

Hello.

Tenth grade. The last year of Hebrew school. During my time here, I have been something of a teacher's pet, just like at school, and that hasn't made me the most popular student. I also happen to be the only AFAB person in my class, which makes things kind of weird, when we do talk about the rare verse that focuses on women or the role of women. So, I have decided that, instead of some verse in relation to gender, or even to sexuality, as was my original idea, instead, I want to go with the basics. In fact, I want to go with the most basic, and probably most infamous verse in Pirkei Avot. "If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for my own self only, what am I?" Hillel, Pirkei Avot 1:14

Yes, yes, I know. The Hillel is overdone. Anybody could write a basic speech about compassion. But this verse really does go much deeper if you look at it from a historical lens. And since overanalyzing and drawing loose connections between things is my specialty, that is what you all have to listen to.

This verse is in favor of moderation. It is about not going to the extreme of sacrifice for others, but also not ignoring others completely. When Hillel asks, "Who will be for me?" he adopts a semi-pessimistic view of the world, one that is understandable, living under Roman rule. And it is understandable that many do share this view nowadays, as we live in a dog-eat-dog society. But does the world have to be like that? Must humanity live constantly at opposition to each other?

Jewish thought contradicts itself on this issue, as it does on literally every single other topic imaginable. Two Jews, three opinions, as the saying goes. But I believe that we can rely on each other more than Hillel thought we could. It isn't the individual that is opposed to cooperation, rather it is society built to facilitate fighting.

But, like I said, I didn't come here to talk to you about cooperation. I came to talk to you about history and sacrifice, specifically those in Jewish history who have taken the concept of "not being for oneself" to the extreme. Yup, that's right. We are talking about murder. Now, my fellow classmates, are you interested?

Self-sacrifice for a cause and a people is far from an antique notion, one held only by the Romans in the days of old. Throughout modern Jewish history and in the face of increased antisemitism, countless Jews have given their lives in the defense of their people and in defense of humanity as a whole, with varying degrees of success. Yet, there is a very rare case of a would-be martyr acting in defense of his people, succeeding in his aim, being exonerated by the court, proving to the world a series of atrocities committed, and inspiring the creation of a league to prevent further acts of antisemitism.

Sholem Shvartsbord was a Jewish Anarchist, born in Balta, in Ukraine. From a young age, he was a passionate defender of his fellow Jews against pogroms, participating in the Self-Defense of Balta against pogroms in 1905, when he was 18. He wound up having to flee Tzarist Russia for his radical politics, winding up eventually in Paris, where he married Anna Render, a woman who would have to put up with entirely too much because of her husband, then joined the French army during World War One and was awarded the Croix de Guerre for valor. After recovering from being shot in the chest, Sholem returned to Russia, siding with the Red Army. During his Russian service, he and his squadron witnessed and defended towns against several pogroms caused by the Ukrainian White Army, led by Symon Petlura. Sholem eventually returned to France, taking up again his trade as a clockmaker, and becoming more connected in anarchist circles.

However, in 1926, he discovered that Symon Petlura was also in Paris, leading a government in exile. Sholem, grieving for the fourteen members of his family murdered by Petlura, and struggling with PTSD, set out to avenge his people. On May 25th, 1926, Sholem

approached Petlura, and after confirming it was him, pulled out his gun and shot Petlura five times, shouting his guilt for the pogroms, then twice more when the general was on the ground. Sholem was taken into custody, and then eventually tried. Jews all around the world leapt to his aid, from fellow anarchist Emma Goldman, to intellectuals like Albert Einstein, to survivors of the Petlura Pogroms campaign for Sholem's acquittal. And, a year after the assassination, Sholem was found Not Guilty of murder, released, and fined one franc. He would spend the rest of his life working to organize Jewish resistance against future pogroms or waves of antisemitism, trying to move to Palestine, but being denied a visa by the British. In the end, he passed away from a heart attack in 1938, not living long enough to see the death of European Jewry. Anna, his wife, would survive the Shoah, outliving him by a decade.

Sholem was willing to give his life to defend his people. The assassination was not only an act of revenge, it was also propaganda, meant to scare antisemites against further harming Jews, and meant to rally Jews to fight back against those who seek our destruction. Life is precious, but when your only options are to lie down and let yourself be killed, or to fight back, you must fight back. To be willing to sacrifice yourself for others is not a decision to be made lightly, but when others are willing to fight to defend you, it is much easier to be willing to defend them.

Hillel does have a point. In a capitalist society, living life entirely selflessly is unfeasible. According to Rabbi Nathan, "Hillel stood in the gate of Jerusalem one day and saw the people on their way to work. "How much," he asked, "will you earn to-day?" One said: "A denarius"; the second: "Two denarii." "What will you do with the money?" he inquired. "We will provide for the necessities of life." Then said he to them: "Would you not rather come and make the Torah your possession, that you may possess both this and the future world?" "This verse of Avot is interesting because it is almost an admission by the rabbis of the past that while we would all prefer to be studying, learning, and growing, instead we have to devote our time to life and

survival. What Shvartsbord wanted, what Hillel wanted, was to create a world where we don't have to work our feet off in order to survive. Instead, we deserve a world where we are given the chance to live. And while Hillel and Shvartsbord used different tactics, what they both truly wanted was the right to be Jewish, safely and freely. And as a Jew, a not the most religious, not very observant, but still a very proud Jew, I want that too.

Thank you.