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Love is the Root

This week's Torah portion contains the famous mandate to "love your fellow as you love yourself" (19:18). In fact, when Hillel was asked to explain the Torah on one foot, he said this is the foundation of the Torah. "What is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the primary principle of the Torah. The rest is commentary. Go learn."

It seems obvious that if we want someone to be kind to us, we should be kind to them. This only seems fair, right? But when we examine the

words of the Torah carefully, we must take note that it doesn't say to *treat* someone like we would want to be treated – rather to *love* someone like we *love* ourselves. What is the deeper meaning of this?

Lesson:

We often think, "of course I love myself!" but when we really think about it, we often love *certain parts* of our self. And maybe certain parts of our self we *don't* love so much. And that is perfectly rational as we are all works in progress.

But loving ourselves – *all parts* of our self – is a prerequisite to loving someone else. If I only love those parts of myself that can be neatly presented and tied with a pretty little bow, then how can I possibly love someone else for their inadequacies? But how do we identify those parts of ourselves that we don't love so much and then learn to truly love ourselves for those parts too?

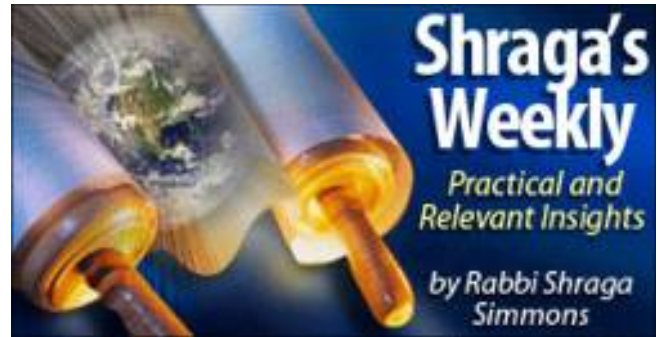
God made a special way for us to identify those parts of ourselves that maybe we *don't* love so much. The very thing that bothers us in other people are usually the very things that we ourselves need to work on. Those around us are our mirrors and if we are triggered by something someone else did, it's an indication to look inside ourselves in that same area. For example, if someone is perpetually late and it bothers us, we can ask ourselves if there is some aspect of time management within myself that I can work on? This takes some quiet self-reflection and many times we find distractions and other tasks to fill our time. But if we really want to work on fully loving ourselves, this is a key ingredient.

Once we've identified a certain area of ourselves that we could improve upon we can ask God to help us, after all we were all created in the image of God – he created us with our seemingly inadequacies! As such, we can acknowledge that God created me with this particular character trait and thus, it is part of my holy mission in life.

When we acknowledge that we have the power to use this particular trait for the positive, and to work on it, then we are already halfway there to transforming it. By looking at this particular part of ourselves, instead of hiding it under deeper layers of ourselves, we are giving even the seemingly ugly parts of our self love and compassion. We are letting that part of us to be seen, to acknowledge it and know that it too was created in the image of God.

Recognizing those parts of myself and accepting them is the first step in seeing that someone else is also a work in progress, and to love them for also being human. Not every part of the rose is beautiful – in fact, some of the rose can even hurt! But that too has purpose and when we are able to see the purpose and beauty first in ourselves, in our mission in life, in our relationship with God, then we are in the right step in being able to see that in other people and fulfill the mandate of truly “loving our fellow like we love our self.”

Exercise: When triggered by someone else, try to go inward and see if there is something within you that can be worked on. Thank G-d for this opportunity for your personal growth instead of focusing on the other person. After offering yourself love and compassion, see if you are able to give it to the other person as well.



Higher Than the Angels

This week's Parsha begins with the Mitzvah to "Be holy." How do we achieve holiness?

The Torah provides many avenues, and keeping Kosher in a primary one. Imagine you're on vacation and you come upon a restaurant offering roasted pork at a good price. Your mouth waters and your stomach growls. But the food is not Kosher, so you pass it by. That's called mind over matter - the soul exercising control over the body. And that's holy.

But there's a much deeper level to the Mitzvah to "Be holy." Nachmanides explains that holiness is the result of exercising restraint in areas that are permitted to us.

Let's go back to our example of keeping Kosher. It may be no great challenge to refrain from eating roasted pork. But the question is: When we sit down to eat Kosher food, what is our frame of mind: Do we pronounce a blessing with concentration, appreciating God's gift of bounty? Do we eat slowly and with dignity? Do we focus on the fact that the ultimate purpose of food is to nourish the body - in order that we'll have strength to do good deeds?

Indeed, it has been said that "all holiness begins at the dinner table."

The story is told of the Baal Shem Tov, the great kabbalist, who looked out the window and saw his neighbor sitting at the dinner table. In the eyes of the Baal Shem Tov, the neighbor appeared not as a human, but as an ox. The neighbor was eating for purely physical reasons, just as would an ox (and the holy Baal Shem Tov was able to perceive this). Although the neighbor was acting in a *permitted* manner, it was not a *holy* one.

Sometimes a child will do something that demonstrates particular self-discipline, and the parent will say: "You're an angel!" But in actuality, the child is greater than an angel. An angel is a purely spiritual being, with no sense of "free will" to choose spirituality over the mundane world of animalism. But we humans - every time we make such a choice, we refine our soul, and achieve a level ... higher and holier than even that of angels.



The Path to Holiness

Acharei Mos-Kedoshim focus on sanctity. We, the Jewish people, are not only mandated to adhere to God's commandments, but through these commandments, we sanctify ourselves and become holy. In these two *parshiyos*, which are usually read together, the Torah gives us specific instructions as to how we might attain that lofty goal. It is not only what we must *do* that is of concern; equally significant is that which we must *avoid* doing.

"Do not imitate the practice of the land of Egypt in which you dwelt, and do not imitate the practice of the land of Canaan to which I bring you, and do not follow their statutes."¹ And this applies to all lands of our sojourns.

It is always tempting to be part of the group - to follow the masses and to adopt that which is in vogue. Therefore, at the very outset of our history, Hashem warns us that if we are to survive as Jews, if we are to retain our faith, then we cannot imitate the ways of the nations among whom we dwell. Our morals, our ethics, are all rooted in Sinai and are not given to change, but the rules that regulate the lives of the nations, the laws by which they live, are in a constant state of flux.

That which only yesterday was considered immoral may very well be accepted today, and this holds true for every aspect of life. Just consider the language that has become politically correct, the manner of dress that is termed "high fashion," the entertainment that is regarded as "culture," the manner in which the young are permitted to address their elders, the breakdown of our families, and you will see for yourself the wisdom of this prohibition.

But what if we don't see it? What if we are comfortable and have no objection to what society advocates? Then remember the concluding words of this passage: "Do not follow their statutes." The only way in which we, the Jewish people, have survived centuries of exile, the only way that we have maintained our Jewishness in a hostile world, the only way we have resisted the onslaught of assimilation was to cling tenaciously to our Torah laws and divorce ourselves from even those statutes to which at first glance we may have been drawn. Our way of life, our values, our morals and ethics are all rooted in Sinai and that Divine Voice from Sinai binds us eternally in every culture, in every century.

Trust: The Basis of All Relationships

One of the mitzvos mentioned in this *parashah* is, "You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind."² This statement is not meant to be taken only literally; it also means that we must be careful not to give misleading advice. We also have to insure that we do not have hidden agendas and that our motivations for giving advice are pure. The question that must arise, however, is,

why the Torah doesn't simply state that we are not permitted to mislead others. Why use this figure of speech, "place a stumbling block before the blind"?

The Torah wants to impart to us the seriousness and the importance of trust. Even as no sane individual would countenance tripping a blind person or allowing him to step in front of a moving vehicle, so too, misleading someone who is unaware is equally deplorable. We all know how painful it is to discover that we have been betrayed by people in whom we placed our trust, so we should take care not to do this to others. All relationships are built on trust. Neither individuals, nor families, nor societies can survive when trust is missing. When we come to this understanding and realize that deceiving or misleading someone is no different than allowing a blind person to walk into traffic, we will surely be more sensitive to every word that we pronounce.

The Golden Rule

Love your neighbor as yourself."³ Rabbi Akiva proclaimed that this is a fundamental principle of the Torah, from which we learn how to relate to our fellow man. The question is asked whether it is possible to love another as we love ourselves. The great Chassidic master, the Baal Shem Tov, responded by reminding us that, even as we are aware that we have many faults and yet still love ourselves, similarly, we should feel kindly toward our fellow man and love him despite his faults.

Rambam (Maimonides) teaches that this commandment instructs us to love every Jew as ourselves, by acting lovingly toward them and

being as careful of their feelings, their possessions, their money, and their dignity as we would our own. On the other hand, Ramban (Nachmanides) teaches that the Torah does not demand that we literally love someone as we love ourselves. As a matter of fact, we have a ruling that, in times of danger, our own lives take precedence. What God *does* demand is that we desire for others that which we desire for ourselves, and we *treat them with the same respect and consideration* as we want for ourselves.

Hillel the Elder paraphrased this commandment, saying, "What is hateful to you, do not inflict upon others," and instructed a would-be convert, "That is the entire Torah. Go and study it. The rest is commentary."

The Path to Holiness

In this week's *parashah*, we discover the meaning of spirituality. "*Vehiyisem li kedoshim, ki kadosh Ani Hashem* - You shall be holy for Me, for I Hashem am holy ..." ⁴ is God's proclamation.

But can ordinary man aspire to holiness? Is that realistic? Yes, the Torah states, not only is it possible for him to attain such a goal, but *he has a mandate to do so*. Our *parashah* does not present this command as a theoretical concept, but it details the exact steps that we must take to realize that goal. As a result, most of the essence of the Torah is mentioned in this *parashah*, for it is through the adherence to these mitzvos that we can become holy. These mitzvos range from revering parents to loving our fellow man as ourselves; from refraining from taking vengeance to being on guard against gossip; from being kind

to the stranger to paying the day worker his wages on that selfsame day; from keeping the Sabbath to not worshipping or fashioning idols, and many more; every aspect of life is addressed.

Moreover, God commanded Moses to teach these commandments to the entire nation: "*Kol Adas Bnei Yisrael*" - every Jew had to be present to underscore the fact that sanctity cannot be attained through a hermitlike existence, nor through self-abnegation, meditation, or climbing the Himalayas, but only through reaching out to others in *chesed*, justice, consideration, and love, thereby bringing them and ourselves closer to Hashem.

Road Map to Sanctity

The Torah never leaves anything to speculation, but provides us with a clear road map that shows us how to attain our goals. Our Sages outlined several paths, each leading to sanctity:

1) Separate yourself from that which is immoral and sinful.

Obviously, our Torah's definition of immorality and sin is a far cry from that which our 21st-century culture has come to accept as the norm. As responsible Jews, it behooves us to study exactly what "immoral and sinful" connote.

2) Sanctify yourself with that which is permitted.

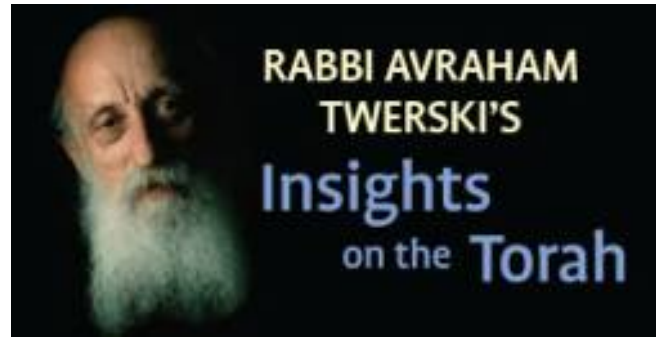
Thus, we are charged to temper all our actions and words with discipline; i.e., we are permitted to eat, but not to be gluttons; we are permitted to shop, but not to be shopaholics; we are permitted to drink alcohol, but not to become drunk.

Thus, we sanctify wine by making *Kiddush*.

3) **To make God beloved through our deeds and words.** As Jews, we are charged with the responsibility of being ambassadors of God. Thus, we have a mandate to inspire people so that they might praise and love Him. By demonstrating kindness, refinement, and consideration, we bring honor and glory to God's Holy Name. And this does not only pertain to major world-shaking events, but to our everyday interactions as well, such as saying "thank you" to a clerk in a store or to a flight attendant, giving someone the right of way when driving, and not grabbing someone else's parking space - and there are myriad other examples.

4) **Even as God is compassionate and forgiving, we must be compassionate and forgiving.** We must strive to emulate God's attributes of mercy and forgiveness in our interpersonal relationships, for therein are to be found the essence of holiness. At first glance, this may appear to be the most difficult of all, but if we bear in mind that we want God to forgive us for our trespasses, then surely, we must also be capable of saying those two powerful words, "I forgive."

1. Leviticus 18:30.
2. *Ibid.* 19:14.
3. *Ibid.* 19:18.
4. *Ibid.* 20:26.



Loving Your Fellow Jews

You shall love your fellow as yourself (Vayikra 19:18).

Rashi explains that this Torah portion was addressed to the entire assembly of Israel because it contains the greater part of the body of Torah. It is possible that "contains the greater part of the body of Torah" refers to the above verse. Indeed, Rabbi Akiva said that this verse is "the all-encompassing principle of Torah" (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:4).

Rabbi Akiva's statement is sometimes translated as, "This verse is the cardinal or primary rule of Torah." This is an inaccurate translation. Rabbi Akiva's words are that this is a *klal gadol*, which means "a great, all-encompassing principle" of Torah, and this has a broad implication.

A *klal* is a general principle under which there are many *pratim* (specifics). Each specific item must have the characteristic of the *klal*. If any specific item does not have the characteristic of the *klal*, then it does not belong there. For example, "animate objects" is a *klal*. A rock lacks the characteristic of animation, hence it cannot be classified under that *klal*.

One of the ethicists said that inasmuch as “You shall love your fellow as yourself” is the “great *klal*” of Torah, this means that it encompasses all 613 mitzvot, and that each mitzvah must partake of the characteristic of the *klal*. Every mitzvah must relate to *ahavat Yisrael* (love for a fellow Jew), and must contribute to *ahavat Yisrael*. Therefore, he concludes, if a person does not have an increase in *ahavat Yisrael* after the performance of a mitzvah, that mitzvah was not done properly. A properly performed mitzvah must contribute to *ahavat Yisrael*.

This statement was nothing less than shocking. I had considered some mitzvot I had done as being properly performed. My tefillin are top quality, and there were at least some times when I had proper *kavannah* (concentration). The matzah I ate at the seder was of the highest quality shmurah (supervision). The sounding of the shofar that I heard on Rosh Hashanah was without fault, and the esrog (citron) that I used for the mitzvah of the four species on Sukkot was free of the slightest blemish. I felt I had fulfilled these mitzvot properly. But I must confess that I did not feel an increase in *ahavat Yisrael* after these mitzvot. The argument that R' Akiva's *klal* necessitates *ahavat Yisrael* as an ingredient in every mitzvah is unassailable. Where was I lacking?

It then occurred to me that I was overlooking something I say in davening every day. Is it not tragic that we may verbalize without thinking about what we are saying?

Prior to the opening prayer, *Baruch She'amar*, there is a short Kabbalistic declaration of intent

that includes the phrase, “I pray in the name of all Israel.” This is not the same as praying for Israel, which we do abundantly in the Amidah and other prayers. Rather, this is a declaration of intent that I am not praying alone, but that I wish to share my prayer with all Israel. Whatever merits accrue from my prayer are not exclusively mine, but belong to all Israel.

I found this same declaration of intent preceding the mitzvot of putting on the tallis and tefillin and the Counting of the Omer. Further research revealed that it is recommended that this declaration is recited prior to every mitzvah one performs.

If there were true unity among Jews, this declaration would not be necessary. Just as the mitzvah of shofar accrues to the entire person rather than just to the ear, so would the mitzvah of every Jew accrue to the credit of all Jews if they were united as one body. Alas, that highly desirable state does not exist, so we must make a declaration that we wish to share the mitzvah with all of Israel. Of course, all of Israel means without exception, and indeed, *ahavat Yisrael* should be without exception.

R' Eliyahu Dessler says that there is a common misconception that you give to whomever you love. The reverse is true: you love to whomever you give. When you give to someone, you invest part of yourself in him, and since every person loves himself, you now love that part of you that resides in the other person (Michtav MeEliyahu vol. 1 p. 36).

If we listen to the words we say and are sincere, then we can fulfill R' Akiva's principle. By



sharing our mitzvos with others, we can generate love for fellow Jews.

Kedoshim (Leviticus 19-20)
basic compendium

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