virtual high fives guiding my way. While Peloton and other similar devices provide what appears to be a completely individualized experience, I don't feel alone. Even though it's just me, on my bike, in my house, I am still mystically surrounded by community.

It reminds us that community can be found even while we are alone in our homes or otherwise physically disconnected from one another. We learned this in so many ways these past 18

months. I led service after service and could just see DJ or Emily, unable to see your faces, yet I felt connected to all who were watching. I couldn't even see the chat live - someone else had to text it to me! Yet, I knew you were there. I knew that my words were not entering a void. The knowledge of your presence made me feel connected in a time when I also felt isolated and alone.

We have learned so much from building digital communities over the past eighteen months. Distance and traffic no longer limited access - members and friends of TBS joined our programming - from services to classes - from all over the country and even across the world. We could eat dinner during services, pray in our pjs or with energetic children and not worry about their sanctuary behavior. When we missed a program, we could watch the recording later. We could join other communities across the country when they offered really interesting speakers, or celebrate a wedding or a B Mitzvah (party on the top, pjs on the bottom) with friends and family from across the world. Or we could attend shiva minyanim for friends and family despite distance and be there for one another in our most pressing times of need.

However, for all that we have gained, we've also found that this virtual world is missing something. We built amazing online communities. And yet, when the Zoom holiday celebration or the Peloton class ends, we are yet again alone.

Even the best virtual experiences cannot replace what we experience when we connect with one another face to face or even casually on the street. Even exchanging pleasantries with a stranger on a train is enough to spark joy.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that when we are deprived of human connection, our stress and depression levels rise.<sup>2</sup> That's not to say there is no delight in individual pastimes or personal experiences - but research shows that peak happiness lies most commonly in collective activity.<sup>3</sup>

Originally coined *Communitas* in ancient Rome, sociologist Emile Durkheim described this reality through the term "Collective Effervescence". To Durkheim, Collective Effervescence describes the sense of energy and harmony people feel when they come together in a group around a shared purpose. Anthropologist Adam Grant reflected on this term in a New York Times article this summer. He wrote, "Collective effervescence is the synchronicity you feel

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fa0037323>

<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.deseret.com/indepth/2020/5/12/21246611/coronavirus-utah-covid-physical-touch-hugs-hand-shakes-affection-distancing-effects>

<sup>3</sup>

[https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/10/opinion/sunday/covid-group-emotions-happiness.html?campaign\\_id=28&emc=edit\\_cu\\_20210714&instance\\_id=35318&nl=theater-update&regi\\_id=77528919&searchResultPosition=1&segment\\_id=63443&te=1&user\\_id=20af3b81f81f1a555ab16f95bb9621ef](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/10/opinion/sunday/covid-group-emotions-happiness.html?campaign_id=28&emc=edit_cu_20210714&instance_id=35318&nl=theater-update&regi_id=77528919&searchResultPosition=1&segment_id=63443&te=1&user_id=20af3b81f81f1a555ab16f95bb9621ef)

when you slide into rhythm with strangers on a dance floor, colleagues in a brainstorming session, cousins at a religious service or teammates on a soccer field.”<sup>4</sup> It’s a liminal moment experienced with people you may know or may not know, but it brings you together. Remember live music? Collective effervescence happens when the musician stops playing and 50,000 strangers collectively sing the chorus of a song. It is a magical experience. Who cares if you’re off key? You are screaming at the top of your lungs because the moment demands it. And as we know, singing together is one of the things least translatable over Zoom!

Judaism understands the importance of gathering together so clearly that certain rituals must be performed in a minyan, a group of at least ten individuals. Tractate Megillah 23b of the Babylonian Talmud teaches that we are required to be in a group of at least ten for many of life’s moments. A minyan supports us when we recite Kaddish for a loved one, celebrates the naming of a new baby, and provides a space for sharing our gratitude and hopes to God in daily prayers. There are certain prayers we are only to recite when we are in a minyan, specifically prayers that invoke God’s holiness. This group can be in person or virtual - the presence of faces and the significance of each individual’s participation is what matters. A minyan means each person counts, because without that person’s presence, the holiness of the prayer experience would be lessened. A minyan is a vehicle for sanctity.

There is a story told about a town that, upon preparing for a visit from the king, decided to fill a giant barrel with wine to present to the king as a gift. In order to fill the giant barrel, they came up with a brilliant idea; each family would bring one flask filled with wine and pour it into the giant barrel. This way, the giant barrel would fill with wine to please the king.

They placed the giant barrel in the center of the town with a ladder reaching to the top. Every day, people lined up to pour their flask of wine into the barrel.

At long last, the visiting king arrived. The townspeople were so excited to present the king with this wonderful gift. They presented the barrel, handed the king a kingly goblet, filled it with wine from the barrel, and waited proudly for his reaction. They were shocked by the look on the king’s face as he drank the wine. He was obviously displeased. When asked why he was so unhappy he responded, “Well, it’s just plain water!”

It turns out that each of the people in the town had thought to themselves: “Why should I have to pour in a flask of wine? I will pour in water instead. I am sure no one will notice if there is just one flask of water among all that wine.” Everyone in the town made the same calculation and

---

4

[https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/10/opinion/sunday/covid-group-emotions-happiness.html?campaign\\_id=28&emc=edit\\_cu\\_20210714&instance\\_id=35318&nl=theater-update&regi\\_id=77528919&searchResultPosition=1&segment\\_id=63443&te=1&user\\_id=20af3b81f81f1a555ab16f95bb9621ef](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/10/opinion/sunday/covid-group-emotions-happiness.html?campaign_id=28&emc=edit_cu_20210714&instance_id=35318&nl=theater-update&regi_id=77528919&searchResultPosition=1&segment_id=63443&te=1&user_id=20af3b81f81f1a555ab16f95bb9621ef)

each poured a flask of water instead of wine into the giant barrel. Everyone assumed that everyone else would take responsibility. But what enables communities to thrive requires exactly the opposite. Thriving communities know that our flask of wine, our voice, our participation, our reach out, is what makes a community holy. When we all assume someone else will step up, or someone else will reach out, we end up with water instead of wine. It is on each one of us to be that holy vessel that fills up another, and fills up our whole community, in a time of need.

We need not choose self or community - this pandemic has reminded us that both can exist at once. We can experience both the individual joy and customization of experiences like Peloton and on-demand services and programs alongside *communitas* and collective effervescence. Our Jewish tradition elevates this idea through a famous chassidic teaching spread by philosopher Martin Buber: "Everyone must have two pockets, so that they can reach into the one or the other, according to their needs. In their right pocket are the words: 'For my sake was the world created,' and in their left: 'I am but dust and ashes.'"<sup>5</sup>

We exist in this both/and - for us the world is created: our individual needs and desires matter. And, too, we are but dust and ashes: we are part of something so much bigger than ourselves. During this pandemic, we have lived largely in the middle, and we have felt each of these extremes - we have had moments when we needed to lean into our own needs and shut out the world. And at other times, we have seen how we are all intrinsically connected, such as the challenging reality of the vaccine rollout. It has brought into clear focus the words of activist Lila Watson who famously decreed - your liberation is bound up in mine - without herd immunity and with new variants cropping up, Covid continues to dictate our daily lives.

If we zoom in on our TBS community (yes, pun intended), how might we find this balance between honoring individual needs and the needs of the whole community? As a congregation, connecting with one another is how we thrive. Throughout this pandemic, we have shown up for one another in myriad ways. To honor the individual, we sent restaurant gift cards to someone who wasn't able to cook because of an injury or illness, reached out to each member, and created expanded educational and programmatic offerings to meet our different schedules and needs. And we have honored the collective community through observing unique holiday celebrations, being very cautious about Covid, and showing up to support the needs of our whole community and larger world as we saw and experienced so much change.

And showing up for ourselves and one another in community is not limited to the more obvious moments. How can we show up by saying hi to the person standing alone at the oneg, or coming to a committee meeting, or volunteering to drop off a meal? To quote our amazing

---

<sup>5</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), pp. 249-250.

Chesed chair Mindy Pasco-Anderson, “you get out so much more than you put in when you help someone else. You can’t fix everything, but you can do what you can.”

As a temple, we create the giant barrel, and it’s on each one of us to fill the barrel with our special wine - with our own gifts. And we remember that coming together as a community is not about the quantity of people, it’s about the quality of the connections. Loneliness is not reserved for those who are physically alone. When we do not feel connected to or noticed by anyone around us, it doesn’t matter how crowded the room is.<sup>6</sup> Feeling connected is about being seen, and thus, it is on each of us to see one another - wherever those interactions may occur.

One of the central messages of Rosh Hashanah is Hayom Harat Olam - today the world is created anew.

But this newness does not mean that we forget what came before, that we forget what we have experienced. We approach each new year forever changed by what we experienced the week before, the year before, the decade before. And when we have lived through such a unique past eighteen months, and continue to be impacted by this pandemic that alters our day-to-day lives, we approach this new year a bit more wearied, a bit more affected by what we have been through. And yet, we are called on to begin anew, and to recognize a world created anew. We cannot yet know what that new world will look like - what type of support we or those in our community will need, and how we will connect. But we do know that each one of us plays a key part of what will sustain us moving forward.

And so, as we move into 5782, let us harness this opportunity for newness and change, and learn how to fit together again. It will feel different, and at times it may feel awkward, but we will piece the puzzle together, from our peloton bikes, our zoom rooms, and our backyard hangouts, through waves in the grocery store and carpool drop-offs and pick-ups. And, slowly but surely, from within the sacred walls and pews of Temple Beth Shalom.

---

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry\\_turkle\\_connected\\_but\\_alone/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_connected_but_alone/transcript?language=en)