

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

To love a fellow Jew as one loves himself is the fundamental rule of the Torah. According to *Ramban*, this *mitzvah* enjoins us to want others to have the same measure of success and prosperity that we want for ourselves. Obviously, this is not in consonance with human nature, whereby one's ego always wants a little more or a little better for himself. He does not begrudge his fellow's success – as long as he has more. How do we define love? How do we understand loving our fellow on the same level as we love ourselves? We find the word love used in describing Yitzchak *Avinu's* love for Rivkah *Imeinu*. The Torah writes: “And Yitzchak brought her (Rivkah) into his mother, Sarah's, tent, and he took Rivkah, and she became his wife, and he loved her” (*Bereishis* 24:67). The Torah narrative makes it clear: their love was the result of their relationship – not the precursor. Yitzchak *Avinu* beheld Rivkah's character, her sanctity, her ability to bring back what had been lost when his mother had passed away. Once he understood her greatness, he loved her. Cognition led to love.

To love one's fellow as one loves himself means: Just as I love myself, ie, I find every reason to rationalize my behavior and ameliorate it positively, so, too, should I act toward my fellow. One does not find fault in oneself, because one always finds a way to make sense out of his own behavior. Do the same for your fellow. Understand him as you understand yourself – that is love.

The love that one should maintain towards his fellow Jew is crucial to one's ability to positively influence a brother who has strayed from religious observance. In other words, outreach is not only about a deep-rooted love and sense of responsibility for Judaism, but rather, about innate brotherly love for each and every Jew. In his commentary to *Parashas Chukas*, the *Me'Or Einayim* (cited by *Imrei Shammai*) writes: “Even if one observes an evil trait or activity committed by his fellow, he should hate only the evil within him, but the portion of him which still retains his *kedushah*, holiness, he should love with his entire heart and soul. Our Master, the holy *Baal Shem Tov*, teaches: ‘A true *tzaddik gamur*, complete, perfectly righteous Jew, who does not possess evil within himself, will not see/perceive any evil within any man. However, one who notices evil within others is looking at a mirror. If his face is filthy, he sees a filthy face; if his face is pristine, he sees only clean.’” Likewise, when we look at our fellow – *kamocho* – as yourself. Your brother is the mirror image of yourself. What you see in him is actually a reflection of yourself. One does not hate himself (unless he has deeper issues which he refuses to acknowledge), likewise, he should find every reason to love his brother. This is how we reach out to our estranged brothers and sisters: with pure love for them.

The *Seret-Vishnitzer Rebbe, zl*, the *Mekor Baruch*, was known for his extraordinary *ahavas Yisrael*, welcoming each and every Jew as if he were his own son. He showed the greatest care and concern for his *chassidim*, sharing in their moments of joy, and grieving with them during their times of pain. The *Rebbe* reached out to the unaffiliated and estranged as a friend, as a brother, never condescendingly, never demanding, only with genuine love. A wealth of stories abound which demonstrate his passion for Jews and Judaism. I have selected one that demonstrates his

unique method of outreach: non-judgmental, brotherly love.

The following signature story was related by a distinguished Israeli physician, who, as a youth, was an orphan taken in by the Diskin orphanage, which was the only religiously observant facility of its kind. Unfortunately, this orphan, as so many others, carried so much pathological baggage on his shoulders that many of them could not sustain the demands that come with religious observance. As a result, he went out into the world as a secular-oriented Jew. This physician hailed from a family which was attached to the Karlin-Stolin *Chassidic* community, but, when one is an orphan with little to no direction, history means very little. At the age of eighteen, he left the orphanage and returned to Haifa from where his family had originated and soon became a totally secular Jew. He did not hate, he just did not care; he had interest in neither Judaism nor its people. His free-fall to complete secularism was quick – descending into the abyss is much quicker than climbing out of it.

One Friday night he was bored, which is not novel when one's life has no spiritual purpose, such that materialism and fun become one's mainstay and focus. He heard that a *Rebbe* was in town – the *Seret-Vishnitz Rebbe*. He got into his car and drove to where the *Rebbe* was conducting his Friday night *tish*, meal. When he arrived at the *shul* and saw the many *chassidim* crowding around the *Rebbe*, he began to have pangs of guilt. After all, he did hail from a fine *Chassidic* family, and here he was coming to the *Rebbe* by car – desecrating *Shabbos* without shame, without impunity. He was extremely upset and decided to work his way up to the *Rebbe* and share his guilt with him.

“*Rebbe*, I am miserable. I came here by car. I was blatantly *mechalel Shabbos*, desecrated *Shabbos*. I cannot stop myself.”

The *Rebbe* embraced him with both hands and declared loudly, “My child, come when you want and how you want. You are always welcome here.”

The doctor remembered those words. The *Rebbe* told him that he could come whenever and however. This meant that he accepted him, even as a *mechalel Shabbos*. The *Rebbe* was doing exactly what the doctor least expected him to do. He thought that the *Rebbe* would reject him and curse him for desecrating *Shabbos*. Instead, he embraced him and invited him to return. How did the *Rebbe* prevent his continued *chillul Shabbos*? He hugged him. He treated him like his child. *Kamocho*. Love each Jew as yourself. Today, the doctor and all of the doctor's descendants are fully observant, wholly committed to *Yiddishkeit*, as a result of his being treated not as a subject, but as family.