

## Languages – Jewish and American

As Jews in modernity, we possess several “languages,” several identities, defined largely by gender, age, nationality and religion. In this break-out session we are focusing on two: Jewish and American.

Often these cultures overlap and reinforce each other (each believes in a system of law: that no one is above the law; that a constitution defines the law; that each individual is of inestimable values, etc.). Other times they don't, (the balance of self-vs. community: rights vs. obligations; concepts of ownership; etc.).

The question for those born into this world of freedom and choice are: What are the differences; when are they significant; and why should we care? How do we negotiate this cultural bilingualism? Given a world of choice, why should we continue to choose to be Jews? If Jewish and American values and motives clash, how shall we choose between them? As Jews, how should we respond to the tug of particularism and the demand of universalism? In the world of social action and social justice these questions become even more refined.

Hillel was a first century rabbinical leader. He is remembered as a kind and wise teacher who had a way with words. One of his most famous says:

**“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But, if I am only for myself, what am I. If not now, when?”**

- When in my life do I feel a sense of obligation? To whom and am I obligated? What do I feel obligated to do? What makes me feel obligated in general?

- Do I have an obligation to engage in social service? If so, where does the obligation come from? If not, why should I choose to engage in social service?

- Either way, who am I when I act? Which culture(s) and which value(s) are motivating me to act?

- Do (or should I) act as a Jew engaged in social service or as an American? What is the difference? Can I be both?