

Loving Far, Too

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Why do you commit to a dinner six months from now that you would not choose to attend this evening? Philosopher Derek Parfit points out that we have a 'bias toward the near.' Things close to us seem of more importance than things far away. The remote feels less real. This is true chronologically but also geographically: people next door seem more real than those across the sea.

We are often flummoxed by this bias. Six months from now we will have to scramble for an excuse to avoid the dinner, or else attend. (You might resort to Cocteau's immortal justification: "Canceling on account of a subsequent engagement.")

The Bible acknowledges our bias: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But it also seeks to make the stranger as close as one's neighbor, and to make the far future vividly present to us. Moral life cannot only be lived with those next door. Someone starving across the world is as real as someone living beneath the bridge near our own homes. Bias toward the near in people and in time is important and helpful: our family and today are naturally our imminent priorities. To be fully human however, we must also be able to overcome it and care for the far — hope for the future and care for all who suffer, wherever they may be.