

# NOT JUST AN ACT OF KINDNESS

*by Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden*

*"And you will love your neighbor as you do yourself." (Vayikra/Leviticus 19:18)*

The Jerusalem Talmud (Nedarim 9:4) transcribes the well known comment of Rabbi Akiva, "This is a significant principle in the Torah", and comments that the observance of this mitzvah (Divine command) saves one from many transgressions. The Babylonian Talmud offers a similar episode with Hillel, who was approached by a gentile seeking to convert. The petitioner had a strange condition: he wanted to learn all of Torah while he stood upon one foot. Hillel responded, "That which is despised by you do not to your friend: this is the entirety of Torah, all the rest go and study."

How do we understand that all of Torah is encapsulated by a terse statement? More so, the mitzvah of loving one's neighbor is a commandment from the Divine directing the behavior of one toward his fellow human. But what of the entirety of ritual law, all the obligations of a Jew in his service of G-d? How are those included in this mitzvah, and how does this mitzvah save us from transgression in that realm?

Chazon Ish (1) explains that one who is ready to forgo his rights for the benefit of his fellow man is equally prepared to indulge the will of the Divine. Indeed, this was Hillel's very answer to the potential convert: the ability to fulfill the mitzvos of the Torah are connected to one's personal achievement in genuine selflessness. If one can relinquish his rights for the benefit of a fellow human - about whom it is possible to feel a sense of competition and superiority - then he possesses great potential to set aside his own agenda to facilitate a relationship with the Divine.

G-d gave us the mitzvos as the vehicles to build a relationship with Him. Learning Torah, observing Shabbos, performing acts of kindness for others (not because it makes us feel good, but because we recognize others as G-d's children whom He wants us to help) are all actions that forge our personal connection with Him. But some mitzvos have multiple facets: not only does the fulfillment of the mitzvah create a bond, but there is a component within the mitzvah that teaches us about the relationship. The mitzvos of family life - getting married and having children - are essential exercises to building the next generation of committed Jews. But these intense relationships challenge, and thereby develop, our character. When the people about whom we care most do not do what we want, do we anger easily? Do we give the benefit of the doubt? Do we treat them selflessly? The Torah addresses our relationship with the Divine in the anthropomorphic terms of our relationships - G-d and Israel are like husband and wife, G-d is our Father and we are His children - so that we take

the human experiences with which we are familiar and utilize them in our relationship with Him.

So, too, our genuine altruism for G-d's children. At its most basic level, it benefits society. More so, we perform these acts of chessed because He instructs us to, and through them we strengthen our connection with Him. We now appreciate that within a simple act of kindness there is an even greater accomplishment: we foster within our souls the trait of selflessness that facilitates our acceptance that the finite human mind will never truly comprehend the will of the infinite G-d.

*Have a Good Shabbos!*

(1) Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz; 1878-1953; halachic (Jewish legal) authority in Lithuania and later in Israel; he held no official positions but was recognized as the worldwide authority on all matters relating to Jewish law and life

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