

Parashat Kedoshim 5779, 2019:

The Essence of the Mitzvot

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, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the most celebrated *mitzvot* of our *parasha* is “*v’ahavta l’reicha kamocha*” — “and you shall love your fellow Jew like yourself.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 19:18) Rashi (1040-1105), citing the *Midrash Sifra* to *Sefer Vayikra*, notes: “Rabbi Akiva said: ‘This is an all embracing principle of the Torah.’” (19:45, translation my own) Perhaps it is Rabbi Akiva’s unparalleled intellectual stature, or his heroic gesture of teaching Torah to his students during the height of the Hadrianic persecutions (130’s CE), that caused his words to become part of the moral fabric of the Jewish nation. Either way, whenever we think of our personal responsibility towards one another, the Torah’s verse, and Rabbi Akiva’s expression, are writ large in the collective consciousness of our people.

Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 31a, is one of the best-known sources in Rabbinic literature wherein we find a restatement and implicit discussion of the phrase, “*v’ahavta l’reicha kamocha*:”

On another occasion it happened that a certain non-Jew came before Shammai and said to him, “Make me a convert, on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder’s staff which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he converted him and said to him, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the entire Torah, while the rest is commentary; [now] go and learn it.” (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

In his commentary on the Torah, *Kli Yakar*, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550–1619), maintains that the Talmud’s phrase, “what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor,” is a reformulation and, in some ways, an interpretation of “*v’ahavta l’reicha kamocho.*” In addition, Rav Luntschitz carefully examines the interaction between Hillel and the would-be convert, and, in so doing, reveals the underlying intent of the latter’s famous words, “teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.”

According to Rav Luntschitz, the non-Jew who came before both Shammai and Hillel was no prankster or joker — even though Shammai apparently viewed him as such. Instead, and this is apparently how Hillel perceived him, the aspiring convert was a potential *ger tzedek*, a truly righteous individual, who deeply desired to accept the Master of the Universe and His Torah, live according to His *mitzvot* and join the ranks of our people. As Rav Luntschitz suggests: “[The potential *ger tzedek*] absolutely wanted [the essence] of all of the Torah’s *mitzvot* presented to him in such a manner that they would have one [unifying] principle, and this is what he actually meant by the words “on one foot.” (This and the following translation and brackets my own) At this juncture, Rav Luntschitz analyzes the *ger tzedek*’s ultimate purpose in making his request:

As a result of this [“on one foot” notion,] he would be able to understand all of the *mitzvot* [with particular emphasis upon the proper ethical behaviors that the Torah commands between man and his fellow man]. He desired this so that he would never forget [the meaning of the *mitzvot*,] since this would be all too easy for a convert who had not studied anything whatsoever regarding the commandments during his youth...Thus, his intention [when he deployed the unusual phrase, “teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot,”] was for [Hillel] to teach him something that could be said quickly and was comprised of few words. This, then, would be the fundamental concept of the Torah, and “the one foot” that he needed; for as a result of this idea, he would be able to remember [and understand] all of Hashem’s *mitzvot*.

In Rav Luntschitz’s estimation, the *ger tzedek* was driven by the highest religious ardor to appear before Hillel in order to understand the authentic meaning of the *mitzvot*, and ever remember their paramount importance. In many ways, therefore, he serves as an ideal role model for us all, since,

far too often, we become overwhelmed by the challenges of daily living and forget that the Torah and *mitzvot* should appear to us as holy gifts from the Almighty. The *ger tzedek* helps us refocus our priorities, so that we may redouble our energies and create a vibrant, dynamic and spiritually-infused relationship with the Master of the Universe. With His help, and our fervent desire, may this be so. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria Etengoff and the parasha's name.

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.