

If Not Now, When? A Judaism of Doing

*By Rabbi Michael Schwab (Draft for Speaking Purposes)
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Three weeks ago I was sitting in a conference room in Atlanta with dozens of black pastors, fellow rabbis, and other civic leaders. We held passionate discussions about how we could each support one another, as we did during the sixties with MLK and Rabbi Heschel, in overcoming racism, antisemitism and unjustified hatred. And as we held these difficult, but inspirational, conversations, and as we shared powerful stories and strategized together, the famous teaching from our great Sage Hillel, uttered over two thousand years ago, came to my mind:

אם אין אני לי מי לי — If I am not for *myself*, who will be for me?

וכשאני לעצמי מה אני — If I am *only* for myself, what am I?

ואם לא עכשיו אימתי — And if not *now*, when?

Simple. Easy to remember. Poignant. And when I first learned those phrases as an adolescent, I don't think I appreciated *just how wise* they really are. Because Hillel, in three short questions, offers us not only a philosophy of life but, I believe, a blueprint for the Jewish people at this particular pivotal moment in our history.

Countless writers, scholars and Jewish leaders have noted that we have now entered into a *new* and *different* era of Jewish life. For much of the period after the Holocaust, Jewish life experienced an *extraordinary* flourishing. The State of Israel was born and became strong. Here in the United States, Jews moved increasingly into the mainstream of American life, serving as leaders in virtually *every* part of American society.

Antisemitism *never* disappeared. Of course it didn't. But for many American Jews of *my* generation, it often felt *peripheral* to daily life. Growing up in the Philadelphia area, other than a few isolated experiences - a kid in my public high school throwing a penny

at my feet, or a friend telling me that if I didn't convert to Christianity he feared I would go to hell, I *rarely* felt that my Jewishness would *seriously* be held against me. And with *broad* American support for Israel, it was easy to imagine that perhaps we had entered into something genuinely *new* in Jewish history: a flourishing Jewish homeland in Israel, *alongside* a vibrant and secure Jewish Diaspora.

And while this reality *still* shines forth today, we now know that it has lost much of its burnish. I don't think I need to stand here and overwhelm you with statistics. We know that antisemitic incidents in this country have gone up well over 200% and have heard so many other facts that are disturbing. What is clear to me is that we *feel* the difference now. We *live* the changing reality that Antisemitism has infiltrated the mainstream and that the State of Israel's status in the world is a lightning rod for *controversy*, instead of *unity*. We have *witnessed* horrific violence against Jews, starting back from the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh *before* October 7th continuing through everything in between until now. We hear rhetoric about Jews, Zionism and Israel in *public* discourse that would have been *shocking* to many of us not long ago. We know Jewish college students who, after what they experienced these past two years, have *questioned* whether displaying a *Magen David*, a Jewish star, will make them a *target*. We know people who think twice before publicly expressing their support for Israel, for fear of rejection, ridicule and forceful intimidation. We increasingly see legitimate criticism of the Israeli government, or its policies, *cross the line* into questioning the *legitimacy* of the one Jewish state. And we have noted that in many circles American Jews are treated as *suspect* unless they *distance* themselves from Zionism.

The change is **palpable**.

But today, I want to emphasize something *equally* important. We, the Jewish community, are not powerless. We *have* agency. We have resources. We have allies. And we live in a *great* country that promises freedom, liberty and rights for *all*. That is one of the *great* differences between *our* Jewish moment and so many difficult moments of our past. We

are *not* Jews living under a medieval king who may decide tomorrow that we no longer belong. We live in a *democracy* that proudly features constitutional protections, extraordinary institutions, organized Jewish communities, political access, economic and civic influence, and countless friends, partners and *potential* allies. And, for the first time in two thousand years, there is a sovereign Jewish state, with diplomatic power and an army.

So this sermon is not about stirring up fear, or the *dangers* we face. It is about our Jewish tradition, which highlights our sacred **responsibility** to take a *personal role* in overcoming them. And that is why I return to Hillel. Because Hillel's teaching is *made* for a moment like this. As his teaching implies, at its core, Judaism does *not* permit us to be *spectators* to history. “If I am not for myself, who *will* be for me?” When the world is not as it should be, our tradition *implores* us to personally do something about it.

At this moment, I believe Jews need to re-embrace a **Judaism of doing**. We need to take pride as Jews that we are not only a *religion* of beliefs but a *people*, inspired by our beliefs, who are *defined* by our deeds -- as partners with God.

And for Hillel it starts with, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי מִי לִי, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” In order to fulfill our potential to contribute to the *wider* world, we need to be strong enough, secure enough and confident enough to stand up for ourselves. There are moments when we cannot simply wait for someone *else* to recognize our pain and come to our defense. *And that moment is now*. Sharing what is *being* done to us, amplifying our victimhood, will not, alone or even primarily, change our reality. *Absolutely*, there are those who will help us and we *certainly* cannot do this alone, but *we* need to lead the way.

As writer and editor Bret Stephens recently argued, we should pay close attention to the *order* of Hillel's teaching. Stephens writes, “Self-respect—‘If I am not for myself’—is the *basis* of the respect we deserve from others—‘who will be for me?’—which, in turn, is the *precondition* for *kindness*—‘If I am only for myself, what am I?’” - “It doesn’t work

the other way around.” In other words, Jewish *self-respect* is a *precondition* for our ability to turn outward *successfully*. We can, and should *always*, *care* about others, no matter what position we are in. But to be the most *effective* partners in doing that work, we need to attend to our own welfare too. Just like when you fly, in the event of an emergency, you should first secure your *own* oxygen mask before you can help others.

What is more, as Stephens further points out, we cannot base our Jewish future upon a desire to be liked or pitied by our neighbors. Rather our future depends primarily upon our community, responsibly and ethically, using the resources that, thank Gd, we *do* possess. As Stephens wrote more pointedly, “It’s to refuse to *hanker* for the approval of others . . . It’s to demonstrate a willingness to use one’s skills, assets, and power . . .” It is up to *us* to advocate for Israel. It is up to *us* to confront antisemitism. It is up to *us* to strengthen Jewish life. It is up to *us* to defend the institutions that protect freedom and pluralism. *We* have to be **doers**—proud, participatory Jews who know who we are and are prepared to act upon what we believe.

And we have extraordinary role models for this approach, dating from the very beginning, to Abraham, the first Jew. Strikingly, when Gd reveals Gd’s intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham uses his agency to *even challenge Gd, Gd’s self*. He said in rebuke to the Divine, “HaShofet kol ha'aretz lo ya'aseh mishpat?” - “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?!” What *chutzpah*! And yet Gd does **not** condemn Abraham for his challenge. Quite the opposite. He becomes a model of someone who will not simply sit quietly in the face of what he perceives to be injustice.

And then there is Moses. While Moses is still living comfortably in Pharaoh's palace, Exodus tells us: **וַיֵּצֵא אֶל־אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם** - “Moses **went out** to his brothers and *saw* their burdens.” On his own, he goes out. He sees. He opens his heart. And then—most importantly—**he acts**. Even *before Gd ever calls* him at the burning bush he takes action on behalf of his people.

In fact, in that one chapter, Moses demonstrates *three* successive acts of this kind of inspirational leadership. First, and most famously, when an Egyptian attacks a fellow Hebrew, Moses unhesitatingly intervenes. Then, when he sees one Hebrew mistreating another, he challenges wrongdoing *within* his own community. Finally, after fleeing Egypt, Moses sees Midianite shepherds mistreating women he doesn't even know, and he intervenes on *their* behalf as well.

His circle of responsibility keeps expanding from defending his own people to standing up for strangers. And throughout history Jews have similarly risen up in the face of *whatever* moral challenges existed in the world. No wonder Rabbi Jonathan Sacks famously wrote: "Judaism was and remains the world's great religion of protest." We see what is wrong, we internalize the moral challenge and then we act: to defend, to assist, and to make the world better.

And the Rabbis turned that *spirit* into *obligation*. The Talmud in *Shabbat* teaches, quote: "Whoever has the ability to protest wrongdoing within his household and does *not* - is held *accountable* for his household; within his city and does not - is held *accountable* for his city; and if he has the ability to protest wrongdoing in the wider world and does not, he is held *accountable* for the wider world." Our *responsibility expands with our influence and we are held accountable!* The Rabbis do not ask every individual to change the entire world. They ask each of us: Where do I actually have a voice—and *am I using it?*

Maybe *you* cannot change the *entire* public conversation about Israel. But perhaps you can change the ones you are in. Maybe you cannot eliminate antisemitism from a university. But you can write to a university president, support a Jewish student, or make sure the administration understands that someone is paying attention. Perhaps you don't have the ear of a senator. But you can contact your elected representatives as often as you wish to urge them to fight hatred and injustice as you see it. You can speak in a social group when silence would be easier. You can attend gatherings, support institutions doing

advocacy work, sign messages or engage with non-Jews you know. And you do not have to be a rabbi or a professional to do *any* of this work. Each and every one of you can do it! And if we do this critical work as a community, our efforts can have a powerful effect.

In fact, modern Jewish history gives us a perfect example. For decades Soviet Jews lived behind the Iron Curtain, many of them denied the ability to live openly as Jews or to emigrate to Israel. American Jews could have said: *What can we possibly do? We live thousands of miles away. This is the Soviet Union. We have no control over what happens there.*

Instead, our community marched. We wrote. We lobbied. We visited refuseniks in the USSR. We made Soviet Jewry an issue for *years* that governments could no longer ignore. Our own Rabbi Kurtz and many members of this community, including a number of you here today, participated in this movement. And history changed. In the late 80's and early 90's the refuseniks went free.

As such, scholar Amotz Asa-El argues that Jewish activism is not some mysterious Jewish gene that will *automatically* express itself. Rather it is an “inherited language and practice.” And, as he said, “Like any practice, it exists only by *being* practiced.” That call to action, that willingness to step forward rather than to the side, must be learned again and again, in *every* generation, including this one.

But Hillel does not stop at “If I am only for myself, what am I?” Jewish self-defense cannot be the entirety of *Jewish* responsibility—and Jewish isolation will definitely *not* make us safer. As Rabbi Sacks famously wrote: “Jews cannot fight antisemitism *alone*. The victim cannot cure the crime. The hated cannot cure the hate.”

And thus we encounter a conundrum. Because one understandable response to the experience of the last several years is to circle the wagons. We have discovered that some people we thought would stand beside us, did not. Some alliances proved less durable

than we imagined them to be. And the natural, though *unhelpful*, reaction is: Fine. We don't need you anyway.

But that *cannot* be our answer. Hillel teaches Jewish strength cannot mean Jewish isolation. As writer and scholar Eric Ward wrote, "Pain cannot be permission to withdraw; because isolation *is what our enemies want*. . . Sometimes you defend people, even people who don't defend you." In fact, building *genuine* relationships outside the Jewish community is not a *distraction* from confronting antisemitism. It is one of the most *important* ways of countering it. Because not only does this help us reach our goal of creating a safer and more inclusive environment for *Jews* in this country, it is absolutely the right thing to do and is an authentic extension of our values that Hillel expressed, "If I am only for myself, what am I"?

That is one reason I have chosen to devote increasing time to this work, creating working relationships, connections and friendships across religious and cultural lines. For example I have joined the Chicago Unity Forum committed to rediscovering the bonds between Chicago's Black and Jewish communities. And recently I had the privilege of helping to create a national summit in Atlanta that brought together rabbis and Black pastors from across the country. Why? Not because Jewish interests and Black Christian interests are identical. They aren't. Not because we will agree about every issue. We won't. And certainly not because relationship requires *anyone* to surrender deeply held convictions, including about Israel.

It is something much more fundamental: *We need to know one another*. We need to understand one another's histories and pain. And we need to then *strengthen* one another through real relationships.

As Jews, we need others to understand that Zionism is not an *abstract* political theory but a central tenet of our identity that holds that Israel is our homeland. That Israel is inextricably intertwined with Jewish history from the start, with Jewish prayer, with our family that lives there and with the security of our people. And that rising antisemitism in

this country is making our society more hostile to Jews in a way that feels threatening to our community.

And *we* need to understand what matters deeply to our neighbors—not simply as a transaction: “*I’ll care about you, so someday you’ll care about me*”, but because Judaism asks *more* of us than that. The prophet Jeremiah taught the Jews of Babylonia (quote): “Seek the welfare of the city... for in *its* welfare you shall have welfare.” We are to care about the flourishing of our fellow Americans because we *are* fellow Americans. The health of American democracy matters because *all* of us depend upon a society built on religious liberty, pluralism and the rule of law.

One of the things I learned at the summit is that there is far more support for the Jewish community among our Black neighbors than many of us realize. But importantly I *also* heard about pain and concerns within the Black community that *we* need to understand and address. Just as during the Civil Rights Movement, we can stand up *together* to fight *all* pervasive hatreds, Antisemitism *and* Racism. *Together* we can *change* the nature of society. *Together* we can live up to *both* of our ethical ideals and support one another in a time of mutual need.

If the Jewish community emerges from these difficult years *more* frightened of everyone around us, we will have lost something precious. If instead we emerge *more confident* in who we are and *more intentional* about the relationships we create, we can become *stronger*. Hillel puts the two truths next to each other deliberately: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” We cannot outsource responsibility for Jewish security and flourishing. We must stand up proudly for who we are and for the rights and values of our people.

But: “If I am only for myself, what am I?” A Jewish community concerned only with itself would betray part of what Judaism asks us to be. We must live out our ethics because it is the right thing to do. And in the end, it will make *all* of us stronger.

Which brings us to Hillel's final question. ואם לא עכשיו אימתי - If not now, *when*? This is the part I most want us to hear. Because I think one of the dangers of contemporary life is that we have become remarkably skilled at being *concerned* without becoming *engaged*. We read. We scroll. We repost. We become angry. We talk to people who already agree with us about how *outrageous* everything is. But this is not enough. Shuki Taylor recently wrote a wonderful essay called “*A Judaism of Doing*.” His subject is Jewish *religious* life in the digital age, but his insight applies perfectly *here*. He writes “Abundance and engagement are not the same thing.” We can have limitless access to Jewish content, as we do today, and *still* become *spectators* rather than *participants* in Jewish life. He calls us back to a Judaism that we build, make, and voice with our own hands and bodies.

The same is true about Jewish responsibility. We cannot outsource our Judaism, or the defense of Jewish life, to the government or to Jewish *organizations* alone. *Thank Gd* for the professionals who devote their lives to Israel advocacy, fighting antisemitism, government relations, campus life, security and interfaith work. We absolutely *need* them and must support these organizations *generously*. But in this era, in this moment in history, we *also* need all of *us* to take *personal* responsibility, now.

We must learn. *We* must speak. *We* must show up. *We* must build.

And just as importantly: we must live robust Jewish lives today! Antisemitism has always tried to make Jews *smaller*: less visible, less confident, less willing to be distinct.

Therefore, one of our most powerful responses is to refuse to allow hatred to define the depth of our Jewish lives. As Bret Stephens writes: One of the best ways to overcome antisemitism is not actually by fighting antisemitism. Rather it is by confounding their goal of diminishing and eliminating us, by *embracing* with *full* hearts our lives and identities as Jews. Study more Torah. Come to synagogue. Invite people for Shabbat, including your non Jewish friends. Provide your children with the best Jewish education. Visit Israel. Strengthen Jewish institutions. Teach your children and grandchildren not only how to *defend* being Jewish—but why being Jewish is *worth defending*. Because if

our entire Jewish identity becomes fighting antisemitism, then antisemitism has already determined way *too much* about who we are.

The Book of Esther contains perhaps the biblical version of Hillel's challenge. When Esther hesitates to use her position on behalf of her endangered people, Mordechai tells her: וְיָמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לַעֲתָ פָּזַאת הַנֶּעֱתָ לְמַלְכוּת “Who knows whether you have attained your position for *just* such a time as this?” Mordechai's message was not: *Esther, you must solve everything*. It was: You have been given something. Now use it. None of us is Esther. But every one of us possesses some *malchut* — some sphere of influence.

And perhaps that is Mordechai's challenge to us today: Who knows whether *we* have been placed where *we* are, with the abilities and opportunities *we* possess, for just such a time as this? We do not have to solve everything. Our responsibility is simply to refuse to stand aside. To refuse to allow fear to make us smaller. To refuse to allow disappointment to make us withdraw from others. And to refuse to become spectators to our own Jewish history.

So we return to Hillel one final time.

אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי מִי לִי — If I am not for myself, who will be for me? We must be strong enough and proud enough to stand up for ourselves.

וְכַשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי מָה אֲנִי — If I am only for myself, what am I? Our strength must also give us the confidence to reach outward—to build relationships, to stand with others, and to help create a society in which *all* of us can flourish.

And finally: וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו אֵימָתִי — If not now, when? Jewish history has given our generation an extraordinary amount of agency. The question is what we will do with it. *My* hope is that we will meet this moment not with fear, but with confidence; not with isolation, but with relationship; and not merely with concern, but with *action*. May we once again embrace a Judaism of doing and may we flourish as a shining light because of it. *Shanah Tovah!*