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## Pirkei Avot 1:14 Nullification, Wholeness and Patience

**Pirkei Avot 1:14 He would also say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?**

Rashi, the Rambam and Rabbeinu Yonah explained this *mishnah* as follows: **If I am not for myself, who is for me?** – If I do not awaken myself to serve God, who will awaken me? **If I am not for myself, who is for me?** – Even after I have taken action, it is just a fraction of the rectifications that I am responsible to make. **And if not now, when?** – Thus, if I do not take action now, when will I make the rectifications for which I am responsible?

### I am Null

Chassidut has a different explanation on this *mishnah*: **If I am not for myself, who is for me?** – According to the Ba'al Shem Tov<sup>1</sup>, every place where the word אֵין (*ain/not*) is written, the vowels can be changed so that it spells *ayin* (nullification). In this case, our phrase would refer to the nullification of Creation within the “Divine nothingness,” (similar to the world, which was created “something from nothing”). According to this explanation, the *mishnah* is directing us to turn ourselves (*ani*) into the nothingness of *ayin* (In Hebrew, *ani*, “I” is spelled with the same letters as *ayin*).

This may seem like a bit much: Why should I make myself into nothing? This self-nullification, however, does not extinguish or sadden the individual. Just the opposite is true. The more that a person thinks that he is great, the more that he will be upset when things don't work out the way he wanted. The more that a person is easy-going and lowly, the happier he will be and the more his life will be light-hearted and illuminated.<sup>2</sup> Kabbalah teaches that the word *mi* (who) in our *mishnah* belongs to the *sefirah* of Understanding, the inner dimension of which is joy. If so, our *mishnah* promises: אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי - When you turn your “I” into nothingness, then מִי לִי – you will enjoy happiness.

<sup>1</sup> Ba'al Shem Tov on the Torah, *Lech Lecha* 26.

<sup>2</sup> As depicted in the story “The Wise Man and the Simple Man” by Rebbe Nachman of Breslev.

## The Essential Wholeness

**And if I am only for myself (*l'atzmi*), what am I?:** There are dark sides of the soul, which are full of self-interest and desire for power. If we want to live a good life, we must work to nullify them. But every Jew has a pure, perfectly whole Divine soul, which is absolute good. The essence of this soul remains whole as long as the person does not sin. This is the “essential me,” or in the words of our *mishnah*, “*ani l'atzmi*.” Chassidut calls it the “essential wholeness.”

Every sin, particularly sins of a sexual nature, blemish the wholeness of the soul. (This is why it is written that regular repentance does not help in the case of sexual sin, which blemishes the wholeness of the soul. Study of the inner dimension of the Torah organically rectifies the essential wholeness). Sin distances us from God, as is written, “For your sins have separated between you and between your God,”<sup>3</sup> and as such, distances us from the inner dimension of our souls, which is a literal part of God.<sup>4</sup>

When a person is distanced from his inner soul, he barricades himself in an ivory tower of desires and lusts that he generates just to cover up his essential distance from God. In light of this, our *mishnah* can be explained as follows: **And if I am only for myself, what am I?** – when the essence of one’s soul remains whole (he has not sinned and blemished it), then he merits “*mah*” (**what**), which also means humility and self-nullification, as Moses, the most humble of men, said, “And **what** are we?” If a person has sinned and the essence of his soul has been blemished, he must repent with love (which also remedies sexual sin). This will rectify his soul and make it whole once more, so that he can once again be innocent and humble.

## Peace, but not now

**And if not now, when?:** Our *mishnah* directs us to be in a condition of “not now.” This is the rectification of impulsiveness in the soul by means of faith in God, as in the verse, “He who believes will not hurry.”<sup>5</sup> He who believes in God with all his heart is not in a rush. He knows that whatever has been decreed Above is what will happen. Of course, this does not contradict the

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 59:2.

<sup>4</sup> Tanya chapter 2: “And the second soul in Israel is a literal part of God above.”

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 28:16 and explained at length in Rabbi Ginsburgh’s Hebrew lessons on Faith and Trust.

anticipation for imminent salvation and the actions that we should take to that end. Nonetheless, parallel to that, the believer believes that God directs everything from above and knows the right time for all that takes place. Thus, he is not 'pressured' for things to happen right now. He can wait for events to unfold at the right time.<sup>6</sup>

The Ba'al Shem Tov called this trait "Tempered Alacrity:" We have to take very quick action and do all that is needed, while simultaneously patiently waiting for God's word to manifest in reality in accordance with man's action. Waiting for God's word and the understanding that it is only His word that will be actualized generates fear of God. This is a fear of God's majesty, which looks on from far, amazed at the greatness and goodness of God, Who calculates everything for the good of the individual and mankind.

According to this explanation, our *mishnah* is saying that if we accept that our desire is not going to be immediately fulfilled, with faith that God will choose the best result for me, even if it is "not now," we will achieve *aimatai*, which means "when" but also means fear of God and His majesty.

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<sup>6</sup> There are people who demand "Peace Now" and because of this impulsivity, which stems from lack of faith in God, are willing to sell everything – including human life and the Holy Land, to achieve their goal. But when a person has faith in God, Who "desired and took it from them (the non-Jewish nations) and gave it to us" (Rashi), he can wait and achieve true peace, which includes both the wholeness of the Nation and of the Land.