

# A GOOD PLACE TO BEGIN

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

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

When a convert requested of Hillel to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot, Hillel told him, "That which is hateful to you do not do to your friend. All the rest is commentary. Go and learn!" (Shabbos 31A) Why did Hillel not say what Rabbi Akiva called, "the general rule in the Torah", "and you should love your neighbor as yourself"? Why did he appeal to the standard of not doing what is hateful?

A king was concerned that the neighboring nation was planning to attack. He didn't know whom to trust so he dressed in ordinary clothing and crossed the border himself. Happily he found not even a whisper of what he had feared and he was ready to head home when something terrible happened. One local citizen studying his face said accusingly, "You're that king!" He panicked and ran. There was a shout, "Let's get him!" Soon a giant mob was chasing him. He managed to dodge the hordes till, in desperation, he rapped on a random door. An elderly Jew noticing his pitiful state took him in. The king told the old man, we'll call Abe, that he was a king and he's running for his life. The next concern was, "Where to hide?" Abe took him to a small hall closet where linens are kept. He stuffed the king into that tiny place where he could hardly breathe and covered him over with pillows. Suddenly an angry army burst in. They searched the usual places and then they opened the closet where the king was hiding. A soldier plunged a sword deeply into each shelf five times before they left. When the boots faded into the night he opened the closet again expecting a corpse but when he removed the pillows he found the king white like a ghost but unscathed. The sword missed each time within a hair's breadth. Abe housed him till the search died down. The farewell it was with emotion. The king thanked him profusely and promised him that in repayment for his kindness he would grant Abe any request.

After the king left, Abe went to the market but no one accepted his money because they suspected him of having harbored the king. Abe had no choice. He had to flee. He made his way to the king's palace. Ragged and hungry he shouted to the guards to let him in. His request was met with derision but after days of pleading they sent a message that a silly old man named Abe insisted on seeing the king. They were surprised by the executive order to rush him in. Before the amazed court they sat together eating luscious fruits and being entertained by jesters. The king asked Abe if he had any requests before retiring for the night. Reflecting on the great contrast of settings Abe asked the king what it felt like when he was in that closet and the swords were probing. The king's face became

beet red. He clapped his hands. Soldiers whisked him away to the dungeon. He stayed there for days in total darkness. He heard constant banging. Afterwards soldiers dragged him into a bright sun lit courtyard where a stage had just been built. There was the king seated on the stage before a large audience. Abe was led prayerfully to the platform where a noose was slipped over his head. The king raised his hand and a man with a black hood grabbed a lever to open the trap door beneath. The King queried, "Any last requests?" The old Jew tearfully asked, "Why? What did I do wrong?" To which the king answered, "Nothing! You asked me how it felt when I was in the closet. Well, this is how it felt! If I only explained it, you would never know what it really felt like."

We never know completely what other people really feel because we are locked within our own universe of feelings. We can extrapolate from our own experiences, though, since we can know more certainly how we feel. The initiate, however most likely possesses an incomplete and yet unripe menu of actions to draw upon. Hillel must have understood that it is probable that everyone has a rich list of hurtful episodes to inform him about what not to do and that is a good place to begin. DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).