



## MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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# An Impossible Directive?

Roughly midpoint in the Torah text, at the culmination of the vital interpersonal laws of Parshat Kedoshim, lies a three-word mandate considered by sages such as Hillel and Rabbi Akiva to be the foundation of all Torah law:

*V'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho...* commonly translated as ... “And you shall love your fellow as yourself.” ...

And yet, how can the Torah demand the impossible? How can God insist that I should love everyone – even a passing acquaintance or, for that matter, even a stranger – as I love myself? On a concrete level, such a commandment seems well beyond our reach.

To go a step further, as many sages note, this demand is not only antithetical to human nature but *contrary to practical halachic dictate*. The Ramban points out that the very same Rabbi Akiva, who considers this

commandment to be “the fundamental rule of the Torah,” elsewhere maintains: “*Your life takes precedence over the life of your friend.*”

Practical application of this latter mandate, the Talmud explains, indicates that if two individuals are traveling in the desert and one of them carries a flask that holds enough water for only one to survive and reach civilization, the individual who possesses the water should not share with his co-traveler. His own need to survive takes precedence over any responsibility he might have towards his fellow.

We are thus faced, the Ramban argues, with a clear halachic contradiction...

If the Torah’s commandment of *V'ahavta* literally means that I must “love my fellow as [I love] myself,” I should have no right to withhold lifesaving sustenance from another, even at the cost of my own survival. I should be required to consider his immediate welfare as precious to me as my own!

Additionally, the rabbis, themselves, clearly recognize the difficulties inherent in the commandment *V'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho...* as evidenced in a number of sources...

When, for example, a potential convert demands to be taught the entire Torah “while standing on one foot,” Hillel chooses this commandment as the foundation all of Jewish law. He does not, however, quote the text directly. Instead, he transposes the directive into the more palatable (and limited) negative: “What is hateful to you do not do

In loving memory of  
**Rebbetzin Josephine Reichel ז"ה**  
on her 24th *yahrzeit*  
ז' אייר

*from the Bronner and Reichel families*

to your fellow.”

Elsewhere, the rabbis find concrete application for the edict of *V'ahavta* in disparate areas ranging from marriage to capital punishment. Their search appears to mirror a desire to find *distinct, limited spheres of law* where the text's formulation can be applied without contradicting other halachic precepts.

Can, however, the sweeping majesty of this edict, described by Rabbi Akiva as *the* fundamental precept of the Torah, be preserved?

Can the text be understood as written, without editorial change and without limiting its application to narrow areas of the law?

Some scholars maintain that the problems associated with the text should be addressed through a simple change of focus. The term *kamocho*, “as yourself,” they claim, is not an adverb defining the boundaries of commanded love (as in: love your fellow “as you love yourself”). It is, instead, an adjective delineating the basis of fellowship (as in: love your fellow “who is as yourself”). Since all men are created in the image of God, the Torah maintains, all are *kamocho*, “similar to you,” and all are, therefore, deserving of your love.

This approach avoids the issues raised above. The text is not commanding us to love others as we love ourselves, a commandment problematic in both behavioral and halachic terms. The Torah is instead informing us why we should love others in the first place: “*Love your fellow, who is, after all, as yourself; created, like you, in God's image and, therefore, worthy of your love.*”

Nehama Leibowitz finds support for this approach in a similar biblical passage: “The stranger [convert] who dwells with

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you shall be like the native-born among you; and you shall love him *kamocho*, as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

In this case, Leibowitz maintains, the last phrase of the commandment clearly reflects back on the meaning of the term *kamocho*. Effectively, the text states: *You should love the stranger, for he is like you. After all, you were once strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Other authorities, including the Ramban and the Chizkuni, however, choose another, bolder, path.

These scholars maintain that the commonly

**Mazal Tov to**  
**Leah & Dahvid Wolf and family**  
**on the birth of a great grandson**

accepted translation of the phrase “*V’ahavta l’reiacha kamocho*” is incorrect. Had the Torah meant to say, “Love your fellow, as yourself,” the text should have read: *V’ahavta et reiacha kamocho.*”

Literally, as written, the text before us translates as: “Love *for* your fellow, *as for* yourself.”

An overwhelmingly powerful lesson is thus transmitted by this passage, as the Ramban explains:

Sometimes an individual may wish well for his fellow only in specific areas. He may wish him wealth but not wisdom and the like; and, even if he wishes him well in all areas – desiring that his beloved fellow attain wealth, honor, learning and wisdom – *he will still not want him to achieve the same level that he, himself, achieves. He will still desire to be superior to his fellow.*

The Torah, therefore, commands that the individual eradicate such selfish jealousy from his heart; *that he should love [desire] well for his friend – as he would want for himself – without limits or reservations.*

Through the eyes of these scholars, the Torah is not demanding the impossible – only the overwhelmingly difficult. Capping the list of interpersonal laws of Parshat Kedoshim is the one commandment that sums them all up: *Truly desire for others what you desire for yourself.*

*If you can achieve that level of love, all the other obligations between you and those around you will be easily met.*

Sometimes limiting the scope can increase the burden...

By placing the commandment of *V’ahavta l’reiacha kamocho* within our reach, scholars such as the Ramban and the Chizkuni

actually make the Torah’s demands upon us more difficult. As long as the commandment remained impossible to attain, we were “safe.” We could be proud to be part of a people whose tradition included this wonderful idea of *V’ahavta l’reiacha kamocho*, yet avoid its practical implications. We could repeat the words as a litany, admire their poetic majesty; but remain beyond their claim on our behavior. Who, after all, could possibly be expected to love someone as himself? Clearly, the Torah could not be talking to us.

Our escape is thwarted, however by the rereading of the text...

*Truly desire for others what you desire for yourself.*

This commandment is attainable, albeit with great difficulty. Conformance requires the cultivation of the purest of hearts; a soul that can truly rejoice in the success and happiness of others without the taint of jealousy. It means that a student rejected for medical school must be as happy over the admission of his friend as if he, himself, had made the grade; that a young single man or woman, actively seeking a *shidduch* (marital match), must rejoice wholeheartedly at the wedding of his/her friend; that an individual denied a promotion must feel gratitude for the promotion of his colleagues to that very same spot.

The challenge is far from easily met, but the potential rewards are great. If each of us cultivates a heart that truly desires for others what we desire for ourselves – without jealousy, bitterness and rancor – we will each learn to rest easy with our own life accomplishments, as well. ■