

Understanding God and Holiness with our Hearts

By Rosa Berman Ruder, May 2024

Parashat Kedoshim contains the highlight of the holiness code, “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” [Lev. 19:2]. It also contains the essence of Judaism, “Love your fellow as yourself” [Lev. 19:18].

Jews are enjoined to love God in the prayer following the Shema, “*Shema Israel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad*” Hear Oh Israel, Adonai our God, Adonai Is One. [Deut. 6:4.] The *Shema* establishes what God repeatedly says in *Kedoshim*: “I the Lord am your God.”

The next paragraph of the *Shema* is the *v’ahavta*: “And **you shall love your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” [Deut. 6:5] According to Bahya Ibn Pakuda in *Chovot HaLevavot* (Duties of the Heart), for religious life it is not so much a matter of the intellect to know God as it is **a matter of the heart** to own and to love Him.

Love of God and love for our fellow human beings go hand in hand:

“Judaism is a twofold affirmation concerning God on the one hand and man on the other, the former being that a man shall seek to know God, love Him, revere Him and do His will, the latter that a man shall love his fellow men also, dealing with them in righteousness and mercy. What is more, the duality of the attitudes as to God and man is more seeming than real. **For to Judaism one love is the obverse and consequence of the other.** Piety toward God is meaningless unless it induces compassion toward human beings... By the same token, every act of righteousness and mercy reveals the Divinity resident within the doer and implies the recognition of an equal Divinity touching the person done by. **The simultaneous love of God and man:** here is Judaism’s first postulate and final inference, its point of departure and its destination, the root of it and its fruitage.” [Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism* (1947), pp 12-17.]

Samson Raphael Hirsch, 19th Century German Rabbi, interprets the commandment “to love your neighbor as yourself” as follows:

“[it] means that we are [required] to rejoice in [our neighbor’s] happiness as if it were our own, grieve over his sorrow as if it were our own, [to] assist as eagerly in advancing his welfare as if we were working to advance our own, and [to] keep trouble away from him as if we ourselves were threatened by it. This is a requirement, Hirsch maintains, that we can and must fulfill even toward [someone] who is downright repugnant to us, for this requirement of love is not dependent on our neighbor’s person or on his personality traits. ... No one may view the prosperity of another as an obstacle to his own well-being or the downfall of another as an aid to his own growth, and no one may rejoice in his own flowering as long as his neighbor’s life remains blighted.” [Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, (1986), p. 455.]

Hillel's Interpretation

Sifra Kedoshim 4:12 affirms that "Love your fellow as yourself" [Lev. 19:18] is the most important commandment in the entire Torah. In a famous passage, Hillel summarized this commandment, and the essence of Judaism, a little differently when he replied to a potential convert that wanted to learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot: "Do not do unto others what you would not want done to you. The rest is commentary, now go and study." [*Shabbat* 31a]. On this subject, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin:

"Hillel restricts himself to a description of Judaism's ethical essence.... Hillel's negative formulation Is much easier to incorporate into daily behavior. Using the phrase 'How would I feel if I' helps a person come up with an answer that will guide their behavior.

A friend of Rabbi Telushkin, psychiatrist Dr. Isaac Herschkopf, argues that Hillel may have been emulating God's articulation of the Ten Commandments. God did not command us to be honest, truthful, and faithful. Rather, He commanded us, 'Don't steal,' 'Don't bear false witness,' 'Don't commit adultery.' It may be less positive, but it is undeniably more effective." [Telushkin, *Hillel, If Not Now, When?*, pp. 19-22]

Another of Hillel's famous formulations appears in *Pirke Avot* 1:14 (Ethics of the Fathers):

"If I'm not for myself, who will be?
If I'm for myself only, what am I?
If not now, when?"

"You cannot neglect your own needs. Neither can you attend only to your own needs. And the tension is not resolved but heightened at the end: you have to decide right away. It would be difficult to imagine a more profound and complete accounting of the condition of the moral human being trying to keep in balance the ultimate irreconcilable demands of life, the inescapable requirement to meet those demands every day." [Jacob Neusner, *Torah From Our Sages, Pirke Avot*, Translation and Explanation, p. 37.]

Rabbi Telushkin wrote that this is what Hillel wished to convey: "In your personal life, you should not veer off to an extreme, treating yourself as a nonentity and only others as important. You have the right to fight for and to push yourself forward. Be for yourself. Just don't be only for yourself." [*Id.* p. 167]

Do Not Hold a Grudge

"Do not hate your kinfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself." [Lev. 19:17-18]

Rabbi Wolpe on forgiveness and self-love:

“Parashat Kedoshim contains a number of laws, but it is revealing to note what immediately precedes the admonition “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The beginning of the verse is *Lo tikom v’lo titur* (Do not take vengeance or hold a grudge against others).

If you are not to hold a grudge, what ought one to do? When someone commits an offense against you, the alternative to holding a grudge is forgiveness. We are all aware that forgiveness is, to say the least, a difficult task. The advice of the Talmud is not easy to follow: ‘Be of those who take an insult but do not give it. Hear their reproach but do not reply.’ (Gittin 36b).

There may be offenses for which forgiveness is not possible. Yet we live increasingly in a society where forgiveness is not given for almost any offense, and words that one speaks can result in being publicly reviled or “canceled” with no apparent path to restoration.

This is not only ungenerous, but a narrow view of the purposes of forgiveness. Judaism has several words for forgiveness or absolution, and if we examine them we may learn something about the placement of ‘do not bear a grudge’ next to “love your neighbor as yourself.”...

What is the purpose of such forgiveness? Return for a moment to the placement of ‘*lo titur*’ next to loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Forgiveness is a release of the burden in one’s own heart. Resentment is painful and difficult for the one who feels it. To hold a grudge, as has been said, is to swallow poison hoping the other person will die.

Loving one’s neighbor as oneself is forgiving not only because it is good for the one who has hurt you, but because forgiving is an act of self-love. Deciding not to be consumed by the toxicity of anger and rancor is to treat oneself both wisely and lovingly.

The previous verse (v.17) tells us, ‘Do not hate your kinsman in your heart.’ It is one of the very few places where the Torah commands emotion. But we can now understand that it does so for our own good, because hatred not only imperils community, but it embitters the life of the hater. One way of understanding the famous verse that follows is – love your neighbor, forgive your neighbor, for that is one way of learning to love yourself.” [Rabbi David Wolpe on *Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim*, The Jerusalem Post, April 22, 2021.]

How do we Attain Holiness in Dealing with Others?

In addition to repeating the Ten Commandments, *Parashat Kedoshim* sets other laws dealing with relationships between people, for example:

“The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning.” (Lev. 19:13)

“You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.” (19:14)

“You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly.” (19:15)

“You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old.” (19:32)

“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (19:33-34)

In his book entitled *Morality*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks emphasizes the need to think about the others in our community in addition to thinking about ourselves:

“Morality represents our commitment to others, our capacity to form bonds of belonging and care. ... The ability to step back and see oneself from the outside is what makes us moral agents, capable of understanding that we have duties, obligations and responsibilities to others. Most important of all, it is **the ability to love that lifts us beyond the self** and its confines.” ... “Commitment is falling in love with something and then **building a structure of behavior around it for the moment when love falters.**”
[Sacks, *Morality*, Basic Books, Hachette Book Group, 2020.]

Meditation for Today

The laws of the Torah provide the structure for our ethical behavior. The sins we confess in the *Al Chet* and the *Ashamnu* on Yom Kippur remind us of the moments when our love falters. If we are to aspire to attain holiness, as God prescribes in *Kedoshim*, there is much to work on every day. A list of Soul-Traits below can guide us. May our path to holiness be smooth this year. Amen.

Eighteen soul-traits to improve our holiness

1. Humility
2. Patience
3. Gratitude
4. Compassion
5. Order
6. Equanimity
7. Honor

8. Simplicity
9. Enthusiasm
10. Silence
11. Generosity
12. Truth
13. Moderation
14. Loving-kindness
15. Responsibility
16. Trust
17. Faith
18. *Yirah* (Fear/Awe)

From *Everyday Holiness, The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* by Alan Morinis (2007).