

# PARASHAT ACHARE MOT-KEDOSHIM

## *Leviticus 16:1–20:27*

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*Parashat Achare Mot-Kedoshim* is one of seven designated Torah portions that, depending upon the number of Sabbaths in a year, is either read as two separate portions or combined to assure the reading of the entire Torah. While this volume will combine them, it will present an interpretation on each of their most important themes.

*Parashat Achare Mot*, which means “after the death of,” recalls the death of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s sons. It describes the rituals for the sin offerings that Aaron is to present in the sanctuary for himself and the people. Mention is made of Yom Kippur, or “Day of Atonement.” Laws regarding forbidden sexual relations are also presented.

*Parashat Kedoshim*, which means “holiness,” lists those ritual and ethical laws that, if followed, will make the Jewish people a “holy” people.

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### OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

**P***arashat Achare Mot* begins by referring briefly to the death of Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, who had entered the sanctuary without permission and with foreign fire for the altar. God instructs Moses to tell Aaron that he alone is permitted to enter the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies. When he enters, he is to dress with special linen garments and to bring a sin offering for himself, his household, and for all the people of Israel.

For himself, he is to bring a bull; for the people,

two he-goats. Standing at the entrance of the sanctuary, he is to mark one of the goats “for God,” and the other “for Azazel,” as the “scapegoat” for the failings, mistakes, and errors of the people.

Afterwards Aaron slaughters the bull and the he-goat marked “for God,” offering them upon the altar and sprinkling their blood around the altar as a means of asking God to forgive the people for their sins. When that ritual is concluded, the he-goat marked “for Azazel” is brought to Aaron. He places his hands upon it and confesses all the wrongdoing of the people. The goat is then sent off into the wilderness, where it is set free to wan-



der and to die, thereby bringing forgiveness for the people's sins.

•2•

The people are commanded to observe Yom Kippur, a "Day of Atonement." It is to be a day of fasting and complete rest, where no work is done and where the people seek forgiveness for all their sins.

•3•

Chapters 17–26 of Leviticus are known as the "Holiness Code." They contain the ritual and ethical practices that one must carry out to live a sacred or holy Jewish life.

Moses warns the people against offering any sacrifices outside the sanctuary or to any other gods. They are told that they may neither drink the blood of animals nor eat the flesh of animals killed by other animals.

•4•

Moses condemns the sexual practices of surrounding peoples and tells the Israelites they must follow God's commandments regarding family purity. These commandments include rules against debasing and shaming oneself or others by removing one's clothing or by having sexual intercourse outside of marriage or with animals. Such acts are abhorrent and defile the people of Israel.

•5•

*Parashat Kedoshim* continues the "Holiness Code" with God's commandment to the people of Israel. They are told: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." Echoing the laws given at Mount Sinai, the people are told to (1) honor their parents, (2) observe the Sabbaths and festivals, (3) refrain from worshiping idols, (4) offer sacrifices acceptably, and (5) leave corners of the field and parts of the vineyard for the poor.

They are also commanded *not to* (6) steal, (7) deal deceitfully, (8) swear falsely in God's name, (9) defraud others, (10) commit robbery, (11) keep the wages of laborers overnight, (12) insult the deaf, (13) place a stumbling block before the blind, (14) render unfair decisions in court, (15) favor the poor or rich in court decisions, (16) pass on rumors or stories about others, (17) profit from the difficulties of others, (18) hate others, (19) suffer guilt for truthfully warning others about the consequences of their actions, (20) take vengeance, and (21) bear a grudge.

In conclusion Moses tells them: (22) "Love your neighbor as yourself."

• 6 •

To these commandments are added others: people must not allow their animals to mate with different kinds of animals; they must not plant a field with two different kinds of seed; they must not wear garments made of two different kinds of material.

The people are presented with regulations for planting fruit trees. They are told they may eat the fruits of these trees only after five years. The

### THEMES

*Parashat Achare Mot-Kedoshim* contains three important themes:

1. Yom Kippur and the "scapegoat."
2. "Holiness" in Jewish tradition.
3. "Loving" others.

### PEREK ALEF: *Seeking Meaning for the Strange Ritual of the Scapegoat*

Yom Kippur, or "Day of Atonement," has been called "the climax and crown of the Jewish religious year." Through twenty-four hours of fasting and prayer, Jews are challenged to review the ethical and spiritual standards by which they live and to reaffirm their commitment to carry out the mitzvot, or "commandments," of their faith. In defining the message of Yom Kippur, Rabbi Bernard B. Bamberger writes that "it speaks to each human being and seeks to bring each person into harmony with others and with God."

The origins of Yom Kippur are shrouded in

people are also forbidden to eat blood, to practice magic or soothsaying, to shave off the side-growth of the beard, to cut the flesh as a way of mourning the dead, or to turn to ghosts, spirits, or to the cult of Moloch, which practiced child sacrifice. In addition, a man who has sexual relations with a slave is to pay damages to her.

The people are also instructed to show honor to the aging and love to the stranger, "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." They are also warned against using false weights and measures and insulting parents.

• 7 •

Several laws are given regarding family relationships. Adultery, homosexuality, sexual relations with animals, and marriage to siblings, half-sisters and brothers, or former in-laws are prohibited, as are sexual relations with aunts or uncles.

The Israelites are promised that, if they observe all these commandments, they will be set apart from all nations as "holy." They will be God's people.

mystery. There are, however, some fascinating traditions associated with the sacred day that help us understand its popularity among the ancient Israelites. One of the most significant and baffling of these is the ceremony of the "scapegoat."

#### *Defining "scapegoat":*

*The term "scapegoat" was apparently coined by William Tyndale, the first great English Bible translator. Thereafter, it came to be used for a person, animal, or object to which the impurity or guilt of a community was formally transferred and then removed . . . in common usage today, a scapegoat is someone whom people blame for*

*their own misfortunes, and even for their faults and sins. . . .*" (Bernard J. Bamberger, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, p. 860)

As described in the Torah, Aaron is to take two he-goats from the Israelite community as a sin offering. After he has slaughtered a bull as a sin offering for himself and his household, he is to bring the two he-goats to the entrance of the sanctuary. There he is to cast lots upon the two he-goats, designating one "for God" and the other "for Azazel." The one "for God" is to be slaughtered as a sin offering on the altar of the sanctuary. Aaron is then to place his hands upon the head of the other marked "for Azazel" and to confess all the transgressions of the Israelites upon it. Afterwards the goat is to be sent off to wander and die in the wilderness. (See Leviticus 16.)

According to the *Mishnah*, the ritual of taking the scapegoat from the Jerusalem Temple into the wilderness began as a very important ceremony, but later it became a cause for great commotion, even embarrassment. People would stand along the path and ridicule the ceremony. Some would point a finger at the goat marked "for Azazel," upon which the High Priest had confessed Israel's sins, and mockingly remark: "Such a tiny scapegoat for such a huge load of sins!" (*Yoma* 6:4)

As we may imagine, many interpreters have asked: What is the meaning of this strange ceremony? How does it relate to the religious significance of Yom Kippur?



*Ibn Ezra*

Commentator ibn Ezra refers to the ritual of the scapegoat marked "for Azazel" as a "mystery." He suggests that it may be connected with a pagan religious practice of offerings to "goat-demons," which were prohibited by the Torah. Such sacrifices may have been gifts to a god many believed ruled the wilderness and was a power for bringing evil into the world. (See Leviticus 17:7.) The scapegoat was offered to protect people from evil influences.

If ibn Ezra is correct, why would Jews have

used a ritual that seems to mimic pagan practices forbidden by the laws of Torah? Modern interpreter Baruch A. Levine explains that the ritual of the he-goat "for Azazel" was not considered a gift to a pagan god. Nor was it seen as a pagan rite. Instead, the scapegoat marked "for Azazel" was a dramatic means through which the Jewish people rejected the influences and temptations of evil symbolized by Azazel.

Levine argues that the sanctuary ceremony was "based on an awareness that, even in a world ruled by God, evil forces were at work—forces that had to be destroyed if God's earthly home . . . was not to be defiled."

In transferring all the sins of the people to the scapegoat and then sending it out into the wilderness marked "for Azazel," ancient Jews believed they were forcing "the iniquities of the people back on Azazel." In a way, Levine concludes, they created a "boomerang effect," returning evil influence "back to its point of departure, to the wilderness!" In doing so, they demonstrated that only God had power in their lives and that they had defeated the symbol of evil—Azazel. (*JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus*, pp. 250–253)

Levine admits that "this entire complex of rituals seems to be predicated on magical perceptions" and that his interpretation is "unacceptable to many modern students of the Bible, as it was to certain traditional schools."



*Rambam (Maimonides)*

One of those commentators is Moses Maimonides, who rejects any identification of the scapegoat with powers or angels of evil. He declares, "It is not a sacrifice to Azazel, God forbid." Instead of being a ritual with magical powers, says Maimonides, the scapegoat ceremony is an "active allegory" meant "to impress the mind of the sinner that his sins must lead him to a wasteland." When those who have broken the laws of Torah see that their sins are placed upon the he-goat and sent out into the wilderness, it is hoped that they will "break with their sins . . . distance themselves from them, and turn back to God in sincere repentance." (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3:46)

**Function of the scapegoat**

*The function of the scapegoat . . . serves as an expression of the educational message of Yom Kippur. Every year one is afforded the opportunity to determine one's own life for better, to purify the heart for service according to the will of God. This holy day teaches us our greatest gift: "Freedom of choice is given." (Avot 3:19; B.S. Jacobson, Meditations on the Torah, p. 173)*



Abravanel

Abravanel also suggests a symbolic interpretation for the ritual of the scapegoat. He believes that the two he-goats, one marked "for God," the other marked "for Azazel," are to remind Jews of the twin brothers Esau and Jacob. Esau, like the he-goat marked "for Azazel," wandered into the wilderness away from his people, its laws, and its traditions. Jacob, like the he-goat marked "for God," lived a life devoted to God's service. According to Abravanel, when Aaron, and the High Priests after him, cast lots to decide which of the two he-goats would be marked "for God" or "for Azazel," Jews were to be reminded that they had a significant free choice to make. They could live like Jacob or Esau, "for God" or "for Azazel." (See commentary on Leviticus 16.)



Hirsch

**The meaning of casting lots**

*Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch sees in the ceremony of deciding which goat will be "for God" and which "for Azazel" a symbol of the choice each Jew makes on Yom Kippur. "We can decide for God, gathering together all the powers of resistance we have been given to resist everything that would tear us away from our vocation to be near to God. . . . Or we can decide for Azazel*

*and uphold, unmastered, our selfish life of desires, and . . . give ourselves over to the uncontrolled might of sensuality. . . ." (Comment on Leviticus 16:10)*

Rabbi Hillel Silverman calls attention to the fact that, according to the Talmud, the two he-goats "must be identical in size, appearance, and value." In this, he contends, is an important lesson. The two goats symbolize what we are willing to give for our own pleasure and enjoyment (for Azazel) and what we are willing to give for the welfare and security of others (for God).

The Talmud insists, says Silverman, that the two goats be identical in size, appearance, and value in order to teach the lesson that "all we devote to personal pleasure and self-aggrandizement (for Azazel) goes 'into the wilderness,' unless we also sacrifice for the Lord and 'make atonement.'" (*From Week to Week*, pp. 108–109)

In other words, the ancient ritual is not just about the "scapegoat," but it is about what is done to both he-goats. One of them ends up as a sacred sacrifice "for God," symbolizing our generosity to others and loyalty to God; the other, "for Azazel," is sent off to wander and die in the wilderness, a sign that serving only our selfish pleasures and pride is a waste of our precious potentials. It is like wasting them in the wilderness. The ritual for both he-goats on Yom Kippur is a reminder of the delicate balance, between caring about oneself and about others, that each person is challenged to achieve.

While its origins are clouded in mystery, the ceremony of the two he-goats continued until the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Interest in uncovering its meaning and connection to Yom Kippur, however, has not ceased. Was it a magical way of ridding the people of Israel of its sins? Was the scapegoat, marked "for Azazel," actually sent out into the wilderness as a sacrifice to a demon or god of evil? Is the scapegoat ceremony a symbol of the various spiritual and ethical choices Jews must make on each Yom Kippur?

Perhaps, in the case of this ancient tradition of the scapegoat, we have an example where all the interpretations provided through the centuries may be correct!

## PEREK BET: *Defining "Holiness" in Jewish Tradition*

*Parashat Kedoshim* begins with God's command to the Jewish people: "You shall be holy (*kedoshim*), for I, the Lord your God, am holy (*kadosh*)." (Leviticus 19:2)

Many Torah interpreters ask what such a commandment means. Does it have to do with a special state of ritual purity? Since it is stated in the midst of a description of rituals associated with the ancient sanctuary, can it have to do with being qualified to enter the sanctuary? Is the commandment to "be holy" possible or practical? Is it realistic to expect a human being to "be holy" as God is "holy"?

Three of the oldest interpretations of the commandment to "be holy" provide some valuable answers to such questions. Rabbi Hiyya, who lived in Israel during the third century, stresses that Moses was told to present the commandment, "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy," to "the whole Israelite community." The commandment was given not to a few pious priests or individuals but rather to the entire community. Achieving the state of holiness, therefore, is not something done by one person or a small group of persons but rather by the whole people.

Rabbi Levi, who taught with Rabbi Hiyya, emphasizes that the commandment to "be holy" and the section of Torah following it were presented directly to the people because "the Ten Commandments are contained in it." Rabbi Levi may be hinting that the way to holiness is through observance of all the commandments listed in this section of Torah. Seeing a parallel between the contents of the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai and the mitzvot presented in these chapters of Leviticus, Levi concludes that God not only commanded the people to "be holy" but stressed the particular moral way of life that would demonstrate that they were a distinct people. (*Leviticus Rabbah* 24)

The *Sifra*, a fourth-century commentary on Leviticus, echoes Rabbi Levi's view. It interprets the words *kedoshim tiheyu* ("you shall be holy") as *perushim tiheyu* ("you shall be separate"). Some scholars say this is a reference to the Pharisees, who were known by the Hebrew name *Perushim*

and who taught that Jews achieved "holiness," or a special status of honor by God, if they carefully observed all the commandments.

Other interpreters argue that the authors of the *Sifra* meant to emphasize the unique responsibility of Jews to become a "kingdom of priests and a *goy kodesh*, or 'holy nation.'" They believed that, by living a Jewish life through carrying out the commandments of Torah, Jews were to be different from other nations, religions, and peoples. By interpreting the word *kedoshim* as *perushim*, the *Sifra's* authors contend that the words "be holy" mean "be different, unique, separate from the ways of others. Be distinct in your moral and ritual way of life."

Does this mean that Jews are to withdraw from the societies in which they live or from contact with people of other religions and national origins? Modern philosopher Martin Buber says no. He writes: "Israel must, in imitating God by being a holy nation, similarly not withdraw from the world of the nations but rather radiate a positive influence on them through every aspect of Jewish living." For Buber being *kadosh*, or "different, unique," does not mean retreating from contact with other religious and national groups. Instead, it is a special goal and responsibility. It means that the Jewish people must achieve an ethical and spiritual excellence that can enrich and "influence" all other peoples. (*Darko shel Mikra*, p. 96)

Yet what is the source of that positive "influence"? What may Buber mean by "every aspect of Jewish living"?

Surveying the commandments clustered around the words "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" provides a significant answer. Taken together they add up to a definition of "holiness" in Jewish tradition. Nearly "every aspect of Jewish living" is noted. Chapters 17–26 of Leviticus, which have become known to biblical scholars as the "Holiness Code," contain commandments that deal not only with the Sabbath, the festivals, and the different sacrifices to be offered at the sanctuary but also include commandments regulating the moral life of the Jewish community.

The list of ethical commandments encompasses nearly every aspect of human relationships. According to these commandments, Jewish morality forbids: exposure of nakedness, incest, infidelity

by husband or wife, idolatry or the worship of other gods, declaring false oaths, stealing, dealing deceitfully or falsely, defrauding another, retaining a worker's wage overnight, insulting the deaf, misleading the blind, rendering unfair decisions, favoring the poor in a dispute, showing partiality to the rich in a dispute, dealing dishonestly in business, profiting by taking advantage of others' misfortune, carrying grudges, spreading hatred, taking vengeance, practicing divination, soothsaying, or turning to ghosts and spirits. On the positive side, Jewish ethics command: reverence for parents, leaving the corners of the field and some of the fruit of the vineyard for the poor and stranger, judging all people fairly, warning others who are about to commit a wrong doing, and loving others as you love yourself.

What emerges in this Torah definition of "holiness" is a unique combination of both ethical and ritual demands. When the people are commanded "Be holy," they are actually being challenged with a unique combination of moral and spiritual obligations. God demands that they live by these practices and shape their relationships and community with them. In so doing, they will become a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." As a model of holiness, they will also inspire or, to use Martin Buber's phrase, "radiate a positive influence on them."

#### *To be holy*

*Rabbi Chaim Sofer comments that "to be holy" . . . means "not merely in the privacy of your home and ashamed of your faith in public. Be not, as the assimilationists put it, 'A Jew at home and a man outside.' Be holy 'in the community,' in public, out in the open, in society. Among your own people or in the midst of strangers, wherever you may find yourself, never be ashamed of your character and sanctity as a Jew." (Divre Sha'are Chaim)*

*Rabbi Aba explained the meaning of "be holy" by quoting the opinion of Rabbi Tanhum, the son of Rabbi Hiyyah: "If a person can protest a wrongdoing of another and does not, or if he can help support students of Torah and does not, such a person is not considered holy. But, if a person*

*does protest the wrongdoing of others and does support students of Torah, that person attains to holiness." (Leviticus Rabbah 15:1)*

*The idea of holiness implies that what we do and what we make of our lives matters not only to us as individuals, not only to society, but to the entire cosmos. A divine purpose runs through all existence. We can ally ourselves to it or oppose it—or, perhaps, worse, we can ignore it. (Bernard J. Bamberger, The Torah: A Modern Commentary, pp. 891–892)*

The rabbis of the Talmud emphasize that each Jew has the power to add to the achievement of holiness by the people of Israel. They speak of the "influence" of those who study Torah, calling attention to two types of students. One type studies Torah, generously supports scholars, speaks kindly to others, and is honest and honorable in all business dealings. Of such a person, people say: "Such and such studies Torah. His father and his teacher deserve to be proud of him, for his deeds reflect honor upon his tradition." The other type of person studies Torah but is dishonest, unkind, and selfish. So others say: "He learns Torah, but his deeds are corrupt and objectionable. He brings dishonor to his people, to the Torah, and to God." (Yoma 86a)

Clearly, the rabbis of the Talmud are concerned with the reputation of the Torah and of the Jewish people. If one lives by the commandment "Be holy" and carries out the laws that define "holiness," then the people of Israel are strengthened in their responsibility to be a model of moral decency and an influence for good among all peoples. For the rabbis of the Talmud, to "be holy" means that every Jew must ask: "What are the consequences of my decisions, choices, words, and promises? Will they improve the world in which I live? Will they reflect credit upon my people, upon the Torah, and upon God?"

#### *Achieving holiness*

*To say that God is "holy" is similar to saying that He is great, powerful, merciful, just, wise. . . . In order to achieve a holiness of the kind associated with God . . . Israel would have to*

*observe His laws and commandments. The way to holiness, in other words, was for Israelites, individually and collectively, to emulate God's attributes. . . . God shows the way and Israel follows. (Baruch A. Levine, JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus, p. 256)*



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Such questions may have been on the mind of Nachmanides as he thought about the meaning of the words "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." In his discussion of the commandment he raises a significant point. He argues that one can carry out the commandments but also be a selfish, mean, and corrupt human being. "A person," he comments, "can be a scoundrel with the full permission of the Torah."

Proving his point, Nachmanides says a person can follow all the sexual laws mentioned in the Torah but take advantage of his own wife in satisfying his uncontrolled passions. Or a person can drink too much, eat excessively, carelessly use obscenities, or speak derisively about others. In business dealings a person can uphold the law of not wronging another but still cheat others by being unwilling to reach fair compromises.

Nachmanides believes that, because one can always find loopholes in the Torah law, people will take advantage of it. That is why the Torah not only provides a long list of commandments dealing with every aspect of ethical and ritual life but also contains the "general command" to "be holy," reminding us "to separate ourselves from those things that are permitted but that we can do without . . . from unnecessary and ugly things." To "be holy," as Nachmanides interprets it, is to refuse to take advantage of legal loopholes or overindulge in matters permitted by the Torah. (See commentary on Leviticus 19:2.)

While interpreted in a variety of ways, the words "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" have been a constant challenge to the Jewish people. In some ages they influenced Jews to separate themselves from other cultures and peoples. At other times they were understood as a reminder that the highest aim of Jewish living is to reach

a "holiness" that reflects honor upon God, Torah, and the Jewish people. Today the ancient words continue to demand new interpretations and new standards for defining what is *kadosh*, or "holy," in Jewish tradition.

## PEREK GIMEL: *Can We Love Others as Ourselves?*

*Parashat Kedoshim* contains one of the most quoted of all commandments within the Torah: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18)

What does this statement mean? Can "love" be *commanded*? Is it possible for human beings to love others, especially outside their families, with the same level of interest and commitment that they have for themselves? What about those who come to harm us or who treat us unjustly? Can we be expected to love them as we love ourselves?



Zugot

One of the earliest explanations of the Torah's commandment comes in the form of a story told about Rabbi Hillel, a popular teacher of the first century B.C.E. Once a non-Jew challenged him with the promise: "I will convert to Judaism if you can teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Rabbi Hillel's response was immediate. "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now go and learn it." (*Shabbat* 31a)

It is obvious that Hillel preferred stating the Torah's positive commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" in a negative way. On other occasions, Hillel also deliberately chose a negative formulation instead of a positive one. For example, he taught: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I care only for myself, what am I? And, if not now, when?" (*Avot* 1:14) He also taught: "Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not be certain of yourself until the day of your death. Do not judge your neighbor until you have stood in his place. Do not say:



'When I have leisure time, I will study.' You may never have leisure time." (*Avot* 2:5)

From Hillel's statements we might conclude that he transposed the positive commandment about loving one's neighbor into a negative formulation because he was convinced that it was easier to understand. We can identify what hurts and harms us. We can say what brings us pain. Hillel's statement counsels that "loving our neighbors as ourselves" means asking, "If my neighbor did to me what I am thinking of saying or doing to him, would it hurt or harm me?" If the answer is "it would bring pain or harm," then it must be avoided.

But what if my tastes are different from my neighbor's? What if my neighbor is hurt by matters or statements that simply do not affect me at all? Is it fair to make judgments about what is hurtful or enjoyable to others from my own narrow perspective? Is it not true that "one person's meat is another person's poison"?

We are told that, when Rabbi Akiba, who considered himself a student of Rabbi Hillel, suggested that the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself" was "the greatest principle of the Torah," his colleague ben Azzai disagreed. Ben Azzai argued that the teaching "God created man in the likeness of God" (*Genesis* 5:1) was a more important principle.

Ben Azzai's view is that people cannot use their own feelings or attitudes as a basis for deciding how to treat others. Preferences, tastes, and perceptions of what brings happiness and what brings pain are very different. Some people are careless about their property; others are not. Because a person may not consider a remark insulting does not mean that another will agree. "You should not say," ben Azzai explains, "'Since I am hated, let my neighbor be similarly hated or, since I am in trouble, let my neighbor be similarly in trouble.' You should remember that both you and your neighbor were created in the likeness of God." In other words, we are to treat others with respect and love, not because we are commanded to do so, nor because we understand their feelings, tastes, or reactions to be like our own. We are to respect the rights, dignity, and feelings of others because, like us, they were created in God's likeness. (*Genesis Rabbah* 24)

***Why should we love our neighbor?***

*Commenting on the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord," ibn Ezra explains that one is responsible to love other human beings because the one God has created all of them. (See Leviticus 19:18.)*

Moses Maimonides also seeks to clarify what the Torah means when it commands "Love your neighbor as yourself." What is meant, says Maimonides, is that "you should love your neighbor with all the qualities and modes of love with which you love yourself." In other words, "the quality and nature of our love must be of the highest category—parallel to that which we employ in promoting our own welfare."

Maimonides, however, realizes the difficulty of the challenge of loving others. Therefore, he suggests it may not always be possible for human beings to provide an equal quantity of concern for the welfare of others. Love and concern, he counsels, are expressed in varying intensities "depending upon the circumstances." There are times when promoting the welfare of others may clash with what we believe is in our own best interest and welfare. In such cases, Maimonides suggests that the intensity and quantity of our love may be compromised. "The Torah," Maimonides concludes, "does not command the extent of our love but rather the genuine character of it."

As to the character of our love, Maimonides is quite specific. Loving your neighbor as you love yourself means visiting the sick, comforting mourners, joining a funeral procession, celebrating the marriage ceremony with bride and groom, offering hospitality, caring for the dead, or delivering a eulogy. Concluding his list of examples, Maimonides writes: "All the things that you would want others to do for you—do for your brothers and sisters." (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Evel* 14:1)

Like Maimonides, Nachmanides also senses that "loving" another person with the same intensity and quantity of concern that one has for oneself is not possible. He bluntly declares that "human beings cannot be expected to love their neighbors as they love their own souls." What the

Torah means by the command to “love your neighbor as you love yourself,” Nachmanides argues, is that people should “wish their neighbors well in all things, just as they wish success for themselves.”

Nachmanides maintains that “even if a person wishes another well in everything, in wealth, honor, learning, and wisdom, he will not want him to be absolutely equal with him. He will want to be superior to him in some ways.” The Torah recognizes this truth about human beings. That is why, says Nachmanides, “the Torah condemns this form of selfishness.” We are commanded “to love your neighbor as yourself” so that “we will learn to wish others success in all things, just as we wish well for ourselves—and to do so without reservations.” (See discussion on Leviticus 19:18.)



*Malbim*

Rabbi Meir Lev ben Yechiel Michael, known as Malbim, disagrees with both Maimonides and Nachmanides. He argues that the matter of loving one's neighbor is not an expression of feelings or wishing others “success in all things.” Instead, the commandment has to do with how one behaves toward others, with actions and not with thoughts.

Drawing upon Hillel's negative teaching and upon the philosophical writings of a contemporary, German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Malbim says that a person should not just wish for his neighbor what he wants for himself, namely, “advantage and protection from harm. He should endeavor to do everything that is to the advantage of his neighbor, whether in terms of bodily health or success in business . . . and it goes without saying that he should not be responsible for doing anything to his neighbor that he would not wish to be done to him. . . . For instance, if a person is prepared to harm his neighbor for the sake of his own advantage, he should ask himself whether he would wish this kind of conduct to become a universal rule.” A person would say to himself: “Do I want to live

in a world where everyone is free to do what I am about to do?” (See discussion on Leviticus 19:18.)



*Peli*

#### *Loving is also forgiving*

Basing his observation on one first created by the Ba'al Shem Tov, Pinchas Peli writes: “It does not take much effort to love good people, nice people. The test of the fulfillment of the commandment is in loving those who are not as good and lovable in one's eyes. ‘Love your fellow human—as yourself,’ as you accept yourself with all your faults and shortcomings, accept others the same way.” (Torah Today, p. 141)

#### *Loving without qualifications*

Simcha Zissel Ziv, a teacher of the Musar, or “Ethical,” movement of Judaism, writes: “The Torah demands that we promote the best interests of others. This cannot be accomplished by repressing our hatred or our rejection of them, nor by summoning up our love as a duty. Such endeavors will never bring genuine love. We simply have to love human beings as we love ourselves. We do not love ourselves because we are human beings, but our self-love comes to us naturally, without calculations, without qualifications and reservations, without any aims and ends. We never hear anybody say: ‘I have already fulfilled my obligation towards myself?’—We must love others the same way, naturally and spontaneously, joyously and creatively, without set limits, purposes, or rationalizations.” (As found in B.S. Jacobson, *Meditations on the Torah*, pp. 180–181)

This idea that love for oneself and love for others are mutually connected forms the basis of modern psychologist Erich Fromm's classic work *The Art of Loving* (Harper and Row, New York, 1974). Stressing the importance of “self-love,” Fromm writes, “The idea expressed in the biblical ‘Love

your neighbor as yourself?" implies that respect for one's own integrity and uniqueness, love for and understanding of one's own self, cannot be separated from respect and love and understanding for another individual. The love for my own self is inseparably connected with the love for any other being."

Fromm explains that "love is an activity . . . it is primarily *giving*, not receiving." In the act of giving, we do not lose, sacrifice, or "give up" that which is precious to us. Instead, giving allows us to experience our power, our vitality. "In giving," Fromm observes, "I experience my strength, my wealth, my power. This experience of heightened vitality and potency fills me with joy. I experience myself as overflowing, spending, alive. . . . Giving is more joyous than receiving . . . because in the act of giving lies the expression of my aliveness."

In defining "genuine love" as "giving," Fromm stresses that one must learn to give to oneself even before giving to others. "Love of others and love of ourselves are not alternatives. . . . Love, in principle, is *indivisible as far as the connection between 'objects' and one's own self is concerned*. Genuine love," Fromm writes, "is an expression of productiveness and implies care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge (of one's self and others). . . . It is an active striving for the growth and happiness of the loved person, rooted in one's own capacity to love. . . . If," Fromm warns, "an individual is able to love productively, he loves himself too; if he can love *only* others, he cannot love at all."

The Torah's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" continues to provoke significant questions about the meaning of love. Despite the various opinions and definitions, however, it is clear that Jewish tradition challenges us to love ourselves by striving for self-understanding, respect, and a sense of our powers for giving and to trans-

form our love of self into a generous love for others. (pp. 18–19, 48–53)

## QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Compare the various interpretations given for the "scapegoat." Which makes the most sense? Why?
2. Jews have often been the target for hatred, the "scapegoat" for the frustrations, anger, and disappointments of others. Rabbi Milton Steinberg suggests that only Jews who are knowledgeable and proud of the "positive healthful values" of their tradition will not be "invaded by self-contempt." Such Jews would not be affected by the hatred of those who would try to make them scapegoats. Do you agree? Why?
3. How would you define "holiness" in Jewish tradition? What are its elements? What must the individual Jew do to achieve "holiness"? What must the Jewish people do?
4. Is it realistic to expect that human beings can really fulfill the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself"? Do you agree or disagree with Erich Fromm that, unless you love yourself, you cannot really love your neighbor?
5. Rabbi Leo Baeck notes the talmudic teaching that "the person who withholds love from another is like one who rejects the service of God." Baeck comments: "To place oneself in the position of our neighbor, to understand his hope and his yearning, to grasp the needs of his heart is the presupposition of all neighborly love, the outcome of our 'knowledge' of his soul." (*The Essence of Judaism*, Schocken Books, New York, 1948, pp. 211–212) How would you compare Baeck's observations with those of Hillel, Maimonides, Nachmanides, and Malbim?