

“The entire Jewish people are a single, perfect whole.”
—Zohar

The importance of love between Jews has been discussed over and over, in every generation, by Jewish rabbinical giants, common folk, and school children. What is the magic of this mitzvah? Why is it so important? The key is in a Gemara, Yoma 9b, which says that the 2nd Temple was destroyed because of the baseless hatred one Jew had for another. In the words of the Gemara, "אבל מקדש שני שהיו עוסקין בתורה ובמצוות וגמילות חסדים, מפני מה חרב? מפני שהיתה בו שנאת חנם." "However, during the Second Temple period Jews were engaged in Torah study, observance of mitzvot, and acts of kindness, so why was the Second Temple destroyed? It was destroyed due to the fact that there was baseless hatred during that period."

This has led to an urgent call for Jews around the world to focus on increasing love towards one another, hoping to learn from our mistakes and ultimately rebuild the temple. This sounds nice, but it's vague. What *is* the mitzvah of Ahavat Yisrael? How can one implement it?

Let's take a look at the original source for this idea- Leviticus, 19:18

“לא תקם ולא תטור את בני עמך ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני ה'”

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people. **Love your fellow as yourself:** I am ה'.”

What does it mean to “love your fellow as yourself?” There's a famous Gemara, Shabbat 31a, that sheds light on this.

“מעשה בגוי אחד שבא לפני שמאי. אמר לו: גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאתה 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.”

“There's a story about one gentile, who came before Shammai. He said to him: ‘Convert me on condition that you can teach me the entire Torah as I stand on one foot!’ Shammai pushed him away with a building tool in his hand. The gentile came before Hillel, who converted him. Hillel said, ‘what is hateful to you, don't do to your fellow. This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and learn.’”

This story explains the meaning of loving your fellow “as yourself” and highlights the extreme emphasis the Torah Judaism places on the command.

Many years later, the great sage Rabi Akiva also commented on the verse in Leviticus. To quote Talmud Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:3:

“ואהבת לרעך כמוך. אמר רבי עקיבא זה כלל גדול בתורה.”

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”. Rabi Akiva says this is a major principle of the Torah.”

Again, we see this primal focus on Ahavat Yisrael in Judaism. Yet Rabi Akiva's message for us is not so simple. Upon closer examination, questions arise. What was Rabi Akiva contributing with his statement? Hadn't Hillel already mentioned the significance and fundamental value of

this Mitzvah, generations earlier? And to further our confusion, Rabi Akiva seems to attribute *less* significance to the command than Hillel had- whereas Hillel considered Ahavat Yisrael to be the *entire* Torah, Rabi Akiva “only” considered it to be a major principle- important, but not all encompassing. What is Rabi Akiva trying to tell us?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains (The Chassidic Dimension, Vayikra, volume two) that Hillel and Rabi Akiva are not actually talking about the same thing. Each of them is approaching the Mitzvah of Ahavat Yisrael from a completely different angle. Rabi Akiva, on one hand, is approaching the topic with an earthly, applied perspective. When a Jewish soul comes down to this world into a physical body, it depends upon the Torah to connect it to Hashem. In this way, the Torah is “above” the Jew, and the Jew exists within the confines of the Torah. This is why, practically, one may not freely violate the laws of the Torah to fulfill an act of Ahavat Yisrael. Certainly, Rabi Akiva considers Ahavat Yisrael to be of vital importance, a “major principle of the Torah,” but it is not, in this context, the *entire* Torah. In our mundane, physical reality, Rabi Akiva is saying, the way to love another is by raising him to the standard of Torah, not by compromising on Torah to meet his standard.

Hillel, conversely, is teaching us about Jewish souls as they are at their source- the level at which every Jew *precedes* Torah. This idea is backed up by Beraishis Rabba, 1:4, which states that

"מחשבתו של ישראל קדמה לכל דבר"- "The thought of the Jewish people preceded any other thing"

On this level, the Jewish people are the essential reason for the existence of the world, and all of Torah is *for* the Jewish people. Since the Mitzvah of Ahavat Yisrael is what brings out the unique qualities of the Jewish people, it follows logically that “this is the entire Torah -the rest is commentary.”

Chapter 32 of the Tanya (פרק ל"ב - being the Hebrew word for heart), is all about Ahavat Yisrael. The Alter Rebbe expounds on Hillel’s statement in a way that makes it possible to access this essential, soul level of Ahavat Yisrael while living in the reality Rabi Akiva describes. Here is an excerpt:

"בְּשֵׁם שְׂכּוּלָן מְתַאֲיָמוֹת, וְאָב אֶחָד לְכוֹלְנָהּ, וְלִכֵּן נִקְרְאוּ כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל "אֲחִים" מִמֶּשׁ, מִצַּד שׁוֹרֵשׁ נַפְשָׁם בְּה' אֶחָד רַק שֶׁהַגּוּפִים מְחֻלְקִים. וְלִכֵּן, הָעוֹשִׂים גּוּפִם עֵיָקָר וְנַפְשָׁם טְפִלָּה – אִי אֶפְשָׁר לְהִיּוֹת אֶהְבָּה וְאַחֲנוּה אֲמִיתִית בֵּינֵיהֶם, אֲלֵא הַתְּלוּיָהּ בְּדָבָר לְבָדָה. וְנִהוּ שְׂאֵמֵר הַלֵּל הַזֶּקֶן עַל קִיּוֹם מִצְוֵה זֶה: 'נִהוּ כָּל הַתּוֹרָה כּוֹלָהּ, וְאֵיךְ פִּירוּשָׁא הוּא כּוֹ כִּי יִסּוּד וְשׁוֹרֵשׁ כָּל הַתּוֹרָה – הוּא לְהַגְבִּיֵה וּלְהַעֲלוֹת הַנַּפְשׁ עַל הַגּוּף"

“Being, moreover, all of a kind and all having one Father — therefore, all Israelites are called real brothers by virtue of the source of their souls in the One G-d; only the bodies are separated. Therefore, in the case of those who give major consideration to their bodies while regarding their souls as of secondary importance, there can be no true love and brotherhood among them, but only [a love] which is dependent on a [transitory] thing. This is what Hillel the Elder meant when he said in regard to the fulfillment of this commandment, ‘This is the whole Torah; the rest is but commentary...’ For the basis and root of the entire Torah is to raise and exalt the soul high above the body.”

In other words, the Alter Rebbe is explaining that when we accustom ourselves to looking past superficialities and seeing people as they are at their core, each a precious Neshama of Hashem, we will be able to truly love every Jew unconditionally, regardless of their stature or other external details. Here’s a story that illustrates the Alter Rebbe’s perspective on the primacy of this Mitzvah: the disciples of the Alter Rebbe asked him: "Which is the greater virtue, love of G-d or love of one's fellow?" The Alter Rebbe replied, “the two are one and the same.” He then explained, “G-d loves every one of His children. So ultimately, love of one's fellow is a greater

show of love for G-d than simply loving G-d. Because true love means that you love what your loved one loves.”

With knowledge of all of the above, it becomes obvious that Ahavat Yisrael is really the core of our nation's survival. From a spiritual perspective, we know that our nation cannot live without Ahavat Yisrael. One proof of this is the students of Rabi Akiva who died because of their lack of Ahavat Yisrael. On a cosmic level, we discussed how Ahavat Yisrael will bring about the final redemption- a time when death is entirely eliminated. Ahavat Yisrael can also be seen as the basis of the entire Torah, and the purpose of creation, per Hillel's statement. With the explanation of the Alter Rebbe, it becomes obvious that someone who is lacking in Ahavat Yisrael is severely deficient in their love and service of Hashem. And, on the most mundane and basic level, the only way for our nation to survive is if we present a united front that is strong from the inside.

Ok, so we see how important it is to be loving and accepting to all Jews. But this mitzvah is easier said than done, and requires a lot of Avodah. It can be hard to develop a feeling that isn't present naturally. According to Chabad philosophy, the most effective way to develop any sort of emotion is through intellect, as the mind rules over the heart. This means spending time learning, and continuing to think about what one has learned.

The more a person understands, the more they will, eventually, feel.

Here are some suggestions of what to learn:

- 1) מאמר החלצו: this Chassidic discourse changes lives. Written by the Rebbe Rashab, the discourse addresses the reasons for disharmony between Jews and what to do about it. Though it was written in 1898, it is as relevant and relatable as if it had been written today. The Rebbe Rayatz recommended that it should be studied periodically both publicly and privately.
- 2) "מעשה אבות סימן לבנים"- the stories of the fathers are lessons for the sons. Share stories of Jewish figures who excelled in this Mitzvah! In his very first talk, the Lubavitcher Rebbe shared a story of each of his predecessors and their Ahavat Yisrael. There are countless stories of great Jewish leaders and their kindness and concern for others. Children should hear from their parents and teachers about Avraham hosting guests, Rochel's sacrifice so as not to embarrass her sister, and Moshe caring for even the smallest sheep. Stories are a great way for adults to internalize the message as well.
- 3) Perek 32 of Tanya. This chapter answers questions such as “how can I love another as much as I love myself if my self love is inborn?” and “how do we respond to Jews who are sinning while loving them wholeheartedly?”
- 4) Learn about others. Don't let your preconceived notions and first impressions stop you from developing meaningful connections with people who might seem different.

Don't make the mistake of waiting to be completely transformed by your learning to busy yourself with actions of Ahavat Yisrael!

Here are some ideas of how to incorporate Ahavat Yisrael into daily life:

- 1) “Each morning, before your prayers, commit yourself to love every other Jew as your own self. Then your prayers will be accepted and bear fruit.”
—Rabbi Isaac Luria, the “Ari”
- 2) Be careful not to speak or listen to Lashon Hara
- 3) Reach out to people who might be lonely

- 4) Look for opportunities to assist Jews- the Baal Shem Tov taught, "a soul may descend into this world and live for 70 or 80 years just to do a favor for another Jew."(Hayom Yom, 5 Iyar)
- 5) Use your resources to help those in need: host guests, cook meals, or visit the sick
- 6) Share your most precious treasure- Torah and Mitzvot- with other Jews

By each working within ourselves, we will soon merit our nation reunited as a single, perfect whole.