

# The Dee Pirkei Avot Project

הוא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי.

וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עִכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתִי:

He used to say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

Mishna Avot 1:14 contains one of the most famous statements of Hillel, imparting wisdom that encapsulates three fundamental lessons which transcend time and remain relevant in the modern world. We can apply each lesson to the individual and to the collective Jewish Community.

The first lesson reminds us of the importance of self-care and self-advocacy. In a world where selflessness is often celebrated, this verse highlights the need to prioritise our own well-being and interests. It encourages us to develop a healthy sense of self-worth, acknowledging our responsibility to advocate for ourselves. As Jews, we have a responsibility to preserve our individual heritage, values and traditions, while asserting our rights and advocating against discrimination and prejudice.

Secondly, the Mishna emphasises the significance of collective responsibility. It cautions against excessive self-centeredness, reminding us that we are part of a broader community. Our actions and decisions impact others, and we must strive to strike a balance between self-interest and the welfare of those around us. The Jewish people are a light unto the nations. We must continue to be active within the global community to cultivate empathy and embrace a spirit of interconnectedness, thereby fostering a more compassionate and inclusive society.

Lastly, the verse emphasises the importance of taking action in the present moment. It serves as a reminder that procrastination and delay can hinder progress and personal growth. By seizing opportunities and embracing the urgency of now, we can realise our potential and contribute meaningfully to the world.

A 2017 study published in the scientific journal Nature Communications (Park et al) used fMRI to show that upon performing generous, selfless acts, the area of the brain linked to happiness and contentment became activated. This neural link proved that generosity is the key to self happiness – exactly what Hillel taught in the 2nd century.

### Discussion Points:

What does it mean to be "for yourself"? How can we take care of ourselves and advocate for our own needs without neglecting the well-being of others?

How can we strike a balance between self-interest and collective responsibility?

How do you interpret the teaching of seizing the present moment in our fast-paced, technology-driven world? How can we avoid procrastination and make the most of our opportunities?

לעילוי נשמת:

לאה בת רפאל הכהן וציפורה

מאיה אסתר בת הרב אריה מרדכי ולאה

רינה מרים בת הרב אריה מרדכי ולאה

Idea by Rena May, close friend of Lucy Dee a"h

