

Walter made it all the way around the block this week.

It doesn't sound like a big deal, but when I first met Walter he refused to move at all, just plopped down in the middle of the sidewalk.

Now- I should probably explain that when you are a six week old corgi puppy, nobody cares that you are sitting in the middle of the sidewalk because they can't walk by you without stopping to coo anyways. So that's how my sister-in-law and I met Walter, on our walk to the gym on Chol Hamoed Pesach.

Walter's owner explained that actually this- sitting on the sidewalk- was progress, because yesterday he wouldn't wear his leash at all, and refused to go outside. So today they were outside, and that was enough for one day. This week, I was walking back from the grocery store and I saw Walter walking on the sidewalk. His owner excitedly told me the big news: Walter made it all the way around the block this week.

What struck me about this whole thing is first of all how devastatingly cute corgi puppies are. Like cuter than really almost anything else.

But second of all- I hadn't previously understood that dogs needed to learn how to be dogs, how to do the most fundamental dog things. It didn't come naturally to Walter to pee on the sidewalk, take a walk, or do any of the other dog things that the more than [20,000 dogs in Lakeview](#) do every day.

And it got me thinking about how humans need to be taught how to do human things as well. Things that are fundamental to our survival are ultimately learned: walking, talking, sharing, potty training.

The tenth century Torah scholar and Jewish philosopher Rav Saadia Gaon, who presided over the ancient yeshiva in Sura, located in modern day Iraq, wrote a work of Jewish philosophy called "Emunot v'Deot." In the third chapter he describes a category of commandments called מצוות שכליות-- Mitzvot of Reason. The other category are מצוות שמעיות-- Mitzvot of Revelation. Other Jewish philosophers have followed in his footsteps, quibbling over exactly which mitzvot fall into which category. But the general idea is that some mitzvot just make a lot of sense to us, they are mitzvot that our rational minds might have even constructed on their own. There are other Mitzvot that we wouldn't know and wouldn't observe except for revelation-- except that Hashem asked it of us.

You might have imagined that the מצוות שכליות, the rational mitzvot, wouldn't require a lot of effort on our part. They are obvious, they make our society better in clear ways-- so we would just do them because they are clearly required of a decent human being.

But the problem is that we're all a little bit like Walter. He needs training and guidance to learn how to be a dog. We need training and guidance to learn how to be humans.

Just about every society has some version of the [Golden Rule](#). They are iterated in different ways: "Never do ourselves what we blame in others" is retold in the name of [Thales](#), a pre-socratic Greek philosopher. "Treat your inferior as you would wish your superior to treat you" wrote the Roman, Seneca the Younger.

In the words of our Parsha:

ואהבת לרעך כמוך

Love your fellow as yourself.

Or as re-told by Hillel to the convert who asked to hear the whole Torah while he stood on one foot:

דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד

That which is hateful to you do not do to another.

A principle which exists in just about every culture-- this is a perfect example of Saadia Gaon's idea of "Rational Mitzvot." It's so rational that everyone else came up with it also. It's obvious.

But Hillel's response to the convert doesn't end with his iteration of the Golden Rule. Hillel goes on to say:

ואידך פירושה הוא, זיל גמור

The rest is its interpretation. Go study.

Go study. The Golden rule requires interpretation and study. It isn't obvious. We don't know how to live this out in our lives without guidance. Fortunately for us, the Torah provides us with that guidance.

Maimonides, the thirteenth century Spanish and Egyptian scholar, wrote in his [Mishneh Torah](#):

מצות עשה של דבריהם

It is a positive rabbinic mitzvah - and then he lays out a whole long list: to visit the sick, to comfort mourners, to attend funerals, to attend weddings, to escort guests, to be involved in all the needs of a burial, to eulogize and to bury. To bring joy to the bride and groom and make sure they have everything they need. Rambam continues:

אף על פי שכל מצות אלו מדבריהם הרי הן בכלל (ויקרא יט יח) "ואהבת לרעך כמוך".

Even though all these precepts are of rabbinic origin, they are expressions of the biblical verse: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18);

כל הדברים שאמרו רוצה שיעשו אותם לך אחרים. עשה אתה אותן לאחיך בתורה ובמצות:

That is, whatever you would have others do to you, do to your brothers in Torah and mitzvot.

Each one of these mitzvot that the Rambam has just laid out are parts of living up to the Jewish standard of the Golden Rule. And there are whole books detailing how to most effectively perform these mitzvot-- we've even been studying one on weekday afternoons between Mincha and Maariv these past few months. Even with such a rational mitzvah, the Torah doesn't leave it up to us to figure it out for ourselves. Go and learn, tells Hillel to the convert, and that's exactly what every Jew needs to do.

For example, in most every culture, people get married. But how exactly do we celebrate with the bride and groom, how do we make this moment special with them? How do we make sure that every new couple are treated the way we would want to be treated in this time of joy?

There are some real complications involved. The Talmud in [Ketubot](#) asks a well known question: כיצד מרקדין לפני הכלה? How does one dance before the bride? Today this is a common wedding song, but in

the context of the Talmud it means, “what should a person say to a bride on her wedding day?” And actually it’s a complicated question-- particularly if they didn’t pick the right dress or makeup artist.

It’s a mitzvah to make the bride happy, but are you allowed to lie? Beit Shammai say no you are not allowed to lie כלה כמות שהיא -- but Beit Hillel disagrees, they say you should tell her she’s beautiful. This isn’t some secular, ethical argument that happens to be played out between two ancient Rabbis-- this is a Torah argument, about how to best be a Jew in the world, how to best celebrate together, how to be a Jewish person in a Jewish community where we see others as extensions of ourselves and treat them accordingly. These questions aren’t simple, we need a thousands years old tradition to help us figure them out-- because the answers put forward by Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel are both reasonable, but ultimately we go with Beit Hillel. You would not want someone to think you don’t look great on your wedding day. Love your fellow as yourself.

Another example. This one from the opposite end of the human emotional spectrum. Maimonides lists ניהום אבלים, comforting mourners, as another obligation stemming from v’ahavta l’reyacha kamocho. These obligations begin at the funeral and the burial, but mostly take place at the Shiva home. For seven days, the mourners sit in low stools and torn clothing and they are homebound-- because our tradition forces people to deal with their loss, to sit in it. And the [Talmud](#)’s advice for visitors to a shiva home coming to provide comfort? אמר רב פפא אגרא דבי טמיה שתיקותא
Rav Pappa said: The primary reward for attending a house of mourning is for the silence. Shiva callers are rewarded for their silence. This is the best way to offer consolation to a mourner: a quiet ear, an open heart. The mourner has deep work to do during their week of Shiva-- visitors are there to help.

In Orthodox communities, most people who visit a shiva sit in silence. Conversation is led, or not led, by the mourners-- who can choose silence if they so prefer. This is a prime example of where our version of V’ahavta l’reyacha kamocho is different from what you might see in other cultures. In the rest of America, people just go back to work after these losses. They cope with them privately, or perhaps not at all. In Judaism we say: our community is here, mourning with you-- with all the complexities of your loss. But it takes work to learn how to make a shiva call, particularly because they are counter-cultural. We are so fortunate to have Torah, halacha, mitzvot that guide us in how to support mourners, making space and showing love to them the way we would hope others would make space and show love to us. V’ahavta l’reyacha kamocho.

Like Walter, Dogs need to learn how to Dog, and humans need to learn how to Human. In a few short years, Walter will be a fully fledged dog-- capable of all the dog things. But humans-- that takes a lifetime of striving and study and practice.

Let’s never be fooled by the idea of “rational mitzvot”-- even if they make sense to us in theory, that doesn’t make us natural experts in their performance. Rational mitzvot, mitzvot that are shared by other societies, mitzvot that even a secular atheist might live their life by-- they still aren’t easy to figure out. Each one of us is still in the process of learning how to do the human things-- and Judaism has a particular trove of wisdom to offer us as guidance and commandment. We are the inheritors of thousands of years of wisdom for how to live out the Golden Rule-- or for us, The Golden Mitzvah.

So I leave you with the advice offered by Hille: ואיך פירושה הוא, -- the rest is commentary; there's more than a lifetime's worth of commentary.
זיל גמור, go and learn.

Shabbat Shalom.