

Parshiot Acharei Mot-Kedoshim, 5770, 2010:

*How to Love Your Fellow Jew*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Ever since the destruction of the second *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) in 70 CE and the vibrant Jewish metropolis of Beitar during the Roman persecutions 52 years later, we have believed that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by a period of near palpable darkness and misery. The great second century CE Mishnaic sages, Rabbis Nehorai and Nechemiah formulated this concept in this manner:

It has been taught: R. Nehorai said: in the generation when Messiah comes, young men will insult the old, and old men will stand before the young [to give them honor]; daughters will rise up against their mothers, and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law. The people shall be dog-faced, and a son will not be abashed in his father's presence. It has been taught, R. Nechemiah said: in the generation of Messiah's coming impudence will increase, esteem be perverted... (*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 97a*, translation, *The Soncino Talmud*)

Rabbis Nehorai and Nechemiah are describing an age of manifest *pirood* (split), and the breakdown of traditional Torah and family values. The result of *pirood* is alienation and disaffection from our fellow Jews. Rather than joining together as family, friends, and communities in mutual respect and tolerance, we become intolerant and treat one another with *chutzpah*, distrust and groundless hatred (*sinat chinam*). Unfortunately, it appears that more often than not we are already exhibiting these characteristics.

Happily, Parashat Kedoshim contains the antidote for such insensitive behaviors against our fellow Jews: "...you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (*v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocha*," *Sefer Vayikra* 19:18). Nearly all commentators agree that the Torah is not commanding us to feel love toward our fellow Jews, since emotions are beyond the pale of command. Instead, Hashem commanded us to act with honor, respect, and dignity toward one another in all areas of the human enterprise. Maimonides ("the Rambam," 1135-1204) gave voice to this idea in the following passage from the *Sefer Hamitzvot*, Positive Commandment 206:

We are commanded to love others [i.e. our fellow Jews] in the same manner that we love ourselves. My mercy and love for my brother [i.e. my fellow Jew] 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." (Translation, my own)

Let us briefly review the Rambam's synopsis of this mitzvah:

1. In order to fulfill *v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocha*, we must emulate our behaviors toward ourselves: "My mercy and love for my brother [i.e. my fellow Jew] should be exactly like the mercy and love I have for myself."
2. We are obligated to guard our fellow Jew's money, possessions, and physical welfare.
3. The litmus test for how I should act toward my fellow Jew has both positive and negative components: "...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."

The Rambam's interpretation of "...you shall love your neighbor as yourself," provides us with some general guidelines as to how we should behave toward our fellow Jews. We are still in need, however, of clear parameters as to what we actually need to do to fulfill this mitzvah. I believe that *Talmud Bavli, Sotah* 14a goes a long way in providing us with just such a "roadmap":

Just as Hashem clothed the naked [in the case of Adam and Chava]... so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as Hashem visited the sick [in the case of Avraham after his *brit milah*]...so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He comforted the mourners as it states; "... Now it came to pass after Abraham's death, that G-d blessed his son Isaac... so, too, should you comfort the mourners. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He buried the dead [in the case of Moshe *Rabbeinu*]...so, too, should you bury the dead. (Translation my own)

The actual mitzvah presented in this passage is that of "and you shall walk in His ways." (*Sefer Devarim* 28:9) Fascinatingly each of G-d's actions that we are instructed to imitate (*imitatio Dei*) are actions that are in the category of *gemilut chasadim* – acts of loving-kindness. In other words, by being *gomlai chasadim* (practitioners of loving-kindness), we imitate the Almighty's very deeds.

The Rambam takes the above-quoted passage from *Gemara Sotah* even further, and applies it in a manner that is directly relevant to the mitzvah of *v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocho*:

It is a positive Rabbinic Commandment to visit the sick, to comfort the mourners, to "bring out" (*l'hotzi*) the deceased, to provide for the needs of the bride, and to escort guests. [In addition, one] must involve himself in all aspects of the burial and carry the deceased on his shoulder, walk before him, eulogize him, dig his grave, and bury him. So, too, [one is obligated] to rejoice with the bride and groom, and to provide for all their needs [at the festive feast.] All of the aforementioned are in the category of physically demonstrated acts of kindness (*gemilut chasadim she'b'guf*) and, as such, have no upward limit. Even though all of these mitzvot are Rabbinic in nature, they are in the

category of "...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." [In general,] all of those things that you would like others to do for you; you should do for your brother in Torah and Mitzvot. (*Sefer Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel* 14:1, translation, my own)

In summary, this passage provides us with a truly pragmatic and paradigmatic formulation for fulfilling "...*v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocho*." Clearly, "love" for one's fellow Jew is not some amorphous or "fuzzy" idea. Rather, for the Rambam, it consists primarily of clearly delineated acts such as kindness toward someone who is ill, burying a deceased individual (*lo aleinu*) and comforting his family, as well as rejoicing with and providing for the needs of a newly married couple. These types of kindness know no upward boundary – in consonance with the nature of the needs of the recipients themselves. One more point must be stressed: As we have seen, each of these discrete actions is a Rabbinic Commandment. When we perform them, however, we fulfill the Biblical mitzvah of "...you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Given all of the above, we have now derived a fascinating equation: *Imitatio Dei*=*Gemilut Chasadim*= "...*v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocho*." In a word, by imitating Hashem's actions we fulfill the mitzvah of loving our fellow Jews. Clearly, this is a vital step in bringing *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the righteous Messiah). May we all be *zocheh* (merit) to witness his coming and the true world-peace he will bring soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

[http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat\\_hashavuah/index.html](http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html) .

Do you have questions, comments, ideas, or thoughts about this *drasha*? Would you like to share them? My blog is located at:

[tefilahandtorah.blogspot.com](http://tefilahandtorah.blogspot.com) .

The E-mail list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via E-mail [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).