

Pirkei Avot 1:4

Translation

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

Maimonides

He said, if I myself will not be the one who bestirs my soul to virtue, who will bestir it? For it has no one to bestir outside of ourselves, as we explained in the Eighth Chapter. *And when I am only for myself, what am I?* - since it is within my authority to incline my soul to whichever side I desire, which good deeds have I performed? As if he were belittling himself by saying, "What am I?" As if to say, what good has come forth from me, seeing that I am not perfect even though I have performed this deed? Subsequently, he retraced and said: If I will not acquire virtues now, in the period of youth, when shall I acquire them—in the period of old age? No, for it is difficult to turn aside from dispositions at that time because traits and attributes have become firm and permanent, whether virtues or vices. And the sage said, (Proverbs 22:6) "Train a child in the path he should follow; even when he is old he will not turn aside from it."

Rav Chaim of Volozhin

(Translation: Chanoch Levi in *Ruach Chaim*)
If I am not for myself, etc. The evil inclination exhorts us to spend all of our time pursuing careers and earning money, since "These are such difficult financial times. Who else will provide for your wife and children?" This is false. Although we must work for a living, there is no purpose in over-exerting ourselves. The Talmud explains that at the time of conception it is decreed whether the child will be rich or poor during his lifetime (*Niddah* 16b). Furthermore, on every Rosh HaShanah it is decreed exactly how

much money a person will earn in the upcoming year (*Beitzah* 16a). In regard to Torah study, the converse is true. The more one studies, the more one knows. If I am not for myself, if I do not make the effort to study Torah, who will be for me? Who will help me? And when I am to myself in financial pursuits, what am I? What can I possibly do to earn more than the amount set at the beginning of the year? Spiritual pursuits are distinct from material pursuits in three ways. 1) We are charged to perfect ourselves spiritually; this is the entire purpose of our existence. Material pursuits, however are a peripheral goal, necessary but insignificant. 2) Exerting ourselves in material

הוא הִיָּה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאָנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי. וְאִם לֹא עֲכָשְׁיוּ, אֵימָתָי :

pursuits will not produce better financial results, but for every effort we make in spirituality, we receive Divine assistance to grow even greater. Nevertheless, we receive

full reward for our achievements. "The wicked one looks to the righteous and attempts to kill him. Hashem will not abandon him in his hand." The evil inclination overwhelms man every day, and if not for Hashem's help, it would be successful (*Sukkah* 52b on *Tehillim* 37:32-33). The verse concludes, "And He will not vilify him in His judgment." Although the person required Divine assistance, he still receives a full reward. 3) With material pursuits, what was not done today can be accomplished tomorrow, but any opportunity for spirituality that has been squandered can never be replaced. Hillel alludes to these three points. 1) If I am not for myself in spiritual growth, who will be? This is my charge, my mission in life. 2) And when I am to myself without any Divine help, what am I? How can I possibly succeed in defeating the evil inclination? 3) And if not now, when? If someone tries to improve, he receives Divine assistance (*Shabbos* 104a), but man must take the first step. If I do not try now, I will not receive this aid, and the opportunities of this day will be lost forever.