



Shabbos Chazon: The Greatest Mitzvah

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The Torah is filled with many beautiful and meaningful *mitzvos* (commandments). These *mitzvos* teach us how to create and sustain a relationship with God and with one another. Imagine for a moment if you were asked, “Which is the most important of all of God’s commandments? Which *mitzvah* do you think outweighs the rest?” Perhaps, it is Shabbos or *Bris Milah* (circumcision) both of which are referred to as an *os* (sign) between God and His nation. Perhaps, it is not any one *mitzvah* but a unit of *mitzvos* like the *Aseres HaDibros* (Ten Commandments) that are the spiritual centerpiece of our Torah. In fact, the great sage, Rav Saadiah Gaon explains that all 613 *mitzvos* are derivatives of the Ten Commandments. Long before you and I pondered this question, the great rabbinic sages of yesteryear were conducting this very discussion.

You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself (Leviticus 19:18); Rabbi Akiva said, “This is an important principle of the Torah.” Ben Azai said, “This is the narrative of the generations of man on the day that God created man, in the likeness of God He created him” (Genesis 5:1), is even more important (Sifra, Kedoshim).

Rabbi Akiva and his disciple, Ben Azai, were trying to figure out what is the most important, core principle we have in our Torah. Rabbi Akiva explains that everything comes from loving the other. This is reminiscent of the story of the gentile who approached the great sage Hillel and said, “I want to convert on the condition that you (Hillel) teach me the entire Torah standing on one foot.” To which Hillel responded, “That which is despicable to you, do not visit upon the other.” Rabbi Akiva continues this tradition and explains that the *mitzvah* of *V’Ahavta l’reyacha kamocho* (Love your fellow as you love yourself) is the most important tenet of our belief. If you can’t love another how can you love God? If you can’t love someone who you can see, touch and experience, how can you love that which is amorphous and beyond the scope of human comprehension? .

Yet, Ben Azai, Rabbi Akiva’s trusted disciple, disagreed with his rebbe (teacher). At first glance, Ben Azai’s statement is difficult to understand as there is no actual *mitzvah* contained in the verse he quotes. This verse, from the fifth chapter of Bereishis (Genesis), begins a listing of the life-spans of the generations beginning with Adam. What is the nature of Ben Azai’s disagreement with Rabbi Akiva? Rav Asher Weiss advances a beautiful insight. Ben Azai says, “*My great teacher, Rabbi Akiva if only we could be as pure as you. It would be wonderful to think that we could love each other as we love ourselves. But this aspiration is fraught with so many problems. There are people who have wronged me, and it is difficult for me to forgive, let alone love them. There are people who do bad things and who is to say they deserve my love. There are simply not “loveable” because of their temperament and disposition. And therefore, I would like to suggest something else. There is something more basic and important than love – respect. We can’t love every other Jew, but we can learn to respect them. “This is the narrative of the generations of man on the day that God created man, in the likeness of God He created him (Genesis 5:1).” Every Jew (it is true for all humanity, but let’s first focus on loving each other), is made in the image of God and for that alone (s)he deserves my respect. To require us to love one another is a tall order, but to respect each other; this is attainable.*”

Such a powerful lesson. Perhaps, it isn’t possible to love everyone – but I must work on my ability to respect the other. There is a societal trend to vilify anyone who does not share “my” views. This is true on an individual and national level. Even the most open minded of people often lack tolerance for opinions and views that may differ from their own. We are each entitled to our personal religious, social and political views but we must learn to respect even those who don’t share them. We can disagree and argue our positions vociferously and passionately, but always with respect and dignity for the other.

This Motzai Shabbos and Sunday, we will observe the fast of the 9th of Av. It is on this day, thousands of years ago, that our beloved Beis HaMikdash (Temple) was set ablaze. So much of the hardship, so many of the heartbreaking difficulties were the result of infighting, factionalism and indifference to the other. We can do better, we can be better. We don’t have to agree – we just must respect.

What is the most important *mitzvah* of the Torah? I’m not sure – much greater men have pondered this question and the answer still seems far from reach. But here is what I do know. The path forward must be lined with love for our fellow Jew. And before we can love we must learn to respect. We need not compromise our beliefs and values we hold dear to make someone else feel happy, accepted or validated. But we must respect the other no matter how deep the divide or disagreement. Why? “*...for in the likeness of God, He created him;*” we are each a beautiful Tzelem Elokim (image of God). May we be privileged to see this Divine identity within ourselves and may we be courageous enough to see it within one another.