



“ואהבת לרעך כמוך - זה כלל גדול בתורה”

The Incredible Lesson to Respect Every Jew’s Way from the Divine Meeting of Rabeinu Tam and His Brother the Rashbam

This Shabbas, we will read the double Torah-portion of Acharei Mos-Kedoshim. Hence, it is fitting that we explore a vital mitzvah that is pertinent to the days of the “sefirah,” namely the mitzvas aseh of (Vayikra 19, 18): “ואהבת לרעך -- כמוך אני ה'” Regarding this passuk, Rashi brings down in his commentary the following from Toras Kohanim: **Rabbi Akiva said, “This is a fundamental principle the Torah.”**

Rabbi Akiva’s well-known statement takes on added significance during the period of “sefiras ha’omer.” For, during this historic period, we mourn the deaths of this great Tanna’s twenty-four thousand students. According to the Gemara (Yevamos 62b), they perished during the days of the “sefirah” for not showing one another proper respect:

“אמרו, שנים עשר אלף זוגים תלמידים היו לו לרבי עקיבא מגבת עד אנטיפרס, וכולן מתו בפרק אחד מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה, והיה העולם שמים עד שבא רבי עקיבא אצל רבותינו שבדרום ושנאה להם, רבי מאיר ורבי יהודה ורבי יוסי ורבי שמעון ורבי אלעזר בן שמוע, והם הם העמידו תורה אותה שעה. תנא כולם מתו מפסח ועד עצרת.”

They said: Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples extending from Gevas to Antiparis. They all died during one period of time, because they did not treat each other with respect. Thus, the world was left barren (of Torah), until Rabbi Akiva came to our Rabbis in the south and taught it to them. They were Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yossi, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua; it was these disciples who

upheld Torah-study at that time. A Tanna stated: All of the disciples perished between Pesach and Shavuos.

From this passage, it appears that Rabbi Akiva’s maxim: “ואהבת לרעך כמוך”, **this is a fundamental principle of the Torah**—was pronounced in the aftermath of the tragic loss of his twenty-four thousand disciples. Therefore, during this crucial time of the year, when we mourn those disciples, it behooves us to consider the vital importance of the mitzvah of: **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** For, it appears that Rabbi Akiva’s disciples were punished severely for failing to fulfill this mitzvah. Additionally, why did they perish specifically during the days of the “sefirah,” between Pesach and Shavuos?

“ואהבת לרעך כמוך”

Encompasses the Entire Torah

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by noting that Rabbi Akiva’s maxim coincides magnificently with the famous words of Hillel HaNasi. Let us refer to the Gemara (Shabbas 31a):

“מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאי, אמר לו גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת, דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו. בא לפני הלל, גייריה, אמר לו, דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד, זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך פירושה הוא זיל גמור.”

There was an incident involving a non-Jew, who presented himself to Shammai. He said to him, “Convert me on the condition that you will teach me the entire

Torah while I am standing on one leg.” He pushed him away with the cubit-long stick in his hand. He then presented himself to Hillel. He converted him. He said to him, “That which is distasteful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the message of the entire Torah; the rest are explanations; go and learn.”

Rashi explains that Hillel’s pronouncement: **“That which is distasteful to you, do not do to your fellow”**-- was a reference to the mitzvah of: **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך”**. This unique, singular mitzvah is the foundation of the entire Torah in one, all-encompassing, brief statement. The rest of the Torah is merely an elaboration of this maxim, which needs to be explored and studied. This is precisely the message conveyed by Rabbi Akiva: **זה כלל ואהבת לרעך כמוך, זה כלל** **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך—גדול בתורה—loving your neighbor as yourself is, indeed, the foundation of the entire Torah.**

This, in fact, was evident at Har Sinai. The Torah was not given to Yisrael until they stood together in total unity as one man with one heart. We learn this fact from the passuk (Shemos 19, 2): **“ויהיו שם ישראל נגד ההר”-- and Yisrael encamped there, opposite the mountain.** Rashi comments in the name of the Mechilta: **“כאיש אחד בלב אחד”-- as one man with one heart.** Thus, we see that unity among Yisrael, between a Jew and his fellow Jew, is the foundation of the entire Torah.

Notwithstanding, we must still endeavor to explain the intent of the non-Jew who made this odd request of Shammai and Hillel. Why did he ask them to teach him the entire Torah while standing **“on one leg”** -- **“על רגל אחת”** ? Furthermore, how did Hillel’s response satisfy his request? Lastly, what, in fact, is the connection between the mitzvah of **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך”** and the entire Torah—to the extent that the Torah was not given to Yisrael until they achieved the degree of unity of **“one man with one heart”**?

The Portions of the Torah Are Complete Only when Yisrael Are United

It appears that we can explain the matter based on a concept that we find in many of our sacred sources. Every Jew possesses a unique portion in the holy Torah. We express this fact in all of our silent tefilos on Shabbas: **“קדשנו”**

“במצוותיך ותן חלקנו בתורתך—sanctify us with Your mitzvos and give us our portion in Your Torah. To understand what this truly implies, we will refer to the Gr”a of Vilna’s explanation of Chazal’s revelation in the Gemara (Nidah 30b) that when a fetus is in utero: **“...מלמדין אותו כל התורה כולה—וכיון שבא לאויר העולם בא מלאך וסטרטו על פיו ומשכחו כל התורה כולה”** **—they teach him the entire Torah . . . when he is born, a malach comes and strikes him on his mouth, causing him to forget the entire Torah.** The Gemara informs us that in utero a Jew is taught his unique portion of the Torah that he is required to clarify in Olam HaZeh. Subsequently, he is made to forget it, so that he will merit fulfilling his task through arduous Torah-study.

With this understanding, it turns out that the completeness of the Torah depends on the unity of Yisrael. Only then can all the portions of the Torah be bound together as one. Conversely, chas v’shalom, if the people of Yisrael are divided, lacking unity and harmony, they cause a rift and disconnect among the portions of the Torah. Therefore, the Torah admonishes us (Bamidbar 15, 16): **“תורה אחת ומשפט אחד יהיה לכם”-- one Torah and one judgment will apply to you—do not allow the portions of the Torah to be split apart due to divisions and discord between fellow Jews.** This explains very nicely why the Torah was only given to Yisrael after they came together as one united body; for, only then was there a glorious union of all the portions of the Torah.

This now illuminates for us the convert’s request of Shammai and Hillel and their respective responses. Evidently, this convert was aware of the fact that every Jew has his own unique portion in the Torah. Therefore, he requested of Shammai: **“Convert me on the condition that you will teach me the entire Torah in its entirety, while I am standing on one leg.”** He specifically employs the redundant language: **“כל התורה כולה”**—**all of the Torah in its entirety**—emphasizing that he wished to comprehend not only his own portion of the Torah but also all of Yisrael’s portions of the Torah. This prompted Shammai to push him away forcefully, because it is impossible for a person to attain all the portions of the Torah. After all, every Jew only possesses the unique portion that he received at Sinai.

Yet, when he presented the same request to Hillel, he was offered an amazing solution: **“That which is distasteful to you, do not do to your fellow.”** In other words, fulfill the mitzvah of: **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך”**—love every Jew as if you are of one mind and body. By doing so, it will be as if you attained all of their portions of the Torah, as well. This is the deeper significance of the expression: **“כאיש אחד בלב אחד”**. When Yisrael are in total harmony and unity, they are like a single body with one heart and one mind; every bit of knowledge and pleasure spreads throughout the entire body.

This explains very nicely Hillel’s final addendum: **“ואידך”** **“the rest are explanations; go and learn.** In other words, after you accept upon yourself: **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך”**—so that it will be considered as if you also attained all of your fellow Jews’ portions of the Torah—then it is incumbent upon you to reveal the meaning of your own personal portion of the Torah, the portion that HKB”H gave specifically to you. For, you must also contribute your portion of the Torah to all of Yisrael. This then is the

meaning of the mitzvah: **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך”**-- **“that which is distasteful to you, do not do to your fellow.”** Just as it is distasteful to you if your fellow Jew is unwilling to share his portion of the Torah with you; in similar fashion, you must share your portion of the Torah with all the rest of Yisrael. By doing so, it will be as if you learned the entire Torah while standing on one leg.

Now, Rabbi Akiva’s twenty-four thousand disciples did not comprehend that every Jew has his own path in the Torah, and that each is equally valid and divinely ordained. As a consequence, they failed to properly respect one another. It was precisely for this reason that they perished specifically during the forty-nine days of the “sefirah” between Pesach and Shavuos. For, these days are when all of Yisrael must unite in preparation for receiving the Torah, just as they did at the time of Matan Torah: **“ויחן שם”** **“ישראל”**—Yisrael encamped at Har Sinai **“as one man with one heart.”** That enabled them to receive the Torah in its entirety on Chag HaShavuos.

The Divine Encounter between Rabeinu Tam and the Rashbam

With regards to this subject, it is with great pleasure that we will explore a fascinating story brought down in the gloss of the Mordechai (Eiruvin 528). It is told that HKB”H miraculously arranged an encounter between two of the great Tosafists—the two holy brothers, Rabeinu Yaakov known as Rabeinu Tam and Rabeinu Shmuel known as the Rashbam. Both were sons of Rabbi Meir, Rashi’s son-in-law; both were privileged to learn Torah with their grandfather, Rashi. Here is the story:

The Rashbam, who typically cast his gaze downward, intended to board a carriage; he didn’t notice that it was being pulled by a horse and a mule. Miraculously, his brother, Rabeinu Tam, appeared there. He told his brother, the Rashbam, not to be so righteous. If you would merely look up, you will see that a horse and a mule are standing before you. We learn in the Tosefta, chapter four of

Maseches Kilayim, that it is prohibited to harness a horse to a mule and a mule to a donkey. Therefore, he abstained and did not board the carriage.

Let us elaborate. The passuk states explicitly (Devarim 22, 10): **“לא תחרוש בשור ובחמור יחדיו”**-- **do not plow using an ox and a donkey together.** Chazal deduce from here that it is prohibited to unite two animals of different species—not just for plowing but for any form of labor, such as pulling a carriage. This is how the halachah is stated in the Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 297, 10):

“אסור לעשות מלאכה בשני מינין, כגון לחרוש ולמשוך בקרון וכיוצא בזה, בין שאחד טמא ואחד טהור, בין ששניהם טמאים, בין ששניהם טהורים.”

It is prohibited to perform work with two species, such as plowing, and pulling a carriage and the like—whether one is impure and the other is pure, whether

both are impure or whether both are pure. Elsewhere, we find the following ruling (ibid. 12): “עגלה שהיו מושכין אותה כלאים, אסור לישב בה אף על פי שלא הנהיג, מפני ששיבתו גורמת להם שימשכו העגלה. וכן אסור להיות אחד יושב בעגלה ואחד מנהיג.” **A wagon that is drawn by animals of different species, it is prohibited to ride in it, even if he is not driving; because his riding in it is the reason that they are pulling the wagon. Similarly, it is prohibited for one to ride in the wagon and one to drive.**

In this story, both the horse and mule are two species of impure animals included in the prohibition of: **“Do not plow using an ox and a donkey together.”** Therefore, it was prohibited for the Rashbam to ride in that carriage drawn by a horse and a mule together. As the halachah states, even though he only intended to ride in the carriage; nevertheless, his riding in the carriage created the need for the animals to pull with greater force. Miraculously, his brother, Rabeinu Tam, happened to be there, prevented him from getting into the carriage and saved him from committing a transgression.

Rabeinu Tam and the Rashbam Represent Two Forms of Serving Hashem

So, now, let us examine this incident more closely in order to better understand the important lesson that it conveys. First of all, it is evident that Rabeinu Tam and the Rashbam had two distinct ways of serving Hashem. The holy Rashbam typically cast his gaze downwards to prevent his eyes from observing things that are prohibited, thereby sanctifying his eyes. On the other hand, his brother, Rabeinu Tam, chastised him: **“Don’t be overly righteous!”** He, too, believed that it is necessary to safeguard one’s eyes, but it is also necessary to raise one’s eyes to avoid violating a halachic ruling.

In support of this explanation, we find that the early scholars nicknamed him **Rabeinu Tam**, because his real name was Yaakov. He possessed a spark from the neshamah of Yaakov Avinu, who the Torah describes as (Bereishis 25, 27): **“ויעקב איש תם יושב אהלים.”** Furthermore, the Torah informs us (ibid. 33, 1): **“וישא יעקב עיניו וירא והנה עשו בא וארבע מאות איש עמו”**—**Yaakov raised his**

eyes and saw—and behold, Eisav was approaching, and he was accompanied by four hundred men. In that time of need, he raised his eyes to safeguard himself from the wicked Eisav.

Now, the Rashbam found himself in a difficult predicament. He wanted to enter the carriage to travel to a particular destination; however, because he did not look up, he did not notice that the carriage was drawn by a horse and a mule. Nevertheless, we have an important principle (Shmuel I 2, 9): **“רגלי חסידיו ישמור”—He guards the steps of His devout ones.** Therefore, HKB”H miraculously arranged for his brother, Rabeinu Tam, to happen to be there for him. In the words of the Mordechai: **“איתרחיש ליה”**—**Rabeinu Tam arrived just in time to save his brother from getting into the carriage and transgressing the prohibition of “kilayim.”**

Without a doubt, Rabeinu Tam was delighted that he was afforded the opportunity to prevent his brother from violating the prohibition of “kilayim.” Nevertheless, he felt it necessary to reprimand his brother: **“Don’t be overly righteous; look up; see that a horse and a mule are standing in front of you!”** Now, the Mordechai does not report what the Rashbam replied to his brother. It is very likely that just as he was extremely careful with regards to the sanctity of his eyes, he was similarly careful to an extreme with regard to his speech. So, perhaps, he chose not to respond in his embarrassment.

Nevertheless, we can surmise what the Rashbam might have thought and replied. He might have said: “Dear brother, this incident proves that my way is the proper way. After all, HKB”H arranged for you to be here miraculously in order to spare me from violating a prohibition. Clearly, HKB”H approves of my demeanor of not elevating my gaze.”

Let us endeavor to resolve this enigma. What are we to conclude from this story? Which of the two was right? Rabeinu Tam concluded from this incident that it is necessary and preferable to look up occasionally to avoid committing a transgression. The Rashbam concluded that it is preferable to lower one’s gaze, so as not to behold prohibited sights.

HKB”H Orchestrated This Incident to Teach Us that Both Represent Divine Truth

To answer this question, let us examine the story more closely. HKB”H arranged for the Rashbam to be spared from the prohibition of “kilayim” through the miraculous appearance of his brother, Rabeinu Tam. Now, HKB”H could have saved him in many different ways. Another carriage could have come along drawn by animals that did not constitute a problem of “kilayim”; any anonymous Jew could have happened by and warned him not to get into the carriage. We must conclude, therefore, that HKB”H saved him specifically by the sudden appearance of his brother to teach us a valuable lesson.

In my humble opinion, it is important to recognize that these two esteemed brothers—Rabeinu Tam and the Rashbam—were among the greatest scholars of their generation; they were from the greatest of the Tosafists. Not only did they teach the members of their generation the ways of the Torah and how to best serve Hashem; but they left their indelible imprint upon all of Yisrael throughout the generations. Anyone who opens up a Gemara with Rashi’s commentary—which is replaced by the commentary of the Rashbam in several Masechtot—and Tosafot, encounters their explanations and clarifications countless times.

Now, each one of them had his own way of serving Hashem, as is evident from this fascinating story. The Rashbam typically lowered his gaze to ensure the kedushah of his eyes. Rabeinu Tam, on the other hand, who was also concerned with the kedushah of his eyes, felt that it is occasionally necessary to raise one’s eyes to recognize and avoid a potential transgression. Each of these great luminaries had his own unique way of serving Hashem.

HKB”H wanted to teach Yisrael that both methodologies are correct and divinely inspired. Each one’s methodology was well-intended and suited its originator’s neshamah. Therefore, HKB”H orchestrated this scenario to highlight the differences between their approaches. On the one hand, Rabeinu Tam saved the Rashbam from riding in a carriage drawn by a horse and a mule; this reinforced his belief that his methodology was correct—that it is imperative to occasionally look up to be sure that one is

not going to violate a prohibition. On the other hand, this sequence of events reinforced the Rashbam’s belief that it is best to lower one’s gaze in all circumstances. For, in the merit of this demeanor, HKB”H arranged for him miraculously not to enter the carriage. Thus, it turns out that via this encounter between these two luminaries, the concept that both ways are proper and divinely-inspired was revealed. David HaMelech expressed this concept as follows (Tehillim 19, 10): “משפטי ה' אמת צדקו יחדיו”—**the judgments of Hashem are true, righteous altogether.**

“Do not plow with an ox and a donkey together” Teaches Us Not to Unite the Forces of Tumah

Let us continue onward on this enlightening journey to better appreciate why HKB”H orchestrated this fascinating scenario to demonstrate the principle of: “אלו ואלו דברי אלקים—**אלו ואלו דברי אלקים**—there are many proper ways to serve Hashem and they do not negate each other. We will begin by introducing the explanation of the divine kabbalist, the author of the Megaleh Amukos on Vaeschanan (71), regarding the rationale for the Torah’s prohibition of plowing with an ox and a donkey together.

Yishmael represents the corruption and tumah of Avraham’s attribute of chesed. He is the klipah’s version of chesed, known as the klipah of the donkey. Eisav represents the corruption and tumah of Yitzchak’s attribute of gevurah. He is the klipah’s version of gevurah, known as the klipah of the ox. These two klipot, headed by Eisav and Yishmael, the ox and the donkey, are formidable, dangerous klipot; for, they are the leaders of the seventy nations of the world. The ministering angel of Eisav stands in charge of the thirty-five nations on the left side of the klipah—the side of gevurah. The ministering angel of Yishmael stands in charge of the thirty-five nations on the right side of the klipah—the side of chesed.

Hence, the Torah prohibited joining them together: **לא תחרוש בשור ובחמור יחדיו—do not plow using an ox and a donkey together.** For, a grave danger exists when uniting these two forces; since they are the root of all the forces of tumah contained among the seventy nations of the world. Along these line, we have learned in the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 71b): “פיזור לרשעים הנאה להן והנאה לעולם”—**dispersal for the**

wicked is beneficial to them and beneficial to the world. Rashi explains that because they are separated from each other, they cannot conspire together and assist each other in perpetrating evil.

Unity in the Realm of Kedushah Creates Separation between the Ox and the Donkey

We have presented several times in the past a fundamental principle from the incredible teachings of the Chasam Sofer, zy" a, in parshas Lech Lecha. He teaches us that when unity exists within the realm of kedushah, it causes division among the reshaim. On the other hand, if, chas v'shalom, there is a lack of unity within the realm of kedushah, it creates unity among the reshaim. He applies this principle to explain the dispute recorded between the herdsmen of Avraham and the herdsmen of Lot (Bereishis 13, 6): "ולא נשא אותם הארץ לשבת יחדיו כי היה רכושם רב ולא יכלו: לשבת יחדיו, ויהי ריב בין רועי מקנה אברהם לרועי מקנה לוט והכנעני -- and the land could not support them living together for their possessions were abundant and they were unable to dwell together. And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Avram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock; and the Canaani and the Perizi were then dwelling in the land. Here is his sacred insight:

"יש לומר כי מדרך הצדיקים להיות באחדות גמור, ואז כינוס לצדיקים הנאה להם והנאה לעולם, וזה עצמו גורם פיזור לרשעים, וההיפוך בהיפוך, כי כשאינם באחדות ח"ו גורם כינוס לרשעים שהוא רע לעולם... והיינו דכתיב ולא נשא אותם הארץ לשבת יחדיו... וזה גרם שהכנעני והפריזי או יושב בארץ בהשקט ושלחה".

It is customary for tzaddikim to exist in total harmony; thus, when they gather together it is beneficial to them and it is beneficial to the world. This fact alone creates separation and division among the reshaim of the world.

Unfortunately, the converse is also true. When a lack of unity and harmony exists among the tzaddikim, chas v'shalom, it allows the reshaim to join together, which bodes evil for the world. We see in the pesukim above that the dispute and lack of unity between Avraham's people and Lot's people enabled the Canaani and the Perizi to dwell in the land in peace and harmony.

We now have cause to rejoice; for, we can comprehend to some degree why HKB"H chose to spare the Rashbam from transgressing the "lo ta'aseh" of: **"Do not plow using an ox and a donkey together"**—by arranging a chance meeting between the two illustrious brothers—Rabeinu Tam and the Rashbam. That encounter demonstrated that although they espoused different philosophies regarding the service of Hashem: "אלו ואלו דברי אלקים חיים"—both are divinely-inspired and correct. We see that the gathering together of tzaddikim benefitted them both and benefitted the world at large. As a consequence, the forces of evil were prevented from joining forces; the ox and the donkey were kept apart. Therefore, it was specifically the joint effort of the two brothers that resulted in the fulfillment of the mitzvah of: "לא תחרוש בשור ובחמור יחדיו".

From all that has been said, we can learn a valuable lesson regarding the sacred avodah that is required of us throughout the year—and especially during the days of "sefiras ha'omer," when Rabbi Akiva's twenty-four thousand disciples perished for not properly respecting one another. It is imperative that we respect our fellow Jew, even when we disagree as to the best and proper way to observe the Torah and serve Hashem. By maintaining unity and harmony within the realm of kedushah, we will create division and discord among the reshaim of the world. Ultimately, this will merit us the complete geulah—swiftly, in our times! Amen.

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