

*If I'm Not For  
Myself....*

*Self vs. Community in  
Jewish Tradition*

**Study Session**

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The following materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains background materials and a facilitator guide. The background materials and facilitator guide will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

Questions? Send them to: [koach@uscj.org](mailto:koach@uscj.org)

# If I'm Not For Myself....

## Facilitator Guide

### Overview and Objective

In the section of the *mishnah* called *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of our Ancestors) Hillel asks, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?" This question speaks to the human tension between a desire to look out for one's own needs and the demands and rewards of being part of a larger community. Perhaps you have felt such a tension in your own life. We have all had experiences when we have ignored our responsibilities towards family, friends, or the Jewish community in order to go to a concert, watch a sports game, or sleep in a few extra hours. Reversely, there are also times when we give so much to our friends and communities that we forget to take care of ourselves!

This study packet will explore the differing values of self vs. community in the Jewish tradition. Hopefully, through studying the texts in this packet and discussing the questions presented, you will gain insight into how to better balance your public and private responsibilities.

Although this material is presented as a progression, you need not follow the format from beginning to end. Be creative with the material and have fun!

## Section One– The Value of Self

### Discussion Questions:

1. Before looking at the texts, please ask the following questions:
  - a. What are your favorite activities to do on your own? For example, do you have any hobbies (like reading, jogging, photography)? How do these activities enhance your life? Why do you enjoy doing these activities on your own rather than with a group of people?
2. Read the excerpt from Numbers 24:5. This is part of a blessing that the non-Jewish prophet Balaam offers to the people of Israel as he looks at the Israelite camp in the wilderness. It is also one of the first prayers that Jews say in the morning. Read Rashi's commentary of Numbers 24:5. According to Rashi, why does Balaam praise the tents of Jacob that he sees in the Israelite camp? Why is it significant that the tent openings faced away from one another? How do you find privacy to be an important tool for self-growth?
3. Read the excerpt from Tractate *Sanhedrin* 37a in the Babylonian Talmud. What does this passage say about the importance of individuals?
4. What does the statement, "The world was created for my sake" mean? Do you think it is an egotistical or a profound statement?

**Texts:**

במדבר פרק כד:ה  
ה מה־טבו אהליך־ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

How good are your tents, O Jacob—your dwellings, O Israel.

*Numbers 24:5*

רש"י במדבר פרק כד פסוק ה  
מה טבו אהליך. על שראה פתחיהם שאינן מכוונין זה מול זה:

**How good are your tents:** Because he [Balaam] saw that their openings were not directed at one another.

*Rashi, Numbers 24:5*

מסכת סנהדרין דף לז א:

מתני' ... שכל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד עולם מלא וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא ... שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד כולן דומין זה לזה ומלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה טבע כל אדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון ואין אחד מהן דומה לחבירו לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר בשבילי נברא העולם ושמא תאמרו

Whoever destroys one person from all of Israel, the Torah finds him as guilty as if he has destroyed a whole world. And whoever preserves one life from all of Israel, the Torah finds him as meritorious as if he has preserved a whole world.... A man forms many coins from the same mold. They all resemble one another. The King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, formed every man from the stamp of the first man, yet not one of them resembles his fellow. Therefore, every single person is obligated to say, "The world was created for my sake."

*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a*

## Section Two– The Value of Community

### Discussion Questions:

1. Before looking at the texts, please ask the following questions:
  - a. What is the definition of a community? How does it differ from a group, club or organization? List the various communities to which you belong.
  - b. What are the rewards of being a member of a community? What are the drawbacks? What are your favorite activities to do as part of a larger community? Why do you enjoy doing these activities with a community instead of by yourself?
  - c. What does it mean to you to be a member of the greater Jewish community?
2. The passage from *Brakhot* 8a suggests that God prefers to hear prayers that are offered in a communal setting. Why would this be true? Do you find praying as part of a community to be different than praying on your own? How would you describe the difference?
3. Read the text from *Leviticus Rabbah*. According to this excerpt, what does it mean to be a member of the greater Jewish community? What responsibilities do Jews have towards one another? How does the behavior of one Jew affect the other members of the community? Do either of the examples offered in this passage remind your own experiences? If you feel comfortable doing so, please share them with others.

**Texts:**

**מסכת ברכות דף ח א:**

מאי דכתיב ואני תפילתי לך ה' עת רצון אימתי עת רצון בשעה שהצבור מתפללין .

What is the meaning of the verse: *And for me, let my prayer be made for You, God, in an acceptable time* (Psalms 69:14)? What is an acceptable time? The time when the congregation prays.

*Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 8:1*

**מדרש רבה ויקרא פרשה ד ו:**

ו תני חזקיה (ירמיה נ) שה פזורה ישראל נמשלו ישראל לשה מה שה הזה לוקה על ראשו או בא' מאבריו וכל אבריו מרגישין כך הן ישראל אחד מהן חוטא וכולן מרגישין (במדבר טז) האיש אחד יחטא תני רשב"י משל לבני אדם שהיו יושבין בספינה נטל אחד מהן מקדח והתחיל קודח תחתיו אמרו לו חבריו מה אתה יושב ועושה אמר להם מה אכפת לכם לא תחתי אני קודח אמרו לו שהמים עולין ומציפין עלינו את הספינה .

Hezekiah taught: It is said, *Israel is a scattered sheep* (Jer. 50:17). Why is Israel likened to a sheep? Just as with a lamb, when it is hurt on the head or on any other limb, all its limbs feel it, even so it is with Israel: if [only one] of them sins, all of them feel it. It is said, *When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?* (Numbers 16:22). R. Simeon b. Yohai taught: This may be compared to the case of men on a ship, one of whom took a borer and began boring beneath his own place. His fellow travelers said to him: "What are you doing?" He said to them: "What does that matter to you, am I not boring under my own place?" They said, "Because water will come up and flood the ship for us all."

*Leviticus Rabbah 4:6*

## Section Three– The Modern Dilemma

In the book *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*, sociologists Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen describe a modern Jewish American life that is focused on personal meaning and individual fulfillment. Through surveys and interviews, Cohen and Eisen concluded that many modern American Jews make decisions about their Jewish practice based on what has meaning for them and their individual families rather than what enhances their experience of community. Cohen and Eisen state:

“The principle authority for contemporary American Jews, in the absence of compelling religious norms and communal loyalties, has become the sovereign self. Each person now performs the labor of fashioning his or her own self, pulling together elements from the various Jewish and non-Jewish repertoires available, rather than stepping into an ‘inescapable framework’ of identity (familial, communal, traditional) given at birth. Decisions about ritual observance and involvement in Jewish institutions are made and made again, considered and reconsidered, year by year and even week by week. . . . Personal meanings are sought by these Jews for new as well as for the inherited observances. If such meanings are not fashioned or found, the practices in question are revised or discarded—or not undertaken in the first place.” (2-3)

- Do you agree with Cohen and Eisen’s description of how modern Jews make decisions about Jewish practice? In your opinion, why do Jews adopt new religious practices?
- Is the process that modern Jews use to make decisions about their Jewish involvement compatible with the Jewish sources that you have studied in this packet?
- What steps should Jewish leaders take to teach a love for Jewish community along with a desire for self-fulfillment?

## Definitions and Biographies

*Dr. Steven M. Cohen* - Sociologist and professor at the Melton Center for Jewish Education at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

*Dr. Arnold M. Eisen* - Sociologist and scholar of Jewish Thought, Dr. Eisen is the new Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

*Leviticus Rabbah* - A collection of homilies based on the book of Leviticus written in the 5th century.

## Additional Resources

- *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: One Man's Journey to Rediscover a Jewish Spiritual Tradition* by Alan Morinis. Broadway Books, 2002 (a good introduction to *Musar*, the Jewish practice of personal growth and improvement).
- *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* by Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen. Indiana University Press, 2000.
- *Spiritual Community: The Power to Restore Hope, Commitment, and Joy* by David A. Teutsch. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005.