

SELF-LOVE: IS IT SELF-ISH?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"Loving thy fellow as thyself," is perhaps one of Torah's most well-known mitzvos. It is the most basic articulation of the category of mitzvos we refer to as "bein adam le-chaveiro," commandments that pertain to inter-personal relationships. Somehow, though, the last two words of the verse did not attain the same level of fame and renown as their counterparts. The pasuk actually reads: "You shall love your fellow as yourself, *I am Hashem.*" What is the Torah trying to stress by concluding its command of fraternal love with an affirmation of belief in G-d?

It is noteworthy, too, that the Torah sets the standard of loving others using the self as the yardstick. Where do we find, asks the Sefas Emes, that there is a mitzvah to love oneself, that we are then commanded to love others to the same degree? And if indeed loving oneself is not a "mitzvah," only an instinctive part of human nature, then how can the Torah use self-love as a benchmark by which to measure our love for our fellow man?

Perhaps the Torah is affirming one of the very basic tenets of psychology and human nature: The self-hater is not capable of feeling true love for others. In other words, it is not so much that self-love is a benchmark for loving others; it's a prerequisite. In this context, when we speak of self-love, what we really mean is having a positive self-image, or what is today known as self-esteem.

We all know people who seem to radiate warmth and love; they just walk into a room and smiles break out. Everyone wants to talk with them; to be with them. There are others who, unfortunately, seem to radiate negativity and bitterness. Their presence makes others feel edgy and upset; quarrels and discord seem to erupt when they're around. It is almost without fail that the most negative people in life, those who have the hardest time expressing their love for others, are the ones who have the hardest time accepting themselves. Their sour faces mirror the negative self-image that resides in their hearts. Perhaps more accurately, their external negativity is in fact their heart's futile effort to expel that negativity and hate from within. Yet, just as rotting flesh cannot rid itself of its stench by imparting it to others, so too the guilt-ridden heart of the self-hater can not be uplifted by projecting its bitterness onto others.

"You can only love your fellow as yourself." In order to number among those who radiate warmth and love, we must first learn to love ourselves.

On the other hand, healthy self-esteem, while perhaps a prerequisite to loving others, is by no means a guarantee thereof. To the contrary, it is all too easy to cross the line from self-esteem to

self-adoration and self-importance. One who loves oneself to the extent that he is blind to his own faults and shortcomings may find it difficult to find others perfect enough to be "worthy" of his love. By being honest with ourselves, and acknowledging our own deficiencies and imperfections (without, of course, destroying our fragile self-esteem), we open the door to loving our fellow, despite his shortcomings.

Take, for instance, the energetic over-achiever. It is extremely difficult for him to accept those less energized than him. He naturally assumes that since his tank is always full, and his schedule overflowing, others too should feel and behave in the same manner. Yet surely in other areas of his life, he too is lacking. Perhaps he has a hard time with anger management. Perhaps, while energetic, his work is sloppy. Whatever the case, by realizing that in his own way, he too is far from perfect, it becomes easier for him to accept the deficiencies of others.

While blindingly obvious, this basic tenet is not the least bit easy to integrate into our lives. Our nature is to accept, or at least justify our own faults; after all - we've grown up with them, we understand them, and they're part and parcel of what we call "us." The shortcomings of others, conversely, might be difficult for us to understand and accept, since we were not built like them.

"You shall love your fellow as yourself." It is only through consciously reminding ourselves that just as we accept and love ourselves despite our faults, that we may come to offer all "fellows" our unconditional love despite their faults; not just those with whom we naturally identify or understand.

In case, at times, our ego blinds us to our own imperfection and inadequacy, we may remind ourselves of the words of Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon: Koheles/Ecclesiastes 7:20), "For man is not so righteous on this earth, as to do [only] good, and never err." Perfection is the domain of G-d alone.

I am reminded of the sign found in some offices and businesses: "Rule #1: The Boss is always right. Rule #2: In case the Boss is wrong, see Rule #1!" Perhaps, along these lines, we can "reinterpret" the above verse. Rule #1: "You shall love your fellow as yourself." As we have explained above, first must come self-respect and love. At the same time, just as you love yourself despite your failures and shortcomings, allow yourself to love others despite their faults and foibles. Rule #2: "I am Hashem." In case you find yourself in a state of faultless perfection, see Rule #1, for I alone am G-d.

"Have a love-ly Shabbos."

Have a good Shabbos.

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