

Kedoshim: Who is the “neighbor” in “Love your neighbor as yourself”?

There is a story about a very poor and religious Jew who came to the synagogue on the eve of Shabbat, and he realized that he forgot to empty his pockets before leaving his house. He checked them quickly just a few minutes before the beginning of Shabbat, and for his surprise he found a ten dollars bill that was the remaining money after buying the food for Shabat. He didn't know what to do... He would never violate the Shabbat carrying money, but ten dollars was for him a significant amount, so he quickly found a very smart solution for not losing it: He opened a Chumash in the synagogue, looked for the Ten Commandments and when he found the text, he put the bill exactly below the verse that says “You shall not steal”. He was sure that if someone finds the bill he will feel guilty and won't touch it. That way he could come back on the end of Shabbat and pick up his money. The man took the Chumash and put it back in the highest row in the bookshelf, right in the corner, and went to the synagogue to pray and to enjoy Shabbat.

A day after, right after praying Maariv and doing the Havdalah, the man came back to the bookshelf and found the Chumash exactly in the same place where he put in the last day. Anxious for recovering his money, he opened it, found the page where the Ten Commandments are but for his surprise there was no money... No bill! He could not believe what was happening! He lost the ten dollars! At the synagogue! So hopeless and sad, he closed the Chumash and when he was putting it back in the bookshelf he noticed that there was like a lifted page right in the middle of the book. So, smiling and full of hope, he quickly opened the book but for his surprise he did not found ten dollars, but a five dollars bill!! And right above the bill there was the verse that says “Love your fellow as yourself”.

In our Parsha Kedoshim we find this famous verse “Love your neighbor as yourself”. It is probably the most well-known verse of the Bible. Ravi Akiva in the second century said it was “the most important rule of the Torah”. But even though is known as the most important one, for Jewish law there are some complications when it comes to the proper way on how to fulfill it.

If the Torah says “Love your neighbor as yourself”, then who is this neighbor? One option is to define “neighbor” as someone who I don't know, someone who is far from me, or even someone who I never met before. Another option would be someone that I do know, close to my: My parents, friends, my family.

And if we choose any of these two option: If “neighbor” = anyone, someone who I don't know, then how can it be that the Torah asks me to love him or her? Is it that fair? How can I love someone who I don't know? And if “neighbor” means people that are close to me. Why do I need the Torah to tell me that I have to love them? If they are already close so probably there is already some type of relationship, so what this commandment is about?

And we can see the difficulty in understanding the verse also in the different translations of the verse. “*Vehaabta lereacha kamocha*” – the difficult word, in the context of the Torah, is “*reecha*”. You have to love “*reecha*” as yourself. So what is *reecha*? Some people translate it as “neighbor” and in that case is someone who lives close to you, but she doesn't live WITH you. She is close, but she is not your friend or your family. Others translate it as “fellow” or “partner”: Someone who is closer than a “neighbor”. You already have a close relationship with him or her. Maybe you live or work with him. In this context, if we talk about “fellow” we are talking about feelings. In addition, the Latin translation of the Bible defines

“reecha” as *“proximus”*, like *“proximity”*. *Reecha* here means “the one who is very close to you”, or even “right next to you”. Finally, Onkelus, the second century translator of the Bible to Aramaic simply translated it as “friend”.

The question, then, is to whom do we have to love? We are not quite sure. We know how to put on Tefillin but we are not sure if this verse is speaking about the poor, my neighbor, an ex-girlfriend or my in-laws! The good news is that when in Judaism there are so many opinions about one rule, we can choose the one that best fit our needs. So why not to start taking this commandment seriously according to what is missing in our lives?

For some of us it's easy to love someone that is close: We take care of our parents, children, say thank you, give love and care. They are always our first priority. But even though we are very generous with them, some of us forget to be supportive with the people who are far: We forget to support social causes and the people who are in need. In that case the Torah comes to say: “Love you neighbor as yourself”: Love the one who is not so close.

For others is easy, in first place, to love people who are far from them. There are people that they are very polite and caring with strangers, but in their families there is disrespect, infidelity and even violence. Sometimes they have a very active social life but their homes are a real mess. We know of many public personalities who devote a lot of time to public event and social causes, but they can't manage the balance so they don't dedicate enough time to their families. To them the Torah says “Love your fellow, your partner, your children...”

We could summarize this mitzvah understanding it as a commandment to listen to the needs of the people we have forgotten. They could be anonymous indigents far from us, or an old-friend who I forgot to call in a difficult time in her life.

Shabbat Shalom