Revenge and "Love Your Neighbor"

View PDF



Rabbi Uzi Weingarten teaches a weekly no-charge class, via Zoom, titled "To Walk with God: An exploration of the moral and spiritual teachings of Tanakh." The class is open to all, Jews and non-Jews. It meets Sun evenings at 7:30 PM, EDT, and repeats Tues evenings at the same time. He can be reached at uziteaches@gmail.com

REVENGE AND “LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR”

Rabbi Uzi Weingarten

This week’s portion includes the Call to Holiness, which includes what may be the most famous

teaching in the Hebrew Scriptures, “Love your fellow as yourself” (Lev. 19:18).

It is noteworthy that this is not all that the verse says. The first part of the verse instructs us not

to take revenge or bear a grudge. Let’s first see what revenge is, and then explore the

relationship between revenge and love.

What is the ‘revenge’ that the verse forbids? The Jewish tradition uses an illustration to explain:

Tom said to Harry, Lend me your sickle” (a tool used to harvest)

Harry responded, No;

Later, Harry said to Tom, Lend me your axe;

Tom said,

I will not lend to you, just as you did not lend to me when I asked;

This is ‘taking revenge.’

(Talmud, Yoma 23a, edited for style and clarity)

Let’s notice two things about this illustration. The first is motive. The reason Tom gives is, I will

not lend to you just as you did not lend to me when I asked.” It is the intention to retaliate that

turns Tom’s refusal to lend into revenge.

The second thing we notice is context. The illustration that the Tradition gives is not about

injustice, which is a real grievance. Rather, Tom asked Harry for a kindness—to lend him

something—and Harry declined.

Nobody has a right to have an item lent to him, and so Harry’s refusal is not an injustice.

However, Tom’s ego might be bruised, and Tom now has a choice about his response.

He can interpret ‘kindness declined’ as Harry wronging him. This would lead Tom to consider it

a grievance, and choose to retaliate. The verse tells Tom to make a different choice: not to turn

Harry's 'kindness declined' into a grievance, but rather to let it slide.

Let's look now at the entire verse: we are not to take revenge or bear a grudge, but rather to

love our fellow. The verse is written in the form of: Don't do A, and instead do B. That is, don't

take revenge, but instead love each other. What does Harry's refusal to lend have to do with

love?

We are more forgiving towards those we love. It helps us overlook the small slights that are

part of any relationship. The verse is telling us that in a case of 'kindness declined,' we are to

take a loving attitude and let it slide, rather than considering it a grievance.

The Sage teaches, "Love covers-over all offenses" (Proverbs 10:12). When there is love, people

will often forgive even a real offense. Love can certainly lead us to forgive 'kindness declined.'

Forgiveness is the opposite of revenge.

PART TWO

Let's look now at three situations in which Tom has the right not to lend. One is if Tom doesn't

lend for any reason other than tit-for-tat. Paraphrasing Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor (France; 12 th

cent.), in his commentary to this verse:

If Tom does not lend an item because he needs it for his own use, or because it has

financial or sentimental value to him, or for any other reason, it is not ‘taking revenge.’

The Torah does not require a person to lend things that he does not want to lend…

The verse only prohibits a situation in which Tom would ordinarily lend the item, and is

not lending to Harry as an act of revenge.

In other words, lending to another person is an act of kindness, but it is not an obligation. The

only thing that the Torah prohibits is when one does not lend as an act of revenge.

Another situation is if it was not a case of ‘kindness declined’ but of injustice. What if Harry

treated Tom unjustly, whether financially or by verbal abuse or any other form of injustice, and

then asks Tom for a favor?

As we have seen, the verse prohibits taking revenge only in situations of ‘kindness declined’; it

does not address situations of injustice. According to one of my teachers, that is because the

Torah cannot address every possible situation. Each individual case has many variables

involved. (See also Ramban to Deut. 6:18.)

For example, a person may feel that it is a matter of self-respect not to lend to one who is

abusive to him, or interact with a person of poor character. The Torah leaves it up to the

individual to decide how to act.

It seems to me that a third exception has to do with reciprocity, which is a necessary

component of healthy relationships. If Harry’s refusal is a one-time event, then Tom is called

not to turn ‘kindness declined’ into a grievance, but rather act with love and let it slide.

But if Tom finds himself doing many acts of kindness to Harry, and there is a pattern of Harry

not reciprocating, then Tom may need to ask himself if this is a healthy relationship. Similarly, if

Harry has a history of borrowing and not returning, or if Tom needs to ask Harry repeatedly to

return the item, then it is legitimate for Tom to decide not to lend again to Harry.