Love Others as Yourself!?! Thoughts for Aharei Mot- Kedoshim

View PDF

Angel for Shabbat: Aharei Mot-Kedoshim
By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” (Vayikra 19:18).

Rabbi Akiva considered this verse to be a great principle of the Torah. Indeed, it is widely considered to be the “golden rule” that is at the root of human morality and civilization.

The only problem is: is it really possible to love one’s neighbor as oneself? In some special cases, the answer is yes. But in many cases, it would seem to be unlikely, if not impossible, to love others as oneself—especially if they are unlovable!

We come across people who are malicious, cruel, or vindictive. We know people who are manipulative, egomaniacal, dishonest and offensive. We see people who act in destructive ways, who undermine families and communities. Can we really be expected to love such people?

Some of our sages have explained that the Torah calls on us to love our “neighbor,” i.e. only those individuals who act in a “neighborly” way, who observe Torah and mitzvoth, who maintain a moral and courteous lifestyle. According to this line of thinking, there is no obligation to love wicked, immoral people.

Maimonides teaches: “It is a commandment to love each fellow Israelite as oneself, as it is stated, You shall love your fellow as yourself. Therefore one must speak in praise of his fellow and be concerned for his property, as one is concerned about one’s own property and honor. One who gains personal honor by shaming another has no place in the world to come.” (Hilkhot De’ot 6:3)

Maimonides offers practical advice on how loving one’s neighbor is to be fulfilled. He does not write about actually loving—or even liking—the other person. Rather, he instructs us how to behave toward others: speak well of them, be concerned for their property. Just as we want others to speak nicely about us and be respectful of our property, so we should demonstrate these qualities toward

others…even if we do not really like them.

Maimonides seems to have based himself on a teaching of the Talmudic sage, Hillel, who taught: that which is hateful to you, do not do unto others. Hillel's emphasis was not on the ethereal emotion of love, but on practical implementation of proper behavior toward others. Even if we do not have positive emotional feelings for particular people, we still should not act toward them in a manner that we wouldn't want them to act toward us.

It seems, then, that we may understand the commandment to love others as a demand that we act decently, that we conduct ourselves with high moral standards…even toward people we may not actually like. We should not lower our own ethical standards even when dealing with less-than wonderful people.

We might also understand the commandment as pointing us in the direction of a philosophy of life that stresses love of others. Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, a 19th century Italian Jewish Bible commentator, noted that it is not possible to love another person as much as we love ourselves; what, then, does this Torah passage mean? He translates the verse as follows: you shall love your neighbor who is like you i.e. you must remember that all human beings are created in the image of God, all have the right to respect and dignity, all share a common humanity. If you recognize that the "other" is actually "like yourself", you will be better able to love/empathize/respect him or her.

Rabbi Reggio's universalistic understanding of the "golden rule" teaches that all human beings--whatever their race, religion or nationality--are entitled to be treated "like ourselves". They, too, were created by God. They, too, have the human qualities with which we are endowed. If we can see "them" as being just like "us", we are more likely to develop a sense of kinship and responsibility to all of humanity.

It must be noted, though, that the commandment to love our neighbor does not mean we should allow him/her to commit injustices. The same Torah portion that calls on us to love others calls on us to chastise those who behave wrongly. We are commanded not to stand idly by when an innocent person is in trouble. We need to recognize that some people forfeit their right to our love and compassion when their behavior is reprehensible and dangerous to others.

The commandment to love others as ourselves implies that we need to love ourselves! This means we need to live upright and honorable lives; when we look in the mirror, we should see someone whom we respect. That is also an essential ingredient in the "golden rule."

Angel for Shabbat