

Love Your Neighbor As Yourself

Introduction

This topic has not yet undergone editorial review

What Does Loving Another Entail?

In Sifra Vayikra 19:18, Rabbi Akiva famously notes that the dictum "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" is "a very important rule in Torah". What, though, is being commanded in this law? At first glance the verse appears somewhat straightforward, but in fact each of the three words of the phrase is open to interpretation:

- **What is included in "וְאָהַבְתָּ"?** Is the Torah enjoining that one feel an emotion or that one perform a set of actions? If the former, is this a viable expectation? Is love even subject to one's will? Though it is fair to expect a person to act in a certain way to another being, is it reasonable to demand of someone to feel a certain way? On the other hand, if the Torah is, instead, dictating certain actions, which would constitute fulfillment of the mitzvah?
- **Who constitutes "רֵעִי"?** Is the law all inclusive, mandating that we love everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, or might it be more limited, including only fellow Israelites? What if the other is not a good person, or simply a stranger? Must we "love" them too?
- **"As yourself"** – Given a conflict of interest between one's self and the other, who comes first? Does the addition of the word "כְּמוֹךָ" to the command to love the other imply that it is wrong to prioritize one's own needs, and that our love for the other should be equal to our love for our self?

Additional Questions

- **"וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִי" vs. "וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת"** – The verb "אהב" is normally connected to its object via the preposition "את" rather than "ל". What is the significance of the somewhat unique formulation of our verse?
- **Context** – The command directly follows the prohibitions against taking revenge and bearing grudges, and immediately precedes the words "אני ה'". How might this context shed light of the nature of the law?
- **Comparable laws** – How do other commandments involving love of another, such as the directives to love Hashem (Devarim 6:5) or to love a foreigner (Vayikra 19:34 and Devarim 10:19), compare to the obligation to love our neighbor? Does "love" have a consistent meaning in each of these instances?

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Exegetical Approaches

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Actions: Doing for the Other

Loving another as one's self entails treating the other as we would want to be treated.

SOURCES: Hillel in Bavli Shabbat, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Rambam, Sefer HaChinukh, Ralbag, HaKetav VeHaKabbalah, R. D"Z Hoffmann

"וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ" vs. "וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת רֵעֲךָ" – R. D"Z Hoffmann asserts that the unique formulation "וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ" teaches that the law revolves around actions rather than emotions, as the love discussed is something you do "to" the other.

Can you command an emotion? The idea that one cannot, at will, simply feel the emotion of love for any stranger (and definitely not a degree of love which is equal to love felt for one's self) is one of the motivations for this approach. R. D"Z Hoffmann notes that though one cannot be expected to love any fellow, one *can* be commanded to do acts of loving kindness to anyone, and thus this is the essence of the command.

"כְּמוֹךָ" – Who comes first? According to this position the word "כְּמוֹךָ" teaches only that you should treat another as you would want to be treated. Commentators debate whether the command obligates one to do for the other even if doing so conflicts with one's own self interest:

- Ralbag asserts that one must always prioritize one's self. Thus, for example, no one is expected to help another in his work at the expense of his own.
- Shadal questions such an outlook, noting that any act done for the other will conflict with doing for the self. Giving from your money or time to another, of necessity means lacking it for yourself. The Torah teaches, that even so, one must do for the other.

Context – The immediate context of our command is the prohibition against taking revenge and bearing a grudge. This approach might suggest that the two are juxtaposed because they are in essence flip-sides of the same idea. Taking revenge entails harming another as they harmed you. Torah teaches not to do that, but to instead treat the other as you wish he'd treat you.

What actions are included

- These commentators point to a wide range of deeds which are included in the mitzvah, from acts of kindness such as visiting the sick, inviting guests, comforting mourners (Rambam) to simple courtesy such as greeting one another with a pleasant demeanor, giving one the benefit of the doubt, or acting respectfully (HaKetav VeHaKabbalah).
- Hillel in Bavli Shabbat formulates the rule in the negative, "do not do to the other what you would not want them to do to you" and Sefer HaChinkuh notes, that as such, it also includes many prohibitions mentioned elsewhere in Torah such as: do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not physically or verbally damage another and the like.

"לְרֵעֲךָ" – who is included? These commentators differ regarding who is included in the word "לְרֵעֲךָ":

- **All** – R. D"Z Hoffmann suggests that the command applies to all, as per the simple understanding of the word "רע" which is used to refer to any fellow.
- **Fellow Israelites** – Sefer HaChinukh limits the law to fellow Israelites. This might be supported by the context, as the surrounding mitzvot relate to "אחיך" and "בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ", terms which focus on the nation of Israel.
- **God fearing people** – R"Y Bekhor Shor learns from the word "כמוך" that one is only obligated to love another who is "like you in fear of God".

Similar mitzvot – According to these commentators the various laws involving "love" are not all fulfilled in the same manner. Some are action oriented, while others involve emotions. According to R. D"Z Hoffmann the distinction relates to whether the commanded is formulated as "ואהבת את" or "ואהבת ל".



Emotion: Generosity of Spirit

The verse commands that we should want for the other what we would want for ourselves.

SOURCES: Ibn Ezra, Ramban

"וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת רֵעִי" vs. "אָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִי" – Ibn Ezra suggests that the unique formulation "לְרֵעִי" implies that the command obligates that one should love the good that belongs (ל) to another fellow, rather than obligating one to love the fellow himself.

Can you command an emotion? According to these commentators, despite the fact that verse does not speak of feeling love, it nonetheless still mandates control over one's emotions. Ramban suggests that our verse is, in effect, the positive formulation of the prohibition against jealousy. It mandates that instead of feeling jealous, one be happy for the other and for the things he has.

"כְּמוֹךְ" – who comes first? Ramban suggests that when the Torah uses the formulation "כְּמוֹךְ", this is simply an exaggeration. Hashem does not really expect one to love the other as he loves himself. Rather, Torah is more simply teaching that one should want for the other what he wants for himself, and not wish that only certain goods befall his neighbor.

Context – Ibn Ezra notes that the verse's conclusion "אֲנִי יְיָ" provides the reason behind the obligation: "I, one God, created all of you", and as such, one should never think he deserves more than his neighbor. After all, everything ultimately belongs to God and all were created equally by Him.

"לְרֵעִי" – who is included? Neither Ibn Ezra nor Ramban address this question.

Yonatan as a model to emulate – Ramban points to Yonatan's love for David as a model for proper fulfillment of the mitzvah. Yonatan held no jealousy for David and was happy for David to be king over Israel.



Emotions and Actions

The law demands that one should both feel love for one's neighbor and express that love through actions.

SOURCES: perhaps Rambam, Moses Mendelssohn

Can you command an emotion? M. Mendelssohn notes that Hashem does expect one to control internal feelings, as seen by the fact that several other laws as well obligate emotions (including the emotion of love). For example, we are commanded to love Hashem, love the foreigner, not to be jealous, not to bear a grudge and the like.

"ואהבת את רעך" vs. "אהבת לרעך" – This position does not differentiate between the two formulations, and might suggest, as an opinion brought by Ibn Ezra does, that the "ל" is simply superfluous or takes the place of the word "את".

"כמוך" – This approach can explain the import of this word in several ways:

- **Equate love of other and self** – Though Rambam is not explicit, he appears to take the verse at face value, and implies that one must indeed love the other just as one loves one self.
- **Equating quality, not quantity** – M. Mendelssohn, in contrast, suggests that the verse intends to equate the "quality" but not the "quantity" of love. Thus, one is obligated to love another the in the way that one loves one's self (as opposed to the way one might love a material object, for instance), but not to the same degree. In cases of conflict between loving another and loving one's self, one may put one's self first.
- **Reasoning behind the command** – This position could have also suggested, as does R. N"H Wessely that the word "כמוך" says nothing about how one fulfills the obligation, but instead provides the reasoning behind it. You must love the other because he is a human, created in God's image, just like you.

Context – This approach sees verses 17-18 as a pair, with the positive command to love one's neighbor being the inverse of the prohibition against hating the other.