

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

And when I am for myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?”

Last night I offered an analysis of this famous teaching from Hillel, the great Talmudic sage.

Today I want to share some thoughts about the third part of Hillel's famous teaching:

V'eem lo achshav, aymatai - and if not now, when?

Well, what does that mean?

To answer that question we must return once more to parts one and two in Hillel's statement. Every experience, if not every moment, causes us to assess whether to apply either the first part of Hillel's teaching:

Eem ayn ahnee mee lee - if I am not for myself, who is for me – is this experience all about me and my need to advance, to succeed, to accomplish.

Or is it more about Part II of Hillel's teaching,

Uchsehahnee l'atzmee, mah ahnee - and when I am for myself, what am I – should this experience be about

something beyond me, above me and is it at least as much a call to serve others as it is to serve myself.

Constantly, continually, in life we are called upon to make decisions.

Sometimes we have to choose to act upon the first part of Hillel's teaching, and sometimes we have to choose to act upon the second part of Hillel's teaching.

And when do you need to make that choice - Hillel answers that question by telling us, *now*,

and now, and now, over and over again – and if not now, and now, and now, then when?

You don't become a person who predominantly promotes the second part of Hillel's lesson by procrastinating, by deferring the decision over and over again, by deciding to be more of a caring person later, not today, but next week, or next month, or next year.

Tell me if it's not true for many of us, that the high holy days are a synagogue version of the well-known play and film, "Same Time Next Year."

Here we are, sharing the same experience once again this year as we did last year and as we will again next year.

Sometimes I wonder if the reason so many of us show up in synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is to prove, that we're still alive.

So, when Hillel teaches, if not now, when – he is teaching that, decisions made over and over again, create tendencies, tendencies create patterns, and patterns create character.

Character decisions don't just happen once and forget about it – rather, they happen over and over again, now, and now, and now, perhaps beginning today!

V'eem lo achshav, aymatai – and if not now, when.

Several years ago, the philosopher, Eckhart Tolle, wrote a best-selling book called, "the power of now."

He teaches quite persuasively that **all we ever have is**, now, so therein lies its power.

How do we pay more attention to the power of now?

How do we become more mindful to access the present moment more deliberately, to make wiser decisions toward developing our character?

Seth Godin is an author, entrepreneur, marketer, and public speaker who writes a daily blog I occasionally read.

Recently he shared the following post titled, “The Tension of Now:” (Contrast to “I’ll do it later!”)

Later is the easiest way to relieve the tension that accompanies ***now***.

But ***later*** rarely leads to the action we seek and the change we need.

When you encounter the tension of ***now***, caused by the urgency of action, veer toward ***more tension, not less now***.

Let me share a story I heard from my dear friend, colleague and chavruta - study partner, Rabbi Mayer Kurcfeld.

Rabbi Kurcfeld is a rabbinic administrator of the Star K kashrut supervising agency which is headquartered in Baltimore.

A few months ago he called me very excited about a letter he received.

The letter was written by a non-Jewish woman who a few years back worked with Rabbi Kurcfeld in arranging for appropriate kashrut supervision within the business for which she was employed.

The letter stated in glowing terms, how this woman was weeks away from completing a program of conversion to Judaism and that how working with Rabbi Kurcfeld provided a model of Judaism and spirituality which she hoped to emulate.

She called him one of the most important if not the most important influence in this life-changing decision.

Rabbi Kurcfeld called this woman and in further discussion it became evident that she was converting to Judaism under Conservative auspices.

Rabbi Kurcfeld asked her, only half in jest, why not Orthodox?

And she responded, probably more in jest, "let's take one step at a time."

Now I share this story with you not because I agree that Conservative Judaism, in its purest form, is to be seen as one step toward orthodoxy, but rather because of what

Rabbi Kurcfeld next shared with this woman and then with me, about another of Hillel's great lessons.

Rabbi Kurcfeld explained that this woman's response helped him to understand the impact of Hillel's famous answer to the convert who approached him and requested that Hillel share the essence of Judaism while the convert is able to stand on one leg.

And what did Hillel teach?

The verse from the book of Leviticus – V'Ahavta L'rayecha Kamocha - and you shall love your neighbor as yourself - that is the Klal Gadol, the primary principle, and what else does Hillel say - the rest is commentary, go and study!

So Rabbi Kurcfeld told this woman - I now understand what Hillel was saying – this is the first step that one must take in order to become Jewish.

After this first step, all the other steps will then follow as commentary and natural byproduct of trying to achieve the ultimate goal of loving your neighbor as yourself.

And when I heard the story I responded to Rabbi Kurcfeld,

that I understand Hillel is teaching that the first step is the most important, also because it is the hardest.

It is the most difficult because, without the first step we get nowhere and, if we are indeed expecting to move ahead the first step needs to happen *now*, before any other steps can logically be taken.

Now while the first step may be the most important, it might not need to be the largest or most impressive.

Sometimes all that is needed now - is just a little movement – a slight shift of perspective to see or hear things more clearly.

Imagine you are in your car driving and the radio is on.

You pull up to Jennifer Road and Medical Parkway, and, the radio reception becomes noticeably weaker and full of static as you wait at the traffic light in that intersection.

What do you do to improve the reception?

I move the car a few inches forward and usually that is all that is needed to improve the reception – a slight, small movement.

What do we do when our cell phone reception is weak – move a few feet and say, "can you hear me now?"

Maybe God is waiting for us to move in one direction or another and is asking us, do you hear me now?

In both examples just described, it doesn't take long to know where you stand, and whether the new position provides a location which is now better for communication.

If this is true for your car radio and for your cell phone, then it could very well be true for us in our lives as we are constantly asked to decide now, and now, and now, how to act, while knowing that every action we take helps to determine the nature of our overall character.

All steps in character development are important, with the first step perhaps being most important, but not necessarily needing to be very large.

And not only can they be small in distance, but also in terms of time.

While they might have to happen now, in order to move ahead later, they don't have to take up a lot of time.

Gretchen Rubin is a former attorney and clerk to Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

She now is an author and writes books, blogs and articles on how to achieve happiness in life, primarily by cultivating habits that should lead to happiness.

Gretchen Rubin believes the notion that clutter gets in the way of happiness so she promotes what she and others have called, "the one minute rule", which she described in these words:

It's very simple: I must do any task that can be finished in one minute. Hang up my coat, read a letter and toss it, fill in a form, answer an email, note down a citation, pick up my phone messages, file a paper, put a dish in the dishwasher, replenish the diaper supply by the changing table, put the magazines away...and so on.

Because the tasks are so quick, it isn't too hard to make myself follow the rule—but it has big results. Keeping all those small, nagging tasks under control makes me more serene, less overwhelmed.”

Gretchen Rubin has pointed out that the one minute rule is especially useful for those tasks we think we can perform at any time.

She understands that tasks that can be performed at any time, often end up being performed at no time.

Let me provide an example of how the one minute rule has been so helpful to me and my family.

I call and speak to my mother every day. (not for everybody or every family)

And the telephone conversation we have usually lasts little more than a minute or two.

My sisters and I have been doing this for years – they call our mother, and up until a year ago my mother and father, usually in the morning and I often would call later in the afternoon.

As you know, my sister Jackie of blessed memory, passed away nearly 2 years ago.

Her older daughter, Pamela who is married, and the mother of two young girls – one is now 7 and the other is three, decided many months ago that she would call her grandmother, her late mother's mother, my mother, every day.

Lindsey, Pamela's younger sister is here now – she also calls her Bubby frequently, almost daily.

The call takes a minute.

Not too long ago my mother shared that she told Pamela, maybe Lindsey too, how much she appreciated this minute of conversation, now, and now, and now, every day.

It brings comfort to my mother and helps to fill in one of the gaps created by the loss of her daughter, my sister Jackie.

It is a great tribute to my sister who raised her daughters this way, demonstrating in her own life how to devote one minute, after minute, after minute in conversation with her mother.

Jackie is gone, but she remains the conduit for the connection between grandmother and granddaughters as they mourn the loss of a woman who stood at the center of their lives.

They take just a minute out of their life every day, to make a huge difference.

Often in life, not more than a minute is needed to begin or fulfill a task, but when invested, the minute can sometimes bring a return that has a long-lasting impact.

Indeed, a minute does not have to be mi-nute!

Some of what Gretchen Rubin recommends to help build habits toward happiness might not appeal to you.

Not everything she writes appeals to me.

But obviously, the one minute rule really struck a chord and is an approach I find helpful.

Earlier, I purposely omitted the name of Gretchen Rubin's most recent book because I want to share it with you, *now*, as I end this sermon.

That title fits quite well with what I've been trying to teach today, and the overall purpose of why we spend so much time in shul on these days of awe.

Simply, the title is – "Better than Before."

Isn't that what we all want from today – to take a step, a first step, an important step, even if it isn't a large step,

Now,

in a decision which might not take more than a minute, to help us become "better than before."

And, if not now, when?