

The World Needs Our Heroism: If Not Now, When

In no particular order here are a few of my Jewish heroes:

Yitzhak Rabin
Harvey Milk
Ruth Bader-Ginsburg
Ellie Wiesel
Emma Lazarus
Theodore Herzl
Marc Chagall
Sue Bird
Mike D.
Jerry Seinfeld
Daniel Pearl
Norah Ephron
Hannah Senesh
Mandy Patinkin
Groucho Marx
Hank Greenberg
Julius Lester
Mel Brooks
Sarah Silverman
Tony Kushner
Golda Meir
Louis Brandeis
Yehudah Amichai
Red Holtzman
Bella Abzug

Who would be on your list?

My favorite biblical figures are Ruth and Joseph. I also love Maimonides, Mordechai Kaplan and Ahad HaAm. Add to them Yehudah Ha-Nasi, Martin Buber, Stephen Wise, Debbie Friedman and, of course, Sandy Koufax.

And before he became a sandwich on Passover or a center for college Jews (now in its 100th year, by the way - a sermon for a future Shabbat), I also love Rabbi Hillel the Elder. Often just called Hillel - kind of like Beyonce, who I also admire, but who is not Jewish.

While we don't know much about his personal life, Hillel remains a revered figure in Jewish history; a renowned Jewish scholar and spiritual leader who lived during the time of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, around the 1st century BCE. He is, perhaps, the most famous sage of the Talmud. His teachings and ethical principles have had a profound and lasting impact on Judaism, shaping the way generations of Jews have approached their faith and moral values. Hillel is best known for his compassionate and inclusive approach to Judaism, often emphasizing the importance of kindness, empathy, and ethical behavior.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, in his biography of Hillel: says that not only was Hillel arguably Judaism's greatest rabbinic sage, he was also its most fearlessly inclusive. Telushkin writes: "though a formal biography is impossible ... I believe it is still possible to construct a very clear impression of a man whose message speaks more urgently to Jews and Judaism today than that of any other Jewish figure in the last two thousand years."

You might know a little bit about Hillel as well. Maybe the Talmudic story about the person who wanted to convert to Judaism:

There was [an] incident involving a Gentile who came before Shammai and said to him: “Convert me to Judaism on condition that you will teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammai pushed the man away with the building rod he was holding. Undeterred, the man then came before Hillel with the same request. Hillel said to him, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the entire Torah! All the rest is commentary! Now, go and study.” (Shabbat 31a)

You might know another of Hillel’s teachings. One that I’ve been thinking about a lot during these days of awe. It highlights a tension about individual versus communal responsibility. It’s from the section of the mishnah called Ethics of our Ancestors:

אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עֲכָשְׁיוֹ, אֵימָתִי

Rabbi Hillel used to say: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

Part 1: If I am not for myself, who will be for me. We must rely on ourselves. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from flight attendants, it is that you put the oxygen mask on yourself first. Personal care, and self-preservation matters. You cannot love others unless you also love yourself.

Hillel’s teaching doesn’t mean we have to do everything for ourselves all the time. It’s not a call of insularity. Being for ourselves means knowing and utilizing the mechanism and the pathways to ask for and get support for. This is especially true if things have been difficult. It’s impossible to get over illness or loss entirely by yourself. But caring for one’s self matters.

According to Telushkin, “in a world that generally assigned little value to hygiene, Hillel enjoyed bathing, an activity that the rabbis regarded as somewhat luxurious, and therefore forbidden, for example to mourners. Hillel, however, clearly regarded taking care of himself as both necessary and enjoyable.” Go to the gym, take a vacation, get a manicure, meditate, visit a therapist, lock your phone in a drawer, skip work for family.

As a community we are required to devote ourselves to our own people. We must worry about the Jewish future by supporting the physical, intellectual, and spiritual needs of *Am Yisrael*: As Rabbi Josh Zweibeck (adapted) notes: Who will take care of our synagogues, our Day Schools, our Holocaust Survivors if we don’t? Who will support Israel if we don’t? I’m always taken with the words of Cynthia Ozick “If we blow into the narrow end of the shofar, we will be heard far,” she said. “But if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wider part, we will not be heard at all

As we approach the fifth anniversary of the Tree of Life Shooting, antisemitism remains a threat in this country and around the world. We felt it acutely in this sanctuary, just last Shabbat. As a community we’ve created defense organizations for just this reason, we’ve built relationships with law enforcement, we hire security guards. Too often in our history we’ve been forced to contend with hate and bigotry - today, we will protect our own. We must be for ourselves, staying true to who we are. Not wavering. When our people are under attack, or when our people are struggling, or when our people are hurting, it is our obligation to open our hearts and hands and our pockets to them in love and support. **If I am not for myself, who will be for me?**

Part 2: If I am only for myself, What am I? But if we focus only on ourselves we become narcissists - unaware of others, unaware of the

world around us, unaware of the pressure upon others, unaware of the troubles of our community. Nobody likes being with a person who only talks or thinks about themselves. If we are only for ourselves, we become miserable people to be around.

An essential component of Judaism is that as individuals we help make a whole. Think about our rituals, we need witnesses for a ketubah, we need a minyan for kaddish, we need others to offer the blessing before reading Torah. We are each part of something bigger - You can't be a Jew by yourself.

The Hebrew word for synagogue is Beit Knesset בית כנסת . In English Beit Knesset is better translated as a "house of gathering." I love that Judaism's most sacred spaces and most cherished moments are rooted in the idea of gathering. The idea of sacred gathering hits at the core of what being a rabbi means to me. The vibrancy of a Jewish community hinges on individuals coming together. Only in partnership can we develop a dynamic home of gathering, learning, and prayer.

Hillel's teaching, of course, goes beyond our Jewish brothers and sisters as well. We are also "for" our neighbors, be they individuals or local institutions, churches, mosques or non-profits. Just as we deplore antisemitism, we know the fight against homophobia and racism and islamophobia is also our struggle. And by the way, we want this to be reciprocal, don't we? We want the nations of the world to care just a little about us, our plight, our fate. We don't want them to stand idly by or look away when our lives are in danger. One way we combat all these forms of hate is by knowing others.

But it's not just hatred, Hillel's message extends to the pressing issues of the day, access to the ballot box, environmental responsibility, early education, affordable housing, we need to be for others. This is why we have an interfaith organizing network. This is why we volunteer at Hope's Corner and CSA and the Ecumeical Hunger Program. This is why on sukkot we're having a Shabbat with a Half Moon Bay Organization that works with farmworkers. I love the Talmudic teaching that a synagogue must be built with windows - not to let light in, though that's a wonderful byproduct - but to ensure that we look out at the world around us - so we don't become insular, walled off from the needs of our community.

Leonard Fein - who devoted his career advocating for social justice - writes: "I like to think that Rabbi Hillel was a savvy teacher and knew precisely what he was saying. He knew that in a heterogeneous society, . . .nothing can be achieved without working together and with others."

Whether it's at our own homes or here at Beth Am, we cannot hide behind the gates and fences of our own neighborhoods. We don't want to build walls that keep others out. Our own success and affluence doesn't exist independently from what happens in other parts of a community. A child in East Palo Alto deserves the same resources as a child in Portola Valley. As Rabbi Zoe Klein of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles says: "When we allow people to be faceless, anonymous, storyless, we allow ourselves to be heartless." It was that same Hillel who taught, "What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow." **If I am only for myself, What am I?**

Part Three. If not now when! The third section is the genius of Hillel's statement. It takes an intellectual exercise – who are we for - and asks us to get to work. Some obligations cannot be deferred.

Each moment of delay adds to our burdens. Have something you need set right within yourself - If not now when? Have a person you need to reach out to - If not now when? Want to make a better world - If not now when? No idea can substitute for experiences - we are a people of doing.

Don't get me wrong. I know it's hard to participate. Inertia and atrophy are hard to overcome. With our busy lives, there is always something that gets in the way. We don't have the time to go to counseling. I'd love to volunteer, it's just that the slots don't fit in my schedule. My job is demanding, someone else will do it. We also, all know the stories of well intentioned civic minded individuals - school boards members, city councils, block associations captains, little league umpires - treated poorly. My heart breaks when people who have committed themselves to the work of the community are maligned instead of lauded.

Yet, despite it all - each of us has a role in building the world we want to live in. We must seek to overcome the barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, appreciation of those around us, participation in the workings of society, and healing the world. The repercussions of delay - for someone else to do it, or a more convenient time to participate - could be disastrous. **If not now when!**

A final note about Hillel. Hillel lived in extraordinarily difficult times. He lived under cruel Roman oppression and during times of deep division in the Jewish world. Soon after his death would be the destruction of the Temple and the expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem. This has been a tough year for Jews, too. Unprecedented division in the land of Israel. Terrifying rise of antisemitism nationally. Discord and discontent here at Beth Am.

Our - and I mean us all of us here today - willingness to embrace Hillel's teaching will be crucial in how we move forward as a synagogue.

As Telushkin writes: “What shines through the teachings of Hillel and his disciples is a fundamental optimism about human nature and the capacity of Torah to affect people positively.... If Torah has something to teach the world, its message shouldn’t be restricted.” **If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?**

I know there are hurt feelings and deep division at Beth Am this morning. I know that for many this sacred place has been a source of pain and unease. I know for some even showing up here for the high holidays was an act of bravery - I don’t take that lightly. I’ve tried very hard this past year - and really my entire 12 years at Beth Am - to be a rabbi to all. I want us to move forward as a bold and generous community. I realize there is no immediate panacea to community divisions. But I do believe we need everyone to be part of creating and re-creating the community we love. – **If not now, when!**

Rosh HaShana is our time to start anew. Our book is wide open, we get to edit it. Can we live with the tension in Hillel’s brilliant paradox?

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? True to ourselves: reflective, self-nurturing. unwavering. optimistic

If I am only for myself, what am I? True to others: generous, responsible, forgiving, open, understanding.

This holy community needs our heroism. Hillel's values give us a roadmap of how to survive and flourish as an individual, as a synagogue, as a nation and as a world. **If not now, when!**

[Hillel, If Not Now When](#), by Joseph Telushkin.

Leonard Fein, [The Jewish Condition](#)

“If not now when – To do good is noble. To tell others to do good is even nobler and much less trouble.”