

If I am not for Myself  
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5770-2009  
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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain tells the following story:

One Friday afternoon, a friend of his was driving along the highway to join his family for Sabbath—the Catskills were where many New York Jews had holiday homes. He saw a motorist stranded by the roadside, his car immobilized by a flat tire. He was wearing a yarmulke.

Naturally the driver assumed that he too was heading for the Catskills and was concerned that he might not be able to change the wheel in time to reach his destination before the Sabbath began.

He stopped, and helped the man change the tire.

As he was parting, the owner of the other car removed his yarmulke and put it in his pocket.

“Why are you doing that?” said the first. “Don’t you wear it all the time?”

“Oh no,” said the other. “You see, I’m not Jewish.”

“Then why were you wearing a yarmulke?”

“Simple,” he replied. ‘I know that if someone is in trouble and is wearing a yarmulke, a Jew will stop to help him.’”

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Jews have a long history of helping other Jews in times of need. Just as one example, the rabbinic literature makes it very clear that the responsibility of redeeming Jews held captive rests not only on the family of the captives, but on all Jews, regardless of whether or not they have any connection to the captives.

Jews have created organizations to settle immigrants, feed the hungry, provide free loans and rescue persecuted Jews from around the world, from the Soviet Union to Ethiopia. Let us not forget the support offered by Jews in the diaspora, financial and otherwise, for the state of Israel. Jews have a history of supporting fellow Jews.

As we find it in the Talmud's discussion of Shavuot, "Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh vZeh," "All of Israel is responsible for one another."

Hillel, the great sage, put it another way, using three questions:

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" and, as commonly translated, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" Finally, "If not now, when?"

Hillel seems to guide us to the following answers:

Better stand up for yourself,  
But not only for yourself.  
And you better act before it is too late.

We are given the directive to stand up to face our challenges and to help others face their own.

At Goldman Union Camp this summer, we discussed this quote from Hillel.

At the time, I thought about how these statements applied to the troubling story of Abraham and Isaac as they walked up the mountain together, today's Torah portion. I imagined these thoughts going through their heads.

Abraham thinking that he needed to do what he needed to do, even if it would be to his detriment, the loss of a beloved son. Isaac, in conflict, wondering if he should stand up for himself against his father or allow his father to act on behalf of his family and future generations. Both knowing that time was growing short.

I struggled to make Hillel's statements fit into the story, but did not find an answer then. At camp, I didn't need the answer. We didn't discuss Hillel's quote in relation to the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac. Instead we talked about real life situations. Let me present one of them to you.

You are one of few Jews in your school or in your workplace. Your schoolmates, or co-workers, perhaps including people whom you like and with whom you wish to be friends, begin ridiculing a fellow student or co-worker because they are Jewish. What would you do and why?

We gave the students the following options:

1. Let everyone know that you are Jewish and that what they are saying is wrong.
2. Say nothing, because it likely won't stop them from being mean to the other student and will only result in them being mean to you as well.
3. Let them know that you disagree with their ridiculing Jews, but do NOT tell them that you are a Jew.
4. Join in ridiculing the other Jew so that they will not suspect you of being Jewish.
5. Try to change the subject.

The staff stressed to the students that the question is not what SHOULD you do, but what WOULD you do. Which option would you likely choose in that situation if it actually happened to you?

Almost all of the students said that they would not seek friendships with the people involved once they knew how they felt

about Jews, so the issue is primarily one of what would they do in the specific situation and why?

Of note, no small percentage of the Middle School students had experiences similar to this scenario and therefore many were reacting based upon what they actually did or would do should the situation arise again.

Most of the students when placed in that situation would try to change the subject as their first option. Their second option would be to let the others know that they disagreed, but not to identify themselves as a Jew. Very few would join in, though one said that he DID when confronted with that situation, but no longer hangs out with those kids and won't do it again the next time. About equal numbers would remain silent or declare themselves to be a Jew.

In schools with fewer Jews, silence or avoidance tended to be the option of choice. Many of the students in schools with larger Jewish populations simply stated that the situation could never occur for them, because everyone they are around knows they are Jewish to begin with.

Almost all of the students agreed that telling everyone they were Jewish and defending their fellow Jews was what SHOULD be done, but many said that they would feel uncomfortable doing that. Letting everyone know that they were Jewish was the option that required the most courage, the hardest to actually do.

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

"If I am only for myself, what am I?"

"If not now, when?"

Those students who would not identify themselves as a Jew or stand up for Jews would be failing to meet Hillel's standard. Those who only would decry the criticism of Jews without identifying themselves as a Jew, certainly prioritize self, but do so in a

manner in which they are not standing up for themselves as a Jew.

Hillel's statement seems to imply that not only do we have to stand up for ourselves, but for others, and to do so at the time, not later on.

Interestingly, the common translation of Hillel's statement loses some of the nuance of the Hebrew. In essence, to translate the second question as "If I am ONLY for myself" is a Midrash. It is an interpretation of Hillel's intent. The question is more literally translated, "But at times when I am for myself, what am I?"

Hillel's intent may well have been to imply that we should not ONLY act on our own behalf. However, the Hebrew lends itself to broader interpretation.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?  
At times when I am for myself, what am I?  
If not now, when?

We assume that the thrust of the statement is to urge us to be more conscious of the needs of others. In fact, the statement may well imply something else. Let's look at the three again for a moment.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

This suggests that there are times, when we must stand up for ourselves because no one else will.

At times when I am for myself, what am I?

This suggests, that when we act on our behalf, our status changes. We can certainly, overdo it if we only act on our own behalf. But our status changes even if we act on our behalf AND that of others.

The question may be "Do we like what we become when we stand up for ourselves and for others?" Clearly, there is a sense of duty and pride when we stand up for who we are and for those like us. The students all said they would feel better about themselves if they chose the option of declaring their Jewish identity and standing up for Jews. But most wouldn't take that option.

The conflict then is one in which the option that makes us feel good about who we are, may cause other problems for us. In other words, the students were telling us that they would rather avoid the problems that come with confrontation, even in defense of themselves and their friends, than to choose an option that makes them feel good about who they are and might make a difference in altering the behavior that they do not like.

I could not help but think of Martin Niemöller's words:

First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up, because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for me.

"At times when I am for myself, what am I?" I ask again.

The answer could be, "empowered."

The answer could be, "proud of who I am."

The answer could be, "the one who will bring positive change."

The answer could be, "the one who repairs the world."

And so, looking at Hillel's last question, "If not now, when?"

Our answer is simple, "Now."

Our job is simple, "Act."

Over the next few days, we will be considering our lives in detail. We will see good things and bad. We will weigh the consequences of action and inaction. Some memories will make us ashamed. Some memories will make us proud. There are people we should approach to apologize and seek forgiveness. We might be afraid, though we know we should act. We know that we should admit fault and seek to right wrongs we have done, pain that we have caused.

It takes courage, friends. It is easier to pretend it never happened. It is easier to act as if there is no pain. It is easier to remain silent and hope that it is never brought to light.

But who will atone for our failings if we do not? Who will right the wrong?

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

How can we be the best people that we can become, the best Jews, the most righteous, if we are not willing to act?

At times when I am for myself, what am I?

And when will we seek to address our failings, to do the right thing, if we are not willing to do so now?

If not now, when?

This is the time.

And so thinking this through, my thoughts returned to Abraham and Isaac. And I remembered my own theory about the Akeidah and its implications.

Indeed I thought, as Abraham and Isaac walked up the mountain, Abraham was thinking that he needed to do what he needed to do to please the divinities, the commonly worshipped gods, even if it would be to his detriment, the loss of a beloved son. Isaac, in conflict, was wondering if he should stand up for himself against his father and the wishes of the divinities or allow his father to act on behalf of his family and future generations. Both knew that time was growing short.

But I had left out an important character in the story—God. So, a bit of my own Midrash.

Perhaps, Adonai looked down upon Abraham and Isaac following the wrong path, about to do evil, and thought, "If I don't act now, Abraham will go through with it." And when Adonai acted, Adonai separated himself from the other divinities that people worshipped in the eyes of Abraham and Isaac and all of their descendents. Adonai became "OUR God" at that moment of decision. God chose "now."

In the year ahead:

May we be willing to do the right thing, though it may be difficult.

May we feel better about ourselves for having acted in the right way.

May we not delay our actions. Now is the time.

L'shanah Tovah!