

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

K'doshim 5781

Most of us are aware of Rabbi Akiva's famous declaration that "'Loving your fellow as yourself' (19:18) is a great rule of the Torah" (Sifra 4:12). The implication of this statement is that this verse somehow encapsulates the very essence of the Torah itself. What, however, is less well-known is that according to the Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 24:7), Rabbi Akiva was responding to his student, Ben Azzai's assertion, that it is the verse, "...on the day Gd created man, He made him in the likeness of Gd" (B'reishit 5:1), that is the true "great principle of the Torah." How are we to understand this difference of opinion?

Ben Azzai was certainly aware of his great rebbe's opinion as to which verse qualifies as the "great principle". However, what may have disturbed him was this: What happens if you do not like yourself? That is, if you allow yourself to be embarrassed and treated poorly by others, should you now be permitted to treat others in the same fashion? Ben Azzai therefore chooses a different verse. In response, quite cleverly, Rabbi Akiva (with Rav Tanhuma's interpretation) employs Ben Azzai's very verse to neutralize the objection. Indeed, love your fellow as yourself; and should you harbor terrible feelings of low esteem, you may not use that inferiority complex

to excuse your mistreatment of others. Why not? Because both you and he are created in the image of Gd, and by demeaning either yourself or your fellow, you are, in effect, humiliating and disparaging Gd, Himself! One might even add that this is exactly what the Torah meant when it concluded the "love your fellow" verse with the expression, "I am HaShem." How dare anyone think of him/herself as a worthless, ne'er do well human being when our Biblical tradition denominates us - nay, blesses us - as being "a little lower than the angels" (T'hilim 8:6).

Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l, offers a powerful antidote to this psychological illness of inferiority by enjoining us to cultivating a genuine sense of K'dusha, holiness. The Parsha of K'doshim opens (19:2) with the famous charge of K'DOSHIM TIHYU, Be Holy. That HaShem has so commanded us clearly implies that we each have the capacity to be just that - holy! In fact, Rav Moshe derives from this religious truth that the blessing recited prior to the performance of a mitzva - ASHER KID'SHANU B'MITZVOTAV, Who has sanctified us through His commandments - should not be misunderstood as meaning that the mitzvot are the source of sanctity. Rather, it is precisely because of our innate potential for k'dusha that enables us to fulfill Gd's commandments (Darash Moshe, Vol.1, p. 154). And when those mitzvot are performed, our inner k'dusha is

actualized and radiates out through our entire personality.

If, then, our ability to truly love our fellow is predicated upon our estimation of our own self-worth, and that self-esteem is somehow tethered to our being holy, how then may we develop and nurture such a sanctified life-style?

The answer, naïve though it may sound, is to commit to an aspiration, as Rav Aharon Lichtenstein once put it; that is, to pattern one's everyday behavior so that it partakes of the holiness of the Creator. What this means is that in addition to being scrupulously ethical, in order to rise to the status of a sanctified human being, one must aspire for more. And it is here that the combined comments of Rashi and Ramban (19:2) are so very relevant.

Rashi (ad loc), quoting the Midrash (Sifra, K'doshim 1:1) maintains that k'dusha means separateness which when applied to man means refraining - desisting - from sin, principally from sexual immorality. Ramban (ad loc) broadens the mandate of k'dusha to include abstaining from all material excess and hedonistic indulgences even be they morally permissible. The commandment requires that we practice moderation and abstemiousness in all our daily affairs. His famous statement is this assertion: that the antipodal of a holy person is one who is a NAVAL BIRSHUT HATORAH, a degenerate person who, while technically observant

of all 613 mitzvos, is nevertheless a knave, a lowlife.

Thus, to be holy means that, beyond living an ethically bounded life, one must aspire to a dignified and noble existence as well. In such a refined, sacred life-style, our demeanor is kind and modest; our speech is decorous and the tone of our voice is calm. Patience and generosity hallmark our character. An aura of innocence and goodness bathes our activities with meaning and inspires us toward accomplishment and purpose. In a word, to be holy means to vanquish our insatiable, voluptuous physical desires, and in that very act of "defeat by our own hand" - in Rav Soloveitchik's arresting phrase - we can rise to a life of hallowed greatness and sanctity!

The late and much-lamented Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski often commented that at the root of man's sinful delinquencies and addictions is his belief that he is a nothing, a non-entity, a zero. His dismal lack of self-esteem allows him to surrender to a gloomy existence where "if I don't matter, then nothing and no one else really matters!" In such an existential void, the mandate to "love your fellow as yourself" elicits only a sarcastic, contemptuous smirk, if that.

A young fellow, crushed by a bitter divorce, was bemoaning his sorry state to a rabbinic friend of much prominence. His feeling of having been betrayed, rejected and deserted made him feel empty and worthless. To which his

distinguished friend sharply replied in rebuke: "If I thought you were piece of garbage, do you really think I'd be spending so much time with you?!" And like a verbal slap in the face, in his friend's empathic response of stern affirmation of his true self, the beaten-down man suddenly wakes up to the bright reality of his own unique and very special precious identity.

The message is clear: aspire to be holy, aspire to emulate Gd's holiness; for when you do - in the elevation and purging of your animality by courageous acts of "self-defeat" - you will slowly emerge as a righteous and noble being who will love and be loved by all.

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But what if our egos could teach us how to love? This is not as absurd as it sounds. Rav Shimon Shkop, in the introduction to his Sha'arei Yosher, discusses our problem: We have a God-given instinct for self-love, and at the same time are commanded to love others. How can we reconcile these diametrically opposed demands? His solution is brilliant. He says that the commandment to love others is a command to redefine who we are. He writes that: The entire "I" of a coarse and lowly person is restricted only to his substance and body. Above him is someone who feels that his "I" is a synthesis of body and soul. And above him is someone who can include in his "I" all of his household and family. Someone

who walks according to the way of the Torah, his "I" includes the whole Jewish people... And there are more levels in this of a person who is whole, who can connect his soul to feel that all of the world and worlds are his "I", and he himself is only one small limb in all of creation. Then, his self-love helps him love ... all of creation.

This is how a selfish person can learn how to love; by seeing themselves as interconnected with everyone around them. For many of us, we experience this feeling with family. Rav Shimon Shkop reminds us that we can take this idea further, and embrace an even larger definition of what "I" means; we can learn to identify ourselves completely with the Jewish people, all of humanity, and even all living beings. This oceanic feeling that we are a part of a larger whole allows us to redefine ourselves, and redefine our self-interest. 🙌