

# CHAPTER 6, LAW 3 - LOVE KNOWS NO BARRIERS

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***There is a universal obligation (lit., 'an obligation on every person') to love every member of Israel as oneself (lit., 'as his body') as it states, 'And you shall love your fellow as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18). Therefore one must speak positively about his fellow (lit., 'speak of his praises') and be careful (lit., 'sparing, sympathetic') with his property -- just as he is careful with his own property and concerned about his own honor. One who honors himself by shaming his fellow has no share in the World to Come.***

This week the Rambam discusses the importance of loving every Jew, based on the famous verse in Leviticus "Love your fellow as yourself." (For some reason, the first words are often mistranslated as "love your neighbor.") This great principle of the Torah, as the sage R. Akiva termed it (Sifra Kedoshim 4:12, brought in Rashi to that verse), follows the Rambam's previous law. Last week the Rambam discussed the obligation to "cleave to the wise." This week we are told to indiscriminately love all the Jewish people.

This obligation is a beautiful and oft-quoted one, but it really engenders a very basic question. How does one make himself love someone else? It's great to say that we must love every Jew, but how are we expected to just turn on an emotion, especially one so strong as love? How can I be expected to love every single Jew, the vast majority of whom I've never met before and don't know from Adam?

Thus, clearly the love the Torah commands us here cannot be understood as some head-over-heels infatuation with every other Jew. We are not expected to be excellent friends with strangers we have never met. Rather, the feeling must be one of an underlying sense of kinship. I feel an innate affinity and camaraderie with my fellow Jews. We all share the same basic goals and values. There is a universal bond which unites us.

This would thus seem to be a very practical obligation. I can't really feel a strong emotional fondness for every Jew I meet but I must view him as a fellow compatriot -- and must treat him as such. Likewise, the Rambam illustrates this law in very practical ways -- that we be considerate of our fellow's honor and property. We might not be able to elicit an intense emotional reaction when we come across a fellow Jew, but we can and must modify our behavior towards him. And quite likely, in so doing our attitude towards him will improve as well.

Some understand the prohibition against charging interest in a similar vein. Any serious economy

cannot run without the charging of interest. If not for it, all surplus money would be stagnant, not reinvested into the economy, and no one other than direct producers would earn any income. (I'm not a finance guy (in the slightest -- nor have I ever owned very much of it), so this is a very crude layman's explanation.) So too, the Torah permits that we lend money on interest to Gentiles (which historically was the somewhat unsavory (and often downright dangerous) role many enterprising Jews had in society). However, to our fellow Jew the Torah forbids it. For just as one would certainly offer open, unstinting aid to his brother in need, so too we must do towards every fellow Jew.

My teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) once illustrated this idea with the following scenario. Say you're somewhere on the other side of the world -- hiking along in the Himalayas or snorkeling through the Great Barrier Reef (distant enough?) :-). You then come up for a break and bump into a slight acquaintance -- say your neighbor from across town or a fellow member of your synagogue of 500. You'd go wild with excitement: "Hey! How're you doing? So good to see you! etc." Now had you passed him by back home in the local supermarket you might have at most offered him some semi-coherent grunt and gone on with your business. (I'm writing from a guy's perspective, that is.) :-) But relative to your present surroundings, you see someone you actually know, however slightly, and you feel extremely close.

This too is the obligation we have towards our fellow Jews, of all stripes. We must recognize that in a very deep sense we all share the same values, goals and national mission -- regardless of differences in our outer trappings, our style, personality, background, or even language. We must not view him in terms of whether or not he's my "type" and the sort I could develop a strong personal friendship with. I must rather view him as one with whom, relative to the world at large, I feel extremely close.

In Proverbs (18:1) King Solomon wrote, "The separated one ('nifrad') will seek out his passions." Why is a pleasure seeker referred to as a "separated one?" Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerona (Spanish medieval Talmud scholar and ethicist) explains that once a person follows his or her desires, no two people are alike. Each has his own set of lusts and urges, and each will go his separate way. One kid will skip school for the basketball courts, one will become a computer hacker, one will memorize every statistic and batting average in the league, etc., etc. Human beings, once loosed on their passions, have less and less in common, and for that matter, exhibit less and less humanity.

If, by contrast, two people are united in common cause, then they are not "separated". They may differ in approach, style, personality, and role, but they are all bound by a common overall mission. Personality-wise, a fellow may just clash with you. He would never be the sort you'd actually develop a strong personal friendship with. But that's really besides the point -- because you're all on the same team. Just as an army or sports team requires many positions and many players, each fulfilling his own unique role while working in harmony with the whole, so too the Jewish people, to fulfill its national mission, requires all sorts of individuals to constitute a nation of G-d.

In the Book of Esther, Haman, the wicked prime minister of King Ahasuerus, conspired to annihilate the Jewish people. When he approached the King to present his request, he described Israel as "one people, scattered and dispersed among the nations" (3:8). We were spread out and vulnerable, a small minority in each of the 127 provinces in which we resided.

And in a deeper sense, Haman was absolutely right. The Jews at that time were very superficial, attempting to blend in with their Gentile host society. (See Talmud Megillah 12a that the Jews of the time sinned "for show" -- in order to curry favor with the Gentiles.) And so, in 127 provinces, there were 127 types of Jews, all more closely resembling (or trying to resemble) their Gentile neighbors than their fellow Jews abroad. I mean, how strong a bond does a young, assimilated American Jew feel with a Jew from India or Morocco (who (Heavens!) doesn't eat cholent and gefilte fish on the Sabbath)? (Or even worse: You say "Good Shabbos" and he says "Shabbat Shalom!")

I recently read the statistic that the majority of American Jews under the age of 35 would not consider the destruction of Israel a personal tragedy for them. Of course it would be tragic, but not in a personal sense -- and not really qualitatively different than hearing of genocide in Somalia, Rwanda, Syria or any other troubled area of the world. Why, I might happen to be umpteenth cousin with some of those Israelis, but we belong to a different culture, have different values and interests, speak a different language, have different ideas on how to bring about peace in the Middle East, etc. Not a whole lot to draw us together -- certainly not culturally or ethnically.

And so, correctly claimed Haman, the Jews of the time were vulnerable -- hopelessly so, and theirs for the taking. We were not a united people, possessing the strength of G-d's chosen nation. We were a bunch of isolated individuals, each attempting to ingratiate himself within a different community and different society -- and hopelessly outnumbered by the many Gentiles among whom we lived and who could so easily and at any time turn against us.

To combat this, Esther instructed Mordechai, "Go, gather all the Jews..." (4:16). In simple meaning, she was instructing him to gather the Jews of Shushan asking them to fast for her. But the deeper meaning is that they must combat the slur of disunity Haman so rightly cast upon them. We must overcome our differences and prejudices and recognize that we are all a single entity, a nation of G-d, and consequently, capable of withstanding all enemies within and without. As the Rambam here states (to translate literally), we must love our fellow Jew as our body. Kabbalistically speaking, we are all a single, unified organism, all different appendages of the same whole. And only with such a unity can we stand together, wherever we may find ourselves, and possess the strength of a nation of G-d.

(Part of the ideas above based on an article which appeared in the (short-lived) journal Jewish Thought Vol. 1 No. 2.)

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