

DO NOT HATE PART 3

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

Western society today places great emphasis on our rights to live life as we wish as long as it does not damage others. An outgrowth of this attitude is the concept of moral relativism; proponents of this concept argue that there is no objective right or wrong and consequently we do not have the right to judge others because of their viewpoint or lifestyle. The Torah strongly rejects this concept and argues that there is an absolute morality and there is a 'right' and 'wrong' way to live one's life ¹. Such an attitude can seem antithetical to the command that we should not hate our fellow man; indeed history has proven that ideological disagreements have been the cause of great hatred. How does Judaism reconcile this apparent dichotomy?

There is a very important passage in the Talmud that can help us more accurately understand the Torah's attitude in these areas. The Talmud states that the Second Temple was destroyed because of 'Baseless Hatred'. Amongst the Jewish people there were many different groups each espousing a different ideology. Their differences of opinion led to great strife and eventually a Civil War, which was a key stage in the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile of the Jewish people. The Talmud describes the disagreements as being 'baseless', meaning that they had no reason for them ². This description is difficult to understand - after all each group did have reasons to hate each other - they believed that the ideology of their rivals was not only wrong but positively dangerous. Accordingly, how can the Talmud describe this hatred as baseless?!

The answer is that a person can disagree with someone else BUT such disagreement is not a valid cause of hatred - the Jews in the time of the Temple destruction did have reasons for disagreeing with each other BUT they were not reasons that justified hatred - consequently the Talmud describes the hatred as 'baseless' because it did not have a legitimate basis.

We can now understand how the Torah can preach absolute morality and simultaneously forbid hatred. We believe that there is a right and wrong and that we must strive to live our lives following the 'right' path. And if a person acts in a manner that does not fit with the Torah's conception of morality then his behavior can be described as inappropriate and even immoral. However this does not mean that we have license to hate him - we can disagree with his actions and at the same time love his essence. With this understanding, the Torah's exhortation to avoid hatred takes on a new dimension - even if we have an ideological disagreement with our fellow we need not turn it into a personal battle.

¹ In truth few people are willing to follow the moral relativist line to its logical endpoint - that one has no right to criticize ANY ideology even if it 'seems' morally repugnant to us, consequently, such acts as murder, thievery, and anti-Semitism become subjective acts that cannot be judged as being evil simply because there is no objective evil.

² Yoma, 9b.

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