

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093  
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263  
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

## Parashat Qedoshim Part III The Basic Principle of Religion

### 1. An Ideal

The pressures and complexities of modern life often interfere with a person's obtaining and maintaining clear insight into religion. There is so much to read, and so many opinions on everything. Issues are often, if not usually, politicized, powerful lobbies deliver attractively dressed messages while concealing relevant information, and the mass media continuously contribute immense emotion to the mix. Concerning our particular communal situation, even among eminently honorable and sincere traditional religious leaders of the Jewish people today – those who base themselves on the same classical, primary sources – we see widely varying views as to how Judaism should be interpreted and practiced. Indeed, even among the leaders of the strictly Orthodox, there is no consensus on many doctrines and practices that one or another subgroup considers from among the essentials of religion.

It is understandable why so many are confused by the presentations of Judaism today, as with much else. It is also understandable why there is such great reluctance on the part of so many upstanding people to seriously consider a commitment to traditional practices and why there is significant defection from observance.

It is a worthwhile practice for each Jew to regularly review the basics of Judaism, those fundamentals about which historically there has been a consensus. Let us carefully examine one of those basics, perhaps the single most fundamental of all, in the words of Rabbi Akiba, ז"ה כָּלֵל גְּדוּל בְּתוֹרָה, "This is a great principle of the Torah" (*Sifra*). I refer to the three-word precept: וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִי כָמוֹךָ, "Love your fellow as yourself" (Lev. 19:18).

A widely-recognized problem concerning this three-word clause is that it is hard to conceive of a demand calling for love of another to the degree that one has for his or her own self or immediate family members. It appears to be asking for what is beyond the standard human capacity to fulfill, requiring an almost super-human effort. Even Rabbi Akiba, who so valued this precept, ruled that when possessing scarce resources in dire circumstances, "your life takes precedence" (*b. B. Mesi'a*. 62a). Many have taken the "Love your fellow as yourself" formulation as hyperbole, intended to bring out a point. However, in context, as part of a legal passage that called for many specific actions, that interpretation seems to be forced.

It is important to note that a few verses later in Leviticus 19, upon mandating the importance of treating the sojourner properly, the Torah also states regarding him, וְאָהַבְתָּ לּוֹ כָמוֹךָ, "You shall love him as yourself" (v. 34), adding to the question.

Perhaps the most convincing interpretation before modern times is that of Ibn Ezra. He explicated the prepositional "*lamed*" prefix that begins the word "*lere'akha*" as meaning "for" and translates "love for your fellow as what you love for yourself," meaning love his betterment and be concerned for his welfare as you are for your own. Thus, although he did not fully remove the obligation from the emotional realm, he did interpret it such that its performance demands are defined and comprehended, in the realm of an individual's exercise of will to fulfill.

However, we now know that in the ancient Near East the word equivalent to the Hebrew "*ve'ahabta*" (generally, "love"), when used in covenantal contexts, takes the meaning of "be loyal to" or "be devoted to." Clearly, it addresses one's will and volition as

opposed to his emotions. It undoubtedly covers the basic needs to live within society.

The call to “love Hashem your G-d” (Deut. 6:5), which also has been a matter of a great deal of discussion through the centuries, also very likely means, “be loyal to.” This is supported by many recent discoveries of suzerain-vassal covenants that stem from the Near East in Biblical times in which kings and local rulers demanded from their subjects full loyalty using the word normally denoting “love.” It has even been found where the call for loyalty was followed by “with all your heart, with all your life and with all your resources,” strikingly reminiscent of the Torah’s formulation in the continuation of the verse of “love Hashem your G-d.” In presenting such a summons in Deuteronomy 6, loyalty to the human ruler is replaced with loyalty to Hashem. It should be borne in mind that the “love Hashem” verse is in a covenantal context; it immediately succeeds the *Shema’ Yisrael* verse, which constitutes a pithy summary of the first two commandments of the Decalogue. It also follows shortly after Moshe reinforced Israel’s covenantal relationship with Hashem with a full recitation of the Decalogue. By employing the common, contemporary formula of “*ve’ahabta*,” the people knew exactly what was being asked of them.

Our Leviticus “*ve’ahabta lere’akha*,” is also most assuredly part of G-d’s covenantal call to Israel and takes the meaning of “be loyal to.” Indeed, the previous verses of the Leviticus 19 chapter contain an exposition of the Ten Commandments (except adultery, which was left for an expanded treatment in the following chapter), the core pronouncements of Revelation and the Covenant. Our verse, a “precept of the heart” that is the culmination of a cluster of other “precepts of the heart” and that immediately follows elaboration of those commandments that deal with human interaction, is a bulwark against violation of those commandments. It corresponds to Commandment 10, “Do not be envious,” which also concludes a series of “between man and man” laws and serves the purpose of preventing violation of those previous laws. An individual who is loyal to others cannot think of taking for himself another’s house, wife, slave, animal or anything that belongs to him. Thus, “*ve’ahabta lere’akha kamokha*” is the counterpart to “*lo tah@mod*.” (See our study

“Linkage with the Decalogue” in which these topics are elaborated.)

The second word of the *ve’ahabta lere’akha kamokha*” clause, which refers to the other that the individual addressed must care for, apparently denotes all those in the circle of that individual, those who that individual interacts with, including non-Israelites. When G-d instructed Moshe to tell the Israelites to request silver and gold vessels from the Egyptians, the latter were called (male and female respectively) רַעֲוֵי and רַעֲוֹתָהּ (Ex. 11:2). The sojourner who is living among Israel, about whom the Torah mandates “*ve’ahabta lo kamokha*,” is clearly referring to a non-Israelite. To the extent that we are not in a situation of dire necessity, such as that in which our own life takes precedence (personal and national), G-d expects us to devote ourselves to the welfare of those others with whom we interact as to our own.

Use of the word “*ve’ahabta*” for describing our responsibility toward Hashem (although in that case it is made comprehensive, “with all your heart,” etc.), as well as that toward our fellowman provides great insight into the definition of religion.

It would seem that every human being (excluding those who have been subject to overwhelming programming and have virtually lost their power of individual discernment and choice) intuitively recognizes “Love your fellow as yourself” as one of the greatest guidelines to live by. Its call for basic equivalence recalls the Genesis proclamation of the dignity of every human being, that G-d created man in His own image (Gen. 1:27). The larger implications of the Creation narrative also come to mind. As one G-d created the world and all in it, ultimately we all are dependent on Him and are to devote ourselves to fulfilling His will. All members of humankind, being in His image and the recipients of His life-affirming blessings, possess limitless dignity and are of unique value; in an important respect all must be appreciated as equal in G-d’s eyes. In Job’s words regarding proper treatment of his slave: “Is not He who made me in the stomach made him, did not One form us both in the womb?” (Job 31:15). In the Mishnah’s formulation (*Sanh.* 4:5):

Therefore was man created as a single individual, to teach that whosoever destroys a single life,

Scripture considers as though he destroyed a complete world; and whosoever preserves a single life, Scripture considers as if he preserved a complete world. In addition [was man created singularly] for the sake of peace among men, that one may not say to his fellow, “My father was greater than yours.”

Isaiah’s magnificent visions of universal brotherhood, disarmament and world peace, also come to mind. “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up sword against nation; They shall never again know war” (Isa. 2:4, NJPS; see Micha 4:3). “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb...and the lion like the ox shall eat straw...For the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord” (Isa. 11:6-9, NJPS).

Indeed, history and the inexorable evolution of human society has taught us that ultimately there really is no other way to proceed except to recognize the dignity of all human beings. As the Talmudic Sages rule in another relevant context, “Who can say your blood is redder than his!” (see *b. Sanh. 74a*).

Finally, it can be recognized that this “great principle of the Torah” is an oft-needed corrective to a selfish life style and over-nurtured ego that undermine authentic commitment to religion.

## 2. An Intermediate Step

Unfortunately, because many find it too difficult or impractical to apply the exalted precept of “Love your fellow as yourself” to daily life, it is frequently neglected. But there is an approach that has been indicated by the preeminent Mishnaic sage Hillel the Elder (first century BCE), and which has been confirmed and reconfirmed by the lessons of psychology and the experience of perceptive individuals.

On what became a famous occasion, a non-Jew approached Hillel and stated that he desired to convert to Judaism on condition that he be taught the entire Torah “while standing on one leg.” Hillel agreed to cooperate and proceeded to teach the potential convert the whole Torah in summary form. He declared, “That which is hateful to you, do not unto your fellow.” That, he asserted, is the essence of the Torah

(therefore also the essence of religion). He added, “the balance is explanation, go and learn” (*b. Shabb. 31a*). Of course explanation is important and should be learnt, but one should never lose perspective and forget the essence. Hillel’s formula is clearly a restatement in a subdued form of “Love your fellow as yourself.”

Merely abstaining from negative behavior toward another is a guideline much easier to relate to than the more idealistic positive formulation of what to do in the Torah rule. The motivational factors associated with Hillel’s formula, which place one’s self-awareness of his personal welfare at the foundation of the rule’s application, are almost always instantaneously accessible to every human being with a minimal degree of concentration and discipline. The extension to others is immediately drawn. Everyone has a good idea of what he would not want done to himself. Everyone naturally knows that feelings and basic needs are similar in one human being to another. Everyone knows that everyone else is also a creation of G-d with an equal right to live and share in His creation and its resources. At a minimum, everyone possesses an equal right to essential necessities and fair treatment. These precious insights are the foundation of Hillel’s formula and provide it its strength.

How can we justify ignoring a plea from a needy person considering the pain we know he is experiencing and the anguish we instinctively sense we would feel if we were in that person’s position and our plea was ignored? How can we exploit a person when we recall the frustration we have felt when exploited? How can we humiliate somebody considering that we know the distress one feels when humiliated? To be sure, these examples are all cases regarding which there are specific *halakhot* in the code of Jewish law. But those who rely on the specific *halakhah* alone are often not sufficiently armed to withstand the tremendous temptations they may be confronted with to engage in rationalizations for self-interest. And rationalizations are ever-present, virtually emerging from thin air. Those who develop the habit of always thinking about how they would like to be treated as a behavioral guideline will retain their integrity and moral dignity and act appropriately even in the face of great pressure.

Ongoing reflection on these fundamentals brings one to a dynamic disposition that makes it progressively more difficult to do to another what is hateful to oneself. The individual who regularly meditates on these thoughts will be on the path to becoming a genuinely virtuous person. As the concepts involved may be quickly, naturally and easily grasped by every human being everywhere, this principle is a guideline that we can hope will one day be deeply inculcated in all our children, which would then bring about a steady improvement in society and lead to a far better world.

In the Western world, the Torah's sublime pronouncement and Hillel's formula were combined, producing "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." This does not express the unselfish idealism of the Torah's precept and neither is it quite as easy to relate to as Hillel's formulation; a person does not instinctively know exactly what he wants others to do unto him to the extent that he knows what he does not want others to do unto him, but nonetheless it may serve as an excellent guideline. This formulation is an example of a Jewish teaching that entered other religious literature and has commanded a great deal of respect in the world.

Unfortunately, many people in their enthusiasm to fulfill religious precepts sometimes get deeply involved in all kinds of details and rituals and forget the most fundamental principle of all, missing the forest for the trees. Sometimes they consider this most critical commandment as one of a great many others. Since one cannot do justice to everything, it gets ignored. We should never allow ourselves to fall victim to this negative syndrome, especially while expending great energy on less important details, thinking we are going forward. We should remind ourselves at least daily never to violate Hillel's maxim. We should inculcate this value in our children by example, instruction and discussion and promote its appreciation among our friends. We should judge behavior by the degree to which it corresponds to this principle. The myriad details and rituals of religion are important but they only have genuine meaning when they are recognized as subordinate to this principle and do not divert us from the essential. As Hillel said, "the rest is explanation."

And we should never lose sight of Leviticus 19:18.

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