

If I Am For Myself Alone

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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Captains log star date 3192.1. The starship Enterprise is on the way to Eminiar Seven in the episode “A Taste of Armageddon” from original Star Trek series. As so often happens with the crew of the Enterprise they will upon arrival, blunder into setting off a full scale war. It falls to Captain James T. Kirk to reason them out of it by the application of a little evolutionary psychology.

KIRK: Councilor Anan, ...you have a real war on your hands. You can either wage it with real weapons, or you might consider an alternative. Put an end to it. Make peace.

ANAN: There can be no peace. Don't you see? We've admitted it to ourselves. We're a killer species. It's instinctive. It's the same with you.

KIRK: All right. It's instinctive. But the instinct can be fought. We're human beings with the blood of a million savage years on our hands, but we can stop it. We can admit that we're killers, but we're not going to kill today. That's all it takes. Knowing that we won't kill today... Peace or utter destruction. It's up to you.

Perhaps our days are not so fraught with adventure as a Star Trek episode and the consequences of our actions less than total galactic annihilation, yet we do make our own choices many times each day – peace or war, approbation or infamy, altruism or greed. To help us make the many choices before us, to help us know the right thing to do, the ancient sage Hillel the Elder offered these words:

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?

Pirkei Avot 1:14

Today, we take up the second of these questions, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” I begin, as I did last week, with the disclaimer that although I have had the hubris to separate Hillel’s three questions into three distinct sermons, they cannot be rightly understood in isolation from each other. So though we consider today our connection to the greater world, we cannot leave wholly aside the questions of self and urgency. Keep those somewhere in the back of your mind as we ask ourselves, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”

The way I answer this question for myself is that if I set aside my connection to and concern for the welfare of my neighbor, I diminish my own humanity. They say that every minister has but one sermon, and that right there is mine: If I set aside my connection to and concern for the welfare of my neighbor, I diminish my own humanity. You’ve all been very nice to sit there and

listen to that same sermon for five years running, but now that we've discovered that Hillel reduced to it a single question 2000 years ago, perhaps we should move on to something else. But what?

Accepting the proposition that being for others is the best way for *me* to be in the world is only my first step. Acting on that proposition is, as we know, a whole other kettle of fish. Choosing peace over war; choosing altruism over greed; choosing small acts of kindness over an insular self-centered mindset takes intention. But as Kirk says, it's up to us. So what will move your minister from *believing* in being for others to *acting* that way? I have always had a somewhat contrary streak, and I resist doing anything that I don't have a good reason for. Like a five-year-old, "why" is sometimes my favorite word. So... why? Why does being only for myself diminish my humanity? Why should I be for others?

There are lots of answers to that question. I'd like to explore a few here and see if any of them resonate. At the outset, let me just say that I de facto reject everything reducing to "because I said so." Because the Bible tells me so; because it's in the constitution; because I learned it from Susie Novak's mother in Sunday School 40 years ago—these will not be acceptable answers. As Michael Schermer writes in *The Science of Good and Evil*, "to be a fully functioning moral agent, one cannot passively accept moral principles handed down by fiat. Moral principles require moral reasoning." (p.2)

One of the classic reasons for acting in the interest of larger society is conscience. Charles Darwin defined the conscience as "a highly complex sentiment, having its first origin in the social instincts, largely guided by the approbation of our fellow-men, ruled by religion, self-interest, and in later times by deep religious feelings, confirmed by instruction and habit." [*The Descent of Man* (1871)]. Others have since edited Darwin, but that's close enough for our purposes. Our conscience guides us to know the right thing, to do the right thing, to act in ways that might seem to be against our own interest to help others. In psychology, conscience is that part of us that exercises moral judgment by responding with feelings of guilt or remorse when we choose actions that are counter to the norms of society and responding with feelings of integrity or righteousness when we conform to what our culture expects.

In religion, conscience is given many different attributes but stills acts as the seat of moral judgment. Some traditions see the conscience as an accumulation of knowledge of good and evil that a person develops through many lifetimes. As you go through the cycle of reincarnation, you learn more about what it means to be a good person and you perfect your ability to act in ways that promote the common good. Other religions see conscience as God-given or at least God-directed, with humans facing a final day of divine judgment. Yet others see the conscience as an inherent and personal quality that we bring to bear when encountering religious precepts.

But conscience isn't the only way we humans define our ability to know and choose the larger good over what serves the self. Another reason we might choose altruism is for our own happiness. Simply it makes us feel good to be helpful, to be of service. Psychologist and religion writer Thomas Moore put it this way. He said that "an ethical life is rooted in the realization that contributing to those around us and to humanity at large is more profoundly satisfying and

fulfilling than any amount of self-serving.” Giving to others helps to fulfill our need to be part of something beyond ourselves. And we feel good about that.

Perhaps you don’t consider an act truly altruistic if we get something out of it, too. After all it is no longer a purely selfless act but has a pay off in happiness. If we do something because it makes us happy does that diminish the good we do? Maybe, but that does not really much concern me, not as much as whether I do the good at all. Even Mahatma Gandhi, famous for his acts of altruism, acknowledged that he didn’t perform acts of service solely for others. Once, when he was praised for helping a village, he said, “I didn’t do it for them. I did it for my own *sadhana* [to advance my own spiritual practice].”

Bill Schulz, President of the UU Service Committee and former head of Amnesty International, a man who has spent his professional life in service to others, says that it is not exactly happiness but beauty that impels him to service. He wrote these words:

Luscious pears, endless seas, jazz by Duke Ellington, paintings by O’Keefe: these are precious gifts the world presents to me. But how can I savor such gifts if I lack the money to buy the pears or the time to visit the sea? The rich and the poor see Paris from two different angles: the rich walk over the Pont Neuf and the poor sleep under it. It’s the same Paris with its same presentations of grace but from under the bridge they’re a lot harder to see. If I find a poem beautiful, I want more and more people to be literate so they can read it. If I find a painting breathtaking, I want more and more people to have the wherewithal to pay the museum fees. Beauty inspires us to do justice so that more and more people can know beauty.

This seems like a pretty highly evolved view to me, and indeed evolutionary theology says it is just that, the product of evolution. The processes of evolution and natural selection don’t care about happiness or beauty, they simply want us to survive and reproduce. Yet biologists, psychologists and theologians say that we humans have indeed adapted in such a way that happiness is part of the equation of survival. The ability to give to others, which evokes feelings of satisfaction, fulfillment and happiness, is a part of our survival mechanism.

To quote Charles Darwin: “As the reasoning powers and foresight... became improved, each man would soon learn from experience that if he aided his fellow-men, he would commonly receive aid in return.” Learning would turn to habit would turn to an inherited trait. Darwin said that we evolved this to such a degree that we not only engage in reciprocal altruism but we are also driven by the need to *appear* good in the eyes of others. Katharine Hepburn, in the movie *The African Queen*, put it more simply when she said, “Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above.”

Later scientists refuted Darwin’s idea that doing good was an inherited trait. Still, they affirmed that through learned behaviors we humans can rise above nature, that people who can maximize friendships and minimize antagonisms have an evolutionary advantage. Evolutionary biologist George Williams held that we execute this evolutionary logic not by conscious choice but by feelings including gratitude and compassion. [George Williams (1966) as quoted in Robert

Wright, *The Moral Animal*]. Perhaps not that far afield from happiness and the need to share beauty.

Many Eastern religions urge the cultivation of compassion as a path toward enlightenment, but like Gandhi, acknowledge that for most practitioners compassion is not without personal gain. It is only at its most evolved form that compassion does not arise out of personal desire but out of the bodhisattva urge, the urge to help others achieve enlightenment. But again, whether it has a component that benefits the self or is wholly selfless compassion for the suffering of others is one of the things that moves us to acts of service.

So which of these reasons resonates for you? Are you impelled to the good by conscience, as a helpless victim of evolutionary biology fueled by the imperative to survive, by your own happiness and the need to share beauty, by compassion? Or is it something altogether different that brings you to acts generosity, kindness and service. How do you respond to Hillel's question, "If I am for myself alone, what am I?" And why?

We live in a society of the individual: do your own thing, have it your way, boundary lines and self-empowerment, self-improvement, self-definition, self-esteem. In their book, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell write about the inflated sense of self that is everywhere in our culture. "Public figures say it's what makes them stray from their wives. Parents teach it by dressing children in T-shirts that say "Princess." Teenagers and young adults hone it on Facebook, and celebrity newsmakers have elevated it to an art form." In the book Twenge and Campbell cite a study that says that in just over a generation from 1950 to 2010, the view teenagers hold of themselves as an important person has changed radically. In 1950, 12% of teenagers surveyed said that they considered themselves an important person. In the 1980s (the "me" decade), it rose to 80%, but the numbers continued to rise even higher into the 21st century.

A secure sense of self is not a bad thing, but Twenge and Campbell say we have taken to such extremes that it's leaving people depressed, lonely and buried under piles of debt. And so, perhaps, meaningful engagement with this question "If I am only for myself, what am I?" is indeed a formula for evolutionary survival. As that guru of the Me Decade, M. Scott Peck, put it, "In and through community lies the salvation of the world. Nothing is more important."

Hillel, in his three questions, was offering his people the wisdom that to be a good Jew means looking inward, but not only that. It also means looking outward toward one's community. I think this is pretty good wisdom for being human, regardless of your faith. Let us not settle for a society that built on the illusion of separateness, but rather on the acknowledgement of all that is shared, that we are "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." [Martin Luther King, Jr.]

May it be so. Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.