

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Acharei Kedoshim

Love Thyself

This week's double parsha contains one of the most famous verses in the entire Torah. , וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ, "You shall love your friend as yourself (Leviticus 19:18)." The great sage Rabbi Akiva taught that this verse is one of the most important principles of the Torah. Let us explore this mitzvah, directive, and its lessons.

Non-ideal Situation

The Talmud (Bava Metzia 62a) tells us of a frightening theoretical scenario. Two people are traveling in a desolate desert and they ran out of water. One of them has a small portion of water left, however, it is not sufficient for both of them to drink and gain nourishment. There is only enough water for one person to drink and enable him to reach the closest city safely. If they split the water, they will both die. What should one do? This is a disturbing quandary and one certainly hopes never to be faced with this type of ethical dilemma. One opinion in the Talmud states that the owner of the water should split it between the two of them rather than watch his friend die on his account (even though this action dictates that both of them will probably not make it)! Another opinion argues and says that he must NOT share it, rather he must keep the water all for himself, as the Torah dictates: , קוֹדְמִים חַיִּיךָ "your own safety takes precedence!" One of these two opinions is that of our Rabbi Akiva, which one do you think he opted for?

Rabbi Akiva's Opinion

Astonishingly, Rabbi Akiva is the latter opinion that dictates that one must care for himself first! How is this not a blatant contradiction to the dictum of "love your neighbor as yourself?" How can we reconcile Rabbi Akiva's two statements? The explanation is as follows. The two statements of Rabbi Akiva are far from contradictory; in fact they both develop upon one another!



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continued ...

How often do we meet someone who loves to care for and do kindness for others. He will do anything to assist someone in need. Yet when it comes to his own life he is not happy or fulfilled and is rather miserable! Why does this happen and how could it be avoided?

The answer is that he knows how to properly treat everyone, well almost everyone, except for one person.... himself! The foundation for proper love for your friend is proper treatment of yourself. The standard for how to love your friend is ,*כמוך* like yourself! Thus, the prerequisite for loving your friend is treating yourself right first.

Balance

G-d teaches man that: your life is most important, you must fend for your own self first. After you have taken care of yourself, after you have filled yourself up with acts of self-kindness and care from the inside, then you allow this to spill forth, overflowing onto everyone else as well. If this prerequisite of self-care is omitted and one negates his needs to please others, then he will quickly find himself used and spent with nothing else left to give others nor himself.

Indeed, Rabbi Akiva entrusts us with the ever-important directive of taking care of our fellow people. However, he teaches us that the proper way to carry this out is by beginning with care of our own selves first. This way, our kindness will spill forth and be shared healthily with the maximum benefactors receiving it! May we all succeed in fulfilling this noble ideal!

Shabbat Shalom!

