

Love Your Friend As Yourself

"וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ"

One of the most famous teachings that the Torah, and the Jewish people, have brought to the world is “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Indeed, so central is this idea in classic Jewish-consciousness that the great Talmudic sage, Rabbi Akiva, proclaimed: “This is a great principle in the Torah!”

The study of this famous dictum will reveal to us that what the Torah is referring to is much more than mere emotions, or positive-feelings towards others. Rather, just as a person loves himself, and actively seeks out ways of improving his life, so too, the Torah teaches us, should we behave towards our brethren.

This session will explore the following issues:

- **Is it really possible to love another person as one loves oneself?**
- **What is the nature of this mitzvah?**
- **How does this mitzvah prevent us from hurting others?**
- **Does one’s own life not take precedence?**
- **What does it mean to “Love your fellow as yourself”?**

1 – PRIMARY SOURCES:
THE WRITTEN-TORAH (CHUMASH) & THE ORAL-TORAH (TALMUD)

Source 1. Vayikra (Leviticus), 19:18 – The Torah source.

Do not take revenge and do not bear a grudge against the members of your people, and you shall love your fellow as you love yourself ; I am God.	לא-תקום וְלֹא-תטֹר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי ה'
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Source 2. Sifra 2:12 – A fundamental Torah principle.

And you shall love your friend as you love yourself: Rabbi Akiva said, “This is a fundamental principle of the Torah.”	ואהבת לרעך כמוך, רבי עקיבא אומר זה כלל גדול בתורה
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Source 3. Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Shabbat 31a – Can the Torah be encapsulated in one principle?

There is a story about a gentile who came before Shammai and said to him, “I will convert if you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammai pushed him away with the measuring stick that was in his hand. The gentile then went to Hillel, who helped him to convert. Hillel told him, “Whatever is hateful to you do not do to your friend. This is the entire Torah. The rest is its explanation. Go and study.”	מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאי אמר לו גיירני ע"מ שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו בא לפני הלל גייריה אמר לו דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד זו היא כל התורה כולה ואידך פירושה הוא זיל גמור
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All of these sources require much elaboration and understanding.

Classic Jewish learning throughout the generations has always embodied the idea that real understanding comes through a process of *question & answer*...so let's proceed to ask some good questions!

2 – QUESTIONS: WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL HERE??

[Question #1] What does R' Akiva mean that “Love your friend” is a ‘*great principle*’? In what sense?? (The same question applies to Hillel’s response to the convert: “*That which is hateful to you...this is the entire Torah*”, how is this the entire Torah?!?)

[Question #2] Why did Hillel paraphrase the mitzvah of “Love your friend” in the negative¹ (“*That which is hateful...don’t do*”)? Why not maintain the verse as it is expressed in the Torah, in the positive: “*Love your neighbor...*”?!?

[Question #3] What is the connection between “*Love your friend ...*” and, the beginning of the verse, “*Don’t bear a grudge, & don’t take revenge*”? (In so far as these mitzvah’s are juxtaposed together, and nothing in the Torah is ‘coincidental’, there’s clearly some connection between these concepts)

What do you think??

3 – YOU COME FIRST

Source 4. Talmud Bavli, (Babylonian Talmud), Bava Metzia 62a

<p>It was taught in a Baraisa: 2 people who were travelling, and one of them had in his hand a jug of water: if they both drink, then both of them will die; but, if only one of them drinks, then he will arrive at refuge.</p> <p>Ben Peturah ruled that it’s better that they both drink, even though they’ll die, rather than one watch his fellow die, until Rabbi Akiva came and taught, regarding the verse, “<i>And your brother shall live with you,</i>”(…) nevertheless, your life comes before his.</p>	<p>תניא שנים שהיו מהלכין בדרך וביד אחד מהן קיתון של מים אם שותין שניהם מתים ואם שותה אחד מהן מגיע לישוב</p> <p>דרש בן פטורא מוטב שישתו שניהם וימותו ואל יראה אחד מהם במיתתו של חברו עד שבא ר' עקיבא ולימד וחי אחיך עמך חייך קודמים לחיי חבריך חבריך.</p>
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No less than R' Akiva himself, who taught the world that loving ones friend is a great principle, establishes another foundational principle: ***your life comes first*** (“חייך קודמים”). Whenever there’s a conflict of interest between your own personal well-being (either physically, emotionally, mentally, financially, etc...) and someone else’s, your own life takes precedence.

*(Note: This does not necessarily mean that one is not allowed to forgo of himself in favor of giving to others, but, rather, that in most circumstances he’s simply not obligated to do so. The exception to this, however, is in a scenario where there is a tremendous loss to oneself, as in the case of the Gemara – i.e. his very life! – there, one **must** give himself priority²)*

¹ As is stated is explained in some of the major commentators: Smag, positive-mitzvah #9; Maharsha on Shabbos 31a

² See Rashi on Bava Metzvi 33a ד"ה כל המקיים בעצמו

With this concept of “חייך קודמים” established, we will now be able to understand the enlightening words of the Ramban (Nachmonidies), in his famous commentary on the Torah, where he explains the mitzvah of “Love your neighbor”:

Source 5. Ramban on Vayikra 19:18

The explanation of “Love your friend as yourself”, is, that it’s an exaggeration: for it is inconceivable that one could love his fellow as much as he loves himself. Moreover, R’ Akiva already established: your life takes precedence over [the life of] your friend (Bava Metzia 62a).

Rather, the Biblical mitzvah is to love ones friend in all matters, just as he loves himself in all good things.

This [explanation] is also implied in so far as the verse does not say “You shall love את רעך”, but, rather it equalizes the two people with the word “לרעך”, similar to which we find (verse 34) “*You shall love towards him, as yourself*” [regarding a convert].

More to the point: the love of both of them should be equal in his mind. That is to say, that, many times a person may ‘love’ his fellow in regards to only specific matters, for example, that he should be successful financially, but not in wisdom, or, [another example] he loves him so much so that he wants his beloved friend to merit success in all matters – wealth, prestige, intellect, and wisdom – only, that he should not be equal to himself, and, deep in his heart he desires that he should always have more than his friend in all good things in life. Regarding this attitude, the verse instructs one to not have this lowly-jealousy in his heart, rather, to love the abundant success of his friend just as he wants for himself, and not to give limits to this love.

וטעם ואהבת לרעך כמוך, הפלגה, כי לא יקבל לב האדם שיאהב את חברו כאהבתו את נפשו. ועוד, שכבר בא רבי עקיבא קודמין לחיי חברך (ב"מ ולמד: חייך סב.).

אלא מצות התורה שיאהב חברו בכל ענין כאשר יאהב את נפשו בכל הטוב.

ויתכן בעבור שלא אמר "ואהבת את רעך כמוך", והשוה אותם במלת לרעך, וכן: ואהבת לו כמוך (פסוק לד) דגר,

שיהיה פרושו להשוות אהבת שניהם בדעתו, כי פעמים רבים שיאהב אדם את רעהו בדברים ידועים, להיטיבו בעשר ולא בחכמה וכיוצא בזה, ואם יהיה אוהבו בכל, יחפץ שיזכה רעהו האהוב לו בעשר ובנכסים וכבות ובדעת ובחכמה, ולא שישווה אליו, אבל יהיה חפץ בלבו לעולם שיהיה הוא יותר ממנו בכל טובה, ויצוה הכתוב שלא תהיה פחיתות הקנאה הזאת בלבו, אבל יאהב ברבות הטובה לחברו כאשר אדם עושה לנפשו, ולא יתן שעורין באהבה.

The Ramban presents 2 penetrating questions on the simple meaning of “Love your friend”:

1. If it means love him as much as you love yourself → that can’t be, since it’s simply impossible to love anyone as much as yourself!
2. If it means to treat him as well as you treat yourself → that also cannot be, because “your life takes precedence”!

Rather, says the Ramban, the mitzvah is simply to want good for another, as much as he wants good for himself. Said in the negative: to remove from ones heart the desire to be ‘better off’ than his fellow.

4 – LOVING, IN PRACTICE

Notwithstanding the penetrating questions of the Ramban, we should not think that the mitzvah of “Love your friend” is *purely* internal, with no practical application. Rather, as the Maharsha says:

Source 6 . Maharsha, Chiddushei Aggadot, Shabbat 31a

<p>“Whatever is hateful to you, etc.” This refers to that which is written in the Torah, “<i>And you shall love your fellow as you love yourself...</i>” We can ask why Hillel altered the mitzvah by phrasing it in the negative, i.e. “Whatever is hateful to you, do not do unto your friend...”</p> <p>The answer is that the mitzvah itself is a type of prohibition just like the other mitzvos in this verse, e.g. not taking revenge and not bearing a grudge. “<i>And you shall love your fellow as you love yourself</i>”, then, is not an imperative to bestow an equal amount of goodness upon another, which we know from the legal principle of “Your life comes first.”</p>	<p>דעלך סני לחברך לא כו'. והיינו דכתיב בתורה ואהבת לרעך כמוך וגו' ויש לעיין בזה... אמאי שינה לומר לו בלשון שלילה דעלך סני כו'...</p> <p>וי"ל דמשמע ליה דקרא לא איירי אלא בכי האי גוונא בל"ת דגביה לא תקום ולא תטור כתיב ועלה קאי ואהבת לרעך וגו' שלא תעשה לו רעה מכל דסני לך כו' אבל לגבי לעשות לו טובה לא קאמר ואהבת לרעך כמוך כדאמרינן חייך קודמין לחיי אחיך וכן מוכיחין דברי ת"י ע"ש ודו"ק:</p>
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Fascinating! The Maharsha addresses the same question as the Ramban (“חייך קודמין”), and points out that the verse itself alludes the essentially non-positive nature of the Mitzvah: In so far as it’s juxtaposed with the negative-prohibitions of “*Don’t seek revenge, etc...*”, the Torah is teaching us that the base-line obligation of “*Love your friend*” is fundamentally a negative-prohibition. In other words: in the least, don’t do to another that which you’d not want done to you!!

The Maharsha thereby answers **Questions #2 & #3** from earlier ☺

5 – OBLIGATION VS FULFILLMENT

Let's go one final level deeper.

In discussing the social obligations one has regarding doing חסד (acts of kindness/giving), the Rambam states the following:

Source 7. Rambam, Hilchos Avel 14:1

<p>It is a Rabbinic positive-mitzvah to: visit the sick, comfort mourners, accompany the deceased, help a bride marry, escort guests, help with all aspects of a burial (carry the coffin, walk in front of it, eulogize, dig the grave, bury). Also, to rejoice with a groom and bride, and to provide them with all of their festive-meal needs. These are all acts-of-giving which have no limit to them.</p> <p>Even though all of these mitzvohs are Rabbinic, they're also included in the Biblical mitzvah of “<i>Love your friend as yourself</i>”, and anything that you would want others to do for you, you should do to others, in Torah and mizvohs.</p>	<p>מצוה עשה של דבריהם לבקר חולים. ולנחם אבלים. ולהוציא המת. ולהכניס הכלה. וללוות האורחים. ולהתעסק בכל צרכי הקבורה. לשאת על הכתף. ולילך לפניו ולספוד ולחפור ולקבור. וכן לשמח הכלה והחתן. ולסעדם בכל צרכיהם. ואלו הן גמילות חסדים שבגופו שאין להם שיעור. אע"פ שכל מצות אלו מדבריהם הרי הן בכלל ואהבת לרעך כמוך. וכל הדברים שאתה רוצה שיעשו אותם לך אחרים עשה אתה אותן לאחריך בתורה ובמצות.</p>
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How can we reconcile these holy words of the Rambam? On the one hand, he says that all of these acts of giving (“חסד”) are Rabbinic, but, on the other hand, they're all included in the Biblical commandment of “Love you friend”? So, which one is it: Rabbinic or Biblical!?!?

The answer is: both!

On a Biblical-level, one is not ***obligated*** to do חסד for others, for exactly the reason we've established earlier of “הייך קודמין” (that is to say, that, since in most scenarios³, one's giving unto another comes at some degree of expense/loss to the giver, his own life takes precedence). However, when one does indeed do an act of giving (visiting the sick, comforting mourners, etc.), he's ***fulfilling*** the Biblical mitzvah of “Love your friend”.

(This halachic-distinction between obligation vs fulfillment – חיובית או קיומית – requires more explanation, but is beyond the scope of this particular session⁴)

³ If, however, the cost/loss to the giver is little, or nil, then he ***would*** indeed be obligated to do the חסד. This, in Halacha, is called “זה נהנה וזה לא חסר” – “this one gains, and this one loses nothing”. Another term for this is “מידת סדום” – “the character-trait of Sedom” (an ancient Biblical city, renowned for its despise of doing acts of kindness for others). The Rabbi's point out in many places that the character-trait of Sedom – not giving, even when it comes at no expense to the giver – is a despicable trait, and a sign of a spiritually-unhealthy individual.

⁴ הבנה זו בדברי הרמב"ם מצאתי בספר "ההלכות שבין אדם לחבירו" מאת הגה"ר יצחק ברקוביץ שליט"א, וכן האריך הגה"ר דוד אריאב שליט"א בספרו "לרעך כמוך"

To Summarize

1. The baseline obligation is to refrain from behaving towards others in a way in which you'd not done to yourself
2. One is not obligated (at least Biblically) to do acts of חסד for others, because of the principle of "חייך קודמין"
3. When one does do a חסד for another, however, he's fulfilling the mitzvah of "Love your friend as yourself"

6 – THE ENTRANCE WAY TO THE ENTIRE TORAH

We'll end where we began, by addressing the first question from earlier: in what sense is "Love your friend" a 'great principle'?

The Sefer HaChinuch, written by one of the great medieval sages, as a concise explanation of each of the 613-Mitzvoahs, addresses this question:

Source 8. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 243

To love each member of Israel with a "soul love," i.e. that one should have compassion for a Jew and his property just as one has compassion for himself and his own property. As the verse states, "And you shall love your fellow as you love yourself" (Vayikra 19:18).

The Sages have said, "Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your friend." In the Sifri, it is stated that Rabbi Akiva said, "This is a fundamental principle in the Torah," meaning that many commandments are related to this one, in the respect that one who loves his fellow will not steal his belongings, nor be unfaithful with his wife, nor will he defraud or insult him, nor trespass upon his property, nor cause him damage in any way. Thus, the fulfillment of many other commandments is dependent upon the fulfillment of this one. This is well-known to any thinking individual.

לאהוב כל אחד מישראל אהבת נפש, כלומר שנחמול על ישראל ועל ממונו כמו שאדם חומל על עצמו וממונו, שנאמר [ויקרא י"ט, י"ח] ואהבת לרעך כמוך

ואמרו זכרונם לברכה [שבת ל"א ע"א] דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד. ואמרו בספרי, אמר רבי עקיבא זה כלל גדול בתורה, כלומר שהרבה מצוות שבתורה תלויין בכך, שהאובה חבירו כנפשו לא יגנוב ממונו ולא ינאף את אשתו ולא יונהו בממון ולא בדברים ולא יסיג גבולו ולא יזיק לו בשום צד. וכן כמה מצוות אחרות תלויות בזה, ידוע הדבר לכל בן דעת:

The Chinuch answers the question very simply & beautifully: many, many mitzvohs in the Torah are dependent on an attitude of "Love your friend as yourself"! In other words, to the degree to which one fulfills the dictum of "Love your friend", he'll naturally fulfill all of the other מצוות בין אדם לחבירו - commandments regarding interpersonal-relationships.

In this respect, "Love your neighbor" truly is a 'great principle': it's the foundation on which the מצוות בין אדם לחבירו are built.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

1. Aaron is out for drinks with his friends after an exhilarating touch-football semi-finals defeat to the Toronto Tutu's. In his rant, Aaron wants to publically share his thoughts about his teammate Jeremy's 'football skills'...should he stop himself??
 2. Jacob works downtown, and often finds himself for lunch at the new King David's falafel store, in Mt. Sanai *Hospital*. Jacob often has an extra 15-20 minutes after he's done eating before needing to return to work: how should/could he use his time?
 3. "Hey, Steve, do me a favor: tell everyone at the meeting that I'm running a few minutes late. Thanks!", Mike yells out as he answers an important phone-call. Steve, who's on his way to the meeting anyways, thinks to himself "What am I, his slave!?!", and refrains from relaying the message...has Steve done something wrong??
 4. Reuven is about to head home in anticipation of his anniversary-dinner with his wife. As he packs up from the office, Shimon, his co-worker, kindly asks if he'd be able to hitch a ride home. Despite his eagerness to help out, however, Reuven realizes that this ride will put him a solid 20-30 minutes out of his way, and likely late for dinner...what should he do??
 5. As Rachel is placing her groceries on the check-out counter at the grocery store, she realizes that she forgot a few items from her list. She runs off from the long line of patiently waiting customers, explaining "I'll be right back in 2 secs!" Is Rachel doing something wrong?
- Advanced⁵**
6. Eric is a very sensitive individual, who's easily bothered by many 'little' things, such as hearing other people chew their food loudly. Ben, on the other hand, is not bothered by these sort of things whatsoever. When Eric and Ben go out for wings one night together, how should Ben eat his wings in the presence of his good buddy Eric?
 7. Albert says that loud noises in the early morning hours simply don't bother him. Being aware of this, Albert's friend Tzvi considers to himself whether or not it would be appropriate to start jack-hammering at 6:30am by Albert's house, even though Tzvi himself would find this extremely annoying. Would this be a violation of "*Love your fellow...??*"

⁵ עיין תו"כ פרשת קדושים פרשתא ב, ס' י"ב