

A RESERVOIR OF LOVE

by Rabbi Label Lam

...and you should love your neighbor as yourself... (Vayikra 19:18)

How much are we obligated to love our neighbor? Usually there is some quantifiable standard that we can use to determine if a given Mitzvah is fulfilled. How do we measure the amount of love to have succeeded in the requirement to "Love your neighbor as your self"?

One of my boys, when he was in grade school, was being picked on daily. We wanted badly to champion his cause but he refused to identify the instigators. The administration and rebbe were consulted. Attempts were made to squelch it. Nothing changed. The poor kid came home in tears every day. We all know the remedy. Kids who pick on others only do it when they sense that they are getting a reaction. There's a tendency to want to tell a child (or an adult) "Don't let them bother you!" Unfortunately it rarely works. If someone tells you not to think about pink elephants suddenly they are dancing ever more in your head. What were we to do?

With help from heaven I stumbled upon a practical approach. At first I sat with my boy and asked him what they had been saying about him that made him feel so tortured. The words bled out slowly, "dumb", "cookoo- head", "stinky" and stuff like that. I wrote down each on a piece of paper and tried to logically dispute the veracity of their claims. I soon realized though, that I was talking to the head when it was the heart that hurt. Then in I put my money where their mouths were and I gave him three dollars- one for each false utterance. I now had his undivided attention. I asked him to please do me a favor and write down each insulting phrase they say tomorrow and that I would pay him a dollar for every one. I gave him a special pad of paper and a pen for the occasion.

Well, the next day he came home with a long face covered with sadness. I was curious to see the paper. Empty! He reported that nobody teased me today. It worked! Once they realized that not only was he not poised to be hurt by their words but that he was happily awaiting them their thrill was ended and so they ceased.

Having realized that it was finally over, I didn't want to lose this precious parental opportunity to crown the episode with a lasting lesson. I felt it necessary to tell my son the following which he accepted with unusual depth and sensitivity, "Now that you know what it feels like to be picked on you should make certain not to do it to anybody else. If there is a kid who is different or lonely or is for whatever odd reason a candidate for being picked on you should make it your business to befriend or defend him. With that in mind, son, maybe this whole mess will have been worth while!"

The standard of love is openly stated in the verse, "Love your neighbor as your-self". The operative phrase is "as your-self". So Hillel told the would-be convert, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow!" (Shabbos 31A) If we healthfully process our inter-personal encounters then they may become the natural guideposts and rulers to measure out love to others. Not more is expected than that. What to do and what not to do is being etched into our psyche over the course of a lifetime. One clever Rabbi once said, "If someone doesn't like their-self, I don't want them to love me!" However, even if one has been flooded with much negativity, it can yet be converted into a reservoir of love. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.