

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

One of the most famous stories from our rabbinic tradition is found in the Talmud and I am certain many of us have heard it several times before.

The story goes that a man who was not Jewish approached the great first-century sage Shammai and asked him to teach the entire Torah as he stood on one foot. Shammai chased the man away with a stick, berating him for the foolishness of his question. The skeptic then approached Shammai's rabbinic rival, Hillel. Hillel responded a bit differently. He said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it!"¹

Not only is this one of the most recognizable stories from our sacred texts, it is also one of the most influential outside of Judaism. Jesus, a contemporary of Hillel and Shammai taught a slightly different version of Hillel's answer which became known as the "Golden Rule." The common English phrasing is "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." He puts a more positive spin the adage.

We also find some derivative of this teaching in many other world religions, including Confucianism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and the Baha'i Faith.

Perhaps if Shammai had known that billions of people over the course of history would come to embrace Hillel's dictum, he might not have impatiently pushed the student away so quickly and we'd likely be singing his praises as much as Hillel's.

Hillel's answer, however, can be interpreted in multiple ways. Maybe he was just as annoyed with this man as Shammai was, but instead of overtly showing his anger, he chose to answer sarcastically. Clearly, the Torah has more to teach than to not be hateful to someone else. Hillel just wanted to shoo this man away and get on with his life.

¹ BT: Shabbat 31a

Not surprisingly, our tradition understands Hillel's answer in a more positive light. In fact, Hillel's answer can be understood as his unique way of quoting one of the central teachings from the Holiness Code in the Book of Leviticus: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*² Rabbi Akiva, agreeing with Hillel, teaches that this is the greatest principle in the whole Torah. It is no surprise that on the holiest day of the year, Jews chant these exact words during the afternoon Torah service. Stick around tomorrow and you'll hear them too.

Such a simple teaching has become the motto for so many faith traditions. In Judaism alone, it is elevated above nearly all other mitzvot.

But what does *v'ahavta l'rey'acha kamocho* actually mean? Who constitutes a neighbor? How can we be commanded to love? And furthermore, is this instruction too lofty to follow or is it achievable?

First, let's look at the word for neighbor, *rey'a*. Who exactly is *rey'acha*? In several texts in the Hebrew Bible, a form of *rey'a* translates more closely to "friend," "companion" or "fellow." We see this in the story of Job when it speaks of his three "friends." In no translation do we read of his "neighbors." We also see the word *rey'eh'cha* in Exodus when Moses approaches a Hebrew and asks him why he's fighting his fellow. It's doubtful the two men are fighting about a tree encroaching over a shared fence.

"Neighbor" in Hebrew is actually another word entirely, *sha'chein*. Yet, in many translations of the Ten Commandments, the word *rey'acha* is translated as "neighbor." *You shall not covet you neighbor's wife; neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, his field...or any thing that is your neighbor's.*

The bottom line is this: there is no way to know exactly what it means.

² Leviticus 19:18

If we were to explore every commentary on this word we would see many translations including “friend,” “companion,” “neighbor,” and “fellow Jew.” Maybe this commandment is just about the person who lives next to us or another Jewish person, but these definitions seem too limiting. How hard can it be to love one of our own? On the other hand, to ask that we love an individual who inhabits a part of the world halfway around the globe is not realistic. How can I love someone I don’t even know? Maybe that’s easier for some of us than loving our next-door neighbor.

Since we cannot possibly know who *rey’acha* is referring to, let’s figure out what this mitzvah is actually commanding us to do. I’ll be referring to *rey’a* as neighbor and fellow interchangeably.

Rashi’s grandson, Rashbam teaches that this imperative is conditional. We should only love our neighbor if they are good to us. If they treat us poorly, then all bets are off. Can you imagine the Golden Rule in this light: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you so long as they’re nice to you. Otherwise, don’t bother.* I usually love Rashbam’s take on the Torah but not this time.

Nachmanides, also known as Ramban, writes that this command is pure hyperbole, a total exaggeration. “One cannot literally be commanded to feel the same love for someone else as one does for oneself.”

So far, the most well known commandment from the Torah is either dependent on other people, or it’s an utter exaggeration.

To find an interpretation that I resonated with, I had to travel a few hundred years into the future from Rashbam and Ramban to the Apter Rebbe, a hasidic legend born in the 18th century.

He teaches that the commandment to love our neighbor does not mean to love only righteous people since it is impossible not to love such people. Rather, God commands us to love even people whom it is hard to love.³

The Torah is encouraging us to be in relationship with those whom we wouldn't necessarily choose to love. Why is our Torah telling us to love these people? Probably because we find it so uncomfortable to do. Our tradition understands the human psyche which is why it pushes us to be the best version of ourselves possible. It is nudging us to go outside our comfort zone.

Who are these people in your life? Who do you find hard to love? Maybe it's your estranged relative. Maybe it's someone in your own Jewish community who might just be in this room right now. Maybe it's a fellow citizen who is on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Maybe it's an immigrant from a predominantly muslim or spanish speaking nation. By the way, is it any wonder that one of the statements of sins in our prayer book is the sin of xenophobia, the fear of the other? We know better than anyone what it's like to be hated.

Whoever it is that you find hard to love is exactly who we are commanded to love.

Rabbi, you're telling me this mitzvah is commanding us to love even those who wish us harm?

Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine believed so. There are many stories showcasing his extraordinary love for even those who were antagonistic to his beliefs. One time a vocal group of ultra-Orthodox Jews, known for publicly opposing Rav Kook's positive attitude towards secular Zionists dumped a bucket of waste water on him. He was completely drenched in this filthy water. News of the attack had quickly spread throughout the city and a prominent attorney recommended that

³ Rabbi Abraham Yehoshua Heschel of Koplitchinitz. Also known as the Apter Rebbe (1748 -1825).

Rav Kook press charges against the perpetrators. The lawyer was taken aback by Rav Kook's response: "I have no interest in court cases. Despite what they did to me, I love them. I am ready to kiss them, so great is my love!"

We certainly can't all be like Rav Kook. Love just oozed out his pours. And I'm not convinced the Torah expects us to be as loving to such individuals either. What Kook shows us, however, is that it is possible to love even those neighbors who clearly don't love us. Is there a limit to the amount of love we can give?

How do we begin to love these neighbors? In Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Sages, we read, "Do not judge your fellow until you have stood in his place."⁴ Loving one's neighbor begins with thinking what it might be like to be in their shoes. This is a real challenge to imagine how the world looks through their eyes. For those close to us, this is not a great task. For everyone else it takes patience, a lot of listening and an open mind. Ask, what motivates them? Maybe these people are acting with best intentions in accord with their moral compass.

No one said following the mitzvot are easy. Why should this seemingly straightforward commandment be any different? We may never get to that place of love with some people, but we are encouraged to try.

The last part of understanding this phrase might be the hardest. How can we possibly love anyone, especially those we despise, as much as ourselves? Isn't this going too far? Saying I have love in my heart for someone who disrespects me is one thing. But to suggest that I should love them as much as I love and care about myself...how is this supposed to work?

Our sages also grappled with this part of the text. Perhaps, they suggest, we don't need to take everything literally. Another way of understanding this commandment is that to love our fellow is to want them to have as much success and prosperity in the world, just as much as we want for ourselves.

⁴ Pirke Avot 2:4

It might seem natural to say that we want the best for anyone but not truly mean it. Loving one's neighbor or fellow means that we should desire for others what we would desire for ourselves, be that happiness, wealth, or a long and meaningful life.

In the Book of Samuel we read that Jonathan loved David "as he loved himself."⁵ How? asks Ramban. He answers, "Because he had removed the attribute of jealousy from his heart." To truly love someone as much as we love ourselves, we must want for them what they want for themselves and if we are able, to help them attain it.

Loving our neighbor is not the only place in the Torah where we are commanded to love or feel an emotion. God does not want us to covet or hold a grudge. And we all know the *v'ahavta*, "You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." It might seem absurd to command us to feel a certain way. Sometimes our emotions control us and not the other way around. These mitzvot are given to us precisely because they are within our human capacity. We can be content with our lot and not filled with envy. We can move on from the past and not carry a grudge with us into the future. And we can love our fellow as ourself. All this takes is a certain mindset and commitment.

The Ramban teaches that the love for our neighbor is the basis for all of society. Friendship, justice and peace all flow from this one mitzvah. Imagine if we took this New Year to work on loving our neighbor, in every sense of the word, from those close to us to those far away. How much peace could we bring to our community and to the world? To truly repair the world and engage in *tikkun olam*, may each of us start with *tikkun ha-nefesh*, changing ourselves for the better. And may that first change be to open our hearts more fully.

Ken yehi ratzon, may this be God's will.

⁵ I Samuel 20:17