

Parashat Kedoshim 5784, 2024:

Lest We Forget

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One of the most celebrated *mitzvot* of our *parasha* is “*v’ahavta l’reicha kamocho* —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 greatness, or his heroic gesture of teaching Torah to his students during the height of the 130’s CE Hadrianic persecutions, 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 kamocho*:”

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 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 seemed to have 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 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 spiritual ardor in order to understand the authentic meaning of the *mitzvot*. 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 spiritually suffused 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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