



'I'—BUT ONLY FOR GOD 20 Menachem-Av, 5735-1975

Every Shabbat of the summer months, we study "Ethics of the Fathers."

Ethics of the Fathers 1;14: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now, when?

There is a specific directive in Mishna Avot, Ethics. –We have often mentioned that Avot is a collection of directives relating to ethics –to man's interactions with his peers. They are based on the deepest secrets and mysteries of Torah, but are expressed specifically in directives about inter-personal behavior.

The Mishna Avot proclaims: "If I am not for me, who is for me?" The Mishna uses the term "I," a self-centered term, for the statement is about "I": "If I am not for me, who is for me?"

Similarly, when one approaches G-d in prayer, and he trusts and believes that his prayer will be effective, he must have the self-confidence to proclaim, "I am in prayer" –that his prayer is important. Yet, this must not cause him to be arrogant, for he is not accomplishing on his own, rather–through "I am in prayer"– his prayers and requests are fulfilled by G-d, and everything will turn out as it should.

One might argue: "If so, why should I bother to do anything? I will rely on G-d, and will not even pray." So we are told: "If I am not for me, who is for me?" We need to use this ability granted by G-d, when He instructed us and gave us the ability for our prayers –"words that come from a Jewish heart"– to "enter the heart and accomplish their goals."

So the words must come from the heart. "What is the service of the heart?"–asks the Talmud. The answer: Prayer.

In this regard the Mishna proclaims, "If I am not for myself, who is for me?" One cannot rely on others, even if the other person is also a Jew, and even if the other person is in the capital city, and has connections, etc. When you require something for yourself, or something for Judaism, and G-d informed you that an issue exists and that you must do something about it; you cannot rely on anybody else, for, "If I am not for myself, who is for me?"

However, you must remember the caveat: Don't go to the opposite extreme. So the Mishna continues: "If I am for myself alone, what am I?" If you rely on "my might and the strength of my hand," you consider yourself the end-all, don't need "I am in prayer" you don't place your trust in G-d; then "I am for myself," and "if I am for myself," then "What am I?"–Nothing.



And this is followed by the Mishna's third directive. When a Jew is approached about some positive endeavor, he should not respond: "True it may be a good thing, but I need time to think it through. -What's the rush and hurry, why make such a tumult?" He'll postpone it until tomorrow when he'll have a calm moment, when "the Lord your G-d will deliver you from all your surrounding enemies," and then he'll think about G-d, think about "follow My statutes, keep My Mitzvot, and do them."

So the Mishna tells him: "If not now, then when?" Since you've learned that a particular action must be taken, and you are able to do it, then "if not now" -if you don't do it immediately at the first moment of opportunity- who knows if you will have a second opportunity to do it? Just as this is true in spiritual service, it is also so in action, and in physical activities. We see this in physical behavior.

This is especially true when someone quantitatively fewer must resolve a problem through superior quality. The way to go about it is not through publicity, announcing that "we will sit down to consider it; make meetings and sleep on it; have one meeting which results in a second, and the second in a third, and then choose a committee to decide the issue."

The answer to that is: "If not now, when?"

