



# MEANINGFUL SERMONS

“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”

## VAYIKRA

**Kedoshim/ 10 Iyar**

What's Love Got To Do With It?

May 6, 2017

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?  
THE SECRET OF AHAVAT YISROEL

ABSTRACT

A hypothetical question: Who is more religious? A person who keeps to the tee 612 commandments of the Torah's 613 – all the *mitzvahs*, except one: “love your fellow as yourself” – or someone who stringently fulfills only this one mitzvah and no other (if that is possible)?

We seek to answer this question as we wrestle with the unpleasant fact that Judaism today seems populated by many devout Jews who present as judgmental, condescending and even hateful to those unlike themselves? Of course, many devout Jews are not like that, but those who stand out. On the other hand, we also see loving people who are not necessarily very pious. Who determined that commitment is defined more by dress and look than by care and empathy?

And it is an apt time to consider these issues, for this week we read in the Torah about the greatest *mitzvah* of them all: *V'ohavto L'roecho Komocho*, which is a fundamental principle in Torah (as declared by Rabbi Akiva). And so today is most opportune to bring attention to a most compelling issue, one that is extremely timely and relevant to the divisive mood of our times – the importance of loving our fellows like ourselves, and what we can do about it.

Furthermore, what better time to talk about it than in these days of the Counting of the Omer, when we refrain from weddings and other celebrations in remembrance of the tragic death of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students who failed to treat one another with respect. How could such great students have defied their very teacher's most powerful message: that love for another is a *Klal G-dol B'Torah*?! What can we learn from their mistake?

Everyone knows the classic story in the Talmud of the potential convert that asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah standing on one foot. Hillel replied: What is hateful to you don't do unto your fellow. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. But as simple and heartwarming as this story sounds, after a bit of thought it is fraught with questions: More than half the Torah consists of laws between man and G-d (e.g. temple offerings, kashrut, prayer). How could Hillel say that not doing unto others what is hateful to you -- loving another -- is the entire Torah?! Then, there are many people who keep the entire Torah and are not particularly sensitive and loving?! And conversely, there are very loving people who don't follow the Torah. So what exactly is the meaning behind Hillel's words?!

A very moving and definitive story about unaffiliated Jews, a brilliant explanation from the Tanya of Hillel's answer to the would-be convert and several fascinating anecdotes – all demonstrate the true, and surprising, meaning of Torah and love.

## 1. Just Like Me (Joke)

A passing preacher saw a guy about to jump off a bridge, and instinctively he pulled over his car and approached, calling out, "Don't do it!"

- "But nobody loves me," the guy on the bridge replied.
- "G-d loves you. Do you believe in G-d?"
- "Yes."
- "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" the preacher asked.
- "A Christian."
- "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?"
- "Protestant."
- "Me, too! What franchise?"
- "Baptist."
- "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"
- "Northern Baptist."
- "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"
- "Northern Conservative Baptist."
- "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?"
- "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region."
- "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?"
- "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912."

Incensed, the preacher pushed him over, yelling: "Die, heretic!"

Now that's the way the joke goes, but we could easily substitute here Jewish denominations and their sub-sects.

Which reminds me of the Jewish maxim:

"Anyone more religious than me is a fanatic, anyone less religious than me is a heretic."

## 2. Who Is More Religious?

You laugh, but let me ask you a serious (albeit hypothetical) question: Who is more religious? A person who keeps to the tee 612 commandments of the Torah's 613 – all the mitzvahs, except one: “love your fellow as yourself”? Or someone who stringently fulfills only this one mitzvah and no other (if that is possible)?

We seek to answer this question as we wrestle with the unpleasant fact that Judaism today seems populated by many devout Jews who present as judgmental, condescending and even hateful to those unlike themselves. Of course, many devout Jews are not like that, but those who stand out. On the other hand, we also see not-so-very devout Jews who are loving people.

And it is an apt time to consider these issues, for this week we read in the Torah about the great mitzvah: V'ohavto L'roecho Komocho, “Love Your Fellow As Yourself.”<sup>1</sup> This mitzvah is so important that, according to the great sage, Rabbi Akiva, it is a foundational principle of the Torah.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, what better time to talk about it than in these days of the Counting of the Omer, when we refrain from weddings and other celebrations in remembrance of the tragic death of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students who failed to treat one another with respect. How could such great students have defied their very teacher's most powerful message: that love for another is a foundational principle of the Torah (*klal G-dol b'Torah*)?!

## 3. Supreme Standard (Optional)

And they were not the only ones.

Despite this supreme standard – to always love your fellow as yourself – history is witness to the inconsistencies and paradoxes in the lives of so-called Torah-observant people. How often have we seen a devout person fall, and how often have we seen supposedly holy men and women stoop to disgraceful behavior? Were they true people of faith in the first place, or mechanical saints, or even worse, just putting on a show?

And this dissonance takes on another bizarre shape as well: At the other end of the spectrum you will find people who, by conventional standards are “not religious” at all (and even anti-religious), yet they are more sensitive and refined than many “religious” people you meet.

Who then is more religious? The bearded man with *peyos*, a *yarmulke* and *kapota*, who devoutly keeps Shabbat and will go to obsessive lengths to find a kosher meal, yet cheats others, beats his wife and visits question-

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 19:18

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Akiva, cited in Torat Kohanim and Rashi on the verse above.

able environments? Or one without a beard, skullcap and religious garb, who may not keep Shabbat or keep kosher, but is impeccably caring, scrupulously honest, helps anyone that comes his way, is kind and giving, sensitive and virtuous?

Who, truly, is the more religious and devout of the two?

Some would reply that the former is, after all Shabbat and *keashrut* are the hallmarks of religious behavior. But that would suggest that outer garments and behavior are more important than virtue and love. The Torah's mitzvahs don't just include keeping Shabbat and keeping kosher, they also include the commandments to treat others with respect, and be honest and ethical.

Actually, it all boils down to loving your fellow as yourself. And this one precept was considered to be the "entire Torah" by the great sage Hillel!

#### 4. Hillel and the Convert

Certainly, the students of Rabbi Akiva, who lived in the 1st century C.E., were well aware that in the 1st century B.C.E., or some two hundred years prior, the great Hillel had identified this mitzvah as encompassing within it the entire Torah. And certainly, the religious Jews of today know that classic story very well. It was probably one of the first stories taught them in cheder.

The Talmud<sup>3</sup> relates that a would-be convert came to Hillel and asked him to give over the Torah "standing on one foot" (meaning quickly). Hillel replied: "What is hateful to you don't do unto your fellow. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Now go and learn."

But as simple and as heartwarming as this story sounds, after a bit of thought, it raises many questions. First of all, we know that at least half of the Torah consists of laws that have nothing to do with love in any overt way. For instance, eating kosher, praying, offering sacrifices, obeying the laws of purity and impurity, etc. What's love got to do with any of that? And how could Hillel have said that not doing unto others what is hateful to you – in short, loving another as yourself – is the entire Torah?! Then, there are many people who keep the entire Torah and are not particularly sensitive and loving?! And conversely, there are very loving people who don't follow the Torah. So what exactly is the meaning behind Hillel's words?!

#### 5. The Tanya's Explanation

One explanation comes from the Tanya penned in the 18th century by the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi.

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<sup>3</sup> Talmud, Shabbat 31a.

In this magnum opus, the Alter Rebbe says<sup>4</sup> that the entire Torah comes down to one thing: making the spiritual aspect of reality (the quality) primary and the material aspect of reality (the quantity) secondary. As long as your body is more important to you than your soul you cannot truly love another.

We live in a world dominated by materialism and physicality. Aggressive brute strength is more powerful than spiritual strength. A small bullet can kill a great person. We live in a world where the body is much more real to us than the soul, where matter is more powerful than energy.

So when we want to experience love, the only way we can do so is by recognizing that there is another dimension called spirituality. Not only is there another dimension but that dimension happens to be primary. Love is possible only through transcendence – transcending the body and experiencing the soul as primary.

And this is what Hillel was trying to convey to the would-be convert: the entire Torah comes to achieve transcendence, including the laws that seemingly have nothing to do with love – like keeping kosher, or keeping Shabbat, or praying. These so-called rituals all exist to alter our perception that the body matters more than the soul ... to help us see quality, and not quantity, as the true reality.

And basically, this is what love is.

## 6. Loving Each Other

I mean, consider how two human beings can really love each other?

We all sit in separate chairs/places right here in this room, because no two bodies can occupy the same space. If one of us here wants to give up our space to another, we have to get up and only then someone else can then take our space.

This is true for all materialism. Materialism means what is mine is not yours. If I have a hundred dollars, and I give you ten, I only have ninety. My wealth has been diminished. If I have one piece of chicken, the only way you can eat that piece of chicken is if I diminish my appetite.

So how can two human beings actually love each other when every act of love requires a diminishment of self?

The answer lies in recognizing another dimension besides the body and its need. The answer lies with the soul.

If we were only material bodies, we would not be able to really love. We would only be able to create a mutual partnerships of give and take. It would simply be a trade-off: I get something from you, you get something from me. I'll give to you because what I get in return is worth it.

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<sup>4</sup> Tanya, chapter 32. The chapter is also referred to "lev" (heart in Hebrew), which is the numerical equivalent of 32. Lev can also be read as love.

So if we defined ourselves as our bodies only, that's the best we could do, since every unselfish act would require diminishment of our bodies, our possessions, our space.

But a soul does not occupy space. It transcends space. Two people can sit in two different chairs but their souls can be as one.

That is love. And that is Torah.

## 7. Torah Without Love

Now, what about the people who are Torah observant but are hateful to others – who have Torah but don't have love?

The answer is obvious. Since Torah equals love, how can they possibly have Torah?

Indeed, the fulfillment of Torah and its mitzvahs in robotic fashion is far from being acceptable in Judaism. Yes, it might be better to train a person by habit to do the right thing than not to do it, but it cannot be said that this is Torah the way it was meant to be practiced.

## 8. Love Without Torah

Conversely, the fact that there are people who behave in a loving way without Torah doesn't prove much. More than likely they are responding emotionally, but when emotion does not move them, they may not be so loving.

And even if they behave selflessly all the time (and that's a big *if*), and even if they behave lovingly without an ulterior motive (and that's another big *if*), consider how much better they would be if they lived the Torah life the way it was meant to be lived?

Naturally, we are all human beings and we have the capacity to love. But to truly love in a selfless fashion, without an ulterior motive, we must see the world not as a material place, but as a spiritual place.

And the Torah presents us with this true reality. It serves as an x-ray of the material and reveals the spirituality that dwells within it.

Normally, we see just the exterior – the body, the physicality. Only when we take an x-ray or a CAT scan, can we see the interior.

The Torah gives us a spiritual x-ray. And the more we master the Torah, the clearer the picture emerges, until we see the world from a totally different perspective.

## 9. A Story of Three Rabbis

At this juncture I'd like to share with you a true story of three rabbis who were asked to appear on a panel discussion on the End of Days. And from the audience – which was composed of several hundred young people – someone asked this question:

“If the world as we know it ends tomorrow, what will happen to the Jews like most of us in this room who are unaffiliated, who are still struggling with what it means to be Jewish, who don't keep Torah, who maybe don't even attend synagogue? What will happen to them?”

The first rabbi said, “G-d will have mercy.” The audience heard this as a condescending answer, and they actually booed him. Did you ever hear 500 people boo somebody in a room? It's not pleasant.

The second rabbi was not about to make the same mistake. He said, “I also would like to know.” Basically, he passed the buck.

And meanwhile, the third rabbi was praying his heart out. He knew that this question deserved a profound response. Five hundred young Jewish people had just heard two glib answers to such an important question. And they were going to walk out with the impression that our rabbinical leaders have no clue. So he was silently asking G-d to help him select – at a moment's notice – from the vast amount of wisdom he has absorbed from his Torah studies and give him the right words that would speak to the heart of this audience.

He opened up by quoting one of his teachers, “If you are asked a question and you don't have an answer, tell a story. And if that doesn't work sing a song.”<sup>5</sup> “So,” he said, “I'm going to tell a story and if that doesn't help I may have to sing.” The crowd laughed. It was good as a warm up but it wasn't going to fly all by itself.

He then told a story about a Chassidic Master [the Rebbe Rashab] who was asked by one of his disciples why he devoted a disproportionate amount of time to uneducated, unobservant Jews. Would not his devout, learned students be more worthy of his time? In answer, the Master asked the disciple, who was a diamond merchant, to bring him several diamonds of varying value. When he did so, the Master laid them out on a table and told the merchant, “Now I am going to choose the one that is most precious.”

He chose a stone, and he asked the merchant, “Am I right?” The merchant replied, “With all due respect, no. To the naked eye, it may look like the most lustrous but, to the trained eye, there is so much more to diamond valuation – the cut, the color, the clarity, the carat...”

The Master smiled, “If that's the case with stones, how much more is it true with souls? To the naked eye, a man may appear one way, but the trained eye sees the soul which is priceless.”

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi.



Having related that story, the rabbi then said, “We do not understand the mysteries of the soul’s journeys. We do not know the challenges and trials each one of us is subjected to. Only G-d knows. So we cannot judge which people – which souls – are greater. The Midrash says that at the end of his life, Moses was shown by G-d all the events that would transpire until the end of days.<sup>6</sup> And Moses, who was such a humble man, was humbled by the struggle of the souls in our time. For the souls today have not seen the miracles that his generation saw. These souls who are trying their best today – precisely because of the unique challenges of modern assimilation – humbled Moses more than anything else.”

And the rabbi concluded with this: “I will tell you what I was taught. If the Messiah comes tonight, the souls with the greatest challenges will march first and lead the rest of us. And by tomorrow morning they, and all of us, will understand that the healthiest and most powerful way to actualize as a human being and as a Jew is through Torah and its mitzvahs. That’s what I was taught.”

There was a tremendous emotional reaction to what he said, because he spoke from the heart, and he spoke with love.

## 10. The Fundamental Answer

Now, why were the other rabbis unable to answer that woman’s earth-shattering and life-defining question? And if they could not answer such a fundamental question, we have to ask what had they been teaching their constituents?! How could they foster love and respect for people who are different – people from other communities, people who may dress and behave differently, people who may go to other synagogues, unaffiliated Jews and so on?

They may know much about the Torah’s laws and dictates, but not much about what it teaches about the soul ... that every individual soul is indispensable and holy, for that is what the Torah means in the very first chapters of the Book of Genesis when it relates that the human being was created in the image of G-d.

Without awareness of every soul’s value, there is no way that we could find ways to love each other unconditionally. The mitzvah of “love your fellow as yourself” can only be fulfilled when we see ourselves and others as souls that are united, and not bodies that are divided.

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<sup>6</sup> Sifrei and Rashi on Deuteronomy 34:2.

## 11. The Error of Rabbi Akiva's Students (Optional)

This was also the problem of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva.

Of course they knew the importance of “love your fellow as yourself,” and they sought to fulfill this mitzvah diligently. They just could not agree how it should be best fulfilled.<sup>7</sup> Each one focused on a different nuance. And had Rabbi Akiva's students loved each other less, this would have been a matter of minor concern, but because each disciple loved his fellows as he loved himself, he felt compelled to correct their “erroneous” thinking and enlighten them as to the true meaning of what their teacher meant. For the same reason, they found themselves incapable of expressing a respect for each other's views when they sincerely felt that the other's understanding was lacking, even in the slightest degree.

Thus they self-destructed due to their inability to co-exist ... to focus not on their differences but on their unity.

## 12. Conclusion

And this is the message that I would like to end with. It's all about unity, it's all about oneness, it's all about love.

The Torah – as given to us by G-d – is first and foremost all about love for each soul. Indeed, it begins by telling us that every human being was created in the Divine Image.

Love and respect for each person means love and respect for the Divine Image within each person, and truly, love and respect for G-d Himself.

This is the entire Torah, for everything else flows from there.

To truly keep the Torah, then, requires that we each be more soulful, more spiritual and more sensitive to our fellows. All the rest is commentary. Now go and learn.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> “Just as every person's face differs from the faces of his fellows, so, too, every person's mind differs from the minds of his fellows.” Midrash Tanchuma, Pinchas 10.