

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Kedoshim

Loving Your Neighbor as Yourself

לֹא תִקֶם וְלֹא תִטּוֹר אֶת בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי ה'

Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against the members of your people; you shall love your fellow as yourself, I am Hashem.¹

INTRODUCTION: A GREAT PRINCIPLE IN THE TORAH

Surely, among the best-known verses of our parsha – if not of the entire Torah – is the mitzvah in our verse to “love your fellow as yourself.” Indeed, R’ Akiva himself famously said concerning this mitzvah that it is “גדול בתורה – a great principle in the Torah.”² However, this very familiarity should itself encourage us to endeavor to understand what exactly this mitzvah entails, as well as what it represents. Indeed, as we will see, each of the three words that make up this mitzvah will demand our careful investigation and contemplation to emerge with a clear picture of what the Torah is commanding us to do.

THE MEANING OF VE’AHAVTA

The Rambam in the Mishneh Torah³ describes our mitzvah in the following way:

Everything that you would like others to do for you, you do for your brother in Torah and mitzvos

We see that the Rambam has presented the mitzvah in purely practical terms. In this, he is perhaps taking his cue from the sage Hillel who, when approached by a prospective convert asking him to summarize the entire Torah “while standing on one foot,” replied: “That which is loathsome for you, do not do unto others.”⁴

What are the implications of this formulation? Is the Rambam indicating that this mitzvah is in essence

1 Vayikra 19:18.

2 *Toras Kohanim*, cited in Rashi to our verse [see commentaries *Maskil le’David* and *Nachalas Yaakov* *ibid.* in explanation of Rashi’s intent in citing this statement in his commentary to the verse].

3 *Hilchos Avel* 14:1.

4 Shabbos 31a.

one of action and not one of emotion? How is this to be reconciled with the plain meaning of the verse which discusses the love one feel for their fellow?

In truth, the full picture of the Rambam's approach emerges when considering a ruling of his elsewhere in Mishneh Torah,⁵ where he writes:

It is a mitzvah for each person to love each and every one of Israel as himself.

Here, we see that the Rambam does formulate the mitzvah in terms of the love i tself one must feel for his fellow Jew. In light of this, his words in the earlier halachah which focus on action were not said in order to *define* the mitzvah, but to give it *practical expression*, so that it not remain as an abstract concept, as the Rambam himself continues: "Therefore, one must speak in [his fellow's] praise and take care regarding his property, just as he protects his own property and honor."⁶ The full mitzvah is thus that of love for one's fellow expressed in actions on their behalf to promote their honor and wellbeing.

THE MEANING OF LE'REYACHA

The Ramban, in his commentary to our verse, raises a basic question concerning this mitzvah, namely, that taken at face value, it seems impossible to fulfil. How can a person be commanded to love all others as much as he loves himself? This is simply unnatural and practically unattainable! To this, we may add that the verse later on in the Prophets highlights one individual who attained this level, namely, Yehonasan's love for David.⁷ The fact that this was such a noteworthy and exceptional achievement clearly implies that it is not expected *from* all people – and certainly not *toward* all people!

However, the Ramban points out that the way we have been translating the word "*le'reyacha*", i.e. as "your fellow," may not be entirely accurate. Let us consider that whenever the Torah refers to loving something or someone, it uses the word "es", for example, in the beginning of the Shema: "וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ" – *You shall love Hashem your God.*" If so, then our verse which commands us to love our fellow Jew should have said "וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת רֵעֶךָ"! Why does it instead use the word "לרעך"? Rather, the letter *lamed* denotes "to" or "for". Accordingly, the command is to wish all good things for your fellow as surely as you wish them *for* yourself, and to have his wellbeing and success at heart as surely as your own is.⁸

THE MEANING OF KAMOCHA

As we have noted, the Ramban asserted that it is impossible to expect a person love others as he loves himself. In this regard, it is most noteworthy to refer back to the verse regarding Yehonasan and David, which states "וַיֵּאָהֲבֵהוּ יְהוֹנָתָן כְּנַפְשׁוֹ". We see that the term used to describe one who loves another as himself is "כְּנַפְשׁוֹ". In light of this, we note that our verse does not say "וְאַהַבְתָּ כְּנַפְשׁוֹ", but rather – "כְּמוֹךָ"! What is the difference in connotation between these two terms?

On a simple level, we can explain that by using the word "כְּמוֹךָ", the verse is not commanding that you love your fellow to the same degree that you love yourself, but rather, in the same way. As surely as you are well-disposed toward yourself, wishing yourself all good things and judging yourself favorably – in spite of your flaws and shortcomings! – so too, you should feel toward others. Our assessment regarding a situation often differs drastically depending on whether the

5 *Hilchos De'os* 6:3.

6 *Ibid.* See also *Sefer Hamitzvos*, positive mitzvah 206.

7 See Shmuel I, 18:1.

8 See also regarding this in the commentaries of Malbim and *Emes le'Yaakov* to our verse.

protagonist is us or someone else. That categorical discrepancy, says the Torah, has to go.

An entirely different approach to the term “כמוך – as yourself” is found in the Chizkuni to our verse.⁹ He explains that the Torah is not commanding you to love others in the same way that *you* love yourself, but rather, to love others in same the way you want *others* to love you! To this end, he cites Hillel’s words to the prospective convert, mentioned above, who likewise expressed this idea in reciprocal terms, “That which you do not wish others to do to you, don’t do to them.” According to the Chizkuni, this reciprocity is indicated by the term “like you” – i.e. like you would want others to act toward you.¹⁰

THE FLOW OF THE VERSE: BETWEEN WHAT MATTERS AND WHO MATTERS

Having examined each of the three words that make up this mitzvah, let us now consider it in its context within the verse, which begins with the prohibitions: “Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against the members of your people.”

On a straightforward level, one can see these two parts of the verse as representing a progression from avoiding negative interactions and feelings toward fostering positive ones. However, it is possible to see the second half of the verse not as developing the idea of the first half, but as a counterpoint to it.

The Rambam,¹¹ when discussing the prohibitions against taking revenge and beating a grudge, proceeds to offer a strategy for avoiding these negative responses:

It is fitting for a person to be foregoing regarding all matters of the world, for in the eyes of those of understanding, these are all transient and insignificant matters and it is not worth taking revenge over them.

These are truly remarkable words. Not only is the Rambam interjecting a hashkafah perspective within a halachic discussion, moreover, the strategy he presents is not one of refining one’s moral character to avoid bearing a grudge etc., but of adopting a deeper and more elevated vision of this world whereby these matters are meaningless and simply not worth the trouble!

However, adopting this approach could potentially generate a negative consequence – for the events and “matters of the world” are brought about by the people who occupy it. Once a person comes to see the episodes and interactions which take place in the world as being ultimately of little significance, he may then come to see the people behind them as likewise lacking significance. In other words, his elevated vision may lead him to disregard everything of this world – including the people who inhabit it! To this end, the Torah follows up the prohibition against taking revenge etc. with the mitzvah to love your fellow man, as if to say, while it may be true that many of your interactions with people are not important – people themselves are *always* important and are deserving of love and goodwill.

A CONCLUDING THOUGHT: GREAT PRINCIPLES AND THEIR HAZARDS

As we mentioned in the beginning of our discussion, R’ Akiva is cited as saying that the mitzvah to love one’s fellow as oneself is “a great principle in the Torah.”¹² The basic understanding

9 See also *Hakesav ve’Hakabbalah* who adopts and develops this approach.

10 [In this regard, the two rulings of the Rambam which we cited appear to differ. In *Hilchos Avel*, he writes, “Everything that you would like others to do for you, you do for your brother etc.” while in *Hilchos De’os* he writes, “It is a mitzvah for each person to love each and every one of Israel as [he loves] himself.”]

11 *Hilchos De’os* 7:7.

12 *Toras Kohanim* to Vayikra, *ibid.*, quoted in Rashi’s commentary there.

of these words is to emphasize the central importance of this mitzvah. One of the Chassidic masters,¹³ however, explained this statement somewhat differently.

We know that thousands of R' Akiva's disciples died within a very short period of time, during the weeks between Pesach and Shavuos. The Gemara¹⁴ explains that the cause for their demise was that they did not accord honor one to the other. Thus, explained the rebbe, R' Akiva surveyed the tragedy which befell his students and lamented: The mitzvah of loving your neighbor as yourself is indeed "a great principle." Sadly, however, it stayed "in the Torah"! They read about it in the Torah but somehow failed to take it out of there and apply it *to their lives*; thus it remained "a great principle *in the Torah*," with tragic consequences for those students.

Perhaps we may add to this interpretation, that the reason why this principle remained in the Torah is precisely because it was a "great principle." Of course, the students understood that there is a mitzvah to love one's fellow like oneself, but because they related to it as a great principle, they waited for a great circumstance or situation which would warrant its application.

What type of situation deserves this great principle to be implemented? Perhaps saving one's fellow from danger, or organizing a means of livelihood for them — something "great"! But what of the more common courtesies and considerations, such as greeting them with a pleasant countenance, noticing and validating their cares and concerns, offering a sympathetic ear and an encouraging word — which are part of the fabric of everyday life? Such matters were considered beneath the grandeur of this great principle, and thus it was left, unused in the Torah, while they waited for the right time to employ it. Such a time never came, and the students were found wanting.

As we seek to learn a lesson from the tragedy of R' Akiva's disciples, part of it must surely be that the true greatness of this principle is that it can be applied to *all* situations, big and small. The Torah is our guide for life. Life is made up of days, and days tend to be filled with everyday events. It is clearly these events that the Torah is referring to when it teaches us that we are to love our fellow as ourselves.

13 Heard from my father, Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, *zt"l*.

14 *Yevamos* 62b.