

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Sermon - 5781

Rabbi Ari Kaiman

Who are we in a Pandemic?
Self Care / Advocating for Ourselves

<p>If I am not for me, who will be for me? When I am for myself (alone), what am I? If not now, when?</p>	<p>אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאַנִּי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתִי:</p>
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Imagine you are walking in the wilderness with one other person. In your bag is enough water to get one person to safety. If the water is split, you will both perish. This question is posed in the Talmud in the context of the obligations of lenders and interest. The ethical questions of health and wealth when resources are limited are not new.

I posed this scenario to one of my children when she asked me what I was working on. Her response was incredulous, why would they be in the wilderness in the first place? That was terrible planning! Shouldn't they both have water bottles? Shouldn't there be a better way where nobody has to die? Sometimes, I explained, the Talmud creates impossible and extreme scenarios so that we can have reference points to draw on for our less extreme realities. She had lots of questions about the character of the two people walking in the wilderness; What was each of their potential? Did they have family that would be impacted? What happened to the rest of the water? Would they really both die if they split the water?

The Talmud tells us none of these answers in the story. All we know is that

one person is in possession of the water and the other is not. All we know is that either one of them makes it to a settled place, or neither of them do. Typical of the Talmud, we're given two responses to the dilemma.

Ben Petura says, *Mutav sh'yishtu shneihem v'meitu* - it is better that they both drink and die, so that one of them does not see, or perhaps cause the death of his friend. This was the case until Rabbi Akiva came and interpreted the verse, "*V'chai Achicha Imcha*" Your brother shall live *with* you. "*Chayecha kodmin l'chayei chavercha*" Your life precedes the life of your friend.

According to Rabbi Akiva's interpretation, In this stark situation of one life lost or two lives lost, the one who has the power of possession of the water isn't expected to sacrifice himself for the other.

So, What's the practical application of this text in Coronavirus world? If you are holding the last package of toilet paper in the store, and somebody else claims to need it more than you, there is no obligation to give up the toilet paper. Your hygiene needs take precedence over the needs of your fellow. I hear that canning supplies are the new scarce resource. Free weights are also tough to come by.

Of course, there are far more serious questions that will be raised than that moment of strange scarcity we all felt back in April. How will a vaccine be distributed? Who is considered "essential," and what are we doing to support those whose jobs necessarily place them in high risk situations every day?

How do we come to terms with our value of protecting life, protecting the vulnerable and the recognition that this virus is not affecting all communities equally? How do we effectively grapple with the inequity that this pandemic has harshly exposed? Are the choices as stark and hopeless as two who walk in the wilderness with only one bottle of water?

It is in this context I wish to introduce our primary text for the year at Shearith.

Im Ein Ani Li, Mi Li? If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

U'kshe-ani L'atzmi, Mah Ani? If I am only for myself, what am I?

V'im Lo Achshav, aimatai? And if not now, when?

Today, we will focus on the first clause, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” At Kol Nidre, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” And, On Yom Kippur day we will take a deep dive into the words, “If not now, when?”

We need not assume the binary of Rabbi Akiva and Ben Peturah. Both the position of, “they should both die rather than one seeing their fellow die” and “your life takes precedence over your fellows” are applicable in our time.

One of the common phrases that has emerged during this Pandemic is that “We’re all in this together.” We all breathe the same air, we all went under lockdown together, we all are affected by this pandemic. But, we are not equally affected.

At Shearith, some of us have lost loved ones, or our livelihoods, or are experiencing increased anxiety, depression, sleepless nights. Some of us are barely surviving. Others among us are doing ok, with life set up in a way to safely social distance and stay employed, with enough wealth to afford regular grocery delivery and mortgage or rent payments. Some of us are even enjoying the lack of traffic, more time outdoors, more time with our immediate family, all the blessings that have emerged.

I think that all of us can probably identify with those who are barely surviving, and those that are thriving, depending on the day.

POLL: How are you today? 1: I'm not sure I'm going to make it to tomorrow / 10: I'm better than ever.

But It is also clear that depending who we are, and our circumstances, we find ourselves generally on one side of this scale - either generally thriving, or generally suffering. These scales are not balanced; we aren't living in a just world.

On either side of that scale, there is the pain of struggle, and there is the pain of helpless guilt, but we all know that pain isn't equal.

Since this pandemic began, I've called many of you, and if I haven't, I hope to soon, and I've heard how a lot of you are doing. There have been studies that show that engagement in faith communities positively impacts mental health. Overall, there is less depression, less substance abuse, less rates of suicide, greater well-being, and greater social support.

Despite what you tell me, we're not all doing well. We struggle in the Jewish community with depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and mental illness, just like the rest of the world.

Our friends at the Blue Dove Foundation, one of the great Jewish non-profits responding to mental health and substance abuse is seeing the challenges that this pandemic presents. Mental health problems are greatly increasing. The challenges of isolation, reduced income, political polarization, the real threats that we all face are pushing our collective society to a breaking point. Though some of us are doing well, and some of us are struggling, all of us can work together to better our mental health and wellness through our sacred Shearith Israel community.

In the phone calls I have made, I have had many conversations where the person on the other end of the line tells me that everything is great, and nothing is needed. The next question is almost always, is there something I can do for the community? I'm sure there is someone else whose need is greater than mine. We often believe that the need is greater elsewhere than

with ourselves. We minimize our own challenges, assume others must need the support more than we do. We don't think we need to ask for water because surely someone else is more thirsty in this time of wandering through the desert of time.

In order for all of us to make it through this together, each of us has to stand up and say, "I matter in this world, I am important, If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

For many of us, it is easier to care for another than to care for oneself.

This year, I am asking you to do something difficult, I am asking you to care for yourself. I am asking you to stand up for yourself. I am asking you to not be afraid to recognize, your health matters to this community, your meaningful engagement matters to this community, and your mental and spiritual health matter to this community. If you are for yourself, it will be better for all of us to be for you.

It's not enough to just say, "I should take care of myself." Judaism demands action, not only words. In the bag we distributed to all our members leading up to this moment was a gratitude journal with these words on the cover. If I am not for myself, who will be for me? Taking a moment and recognizing that there is something to be grateful for is a step towards self care. It's the practice of waking up and saying *Modeh Ani Lefanecha, Melech Chai V'Kayam, Shechezarta Bi Nishmati Bechemla Rabbah Emunatecha*. I am grateful to You, living, enduring Sovereign, for restoring my soul to me in compassion. You are faithful beyond measure.

Our very breath is a starting place for gratitude. Take a deep breath, feel the divine potential that is waiting to be nourished within you, if we just care for ourselves.

Right now, in the chat - I want to know. What are you going to do to take care of yourself in 5781?

For me, self-care comes in the form of vigorous exercise. Even though I miss going to my gym, I don't compromise my time to care for the health of my body. For me, self-care comes in the form of Facebook prayer with my daughters. Even though I miss in-person services, those moments of song nourish my soul.

For you it's what you have just responded in the chat.

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

I want the Shearith Israel community to be helpful in the effort to help you care for yourself. We will be a better community if each one of us takes enough responsibility to stake your claim in this community and say - I matter here.

Collectively, we can do more to know what you really need, and we will be doing more this year to care for you.

This year, Shearith Israel will begin a campaign to deepen our knowledge of each and every one of you. I intend to spend a significant amount of time talking, one on one with each of you to better understand who you are in this community and how we can better connect you to meaningful living through Judaism. This campaign isn't to raise money for a better building, or awareness about the many causes our community is engaged in. This campaign is to better engage each and every one of you individually so that our community is stronger together. For it is only when we stand up for ourselves that we are able to stand together with strength, and when we stand together, our lives gain purpose and meaning through Judaism.

Rosh Hashanah is when God opens our book of life, reads our story, and we pray, grants us the gift of another year of life. You matter in God's eyes. You matter to this community. You matter. May we each be inscribed in the book of life. May we answer the call to be for ourselves, so that we may be prepared to be for others as well.

Shanah Tovah U'Metukah