

“Love Your Neighbor! As Yourself?”
(Leviticus 19: 1-3; 15-18; Judge 5:24-31)

Hareni mekabel alay mitzvot aseh, shel v’ahavta l’reaycah camocha. V’hareni mishtadel leahov kol adam v’chava, b’chol nafshi u’b’chol meodi.

“Behold I accept upon myself the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” and behold I will strive to love every man and every woman with all my soul and with all my being.”

Every Shabbat morning, before offering the traditional liturgy found in the prayerbook, I chant this kavvanah, this meditation of intention. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi taught that this kavannah tunes the heart and creates a gateway to come before God in prayer.

The commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is found in a section of Leviticus identified as the “Holiness Code”. In it are a variety of ethical mandates for how to live. To be holy is to treat others justly, humanely, with sensitivity. The laborer is to be promptly paid. The grocer is to keep honest weights and measures. The judge is to treat all who come before the bar fairly, regardless of wealth or station.

Many of these are straightforward behavioral directives. Not so with the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. These three Hebrew words constitute a thicket of interpretation. V’ahavta: “You shall love”--What constitutes love? Can love be commanded? Would it be more accurate to say, “You shall care for?” L’reacha-“Your neighbor” Who is our neighbor—the member of our clan, the boy next door, the immigrant in East Palo Alto or the victim of the flood or tsunami whose pain enters into our living room? Kamocha-“As yourself” What are the boundaries of the self? For that matter, do we love ourselves? Perhaps we struggle with under-confidence or self-loathing; is that how we want to see others? What is the relationship between our neighbor and our self?

In his book, The Ethics of Memory, Philosopher Avishai Margalit distinguishes between the universe encompassed by ethics and that encompassed by morality. He speaks of “thick relations”, those we identify with and are anchored to by a shared past—parents, friends, lover, fellow-countrymen—or “thin relations”—those we recognize by virtue of being human—a woman, a sick child, a villager living in poverty. With this distinction, Margalit writes, “...in the context of morality, *neighbor* means a mere fellow human being. But in the context of ethics, a neighbor is someone with whom we have a history of a meaningful, positive, personal relationship, or a history that can be mediated through some imagined community.”ⁱ

I thought of this distinction between ethics and morality, between thick and thin relations, two weeks ago, when we had the privilege of hosting His Holiness the Dalai Lama at Stanford. In the Saturday panel discussion organized by the Medical School, Buddhist scholars and neuroscientists reflected from their differing perspectives on craving and on suffering. Early on, the neuroscientists shared a finding concerning the biology of empathy. Through brain imaging, they discovered that the part of the brain that lights up when a person experiences physical pain, also lights up when loved ones are in physical pain. Pondering this result, His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked whether they had also done the experiment with the subject responding to the pain of strangers or perhaps to that of enemies. The neuroscientists shook their heads. Alas, that experiment had not yet been done. And so His Holiness, with his sharp, incisive mind and his generous, mischievous wit responded, “Then, this is foolish compassion!”

I think we all needed to wrap our minds around the notion of foolish compassion. But from a Buddhist perspective, it is straightforward--empathy and compassion for loved ones is an extension of the self. Wise compassion comes from feelings for those who are unrelated. His Holiness suggested doing that experiment.

How does one move, in the Dalai Lama’s words, from foolish compassion to wise compassion? How does one progress, in Avishai Margalit’s words, from thin relations, or morality to thick relations, or ethics? How do we bring those distant in space and experience into the realm of neighbor? Perhaps it is no coincidence that the beloved and gentle Mr. Rogers, a Presbyterian minister as well as role model to generations of children, used to ask his television community, “Will you be my neighbor?”

I’ve spoken before about the power of the grief and bereavement group that we in the Office for Religious Life convene, together with Residential Education and Counseling and Psychological Services here at Stanford University. This group constitutes a holy moment where Stanford students go from being strangers to becoming neighbors. Around the table, when we met this past Thursday, were students from different countries, from different parts of this country, from different programs, from different ethnicities, and from different religious traditions. Beyond the label “Stanford student”, when they entered the group, they had no common identity. But as they listen to one another share stories, share pain, share struggles, and yes, share laughter, they travel from being strangers to become a community of memory. Their common humanity emerges as their empathy overflows. I watch wise compassion emerge in their silences and in their reaching out toward one another, in their remembering a story previously told about another’s loss and in their tender advise on getting through a rough patch. Despite a world of difference, they become neighbors.

These students began without preconceived notions about one another. There were no explicit barriers to their creating a neighborhood. But the experiment that His Holiness the Dalai Lama suggested was not only to determine whether strangers would evince compassion toward one another, but also to determine whether enemies would, as well. For Buddhist practitioners, meditating on loving-kindness and compassion extends the boundaries of the neighborhood. For Jews, study and observance extends the

boundaries of the neighborhood. My teacher, Rabbi Edward Feld, interprets a Talmudic text to suggest that we can learn compassion for our enemies through ritual.ⁱⁱ In the Judges text we just read, we find the poignant image of Sisera's mother fruitlessly waiting at the window for her son to return from battle. Sisera was a Canaanite general who oppressed Israel. Deborah, the prophet, gathers an army to oppose him; he is defeated, runs away and is killed by a woman, Yael, as he seeks refuge. The Bible celebrates this moment in the song of Deborah. It is here, embedded in this victory song, that we are confronted with the image of Sisera's mother watching from the window, waiting for her son's return, crying as she realizes that he will not come back.

The Bible celebrates Deborah's victory. But even in the midst of rejoicing, the Bible will not allow us to ignore the cost, even when that cost is paid by Israel's enemies. The rabbis, noting this inclusion, highlight the plight of Sisera's mother, and ritualize empathy on one of the holiest days of the Jewish calendar. On Rosh Hashanah, the central ritual act is the sounding of a ram's horn, a shofar. There are three distinct calls that are sounded. The first and last note, the *Tekiah*, is a long note, used in Biblical times to gather Israel into an assembly, or for war. This is also the sound at the end of Yom Kippur, the end of ten days of repentance, symbolizing a clean slate, a fresh start for the world. (blow *tekiah*) The *Tekiah* is the triumphant call of redemption. But in between, there is the *Teruah*, a shorter, broken sound. And accompanying the *Teruah* was a debate about how this call should be sounded.

In Talmud Rosh Hashanah 33b, "Abaye expounded: The disagreement regarding how to sound the *teruah* revolves around the following: The Biblical verse in Numbers 29 instructs 'Rosh Hashanah should be a day of sounding the *teruah*,' and the Aramaic translation for '*teruah*' is '*yevavah*.'

Now, regarding the mother of Sisera, the Bible remarks that when she heard of her son's death, "the mother of Sisera stood at the window '*vativav*.'" One opinion is that the meaning of '*vativav*' is that she sighed and sighed and therefore the *teruah* should sound like *shevarim*, a gasping sound, (blow *shevarim*). Another opinion is that she cried and cried and therefore the sound of the *teruah* should be constantly broken like uncontrollable crying (blow *Teruah*).

On the holiest days of the Jewish calendar, literally, the ritual gathering of the clan, Jews must include in our neighborhood, the pain of our enemies. In order to hear the call of redemption, we are asked also hear the humanity of the other. We might hear our enemy's mother gasping or we might hear her wailing, because both sounds are included in the Shofar calls. But no matter which one we understand to be her cries, we hear her pain and suffering in the sound of the Shofar.

As Rabbi Feld writes, "The road not only to our own redemption but to the redemption of the "other" may lie in each side experiencing the pain of the other. If each could understand the other's suffering, if Palestinians could cry over the death of Jewish teenagers killed by a suicide bomber while they danced in a discotheque, and if Jews could feel the pain of the parents of an eight year old child killed by a scared Israeli

soldier firing wildly at a checkpoint, then perhaps the redemption would be at hand or at least, then, a peaceful alternative would seem possible.”

Ritually, the rabbis are affirming that unless we hear the pain of our enemies in the blasts of the shofar, there can be no redemption.

Last week, a decision by two Palestinian parents brought us closer to that redemption. A 13 year-old Palestinian boy, Ahmed Ismail Khatib, was by killed by Israeli Defense Forces in the West Bank town of Jenin when he walked out of his family home carrying a toy gun that soldiers mistook for a real one. Amidst their grief, Ahmed’s parents decided to donate his kidneys, liver, lungs and heart to Israelis waiting for transplants. The recipients included Jews, Arabs and a Druze girl.

Ahmed's parents met with the parents of the children whose lives were saved by their hearts and their doctor’s hands. The first meeting was with the parents of 12-year-old Samah, an Israeli Druze girl who received Ahmed’s heart.

“We are also her parents now,” Ahmed’s mother told Samah’s mother Yousra, as she hugged her.

“ We are one family. I hope you will accept me as your sister,” Yousra said.

Fairouz Gaboua, whose 5-year-old son Mohammad received one of Ahmed’s kidneys, came to thank the Khatibs. Tovah Levinson of Jerusalem, the mother of 3-year-old Menouha who received Ahmed’s second kidney, was also there to meet the family. Tovah Levinson said, “We are really grateful to you for saving our daughter’s life. God will pay you back for that good deed.”

Ahmed’s parents responded, “We hope her wounds will heal soon. We hope that she will work to promote peace once she grows up.”

Ahmed’s father addressed the Israeli public through a letter in which called on both Israeli and Palestinians to instill “a new culture in our children’s minds...I feel very good that my son’s organs are helping six Israelis...I feel that my son has entered the heart of every Israeli.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Not only did Ahmed’s father extend the boundaries of his neighborhood, he also gives new meaning to the commandment, “ You shall love your neighbor as yourself”. He give new meaning to the definition of “self”. Ahmed’s self, his life force, saved six other people—people who might have been his enemies, but became instead his kin. Ahmed’s self is now shared by six people, six families, radiating outward and multiplying exponentially. “We are also her parents now.” “ We are one family. I hope you will accept me as your sister.” By their profound and selfless gift, Ahmed and his family offered wise compassion to individual Israelis and to Israeli society as a whole. There is no doubt that, were the neuroscientists to image the brains of Ahmed’s parents, they would light up with wise compassion.

“Vahavta l’reaacha kamocho” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. “ While these three words are powerful and challenging, they are not the end of the story, nor even the end of the sentence. The Bible says, “Vahavta l’reaacha kamocho, ani Adonai.” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Eternal.” When the compassion that we seek seems far from us, when the hope of a shared humanity seems elusive, when the divisions and turbulence in our world makes it hard to imagine that we can make of that world a neighborhood, we need to remember those final two words. “Ani Adonai”, “I am the Eternal”. We can find our way to holiness through the guidance of the Eternal who gave us the gift of love, who taught us what it means to be a neighbor, and who helps us to appreciate and acknowledge the self that is our unique essence. The Eternal, who embodies holiness, who demonstrates compassion, who teaches us ethics, begins the Holiness Code with these words, “You shall be holy. For I, the Eternal, Your God, am holy.” When we strive for holiness, when we live with compassion, when we reach out to extend the boundaries of our neighborhood, we are imitating God and bringing God’s presence more visibly into our midst. When we are holy, what we extend is God’s holiness.

May each of us live our lives with open hearts and with outstretched hands. May we care for our neighbors as we care for ourselves. May our intentions be the gateway to true compassion, to heartfelt prayer and to generous community.

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ⁱ Avishai Margalit, The Ethics of Memory, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2002, p. 44-45.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Edward Feld, “What are we supposed to hear when we listen to the shofar?”, Rosh Hashanah, 2003, <http://www.shalomctr.org/node/457>

ⁱⁱⁱ Meital Yas'ur-Beit Or with contributions by Ali Waked, “We are Samah's parents too': Parents of Palestinian boy killed by IDF fire, whose organs were donated to Israeli children, meet with children who received their son's organs”, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3169828,00.html> and AP story, “Palestinian ‘proud’ about donating son’s organs, in “j.: the Jewish news weekly of Northern California, November 11, 2005, p. 22.