

If I Am Not For Myself, Who Will Be For Me?

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Did you hear the one about when Past, Present, and Future walk into the synagogue at the same time? It was a tense moment!

Yes, this Rosh Hashanah comes at a time of tension in our world. In my holiday sermons this year, I hope to bring timely issues into dialogue with timeless wisdom. Over these coming Days of Awe, I invite you to join me in looking at our lives today through the lens of a teaching of the great first century Sage Hillel:

אם אין אני לי מי לי?

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

וכשאני לעצמי מה אני?

And if I am just for myself, what am I?

ואם לא עכשו אימתי?

And if not now, when?

Pirke Avot 1:14

Notice that Hillel's teaching is in the form of questions. He invites us to question ourselves and to challenge ourselves. I'll be focusing on a different aspect of this teaching at each sermon, and our Cantor and choir are singing the words to different melodies. This morning, I'm focusing on the first question: If am not for myself, who will be for me? So for the next 20 minutes, let's put aside universal concerns, of which there plenty, and look at some of the particular issues facing us as Jews in this time and place. I say "in this time and place" intentionally,

because I cannot, of course, speak for all Jews everywhere. This morning I am speaking as an American Jew today.

With that orientation, I would like to look at two very different arenas in which we as American Jews are called upon to assert ourselves and to be for ourselves. The first is domestic and that is how to be for ourselves in the face of resurgent anti-Semitism from racist white supremacists. The second, *l'havdil* (to make a distinction), is how to be for ourselves as American Jews in relationship to Israel.

I don't want to sound like that old joke (and you'll know it's old because of the content): "What's the definition of a Jewish telegram: 'Start worrying. Details to follow.'" Most of the time, I do not focus on anti-Semitism, not because it's not a problem, but because I want to focus on a positive approach to being Jewish, the joy and not the oy.

I always keep in mind a teaching from Rabbi Aryeh Scheinberg, my Orthodox Rabbi in my home town of San Antonio. He pointed out that the Torah includes two strong commandments **to remember**. On the one hand, in the book of Deuteronomy we are commanded to **remember** and to wipe out the memory of Amalek. Amalek was a ruthless tribe that attacked the weak and tired Israelites on our way out of Egypt, and became a symbol for all the baseless hatred toward the Jewish people throughout history. So remembering Amalek means to fight anti-Semitism and hatred. After the Holocaust, it sometimes seemed like many 20th Century Jews based their Jewish identities on fighting antisemitism, or to paraphrase the philosopher Emil Fackenheim, on surviving as a people as a commandment unto itself, so as not to grant Hitler a posthumous victory.

But the other major Torah commandment to **remember** comes from the book of Exodus. There we are commanded to **remember** Shabbat and to keep it holy. Shabbat is a symbol of holiness, goodness, heritage and family, a weekly glimpse of the world we want to create for everyone on earth.

Rabbi Scheinberg urged us to adopt a Judaism that emphasizes “Remember the Shabbat” more than “Remember Amalek.” To avoid history repeating itself, we must unfortunately remember the lessons of history: the Amaleks, Pharaohs, and Hitlers of every generation. We must organize, speak out, and guard against the tragic rise of racism, intolerance and extremism in our midst today.

To make our history and our survival meaningful, though, we must remember the Shabbat. On one level, that means to experience all the beauties of our heritage, to be nourished by them and to live them. To remember Shabbat is also an allusion to our mission as a light to the nations. Shabbat is a “taste of the world to come,” a weekly recurring experience of the world we as Jews aspire to for *all* human beings: a world of peace, harmony, and dignity for all.

For the most part, we as American Jews are “for ourselves.” The vast majority of us are proud to be Jewish and have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. In general, others like us, too. The most recent Pew study on how Americans view people of different religions shows that Jews are viewed warmly by almost seventy percent of Americans and disliked by only one in ten. That makes us the most liked religious group in America.

But at the same time, when it comes to religiously motivated hate crimes, according to the FBI, Jews are the group most often targeted. So the people who don’t like us, really don’t like us. Nowhere was this more evident than the march of neo-Nazis and white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia last month, menacing a synagogue, brandishing torches and weapons, chanting blatantly anti-Semitic and racist slogans straight out of the Third Reich. The Anti-Defamation League noted that anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S. jumped 86 percent in the first quarter of 2017 compared to same period last year (at the same time, it should be noted, that other minority groups, have also reported a spike in hate crimes directed at them). In recent months, some synagogues and Jewish

institutions from California to Montana, Massachusetts to New York, have been hit with vandalism and hate messages.

Let us remember that the vast majority of Americans today do not support the KKK or racist groups. The white supremacists are a small minority who are widely denounced by political, military, religious, and business leaders. That being said, our fears are triggered, because after the Holocaust we are keenly attuned to how hatred begins with words and spreads to actions. We know in our hearts that America is different only when our leaders from the very top offer a clear and morally unambiguous denunciation of racism and antisemitism. A failure to do so is rightfully denounced.

So how can we be “for ourselves” in response to this kind of blatant anti-Semitism? I’ll suggest two ways. First, by doing the things that our community learned to do after the Holocaust, and supporting the organizations that are experts in doing them. The long-term, unglamorous work that groups like the AJC, ADL, and United States Holocaust Museum have done to build coalitions and raise awareness bears results and deserves our support. For example, over 350 mayors from all 50 states have signed on to a Mayors United Against Anti-Semitism campaign sponsored by the AJC. This shows the power of our legacy organizations in combating antisemitism and prejudice.

Secondly, we can only be for ourselves as Jews when we realize that we are interconnected with the rest of society, and in particular with other minority groups. Sometimes it is hard to figure out where we as Jews fit in to the usual categories. It is not clear if we are a religion, an ethnicity, a people, a tribe, or all of the above. At times we are persecuted, considered outsiders, and at times we are privileged and need to embrace our responsibilities as allies. In the words of Liya Rechtman of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. “Our obligation in solidarity with the black community was not completed when Abraham Joshua Heschel

marched with Martin Luther King Jr. We must continue to advocate on the frontlines of equality and work together with communities of color.”

And we need to be more aware that our own American Jewish population (and even more so, the Israeli Jewish population) is racially and ethnically diverse, and to listen and learn from the experience of Jews of color. Judaism is a very big tent: Jews come in all hues and many cultures. Some identify as Jews by religion, some by family background. Our very name Hebrews, *Ivrim*, reminds us that we are by nature boundary crossers, and therein lies our strength.

A thorough analysis of our multifaceted and complex identities as Jews is beyond the scope of a sermon. What I can say with absolute clarity is that being for oneself as a Jew is inseparable from being for civil rights, welcome, and equality for all people. Not just because we know that only a tolerant society will ultimately tolerate us, but because this is what the Torah demands in the mitzvot to love our neighbor, love the stranger, and pursue justice. That’s why we see Jewish groups engaged in civil and immigrant rights, and forming new alliances with other minority groups, notably those with Muslim Americans such as the AJC’s Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council and the women’s group known as the Sisterhood of Salaam-Shalom. The AJC has also started the Latino-Jewish Leadership council, citing, “when the very ethos of American pluralism has been challenged by some, when hate crimes have increased, and when entire communities have been stigmatized, creation of this Council reinforces the importance of our shared destiny, and the strength and resilience our nation derives from its diversity.”

As our member Professor Sarah Tauber told me, Hillel’s saying, encompassing being for ourselves and for others, “is not a segregation model or a zero-sum. Racists say the opposite of Hillel: ‘if I am for others, I lose.’ Jewish tradition is the anti-zero sum. If we are for others, we are for ourselves as well.”

Yet difficult as it is to face renewed racist anti-Semitism, being for ourselves in this situation is pretty straightforward. We have tools, through our legacy organizations and our interfaith and intergroup connections, to face dealing with our own vulnerability. The second area in which we need to be “for ourselves” today is much more complicated and nuanced: how to be “for ourselves” as American Jews in relationship to Israel. When it comes to dealing with our own power—a new experience after two millennia of diaspora—we are still on a steep learning curve.

The first thing that confounds us in being for ourselves in regard to Israel, is how we communicate amongst ourselves as Jews, as well as to others about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We know that Jewish college students across the nation often encounter harsh anti-Israel sentiments on campus, such as repeated disruption of events by Israeli speakers or of Hillel activities in support of Israel. We know that Israel is often subject to a dual standard and even to demonization and delegitimization rarely directed at other nations, and too often, legitimate criticism bleeds over into unthinking prejudice not only to Israel but to any person or organization associated with Israel. It can sometimes be difficult to discern the difference between a real honest critic of Israel and one who is offering that that criticism consciously or unconsciously because they don’t like Jews.

How can we as American Jews be for ourselves in relation to Israel? Most of us are awed by the miracle of our nation reborn from the ashes after two millennia, to become a leader in education, medicine, science, agriculture, and a homeland to Jewish refugees of many diverse ethnicities and cultures. Many of us have relatives who live in Israel whose safety we are concerned about. We want to know that our people have a safe haven in the world. At the same time, most of us know that we can’t have Jewish values of justice, human dignity, and equality and not apply them equally to Palestinians, to Bedouins, to migrant refugees. We can’t hope for a peaceful future for Israel without working for a peaceful and dignified future for Palestinians as well,

because the fate of our two peoples is inexorably tied together. How can we be for all those things at once? How can we not?

Rabbis are supposed to give you the answers but the answers today really aren't easy. I believe, like Hillel, that a good rabbi really helps you to refine and explore your questions. May I suggest that we can't be for ourselves facing harsh critics of Israel unless we can ask these questions and have these conversations within our own community in a new language of respect. The Talmud speaks of a *Machloket le-shem Shamayim*, a dispute for the Sake of Heaven, which means it is for the highest good and conducted with deepest respect and humility. We can take note of a project started in Israel, the 9th of Adar Project from the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem, which seeks to cultivate a culture of constructive conflict and healthy disagreement across personal, political, religious and other divides. Throughout the year I plan to share their texts and questions at PCS.

These thoughtful and nuanced discussions need to start at a young age, too. Kids who are bar and bat mitzvah today will be facing a complex and challenging world of identity debates in college and beyond. An elementary school level of Jewish education is not going to be enough when they get to college and encounter "Israel Apartheid Week." This is why building a substantial educational program for our post b'nei mitzvah students is a crucial way of being *for ourselves* and our future.

When it comes to being for ourselves regarding the Jewish character of Israel, disputes between the Israeli government and diaspora denominations have sharpened this year, in particular around issues of religious freedom and equality in our homeland. *Hiddush*, meaning "Renewal," the movement for religious freedom and equality in Israel, has just released a letter, which we have on the back table. Signed by a bevy of Jewish leaders and public figures from Modern Orthodox to Reform, it outlines a vision for Israel as a Jewish state with freedom of religion for all. Please consider signing on; instructions are on the paper.

When four female rabbinic students are basically strip searched at the Kotel, the Western Wall, to see if they are smuggling a Torah into the women's side, as American Jews we rightly care. When over 660,000 Israelis can't get married in their own country because all Jewish weddings are controlled by the Rabbinat and they don't qualify, we as American Jews should also care. I encourage you to go on line to learn about this important group, which local Westchester rabbis hope to bring to our community later in the year. To quote Hiddush, "those of us who are not citizens of Israel understand that basic decisions regarding the character of the State must ultimately be made by its own citizens, but as Jews committed to a diverse Jewish community, both outside and inside of Israel, we seek to lend our support to this important endeavor."

The ability to reach across divides, to cross boundaries, to argue for the sake of heaven, these are hallmarks of Jewish wisdom. Ultimately it all brings me back to what my rabbi said years ago: "Remember Shabbat," should take precedence. As we face a more challenging and sometimes threatening world, we have to stay rooted within our own soul. We need Shabbat and all it stands for as a center in the storm, a reminder of our greater mission, a time to come together in community and have those meaningful dialogues. No matter what their circumstances, often far more threatening than any we face today, our ancestors never gave up on the messianic dream at the heart of Judaism, the dream of creating a Shabbat world for everyone. When we "remember Shabbat," and live our lives by it, Judaism has a meaning beyond survival.

Our people's past, our present, and our future are coming together this Rosh Hashanah. Times may be tense, but by being for ourselves, and by listening to one another with respect, compassion, and humility, the future can be sweet:

Le-shanah Tovah Tikateyvu, Shanah Tovah umetukah. I bless us all for a good and a sweet year.

Amen