

Love Your Neighbour

We begin with two verses: one from the Bible and one from the Babylonian Talmud.

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself”
(Leviticus 19:18).

“What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow” (Shab. 31a)

This famous rabbinic quotation is attributed to Rabbi Hillel. Hillel was one of the most influential Jewish sages. He lived at the turn of the first century CE and his teachings would likely have been known to Jesus.

Ponder these verses. Discuss with a friend. Then bring your observations into conversation with some of the Jewish sages* whose interpretations follow.

Nahmanides (13th c. Torah scholar) views Leviticus 19:18 from the stance of the person commanded to love. After noting that “one’s self” is unique, distinct from every other human being, he concludes that the Torah is teaching us to overcome the human tendency to be self-centred in our loving. (For example, I might wish my colleague success, but not to the extent that she might be promoted before me!) In Nahmanides’ view, *we should wish other people well in all things, just as we do in our own case, and place no limitations on our love.*

The Biur (18th century Torah commentary) takes up Hillel’s statement in a way that affirms human equality: “the command to respect our neighbour’s feelings and interests apply to every human being without distinction.”

While some traditional views emphasise the extent to which one should love, an alternative view among the sages focuses on the principle that motivates love. That is, love your neighbour because, like yourself, your neighbour was created in the image of God. As Rabbi Akiva says in the Mishnah (Avot 3,14):

Beloved is the human being, created in the image of God.

In this view, love for a human being is motivated by respect for the divine image. What we share with other members of the human family is a special relationship with the divine. Note that this interpretation would not be so clear if the words “as yourself” were omitted from our original verse.

This personal identification with one’s neighbour is also found in Leviticus 19:34 where it says: “you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” To know what it means to live as a stranger is to know (and empathise with) the heart of a stranger.

Similarly, verse 19:18 could be understood this way: Since you know what it is like to be a human being, you understand your neighbour’s quest for love. Therefore, love him/her “as yourself”. •

For further reflection:

“The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbour (cf: Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40).”

— 1974 *Guidelines for Implementing Nostra Aetate*, 4 (Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews)

* See Leibowitz, 366-372.

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, Vol.1 (Jerusalem, 1993). Dialogika online library of documentation pertaining to Jewish-Christian dialogue. Scripture: NRSV.

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