

Loving Your Fellow As Yourself:
Five Levels of Love

Leviticus 19:18

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ...

...you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Maimonides Positive Commandment #206

The 206th *mitzvah* is that we are commanded to love each other as we love ourselves. I should have mercy for and love my brother as faithfully as I love and have mercy for myself. This applies to his financial and physical state, and whatever he has or desires. What I want for myself I should want for him, and whatever I do not want for myself or my friends, I should not want for him. The source of this commandment is G-d's statement, "You must love your neighbor as [you love] yourself."

Hillel and Rabbi Akiva

The Talmud records the following story: a potential convert came to Hillel and said, "Teach me the entire Torah while standing on one foot." Hillel responded, "That which you despise, do not do unto your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary. Now go and learn."

Years later, Rabbi Akiva famously stated, "You shall love your fellow as yourself"; this is a great principle in Torah."

Since Hillel had already taught that loving your fellow is the "whole Torah," what did Rabbi Akiva add by saying this?

Five Levels of Love

1. The first level of love is the one described by Hillel – to refrain from doing anything negative to your fellow. Do not steal his money, do not gossip about her, etc. This is love via the negative commandments.

2. The second level of love is described by Rabbi Akiva. He teaches that loving your fellow as yourself

means not just to refrain from harming him, but to do for him as you would want done for you – caring for his property, doing business honestly with him, etc. However, even according to Rabbi Akiva, you are still at the level of loving your fellow *like* yourself, but not exactly *as* yourself. You are still putting yourself first.

3. The third level is embodied in the approach of the Alter Rebbe - *c'mocha mamesh* – your fellow is literally you. The Alter Rebbe writes in Chapter 32 of Tanya that we are all brothers one with each other – we all came from the giant soul of Adam, we all have one Father in Heaven. When we love our fellow, we are actually loving ourselves because we are truly one with him.

A story exemplifies this: the Russian government at one point put a large tax on Jewish whiskey and vodka, making it nearly impossible for the Jewish innkeepers to earn their living. Three chassidim went to the Alter Rebbe to ask his help and advice on the situation. The Alter Rebbe told them, “When G-d gives a blessing from above, love and brotherhood are the vessels for this blessing. When the kohanim bless the Jews, they bless them with love. There are two interpretations of this. One is that blessing should come down with love and ease. The second is that they bless the Jews that they should love one another.” The Alter Rebbe then led his chassidim into the shul and got up onto the bimah. “G-d sustains us with kindness,” he exclaimed, “not with brewhouses!”

What gives us our livelihood is G-d's kindness. If the Jews will love and care for one another, they're going to be blessed with all they need. If there is divisiveness, G-d forbid, there are holes in the vessel, and we lack blessing. That year, the Jews in Russia witnessed a great economic blessing.

4. The fourth level is to actively seek out your fellow to love. The Friediker Rebbe gave over a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev: in Pirkei Avos, it is taught, “Any Torah [learned] that is not accompanied by work, ultimately will be nullified.” The Baal Shem Tov says that “work” means having a preoccupation with loving your fellow as yourself. If you learn Torah but you do not love your fellow, you ultimately will have no Torah.

On this, the Rebbe asks, “What is the novelty that you must study with love for your fellow? We already know this from the Gemara that says, 'When a poor man [one lacking knowledge] asks a rich man [a scholar] a question in Torah, and the rich man answers, G-d enlightens both their eyes. If he does not answer, G-d takes the knowledge from the rich man and gives it to the poor man.’”

The answer is that the meaning of 'work' is to go into the streets and seek out other Jews to help, not wait for them to come to you! The Baal Shem Tov teaches that a soul may descend into this world for 70 or 80 years just to do a favor for his fellow. This teaching was a paradigm shift for Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev to seek out Jews who needed help.

5. The fifth level is to love another Jew with no strings attached. In 1976, the Rebbe came out with his *Ahavas Yisroel* (Loving Your Fellow) mitzvah campaign. The Rebbe taught that to truly fulfill the mitzvah of loving your fellow, you must love him altruistically. If you have something to offer, and your fellow needs something, do not wait for them to ask – go to them and help. And do not do this because you will be blessed or rewarded. Do it purely out of love. What is the innovation here? When your fellow sees your actions of love, he/she will be inspired by you!

A few years later, in 1983, the Rebbe coined a new term – *achdus Yisroel*, to literally become one with your fellow Jew. The Rebbe explained we are in exile because of unwarranted hatred. To counter that, we need unconditional love. When we achieve unconditional love for our fellow, we will remove the cause (hatred), which will remove the effect (exile), and automatically Moshiach will come! How is it even possible, the Rebbe asks, that a Jew should hate another Jew, or fight with another Jew, or that divisiveness should exist amongst us? How can you hate your fellow when you are one? Because “G-d causes man to trip” – every descent is for the sake of a greater ascent. Our separation will bring about a greater oneness than ever before: *Achdus Yisroel*.

How did the Rebbe develop this idea? It is found in a parable in the Jerusalem Talmud, in Tractate Nedarim: a person is cutting a piece of meat and accidentally cuts his finger. Should the hand that is cut now retaliate against the hand that injured it? Ludicrous! So, too, it is with the Jewish people – we are each a limb of the same body. This is the meaning of loving your fellow as yourself, that we are truly one! We are not just brothers, but truly limbs of one being.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai states, “I have the power (because of my merits) to exonerate the entire world from judgment (punishment)!” The Rebbe asks, how can the Rabbi Shimon exonerate someone? How would his merits help a person that was sentenced to prison? The answer is because Rabbi Shimon had the ability to figuratively become one with his fellow. Once he became one with that person, he (Rabbi Shimon) was no longer guilty.

But who are we to compare ourselves to Rabbi Shimon? In the 1980s, the Rebbe said that this is the responsibility of every Jew – to become one with our fellow! We know that a *tzaddik* is similar to G-d – just like G-d does not give us a mission we cannot complete, neither does a *tzaddik*. The Rebbe charged us with *achdus Yisroel*, so we can certainly achieve it.

Every morning before prayer, some communities have a custom to say, “Behold, I take upon myself the positive mitzvah of loving your fellow like yourself.” The Rebbe said that even though as a general rule, we never ask communities to change their customs, the communities that do not make this statement before prayer should begin to do so. (1) This will bring peace to the Jews, which in turn will bring peace to the world. (2) It will strengthen the unity of the Jewish people and bring the Redemption.

In 1984, the Rebbe established that all men, women, and children should learn a portion of Rambam each day. The Rebbe says that if every Jew studies Rambam, this will create *achdus Yisroel*. The Alter Rebbe tells us in Tanya that when a Jew studies Torah, this causes a wondrous unity that is incomparable to any other unity. Similarly, we can say when two people study, their two minds wrap around each other and become one. If we all learn the same Rambam together, we all will become one in thought, speech, and action. Why Rambam? Because he unified the entire Torah by writing out all laws, including those that only apply in Temple times. Furthermore, the way you become one with another is by revealing the fifth level of the soul, the *yechida*. Each *yechida* contains a spark of Moshiach, so by achieving oneness, we reveal Moshiach in the world. May we truly unite in love with our fellow, thereby meriting the coming of Moshiach immediately!