

You shall love your fellow as yourself. (19:18)

Rabbi Akiva declares that the *mitzvah* of *ahavas Yisrael*, to love one's fellow as himself, is the fundamental rule of the Torah. Hillel paraphrased this *mitzvah*, *Man d'alach sani l'chaveircha lo saavid*, "What is hateful to you, do not do unto others." When a gentile came to Hillel and asked to be converted "while I stand on one leg," he responded with the above rule. The question is asked why Hillel did not use the *pasuk*, *V'ahavata l'reiacha kamocho*, to respond to the gentile. The **Chidushei HaRim** explains that, since the fellow was still a gentile, he was unable to grasp the positive aspect of the *mitzvah* – to love a Jewish person constantly and proactively. In his non-Jewish state, he could only grasp the negative – not to do something to another person which he would not want done to himself. This is a powerful statement which underscores the deep chasm that exists between the nature of a *ben Yisrael* and one who is not.

In his *Shemen HaTov*, **Horav Zev Weinberger, Shlita**, quotes the *Bais Yosef* who offers a similar statement. The Torah (*Bereishis* 21:33) writes, "He (Avraham Avinu) planted an *eshel* (either an orchard or an inn for lodging) in Beer Sheva, and there he proclaimed the Name of Hashem." In the *Talmud Sotah* 10b, *Rashi* explains how Avraham utilized the *eshel* as a vehicle for engendering spiritual ascendancy. After wayfarers had enjoyed a refreshing repast, he would say to them, "You should bless the One from Whose food you have eaten. You think that you have eaten from mine? No! It all belongs to the One Who brought the world into being." The *Bais Yosef* wonders why Avraham asked them to make a *brachah acharonah*, after-blessing, following their meal. Why not a *brachah rishonah*, blessing prior to partaking the food? The *Talmud* in *Berachos* 35a, posits that one can derive the obligation to bless before one eats through a *kal v'chomer*, a priori logic. If one blesses after he is satiated, certainly he should bless when he is hungry! Why did Avraham not encourage them to bless Hashem before they ate? The *Bais Yosef* explains that, since they were still pagans, it would be sufficient that they bless once they had received pleasure. To ask them to bless before they even received the "gift" would be too much to expect. Once again, we note two aspects concerning loving one's fellow – positive and negative. To act affirmatively with sincerity, to be progressive in one's attitude to his fellow man, is, for some, a challenge. This is why one must work on himself to overcome the obstacles that stand in his way of achieving *ahavas Yisrael* – on the Jewish level. To refrain from harming another Jew is something that even a gentile understands!

One aspect of the love that one must manifest for his fellow is always to judge him favorably. There is no dearth of stories which highlight this quality. I recently heard a story concerning the *Bobover Rebbe*, **Horav Shlomo, zl**, that was enthralling. The *Rebbe* was known as the modern-day Aharon *HaKohen*, who exemplified the trait of *Ohaiv shalom v'rodef shalom*, one who loves peace and pursues peace. He sought every opportunity to accentuate the positive when it concerned a Jew – regardless of his actions or religious affiliation. He abhorred controversy in any shape or form. His smile manifest the deep and boundless love that he had for all Jews.

When *Bobov* first established itself on American soil following the Holocaust, their center of

activities was on New York's West side. It was a small community, comprised of a handful of broken people who had experienced horrors that defied description. The glue that kept them together was the hope fomented by the *Rebbe*. His love was fatherly. He never questioned; he only encouraged – with a smile. For some, this was the difference between life and death – between religious observance and spiritual extinction.

One of the *shul's* members was a Polish Jew who had survived the war and followed the *Rebbe* to the West side. He would attend the services and participate in all of the *Rebbe's* activities. As he did with all of the others, the *Rebbe* took him under his wing, giving him a place of distinction among his small cadre of followers. One Friday night, he did not show up for *davening*, so the *Rebbe* asked his son, *Horav Naftali, zl*, to go look for him. Setting out for the man's apartment, *Rav Naftali* took a shortcut through Central Park. One can imagine the young man's (who was successor to his father's throne) shock when he noticed the man sitting on a park bench – smoking a cigarette – on *Shabbos*! *Rav Naftali* made an immediate about-face and returned home to tell his father the sad news.

The *Rebbe* listened to his son and replied, "He was not smoking; it was the Nazis who were smoking!" The subject was closed; the conversation had ended; there was no room for discussion. The *Rebbe* implied that what his son had seen, was an aberration attributed to the harmful influence that resulted from the tragedy of the Holocaust.

Two weeks later, the man returned to Friday night *davening*. The *Rebbe* honored him with leading the *Shabbos zemiros*. Later that evening, *Rav Naftali* was incredulous. "*Tatte!* He smoked on *Shabbos*! How could he lead the *davening*?" The *Rebbe* replied, "I told you before that he did not smoke on *Shabbos*; the Nazis smoked on *Shabbos*!"

Fast forward decades later, when the *Rebbe* asked *Rav Naftali* to accompany him to a *sheva brachos*, the festive meal honoring a nuptial ceremony. When they walked in, they were greeted by a scene that brought tears of joy to the heart. The man who had years earlier been standing on shaky spiritual ground was now surrounded by a family of *Chassidic*-bred, fully-observant children. He was resplendent in his *Chassidic* garb of *shtreimel* and *bekeshe*. The *Rebbe* looked at *Rav Naftali* and remarked, "I told you that he was not smoking; it was the accursed Nazis who were smoking."

The *Rebbe's* boundless love for a fellow Jew gave him the forbearance and insight to look deeper and see beyond appearances that belied the true essence of the Jew.