

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Acharei Mot

Among the many mitzvot listed in this week's parsha, the Torah says (Leviticus 19:18) "You should love your friend as yourself." Rashi there quotes from the midrash that Rabbi Akiva commented, "this is a great general principle in the Torah." Similarly, the Talmud (Shabbat 31a) records Hillel told a prospective convert that all of the Torah expands on the general idea, "whatever you would dislike for someone to do to you, do not do to your friend."

But how does one actively fulfill the mitzva of loving a fellow Jew? Maimonides explains one fulfills this mitzvah by providing for another person's needs and wants, just as he would care about his own needs and wants. He gives examples of visiting the sick, bringing joy to a bride and groom, and protecting another person's money and belongings from loss or theft.

Another rabbi in the midrash argues that the verse "Shema Yisrael" teaches us a general principle that serves as a foundation for the Torah. A third rabbi says the description of the daily sacrifices in the morning and evening serves as a great principle upon which the Torah depends. We can understand that "Shema Yisrael" serves as a foundation for all of the Torah, because without belief in G-d, the whole Torah would have very little relevance. We also can understand the daily sacrifices as foundations for all of Torah, because G-d desires consistent mitzva observance. But how does the mitzva of loving a fellow Jew serve as the basis for all of Torah?

The Sefer Hachinuch addresses this by pointing out that many mitzvot depend on one's sensitivity for others. For example, a person will not steal, commit adultery, or verbally abuse another person if he really loves him. The mitzvah of loving a fellow Jew impacts the way a person conducts himself in all of his interpersonal relationships. But this explanation seems somewhat difficult, because Rabbi Akiva says loving a fellow Jew serves as a general foundation for all of Torah. How does loving another person facilitate the observance of the mitzvot bein adam la'makom, the commandments between man and G-d?

To address this question, Rashi (Shabbat 31a) suggests the "friend" in the verse, "Love your friend," really refers metaphorically to G-d. If so, the verse means that you should not violate the words of G-d, just as you would not like your friend to violate your wishes. Rashi cites a verse in Proverbs (27:10) as a precedent that King Solomon referred to G-d as a "rei'a" (friend), so the same word in our verse in Leviticus can also be a reference to G-d.

However, according to this explanation, the command to love one's "friend" does not connect well to the instruction earlier in the very same verse (Leviticus 19:18). The verse starts with the command to not take revenge against others people, and the simple reading of the verse is that the command to love refers to the same people mentioned earlier in the verse and not to G-d.



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The Baal Shem Tov's comments on the end of this verse can solve our problem. He explained that the verse ends with the words "I am G-d" because opening one's heart to another person really enables one to develop a relationship with G-d. Since one must break out of his own shell in order to care about others and see their needs, helping others enables him to relate better to G-d. Loving others is the pathway through which one comes to know G-d. If so, loving others also serves as the basis for the mitzvot between man and G-d, and most appropriately can be called a "great general principle in the Torah."

Although loving other Jews is a central mitzvah throughout the day, the Arizal surprisingly says that before one starts to pray in the beginning of the day, he should accept upon himself the mitzvah of loving fellow Jews. He says he should think specifically about the people he knows personally in his community. He should consider himself one limb of a whole body, whose other limbs are the other Jews. If he loves other Jews and prays on their behalf, then his prayer will rise up to the heavens not as the prayer of an individual, but as a prayer joined together with the collective prayers of the community of Israel. This will give the prayer a power that will make it more favorable to G-d.

Arizal adds that if someone knows that his friend suffers from an illness, a difficult issue in his family, or any trouble, he should pray on behalf of that person. Additionally, if he knows that his friend struggles with something he himself struggles, he should pray simultaneously on behalf of himself and his friend.

We see from the Arizal's suggestion that the mitzvah of loving another person does not only include giving money to the needy, visiting the sick, or giving advice to the bewildered. It also includes praying privately for others, a kindness that the other person may never know his friend did for him. Sometimes a person is so busy working, or traveling on a business trip, that he can go a whole day without personal contact with a community. Arizal teaches that every day he can fulfill the mitzvah of loving another Jew, a foundational mitzvah in the Torah, simply by praying for him.

Shabbat Shalom!

