

ALL THE REST IS COMMENTARY!

by Rabbi Label Lam

You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the members of your people; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself- I am Hashem (Vayikra 19:18)

When a potential convert approached Hillel and asked to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot, Hillel summarized as follows, "That which is hateful to you do not do to others. All the rest is commentary. Now go and learn." (Shabbos 31A)

Is that in fact the entire Torah? That may be a key to commandments between man and man. What about the many Mitzvos between man and G-d? Where do Tefillin, Mezuzah, Kashrus, Blessings and the like fit into Hillel's paradigm of "the entire Torah"?

Harry was down on his luck and struggling financially. He went to an old friend Mike for some help. Mike was sitting pretty and enjoying great personal success. Sensing Harry's desperation, without hesitation, Mike went to the phone and in moments achieved what Harry had been struggling to accomplish for too many months. He landed him a job. Harry was so happy to get even this ground level position. Over the years he worked his way up to top management and eventually had enough personal experience and capital to start his own company. He succeeded in a big way.

In the meantime, Mike's industry started to slump and he found himself without income for almost a year. He was already deep in debt and desperate. Not knowing where to turn he went to his old friend Harry who he had helped back when. Harry welcomed him into his lavish office and heard his sad story. Recalling that Mike had been the one who had made that phone call in his hour of need he reached deep into his pocket and fished around till he came up with a quarter. "That phone call must have cost you about a quarter!" He handed it to him, and then had him escorted out!

What do you think when we hear such a story? It makes your blood boil. What an ingrate! How could someone be so callous and so insensitive, so unappreciative? Right? I think that's everybody's natural reaction! What a bum! What a no good-nik that Harry guy! Everyone understands and appreciates the moral imperative of gratitude.

Every mother at the barber's shop reminds her little boy, "Say thank you to the man, Phillip! Take the lollipop out and say it so he can hear you!" The barber is happy to get his twelve dollars and a tip. Who's the "thank you" for? It's for the benefit of the kid! He needs to develop, for his own basic humanity, an ever-deepening sense of gratitude.

Now if that's what is expected for a haircut, or for a job reference, what language is left when great thanks are owed? Let's say you negotiated a fellow's release from a hopelessly long prison sentence. You buy him a wardrobe. You give him a car. You land him a job. You build him a house. You find him a wife. All you ask for is some token remembrances. Put a sign by the door with my name inscribed somewhat inconspicuously. Use only certain fuels in the car. Call me and leave me a message. I want to know how you're doing. Follow scrupulously the guidelines in the marriage manual. Work honestly. Be happy. Be exemplary. Remember you represent me! It's a lot but it's not too much! Is it? Now, how would we feel if our beneficiary defaulted on these requests?

What if we became aware and even convinced that some-"One" has given us not just a haircut but a head, not just a livelihood but a life? Wouldn't we want to know how to begin to say "thank you"? Now, all the rest is commentary!

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