

Drasha from the author of *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh*

A close-up photograph of a person wearing white prayer shawls (tallitot) with an embroidered floral border. The person is wearing a black kippah (skullcap) and has their hands clasped in front of their face in a prayerful gesture. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Three Levels of Ahavas Yisrael

Va'eschanan

Getting To Love Your Fellow Jew: Chapter One
The Three Levels of Ahavas Yisrael

Introduction: The Rambam's Words About Ahavas Yisrael

With *siyata d'shmaya* (assistance from Heaven) we are beginning here to study the subject of *ahavas Yisrael*: to love a Jew.

There is a *mitzvah* in the Torah to love a Jew: “*And you shall love your friend as yourself.*”¹ The Rambam (In *Sefer HaMitzvos*²) writes that *mitzvah* is “To love our fellow Jews as much as we love ourselves. And one should feel compassion and love for his Jewish brethren just as much one feels compassion and love for oneself. And whatever you desire for yourself, so should you desire for another. And that which is hated to you, you should not do to others. This is the meaning of “*Love your friend as yourself.*”

According to the aforementioned words of the Rambam, the *mitzvah* to love other Jews is defined as loving another Jew, just as much as we love ourselves. The Rambam has explained that this love is expressed through feeling the same compassion for others as you have on yourself.

Elsewhere, the Rambam writes in *Hilchos De'os*³ that there is a *mitzvah* upon each Jew [individually] to love every Jew as much *k'gufu*, “as much as he loves his own body”, and therefore, one should speak of the praise of others and be careful with others' money, just as much as you want your money to be cared about and just as you care for your own honor. Here the Rambam is saying that the *mitzvah* is to love another Jew “as much as one loves his own body”.

Let us now ask the following question. According to the Rambam, when the Torah says to love a Jew “as yourself”, does it mean that you should love another as much as you take care of your own body? Or does it mean that you should love another as much as you love your own soul? In *Sefer HaMitzvos*, the Rambam is implying that you need to love another Jew as much as you love your own “soul.” In *Hilchos De'os*, though, the Rambam is implying that you need to love another Jew to the same extent that you care for your own physical body. What, then, is the *mitzvah* of *ahavas Yisrael*? Let us explore this issue, so that we begin to deepen our understanding of *ahavas Yisrael*.

What Does It Mean To Love Another Like Yourself?

We first need to understand what it means to love and care for another as much as you care for your own body (*k'gufu*).

¹ Vayikra 19:18

² Rambam Sefer HaMitzvos 206

³ Rambam Hilchos Deos 2:3

This kind of love, *k'gufō*, is described in the statement of the Gemara, “One who loves his wife and honors her, even more than his own body”⁴, implying that love in marriage is for a man to care about his wife more than the care and concern he has for his own physical body. What does it mean to love someone else *k'gufō*?

Simply speaking, it means to love another as much as you love your own body, but perhaps we can say that the term *guf* (the physical body) is just being used here as an analogy. The term “*gufō*” can also mean the actuality of something, like we find in the term of the Gemara, *gufō shel dovor*, “the body of the thing”, which implies the bodily structure of something, but not the physical body of a person.

However, when we explore this deeper, there are really three general levels of *ahavas Yisrael*. The Torah says to love another *kamocho*, lit. “like yourself”. There are actually three levels to *kamocho* (loving another Jew like your own self).

The First Level: Loving Another Similarly To Yourself

The lower level of this love is described by the Ramban⁵, who explained that the word *kamocho* means only “like” yourself, similar to how much you love yourself, but not that you should love a person as much as you love your own self. The Rambam explains that the Torah’s commandment to love every Jew is to try to be at an equal stance with every Jew, but the Torah is not commanding a person to love another Jew more than he loves himself. This is because it is an unchangeable fact of human nature that a person always loves himself more than anyone else.

According to the Ramban, the Torah’s commandment is that you should try to love another Jew as much as you can, as close as possible to the level that you love yourself. The most you can love another person can be similar to the degree of your own self-love, but your love for another person cannot be stronger than the love that you have for yourself. The mitzvah to love another Jew is to love him similar to how much you love yourself – but it can never be on the same level that you love yourself. This is all the first level of *ahavas Yisrael*.

The Intermediate Level: Loving Another Equally To Yourself

There is a second, higher level of *ahavas Yisrael*, which is described in the *sefer Mesillas Yesharim*, that when the Torah says to love another Jew *kamocho*, like yourself, the Torah is commanding you to love another Jew on the same level that you love yourself (*kamocho mamash*). This level is also described in other words of our Sages: to love another Jew, equally as much as you love your own self.

⁴ Talmud Bavli Yevamos 62a

⁵ Ramban on Vayikra 19:18

The Highest Level: Loving Another More Than Yourself

Finally, there is a third level of *ahavas Yisrael*, which is the highest level of love, is exactly the opposite approach of the previous two levels: It is to love another Jew even more than you love yourself. According to this approach, *kamocho*, to love another “like yourself” is because your love for another needs to be greater than the love you have for yourself, and therefore, love for another is only “like” your own self-love - but it should not be equal to how much you love yourself, for you are really supposed to love another Jew even more than you love yourself!

This level of love is based on the teaching of Chazal that one of the questions a person will be asked in Heaven is, “Did you treat your friend royally and with pleasantness?” In other words, you need to view another Jew as being more important than you. In actuality, this means being *moser nefesh* (self-sacrificing) to do favors and kindnesses for another Jew.

This ability is ingrained in a very deep place in each and every Jew’s soul. A good example of this is the love that parents have for their children: A father and mother love their child more than they love themselves. This is the root of a deep ability in the soul to love another more than you. The highest root of this ability is the soul’s ability to love the Creator even more than you love yourself, but when used on the lower level, it manifests in the ability to love one’s child more than the love that one has for oneself. One can also take this love further and expand it to include the rest of every Jew in *Klal Yisrael*.

With this kind of love, *kamocho* is to love another only like yourself because the love that you have for other Jews needs to be stronger than the love you have for yourself.

(To summarize, there are three levels of loving another Jew (*ahavas Yisrael*), in order of progression: (1) Loving another Jew similar to how you love yourself, but not equally as much as you love yourself. (2) Loving another Jew on the same level that you love yourself. (3) Loving another Jew more than you love yourself.

Analyzing The First Level of Ahavas Yisrael

Let’s analyze this further. What are the roots of these three different levels of love? (If only we can get to even the first and second levels mentioned, and perhaps we can touch upon the third level - if not entirely, then partially.)

In the words of the Rambam quoted at the beginning of the lesson, the Rambam wrote that a person should love another *k’gufu*, as much as one cares for his own body. Can this be describing the highest level of love, which is to love another more than you love yourself? This cannot be, because the Rambam says *k’gufu*, to love another as much as you care for your own *guf* (body), and there is a

principle that “Your life takes precedence” (*chayecha kodmin*)⁶, which means that you cannot give importance to another’s physical life more than your own.

The Gemara gives a famous case: If two people are walking in the desert and one of them has a jug of water, and the other will die if he doesn’t give him to drink, he is not obligated to give up his water for the other, if this will mean giving up own his life for the other person. This is because the Torah says “And you shall live by them”, which is expounded to mean, “And you shall not die because of them” (following the Torah’s commandment of loving another Jew does not obligate you to die for another Jew). When it comes to the life of your physical body, you are commanded to love your own life more than another’s.

(The Gemara discusses the case where a person only has enough water to quench the thirst of one of them, but our Sages also discussed what the *halachah* will be when it comes to saving the *ruchniyus* (spiritual situation) of another Jew versus saving your own *ruchniyus*. The discussion then becomes very different, because the spiritual world has different rules than the physical world.)

What we learn from the aforementioned Gemara is that your physical safety takes precedence over another’s. Therefore, when the Rambam says that one must love another *k’guf*, this love has its limits, just as your life comes before another’s. Thus, the *ahavas Yisrael* which the Rambam is discussing is to strive to love another like yourself, but not exactly as much as you love yourself.

Note also that the Rambam also says that the *mitzvah* to love all Jews is upon “each Jew”, which implies each Jew as an individual, as opposed to all Jews collectively. There is a big difference. Loving each Jew individually will mean that there is room for individuality, and that is why your life would take precedence to another’s. From the perspective of the *guf* (body), there is no concept of having a collective love for all of *Klal Yisrael*, because the body views each person separately and it does not see each person as part of a collective whole.

(Another reason for the Rambam’s stress on this “individual” love for each Jew perhaps is also because the Rambam’s view is that there is a separate *mitzvah* to love a convert, in addition to loving him because he is a Jew. Therefore the Rambam may have added that the *mitzvah* is to love each and every Jew, to include the *mitzvah* of loving a convert).

In short, the Rambam is describing the lower level of *ahavas Yisrael*, which is from the vantage point of the body, and according to that vantage point, one is not able to love another Jew more than oneself.

Analyzing The Second Level of Ahavas Yisrael

The second level of *ahavas Yisrael* mentioned, described by the *Mesillas Yescharim*, is *kamocho mamash*, to love another Jew as much as you love yourself, in the literal sense.

⁶ *Talmud Bavli Bava Metziah 62b*

How can a person love another as much as he loves himself? From where can a person get the power to do this? The principle of *chayecha kodmin*, that your life takes precedence over another, is only with regards to the physical. But in the world of the spiritual, in the world of souls, there is no room for separation, because all souls are connected together and unified. From the view of the soul (the *neshamah*), loving other Jews does not mean to love each Jew in the individual sense, but to love them all collectively, as being a unit of *Klal Yisrael*.

There are two different levels of loving another Jew. The lower level, the view of the body, is to love each Jew separately and on an individual level, to see each Jew as an individual whom you must love. This is the kind of *ahavas Yisrael* which the Rambam and the Ramban are describing. In this level of love, you must love others just like you love yourself. You take your own love for yourself as an individual, and you extend that love to other individual Jews. For example, the Rambam wrote that the *mitzvah* of *ahavas Yisrael* is to do kindnesses for others which you want done for yourself, and to want for others what you would want for yourself. You love yourself as an individual, and your *mitzvah* of *ahavas Yisrael* is to also treat others as individuals, whom you should treat just as you want yourself to be treated.

The Sages were asked, what if there is something which your friend wants but which you wouldn't want for yourself? Are you still obligated to do it for your friend, since you wouldn't want it for yourself? This is a separate point, but it only brings out the point further, that the *mitzvah* to love another Jew according to the Rambam and the Ramban, is to desire for another only what you would want for yourself, because it is a love that begins with the individual.

Higher than this level is to love the collective unit of the Jewish people [which extends to loving each of them individually], and this is the level that the *Mesillas Yesharim* is describing, *kamocho mamash*. This is a love that does not begin with yourself, but with being part of a greater whole: The collective unit of *Klal Yisrael*. Of course, it also means to love each Jew, but it is not an extension of your own self-love. It is a love that comes from connecting to the unit of the Jewish people, as opposed to each loving each Jew separately. It is a love that is coming from the collective unit of *Klal Yisrael* as they (and you) exist in the world of souls above. In this level of *ahavas Yisrael*, the root of the love is to love *Klal Yisrael* as a unit, while the "branch" of this love is to love each individual Jew.

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This level is also alluded to even in the Rambam's view, with regards to the *mitzvah* of loving a convert. The Rambam writes that there is a separate *mitzvah* to love a convert, besides for the *mitzvah* of *ahavas Yisrael*, because a convert has "entered under the *Shechinah*." In other words, besides for loving a convert as an individual, we must love the convert because he is part of the collective unit of souls that is the *Shechinah* (as is well-known from the teachings of our Sages, that the *Shechinah* is the collective root of all Jewish souls). If he wouldn't be joining the *Shechinah*, there would be no reason to love him. Thus, the entire reason to love him, the root of the love, is because he is part of the collective unit of *Klal Yisrael*.

7 Editor's Note: The collective unit of *Klal Yisrael*, where all Jewish souls are rooted in, is also referred to as the *Shechinah*

In short, the intermediate level of *ahavas Yisrael* is to love every Jew both on a collective level and on the individual level, to love a Jew because each Jew is an extension of the collective unit of Klal Yisrael.

We can also find support to this concept from the wording of the verse, “Love your friend like yourself”, where the Torah says “your friend” specifically, as an individual. Why is the Torah using speaking in individual terms, “your friend”? And since the *mitzvah* of *ahavas Yisrael* includes both loving the collective unit of the Jewish people as well loving each individual Jew, why is the Torah only speaking about loving each Jew individually? It is because *ahavas Yisrael* is revealed by loving each Jew individually, but the root of *ahavas Yisrael*, the reason to love each Jew, is because we are all connected together under one unit, in the world of souls.

Analyzing The Third Level of Ahavas Yisrael

The third and highest level of *ahavas Yisrael* mentioned, loving another Jew more than you love for yourself, is the level of the future, after the coming of Mashiach.

The first level of *ahavas Yisrael* mentioned (loving another almost as much as you love yourself) is the level of the current 6,000 year period we are in the midst of, which generally corresponds to “This World”. The second level of *ahavas Yisrael*, which is the love between souls in the higher realms, corresponds to Gan Eden, which is the bridging point between This World and the Next World.

The third level of *ahavas Yisrael* is the level of the future, and we can have some illumination of it even now. Just as Shabbos is called a “semblance” of the World To Come, so can we have a “semblance” of the level of the World To Come, a small spark of it in our souls. If we can access even a “spark” of the level of the World To Come, we are lucky.

Let us now try to understand, briefly, the depth to this level of *ahavas Yisrael*: when one loves another Jew more than he loves himself. Where does a person get the power to love others more than he loves himself? It is more understandable to love another as much as you love yourself, by viewing all others as equal to you and by sensing the *achdus* (unity) with all other Jews. At best, one can love others on the same level that he loves himself. But how can a person love another *more* than he loves himself?!

It is for the same reason that a person is able to love *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. What is the source in our soul that motivates us to love *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*? On a simple level, this is because “*You are children to Hashem your G-d*”,⁸ there is a reciprocal love of a child to a father because the father loves the child, and therefore, because Hashem is our Father Who loves us as His children, we have a natural love for Him as well.

⁸ Devarim 14:1

A father's love for his child is greater than the child's love for his father. For example, there is a *halachah* brought in the Gemara that an intruder who burrows into someone's house through a tunnel is deemed a potential murderer to the house owner, even if the intruder is the child of the house owner, because the child might not have mercy on his father. However, if the intruder is the father of the house owner, we assume that the intruder will not want to kill the house owner, who is his child, because of the father's love and natural compassion for his child. However, in spite of this difference, the child certainly has a love for his father (it is just not as strong as his father's love for him).

The love that a child has for his father is rooted in the father's love for his child, which is rooted in Hashem's love for His children, the Jewish people, for He is "our Father, the Merciful Father." That is the simple understanding of where we get the strength from to love *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

However, there is also a deeper source of why we are able to love *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. The Hebrew word for love, *ahavah*, is from the word *av*, father. The father always precedes the child, and the father represents the point which preceded the child's existence. The love that a person is able to have for *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* is because He is the root and the source which preceded one's existence, and therefore the love that a person can feel for *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* can actually be greater than the love that one has of himself!

This is all the more so because He is eternal and He preceded us, and we as His creations have an inborn love for Him. His existence preceded our own, and our entire existence is only possible due to His existence (as the Rambam writes in the beginning of *Sefer HaMitzvos*, which is a topic that we will not get into now). Thus our soul's love for Hashem is, on a deeper level, because we love that which came before our own existence, and since He preceded our own existence, we are able to love Him more than we love ourselves. It is very difficult to describe this fully.

In different terms which mean the same thing, the Rambam writes in the introduction to *Sefer Mada* (in his *Mishneh Torah*) that if Hashem would not be in existence, *chas v'shalom*, nothing else can exist, and the fact that Hashem exists does not even necessitate our own existence [Hashem lets us exist only due to His kindness]. Thus, we are able to love *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* more than we love ourselves, because He could have made it that we don't exist. One can realize that his very existence is totally subservient to the Creator's, that there is no existence of his own, and for this reason one is able to love the Creator even more than he loves himself.

This is the root of how a person is able to love that which is besides for his own existence (including other creations), even more than he loves himself. This is also the depth behind the commandment of "And you shall love Hashem your G-d", with all your heart and with all your life and with all your possessions", which the Sages explained to mean, "Even if He is coming to take your life."⁹ This is the obligation of giving up one's life if one is faced with committing any of the three cardinal sins. It is because one is able to love Hashem more than he loves himself, because there is a deeply rooted ability in the soul to love that which came before one's own existence. It is the power to have *bittul* (self-effacement) to the Creator.

⁹ *Mishnah Berachos 9:5*

This is also the deeper source of the ability to have *ahavas Yisrael*. The power to love another Jew is really a deep, hidden ability of the soul. It is the ability to say, “I am prepared to give up my very existence, for the sake of another Jew. Even if I don’t exist, the other still exists.”

In the external sense, this means that I should give precedence to others and I don’t have any superiority over others. There is a *halachah* of *chayecha kodmin*, which is that my life takes precedence over others, such as in the case where there are two people in the desert and one of them has a cup of water to drink, where he is not obligated to give up his cup of water to save the other’s life. That is true, from the perspective of the physical level of existence. But from the viewpoint of the spiritual, in the world of souls, the *mitzvah* to love another Jew like yourself means that your own existence is not important than another’s. From the view of the soul, you are able to love another more than you love yourself. The soul is able to accept that its own existence can be negated, in favor of another’s.

Three Levels of Existence: Body, Soul, and G-dliness

Let us now be clearer about this. As long as one is only living at a physical level of existence, his love for himself will be stronger than his love for another, so it will not be possible for him to love another Jew more than he loves himself. Only when one reveals his soul can one find the power to love another Jew as much as he loves himself, because when one reveals his soul, he can have the viewpoint from the world of souls.

Going further, when one is in touch with G-dliness (which is an even higher viewpoint than the world of souls), where one recognizes *Ain Od Milvado*, “There is nothing besides Him”, at that level, one is able to love another even more than himself. One’s love for the Creator, which can be stronger than the love one has for himself, is able to branch out into a love for all other Jews as well.

What are one’s emotional limitations of *ahavas Yisrael*? At best, one can feel that others are equal to him, so he will love others as much as he loves himself. But at that level, one acknowledges that there is a separation between him and another. We have different bodies, different souls, and different soul roots. One cannot love another Jew more than he loves himself, with just *ahavas Yisrael* alone that isn’t coming from love for the Creator. He will be able to view others as equal to him, but he won’t be able to love them more than he loves himself.

The only way to love another more than you love yourself is when your love for another is an extension of your love for the Creator. As mentioned, one reaches love for the Creator by recognizing the reality that there is nothing else besides for the Creator, which causes him to feel that his own existence is completely nullified by the Creator’s. One can reach this level by working on the awareness that there is truly nothing besides for the Creator, simply speaking – as the *Nefesh HaChaim* described at length¹⁰: There is no existence of my own, for there is only the Creator. (We

¹⁰ *Nefesh HaChaim Shaar III*

won't get into the intricacies of this right now.) Just like you can be prepared to give up your own existence for the Creator's, when you recognize that only He exists and nothing else, so can you be prepared to give up your existence for another human being.

Where do we see this kind of love manifest? As mentioned before, although the higher use of this ability is to love the Creator more than one loves himself, this ability is also used on a lower level, in the love that a father has for his child, where a father loves his child even more than he loves himself. The rule is that a father has more compassion on his child than the child's compassion for his father. The father precedes the child, and later the father leaves the world and the child remains on the world, and the child continues the father's existence. We learn from Yaakov Avinu that as long as children were still living, it was considered as if he was still alive. This is because the children continue the existence of their father, even after the father leaves the world. The father disappears, and he is continued through his children, who inherit him. The father is willing to give up his own existence and all that he has to his children, allowing them to inherit him, because he loves them more than he loves himself.

(On a deeper note, this was actually a result of the first sin. If not for the sin of Adam, a person would love the Creator more than he loves himself. As a result of the sin, when death was decreed upon mankind, this ability of love is no longer used for the Creator, and instead it is used with regards to one's children, where one will love his children more than he loves himself, allowing them to inherit him and take his place and all of his possessions. This ability is really an offshoot of the ability to love the Creator more than one loves himself, and as a result of the sin, the ability is no longer used that much with regards to the Creator, and instead one is usually using this ability with regards to his children. Since that is the case, the love that one feels towards his children can actually prevent a person from having genuine *ahavas Yisrael*, and that is why a person will still need to deepen his *ahavas Yisrael* towards other Jews, and it is not enough that he loves his children).

In summary, there are three levels of *ahavas Yisrael*, loving another Jew. The first level is when you love another Jew, but not as much as you love yourself. The second level is when you love another Jew as much as you love yourself. The third level is when you love another Jew more than you love yourself.

When a person is living from the viewpoint of the physical body alone, it is impossible to reveal love for another Jew. When one is living on the level of the body, if he reveals any love for another Jew, at best, he will love him somewhat, but he will not be able to love the other Jew as much as he loves himself. He will love himself more than he loves another person.

When one lives a life of the soul (the *neshamah*), one will be able to love another Jew equally, as much as he loves himself. And if one merits for the "light of Hashem" to settle upon him (a revelation of G-dliness, which is a degree of the *Shechinah*), from recognizing *Ain Od Milvado*, one can reach the level of loving another Jew even more than he loves himself.

It is simple and clear that each person has all of these three levels of *ahavas Yisrael* within him, together. Since we have a physical body as well as a soul, we are capable of the first two levels of *ahavas Yisrael* (loving another almost as much as we love ourselves, and loving another equally as

much as we love ourselves). And because there is also the revelation of Hashem's Presence deep in our hearts, we are also to expose the third level of *ahavas Yisrael* within us: The ability to love another Jew even more than we love our own selves. These are all different dimensions to one's being, and therefore, all three levels of *ahavas Yisrael* are within reach of every Jew.

These three different levels can also be compared to the three sections of the body. The upper third of the body [which contains the head] represents the most spiritual part of one's being, the level of G-dliness, which is capable of loving another more than oneself, the level of being *moser nefesh* to love another Jew, which can only come from nullifying oneself to the reality that there is nothing besides for Hashem. The middle third of the body [corresponding to the chest and torso] represents the intermediate spiritual level of one's being, corresponding to the soul, which is capable of loving another Jew equally as much as one loves himself. The lower third of the body [from the waist downward] represents physicality, the lowest part of one's being, which is capable of loving another Jew almost as much as one loves himself, but not more than he loves himself.

Practically Speaking

There are times where a person is experiencing the higher level, times when he lives at the intermediate level, and times when he lives at the lower level, of *ahavas Yisrael*. In any case, each person at his current level needs to be in touch with all of these three levels of love, even if it is only a spark of these levels and it is not the absolute level.

It is impossible for a person to always love others more than he loves himself, because this will only be possible in the times of Mashiach. We mainly need to work on increasing the first level of *ahavas Yisrael*, which is to strive to love others almost as much we love ourselves. We won't be able to reveal that much of the two higher levels of *ahavas Yisrael* (equality and loving others more than ourselves), but we can still reach some degree of it.

Our practical work in gaining more *ahavas Yisrael* is try to increase each of these three levels of loving another Jew. Even though we can't reach all of these levels completely, every person at his own level needs to be in touch with at least a bit of each of these three different levels, of loving another Jew.

In Conclusion

With *siyata d'shmaya*, this chapter has been an introduction to the beginning of understanding what *ahavas Yisrael* is. In the coming chapters, with the help of Hashem, we will go through each of the levels of *ahavas Yisrael* in more detail.