

This dvar is dedicated to my son Eitan, whose bar mitzvah was parshat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim, 11 years ago, on April 28, 2007

What's Love Got to Do with It?

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ Love your friend as yourself

וְאָהַבְתָּ לוֹ כָּמוֹךָ, וְאֶתְכֶם הִגֵּר אֲתֶכֶם Love the stranger among you as yourself

These two commandments centered around LOVE appear in chapter 19 in today's parsha. What connects them is the word KAMOCHA, as yourself. LOVE – as yourself – your friend, neighbor. Love – as yourself – the stranger who dwells among you.

AHAVA: Alef Hey Bet: This word for LOVE appears only twice in the Book of Leviticus. Vayikra. and in both cases, in this unique construction.

In the first book, Genesis, a variation on AHAVA appears about 14 times. Eleven of those have to do with love between people – the very first mention is at the Akeda, when God tells Abraham to take his son, his only son, that he LOVES, and sacrifice him. Subsequent uses of the word are about love between people – parents and children, husband and wife. But three times, it's used in reference to food, Food as LOVE. Isaac asks Esav to prepare for him “that food I LOVE.” וְעֵשָׂו - לִי מִטְעָמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר אָהַבְתִּי

In the second book, Exodus, LOVE appears twice: between people and God, “showing mercy unto the thousandth generation of them that love Me and keep My commandments.” And between people and people, in the passage about a slave who loves his master, wife, and children. The fourth book, Numbers has no mention of LOVE at all. And in the final book, Deuteronomy, a variation of AHAVA appears about 25 times, almost all referring to God loving the Children of Israel, or the Israelites loving God.

Here, in Leviticus the third and center book of the Five Books of Moses, LOVE appears just these two times, in a unique structure that does not appear elsewhere in the Torah.

It's a subtler, more sophisticated, and more challenging use of the word AHAVA.

Let's look at the first instance, Chapter 19, verse 18: וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ, *V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho*, commonly translated as “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This word “rei'acha,” friend, neighbor, is one frequently used in the Torah when behavioral dictates are given. Rabbi Akiva called these three words “the great, or fundamental, principle of the Torah.” The Talmud uses it as a jumping off point for the story of the non Jew who approaches Hillel asking for the entire Torah to be taught on one foot. Hillel replies: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow; this is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.”

But to me, this is a negative spin on this commandment, which is talking about something more profound than simply “Don’t be mean to others.” There are two significant components about this phrase. – Love your friend, “*V’ahavta l’rei’acha*” וְאַהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִי and “Kmocha,” as yourself.”

When I was teaching my son Eitan for his bar mitzvah, and we were discussing his parsha, he questioned this passage. He said, “What if my neighbor doesn’t like the things I like? It doesn’t make sense to do something I like that they might not like.” But even thinking in that way is a positive interpretation of this commandment. We need to think about how we feel, and how the Other might feel in that situation. So, it’s not about specifically doing something the Other may or may not want, but about treating the Other with respect – and respecting ourselves as well.

And this must have resonated with Eitan, because, when we made his tallit together, he chose *V’ahavta l’rei’acha kamocho* וְאַהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִי כְמוֹךָ as the phrase to write on the collar, the atara, of his tallit.

By acknowledging caring for the Other, we are caring for ourselves.

KAMOCHA. As Yourself. This commandment is saying it is essential that we LOVE ourselves. Effectively, to be in touch with our feelings in a very real sense. By being in touch with ourselves, we are able to connect with others.

A traditional interpretation of this commandment, when put together in a list of the 613 mitzvot is “Love Fellow Jews” or “Love all human beings who are *of the covenant*.” This comes from the context of the passage – the commandments before do have a negative spin – don’t take vengeance and don’t bear a grudge against “your people, *b’nai amecha*.” These are DO NOT commandments – but LOVE YOUR FELLOW BEING is a DO, a positive commandment.

The grammar in this phrase, and the one that follows later in the same chapter, is also unique in the Torah.

In the other books of the Torah, *V’ahavta ET* is the standard grammatical construction with LOVE. For example, in the Shma, *V’Ahavta ET Adonay Elochecha*. “ET” is a word that doesn’t have a direct translation, It’s a structural word that comes before a definite object. “And you shall love ET the Lord your God.”

Here, the text says *V’ahavta LE* – literally and you shall LOVE TO your friend, TO the stranger. You are sending lovingness out toward another.

V’ahavta LE, bestowing love in the direction of.

The complete verse 18 reads,

יח. לא-תקום וְלֹא-תטֹר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ, וְאַהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִי כְמוֹךָ: אֲנִי, יְהוָה.

18 Do not be vengeful, and do not bear any grudge against the children of your people, and love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

And it’s bolstered by the use of LOVE a few verses later, chapter 19, verse 34:

לד כְּאֶזְרָח מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לָּכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אֲתֶכֶם, וְאָהַבְתָּ לּוֹ כְּמוֹדֶ--כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם, בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: אֲנִי, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

34 The stranger that travels with you shall be unto 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.

The concept of LOVE as a commandment is challenging – an emotion as behavior: Be Happy, Love. But here, God is encouraging compassion. In this second example of loving another, a reason is given – love the stranger among you, because you know what it is like to be a stranger.

The scarcity of the word LOVE here is indicative that it is not a word to be used lightly. LOVE matters.

When I was pondering this dvar, commentary, deciding what passage to explore to honor Eitan in memory of his bar mitzvah this year, I found a book in my neighbor's Little Free Library. A small volume, with the title "Love Yourself, Like Your Life Depends On It." A direction for my dvar, yes, and for how we exist in the world. In fundamentally loving ourselves, being positive about our own selves, we have the direction in how we treat those around us. LOVE, as yourself, those close to you, next to you, and those new, choosing to be with you.

Love here is a dictum of behavior.

This kind of LOVE is LOVE for fellow beings – it's not the same as the paternal/ maternal/ romantic love described in Genesis; it's the stepping stone, here, in almost the exact center of the Torah, between the human-human LOVE of Genesis and the Human-God LOVE of Deuteronomy.

Significantly, each of these verses ends with *Ani Adonay* – I am God. As if by loving, by behaving with lovingkindness, we are enabling God to be our Best God.

There is a pause between "LOVE your neighbor as yourself" and "I am God" and between "LOVE the stranger as yourself" and "I am Your God." And the connection – loving that way, being compassionate toward others, both the familiar and the stranger, is what makes the divine, divine.

What's LOVE got to do with it? Everything.

Given at Temple Beth Shalom, Cambridge, Mass., April 28, 2018

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