

A story to begin:

A doctor, a lawyer, a little boy and a priest were out for a Sunday afternoon flight on a small private plane. Suddenly, the plane developed engine trouble. In spite of the best efforts of the pilot, the plane started to go down. Finally, the pilot grabbed a parachute and yelled to the passengers that they better jump, and he himself bailed out. Unfortunately, there were only three parachutes remaining.

The doctor grabbed one and said “I’m a doctor, I save lives, so I must live,” and jumped out.

The lawyer then said, “I’m a lawyer and lawyers are the smartest people in the world. I deserve to live.” He also grabbed a parachute and jumped.

The priest looked at the little boy and said, “My son, I’ve lived a long and full life. You are young and have your whole life ahead of you. Take the last parachute and live in peace.”

The little boy handed the parachute back to the priest and said, “Not to worry Father. The smartest man in the world just took off with my back pack.”<sup>i</sup>

...

Selfishness can be defined as “lacking consideration for others; being concerned chiefly with one's own personal profit, pleasure, or in this case, survival. To be selfish then is to think only of ourselves.

We are hardwired to be selfish – to seek self-preservation. And yet, from an early age, we are trained to overcome this human inclination. We are encouraged to be selfless, to put the needs of others before our own. Think about it: we heap praises on someone who always gives and never takes for themselves. We hold ourselves to that impossible to achieve expectation of doing the same. And I wonder, why do we continue to strive for the unobtainable? We just cannot give of ourselves to the point where there is nothing left.

As a teenager growing up in the 1980’s, a favorite song from my youth group days was the Debbie Friedman melody Im Ein Ani Mi Li. Its words came from the great sage Hillel and posed three questions:

אם אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני. ואם לא עכשיו, אימת?

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?<sup>ii</sup>

My youth group friends and I gleefully sang the melody hearing it as a call to action. Glossing over the first line, the second phrase spoke to us: If I am only for myself, what am I? It was of course, about putting others first. Clearly, if we worried more about ourselves, what kind of person could we claim to be? To the ears of a high school student, “what am I” had a certain scorn attached to it; especially if the answer implied that I wasn’t doing enough to help others in my community less fortunate.

In recent days, I have been thinking about that song a lot, specifically, the first line. “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” is resonating loud and clear in these strange pandemic times.

It is nearly impossible to not have been affected by Covid-19 and everything that goes along with it: quarantine, working from home in less than ideal spaces, home schooling, the fear and worry about contracting the virus or unknowingly spreading it, maybe even having it...all of it has taken its toll. We mourn the loss of normalcy, of routine. Things that we used to do that seemed insignificant now seem more important as we realize how much things have changed. Meeting someone for a cup of coffee or at a restaurant, watching sports events – our children’s and our Pittsburgh teams, going to school and college...yes we can still do some of those things. But the reality is that stark changes to everyday life have left many of us worn out, depleted.

*Im ein ani li mi*.....if I am not for myself, who will be for me? Many of us are not taking good care of ourselves. Personally, I know that I can do better. There is no shortage of help to do so....a quick internet search yielded literally thousands of articles outlining the steps we can take to care for ourselves. But.... *Uksh’ani la’atzmi, ma ani?* If I am only for myself, what am I? Why does taking care of ourselves feel selfish? Why does it feel like if I am taking time for me, it is the same as taking the proverbial parachute from the young boy on the plane?

Maybe it’s time to rethink our understanding of Hillel’s words.

*Im ein ani li mi*.....if I am not for myself, who will be for me? Could we hear these words differently? Can we accept them not as words of rebuke but instead as a gentle reminder to add our own self-care to the never ending list of things to be accomplished? We are all being asked to do so much these days – to stay on top of current events, to support important causes, to manage changing work and school schedules, to learn how to use new technology platforms and of course to incorporate the most recent recommendations on masking and social distancing into all aspects of our lives. When it all becomes too overwhelming, our wise tradition gives us Shabbat and along with it, permission to step back from the stresses that surround us day in and out. Shabbat gives us time to rest and refuel, to not DO but simply to just BE. Of course, this does not mean turning a blind

eye to the world around us, it just means turning off the news and taking time to sustain ourselves, by nourishing our bodies and our souls. The world will still be there when we return.

*Uksh'ani la'atzmi, ma ani?* If I am only for myself, what am I? Can we hear the words of this second question differently too? What if we could accept them not as a mandate to give but as encouragement to fortify ourselves? For only when we are cared for can we in turn care for others. Consider the Oxygen Mask Theory: it's a real thing. Remember the last time you flew on an airplane? For some of us, it seems like a long time ago! Whether or not you were on that flight with children, you know the drill. A flight attendant always approaches parents with young children to remind them that they should affix their own oxygen mask before helping their child with theirs. If you don't, you risk not being able to help at all.

If we are "running on empty" trying to please everyone and juggling to "keep all the balls in the air," we will be unable to really help when it is important to do so. Only when we are at our best, our strongest can we truly take care of others. This means putting on our oxygen mask first whether we are on a plane or firmly rooted on the ground.

And finally, *v'im lo achshav, eimatai...* "if not now, when?" That is the million dollar question. We cannot wait for things to get better. We have no idea when normalcy will return. But even in times of uncertainty, we can create sacred moments. We can restore holiness to our lives by resuming routines and maintaining connections. We can restore holiness when we embrace the now – even with all its imperfections. Blessings abound, if we but open our eyes to them.

It shouldn't be surprising that Jewish tradition can guide us on our journey of self-care. Writes Samantha Vinokor-Meinrath:

[As] I started to develop the vocabulary of self-care...I began to uncover the rich, multifaceted array of connections between Jewish rituals and culture and the modern self-care phenomenon. Turns out our religion has been tuned into the idea of self-care long before it became an Instagram hashtag.<sup>iii</sup>

The Jewish New Year provides us with an opportunity to begin anew. And we ask: how will we take care of ourselves this year?

Will we nurture our spirits – through prayer, study, rituals such as lighting Shabbat candles, baking challah, eating a home cooked meal with loved ones, watching the sunset, noticing the moon, smelling the sweet spices of Havdalah... Whichever we choose, may we embrace it and watch our spirits soar.

Will we nourish our bodies – with good food, good wine, healthy eating, rigorous exercise, gentle runs, family walks, long naps... whichever we choose, may we go for it, and feel our strength and energy grow within us.

Will we stretch our minds – by trying new things, learning new skills, engaging in friendly debate, having deep conversations... whichever we choose, may we grasp onto it and be guided by new knowledge and understanding.

Will we seek to lift our hearts – by spending time alone reading a good book, holding hands with loved ones, hugging children, catching up with friends, taking deep breaths, laughing... whichever we choose, may we let those sacred moments heal our tired and stressed souls.

Hillel's words, reimagined, pave the way forward as we enter this New Year.

*Im ein ani li mi.....*in this New Year may we take time to care for ourselves, to support each other on our paths to wholeness

*Uksh'ani la'atzmi, ma ani...*may we strengthen each other as we create holy moments together

*Im lo achshav eimatai...*the time is now.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> It is unclear who the author of this tale is. I found it on <https://witandwisdomstories.com/selfishness/> where it is attributed to Michelle Fortes and posted on January 1, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:14

<sup>iii</sup> Samantha Vinokor-Meinrath, posted on October 15, 2018 on the website: <https://www.heyalma.com/jews-practiced-self-care-before-it-was-a-hashtag/>.