



## Rabbinic Wisdom for Hard Times

By Natasha Dresner

People's true nature gets tested in times of prolonged stress and crisis. That is why, in the last ten weeks of working with my nonprofit clients in this new COVID-19 world, I have witnessed so many examples of true leadership that inspired me to write this article. Those examples need to be celebrated and, most importantly, carried with us into our new normal and beyond – whatever that will look like – so we can be our best selves at all times, and not only in a crisis.

As, perhaps many of you, I have found myself in these last ten weeks leaning into familiar, time-tested things that ground and comfort me like food, family, work, puzzles, and words to live by. So, please allow me to share with you the following three lessons I observed of true leadership through the lens of this famous *quote from Rabbi Hillel*: “*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?*” Never before have I experienced these words as being truer, more resonant, and more necessary than today.

1. “***If I am not for myself, who will be for me?***” is the first part of *Rabbi Hillel's quote* that in and of itself (without the other parts) could be easily misinterpreted as being selfish. However, that could not be further from the truth. The true leaders I'm seeing in action make sure to take care of themselves, so they can continue leading and taking care of others. Think of it like putting an oxygen mask in an airplane on yourself first; it isn't selfish, it's practical and saves other lives (along this same vein, putting on a mask these days is to safeguard others, *not ourselves*). So, why is it that we need a crisis to realize that self care and putting yourself first is a healthy leadership and life practice?!

Now, apply the same logic to a nonprofit organization that needs to take care of itself/its staff in order to take the best possible care of its community. Is that selfish? True leaders I've observed in the last ten weeks have applied this logic to the way they lead. For example, they are not afraid to ask their community for moral and financial support. They are advocating on behalf of their organization, making their case for support urgently and unapologetically even if it's not about providing basic necessities. Your mission may not be at the top of the “needs chain,” but it is just as – if

not more – important to some people. So, if you as a leader don't advocate for your organization and its mission, who will?

2. **“If I am only for myself, what am I?”** – I have seen so many organizations realize that they need to come together, stop competing, and share their creativity and resources to not only survive this Coronavirus crisis, but to come out of it stronger. I want to give a huge shout-out to all of the board chairs, executive directors, development directors, board members, program staff, and other volunteer and paid professionals, who have embraced this value and been guided by it. You know who you are! Nonprofit organizations that would typically see each other as competing for clients, donors, publicity – you name it – have been sharing their fundraising strategies and language, their communication approach and templates, their financial models and what-if scenarios.

The sharing, however, goes way beyond these practical examples. I have seen former competitors offering emotional and psychological support to each other, letting people know and feel that they are not alone in the middle of this seemingly endless storm. As a result, an entire industry (in my case, the Jewish nonprofit day and overnight camps I work with) is stronger, more prepared and aware of where to turn for support and advice as things continue to unfold.

*Additionally, I have never seen boards and staff needing to make more difficult decisions than during this period. The common denominator of their true leadership – no matter what the decision – has been centered around the people they serve versus only themselves.*

3. **“And if not now, when?”** – Staying current, responding thoughtfully but quickly and, most importantly, adapting and pivoting almost constantly is the name of the game now. True leaders recognized that their organizations couldn't continue doing business as usual and that they needed to address their problem areas now (or, possibly, never). In crisis, our organizational problems become painfully obvious and unavoidable. For example, the organizations that do really well with fundraising now are those that embraced the culture of philanthropy and relationship-building well before this crisis hit, and they are now harvesting the fruits of their labors. That's real leadership, but so is recognizing your mistake of not doing that before and starting to embrace it now. As the famous saying goes “The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now.” It takes a lot of courage to choose change and, fortunately and unfortunately, crises provide excellent motivation to do so.

*Now is also the time to decide, if you haven't already, what kind of leader you want to be: one who sees possibility or one who sees hopelessness; one who chooses abundance (the glass is half full) instead of scarcity (the glass is half empty). For*

example, the nonprofit leaders who see possibility and the glass as half full are recruiting talented people who have more time now and desire to help their boards and committees. Why not now? And if not now, when?

So, take these lessons, if they resonate with you, share them with your organizations, and make them yours. And remember, leadership is not a title, it's an act of courage. So, you don't need to be a CEO or a Board Chair to lead, you just need to care and be brave, and ask yourself these three questions: "*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?*"

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