

One People, One Heart, By Ayelet Friedman, 15 years old

At first, the news of this novel coronavirus was told to me as if it was a situation of little importance. But as it started to spread like wildfire, my feeling of normal contentment immediately changed to anxiety for the well-being of our future and our safety. People have not stopped dying and the cure may remain unknown. What once seemed like an insignificant virus turned into a frightening, international pandemic, striking the most vulnerable victims without warning. Through this disastrous time, we can only depend on Hashem, and our hishtadlut, our personal effort, to look out for our community.

Throughout the trials of Jewish history, no matter the circumstance, there has been a continued strong sense of community. Especially during these extremely difficult times, we must be there for each other. As a true nation, we must exemplify the phrase, "כָּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד," or "One Person, One Heart," to the fullest. Through the celebratory and heart-wrenching times, Jews have made it a priority to unite and support each other. There is innate relief knowing that our shared Judaism and our beliefs make us more than just individuals who abide by the same rules. Really, we are something more. In our hearts we are a family.

When people are defenseless or when they need aid or mitigation, they frequently turn to others. And as the virus wreaks havoc, even though physically we cannot come within 6 feet of one another, we continue forward with one heart. This is the will of Hashem. No matter what we endure, we must band together, because together we are stronger.

But what really is a community? It is typically understood as people who live in the same area or have common interests and goals. But a Jewish community, and our Baltimore Jewish community, surpasses this simple definition. We tend for our neighbors as if they were our own sisters and brothers. Although this is an obligation, as it says in the Talmud, "Kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh," or "All of Israel are responsible for one another," we view this to be a privilege that we happily execute.

Through this pandemic, we constantly hear of people, maybe even our friends and family, getting sick. Jews immediately will daven (pray) and recite Tehillim (Psalms) for those in the community, and use their time -- time that they can never regain -- even if they have never met the afflicted person in their life. The amount of love and effort that Jews continuously shower upon strangers is astonishing. Because deep in our hearts we recognize that it does not matter if they would return the favor or carry out the action we have done for them; rather that that person that you may have helped is a member of our nation, and this is enough.

One may begin to wonder about the importance of supporting each other. We are all strongly empowered individuals that can alone conquer what we presume as the inevitable if we are willing to put in the time it will take and the energy it undoubtedly will consume. With assistance from others, though, the burden of that heavy work may be lifted from upon you, and over time may even disappear, being replaced by a happier life filled with appreciation for others. Over this past year, though it may have been extremely hard, and the future remains murky, I regularly witness Jewish people who remain optimistic as they are assisting others. The idea that I may have helped to support someone in our community leaves a sense of warmth in my heart. When you are selfless, it is a gain for yourself because it is on the path to becoming a more exceptional human being.

Our Jewish community is built of this fabric. We are embodied with a benevolent heart, and filled with leaders, laypeople, and unsung heroes we all rely upon. We are blessed with people that are so willing to give over what they have, and those who will support community members through simple or deeper troubles. Jews may have built this sense of community, but that community has in turn created within us a deeper connection for one another, and even more so, one strong heart.