

We Declare Interdependence

Rosh Hashanah II 5787

September 13, 2026

Rabbi Evan Traylor, CBE Assistant Rabbi

The ideals of this country's Declaration of Independence have reverberated throughout our society for 250 years. This declaration broke free from the old world order, establishing a new one built on freedom, liberty, and democracy. To be sure, these ideals were never present or real for everyone in this place. But the centrality of independence has created a country that is creative, innovative, ever-changing, and growing. We constantly aspire toward something more, something better, that can be accomplished through hard work and dedication. And yet, what is also clear is that over these many years, this Declaration of Independence, a declaration of being separate and apart, has taken root in our society in detrimental ways.

The biologist Lynn Margulis notes in her 1965 book, *What is Life*: “Independence is a political, not a scientific, term.” The very idea of independence belongs in the political realm, not in the realm of science. Biologically, we are not meant to be apart from other people, just as animals all around the world hunt in packs, fly in formation, and migrate in groups. As human beings, we rely on each other for survival, for care, for support, for comfort, and for joy. And it is not only human biology that points us in this direction, but Jewish tradition as well. While the founders of this country declared independence all those years ago, science and Judaism articulate a different truth, one grounded in millennia of evidence: That in order for us to thrive in this world, we don’t need more independence; we need interdependence. In fact, 250 years later, what we need now in this moment more than ever, is a Declaration of Interdependence.

Now, it's important to note that this phrase, Declaration of Interdependence, was coined more than one hundred years ago and has been used several times since then: The United States Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace used this phrase when advocating for the passage of the Farm Act of 1933, imploring Congress to protect rural Americans; philosopher and historian Will Durant used it when cobbling together an interfaith forum in 1945 to respond to the devastation of World War II; Greenpeace and other more modern ecological organizations have used it to try and reaffirm our commitment to our planet¹; and just this year, both the Davos World Economic Forum² and a group of progressive activists³ have used this phrase to express a new paradigm for living in our world today. These declarations have lifted up our shared humanity in an attempt to create a better world. But perhaps missing from these declarations is something that all of us gathered here today can bring to this conversation; something that again stretches beyond modern political ideas: we can bring Jewish wisdom.

¹ Declaration of Interdependence, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_of_Interdependence.

² Davos World Economic Forum, <https://www.interdependencedeclaration.org/>.

³ Next250, <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/next250-declaration-of-interdependence/>.

Let's begin with the Hebrew Bible: In its entirety, including Torah, Prophets, and Writings, the word טוב, meaning "good" is used 565 times as an adjective. Only in two of those instances, 2 out of 565, do we read the phrase בלא טוב, "not good." Remarkably, both instances are about relationship and community. After God has created Adam, the very first human being, God declares, לֹא־טוֹב הֵינִי לְאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ, "It is not good for the human to be alone." Nachmanides, our rabbinic commentator from 13th century Spain, explains that "it cannot be said of humans that "it is good" when we are alone for we will not be able to so exist." Deeming the isolation of this individual, the very first human being, as detrimental, God creates Eve, jumpstarting our innate human need for relationship, connection, and community.

If our Declaration of Interdependence was first uttered in the Garden of Eden, its hopeful, loving call reaches a climax at Mount Sinai. After escaping enslavement in Ancient Egypt, it is time for the people, all the people, to commit themselves to one another and to God. Standing shoulder to shoulder, across generations, this moment in Torah binds us all together, creating a shared covenant that our people have sustained for millennia. We can imagine, as we often do, that we too were also present in that moment of divine revelation. As if we too, each of us, could look to our right, and look to our left, and ahead of us and behind us, and know that we were in this together, that we need one another to thrive in this world.

After Mount Sinai, we read the only other time the Hebrew Bible includes the phrase **לֹא טוֹב**, “not good.” Moses has set about the work of building a new society for all of the Israelites; but his father-in-law, Jethro, sees the ways in which the work is too much for Moses to complete alone. Jethro admonishes Moses: **לֹא-טוֹב הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה**, “The thing you are doing is not good.” **לֹא-תוּכַל עֲשֹׂהוּ לְבַדְּךָ**, “You cannot do this alone.” We need each other, our Torah tells us.

In one week from tonight, we will again gather shoulder to shoulder, across generations, for Yom Kippur, our day of repentance, repair, and return. On that day, we confront our sins from this past year, the ways in which we have fallen short. Our sages teach us that for sins we have committed against God, the prayers of Yom Kippur serve as our repentance. But for sins we have committed against other people, our prayers are not enough; we are responsible for repairing the harm that we committed by seeking forgiveness from those individuals.

The twentieth century theologian William J. Everett defines sin as "rejecting relationships, both private and public, in which we affirm our own dignity and respect the dignity of the other." Positive, healthy relationships are an affirmation of the divinity found in each and every one of us. Rejecting those relationships, rejecting our own holiness, or ignoring the holiness of another person, constitutes sin. We could understand this just by looking at the long list of sins we will recite as one community on Yom Kippur. Many of these have to do with the ways in which we've harmed other people in the past year, ways that we've rejected their humanity, and our own. Another theologian, Martin Buber, furthers this idea through his claim that when two people are in deep relationship with one another, that space is how God becomes present. Therefore, rejecting relationship is not only about harming another person; it is also a rejection of God, the divine, the great oneness of the universe. The only way to correct for this sin, to atone for it, is to repair our relationships and cherish them; it is to declare interdependence.

For as much as we may want to declare interdependence, to improve our relationships and belonging in community this year, it's clear we are living in a moment in which being in relationship with one another feels difficult. In 2023, United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared that this country was suffering from the effects of a loneliness epidemic. This groundbreaking report outlined the ways in which our society has come apart from one another, leading more people to feel the effects of sustained loneliness and isolation. Here are some of the statistics from the report:

- From 2003 to 2019, social isolation, measured by time spent alone, increased almost 24 hours per month. That's an entire extra day each month that many of us are spending by ourselves, as opposed to being in the company of others; and this is before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In 1999, 70% of Americans were involved with a house of worship; in 2023, that number was only 49%, dipping below half of the population of this country.
- And perhaps most shockingly, the report notes that "lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day."⁴

⁴ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

These statistics paint a terrifying picture of our reality. And, it's important to say that the experience of feeling lonely is entirely natural; humans have felt lonely all throughout our existence. And being alone, spending time by ourselves, is different from feeling lonely or isolated. The negative physical, emotional, and mental effects named in this study and others are a result of sustained loneliness and isolation, over a long period of time. And yet, the effects of this epidemic are increasing dramatically, hurting millions of people throughout this country.

I am sure that each of us could create a list of reasons for this increase in loneliness: the COVID-19 pandemic kept us physically apart from one another; political divisions in this country have frayed relationships; the rapid advances in social media and AI make us feel as if we are connected, but keep us wired to our phones; our workplaces shifting to the more convenient and comfortable work from home; even small changes in technology allow us to have groceries, take-out, and packages delivered instead of going to a store or restaurant and interacting with the people around us.

Although the Surgeon General's report focuses on the 21st century, the sociologist Robert Putnam has observed that this trend away from community and toward loneliness and isolation has been growing for decades. His seminal book on this topic, *Bowling Alone*, shows the gradual decrease in bowling leagues, civic organizations, religious institutions, and more beginning in the mid-twentieth century. Perhaps you've felt some of the effects of this growing loneliness and isolation in our society: the annual college roommate trip that somehow stopped; moving the weekly boardgame night to monthly; finding yourself volunteering less in the community; people not as available to get dinner, talk about a book, or go for a walk in the park. We are slowly coming apart from one another, and we've been on this path for some time now. Taken all together, these factors in our society have led us to a time and place in which loneliness, isolation, and disconnection plague our entire society.

This is not the way we were meant to live. So as we enter this new year, the question before us right now is where do we go from here? The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asked that very question and offered us a stark choice in the last book of his life: “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?” For the chaos that surrounded Dr. King then, and for the chaos that surrounds us right now, the answer, the antidote, the salve must be community. It must be the building of the beloved community, a vision of the world to come that Dr. King preached about, in which the divine nature of every person is known and appreciated and protected and celebrated. He notes towards the end of his book that “In a real sense, all life is interrelated...whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”⁵ And so our response to the chaos, as our biological makeup urges us, as our Torah guides us, our response must be one of community, one of connection, one of interdependence.

⁵ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos Or Community*, Pg. 191.

So what could that actually mean? What could choosing community over chaos actually look like, sound like, feel like in our world today? Before going big, let's start small and personal. I'll invite you to pause and recall 1-2 of the most significant moments in your life. (Pause) Was it a wedding? Welcoming a child into the world? A big work accomplishment? Dancing at a simcha? Traveling to your dream destination? Saying goodbye to a loved one? Mourning them at the cemetery? For me, it's standing under the chupah with Lindsey and all our family and friends; or being here, in this sanctuary and with this community, as we gave our daughter Ida her Hebrew name. Across each of these memories, the moments that make up our lives, that we hold the most close, there were probably other people there. People you love and care about and who bring so much goodness to your life. Declaring interdependence is about showing up for those people and creating more of these moments that make you smile widely, jump for joy, warm your heart, and nourish your soul.

Let's widen the scope now: what could declaring interdependence look like for the Jewish people? Towards the end of our Torah, as the Israelites prepare to finally enter the Promised Land, we witness one final moment of our ancestors declaring interdependence with one another: אַתֶּם כֻּלְּכֶם, "You stand here this day, all of you... יְשׂרָאֵל, "all of the people of Israel" for this moment of covenant, between each of you and with God. וְלֹא אִתְּכֶם לְבַדְכֶם, "But, it is not with you alone..."⁶ This covenant will be constructed, maintained, and cherished by each of you, and all of you, not just for the Israelites gathered in this one moment of Torah, but with all people who are part of this community for all time. This moment stretches out and binds us across thousands of years of tradition, a tradition that has always included Jews believing, exploring, and practicing Judaism differently. Declaring interdependence for the Jewish people, in this moment, and in this city, is about staying in relationship, still seeing others as Jews or part of the Jewish community, even when we disagree about the biggest issues.

⁶ Deuteronomy 29:9-14

And what makes that possible is showing up for one another, building community and relationships that can help us navigate this chaotic moment in time. That's what we're building here at CBE, but it takes all of us, all of us showing up for one another. So perhaps this is the year that you sign-up for Chesed and help other community members in need of support. Or you take a class, diving deep into a new Jewish topic. Or you join one of our new Shabbat initiatives, bringing even more meaning and celebration to Shabbat each week. Or you join one of our many small groups, gathering with others around a shared interest, identity, or life stage, our own localized response to the loneliness epidemic. Any one of these ways, among many more, is how you could declare interdependence with other Jews this coming year, building relationships that can sustain us through the chaos of this time.

We started small and personal, widened to the Jewish community, and now we can imagine what fulfilling this Declaration of Interdependence could mean for our city, country, and world. Seeing ourselves as bound up with other people we don't yet know, but understanding that our lives are intertwined in miraculous ways. It's the small things: talking with a neighbor as you walk the dog; volunteering on Sundays to deliver meals to our neighbors in shelters; taking out your headphones to say hi to the cashier at the corner store; all of these things and more build small relationships that make a difference. Thinking back to that horrific day 25 years ago, many of you felt bound up with other New Yorkers, doing everything possible to support one another, care for the injured, and show love for the grieving. And you continued that support, care, and love for days, weeks, months, and years afterward. As many of you know, I grew up in Oklahoma City, and although I was only a baby when the Oklahoma City Bombing happened, I heard stories all my life of the ways that individuals, all around the city, state, and even country, showed up to provide support, care, and love. These moments of tragedy and others - natural disasters here and abroad, October 7th and the devastating violence since, ICE crackdowns, and more - these moments make our biology kick-in and remind us of our interdependence. That we are bound up with one another. That relationships, big and small, with loved ones and with strangers, within our Jewish community and beyond, that relationships are at the center of our life. We need only remind ourselves of that truth as often as we can.

In closing, I've been reflecting upon the second of Rabbi Hillel's three questions found in Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of our Ancestors. First, he asks "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" His third question is perhaps the most famous: "And if not now, when?" But his second question strikes at the heart of our exploration today: "But if I am only for myself, then what am I?"⁷ If we are only for ourselves, who are really in this world? We may be upholding the ideals of this country's Declaration of Independence, but we would be forgoing what is clear from both human biology and the wisdom of our Torah: we need each other. Just as the sound of the shofar declares the start of a bright new year, may each of us declare interdependence. May we declare that a life together is better than a life isolated and lonely. May we declare our hope in the reality of the beloved community, a world in which all God's children recognize the divinity in one another. May we declare our hope in ourselves, in one another, and in our world. A hope we so desperately need right now. A hope that we can bring into this new year. Shanah tovah!

⁷ Pirkei Avot 1:14