



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHAVUOT > One

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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May 26-27, 2012

Shavuot - One

**Unconditional Love**



## Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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### ABSTRACT

Why do we Jews find it so difficult to love each other?

Isn't love and unity the most important of all principles? As the greatest of all sages, Rabbi Akiva, declared that the mitzvah to “love your fellow as yourself” is the fundamental principle of the Torah – indeed, the essence of the Torah.

If even a single Jew was missing at Sinai the Torah would not have been given! Why was that a condition, and what does that teach us about our attitude to other Jews today, even those that are complete strangers to us?

Perhaps the difficulty to love another is precisely because of its importance: The higher the stakes, the more powerful a force, the greater the resistance to it.

God is One, and thus we must stand as one. Therefore, before the word of the One God contained in the Torah could be received by the Nation of Israel at Mount Sinai, it was necessary that the people stand together as one – “as one person, with one heart.”

This was quite a challenge since the Jews were a cantankerous bunch. They could not stop their squabbles and complaints back in Egypt, and then at the Red Sea, and in the desert up to their arrival at Sinai.

“Two Jews, three opinions,” was invented back then. And though it sounds funny, it was quite a problem.

Through a fascinating anecdote about a controversial blog which advocated loving every Jew, even the criminal, this sermon examines Jewish divisiveness and closes with a heart-rending story of a man, a victim of the Holocaust, who taught his survivor son what it is to rebuke with love.

Shavuot

One

Unconditional Love

## UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

### Prerequisite to Sinai

## 1. Love and Unity

The most important of all principles – as well as the most elusive – is love and unity between individuals.

Yet, the greatest of all sages, Rabbi Akiva, declared that the mitzvah to “love your fellow as yourself” is the fundamental principle of the Torah<sup>1</sup> – indeed, the essence of the Torah.<sup>2</sup>

This may explain why loving our fellow is so difficult, for the more powerful a force, the greater the resistance to it.

But loving our fellow – and the unity that flows from it – is the prerequisite for connecting with God, who Himself embodies union, as the quintessential statement of Judaism (the *Shema*) declares: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad*, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”

Therefore, before the word of God contained in the Torah could be received by the Nation of Israel at Mount Sinai, it was necessary that the people stand together as one – “as one person, with one heart.”<sup>3</sup>

This was quite a challenge since the Jews were a cantankerous bunch. We well remember their squabbles and complaints back in Egypt, and then at the Red Sea, and in the desert up to their arrival at Sinai.

“Two Jews, three opinions,” was invented back then. And though it sounds funny, it was quite a problem.

<sup>1</sup>Leviticus 19:18 and Torat Kohanim and Rashi on the verse.

<sup>2</sup>See Talmud, Shabbat 31a.

<sup>3</sup>Mechilta, Rashi Yisro 19:2. This unity elicited God’s decision to give Jews the Torah, as per the Midrash, Vayikra Rabba 9:9.

## 2. Living in Harmony

Living in harmony is hardly simple. At least for the Jews. For they are a stubborn, hard-headed and stiff-necked people. And this has been their greatest weakness as well as their greatest strength. Their stubbornness has meant that the Jews have stood up to hundreds of years of relentless persecution, often giving up their lives rather than give up their Judaism.<sup>4</sup> But it has also meant that the Jews have been as disunited as a people can be.

An example: When U.S. troops liberated Afghanistan from the Taliban, they found only two Jews still living in Kabul, and they were not speaking to each other. That's the quintessence of being "stiff-necked" – enemy all around you, but you can't even say *Shalom* to each other.<sup>5</sup>

Another example: In 1950s, Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel, had a legendary conversation with Harry Truman, the U.S. president, who was complaining that it was a very hard thing to be president of 180 million people. Weizman retorted, "You should try being president of 1.8 million presidents."<sup>6</sup>

The Jewish penchant for argument and disunion has given rise to a stream of jokes, like: "If you were to find two Jews on a desert island, you'd find three synagogues. One for each and a third one neither will go into."

But it's far from funny.

<sup>4</sup> Midrash Rabba on Exodus 32:9.

<sup>5</sup> They were the subject of two plays, *The Last Two Jews in Kabul* and *Two Jews Walk into a War*, as well as a documentary *Cabal in Kabul*. The elder, Ishaq Levin, died at age 80 in January 2005, and the survivor, Zebulon Simentov, remarked he was not sorry to see him go. See "World Briefings," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Blech, Benjamin, *Jewish History and Culture*, New York: Alpha/Macmillan, 1999, p. 297.

### 3. Divisions Between People

It's bad enough that inherent self-interest divides people. What is even more troubling is when they justify their reasoning for being divisive and rejecting others. Some even dress it up in "holy" garments, arguing that their objection to others is "not personal," but it's what God wants (as if they know what *God* really wants)...

Love your fellow takes on special significance on Shavuot when the Jews managed to get it together. Indeed, their unity prompted God's decision to give them the Torah.<sup>7</sup>

And on Shavuot we also honor the *yahrzeit* of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic Movement, who made it his life mission to propagate love to all people unconditionally.

### 4. Controversial Blog

In this spirit, I'd like to tell you what happened to a colleague of mine, incidentally a Chassidic rabbi. He had posted a controversial blog online which contained the following statement:

Hillel famously said: "Love all creatures and bring them close to Torah."<sup>8</sup> When Hillel used a seemingly strange expression, "creatures" instead of "people," he was reminding us somewhat arrestingly that even if a person has no apparent quality or virtue, he/she must be loved by the mere virtue of being God's creature. God chose to create him/her and that is the greatest reason to love one another. Therefore, we love everyone unconditionally, *including* a *criminal* and someone who is not living up to his calling. It does not stop there. True unconditional love also means that you want the best for the one you love. Thus Hillel said: "And bring them closer to Torah." Love for your fellows dictates that you do

<sup>7</sup> Midrash, Vayikra Rabba 9:9.

<sup>8</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:12.

everything in your power to inspire and motivate them to live up to their greatest potential. Therefore, I may disagree with other Jews' behavior or choices, but I embrace them as my brothers and sisters, for they are the children of God.

As you may imagine, the response was swift, and it was damning.

## 5. Talk-Back

One talk-backer wrote:

How strange it is that Jews should love everyone unconditionally including the criminal! There are three problems with your statement: One, that we are commanded to love everyone. This is absurd! Not everyone deserves to be loved equally. People should deserve love by being good and kind and loving. Two, that this love should be unconditional. What a concept! We should love our children and spouses unconditionally. The commandment concerning our parents states that we must honor our parents, the word love is not even hinted at. What you say is such Christian babble! Three, that we should love the criminals unconditionally. Again, Christian babble. Criminals should be punished and suffer, not be supported and loved. You love people who deserve your love.

Where does it say that God loves everyone including the criminals? On the contrary, He goes after the evil and wicked with a mighty wrath to teach and purify. Yes, He allows the sinners to repent but first they must ask forgiveness, admit wrongdoing, pay compensation, and never repeat their crimes.

When you love someone, whether a criminal or not, unconditionally, you give that person the power to continue his wrongful activities because he knows that you will continue to love and support him no matter what. How can you impact someone to be good if he is evil? Do you think your exemplary behavior will change him? You are really naïve!

And that was one of the nice notes. What did I say before – Jews have strong opinions, right?

## 6. Responding with Love

But my friend was able to stand up to all that – and to respond with love.

He cited the famed mitzvah, “And you shall love your fellow as yourself,”<sup>9</sup> pointing out that the word used is “love” and not just “honor.” And it is not just plain love but “as yourself.” And that this mitzvah is considered a “fundamental principle” of the Torah (according to Rabbi Akiva) and even “the entire Torah” (according to Hillel).<sup>10</sup>

In addition, there are other mitzvahs that require us to love even strangers and not to hate our brothers.<sup>11</sup> And that this extends to “every single Jew”<sup>12</sup> and even to criminals.<sup>13</sup>

This is stated by numerous sages who point out that every human being – and certainly every Jew – was created in the image of God and has a divine soul, even the criminal. And his soul is eternal and immutable, and it will therefore ultimately cause him to repent and have “share in the world to come.”<sup>14</sup>

## 7. Jewish Unity

And that brings us back to the subject of this talk – Jewish unity (or Jewish divisiveness as it were).

The Talmud states that all Jews are like “one body.”<sup>15</sup> And therefore, as inconceivable as it is for one body part to hurt another – for the left hand to injure the right hand – so, too, it is with the Jewish people.

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<sup>9</sup> Leviticus 19:18.

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Akiva, *Torat Kohanim* on the verse above. *Shabbat* 31a.

<sup>11</sup> Leviticus 19:17 and 19:34.

<sup>12</sup> Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchos De'eot*, 6, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Tomar Devorah* by Moshe Cordevero, p. 1570, chapter 2. See also *Emek HaMelech, Shaar Tikkunei Teshuvah* ch. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 60:21.

<sup>15</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi, *Nedarim* 9, 4.

Although this may not be apparent, at the soul level it is completely thus.<sup>16</sup>

Weighing in on the debate in the Talmud<sup>17</sup> on the question, “If one who sees his friend sinning should he hate him?” the *Tanya* states that the Talmud here is assuming that the friend is knowledgeable of the Torah and otherwise observant. But even if such a friend clearly knows he has sinned and has not repented, “there still remains the duty to love him ... on account of the aspect of hidden good in him, which is the divine spark in him, which animates his divine soul.”

Further, the *Tanya* advises that one cannot go wrong by being compassionate, for “compassion destroys hatred and awakens love.”

But if the sinner is not a friend and is not Torah observant, the *Tanya* suggests following the advice of Hillel, “Be among the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving all creatures and drawing them near to the Torah.”<sup>18</sup>

So we see that compassion and love should be the dominant force even in rebuke and discipline.<sup>19</sup>

## 8. The Issue of Punishment

Punishment, according to Torah, is only a method to repair and purify, and must be done with love not hate, with the intention to heal, not destroy.

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<sup>16</sup> This concept is explained at length in the *Tanya*, ch. 32, and *Derech Mitzvosecho*, *Mitzvat Ahavat Yisroel*.

<sup>17</sup> Shavuot 30a. Also see *Pesachim* 113b, and *Erchin* 16b.

<sup>18</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 1:12.

<sup>19</sup> As the verse in the Book of Numbers (35:24-25) states: “Judge the people ...(so that you) protect the people.” See also *Sanhedrin* 2a and *Rosh Hashana* 26a.



This is fundamental Jewish thought which, contrary to Christian thought, is based on the principle that good is always dominant and inherent, and evil is an aberration and transient. In Judaism there is no such thing as original sin, damnation, and power of the devil that is stronger than good. Each human being has the independent power to battle the forces of evil and prevail.

However, in no way does this permit, endorse, or even tolerate, evil actions.

Repenting sinners must first ask forgiveness, admit wrongdoing, pay compensation, and never repeat their crimes. But true unconditional love does not mean that (as the talk-backer claimed) “you give the sinner the power to continue his wrongful activities because he knows that you will continue to love and support him no matter what.” True love means that you do everything in your power to influence and change his behavior (provided, obviously, that you have that power and won’t get hurt in the process).

## 9. Sinners, Heretics and Atheists

Even regarding “heretics and atheists,” about whom King David said “I hate them with a consummate hatred,”<sup>20</sup> it is incumbent to bring them closer to God. The reason is that “the sins should be erased but not the sinners.”<sup>21</sup> And even their souls remain pure, and there is hope for their return to God so that they can “share in the world to come.”<sup>22</sup> Even if they do not do repent, their souls remain immortal (though they may live on in another state or in another body).

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<sup>20</sup> Psalms 139:22.

<sup>21</sup> Psalms 104:35. Berochot 10a.

<sup>22</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuvah ch. 3.

All this is so much more underscored in our generation, when heresy in general is a result more of ignorance than maliciousness. In addition to the fact that we do not know what is in the heart of another person, and we must always judge that person favorably and not judge someone until we stand in his or her shoes.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, and this perhaps is the most important point. We have all personally witnessed and experienced the deep (and often justified) disillusionment of so many Jews with established religion (including the distorted views of an “angry” and “wrathful” God, and the fear and dogma related to religion), and we have seen the critical need to present Judaism with love and sensitivity, in a warm and non-judgmental manner, that is welcoming and allows for receptivity.

As Jews, what we need today more than anything else is to finally look at each other as brothers and sisters. And instead of all the infighting of “denominations,” recognize that we are all “one nation,” “one pillar,” and “one person, with one heart.” And this does not need to compromise our diversity.

## 10. Beyond Stereotypes

We need to get beyond the labels and stereotypes that divide us, and treat our fellow Jews as our own family.

If you saw your own child – or yourself, for that matter – misbehave, you would not cease to unconditionally love yourself or your child. Yet, out of love, you would also discipline the child, and you would let your child know that even the necessary punishment is coming out of love.

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<sup>23</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:6 and 2:4.

## 11. Punishment Out of Love

Now I would like to tell you a heart-warming story of one Jew, who perished in the Holocaust, and how, ever-so-lovingly, he reproved his erring ten-year-old son. This story was told by the son, Leibel Zisman, in his amazing autobiography of survival and faith, entitled *I Believe*:

Only once in my life did my father spank me. On this occasion, I got it into the *gingie* head of mine to break all the windows on Vilna Gass (in Kovno, where my father's shop was located).

Vilna Gass was a street of shops, and all the shops had small basement windows at the level of my shoe. I kicked one, and it broke; the tinkling glass made a nice sound. So I proceeded like this right on down the street. Naturally, there was an uproar, and my father was informed that a red-headed boy (there was only one who fit that description) had broken all the windows. I well remember how angry he was – which was a rare sight. I knew by then that my father was a good and patient man, but you better not cross him – he was fierce when he was angry. On this occasion he said to me, “I am not going to punish you now, because I am too angry, and the Torah teaches that we should never rebuke anyone in anger. But I want you to know that you should never in your life hurt another person or that person's property. Never!”

That was it. But two days later, he called me in again, and he said, “Now I am no longer angry at you, so I will punish you. I love you and I don't want to punish you, but you must be punished for what you did.” And then he spanked me.

We are all family. When we are called upon to “discipline” another, we must do so like this wise father – never out of anger, always out of unconditional love.

Our attitude must be to see the person as a member of own family – because, truly, he or she is!

We do not need to compromise our own commitment to Judaism to love another Jew who has not yet reached the highest place, but we can always encourage him or her, and welcome him or her to grow together with us in our relationship with God.

And when better to begin than today – on Shavuot – when we all stand together to receive the Torah “as one person, with one heart.”

Amen.