

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR PART 1

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

"Do not take revenge, do not bear a grudge against a member of your people, love thy neighbor like yourself."¹

"Love thy neighbor" - is there any commandment more well-known than this? Yet we must ask ourselves what this requires on an individual level? Understood literally this would imply that we must have the same emotional feelings of love to others that we naturally feel for ourselves. Yet is this really possible? We all feel a very strong love for ourselves and it is surely impossible to love other people to the same extent.

A more satisfactory explanation of this commandment is that it obligates us to strive to desire that our friend succeeds in life. This attitude is not based on emotions, rather it comes from an intellectual understanding that the success of another person should also be a source of joy to ourselves. In order to achieve this level we must work on removing feelings of jealousy towards others. Jealousy comes when a person feels threatened by his friends achievements, and feels inadequate as a result. But we need to recognize that each person has his own unique set of talents tailor-made for him to be able to fulfill his potential in life.

For example, the abilities required of a pitcher in baseball are very different from those needed to be a great batter. Would a pitcher be jealous of the batter's ability to hit a ball very hard?! And likewise, would a batter feel lacking if he could not pitch a ball as accurately as the pitcher?! Of course not - they realize that they have a particular role in the team that requires certain talents but not others. So too, I have no reason to feel jealous of my friend's abilities. Had I needed them I would have been blessed with them!

Once we can internalize this idea then it will become far easier to share in our friend's joy and empathize with his pain. So, when a friend is seeking employment, the command of "love thy neighbor" tells us that we should strive to want him to succeed as much as we would want to succeed ourselves. And if he fails in a test then we should try to imagine how we would feel in the same situation and transfer that feeling to him. This is one of the key aspects of 'love thy neighbor' and if we can live by this then we can avoid unwarranted jealousy and feel far more content with our lot in life.

¹ Vayikra, Parshas Kedoshim, 19:18.

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