

Parashat Kedoshim 5771, 2011:

How to Love Your Fellow Jew

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The phrase "...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (*Sefer Vayikra* 19:18) is one of the most often quoted verses in the Torah. Indeed, it is so frequently repeated by the world at large, that it has nearly taken on the status of a slogan rather than a *pasuk* (verse) in our holy Torah. Unfortunately however, its popularity has often confused its meaning. After all, "...*v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocha*" (the original Hebrew phrase of our verse) is not only a *pasuk*; it is part of the *Taryag Mitzvot* (613 Commandments). Thus, the Rambam (1135-1204) states in *Sefer Hamitzvot*, Positive Commandment 206:

We are commanded to love others [i.e. our fellow Jews] in the same manner that we love ourselves. My mercy and love for my brother [i.e. my fellow Jew] should be exactly like the mercy and love I have for myself; [specifically in regards to] his money, physical welfare, and everything that will ever be in his possession or he will want. And, everything that I wish for myself, I should desire for him. [Conversely,] anything that I would hate for myself or for anyone who associates with me, I should find hateful to him in the exact same fashion. This is what the Torah stated: "...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (All translations my own)

Maimonides' formulation of our mitzvah in the above-cited passage is decidedly general – as befits the inherent purpose of the *Sefer Hamitzvot*. Like any other mitzvah, however, it must have a definitional structure that dictates the mode in which it can and must be fulfilled. Without these parameters it would be reduced to nothing more than "a good idea," or a "nice thing to do." Yet, it is a Torah commandment. Therefore, it must be implemented in a specific fashion and via precisely mandated actions. Consequently, the Rambam addresses the practical aspects of this commandment toward the beginning

(*Hilchot Deot* 6:3) and end (*Hilchot Avel* 14:1) of his *magnum opus* of Jewish jurisprudence known as the *Mishneh Torah*. Given these two placements of this halacha, it appears that he is giving us a crucial, if somewhat implicitly stated message: The Torah begins and ends with the fundamental concept of love for our fellow Jew.

In the *Hilchot Deot* passage, the Rambam urges us to be sensitive to, and respectful of, our fellow Jews, and to be as careful with their money and possessions as we are with our own:

It is incumbent upon every person to love each and every person from the Jewish people – like himself. As the Torah states: “...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Therefore, you must relate his praise and be protective of his money in the selfsame manner that one is protective of his own money and his desire to be respected [by others].

This is a “big-picture” Maimonidean statement. Herein, he urges us to seek our fellow Jew’s welfare via ensuring his respected position within society and by protecting his possessions. Thus, love for our fellow Jew is, in fact, demonstrable – instead of some weak construct devoid of substance and meaning.

The Rambam’s final words of the above-stated law, however, are particularly powerful: “Anyone who brings honor to himself based upon the diminution of his friend’s status [‘*b’kalon chaveiro*,’ in the eyes of others] does not have a portion in the World to Come.” In many ways, this formulation is nothing short of remarkable. Allow me to explain: Sitting in the succah during Succot and eating matzah on Pesach (Passover), for example, are two other positive commandments that are found within the *Taryag Mitzvot*. They are hallmarks of their respective festivals. Yet, Maimonides never states that he who fails to fulfill these mitzvot is denied a portion in the World To Come. Failure to *mekayam* (fulfill) these commandments results in a *bitul aseh* (failure to fulfill based upon an act of

omission). While this is a potent impetus to keep these mitzvot, it is a far cry from being denied a portion in the World To Come! Therefore, we can clearly see the singular importance of “...*v’ahavta l’reiecha kamocha*” within the Rambam’s system of mitzvot analysis. Moreover, it looms large within his understanding of the ethics and morality of the Torah.

It is within *Hilchot Avel*, however, that we find the most practical formulation as to how one ought to perform the commandment of “...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Herein Maimonides states:

It is a positive Rabbinic Commandment to visit the sick, to comfort the mourners, to “bring out” (*l’hotzi*) the deceased, to provide for the needs of the bride, and to escort guests. [In addition, one] must involve himself in all aspects of the burial and carry the deceased on his shoulder, walk before him, eulogize him, dig his grave, and bury him. So, too, [one is obligated] to rejoice with the bride and groom, and to provide for all their needs [at the festive feast.] All of the aforementioned are in the category of physically demonstrated acts of kindness (*gemilut chasadim she’b’gufo*) and, as such, have no upward limit. Even though all of these mitzvot are Rabbinic in nature, they are in the category of “...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” [In general,] all of those things that you would like others to do for you; you should do for your brother in Torah and Mitzvot.

In summary, this passage provides us with a truly pragmatic and paradigmatic formulation for fulfilling “...*v’ahavta l’reiecha kamocha*.” Clearly, “love” for one’s fellow Jew is not some amorphous and “fuzzy” idea. Rather, for the Rambam, it primarily consists of clearly delineated acts of kindness toward someone who is ill, burying a deceased individual (*lo aleinu*) and comforting his family, as well as, rejoicing with, and providing for, the needs of a newly married couple. These types of kindness know no upward boundary – in consonance with the nature of the needs of the recipients themselves.

Given all of the above, we now have a roadmap for fulfilling the mitzvah of “...*v’ahavta l’reiecha kamocha.*” May we be *zocheh* (merit) to fulfill the mitzvah of loving our fellow Jew by following Maimonides’ guide for our perplexed and searching generation. If we can perform acts of loving kindness to our fellow Jew – simply because he/she is our fellow Jew, then we will be well on our way to bringing *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the one and only righteous Messiah) speedily and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.