

Do Americans still believe that we share a common good?

70 years ago, in the war against Nazism, Americans across the country accepted ration cards. They selflessly supported the war effort because they believed in the common good. How different things are today! Today, in the war against terrorism, when the FBI asked to see the contents of the San Bernardino terrorist's iPhone, Apple CEO Tim Cook refused to create the necessary backdoor. This would be an invasion of privacy and set a dangerous precedent, he claimed. Said the FBI in the wake of a terrorism investigation: (Special Agent Jack Bennett), "We were pretty surprised this became a national debate. We were trying to get on one phone because we had 14 murdered people."

The common good, versus the Individual. Now, you and I have our personal rights to privacy safeguarded by the 14th Amendment. But how is this growing focus on our individual selves influencing our society as a whole? Consumed with my own interests and opinions, do I still regard my neighbor, as "my fellow American"? Do we still feel that we share values with each other, that we have responsibilities to each other?

Social scientists call this growing focus on our needs and wants, "cultural narcissism." Scientists W. Keith Campbell and Jean Twenge say we can track the rise in cultural narcissism in ways like, believe it or not, our pronoun usage. In the 5 million books housed by Google and the lyrics of Billboard's Top 10 songs, the use of the words "I, me, mine" has grown, while the use of the collective words "we, us, our" has declined. This cultural narcissism is reflected in our growing insistence that our personal desires are paramount to everything else. There used to be a day when we valued being similar to others around us. Now we focus on how individualistic we can be- from our custom homes, to how we order our coffee over at Simones. In the 1940s, a third of us named our sons one of the top ten most popular names in America. Nowadays we search for the most unique names... and create unique spellings, as if to say, this person is unlike anyone else. Society has grown and changed to accommodate our individual needs- take, for example, our grocery stores, which respond to our needs to be gluten free, lactose free, GMO free, sugar free, fat free or organic! And while most of us would applaud this recognition of our individual tastes- social scientists tell us it adds to this widespread tendency toward vanity, materialism, and entitlement. At its worse, our need for individualism is expressed in our desire to share all our thoughts on twitter, facebook and social media. At its best, the focus on catering to the individual leads to groundbreaking technologies like immunotherapy- where we can tailor individual medical treatments to each person. Campbell and Twenge would argue that all of these examples reveal a prevailing self-centeredness.

And so I ask, is America in danger of losing the "we", as in "We the people", to the "I" as in—its all about me?

When we as Americans so prioritize our individual interests and desires, then what is it that I am willing to give up, or compromise, for a greater communal

good? In a nation beset by violence, where 3 people are murdered by guns every hour in this country-- which means one person will be killed by a gun by the time this sermon is over-- will I compromise any rights as a gun owner? Will I agree to regulation, to self-restraint from what I want— the type of weapon, the background checks, the size of the magazine - for what might be a common good? In Australia, after 35 people were killed and 23 wounded in a 1996 massacre (Port Arthur, Tasmania,) Australians willingly curtailed gun rights for what they perceived was a common good. Could we do the same here? Or take water usage. In the midst of a 5-year drought, can I willingly limit my use of water in my kitchen, shower and lawn, for the sake of California's future water needs? Or dependence on fossil fuel. Can I curtail driving my car—perhaps one of the things we do that most caters to our individual lives and convenience-- when driving perpetuates environmental pollution? Have we begun to think of these as personal rights, and how does that impact America's growing need for more societal responsibilities and restraints, for the common good?

Fortunately, "We the people" was crafted by founding fathers who knew that our individual desires can be pursued only within our obligations to the common good. Our liberty must be balanced by the needs of community, our rights must be balanced by our responsibilities. Our founders built the country on this set of delicate balances. But when we lose these civic values, the balances are upset. Liberty extinguishes community. We believe our rights outweigh our civic responsibilities. We lose our sense of national community. We become like guests in a hotel- living next door to each other but with no responsibilities for the other, or the common space we share. And if we have no bonds that hold us together, then we have no communal resolve to solve any of our country's problems.

In American society, we are at a moment of needing to restore the "we" against the growing appetite for the "I."

But this balancing the "I" and the "We" isn't just an American concern. As Jews, we too struggle with the balance between the self and the community. On one hand it might seem that, as liberal Jews, we hold fast to the supremacy of the "I" -- that liberal Judaism is about individual freedoms. We are free to choose how much, or how little we participate in Jewish ritual life, how much or how little we support and sustain our synagogues, non-profits, federations, and Israel. We choose whether Jewish morals and ethics impact our relationships, our philanthropy, and our social justice efforts. As liberal Jews, we insist on the right to choose what matters to us, and how we will live our lives. We are all about the "I", but do we do so at the expense of the "we?"

The answer is no- we cannot be about the I without the We, or Judaism ceases to exist as. The moment we turn our eye from our concern for others, we stop being Jews. A Jew cannot exist in a vacuum- everything about Judaism compels us to participate in, care for, and sustain the community... and its values, beliefs, and ideals. And this is the difference between being an American and being a Jew. One can be an American, by virtue of one's birth to American parents or naturalization. You can choose to never participate in society, and still be an American. Your children will be American- by virtue of the place of their birth. Not so for Judaism, for if being Jewish asks no commitment to the We, then there is no community to

perpetuate. Your children cannot be Jewish because Judaism becomes a relic- just a word that describes one's heritage, not a people with a future. Judaism ceases to exist the moment we separate the I from the We.

And furthermore, the essence of being Jewish is that the I and the We are intertwined. There is no I vs. We- there is only I and We. The I can only reach its full potential within the framework of caring for others, sustaining the community. And the community can only thrive when individuals are given ways to express their higher selves, their values and beliefs.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik expressed this in his famous characterization of Adam I and Adam II. Soloveitchik personified us as having a worldly desire for material success, for ambition and status. This part of us that focuses on our own accomplishments he called our Adam I. But within us lies Adam II, the one who yearns for meaning and purpose. We fulfill ourselves by being committed to higher ideals and enduring values. When we selflessly give our love and care for the good of others, for the benefit of society, this is our Adam II. And the human being possesses both Adams, balancing the need to strive for self and the need to be committed to something transcendent.

In America, we can choose to only actualize our self-focused Adam I. We continue to exist as a country, but America is the poorer when we focus only on ourselves and our wants. We are richer when we are selfless and embracing of a common good. This is a good day to ask ourselves the question- do I believe in the common good, and what am I willing to do to affirm that value in my country, my state, my civic community?

And it is a perfect day for asking ourselves, how and when and where am I committed to my Jewish community? Do I raise my voice in support of Jewish causes? Am I giving my creativity to ensure a vibrant community? Am I engaging with the wide world of Jewish texts, which is the core of what Judaism is about? Am I am linking my spiritual life to the soul of the Jewish people? Am I allocating tzedekah to sustain the institutions that do the work of representing Jewish concerns in the world, and who care for the individuals in need, here and in Israel? Today we lift up the values of Judaism-- to teach, to learn, to pray, to celebrate, to repair the world, to grow in wisdom, and to pass our values on to the next generation-- for in affirming the communal good, we find our own most personal fulfillment.

There is a beautiful teaching in Talmud that even the poor are asked to give tzedekah....certainly not to impose a hardship, but because there is a deep recognition that we are fulfilled as human beings when we give to others. We are responsible one for each other- Kol Yisrael aravim zeh b'zeh. Can we bring that message to our fellow Americans? Can our Jewish wisdom help us say, "when we see wrongdoings in our society, we can't point fingers, rather, we must take responsibility, for we have let society become this way?" Hillel the sage asked us, two millennia ago: "if I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am only for myself what am I? And if not now, when?"

The greatest American generation was the greatest generation, not because of their military strength, but because of their moral strength- the selfless way they banded together for the common good. As Jews, we know what it means to reach

our greatest potential in the many acts of giving to community. May this be the message we reclaim this HHD and that we bring to our beloved country, in our troubled times ahead. Amen.