

Rav Kook Torah

by Rabbi

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Love Your Neighbor

“Do not take revenge nor bear a grudge against anyone among your people; you must love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Lev. 19:18).

Is this mitzva of Ahavat Yisrael realistic?
Is it possible to truly love another person as much as we love ourselves?

Attaining Ahavat Yisrael

Rav Kook stressed the importance of loving the Jewish people. In his magnum opus *Orot HaKodesh*, Rav Kook gave practical advice on how to achieve this love.

Love for the Jewish people does not start from the heart, but from the head. To truly love and understand the Jewish people – each individual Jew and the nation as a whole – requires a wisdom that is both insightful and multifaceted. This intellectual inquiry is an important discipline of Torah study.

Loving others does not mean indifference to baseness and moral decline. Our goal is to awaken knowledge and morality, integrity, and refinement; to clearly mark the purpose of life, its purity and holiness. Even our acts of loving-kindness should be based on a hidden *Gevura*, an inner outrage at the world’s – and thus our own – spiritual failures.

If we take note of others’ positive traits, we will come to love them with an inner affection. This is not a form of insincere flattery, nor does it mean white-washing their faults and foibles. But by concentrating on their positive characteristics – and every person has a good side – the negative aspects become less significant.

This method provides an additional benefit. The Sages cautioned against joining with the wicked and exposing oneself to their negative influence. But if we connect to their positive traits, then this contact will not endanger our own moral and spiritual purity.

We can attain a high level of love for Israel by deepening our awareness of the inner ties that bind together all the souls of the Jewish people, throughout all the generations. In the following revealing passage, Rav Kook expressed his own profound sense of connection with and love for every Jewish soul:

“Listen to me, my people! I speak to you from my soul, from within my innermost soul. I call out to you from the living connection by which I am bound to all of you, and by which all of you are bound to me. I feel this more deeply than any other feeling: that only you – all of you, all of your souls, throughout all of your generations – you alone are the meaning of my life. In you I live. In the aggregation of all of you, my life has that content that is called ‘life’. Without you, I have nothing. All hopes, all aspirations, all

purpose in life, all that I find inside myself – these are only when I am with you. I need to connect with all of your souls. I must love you with a boundless love...

Each one of you, each individual soul from the aggregation of all of you, is a great spark from the torch of infinite light, which enlightens my existence. You give meaning to life and work, to Torah and prayer, to song and hope. It is through the conduit of your being that I sense everything and love everything.” (Shemona Kevatzim, vol. I, sec. 163)

Love for Every Jew

For Rav Kook, Ahavat Yisrael was not just theoretical. Stories abound of his extraordinary love for other Jews, even those who were intensely antagonistic to his ways and beliefs. Below is one such story, from the period that Rav Kook served as chief rabbi of pre-state Israel.

A vocal group of ultra-Orthodox Jerusalemites vociferously opposed Rav Kook due to his positive attitude towards secular Zionists. They would frequently post in the streets of Jerusalem broadsheets that denounced the Chief Rabbi and discrediting his authority.

One day Rav Kook returned from a brit mila ceremony in Jerusalem’s Old City, accompanied by dozens of students. Suddenly a small group of hotheaded extremists attacked the rabbi, shower-

ing him with waste water. The chief rabbi was completely drenched by the filthy water. Emotions soared and tempers flared.

By the time Rav Kook had arrived home, news of the attack had spread throughout the city. Prominent citizens arrived to express their repugnance at the shameful incident. One of the visitors was the legal counsel of British Mandate. The attorney advised Rav Kook to press charges against the hooligans, and he promised that they would be promptly deported from the country.

The legal counsel was astounded by Rav Kook’s response.

“I have no interest in court cases”, replied the Rav. “Despite what they did to me, I love them. I am ready to kiss them, so great is my love! I burn with love for every Jew.”

These were Rav Kook’s thoughts, shortly after this deeply humiliating act.

Rav Kook would say:

“There is no such thing as Ahavat Chinam – groundless love. Why groundless? He is a Jew, and I am obligated to love and respect him. There is only Sinat Chinam – hate without reason. But Ahavat Chinam? Never!”

*Adapted from Orot HaKodesh vol. III, pp. 324-334;
Malachim K’vnei Adam, pp. 262, 483-485*