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Three Kinds of Love

The holy *Zohar* states that there are “three crowns” which are all intertwined with each other: love for Hashem, love for the Jewish people, and love for the Torah. Each of these are interconnected, so a person cannot have one of these loves if he is missing the others.

Simply put, in order to love Hashem, we must also love the Jewish people as well as to love the Torah. In order to love the Jewish people, we must also love Hashem and love the Torah. And in order to love the Torah, we must love Hashem as well as love the Jewish people.

That is true, but the deeper explanation, however, is that these are all *paths* to get to the other. The *path* to love Hashem is through loving the Jewish people together with loving the Torah. The *path* to get to love of the Jewish people is through loving Hashem together with loving the Torah. And the *path* to loving the Torah is through loving Hashem together with loving the Jewish people.

There is a discussion amongst our Sages (in the *Talmud Yerushalmi*) about which love has to come first, but everyone agrees that the purpose of all these three kinds of love is to love Hashem. Thus, love of the Torah and love for the Jewish people are but the “garments” of the true love – love of Hashem. Our love for Hashem is thus “clothed” in our love for Torah and in our love for the Jewish people.

Our *avodah* (inner work) in *ahavas Yisrael* (loving the Jewish people) is to understand how all these three kinds of love are essentially one and the same: how they lead to love for Hashem.

Two Steps to Ahavas Yisroel - “Remove Yourself From Evil” and “Do good”

In *Tehillim* it is written, “Remove yourself from evil, and do good.” There are always two steps in any *avodah* that we have – first we must remove ourselves from any evil or obstacles, and only then may we attempt to “do good”. Thus, before we learn how to “do good” in our *avodah*, we must first remove the evil, if we are to get to any good.

Therefore, we have two steps in *ahavas Yisrael* (loving the Jewish people). The first step in *ahavas Yisrael* is to first “remove yourself from evil”, and the second step in *ahavas Yisrael* is to “do good”.

The *Mishnah* in *Avos* states: “What is hated to you, do not to do your friend.” This is our first step in

ahavas Yisrael: loving other Jews. We must stay away from committing evil acts towards other Jews, such as being inconsiderate to another Jew. Only after we succeed in fulfilling this first step can we proceed to the actual *mitzvah* of *ahavas Yisrael* of “*And you shall love your friend like yourself.*”

The first step we will need to do is not do wrong things to others, but this is not yet the actual level that is *ahavas Yisrael*. It is but a prerequisite. In order to achieve *ahavas Yisrael*, in order to “do good” for others, first we should not do inconsiderate things to other people. Only by being considerate to others in the first place can a person come to “do good” for others out of love.

On a deeper note, to “do good” doesn’t necessarily have to mean doing physical acts of kindness for another person. A person can “do good” with one’s very heart. This we can see by the following phenomenon. Let’s say two people who never met each other in their life are suddenly informed that they are long-lost brothers. Suddenly, these two strangers will be filled with an enormous love for each other. What can we learn from this? It shows us that the love present in the Jewish people is a real, existing force within us that can always be accessed – if we choose to, that is.

Although we are ultimately speaking here about increasing our *achdus* (unity) to each other, our *avodah* with this not simply to try to “become one” with each other; rather, all of us already are one. Every Jewish soul, all of us, has the same root; we are all essentially one unit. So what it is that we have to do? All we need to do is *remove* the obstacles holding us back from our natural love toward each other, and that will *reveal outward* the love for others Jews that we have deep down in our souls.

“What is Hated to You, Do Not Do Unto Others”

The *Gemara* states, “Rabbi Akiva said, “What is hated to you, do not do unto others, for it is written, “And you shall love your fellow like yourself.” What is Rabbi Akiva saying? That a person shouldn’t kill or steal? That we shouldn’t cause others pain? Although it is definitely true that we shouldn’t cause others pain, this cannot be what Rabbi Akiva was coming to say. A person shouldn’t cause pain to others regardless, even if he doesn’t mind if someone else would do it to him.

What doesn’t bother one person may still bother another person, and one may not do something to another that is bothersome even if he himself isn’t bothered by it. So what does it mean that you shouldn’t do to others what you yourself do not want done to you? What does it have to do with you? Simple human decency requires that we shouldn’t cause pain to others; that is not new to us!

Rabbi Akiva is coming to tell us an entirely new idea. What Rabbi Akiva came to tell us is that a person shouldn’t only be concerned about himself; he should be concerned about others. “What is hated to you, do not do unto others” - a person wouldn’t want that another person should only care about himself and not to care about him. Therefore, don’t do that others. Just like you don’t like it when another person only cares about himself and he doesn’t care or worry about you, so should you be the same and not only worry about yourself.

Remove Your Ego

Elsewhere in the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva says, “*And you shall love your fellow like yourself*” - this is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary.” Loving other Jews is the entire Torah! Why? How can this be the entire Torah?!

Loving the Jewish people doesn’t mean that we simply shouldn’t act cruel to another Jew; we don’t need our Sages to tell us that. Loving the Jewish people means to remove the barriers between ourselves and other Jews. And what is that barrier? It is the self-serving ego, the “I” in a person, which allows a person to only care for himself. Our *avodah*, then, is to nullify that ego, and then we will naturally come to love others. Thus, Rabbi Akiva is saying that our *avodah* of nullifying your ego is the

underlying essence of all of the Torah.

To Love Others Like Yourself

There is a discussion in the *Rishonim*^[1] if the commandment of the Torah to love others “like yourself” is literal or not. The view of the Ramban^[2] says that it is impossible to love others as much as you love yourself. Instead, he interprets that to love others “like” yourself means that a person should treat others the same way he would want to be treated. Other *Rishonim* seem to disagree with this view, and they interpret the Torah’s commandment in the more literal sense – that you must love another Jew just as much as you love yourself.

From a superficial perspective, it would seem that these two opinions contradict each other. One is saying that it is impossible to love others with the same love you have for yourself, and the other seems to be saying that it is indeed possible. However, from a deeper, inner perspective, there is no contradiction; both opinions can be possible. How can they both be reconciled? It is based upon the understanding we have explained above, that if you only love yourself, you cannot love others, but if you nullify your ego, you can then be able to love others - no less than how love yourself.

To love only “yourself” will mean that you will not be able to love others. But if you remove the ego, then you can now love others. Thus, the Ramban said that you can’t love others as much as you love for yourself, that is, if you haven’t yet nullified your ego. When you haven’t yet nullified the ego, then you will only love yourself, and you will not be able to love others as much as you love yourself. But the other *Rishonim*, who said that it is possible to love others as much as you love yourself, are describing the higher level, where a person has removed his ego. Such a person can love others just as much as he loves himself.

From this deeper perspective, there is no disagreement between the Ramban and the other *Rishonim* if it’s possible or not to love others just as much as you love yourself – for as we have explained, it will depend on if the person has nullified the ego or not.

Our Avodah: To Reveal the Selfless Love for Others

Thus, our *avodah* is to reveal from within ourselves that hidden, selfless love for other Jews. We are not “looking” to “find” anything new over here – we already have it within us! We are searching for our long-lost power to love others. We are looking for our true self, which is to be selfless and love others.

Loving the Jewish people (*ahavas Yisrael*) is thus a deep, inner matter. It is not the superficial kind of “love” that we may think it is. The problem is that our ego, the selfish “I” in us, is holding us back from loving anyone other than ourselves. We need to remove that “I”, and the more we nullify our “I”, the more love we will uncover toward others.

Until now, we only addressed the first step, which is to “*remove yourself from evil.*” We have explained that we stay away from evil from not doing evil to others, and this can only be achieved by nullifying our ego. This paves the way for the second step, to “*do good*” – which is the actual *ahavas Yisrael* that we are trying to reach.

We will now speak of this second step. The second step, to do “do good”, contains two levels, in addition to a third level, which comes after the first two levels, as we will explain.

Our Goal: Unity

How do we come to reveal our love for other people? The *Sefer HaChinuch*^[3] writes that that “the

heart is pulled after the actions.” Doing mere acts for other people can awaken the love in our hearts.

On a superficial level, this means that we should be kind to others even though we don't feel any love to them, and by doing acts of kindness for others, that will cause us to love others. That is true, but there is more depth to this matter. There is an inner mission here. It's not enough that a person should feel that he loves the other. What we are trying to achieve is *achdus* (unity): a sense of “oneness” with the other, when I feel that I and another Jew are really “one” – when I see another Jew as a part of me.

Our intention should therefore be to “do” goodthings for other people *because* we want to achieve that sense of *achdus*/unity with the other. That is the goal of doing kind acts for others, and that is what it means to have *ahavas Yisrael*: being kind to other Jews because I want to arrive at unity with another Jew.

In Summary

To summarize, there are three steps towards *Ahavas Yisrael*:

Step 1 is, “*Remove yourself from evil.*” This includes basic consideration to other Jews; not to be inconsiderate to another Jew. (This is the lowest level of *ahavas Yisrael*, and it is the level that is treated generally in all of the works of *mussar*).

Step 2 is, “*Do good.*” This part means that one should not only be concerned for his own needs, and to be concerned about others. (This is the middle level of *ahavas Yisrael*, and it is the level generally described in most works of *Chassidus*).

Step 3 - *Achdus/Unity*. The goal of *ahavas Yisrael* is not just to feel loving towards the Jewish people, but to arrive at a sense of unity with another - to realize that another Jew and I are essentially one; to feel that another Jew is a part of me. (This is the highest level, and it is the level treated in the works of *Chabad Chassidus* such as in sefer *Tanya*.)

[1] *Early commentators, spanning the 10th-15th centuries*

[2] *Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (known as “Nachmanodies”)*

[3] *Sefer HaChinuch 15; see also Mesillas Yescharim chapter III*

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