

# TORAH OF *Reconciliation*

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## KEDOSHIM קְדוּשִׁים

(Leviticus 19:1–20:27)

### ***Transform Hatred into Love***

You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:17–18)

Verses 17–18 constitute a unit. The context suggests the interpretation that an individual should not allow ill feelings to fester; rather, he should confront his kinsman and admonish him directly, in this way avoiding grudges and vengeance that breed hatred. Moreover, a proper attitude promotes love for one's neighbor. The opening statement (v. 17) contrasts with the conclusion (v. 18) as hate contrasts with love. (Baruch Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Leviticus*<sup>1</sup>)

This passage in Torah names the reality of hatred, but says that hatred can and must be transformed into its opposite by directly and compassionately working through one's feelings. Even the method of approach to another should be in the spirit of one's purpose. That teaching is alluded to in the clause "and not bear sin because of him" (verse 17). On those words, Rashi comments that "one should not embarrass him [the object of hatred] in public" in the course of reproofing the other. The ultimate goal is love. While elusive, the state of love between people should be pursued even if

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1. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989, p. 129.

the pathway leads through times of conflict. The destructive consequences of enduring hatred for both parties are to be actively avoided.

With regard to transgressions between one and a fellow as one who harms another or curses the other or steals from the other, one is not forgiven until one gives to that other what one owes and mollifies the other. Even if one has returned the money that one owes to the other, one must mollify him and ask that the other forgive him. Even if one only demeaned the other with words, one must mollify him and approach him until he grants forgiveness. If the other refuses to forgive him, one arranges a delegation of three people from among one's friends who approach the other and petition him.

If he is not mollified, one dispatches a second and a third delegation. If he is not mollified by them, one goes one's way, and the one who would not forgive is the sinner....

It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and not be reconciled. Rather one should be easy to mollify and difficult to anger. As a transgressor seeks pardon from another, one should grant forgiveness with a full heart and a willing spirit. Even if another oppresses you and sins against you many times, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge." This is the way of the seed of Israel when their heart is in the right place.

If one sins against another and the other dies before one requests forgiveness, one should take ten people and have them stand by the grave. And one should say before them: "I transgressed against the Lord the God of Israel and against this person and I did such and such to him." And if one owed money to him, one returns it to the heirs. And if one does not know any heirs, one deposits [the money] with the court and confesses. (Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, "Laws of Repentance" 2:9-11)

When a cleavage between people is caused by sin, the *halacha* requires one to be relentless in seeking forgiveness in order to restore a relationship. A failed personal approach is followed by enlisting the assistance of others. Only if repeated attempts fall short does one's obligation cease. At least every effort

has been made. One's obligations even reach beyond the grave when loose ends have not been addressed during the lifetime of the one offended.

Maimonides turns also to the reciprocal obligations of one who is petitioned for forgiveness. Seeking forgiveness and granting forgiveness are both seen as binding. The thread woven through such a passage is the heartfelt determination never to let interpersonal conflict remain unresolved.

### ***What Are the Consequences of Hatred?***

You shall not hate your brother in your heart... (Leviticus 19:17)

Know and understand that great is peace, for Rabbi Yochanan said: "Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because they did three transgressions: idolatry, promiscuity, and bloodshed. Why was the second Temple destroyed? Since there were those great in Torah [learning] and in bestowing kindnesses, why then was it destroyed? Because among them there was causeless hatred."

And the causeless hatred among them is hinted at. And it is hinted at in the beginning of [the book of] Lamentations in the first [letters] of the [first] words: *eiva ra'a* [terrible hostility]. This is a matter which appears [to indicate] that the sin of baseless hatred is very great. For those who committed the three transgressions were immediately redeemed after seventy years, and for those who only bore [the sin of] causeless hatred, their end [of exile and redemption] has not been revealed. (Rabbi Aaron son of Rabbi Jacob Hacohen of Narbonne, *Orchot Chayim*, "The Law of Honoring Father and Mother," 5)

In the minds of the sages, causeless hatred brought horrific consequences leading to national tragedy. The destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the continuing exile was attributed to this fatal inner flaw among the people, much more than to the daunting power of Rome. The biblical book of Lamentations, attributed by tradition to Jeremiah and devoted to the destruction of Jerusalem, hinted at the source of the people's plight. The first letters of the first seven Hebrew words of chapter 1 spell *eiva ra'a*, "bad hatred" or "terrible hostility." It was this hatred among

brethren that consumed the inner strength of the nation and made it vulnerable to defeat.

### ***The Obligation to Reprove Another Is Central***

You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. (Leviticus 19:17)

This commandment is to reprove one who has sinned and to show the other great love [indicating] that one loves the other so that the one [who reproves] is not punished. For regarding the Holy One, blessed be He, it is written: "God reproves one whom He loves" (Proverbs 3:12). And just as the Holy One, blessed be He, does, reproving one whom He loves, flesh and blood should learn from that path and reprove one's fellow. As for the Holy One, blessed be He, how does He reprove flesh and blood? He reproves him with love in secret. Should the other accept it, all is well. If not, He reproves the other amidst [others who] love him. If the other accepts, all is well. If not, one should reprove publicly before the eyes of all. If the other accepts, it is well. If not, it is permissible not to further reprove but rather to depart and go on one's way. (Zohar 3:85b)

The Zohar's reading of this passage deepens the understanding of the role of reproof within the context of love. God is the model of chastisement of those whom God loves. Here reproof is held up as a commandment, following the divine model. The way reproof is delivered is of crucial importance, with scaled steps including expressing reproof in privacy, then within a restricted loving circle, and finally with reluctance in full view of the public. Finding a way to deliver reproof without embarrassing a person is the point. The Torah teaches that reconciliation with another must include honest talk but always expressed compassionately.

If one sees a Gentile committing a transgression, if one can protest then one should, since the Holy One, blessed be He, sent Jonah to Nineveh to cause them to repent. (*Sefer Chassidim* 1:124)

The obligation to reprove, being among the highest expressions of love, is here extended to the non-Jew as well as to one's kinsperson. In many times and places where Jews have lived, speaking critically to the non-Jew could entail danger. Yet from the Middle Ages comes the extension of the circle of reproof beyond the circle of Jews. Kindnesses were to be delivered without distinction. Among the highest of them was the commandment to offer constructive, compassionate criticism.

### ***Seek the Merit of Another***

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:18)

What is the [meaning of] the juxtaposition of "I am the Lord" to the beginning of the verse? And I have said that the intention of the verse is to explain the beginning of the verse: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself..." Should you say in any form, "How can I work on myself so that there be no ill feeling against him [the other] and even love him?" the verse comes to respond: "I am the Lord." "I am the Lord Who has loved him... Likewise you can love him." In truth it is a simple matter. For below [on earth] since one can see in one's fellow only the aspect of the material in which he is clothed, he [the other] seems as nothing in his eyes. And, in particular, if in any matter [the other] is against oneself, he dismisses [the other] in his thoughts. It is not the same with the Holy One, blessed be He, Who knows the essence of the holy root of a Jewish soul. (Chafetz Chayim, *Shemirat Halashon*, "Shaar Hatevuna," chapter 6)

And do not judge your fellow until you have arrived in his place. (Ethics of the Fathers 2:4)

And he [Rabban Gamaliel the son of Rabbi Judah the Prince] further said that it is not worthy of an individual to judge one's fellow and to say that so-and-so did something that it is unworthy of a

person to do, thus judging the other for what he did. Regarding this he said, “Do not judge your fellow until you have arrived in his place.” This means that there are many causes for a person’s [behavior], and if one should find oneself ensnared in that very cause just as the other, one might have done just as the other had done. For an individual person has neither security nor faith, being a creature of change. (Maharal of Prague, *Derech Chayim* 2:4)

Further I heard [said] in his holy name [Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk]: “Once he said within the congregation the following words: ‘What do I wish from you? Only three things: From within oneself, do not look outside. And do not look within every other. And do not believe in yourself.’ Understand because this is the foundation of the Jew.” (Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk<sup>2</sup>)

The additional two words *Ani Hashem*, “I am the Lord,” at the end of these two dramatic verses in Torah provide the opening for a basic teaching about judging another and reconciling. How can one move the seemingly great distance from hatred and vengeance to love? The Chafetz Chayim teaches that there is more to another than one can possibly know within the context of human relationships. In contrast to the limits in which we know and judge one another, there is God Who knows and treasures the worth of every human being. The pathway described advocates a suspension of personal judgment in the face of a deeper judgment by God. There should be an assumption that what one knows about another pales in contrast to the reality of the other before God. The path to reconciliation is humility in judgment. The teacher of the Mishna, the Maharal of Prague, and the Kotzker Rebbe teaching separately over a span of a millennium and a half lend support to the idea that one should use restraint in judging others.

### ***Forgive without Rebuke***

If someone is sinned against by another and the offended party does not wish to rebuke him or to say anything to him – perhaps because

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2. Cited in Kadish, *Siach Sarfe Kodesh* 1:68.

the sinner is simple-minded or distraught – then if one forgives him in his heart and bears no animosity against him and does not rebuke him, this is indeed the way of saintliness. (Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, “Laws of Ethical Character” 6:9)

As much as rebuke is treasured as a means toward reconciliation, there are limits to its applicability. There are times when the other is judged to be beyond openness to rebuke. Then one still can choose to forgive the other in one’s heart. The goal is overcoming tensions and restoring a relationship. Arriving at that place by any means is desirable. Ongoing ill feeling saps the energy of the human spirit.

### ***Learn to Love Your Greater Self***

...Love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)

I heard from my master, my teacher, and my Rebbe, the great holy torch, Shmuel Shmelki, the head of the court in the holy community of Nikolsburg: ...I asked him how to keep the commandment of “Love your fellow as yourself” when my fellows do me evil? And he responded to me in a wise manner that I could receive from him: Are not all the souls of Israel one? The soul of the first man and the collectivity of Israel are all sparks from his soul.... At times a person strikes himself hard by accident without intending. The head is the king of the body. Will a person take a stick and strike the hand that hit himself unintentionally? Is this not to be considered an accident, and why should one cause more pain to oneself?

So it is precisely in this manner where one is one soul with one’s fellow; and, when one repays the other with evil, one causes pain to oneself. Rather one should consider that everyone comes from God, and He has many messengers.

I further asked him: If we see a wicked person before God, how is it possible to love him? And he answered me: Are not the souls of every person a portion of the Divine above? Therefore let one feel compassion for God Whose holy spark is trapped in husks.... (Shmuelke of Nikolsburg, *Orach Chayim*, Noach, Shemini)



Rabbi Shmuelke interprets this famous verse from Torah creatively. What does it mean to “Love your fellow as yourself”? It is to recognize that the other is truly part of oneself. Deeper than the boundaries that separate one person from another is a substrate that includes both in a larger whole. When one sees the other in this way, forgiveness and love are more easily awakened.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Love the Stranger***

And if a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger that sojourns with you shall be to you as the home-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:33–34)

The stranger who sojourns with you [as one of your citizens] you shall love him as yourself. Just as is stated with regard to an Israelite “love your fellow as yourself,” so also it is stated with regard to strangers “you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Know the soul of strangers, for even you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (*Sifra Kedoshim* 3:8)

The highest position in the love of people must be taken by the love of man, and it must extend to all men, despite all differences in opinion, religion, and faith, despite all distinctions of race and climate.... We must know that the point of life, light, and holiness never moved from the divine image bestowed on humanity in general, and on every people and tongue, each according to its significance, and that this holy kernel will elevate all. Because of this point of life we wish for the total elevation that will affect the world, the light of justice and righteousness...the perfection of all that is created, and man and all his faculties first. (*Musar Avicha* 96, 98<sup>4</sup>)

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3. My thanks to my colleague Rabbi Paul Shleffar for teaching me his insights into this passage.
  4. Quoted in Yoel ben Nun, “Nationalism, Humanity, and Knesset Yisrael,” in *The World of Rav Kook's Thought*, ed. Benjamin Ish-Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg (New York: Avi Chai Foundation, 1991), p. 212.

Torah legislation shows special concern for the strangers who are a minority living on the fringe of society. No fewer than thirty-six times within Torah, far more than any other subject of law, warning is given to guard the welfare of the stranger. The Torah demands even more than protection and tolerance. As the *Sifra* comments, it is noteworthy that later in the very chapter where the love of kinspeople is required, similar language extends the mandate of love to the vulnerable few who live within a majority culture of Jews. Love is the highest rung in the ladder of caring for another. There is no distinction drawn between one's ethical relationship to a fellow Israelite and to a stranger.

Rabbi Kook, the first modern Ashkenazic chief rabbi in pre-state Palestine, makes the circle of love global. No one stands outside the obligation to love and to be loved. The reason is the holy spark that animates every human being, a divine gift that is never lost.