

Love Your Neighbor

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Once again we return, in our cycle of reading the Torah each week, to the iconic, indeed universal, “VeAhavta LeReyacha Kamocha” (Leviticus 19:18), which is usually translated in English as, “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” For most people this is understood to mean that we should love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. Which seems both an impossibility as well as an improbability. How can one realistically require this? And what if one does not love oneself? Does that mean one is relieved of the obligation?

In fact, both grammatically and in terms of simple common sense, it should translate as, “Show love towards you neighbor because he (or she, of course) is the same as you.” We are all the children of one God, as the saying goes. As the Talmud (Sanhedrin 74a) says, “Who is to say your blood is any purer than anyone else’s?”

The question one is bound to ask, of course, is how do you define a neighbor? Rashbam (Samuel ben Meir, Troyes c. 1085 – c. 1158), the great literal commentator and grandson of Rashi, qualifies this as applying only to good people, not bad ones. But still, we could ask, which good people? Christianity might require one to turn the other cheek. Judaism requires one to recognize evil where it exists and combat it.

There is a well-known debate in the Talmud (Yerushalmi Nedarin 30b) over what is the single most important sentence in the Torah. Rebi Akiva says it is “VeAhavta LeReyacha Kamocha,” loving your neighbor. Ben Azai, his contemporary and friend, disagrees. For him it is, “This is the history of mankind who God created in His image,” (Genesis 5:10). The difference is that Rebi Akiva defines neighbor as being a fellow Jew, someone committed to the same ethical and ritual values and standards. Ben Azai says that it is the commonality of humanity that matters most. We were all created in the image of God. Not literally, of course, but all with a spiritual dimension and a capacity for good.

The Talmud seems to come down on Ben Azai’s side, because the phrase “Love Your Neighbor” is quoted overwhelmingly in regard to a criminal (Pesachim 73a, etc.). Even if he is condemned to die, “make sure his death is a humane one.” Here is not the place to go into capital punishment. Suffice it to say there are very different attitudes to be found in the Talmud. But the very fact that one has to be considerate and sensitive even to a murderer shows that that loving one’s neighbor is indeed supposed to apply even to bad guys! And it certainly applies to good non-Jews as Ben Azai’s position implies and as Rebi Akiva clearly agrees in Avot 3:14.

There is quite a separate command to be helpful to your compatriot, “Ve Chai Achicha Imach,” (Leviticus 25:36): “You must ensure that your brother is able to live alongside you,” in the context of supporting the indigent.

Loving the "other" is used in Leviticus elsewhere. "And you should love the stranger as yourself because you were strangers in Egypt," (Leviticus 19.34), where it clearly is not someone the same as you. It strikes me as obvious that we have an obligation to be considerate towards everyone we encounter, not just our immediate neighbors. All of mankind. The Mishnah in Rosh Hashana states quite explicitly that God cares about and judges all of humanity. "On Rosh HaShana everyone on earth passes before God [and is judged each year]."

I think the broad message is clear. We all want peace. But if you cannot get on with your immediate neighbor, how the heck can you expect to get on with those further removed from you? Which of course is precisely what is wrong with all religions. Great on the theory as some may be, they are woefully lacking on the practice!

This importance of respecting others is behind the period of mourning we are presently in called the Omer. The Torah describes bringing the Omer, as the first sheaf of the barley harvest to the Tabernacle and then counting 49 days until the festival we now call Shavuot. The earliest source of something tragic happening then is the Talmud (Yevamot 62b), where it says that Rebi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students who did not behave respectfully towards each other and they all died between Pesach and the thirty-third day of the Omer. But there's no mention there of a period of mourning or a time when we do not celebrate weddings.

Some authorities thought the whole custom was spurious. They suggest the true origin of the custom of mourning, is that Rebi Akivah supported the Bar Kochba revolution against Rome, which led to his death and that of many of his followers. It was the reason for Emperor Hadrian's anti-Jewish legislation and persecution. Others (for example Aruch HaShulchan 301.1) point out that as the custom of mourning only dates back to Medieval times, it was really a response to the Crusades whose murderous campaigns usually began after Easter. Pinning it to Rebi Akivah's time was so as not to offend the Church. Now we mourn for all our fallen heroes, from that period through to the millions who perished in Europe, and those who still give their lives every day for us.

But the message is clear. If we cannot even be humane to our own, we are doomed to suffer. The sight of rival groups of ultra-religious Jews fighting, demeaning, and attacking each other, let alone other less extreme Jews, and using politics to defeat each other is depressing beyond imagination. We have this capacity to adhere to traditions and customs and yet to completely ignore the ideas and intentions behind them. It's called zealotry.

And if we cannot act humanely to our own, how can we hope to act humanely to others? It may be true that we have no obligation to be nice to those who hate us, and there are plenty of them. But we must at least compensate by being extra nice to those who do not reject us or our right to live like any other people in the world. As for those who are against us, if they want others to respect their integrity and distinctive ways of life, they ought to extend a similar tolerance toward others.

As another commentator said, "If there is a fault in you, cure it instead of

blaming it on your neighbor." Or anyone else. Showing love and concern to others is such a fundamental issue, yet it seems as hard for most humans to follow now as it ever has been.