

INDIVIDUALISM VS. COLLECTIVISM



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI
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If given the choice, would you sacrifice your own goals, dreams, and desires for the sake of your family or the welfare of your group? Dutch social psychologist, Geert Hofstede, conducted pioneering work in the field of cross-cultural psychology, analyzing the differences between different types of cultures. Two essential elements of his work include characterizing individualist versus collectivist cultures. Individualist cultures—such as the United States and Western Europe—tend to value independence, autonomy, and uniqueness. In contrast, collectivist cultures—typified by East Asian countries—value group membership and harmony over the expression of one’s personal values or opinions.

Does the Jewish tradition fit into an individualist or a collectivist framework?

One of the classical sources that suggests a collectivist trend within Jewish thought is rooted in the passage of rebuke found in *Parshat Bechukotai*. In what was meant as a haunting description of destruction, the Torah states that even with no one pursuing them, *Am Yisrael* will run away in such a panic that they will stumble over one another (Vayikra 26:37). In this imagery of people stumbling over each other, the Sages find an allusion to the idea that all of Israel is responsible for one another: “*kol Yisrael areivim ze baze*h.” This principle has ramifications for several laws, but also serves as a deeper ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical message of collective responsibility. Through the challenges and the celebrations, we are in this together. That notion generates moral and religious responsibilities towards one another.

Yet, despite this and other indications tending towards categorizing Torah as a collectivist system, we find several individualistic notions within Torah, as well. As an example, every individual is obligated to say, “the world was created for me.” In addition, an individual is not allowed to be sacrificed for the sake of saving the community, and one is obligated to save oneself before saving somebody else.

Not fitting well into either paradigm, it becomes clear that Jewish thought contains both collectivist and individualist impulses. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains in his essay, *The Community*: “The greatness of man manifests itself in his inner contradiction, in his dialectical nature, in his being single and unrelated to anyone, as well as in his being thou-related and belonging to a community structure.” The different sources that push and pull in different directions reflect this tension that requires us to balance the individual and collective components of our natures.

This blended balance of individualism and collectivism is further reflected in the concept of counting, as related to counting the 50 years until the *Yovel* (Jubilee) and the counting of the weeks and days of the *Omer*. While discussing the laws of *Yovel* in *Parshat Behar*, the verse states in the singular tense, “you should count” – “*ve-safarta lecha*” (*Vayikra* 25:8). The Sages understand this as a directive towards the court. There should be one singular count for the entire population done by the *Beit Din*. When discussing the counting of the *Omer*, there are two different verses, with two distinct tenses used. On the one hand it states that you should count in the singular “*tispor lach*,” (*Devarim* 16:9) but it also states the same idea in the plural “*u-sefartem lachem*” (*Vayikra* 23:15). The Sages learn from this that there is both an obligation for the individual to count as well as a directive for the courts to count on a communal level.

The counting of the *Omer*, rabbinically symbolic of our preparation for receiving the Torah, incorporates the dual elements of individual and communal responsibility. We are both an individualistic and collectivist culture and it is our job to use the guidelines and framework of the Torah to strike a balance between prioritizing ourselves and serving our community.

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