

If I Am Not for Myself

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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Im ain ani li mi li
u'khsheani l'atzmi, ma ani
v'im lo achshav aimatai?

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
And if I'm only for myself, what am I?
And if not now when?
Avot 1:14

When someone asked the great Jewish sage Hillel the Elder how we are to know the right thing to do, Hillel responded not with an answer but with these three questions. Today and for the next two Sundays I want to explore these questions more deeply, teasing apart the separate phrases to mine Hillel's meaning. But before we launch into that I have to offer two points of contextualization.

The first is that this series of three sermons is really an outgrowth of the service Ellen Culpepper and I presented on December 7, based on the work of Walter Brueggemann. In his book, *Reality, Grief, Hope*, Brueggemann considers how an ancient people dealt with the collapse of a civilization weighed down by economic greed, increasing violence and a nationalistic militarism. He draws parallels to contemporary American culture, questioning whether our way of life is sustainable. Brueggemann calls today's churches to the prophetic task of leadership in facing a difficult reality, undertaking the grieving necessary to let go of what was and build hope in finding a new way. The task he sets us is not a simple one, nor a small one, so it behooves us to take some time to consider how it might be done. That, built on the framework of Hillel's words, is really what these three sermons are about.

The second disclaimer is that while I am choosing to consider each phrase of Hillel's words separately, they cannot rightly be understood if separated from each other. So if we are to consider each part, we must always keep in mind the other two as context and corrective.

Im ain ani li mi li
If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I do not see the divine nature of my own being, who will see it? If I do not nurture that awe, that reverence, that love I hold within myself, how can anyone else see it in me? If I do not advocate for myself and my needs, who will respect them? If I do not understand who I am and where I stand in the story of human striving, how can anyone else know me?

u'khsheani l'atzmi, ma ani

But if I do all these things for myself alone, I lose my humanity. If I do not recognize that I am but a part of a greater whole, I have lost the grounding for my own divine nature, and my actions devolve to selfishness, narcissism and greed.

v'im lo achshav aimatai?

And if not now, when? Knowing the right thing to do requires bringing our attention to the present to see what is needed in the present. And it requires that we act in the present, that we do not to delay taking the right action. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "justice delayed is justice denied."

So without further ado and disclaimer let us look more closely at the first phrase in Hillel's famous words. Im ain ani li mi li. If I am not for myself, who will be for me? There are many shades and flavors of meaning there – to know ourselves, to care for ourselves, to advocate and vote for ourselves. I don't think any of these nuances is an incorrect interpretation for as Hillel also said whosoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whosoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world. Acknowledging our inherently and inextricable oneness with all humanity, all living things, all creation, we can only help creation when we help ourselves and help ourselves when we help creation.

So if we want to help heal the world, if we want to do the right thing, we begin with ourselves. The Hasidic master Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg put it this way:

The Talmud tells us that if all the world were to repent, the Messiah would come. Knowing this, I decided to do something about it. Where to begin? The world? It was too large and I was too small. So I thought: Let me start with my own country. That, too, proved too much for me. My own town? I failed there as well. My neighborhood, my own family? Even there I did not succeed. Never mind, I thought, I shall work on myself.

So we begin with ourselves and where we are, but surely we need to progress beyond ourselves or right action becomes an exercise in narcissism. As I said, keep in mind that questions 2 and 3 are still coming as corrective. But why is it so important that we start with ourselves, that the encouragement to be for ourselves comes in the first of Hillel's three questions?

Because all social change necessarily entails taking risks, facing uncertainty, going up against the odds, and that requires both hope and courage, which are qualities to be found within ourselves, by knowing ourselves and by nurturing that within ourselves that allows us to step beyond our fear. It is our own emotional resources that allow us to shift from reacting out of fear to responding with agency when faced with a challenge. Others can help us build these resources (that's why we're here in this room, after all) but they are, ultimately, our resources to own and nurture.

Right before Christmas we adopted a new cat, Lucy. She was a rescue cat that an acquaintance was not able to keep so we took her in as a companion for our incumbent, Rosa. Well, from whatever circumstances left Lucy near to death living on the streets she learned to react to almost everything as a threat, and so she hisses and lashes out in fear at almost any movement and

certainly at every touch. It's how she has learned to survive in a hostile environment. It is also a complete puzzlement to our other cat who has known nothing but warm laps and a full food bowl for 14 years. Rosa *responds* with agency when you pet her. Depending on her mood she either purrs or gets up and leaves. Lucy *reacts* from fear hissing and biting. In some ways, people are not all that different from cats.

It is much easier and more likely that you will bring about lasting change by responding with agency, rather than reacting out of fear. If we are to take seriously Brueggemann's prophetic challenge to reconsider the sustainability of our way of life, it will require agency over fear. It will take courage. To consider the full reality of American society, to grieve the passing away of life as it was, and to look forward with hope will require courage. Taking the risks and facing the uncertainty of change always requires a certain courage, a courage that can be built by *being for yourself*, knowing that you are inextricably part of both the need for change and the agency for change.

Part of being for yourself is caring for yourself and allowing your community to care for you so that you have the resources to continue, but, more, I think it is about knowing yourself. This, to me, is great part of Hillel's first question, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" This says to me that I have to be firmly grounded in my own values and convictions. That means being firmly grounded in my identity. That means knowing who my people are, where I stand in the story. You see the impossibility of separating the phrases of the individual and the communal because they each, continually and ultimately, lead to each other.

But even as part of the greater whole, I need a firm grounding in what *I* truly believe, what is important at base for me. Without this I will just get shifted by every new wind that blows. That is not how courage or hope is built or sustained. Connecting to the fad of the moment might be momentarily energizing but being constantly on the move, ping-ponging from one position to another, does allow us to put down the roots that allow courage and hope to grow and blossom.

I have spent a great deal of my life not being me, not living in my real identity. I know many others who can relate to that and I think we all have some part of ourselves that we hide away. But growing up in the 60s in all white suburbia, being Puerto Rican was simply not the done thing. And so I wasn't ever Puerto Rican. My parents, aunts and uncles, from an undeniable desire to protect their children and have us all blend into the American melting pot, named us things like Jackie and Beverley and Sharon. Jaime became Jimmy and Eduvijes became Eddy. Despite the food we ate and the language we spoke, we were never Puerto Rican.

There were also issues of class that were challenged as I went to college and then to work with a wider diversity of people than I had grown up with. As a young adult working in the high tech industry, I traveled frequently on international sales calls. I quickly learned to order the right wine with dinner and use the right fork. But in my house there was no wine with dinner and you got only one fork so it was no mystery which to use.

A large part of setting aside my identity was, I think, natural and necessary in the culture and class I inhabited. It seems a natural part of youth to explore and try on new things to know what fits for you. But at some point you need to choose, to become grounded in what is true for you. I

even think it is good thing to continue that exploration through every stage of life, to try new things, learn new ways of being, to test them out and try them on. But never at the expense of who we truly are. Never because we are ashamed of who we truly are and want to hide that.

Yet think of all the ways we hide who we are, all the pieces of ourselves we are not comfortable owning, sometimes out of necessity for emotional or physical survival, but sometimes just from a fear that may be more imaginary than real. Sometimes, like our new cat, simply from a fear that is a learned reaction, one that no longer serves us well since it prevents the very thing we want most—secure and real bonds with our others.

So this question that Hillel poses, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” is not a selfish question, but it is a self-regarding question. It calls us to look at who we truly are and to find firm ground in identity, to find courage in self-knowledge and hope in knowing our place within the story of the world.

This is perhaps our best hope to change the world. To discover who we truly are and be courageous enough to share that because it is our stories of self that move others. We all have stories of pain and hope to which others can connect as we invite them to the work of transforming our world. We all have experiences of pain otherwise we would have no reason to want change in the world. And we all have stories of hope otherwise we wouldn’t even consider whether change is possible. These are the stories that connect us to others and the stories that invite them to join in our work. We miss a great opportunity when we hide ourselves away from others in both our brokenness and our glory. By shutting off parts of ourselves we deprive ourselves and others of the pain and the hope that can carry us forward together.

As our reading this morning said:
 You, with your broken heart and your seeking,
 You are the utterance of the timeless word.
 The name of the Holy is pronounced
 through your being.

It is, however, not only about recognizing our own participation in the holy unity of all things, it is understanding that our brokenness is also part of that holy oneness, a necessary part. It does not diminish us but rather makes us one with all life. It is through understanding and accepting ourselves that we become more fully human, more fully available to bring healing to the world. For the name of the Holy is pronounced through our being.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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Having found hope once might get us started but hope must be sustained