

“MEMAAYAN HACHAIM”

Mussar talks from the Masgiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

“You Shall Love Your Neighbor As Yourself” - Intensive, Inner-Focused Review Regarding the Good of Your Fellow

In Parshas Kedoshim, the Torah states: “You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the members of your people; you shall love your fellow as yourself—I am Hashem.” (Vayikra 19:18). This verse articulates a fundamental principle concerning the spiritual correction at the root of the days of Sefira, during which 24,000 students of Rebbe Akiva passed away as a result of their “not showing respect one to another”. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to learn the deeper meaning of this commandment in order that we can know how, during these days of Sefira, we can make our spiritual corrections.

The halachic midrash of Sefer Vayikra, Toras Kohanim (4:12), cites on this verse: “‘Love your neighbor as yourself’: Rebbe Akiva said, this is a great principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai disagreed; ‘This is the book of the generations of man’ (Breishis 5:1)—this is a principle even greater than the previous one.”

The Chofetz Chaim explains in his commentary on Toras Kohanim the depth of the disagreement of Rebbe Akiva and Ben Azzai.

‘This is a great principle of the Torah’: any behavior which you detest, do not do to your neighbor. ‘This is even a greater principle’: if we would only learn from the first verse, we might think concerning a person of humiliated stature that he could do likewise to his neighbor and act in a humiliating fashion toward him, for after all, he could say, ‘I’m not particular if others humiliate me!’ Therefore, the second verse (i.e. from Breishis—Trans.) ‘This is the book of the generations of man’ which also states ‘in the image of the Almighty He made him’, an even greater principle is articulated, for who, after all, do you humiliate if you act

disrespectfully to your neighbor? None other than the image of visage of Hashem.

According to this explanation, the basis of the disagreement between Rebbe Akiva and Ben Azzai is that Rebbe Akiva maintains that the parameters of the obligation of loving one’s neighbor is “kamocho”, that is, “like oneself”. In other words, one is obligated to love one’s friend to the extent one loves and is concerned about his own honor. According to Rebbe Akiva, exactly as one worries about his own honor is he to worry about he friend’s honor as if it were his own. What emerges from this analysis is that in the situation where one is NOT concerned for his own respect (eg. if he himself is a poor, lowly individual—Transl.), the Torah would not obligate him to honor his neighbor any more than he would honor himself.

The Chofetz Chaim explains that it is to this logical conclusion that Ben Azzai responds: “This is the book of the generations of man” teaches that there is another totally different Torah obligation towards your friend, one that is infinitely greater than Rebbe Akiva’s “great principle of the Torah”—none other than the obligation to honor your friend based on his being one of the “generations of man”. Ben Azzai maintains that we can recognize that our neighbor is the creation of the Almighty’s hand and carries the Creator’s own image. Thus, even in a situation where a person would not be concerned for his own honor, he still is commanded to honor his friend with all his might, and hence, this is even “a greater principle”.

We thought to provide a logical rationale for Ben Azzai’s disagreement in the following manner: the verse in Kedoshim, “love your neighbor as yourself”,

IN HONOR OF THE MARRIAGE OF
ZVI BORUCH HOLLANDER AND HODA STOLBERG
ON LAG B'OMER IN CHICAGO. MAY THEY MERIT TO BUILD A BANYAN ADEI AD!

presents an obligation difficult to follow. It is not easy to learn from one's own inner drives to recognize the needs of his friend, and one's intellect is not given to assist in this effort. On the other hand, the verse in Breishis, "This is the book of the generations of man" presents an obligation most intuitive. A person easily recognizes that the soul of each and every Jew is a portion of the Almighty Himself on High, and it is a clear logical step, of which one's intellect is quite accustomed, to understand that just as one must show honor to the Creator, one must show that same honor to that portion of Him in the soul of his friend. Indeed, one of the fundamental ways to honor Hashem is to first and foremost to recognize the value of one's own soul. It is for this reason that King David, in Psalm 30, writes: ". . . so that my Honor will sing to You", when referring to his own soul.

The Iggeres HaGr^a quotes the following: "A person is asked at the time of his final judgement, 'Did you make your friend a king over you, with gentleness?'" It would appear that we could ask, "What does this question have to do with a person's final judgement in Heaven? 'Did you make your friend a king over you' is a question specific to one's interpersonal relationships. What is its connection to a person's final judgement?"

The answer appears that the question of 'Did you make your friend a king over you, with gentleness?' far from being a specific interpersonal query, is rather a question concerning one's foundational worldview. It is as if one is being asked, "Upon what principle did you lay your personal foundation in life?" We know that each individual is created "in the image of the Almighty", and as such, he contains within himself profound elevation and spiritual greatness, to the point that the Mishna tells us that each individual is obligated to say about himself, "the world was created for my sake"! Hence, what a man is being asked at his final earthly judgement is whether he placed before himself this truth, the awareness in each of his compatriots a recognition of their lofty nature! Did he see in others, and perhaps, even just as important, in himself, the Divine image? Therefore, it is just this question which is asked at a person's judgement day, for it implies a deep overriding claim upon a person—the question of "upon which principle did you base your existence?!"

This conforms exactly with how we explained the rationale of Ben Azzai above. Based on the verse ". . . in the image of Elokim He made man" one can lay the foundation of his interpersonal relationships on a spiritual plane, readily proclaiming as "king" the Divine nature in his fellows. Such a worldview derives from the depth of his own psyche. With this explanation, we can see why Ben Azzai felt this approach was indeed, a "greater principle" than "love your neighbor as yourself". Through it, one's entire approach to his fellow takes on a profoundly different character.

Yet, we can also explain the disagreement between Rebbe Akiva and Ben Azzai in another way, one based on the approach of the sages of the Mussar Movement. In this analysis, the words of Rebbe Akiva and Ben Azzai identify 2 aspects of the obligation to love your neighbor: 1. From the point-of-view of "love your neighbor as yourself", which is limited to a reciprocal honor of one's fellow; and 2. From the point-of-view of "This is the book of the generations of man", which teaches of an obligation not only to honor, but also, and indeed, primarily, to learn the needs of one's fellow, to understand his ways and thus to recognize what he lacks, with the same precision required as if one was learning in depth a book on a difficult subject. This second obligation is significantly more difficult than to simply show honor, and thus, Ben Azzai refers to it as a "greater principle".

We learn from here a significant lesson for these days of Sefira. It is incumbent upon each and every one of us a holy obligation to fulfill, in a deep and far-reaching manner, the loftiest level of the mitzva to love our neighbor like ourselves—that is, to develop a sensitivity towards him in such a way that we learn the story of his life like "the book of the generations of man", to enter within his heart and his feelings, in order to know what his needs are and how it is possible to be of his aid. Only thus can we fulfill with the greatest precision the Torah's mitzva to honor our friend in a way that allows us to correct the sin of Sinas Chinom, wanton hatred, which is the cause for which the Beis HaMikdosh was destroyed and why the 24,000 of Rebbe Akiva's students died.

There is a well-known incident related about the

Besh"t, the Baal Shem Tov, in which he once saw 2 drunken men wallowing in the gutter. One said to his fellow, "Ivan, you don't know how much I love you!" His friend responded, in his drunken stupor, "If you really love me so much, do you know how pains me, and what I need?" From his experience, the Besh"t related, we see that true love means to know the reality of the object of one's love. We must learn from this incident, the Besh"t continued, the measure of true love and honor for one's fellow is "to enter within his psyche, to know in truth what one's friend needs. Only then, he taught, can one properly honor and indeed, to perceive his lofty nature and treat him appropriately. Again, this teaching fits with the explanation we cited above. The duty of each of us vis-à-vis our fellows is not only to simply "honor" our friends, but primarily view him as "a book of the generations of man", to analyze his honor and feelings as we would a scholarly tome.

I once heard in the name of my father-in-law's uncle, R' Yosef Engel zt"l., who quoted the Rebbe R' Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, zt"l., that one of the latter's sons was appointed over the town's Hachnasas Orchim for the Chasidim who would visit the Rebbe over Shabbos. Once, the Rebbe asked his son, "What chiddush (innovative thought) did you develop in the sugya of hachnasas orchim!?" The son was prepared for the Rebbe's query, and he answered: "I was mechadeish that when a guest arrives in town for Shabbos, I immediately, even before I provide him with food, I make his arrangements for his lodging. Only then do I see to his meals. Why? I realized that until a guest knew where he was staying, he wouldn't be relaxed and comfortable to eat his fill." From this story we can see how, to properly fulfill the mitzva between man and his friend it is necessary to delve into his psyche of the recipient, to know his heart, to know his soul. This is an example of the loftiest levels of the mitzva between man and his friend, of the mitzva of "love your neighbor as yourself."

My father, my master, of blessed memory, R' Shmuel Dovid, Walkin zt"l., wrote me once in the name of the Gaon R' Shimon Shkop zt"l., the following: "Just as it is necessary to exert oneself to the utmost in order to resolve a difficulty in the Responsum of R' Akiva Eiger zt"l., to that same extent is it necessary to toil in the

area of proper respect incumbent upon us towards our fellows!"

The Gaon R' Yitzchok Hutner zt"l. used to relate that he heard in the name of the Rebbe, R' Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, zt"l.: "It is well-known the principle in Torah thought that every creation that the Almighty created in this world has 3 things: a. a purpose, b. an essence, and c. an objective (Heb. matara, mahus, v'tafkid—Transl.) What, then, is the purpose for which a person with an unsound intellect was created (Heb. rosh akum Transl.)?" To which he answered: "So we may give the other person the benefit of the doubt!" To such an extent is the requirement of the Torah in our conduct towards our fellow!

The gemora in tractate Yevamos (62b) cites the famous incident concerning the students of Rebbe Akiva. "They all died during one period (i.e. during the days of Sefira) due to the fact that they did not properly honor one another." However, in the Midrash we find that their flaw was that they were stingy with one another! (Heb. tzar ayin, lit. narrowness of the eye. In context, the phrase refers to never seeing the good, mean-spirited, in contradistinction to tov ayin, seeing the good.) What, in fact, was the real reason behind the students of Rebbe Akiva's demise?

The Mashgiach of Ponevez, the Gaon R' Yechezkel Levenstein zt"l., once related to me his answer to this question. Indeed, the overt reason for the death of the students of Rebbe Akiva was as stated in the gemora in Yevamos, that they did not conduct themselves with proper respect towards their fellows. Yet, they hid this behavior with the excuse that their intention was pure, for the sake of heaven. That is, their behavior exhibiting a lack of honor to their fellow students was only due to their desire to help them break their poor character and uproot their desire for honor. Hence, their actions were laudatory! Yet, the Midrash reveals that their rationale hid a deeper internal flaw which their teacher, Rebbe Akiva revealed afterwards. Their true, inner sin was that within their hearts, they maintained a tzar ayin one to another, a mean-spiritedness which did not stem from a desire to break a bad character train, but rather, from a lack of inner character development and personal bias. Thus, explains R' Chazkel, there is no contradiction between the gemora and the Midrash.

However, according to the approach we've used above, we thought to answer this apparent contradiction in an extremely sharp fashion. In fact, there is no contradiction whatsoever between the gemora and the Midrash. Rather, the sin of the students of Rebbe Akiva, for which they were liable the death penalty was really one sin, with 2 aspects. In the commandment of the Torah to honor one's fellow, we have seen there are 2 parts. First, from "vahavta l'reiacha kamocho", we derive an obligation to honor on neighbor. Concerning this, we have the the gemora in Yevamos teaching that the students did not honor each other properly, treating each other with proper respect. But there is a second requirement in our conduct towards our fellow, from the verse "zeh sefer toldos adam", the obligation to delve deeply into our neighbor's psyche, to learn it like a profound text to understand the subtle nuances of respect a particular individual needs. Regarding this aspect of our obligation, the Midrash states that the students of Rebbe Akiva possessed a mean-spiritedness, a "narrowness" of perspective towards their colleagues. They did not wish to broaden their vision to be sensitive to their deepest needs, in conformance with the requirement of this second verse.

We also see just this analysis regarding the Torah's description of the growth of Moshe Rabbeinu, of blessed memory. In Shemos, (2:11) "... and Moshe grew, and he went out to his brother and saw their suffering." Rashi, on this verse, says: "He focused his eyes and his heart, to suffer together with their pain" (Heb. noson einav v'libo l'hios meitzar aleihem). It is amazing that Moshe, who had grown up throughout his youth in Egypt where he daily "saw their suffering", the oppression and difficulties the Egyptians meted out to his Jewish brothers, , only now does the Torah tell us that he "saw their suffering"! The answer is as we've discussed previously, the important principle in our interpersonal conduct: in order to truly feel our fellow's pain, to deeply understand how to respond to him, we must do as Moshe did, to "go out to his

brothers, to learn their lives like a book! As Rashi explains, Moshe focused his eyes and heart—to be able to become a leader and to properly react to the suffering of a fellow mandates a greater attention, a loftier effort to understand his situation, and only then, after he has entered his fellows heart, will he be able to appropriately respond to his need.. Thus, Moshe did not truly "see" for "feel" until he had focused his eyes and heart. Only then could the Torah state that he had "grown up" to become the leader of the Jewish people. To be a leader, Moshe had to be able to suffer their suffering.

During these days of Sefira, we must review and clarify to ourselves that the process of honoring our fellow—and this must be deeply implanted in our psyches—requires that we introspect and view with a depth of vision into his life experiences. As we've learned, only in this manner will we be able to properly honor him. Moreover, this is the deeper understanding of our obligations between man and his friend, the level which the mitzva "love your neighbor as yourself" mandates. We must be prepared to "go out to our brothers", that is, to see and feel their experiences, outside of our everyday view, and to look profoundly into their soul, their pain. It was in this way, as the Torah teaches, Moshe Rabbeinu "grew up", maturing to become fit to be the leader of the Jewish nation. Only thus will it be possible to bring forgiveness for the underlying cause of the destruction of the Beis HaMikdosh and the death of Rebbe Akiva's 24,000 students.



[Written and translated according to understanding of writers]

The shmuess for Chodesh Sivan and the Yom Tov of Shavuot will be published, please G-d, the week of Parshas Bamidbar



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