

Judaism's "Great Principle":

But What Does It Mean to Love Our Neighbor?

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I. The Verse(s)

1. ויקרא יט:יז-יח

לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך הוכח תוכיח את עמיתך ולא תשא עליו חטא: לא תקם ולא תטור את בני עמך ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני יקוק:

1. Leviticus 19:17-18 (New JPS translation)

¹⁷You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord.

II. "The [or perhaps "A"] Great Principle of the Torah"

2. ספרא קדושים ב:ד

ואהבת לרעך כמוך, רבי עקיבא אומר זה כלל גדול בתורה, בן עזאי אומר זה ספר תולדות אדם, זה כלל גדול מזה

2. Sifra Kedoshim 2:4

"And you shall love your neighbor as yourself": R. Akiva says: This is the ["a?"] great principle in the Torah. Ben Azzai says: "This is the record of Adam's line" (Genesis 5:1) — This is an even greater principle.

III. Action, Emotion, or Both? Perspectives from Bible Scholarship

A. Action (primarily):

3. Jay Sklar, *Leviticus* (2014), p. 247

Love is not first and foremost a feeling, but an action. In this context, such love means a person is to forgive a neighbor's wrongs as quickly as his or her own. More broadly applied, it means a person is to show others the same practical care he or she shows himself or herself.



4. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22* (2000), 1653

How can love be commanded? The answer is simply that the verb *ahav* signifies not only an emotion or attitude, but also deeds.

B. Emotion:

5. Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (2004), pp. 337, 346

Remarkably, this law [in v. 17] controls an *internal attitude* that is “in your heart.” No human legislative body would dream of formulating such a decree because not even the FBI, with the latest surveillance technology, can enforce it. The Lord can hold people responsible to love (19:18) rather than hate (19:17) or covet (Exodus 20:17) because [God’s] perception penetrates human thought... In this contrast between love and hatred at the heart of Leviticus 19, the divine legislation reaches behind superficial action to its cognitive and emotional driving forces...

Whereas we tend to think of “love” as a feeling, in the Bible it is also a principle. The verb *a-h-v* (“love”) in Leviticus 19:18 includes the idea of affection, but the fact that God can command [God’s] people to love shows that love is something they can choose to do rather than passively waiting for a certain feeling. If love were only a feeling to fall into, how could the Lord hold anyone accountable for having it? Whether we naturally like another person or not, God requires us to treat him or her according to the principle of love, which rules out harboring a grudge.

C. Emotion and Action:

6. Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus* (2002), p. 165

The word *love* implies both attitude and act; one must not only feel love but also act in ways that translate love into concrete deeds. Just as one expresses love for God through active obedience to God’s commandments, so one must demonstrate love for others by reaching out to them with tangible deeds of compassion and concern...

The word *neighbor* refers to a wide range of persons with whom Israel would have had relationships...The “neighbor” is not limited to the peer with whom one shares a certain social status. It is also the disadvantaged person shunted to the edges of society, especially those persons the community may be tempted to ignore, perhaps even abuse, for economic, political, or physical reasons.



D. Philosophical Interlude: Are We Responsible for Our Emotions?

7. Nancy Sherman, “Taking Responsibility for Our Emotions” (1999), p. 294

We often hold people morally responsible for their emotions. We praise individuals for their compassion, think less of them for their ingratitude or hatred, reproach self-righteousness and unjust anger. In the cases I have in mind, the ascriptions of responsibility are not simply for offensive behaviors or actions which may accompany the emotions, but for the emotions themselves as motives or states of mind. We praise and blame people for what they feel and not just for how they act. In cases where people may subtly mask their hatred or ingratitude through more kindly actions, we still may find fault with the attitude we see leaking through the disguise.

IV. Action, Emotion, or Both? Perspectives from Jewish Law and Thought

E. Actions: What One Must Not Do

8. תלמוד בבלי בבא מציעא סב.

שנים שהיו מהלכין בדרך, וביד אחד מהן קיתון של מים, אם שותין שניהם- מתים, ואם שותה אחד מהן - מגיע לישוב. דרש בן פטורא: מוטב שישתו שניהם וימותו, ואל יראה אחד מהם במיתתו של חברו. עד שבא רבי עקיבא ולימד: וחי אחיך עמך - חייך קודמים לחיי חברך.

8. Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 62a

If two are traveling on a journey [far from civilization], and one has a pitcher of water, if both drink, they will [both] die, but if one only drinks, he can reach civilization, — The Son of Patura taught: It is better that both should drink and die, rather than that one should behold his companion's death. Until R. Akiba came and taught: “That your brother may live with you” (Leviticus 25:36). your life takes precedence over his life.

9. תלמוד בבלי שבת לא.

מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת. דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו. בא לפני הלל, גייריה. אמר לו: דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד - זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך - פירושה הוא, זיל גמור.

9. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

It happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, “Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah. All the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.”



10. תרגום יונתן ויקרא יט:יח

לא תהוון נקמין ולא נטרין דבבו לבני עמך ותרחמי לחברך דמן אנת סני לך לא תעביד ליה אנא יי:

10. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan

Do not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people; love your fellow, for what is hateful to you yourself, do not do him, I am the Lord.

F. Actions: What One Must Do

11. רמב"ם הלכות אבל יד:א

מצות עשה של דבריהם לבקר חולים, ולנחם אבלים, ולהוציא המת, ולהכניס הכלה, וללוות האורחים, ולהתעסק בכל צרכי הקבורה, לשאת על הכתף, ולילך לפניו ולספוד ולחפור ולקבור, וכן לשמח הכלה והחתן, ולסעודם בכל צרכיהם, ואלו הן גמילות חסדים שבגופו שאין להם שיעור, אע"פ שכל מצות אלו מדבריהם הרי הן בכלל ואהבת לרעך כמוך, כל הדברים שאתה רוצה שיעשו אותם לך אחרים, עשה אתה אותן לאחריך בתורה ובמצות.

11. Maimonides (1135-1204 CE), Mishneh Torah, Laws of Mourning 14:1

It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, to prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial, carry a corpse on one's shoulders, walk before the bier, mourn, dig a grave, and bury the dead, and also to bring joy to a bride and groom and help them in all their needs. These are deeds of kindness that one carries out with his person that have no limit. Even though all of these commandments are of Rabbinic status, they are included in "Love your neighbor as yourself"—all the things you would want others to do for you, you do for your brother in Torah and the commandments.

12. הכתב והקבלה ויקרא קדושים יט

(יח) ואהבת לרעך כמוך.

12. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865), Haketav VehaKabbalah on Leviticus 19

(18) And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

ר"ל כל אופני הטוב והחסד שאדם מסכים בדעתו וגומר בלבו שראוי לו לקבל מאהובו יעשה לרעהו שהוא כל אדם, והוא, ראובן רוצה משמעון אהובו שיתנהג עמו כאהוב נאמן בכל הדברים, וחושב בלבו אלה הדברים והאופנים שראוי לו לשמעון להתנהג עמי,

[Scripture] means to say that all of the kinds of goodness and kindness which a person is confident that he should be receiving from his friend, he should do for his fellow—that is, for



every human being. For example, Reuven wants his friend Shimon to treat him like a faithful friend in all things, and considers which are the things and the modes of conduct that it would be appropriate for Shimon to treat me with.

א' שיאהב אותו באמת לא בזיוף,
 ב' שיתנהג בי כבוד תמיד כי כן ראוי להיות וכמאמר חז"ל, כבוד חברך כמורא רבך,
 ג' שידרש שלומי תמיד כי כן ראוי לרעים אהובים להיות בשלום תמיד ולדרוש איש בשלום רעהו,

First, he should truly and sincerely love him;

Second, he should always treat me with respect, as is appropriate, and as our Sages tell us in Pirkei Avot, “[Let] your friend’s honor be (as dear to you) as your teacher’s honor [i.e. very dear]”;

Third, that he should always seek my well-being; as is appropriate among close friends-- to be at peace and to seek out one another’s well-being;

ד' שישתתף בצערי,
 ה' שיקבל אותי בסבר פנים יפות כשאבוא לביתו,
 ו' שידון אותי לכף זכות בכל דבר,

Fourth, that he will share in my sorrow;

Fifth, that he will welcome me with a warm smile (*be-sever panim yafot*) when I visit his home;

Sixth, that he always judge me favorably (*le-khaf zekhut*) in every matter;

ז' שיתנדב בגופו באיזה טרחה קטנה בשבילי והוא ילוני בעמלו לפעמים בדבר שלא יעמל בו הרבה,
 ח' שיתנדב להושיע לי בדבר מועט מממונו לפעמים בעת שאצטרך בהלואה או במתנה דבר קטן ולא ימנע ממני שאלה אחת קטנה כדרך טוב איש חונן ומלוה,
 ט' שלא יתגאה עלי,

Seventh, that he himself will gladly go through a little trouble for my sake

Eighth, that out of his own accord, he will help me with a little money when I need a loan or a small gift, and that he won’t deny me some minor request, as is the way of someone who is generous and giving;

Ninth, that he won’t be too haughty towards me;

והוא מסכים בשכלו וגומר בלבו עוד דברים רבים כאלה, אבל לא יסכים בשכלו ששמעון יתן לו כל הממון
 שלו וכל רכושו באהבתו אותו, זה לא ירצה ראובן מעמו ולא יחפוץ מאתו, כי הדעת לא יסבל זה והשכל
 לא יחייב כן;

Reuven is confident of many more such things, but he will not think that Shimon needs to give him (to Reuven) all his wealth and all his possessions because of his love for him; this Reuven would not want from him, for this is unreasonable and cannot be expected.



והנה כל האופנים במספרם כמשפטם אשר יחפץ לבב ראובן שיעשה לו שמעון אוהבו, אותן בעצמן צריך שיעשה ראובן לשמעון, ובזה הוא יוצא ידי חובת אהבת שמעון בשלמות גמור, לא שצריך למסור לשמעון כל ממונו וכל ביתו עם חדריו ועליותיו וכל רכושו באהבתו אותו, שהרי אין רוצה כזאת משמעון רעהו, וז"ש ואהבת לרעך כמוך כלומר האהבה לרעך יהיה בכל אותן האופנים, כמוך, כמו שאתה מבקש את האהבה מרעך.

All these various aspects [of goodness] that Reuven wishes in his heart that Shimon would do for him, Reuven himself must do these very things for Shimon; that's how he fulfills his duty of loving Shimon wholeheartedly. Not that he needs to hand Shimon all his money, and his whole house with all its rooms and floors, and all his belongings out of love for him, because he does not want this from Shimon his friend. Therefore it says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," which means that your love for your fellow will be in all ways, just like you the love you want to receive from your fellow.

ומעתה לא יקשה בעיניך מה שנתקשו המפרשים ע"ז הפסוק איך תצוה התורה דבר שהוא נגד הטבע ואין האדם יכול לקיימו? ולברוח מן המצר הזה ברחו ונפלו בדחוקים עמוקים, כי י"א כי כמוך על דרך הפלגה וגוזמא, וי"א כי כמוך בהנאה בדבר שאתה מקבל הנאה תתן לו, אם אתה אוהב סוס תן לו וכדומה לזה; And from all this, what the commentators struggled with in this verse will no longer seem difficult to you: how can the Torah command something that is against (human) nature and that cannot be fulfilled by a human being? In order to escape this bind, they appealed to extremely forced explanations, for some say that the word "*kamokha*," as yourself, is exaggeration and hyperbole, and some say that it refers to pleasure, meaning that you should give him things that bring you pleasure, such as if you like horses, you should give those to him, etc.

ובאמת אין אנו צריכים אל הדחוקים האלו כי לא קשה מלת כמוך כלל, כי בזה תבאר לנו התורה כוונתה שתצוה על דבר שהוא דרך הטבע, ושכל אדם יוכל לקיימה, לא על דבר שהוא נגד הטבע ושאינו אדם יוכל לקיימה.

But in reality, we don't need these forced explanations, for the word "*kamokha*," as yourself, is not difficult at all. Through it, the Torah tells us its intent to command us regarding things that accord with nature that every person can fulfill, and not things that are against nature which no one can fulfill.



G. Emotions: What One Must Feel

13. רמב"ן פרשת קדושים יט

וטעם ואהבת לרעך כמוך - הפלגה, כי לא יקבל לב האדם שיאהוב את חבירו כאהבתו את נפשו, ועוד שכבר בא רבי עקיבא ולמד חייך קודמין לחיי חבירך (ב"מ סב א):

אלא מצות התורה שיאהב חבירו בכל ענין כאשר יאהב את נפשו בכל הטוב. ויתכן בעבור שלא אמר "ואהבת את רעך כמוך", והשוה אותם במלת "לרעך", וכן ואהבת לו כמוך (פסוק לד) דגר, שיהיה פירושו להשוות אהבת שניהם בדעתו, כי פעמים שיאהב אדם את רעהו בדברים ידועים להטיבו בעושר ולא בחכמה וכיוצא בזה, ואם יהיה אוהבו בכל יחפוץ שיזכה רעהו האהוב לו בעושר ובנכסים וכבוד ובדעת ובחכמה, ולא שישוה אליו אבל יהיה חפץ בלבו לעולם שיהיה הוא יותר ממנו בכל טובה, ויצוה הכתוב שלא תהיה פחיתות הקנאה הזאת בלבו, אבל יאהב ברבות הטובה לחבירו כאשר אדם עושה לנפשו ולא יתן שיעורין באהבה. ועל כן אמר ביהונתן (ש"א כ יז) כי אהבת נפשו אהבו, בעבור שהסיר מדת הקנאה מלבו ואמר (שם כג יז) ואתה תמלוך על ישראל וגו' :

13. Nahmanides (1194-1270) on Leviticus 19

This is an expression by way of overstatement, for a human heart is not able to accept a commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. Moreover, Rabbi Akiva has already come and taught, "Your life takes precedence over the life of your fellow-being." Rather, the commandment of the Torah means that one is to love one's fellow-being in all matters, as one loves all good for oneself. It is possible that since it does not say "and thou shalt love 'et rei'akha' [which literally means "to" thy neighbor], and similarly it states with reference to a proselyte, and *thou shalt love 'lo' (him) [but literally: to him] as thyself*, that the meaning thereof is to equate the love of both [himself and his neighbor, or himself and the proselyte] in his mind. For sometimes a person will love his neighbor in certain matters, such as doing good to him in material wealth but not with wisdom and similar matters. But if he loves him completely, he will want his beloved friend to gain riches, properties, honor knowledge and wisdom. However [because of human nature] he will still not want him to be his equal, for there will always be desire to his heart that he should have more of these good things than his neighbor. Therefore Scripture commanded that this degree of jealousy should not exist in his heart, but instead a person should love to do abundance of good for his fellow-being as he does for himself, and he should place no limitations upon his love for him. It is for this reason that it is said of Jonathan's [love for David], *for he loved him as he loved his own soul*, because Jonathan had removed [altogether] the attribute of jealousy from his heart, and he said [to David], *and thou shalt be king over Israel*, etc.

