Ahavat Yisrael

The commandment of Ahavat Yisrael – loving one’s fellow Jew – is one of Judaism’s more famous values. As Rabbi Akiva proclaims, “This is a major principle of the Torah!” Yet how can we love our neighbor as we love ourselves? The Sefer HaChinuch teaches that this mitzvah entails protecting another’s property, preventing him from being harmed, speaking only well of him, respecting him, and certainly not glorifying oneself at his expense. Its fulfillment is regarded to be a pre-condition for peace, as well as the prerequisite for the national redemption of the Jewish people.

This class will explore the following questions:
~ Is it really possible to love another person as one loves oneself?
~ How does this mitzvah prevent us from hurting others?
~ What does it mean to “Love your fellow as yourself”?
~ Are we ever allowed to hate anyone?
~ How does Ahavat Yisrael ensure peace?

Class Outline

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Part B: Ahavat Yisrael as an All-encompassing Principle

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SECTION I: THE MITZVAH OF AHAVAT YISRAEL

PART A: THE COMMANDMENT TO LOVE ONE’S FELLOW JEW


Do not take revenge and do not bear a grudge against the members of your people, and you shall love your fellow as you love yourself; I am God.

לֹא-תִקֹּם וְלֹא-תִטֹּר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ אֲנִי ה' 

2. Onkelos, ibid. Loving means having compassion

And you shall have compassion for your fellow Jew as you have for yourself; I am God.

כָּמוֹךָ אֲנִי י' 

PART B: AHAVAT YISRAEL AS AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING PRINCIPLE

1. Sifra 2:12 – A fundamental Torah principle.

And you shall love your friend as you love yourself: Rabbi Akiva said, “This is a fundamental principle of the Torah.”

כָּמוֹךָ אֲנִי י' 

2. Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Shabbat 31a – Can the Torah be encapsulated in one principle?

There is a story about a gentile who came before Shamai and said to him, “I will convert if you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shamai pushed him away with the measuring stick that was in his hand. The gentile then went to Hillel, who helped him to convert. Hillel told him, “Whatever is hateful to you do not do to your friend. This is the entire Torah. The rest is its explanation. Go and study.”

אֶעֱבֶר יַעֲבֶר שֵׁם בָּא לָקוּץ אָמַר לוֹ גִּירֵנִי עַד שָׁלוֹם וְלֹא-תַעֲבִירוּ אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ אֲנִי י' בָּא לָמוּ עַד שָׁלוֹם וְלֹא-תַעֲבִירוּ אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ 

3. Kli Yakar, Vayikra 19:18 18 – Hillel taught that the Torah can be summarized by an all-encompassing principle.

It seems that this gentile was a righteous convert and was not acting in a sarcastic manner, jokingly suggesting that he be taught the entire Torah while literally standing on one foot. Rather, he must have requested a method by which he could base all of the Torah’s commandments upon one unifying principle – “one foot” – in order to avoid the lack of clarity that converts customarily experience, since they do not learn about mitzvot from their youth. Therefore, Hillel gave him a brief form of this all-encompassing principle, with which he would be able to remember all of the mitzvot.

לֹא-תִקֹּם וְלֹא-תִטֹּר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ כָּמוֹךָ אֲנִי ה'
4. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 243 – Defining the mitzvah to love each Jew: showing compassion to a person and his assets.**

To love each member of Israel with a “soul love,” i.e. that one should have compassion for a Jew and his property just as one has compassion for himself and his own property. As the verse states, “And you shall love your fellow as you love yourself” (Vayikra 19:18).

5. **Sefer HaChinuch, Ibid. – Treat a person the way you would want to be treated yourself.**

The elements included in this mitzvah follow the general principle that one should treat another person in the way he would treat himself, e.g. protecting his property, preventing him from being harmed, speaking only well of him, respecting him, and certainly not glorifying oneself at his expense. The Sages have said regarding this last point, “One who glorifies himself at the expense of his fellow has no share in the World to Come.” Whereas, one who behaves with others in a loving and peaceful manner fulfills the verse, “Israel, by whom I am glorified.”

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**SECTION II. AHAVAT YISRAEL AS A PROHIBITION AGAINST HURTING OTHERS**

**PART A: NOT HURTING OTHERS**

The Torah states the mitzvah of Ahavat Yisroel in the positive, “And you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself” whereas Hillel in Talmud Shabbat 31a teaches the principle from a negative perspective, “Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your friend.” What is Hillel coming to teach?

1. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 243 – Loving your neighbor as yourself also means not hurting others**

The Sages have said, “Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your friend.”

In the Sifri, it is stated that Rabbi Akiva said, “This is a fundamental principle in the Torah,” meaning that many commandments are related to this one, in the respect that one who loves his fellow will not steal his belongings, nor be unfaithful with his wife, nor will he defraud or insult him, nor trespass upon his property, nor cause him damage in any way. Thus, the fulfillment of many other commandments is dependent upon the fulfillment of this one.
Imagine a person sitting and cutting a piece of meat, who accidentally cuts his own hand with the knife. Would it be logical for him to hit the hand which is holding the knife in revenge?

Nevertheless, this analogy only applies to a person who is your comrade in scholarship and deeds. However, regarding an evil person who does not accept rebuke – it is a mitzvah to hate that person.

This mitzvah is understood as a negative commandment, similar to the other two mitzvot (prohibitions) in the same verse. Furthermore, “Viyahavta” does not mean bestowing equal goodness upon others.

1. **Sefer HaMitzvot HaGadol, Mitzvat Asei 9 – A broader understanding of the mitzvah views hurting others as if one actually harms oneself.**

2. **Maharsha, Chiddushei Aggadot, Shabbat 31a**

3. **PART B: USING SELF-UNDERSTANDING TO FULFILL THE MITZVAH**

   1. **Use perception and insight to ascertain what bothers your neighbor.**

   “And you shall love your fellow as you love yourself”. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said “Love” means you do not do or say to someone else something that you know is hurtful to him. Do not ask, “How do I know what bothers him? Am I a prophet?” That is why the verse includes the word “yourself,” i.e. learn from yourself, that which you know in your heart. This is what Hillel meant when he said, “Whatever is hateful to you, do not do unto your friend” – this is the whole Torah and the rest is commentary.
PART C: THE PUNISHMENT FOR HURTING OTHERS

1. **Talmud Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud), Chagigah 10a – Loss of the World to Come.**

   Rabbi Yosi ben Chanina said, “One who glorifies himself through the denigration of his fellow has no share in the World to Come.”

PART D: NOT SUBJECTING PEOPLE TO SITUATIONS IN WHICH HATRED CAN ARISE

1. **Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 41a – Taking precautions to prevent discontent.**

   Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav, “It is forbidden for a man to betroth a woman unless he has seen her.” We are concerned that if he has not seen her before the betrothal, he may discover something displeasing about her after their marriage, and become repulsed by her — and the Torah says, “And you shall love your fellow as you love yourself.”

SECTION III. THE MEANING OF “AS YOURSELF”

PART A: LITERAL EQUALITY

The general approach to this mitzvah is in line with the Sefer HaChinuch above (I.B.4-5) and the Ibn Ezra and Rambam below: Treat your neighbor in all respects just as you would want others to treat you.

1. **Ibn Ezra, Vayikra 19:18**

   In my opinion, the meaning of the verse is as it sounds, namely, that one should love his friend in the same way as himself.

2. **Rambam (Maimonides), Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot (Laws of Conduct) 6:4**

   It is a mitzvah incumbent upon every person to love each member of the Jewish people as much as he loves himself, as the verse states, “And you shall love your fellow as you love yourself.” Therefore, one must speak praise of another person and be cautious with another’s property in the same way that he desires to be honored and is cautious with his own property. However, one who glorifies himself through the denigration of his fellow has no share in the World to Come.
PART B: NON-LITERAL EQUALITY

Even though we should equally “Love our neighbor as ourselves,” there is an exception when only one person can live in a triage situation. If two people are traveling in the desert and only one person is holding a bottle of water with little hope of finding more, he does not need to share.

1. Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 62a – The statement, “And your brother shall live with you,” teaches that your life takes precedence.

Rabbi Akiva came and taught, regarding the verse, “And your brother shall live with you,” nevertheless, your life comes before his.

SECTION IV: IS HATRED EVER PERMISSIBLE?

Although we have a mitzvah to love a fellow Jew, there are circumstances when this principle does not apply.

PART A: HATING IMMORAL PEOPLE

1. Tehillim (Psalms) 139:21 – Hating those who hate God.

Shall I not hate those who hate You, God, and shall I not agitate against those who deny Your Providence?


Rabbi Shmuel bar Rabbi Yitzchak said in the name of Rav, “It is permitted to hate [someone in whom you have detected immorality], as the Torah states, ‘If you see your enemy’s donkey struggling under its burden … ’” Lest you think that the word “enemy” refers to a non-Jew, we have received a teaching that it refers to a Jew who is your enemy. But is it permitted to hate a fellow Jew, for we know that the Torah says, “You should not hate your brother in your heart”? Rather the verse must be speaking about someone whom you alone saw do an immoral act [and it is this Jew that you are permitted to hate].


Jews are commanded to love one another in a generous way. Lest we think that this applies to everyone, the verse includes the word “fellow,” meaning someone who, like you, has accepted the responsibility for the commandments and loves mitzvot as you do. However, if someone is a sinner, we are not commanded to love him; rather, we are commanded to hate him, as the
verse states, “Reverence for God is the hatred of evil,” and as another verse states, “Shall I not hate the one who hates You, God?”

PART B: THE LIMITS OF HATRED

1. Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, 272:11 – Even though there is a mitzvah to hate certain individuals, there is an overriding mitzvah to assist them in times of need.

The “enemy” of which the Torah speaks is a Jew, not a non-Jew. Nevertheless, how can a Jew hate another Jew? After all, the verse states, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart!” The Sages said that this applies in a case where you have observed someone committing a sin, and even have rebuked him, he continues to do it. In this case it is a mitzvah to hate him until he repents. However, even if he has not repented, if you find him in need of help, either with loading or unloading his burden, it is a mitzvah to help him do this and not leave him by himself, lest he delays in that place because of monetary reasons and comes into danger. The Torah is stringent regarding Jewish life, whether of a righteous or an evil person, for they are both dependent upon God and believe in the fundamentals of faith.

PART C: WHEN LOVE AND HATRED ARE SIMULTANEOUS

1. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Tanya, Ch. 32 – Loving the good, yet despising the bad in the same individual in order to bring him close to Judaism.

Regarding that which is stated in the Talmud – that it is a mitzvah to hate someone who sins – this refers to someone who is your equal in learning and deeds, and whom you have properly rebuked. But if he does not fit this description, Hillel the Elder has taught us, “Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving God’s creatures and drawing them close to Torah.” Those who are far from God’s Torah must be drawn close with strong bonds of love. Thus, the mitzvot to love and to hate co-exist. It is a mitzvah to hate the evil that exists within a person while loving the hidden spark of godliness that resides within him.
SECTION V: THE AIM OF AHAVAT YISRAEL: PEACE

PART A: AHAVAT YISRAEL BRINGS PEACE

1. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 243 – The goal of Ahavat Yisroel is to create a feeling of peace among people.

The basis for this mitzvah is well known, namely that a person will respond in kind to the way that he is treated. Fulfilling this mitzvah can bring peace to all living beings.

PART B: THE VALUE OF PEACE: HONORING OTHERS

1. Sefer Mitzvot Katan, Mitzvat Asei 8 – Showing honor to others, knowing that each person is created in the image of God.

Included in this mitzvah is the engendering of peace between a person and his friend. Ben Azzai expressed it even more strongly than Rabbi Akiva: “For man was created in the image of God,” meaning that even if a person is not particular about his own honor, he should be particular about the honor of his friend.

PART C: HATRED AS THE CAUSE OF EXILE

1. Ibid. – Baseless hatred led to the destruction of the Second Temple and caused the exile of the Jewish nation. Loving Jews will help rebuild the Temple.

King David wrote, “Seek peace and pursue it.” One must know and understand the greatness of peace, for Rabbi Yochanan explained, “The First Temple was destroyed because of the sins of idolatry, licentiousness and murder.” Why was the Second Temple destroyed, when the members of that generation were great scholars and distinguished in their charitable acts? Because there was baseless hatred amongst them. Obviously, the punishment for baseless hatred is immense, for those who committed the three cardinal sins of the Torah were redeemed after only seventy years of exile, while those whose only flaw was baseless hatred have not yet been redeemed, and the time of their redemption is not known.

[The Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. The Diaspora began c.138 C.E.]
PART D: ALL JEWS ARE ONE

1. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Tanya, Ch. 32 – All Jews are connected to one another through our Divine souls.

A person who recognizes the loftiness of the soul, as contrasted to the lowliness of the body, can easily fulfill the mitzvah of loving one's fellow. All Jews are interconnected and all are children of One Father, and therefore we are called brothers, since each person's soul has its root within God, and one is only divided from the other in the physical sense. On the other hand, one who gives precedence to the physical will not be able to truly fulfill this mitzvah in an unconditional way, as required. That is why Hillel described this mitzvah as the most fundamental commandment in the Torah, while the rest is commentary. For the foundation of the service of God is to elevate one's soul to its root and thereby draw down spiritual sustenance for the Jewish people, which is not possible to do if we are divided.