



## The Community and the Individual

by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

*Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz is about to complete his monumental project, a 45-volume translation and commentary on the Talmud, begun in 1965. This accomplishment will be celebrated worldwide with a Global Day of Jewish Learning on Nov. 7, 2010. We are proud to be partnering with the Global Day. For more information and to find a Global Day event in your community visit [www.theglobalday.com](http://www.theglobalday.com).*

"Wherever there are ten Jews, the *Shekhinah* - Divine revelation - is also present there." The Talmud (Sanhedrin 39a) speaks here not only of ten Jews praying or studying Torah together: it speaks of any ten Jews. A community is not just a mere social gathering, connecting people together: it is a glorious entity in itself. The Almighty is living within us not as individuals, but as a community. But after we fulfill the needs of the community, what happens to the individual? What does the individual do, both when within and outside the community? Every individual is, for better or for worse, a unique being. Even in a community that is a body divine, each one has his own soul, pains, joys.

In our social life there are, then, two different calls: one to the community; the other, to the individual. In a community, one sometimes tends to forget that a *minyan* is made up of ten individuals, and that each individual has a life of his own, with a call within that life.

We learn something about the call to the community and the individual from reading of the *Shema*. We may not always be aware of the purpose of the *Shema*, but it is a part of what we really are; our existence is built upon it. The first two portions are somewhat repetitious; yet there is one major difference between them: the first portion is written in the singular, while the second is written in the plural. The first portion turns to the individual, while the second speaks to the community. The one dealing with the individual speaks about loving God "with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." The second portion speaks of you (plural) loving God "with all your hearts and with all your souls," without mentioning "with all your might."

To give God "all your heart" means to do things whole-heartedly, to worship G-d with zest. "With all your soul" means, with one's very life.

But what is "with all your might"? That is very hard to explain and translate. It may mean: you should give God all your heart and all your life, and then you have to give Him more. That "more" is the essential part of "with all your might." For every person, there is something more precious than life itself - that additional thing which is unthinkable to give.

This last demand, however, is only made of each individual member of the community. One must remember that maintaining a community and its institutions requires individual giving and often personal sacrifice. When that is lacking, no communal work will do any good; for in the final analysis, the community begins and ends with that which the individual can or will do.

We are now in the month of Elul. Elul is a time for looking in the mirror at oneself and trying to find out where I am standing in the world. It is about figuring out: Who am I? Where do I really belong? Where am I now? In Elul we are supposed to meet ourselves, which is so much more difficult than meeting someone else. It is the time for making sure we have not missed the first person singular. And when I do meet myself, further questions arise: What does the individual do within the community? How can the community be made real? When it is made to stand on the real pillars of the community - namely, the individuals.

A Jewish way of putting it is to say that each of the individuals within the community should be a *mentsch*. We need to know not only how many organizers and how many greater and smaller personalities there are in our community; we should wish to know how many *menschen* there are. That is a different way of counting.

The shofar is a very primitive, inarticulate instrument, not at all musical. Its cry is the voice of "me," whoever "me" is, shouting: I am here, I still exist. I may not be of any value, but this primal, coarse voice comes from within me. This sound is the voice that will be recognized after all the words are forgotten. The blowing of the shofar reminds people of that most basic, fundamental question: Who are you? What are you going to do? What are you going to do with yourself?

This kind of a cry does not create a community, nor does it create *Klal Yisrael*. However, it reshapes the community and puts it on a very different basis. Only when a community is made up of a *minyan* not of twenty legs, but of ten hearts, does it have a good chance of being built in the right way.

May you be blessed with a happy and healthy New Year.