

What is Halachic Love?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The phrase in Parashat Kedoshim, "...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself," (*Sefer Vayikra* 19:18) is one of the most often-quoted verses in the Torah. Unfortunately, its popularity has done little to reveal its inner halachic meaning and parameters. Let us turn, therefore, to the Rambam's (Maimonides, 1135-1240) definition of this *mitzvah*:

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." (*Sefer HaMitzvot*, Positive Commandment 206, translation my own)

Maimonides' formulation of our commandment in this passage is decidedly general – as befits the inherent purpose of the *Sefer HaMitzvot*. Fascinatingly, he also champions this approach in one of the two discussions of this *mitzvah* that appear in the *Mishneh Torah*:

It is incumbent upon every person to love each and every person from the Jewish people – like himself. As the Torah states: "...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Therefore, you must relate his praise and be protective of his money in the selfsame manner that one is protective of his own money and his desire to be respected [by others]. (*Hilchot Deot* 6:3)

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, understood the Rambam’s presentation of “...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” in *Sefer HaMitzvot* and *Hilchot Deot* as epitomizing “a passive contemplative perspective.” Moreover:

On the face of it, at least, it appears that that this love requires no actions and no concrete realization in the form of energetic acts and relationships. It is expressed through a spiritual link of esteem and affection, inner warmth and closeness. The commandment is fulfilled through the emotion itself: a person shows concern for the honor and property of the thou; he is dismayed when his friend finds himself in difficult straits or is embarrassed in public. It is all a matter of sympathy, participation in his sorrows, and sharing in his troubles and misgivings...Therefore, both the essence of the commandment as well as its performance remains enclosed within the borders of faceless inwardness. (This and the following quotes, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Morality: Essays on Ethics and Masorah*, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler editors, page 165)

It is within the second discussion of “...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” in the *Mishneh Torah* wherein we find this commandment cast in a decidedly contrasting light. Instead of passive contemplation, we are met with the obligation to be actively and dynamically engaged in the lives of our fellow Jews:

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’gufo*) 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*. (*Hilchot Avel* 14:1, translation and underlining my own)

In sum, this passage provides us with a truly pragmatic formulation of how to fulfill the commandment of “...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The Rambam teaches us that this is achieved through the performance of clearly delineated Rabbinic acts of *gemilut chasadim*, such as visiting the sick, burying a deceased individual and

comforting his family, as well as rejoicing with a newly married couple. In consonance with the nature of the needs of the recipients themselves, these actions have no upward limit as to how often they may be performed. Rav Soloveitchik explicated the meaning of this passage in his deeply insightful manner:

Love is understood as performing physical acts of kindness; its essence is identical with acts of kindness, with the mighty effort to express the feeling through deed. Internal sympathy does not suffice. It must find its active correlative so that it shapes my way of life, my actions with regard to the thou. The external manifestation is essential to the fulfillment of the commandment of love, and without it the person has not fulfilled his obligation. If that is the case, this commandment is similar to others insofar as it is fulfilled through concrete action. Although its fulfillment focuses on the heart, its realization is objective. (Underlining my own)

Upon due reflection it appears that the Rambam's statements in *Sefer HaMitzvot* and *Hilchot Deot* contradict his position in *Hilchot Avel*. In other words, is the *mitzvah* "...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" fulfilled solely through passive contemplation, or does it demand decisive and clearly defined external acts of *gemilut chasadim*? According to Rav Soloveitchik, both notions of the Rambam "are accurate, for they are complementary, not contradictory." This is the case, since "...the Torah is not content with the passive-contemplative form of love," it also "demands a dynamic love with respect to the thou." At this juncture the Rav explains exactly why the Rambam's two approaches to the *mitzvah* of loving one's fellow Jew are truly complementary:

In *Hilchot De'ot* [and *Sefer HaMitzvot*] where Maimonides discusses character traits, moods and states of mind, he mentions only the axiological [value-laden] action that is expressed in a feeling of warm affection...Accordingly, it does not mention the concretization of the quality of love. However, the energetic love that is channeled into concrete actions is important as well [i.e. *Hilchot Avel*]. Internal, subjective feelings of affection are not enough. A person must...give them the concrete form of showing kindness and love to others. And thus the commandment to perform acts of kindness emerges, manifesting dynamic love that motivates one's conduct toward others... (Page 168, underling and brackets my own)

Long ago, Rabbi Akiva famously declared: “*V’ahavta l’reiecha kamocho, zehu klal gadol b’Torah*” (“And you should love your neighbor as you love yourself, this is the overarching principle of the Torah.” (*Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedarim, 9:4*) Armed with the Rambam’s insights, and the Rav’s penetrating analysis, we can now understand Rabbi Akiva’s adage and the truly singular import of this *mitzvah*. With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may we ever grow in our feelings of love and mercy for our fellow Jews, and stand ready to help them through heartfelt actions of *gemilut chasadim*. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the *parasha*’s name.

The email 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 email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.