



LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR – IS IT POSSIBLE?

SOURCE SHEET AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A. LEVEL I - DON'T HURT OTHERS

If you ask the common man in the street “who is a good person” you are likely to hear that it’s a person “who doesn’t hurt anybody”. This certainly seems to be the moral baseline for our society, but it’s a pretty low bar. Where do you suppose it comes from? Let’s take a look at Source 1:

SOURCE 1: *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 a ruler 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 commentary. 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

Although our Rabbis explain that Hillel’s words are based upon the famous biblical injunction: **love your neighbor as thyself**, when talking to the gentile, Hillel oddly limits the verse’s scope to only “not hurting people”.

Q: Why do you think he does this?

There are those who understand that although the mitzvah encourages positive actions, it only requires refraining from things which hurt others. Others maintain that it refers to both and perhaps Hillel’s intent was to engage the Gentile on a level that he could relate to at the time, even though the Torah ultimately requires more.

Let’s take a look at the actual mitzvah of loving your neighbor and what it requires:

B. LEVEL II - LOVING OTHERS AS YOURSELF

SOURCE 2: *Vayikra (Leviticus), 19:18 – The Torah source for the mitzvah love your neighbor*

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 ולא-תטר את-בני עמך ואהבת
לרעה כמוך אני ה'

Q: Why is “love your neighbor” included in the same verse as “bearing a grudge and taking revenge”, two injunctions with have categorically opposite intents?

Q: What does k’mocha, “like yourself” add to the intent of the mitzvah? It seems superfluous.

Let's try to answer the first two questions by revealing the thought process that underlies revenge? As we read the next source, consider how it's message gives new meaning to k'mocha -- like yourself.

SOURCE 3: *Great Book of Mitzvot (SM'G), Pos. # 9 – A More Encompassing Concept for K'mocha/ like yourself*

Mitzvah of loving your neighbor as yourself: The general principle is that what is hateful to you don't do to your friend. (Shabbat 31) Therefore, imagine a person sitting and cutting a piece of meat, who accidentally cuts his other hand with the knife. Would it be logical for the other hand to **cut the hand which is holding the knife in revenge?**

מצוה ואהבת לרעך כמוך כללו של דבר
דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד כדאיתא
במסכב' שבת [דף כ"א] ובירושלמי
דנדרים [פ"ט] גר' מי שיושב ומחתך
בשר והכה ידו בסכין וכי תחזור ידו
ותכה ידו להנקם

Q: Why is taking revenge in this case ridiculous? What is the underlying conclusion we can draw from this observation?

The basis for "not taking revenge" and loving people is to understand that we are all one; That's why we don't take revenge on our kids and also the reason that the Torah stresses k'mocha – Like Yourself in the verse. We need to regard people that way to love them.

Consider the following source, which deepens this understanding and reveals another critical dimension.

SOURCE 4: *Strive for Truth. Rabbi Eliahu Dessler- Essay on Kindness.*

If I give to him; I have a share in his being. You shall love your neighbor as "yourself" ... By giving to him of yourself, you will find in your soul that you and he are indeed one; you will feel in the clearest possible way that he really is you, as "yourself".

Q: Above we advanced the notion that seeing others as one with you will promote loving acts, Rabbi Dessler seems to flip the equation; how so and to what end?

Rabbi Dessler is pointing out that the mitzvah itself –giving to others- is the road to love and unity! It's a bit chicken and egg but both paths will get you there.

Q: What extra meaning does the phrase " I am G-d" bring to our verse (Source #2)?

Before you go on to the next source which directly answers the question, look back at source #4 and see if anything said by Rabbi Dessler leads to an answer.

SOURCE 5: *Small Book of Mitzvot (SM'K), Pos. #8 – Bringing it Back to the Source*

Included in this mitzvah is the engendering of peace between a person and his friend. Rabbi Akiva called it the central principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai expressed it even more strongly than Rabbi Akiva by saying **"For man was created in the image of God,"** meaning that even if a person is not particular about his own honor, he should be particular about the honor of his friend.

לאהוב את חבירו דכתיב (ויקרא י"ט)
ואהבת לרעך כמוך, ובכלל זה הבאי שלום
שבין אדם לחבירו ומכריעו לכף זכות.
לאהוב את חבירו אמר רבי עקיבא כלל
גדול בתורה ואהבת לרעך כמוך. הוסיף בן
עזאי ואמר גדול הימנו שנאמר כי בצלם
אלהים עשה את האדם. פ"י אף על פי
שאינו מקפיד על כבוד עצמו יש לו להקפיד
על כבוד חבירו

Q: How does knowing we are created in the image of G-d help us generate the feelings of unity which this mitzvah requires?

Unity emanates from this understanding that what makes us all one is that we have a G-dly soul- in that truth we are all One. If we see this in ourselves and identify on a soul level, then we will automatically see and connect to others on this basis, engendering love in feeling and deed.

C. LEVEL THREE: HOW DO WE FULFILL THE MITZVAH?

SOURCE 6: *Book of Mitzvot – Maimonidies, Mitzvah 243 – What to Believe and Feel*

My mercy and love for my brother should be exactly like the mercy and love I have for myself; [specifically in regards to] his money, physical welfare, and everything that will ever be in his possession or he will want. And, everything that I wish for myself, I should desire for him. [Conversely,] anything that I would hate for myself or for anyone who associates with me, I should find hateful to him in the exact same fashion. This is what the Torah stated: "... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

היא שצונו לאהוב קצתנו את קצתנו
כאשר נאהב עצמנו ושתהיה אהבתנו
וחמלתנו לאחיו כאהבתנו וחמלתנו
לעצמו בממונו ובגופו וכל מה שיהיה
ברשותו אם ירצה אותו ארצה אני
אותו וכל מה שארצה לעצמי ארצה
לו כמוהו. והוא אמרו יתעלה ואהבת
לרעך כמוך. (קדושים תהיו, מדע
הלכות דעות פ"ז

Q: How do we fulfill the mitzvah of loving fellow Jews according to Maimonidies?

In short everything I should want for myself I should want for others. The next question is obviously, **is wanting and feeling love alone enough?** Consider the following source.

SOURCE 7: *Mishneh Torah – Maimonidies Laws of Mourning 14:1 How to Act.*

It is a rabbinic positive precept to visit the sick, comfort the mourners, escort the dead, support the bride, escorting the [departing] guests on the road — — as well as to cheer the bride and the groom, and to assist them in whatever they need. Even though all these precepts are of rabbinic origin, they are included in the biblical mitzvah: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18); that is, whatever you would have others do to you, do to your brothers in Torah and mitzvot.

צוֹת עֲשֵׂה שֶׁל דְּבָרֵיהֶם לְבַקֵּר חוֹלִים. וּלְנַחֵם
אֲבֵלִים. וְלְהוֹצִיא הַמֵּת. וְלְהַכְנִיס הַכֶּלֶה. וּלְלוֹוֹת
הַאֲרוּרִים. וְלְהַתְּעַסֵּק בְּכָל צָרְכֵי הַקְּבוּרָה. לְשֵׂאת
עַל הַכֶּתֶף. וְלִילֵךְ לְפָנָיו וְלִסְפֹּד וְלִחְפֹּר וְלִקְבֹּר. וְכֵן
לְשַׂמַּח הַכֶּלֶה וְהַחֲתָן. וְלִסְעֹדֵם בְּכָל צָרְכֵיהֶם. וְאֵלוּ
הֵן גְּמִילוּת חֲסָדִים שְׂבִיגוֹפוֹ שְׂאִין לָהֶם שְׂעוֹר. אִף
עַל פִּי שְׂכָל מִצְוֹת אֵלוּ מִדְּבָרֵיהֶם הָרִי הֵן בְּכָלֵל
(וִיקָרָא יִט יח) "וְאֶהְבֶּתְ לְרַעֲךָ כְּמוֹךָ". כָּל הַדְּבָרִים
שְׂאֵתָה רוֹצֵה שְׂיַעֲשׂוּ אוֹתָם לְךָ אַחֲרֵים. עֲשֵׂה אֵתָה
אוֹתָן לְאַחֲרֵי בְּתוֹרָה וּבְמִצְוֹת

Maimonidies clearly extends the mitzvah of "love your neighbor" from thought and emotion to actions that show one's love. He lists several important mitzvot, but in truth the whole category of mitzvot popularly called Gemilus Chassadim/Chessed – Acts of Kindness - are a fulfillment of the mitzvah of "love your neighbor as yourself"

Let's take another look at the phrase "k'mocha"- as yourself, from a halachic/legal perspective, which seems to suggest placing some limitations on the mitzvah.

SOURCE 8: *Nachmanidies commentary "love thy neighbor". Lev. 19:18*

The phrase "love your neighbor as yourself" is an **exaggeration**, since the heart of a person will not accept that he love his fellow as he loves himself. Moreover, Rabbi Akiva has already taught (Bava Metzia 62), "Your life (and material well-being) comes before the life of your fellow." However, the Torah still requires that one should love his neighbor with every item with which he loves himself, and every benefit the he wants to receive.... And the Torah commanded that there not be petty jealousy in his heart. Rather, a man should wish his fellow well in everything, just as he does in his own case, and place no limitations on his love.

טעם ואהבת לרעך כמוך הפלגה כי לא יקבל
לב האדם שיאהוב את חבירו כאהבתו את
נפשו ועוד שכבר בא רבי עקיבא ולמד חייך
קודמין לחיי חבירך (ב"מ סב) אלא מצות
התורה שיאהב חבירו בכל ענין כאשר יאהב
את נפשו בכל הטוב... ויצוה הכתוב שלא
תהיה פחיתות הקנאה הזאת בלבו אבל יאהב
ברבות הטובה לחבירו כאשר אדם עושה
לנפשו ולא יתן שיעורין באהבה

Q: Is it possible to really love another as much as oneself?

All the commentators have to deal with the intent of the expression "like yourself" , in order to make sense of the legal scope of the mitzvah. Nachmanidies, among others, is of the opinion that the mitzvah cannot be to love your friend exactly as you love yourself.

Lending support for his view, the verse actually reads "v'ahavta **le**'re'echa **Ki**mocha". The "le" is translated as "towards" your friend like yourself. In other words, in that direction. "Ki" is translated as like, but not necessarily equal.

But as he concludes, although this level of love may not be legally required due to the nuance in the language, it is surely the goal towards which we should all strive!