

Parashat Kedoshim 5774, 2014:

How to Love Your Fellow Jew: A Guide for the Perplexed

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Shmuel David ben Moshe HaLevy, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

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 quoted by the world at large that it has taken on the status of a slogan rather than a *pasuk* (verse) in our holy Torah. Unfortunately however, its popularity has usually confused its meaning. In addition, "...*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, like any other mitzvah, it has a definitional structure that dictates the mode in which it can and must be fulfilled. It is not just "a good idea," or thought. Instead, *v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocha* must be implemented in a specific fashion and through demonstrable deeds.

Rabbi Akiva, one of our greatest sages and heroes, focused upon the overarching significance of "...*v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocha*" in a number of different sources. By way of illustration, he taught us: "...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself,' this is the all embracing principle of the Torah. One should not say: Since I have been embarrassed, let my friend be embarrassed with me, [or] since I have been ruined [perhaps financially], let my friend be ruined with me." (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 7:24, *Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedarim* 9:4, and the *Sifra* to *Parashat Kedoshim* 4:45) Moreover, Rabbi Akiva clearly

links our *pasuk* to actions, rather than to mere thoughts or sentiments. The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in his commentary on our *pasuk*, follows Rabbi Akiva's lead when he notes that the Torah could not have been referring to commanding the emotion of "love," since the emotional sphere resides outside the scope of that which can be commanded.

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) in *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot* 6:3 focuses upon the practical aspects of this mitzvah. In his determination of the halacha, he stresses sensitivity to, and respect for our fellow Jews, and urges us to be as careful with their money and possessions as we are with our own. Moreover:

One is commanded to love each and every Jew as one does oneself, for it is written, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Therefore, one has to count other people's gains and to be as careful with their money as one is with one's own and according to one's self-respect. Anybody who does not respect his fellow has no share in the World To Come. (Translation at: <http://www.btzedek.com/scholarship/scholar002.html>)

The Rambam's final words in this ruling are particularly powerful. By way of illustration, sitting in the succah during Succot and eating matzah on Pesach are two other positive commandments that are universally counted within the *Taryag Mitzvot*. They are hallmarks of their respective festivals. Yet, the Rambam 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 import of *v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocha* within the Rambam's system of mitzvot and conception of ethical behavior.

In his discussion of our *pasuk*, the anonymous author of the *Sefer HaChinuch* (13th century) at first echoes the above-quoted words of the Rambam. He continues, however, to add the words of the great Mishnaic sage, Hillel, that were spoken to the would-be convert: “*d’alech sani l’chaverech lo ta’avid*” (“Do not do that which is hateful to your friend,” *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 31a). This means that we must scrupulously avoid any and all behaviors that could be harmful to our friends. This, opines the *Sefer HaChinuch*, is the litmus test for determining the suitability of our behavior toward our fellow Jews. In addition, it provides us with a moral compass by which we may chart our course in the fulfillment of *v’ahavta l’reiecha kamocha*. In sum, our actions towards others must reflect how we, ourselves, would like to be treated.

May we be *zocheh* (merit) to grow in our understanding and practice of *v’ahavta l’reiecha kamocha*. In doing so, may we, as individuals and as a nation, help bring *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the Righteous Messiah) speedily and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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