YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Bein Adam Le-chavero*: Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

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**Shiur #28:  *Ve-ahavta Le-reiakha Kamokha —* The Great Principle of *Ahavat Yisrael***

**The Importance of the Mitzva**

Many people identify Judaism’s fundamental principle of interpersonal relations with the directive (*Vayikra* 19:18): “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha*,” “You shall love your fellow as yourself.” After all, the general language of the commandment seems to be all-encompassing, including within it the call for all possible interpersonal interactions to be guided by love. This assumption is furthered by at least three additional sources that seem to support the understanding of this principle’s preeminence.

Firstly ([in lesson #07](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero/07chavero.htm)), we have seen that the Rambam writes that all the various rabbinic *mitzvot* of *gemilut chasadim* are biblical fulfillments of the mitzva to love one’s fellow as himself. Secondly, Rabbi Akiva, the great *tanna*, explains the fundamental nature of this commandment when identifying “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha”* as “a great principle of the Torah” (*Torat Kohanim* 4:12). Lastly, the Gemara records the story of a non-Jew who poses the challenge, “Convert me on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah while standing on one foot.” Shammai throws him out of the room, while Hillel accepts this challenge, explaining:

That which is hateful to you, do not do to your peers — this is the entire Torah. All the rest is simply elaboration. Go and study it. (*Shabbat* 31a)

Though not explicitly quoting this verse, the simple understanding of Hillel’s statement (the second opinion in Rashi’s commentary there) is that it refers to this mitzva as the essential underpinning of the Torah. Though we must question why Hillel chooses to reword the verse, he expresses the same idea, indicating its significance. The basis of the Torah according to Hillel is treating one’s fellow properly.

One might wonder, with an understanding of this mitzva’s importance, it is a little strange that we have not yet devoted at least one lesson to this fundamental principle. Notwithstanding the other important *mitzvot* and directives we have discussed, should this “great principle of the Torah” not take precedence?

Let us turn our attention to the Torah’s presentation of the *mitzvot* themselves. We have noted (lesson #26) that the Torah, in *Parashat Kedoshim*, the *parasha* teaching us how to be holy, puts *geneiva,* stealing, at the top of a list of interpersonal directives (*Vayikra* 19:11). Not only does the Torah not begin with the positive requirement of loving one’s fellow Jew, we do not find it mentioned in the second or third spot either. In fact, it is mentioned last, as the final directive in an extensive list of primarily negative commandments (*ibid.* verse 18). Why does the Torah not begin its discussion with this positive “great principle of the Torah”? Why is it relegated to the last spot? Furthermore, why, if it is preceded by the opposite requirement, “Do not hate your brother in your heart” (verse 17), does the Torah place it in the same verse as less complementary prohibitions, taking revenge and bearing a grudge?

It seems that the proper understanding of “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha”* specifically lies in an understanding of the related prohibitions mentioned in the same verse. “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha”* does not stand on its own, but rather as the culmination of all the preceding principles. For this reason, we will introduce this mitzva this week, but we will return to it in depth only after dealing with the related *mitzvot* that are mentioned together with it. After analyzing this mitzva in the greater context of interpersonal *mitzvot*, we will have the capacity to grasp more of its essence.

**What is This “Love” All About?**

To properly fulfill “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha,”* one must know what it entails. If one would take the words literally, “You shall love your fellow as yourself,” one might assume that one must actually love others with the same degree of love one has for oneself. But is that really possible? Does it indicate that anything one buys for oneself one must purchase for one’s fellow as well? If so, anytime one is hungry for an apple, one should buy for one’s five friends as well. While this may be doable for some, it is highly unlikely that anytime one purchases a family car or home, one should be expected to do so for all of one’s friends. Can that really be what the Torah has in mind? In a less dramatic manner, we may ask the following question: is one allowed to make a lavish wedding or other meaningful affair, or must one scale down the affair in order to “love” others more and be able to provide more for the needy?

We also must define who is included in this directive. Simply said, who is “*reiakha”* mentioned in the verse? Must one “love” all Jews, even those who are evil or dangerous, even those who have chosen to do others harm?

**The Verse and Its Depth**

As usual, we will begin by looking at the verses themselves and seeing the context and the language which the Torah uses to teach us this mitzva. As mentioned, the mitzva is presented in the context of interpersonal *mitzvot* in *Parashat Kedoshim*, among the *mitzvot* required to fulfill the Biblical mandate to “be holy.”

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen, and you shall love your fellow as yourself. I am God.” (*Vayikra* 19:18)

The verse formulates the obligation of loving one’s neighbor in the affirmative, as opposed to Hillel’s formulation cited earlier, articulated in the negative: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your peers.” Furthermore, Hillel focuses on action, “do not do," as opposed to the verses calling for love, seemingly an emotional feeling. Hillel’s statement would seem to be very clear in its intention: it prohibits action. The verse, however, is very vague. What is this love and how is it accomplished — in the heart, in the mind?

Some commentators, among them Yonatan ben Uzziel, translate the biblical directive with Hillel’s words, revealing their understanding that the verse essentially is expressing a prohibition of action rather than a positive requirement of love. The Maharsha (*Shabbat* 31a) points out that though the verse speaks in the positive formulation, Hillel nevertheless expresses the obligation in the negative because the mitzva is presented in the same verse as the prohibition of revenge, indicating that it too is a prohibition of improper action. This begs the question: if, in fact, the Torah is really expressing a directive of action, why formulate it as a mitzva of love? This question will actually lead us to a very fascinating difference of opinion regarding the nature of this mitzva.

The commentators also deal with a number of questions that arise in attempting to understand the verse. Firstly, regarding context, what is the connection of this mitzva to the other *mitzvot* mentioned in this section, especially the prohibition of revenge recorded in the same verse? Secondly, why is the language of the commandment “*le-reiakha”* instead of “*et reiakha*," the formulation found regarding the obligation to love God (*Devarim* 6:5)? After arriving at a proper definition of the obligation of love, *ahava*, the most important word to understand is “*kamokha*,” “as yourself.” Furthermore, what is to be derived from the conclusion of the verse, “I am God”? How does that relate to the nature of the mitzva?

The commentators are also bothered by the seeming contradiction within Rabbi Akiva’s worldview. He describes this mitzva as a great principle, but according to *Bava Metzia* 62a, he expounds the verse “And your brother shall live with you” (*Vayikra* 25:36) to teach us that “Your life comes first, before the life of your friend.” Though we will deal with this issue at great length in the following lesson, some commentators use this latter statement as the basis of their approaches, so we must discuss how it affects our understanding of the basic mitzva.

**Action or Emotion**

*The Rambam’s View*

The various interpersonal *mitzvot* mentioned in the verses cited above might all share a unified theme of how to deal with one who has wronged you, as the Rashbam explains (*Vayikra* 19:17-18). This might lead one to believe that “*Ve-ahavta*” is also focused on a directive of action; however, the Rambam seems to explain differently. The Rambam expresses the obligation of loving one’s neighbor in its most basic understanding, an emotional requirement of love.

To love one another as we love ourselves — I must have compassion and love for my coreligionist as I do for myself, as regards his wealth, his body, and all that he possesses and desires. All that I desire for myself I must desire for him; and all that I do not desire for myself or for my loved ones, I must not desire for him. (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot 206)*

This does not mean that the Rambam requires one to develop an emotional bond only, without any ensuing action, as the Rambam himself expresses the need to express the love through action. The Rambam, near the beginning of his magnum opus, *Mishneh Torah*, in *Hilkhot De’ot* 6:3, adds the element of action as well:

Each man is commanded to love each and every one of Israel as himself, as it is stated: “You shall love your fellow as yourself.” Therefore, one should speak the praises of others and show concern for their money, just as he is concerned with his own money and desires his own honor…

In *Hilkhot Avel* (14:1), the Rambam broadens the scope of “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha”* to *mitzvot* codified by the rabbis:

It is a positive rabbinical mitzva to visit the sick and to comfort mourners… These are the acts of *chesed* done bodily which have no limit. Even though all of these *mitzvot* are rabbinical, they are included in “You shall love your fellow as yourself” — everything you wish others to do for you, you should do for your brother in Torah and *mitzvot*.

Despite the Rambam’s recognition of the call for action in the verse, the source of the requirement is his literal understanding of the verse, calling for an emotional love for one’s fellow Jew.

*The Ramban’s View*

The Ramban, on the other hand, explains that one cannot take the verse literally, understanding that the intent of the commandment is that one must not harbor jealousy of any kind to one’s neighbor, but should desire good for him, just as one wishes good for themselves. His understanding is based on the various difficulties with the verse presented above.

The phrase “Love your neighbor as yourself” cannot be meant literally, since man cannot be expected to love his neighbor as himself. Moreover, Rabbi Akiva has ruled that “Your life comes first.” The Torah here enjoins us that we should wish upon our neighbor the same benefits that we wish upon ourselves. Perhaps, this is the reason for the dative instead of the accusative form of the verb phrase; we find the same in “And you shall love him as yourself” (19:34). Indeed, sometimes a person may wish upon his neighbor certain benefits, but only wealth, not wisdom and the like. But even if he wishes his cherished friend well in everything, i.e. wealth, honor, learning, and wisdom, he will not do so unstintingly; he will still insist on a larger share of the benefits. It is this shortcoming that the Torah condemned. Rather, a man should wish his fellow well in everything, just as he does in his own case, and he should place no limitations on his love. Therefore, in the case of Yonatan and David (I *Shemuel* 20:17), it says that Yonatan “loved him as his own soul,” since he had removed all jealousy from his heart, declaring “And you shall rule over Israel” (*ibid.* 23:17).

The Ramban’s idea is based primarily on the qualifying term “*kamokha,”* asexpressed by other commentators who follow in his footsteps (see Chizkuni). According to the Ramban, *“kamokha”* qualifies the degree of love. Since no one can fulfill the literal meaning of the verse, rather than an emotional directive, it is a call to wish the best for one’s friend, the same way one wants the best for oneself.

Other commentators similarly state that Hillel’s statement, though formulated in the negative, is the only possible understanding of the verse, for one cannot really love another as oneself. Therefore, Hillel explained that the mitzva is one of action, ensuring that one does no actions that one would not want done to oneself. This understanding of “*kamokha”* focuses on the actions one would want done to oneself.

Evidently, the Rambam feels that one could actually love one’s friend as one loves oneself (see next lesson), as the text in *Mesillat Yesharim* quoted later reveals. Others understood “*kamokha”* differently and focus on the nature of the other person.

Others understand that “*kamokha*” is a limitation: one is required to love the fellow who is righteous. The Rashbam (*Vayikra* 19:18) arrives at a similar conclusion, but from a different part of the verse:

“You shall love your fellow as yourself” — only if he is your fellow, i.e. virtuous, but not if he is wicked, as it is written, “To fear God is to hate evil” (*Mishlei* 8:13).[[1]](#footnote-1)

According to another approach, “*kamokha*” does not require the other to be righteous. Rather, it refers to standards of behavior that an individual expects in interpersonal relationships; one cannot expect to receive the benefits of these standards from others without upholding them towards others. (Ha-Ketav Ve-kabbala puts together a list: frankness and a lack of hypocrisy, respect, inquiring about one’s welfare, sharing in grief, cordiality, giving the benefit of the doubt, lending, et cetera.) This understanding of “*kamokha”* essentially calls for one to look at oneself, see what one actually needs and do these things for others. One might view this as egotistical, focusing on one’s own needs and applying it to others (see the Malbim’s explanation of ben Azzai’s opinion in the next lesson), but Rabbi Akiva’s viewing this as a great principle seems to reflect the benefits accrued by thinking in this manner. There is no better measure for what actions of others may be hurtful or appreciated than one’s own feelings. “*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha”* calls for man to spend time analyzing his own needs — rather than guessing about others’ needs — in order to be able to provide the same for others*.*

There is one caveat though that must be expressed in this context: not all people are the same. That which does not bother one individual may be extremely painful for another. A number of commentators express this clearly: one must provide for others what others in fact need. For instance, the Peleh Yoetz (*Ahava*) writes that one’s behavior toward others should be based on others’ feelings, not one’s own. If one’s fellow want something to be done for him, even if one would not need or want it, one should do it for his fellow. The same applies in the negative. Even if one would not mind a particular statement or action, one must not do it or say it to someone who would be bothered by it.

**Two Sides of the Same Coin**

Though some commentators view the mitzva as a call to emotional closeness and others as a duty of action, it seems that the various understandings of the mitzva actually blend together to shape a person’s personality to become a giver, expressing love and simultaneously developing feelings of love.

Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, in his celebrated “*Kuntres Ha-chesed,” “*Discourse on Loving-kindness,” develops a deep understanding of Judaism’s outlook regarding the proper balance between “giving” and “taking”. While it would seem that “taking” is the favored action of many, Judaism guides us to lead a life of giving and to ensure always that we are giving more than we are taking. Contrary to common assumption, Rav Dessler explains that giving is not an outgrowth of love; giving, in fact, creates love.

Here we come to an interesting question. We see that love and giving always come together. Is the giving a consequence of the love, or is perhaps the reverse true: is the love a result of the giving?

We usually think it is love which causes giving, because we observe that a person showers gifts and favors on the one he loves. But there is another side of the argument. Giving may bring about love for the same reason that a person loves what he himself has created or nurtured: he recognizes it as a part of himself. (*Strive for Truth*, Vol. I, pp.126-127)

Rav Dessler explains that the root of the word *ahava* is “*hav,*” “give.” It is giving that creates love by affecting the mindset of the giver. In addition, he cites *Derekh Eretz Zuta* (ch. 2): “If you want to keep close to the love of your friend, make it your concern to seek his welfare.” Some of his concluding remarks reflect the connection we have posited between those opinions who view the mitzva as one of emotional love and those who view it as an obligation to give, because, as he explains (*ibid.* p. 130), the two go hand in hand.

Someone who has been granted the merit to reach this sublime level can understand the command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” in its literal sense: “As yourself: without distinction; as yourself: in actual fact.” By giving to him or yourself, you will find in your soul that you and he are indeed one; you will feel in the clearest possible manner that he really is to you “as yourself.”

**The Religious Aspect of this Love:**

As noted, the verse commanding *ahava* of others concludes, “I am God,” seemingly relating the obligation of love to a religious connection with God. Secondly, Rabbi Akiva’s terminology, referring to loving one’s fellow as a great principle of the Torah, seems to attribute religious significance to this love.

Rav David Tzvi Hoffman explains that the concluding phrase indicates that “I am God” who created all; by that right, God demands the unity of humankind, through ethical treatment, that acts as the source of people coming together.

Avnei Ezel (quoted in Nachshoni) explains Rabbi Akiva’s statement by stating that this unity depends solely on the Torah, its *mitzvot* and faith in the Creator of man.

The unity that men create by means of their own humanitarian or social ideologies cannot endure, for they have no true basis. In fact, we can all see what has befallen man as a result of democratic universalism or material socialism. When there is no “I am God” as the basis for the love of one’s fellow, love has no enduring practical basis.

The Baal Shem Tov sees another meaning in “I am God.” God’s treatment of man will mirror man’s treatment of others. One who does not treat others with respect should not expect others to do so as well.

The religious nature of this mitzva is also expressed through its significance for other *mitzvot*, as expressed by the Chinnukh (Mitzva 243):

This is a major principle of the Torah, meaning that many *mitzvot* of the Torah depend on it, for one who loves his neighbor will not steal from him, will not commit adultery with his wife, will not cheat him out of money, and will not harm him in any way. There are numerous other *mitzvot* in the Torah that depend on this, as anyone with intelligence will realize. The logic behind the mitzva is well known, for just as he does to his fellow, so will his fellow do to him, and in this way there will be peace among mankind.

**God Acts out of Love of Man**

The importance of showing love towards others is analogous to another obligation of love, loving God. The Ramchal, in his masterwork *Mesillat Yesharim,* enters into a lengthy discussion of how one expresses their love of God through *chasidut* (see lesson #16): performing actions to bring joy to God rather than for their own needs. He adds that one should develop concern for the welfare of the Jewish people and the world, and one should perform deeds on behalf of the Jewish nation. Towards this end, he expresses the following startling statement:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, loves only him who loves Israel; and to the extent that one's love for Israel grows, so does the love of the Holy One, Blessed be He, grow for him. (*Mesillat Yesharim,* ch. 19)

The Ramchal then continues that any striving *chasid* should make it his business to exert himself on behalf of the Jewish people.

These are the true shepherds of Israel, whom the Holy One, Blessed be He, greatly desires: who sacrifice themselves for His sheep; who concern themselves with their peace and well-being and exert themselves for it in every way possible; who always stand in the breach to pray for them, to nullify stern decrees and to open the gates of blessing for them. The situation is analogous to that of a father, who loves no man more than the one whom he sees to have a genuine love for his sons. Human nature attests to this. And this is the idea behind the statement concerning the high priests (*Makkot* 11a), "They should have pleaded for mercy on behalf of their generation, but they failed to do so." We also find a similar statement there, "A man was eaten by a lion at a distance of three miles from R. Yehoshua ben Levi, and Eliyahu did not appear to him for three days." We see, then, that it is the saint's duty to seek the good of his generation and to exert himself for it.

**Concluding Remarks:**

We have only begun to analyze this mitzva, which comes at the end of the list, as the climax of the interpersonal directives. With an understanding of the importance of the mitzva, there is a simultaneous acknowledgment of the difficulty involved in its practice, along with the questions that arise regarding the proper fulfillment of these laws. In the next lessons, we will discuss the balance between one’s own personal needs and their providing for others: may man be partial to himself?

1. The nature of one’s obligation to love evildoers is a complicated topic. Due to its applicability to a number of other principles, we will have to wait a little to discuss it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)