

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Akharae/ K'doshim

Hillel the elder once taught, while standing on one leg, "What is hateful to you, do not do to others, the rest of Torah is commentary. Go and learn." This teaching is an extrapolation of the Torah's teaching, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." (Leviticus 19:18) This is the origins of the "Golden Rule." Our tradition further teaches us that at the root of most ethical conversations, this text has a voice in the decision making process. Rabbi Akiva taught that this text from Torah was its most important rule. He taught it to his disciples, and according to tradition, all 24,000 of his disciples mastered this text ... too well, and as a result destroyed the community. How could this be?

Perhaps we can shed some light by looking at the nature of the text and the way in which the two sages employed it. Hillel understood something about the text that I feel Akiva did not. The commandment seems fairly clear, and has been echoed throughout time. The command is, though, at best, ambiguous. Love is, as the movie and song teach, "A many splendored thing." Love is the ultimate goal for humanity. It is the stuff that creates families, just as it brings healing to the world. That part is easy. But the text does not just say "love." We are commanded to love each other just as we love ourselves. This teaching works wonderfully where we truly "love" ourselves. Where we struggle with our own egos, blemishes, guilt, and other assorted baggage, we do horrible things to ourselves. We compensate for not truly loving ourselves with all sorts of destructive behaviors. If we were literal to the command, we really would be mistreating everyone around us, the same way in which we abuse ourselves. Once again, the text, when read literally, causes us some reason for concern.

The issue for Akiva's students was that they took the text literally, but in a different way. They were so concerned with the welfare of each other that they held each other to an amazingly high standard. The dilemma is that each held the other to his own standard. Taking literal the command to love another as we do ourselves, the students went about trying to make each other (and all around them) uniform to his own way of observing. In essence, there were 24,000 people competing to having everything done his own way. In so doing, not only did each demean the others, but chaos ensued and the community fell apart. We see this in our own daily encounters, as those who truly love themselves and believe in themselves and hold very narrow religious or political beliefs try to share that "love" with us, forcing us (with violence if necessary) to accept their gifts of "love."

I think Hillel understood this potential misuse of the text and created a more focused rendering of it. In making his best known statement, he makes sure that what we do is positive by going past "Do to others what we want done," to "do not do to anyone what is painful." Yes, many who are self destructive seem impervious to pain, but most people know what hurts and what does not. Many self inflict to cause or focus pain, distracting them from emotional suffering that they might endure. Still many others are trapped in the grips of emotional/physical pain with no understanding/ability to break free. Hillel, however, holds us to a much greater standard, whatever pain we might be willing to inflict on ourselves, we cannot do it to others. Whatever pain we experience, we are not allowed to perpetrate it onto others. Misery may love company, but we are not allowed to create that company. In fact, the idea is that where we find the energy to help others, we might also find some new insight into ways to help ourselves. During my tenure as Chaplain at what was then Glen Manor Home for the Jewish Aged in Cincinnati, I regularly met people who were visitors one day and the stroke victims and residents the next. I learned what it meant to hold on to every piece of living, and hence every moment of celebration. I learned from people who had loved enough to help others, who then understood why it was so important, even in their disability, to love themselves. Even in their diminished state, they loved and celebrated, and shared that love.

Love is a gift. Loving ourselves needs to be absolute. Not one of us is perfect and while I am not advocating that we should be satisfied with imperfection, we must learn to be at peace with who we are and be able to celebrate every piece of our existence. With messianic hope, we want everyone to know and feel love from each other – a holistic love that exists simply because we are brothers and sisters sharing the same divine parentage. Where we disagree love should make sure that we still respect and dignify each other. Where we suffer, love should make sure that we do what we can to keep others from knowing the pain we experience. This is the type of love that will heal relationships and heal the world. Shabbat Shalom.