

Loving Your Friend as Yourself

One of the most well-known verses in the Torah is וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ.¹ It is often erroneously translated as “love your neighbor as yourself.” In our society many people do not know their neighbors, let alone love them. We live in silos in the suburbs, with each individual home being a world unto itself. A better translation of the phrase is to “love your friend as yourself.” The word רֵעַ in Hebrew means friend. At the same time, how many of us love our friends as ourselves? We might wish our friends well and any opportunity for success, but if we are competing with them for a job would we really want them to have the same success as us?

What I find fascinating about the word רֵעַ is that it is the same word which is used in the *Sheva Berachot*, the 7 marriage blessings. In the sixth blessing we say שִׂמְחַת רֵעִים הַאֲהוּבִים, “loving friends shall truly rejoice.” Often people say, “I’m in love with/I married my best friend”-and today is no exception to that. By the time a couple reaches the הַפָּה, they know each other so well.

¹ Leviticus 19:18

The blessing continues כשמחך יצירך בגן עדן מקדם “May your joy be as that of the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden.” We pray that Sara and Jeffrey always feel the sense of edenic paradise, that the joy which you feel now as well as under the wedding canopy will remain with you always. We know that often in life joy climaxes and then fades; the honeymoon period is too short-lived. It takes work in order to keep up the level of joy and intensity that one feels at their wedding. One thing that helps us do it, however, is to recognize that you are and will remain lifelong friends. Friendship strengthens every bond, including a loving relationship like yours.

Can you really love even your רע, your significant other and life partner, as yourself? We are so competitive with one another, always striving to prove “I’m right and you’re wrong.” Even with our partners, we tend to play the blame game when things don’t go as we envision- and even worse we can throw others in the middle of our grievances. A statement like “love your significant other as yourself” demonstrates that

when we hurt our partner we also hurt ourselves. We are stronger together.

Rabbi Isaac Luria teaches that when we wake up every morning we should say *הריני מקבל עלי את מצות הבורא ואהבת לרעך כמוך* “I receive onto myself the commandment from the Creator to love your neighbor as yourself.”² The fact that he said it every morning demonstrates the perpetual need to remind ourselves of it. Without remembering to treat one with whom we are in relationship as we treat ourselves, we can quickly spiral into marginalizing or putting down that person to build ourselves up. We need to lovingly remember to embrace this principle each and every day; one which is easy to say but hard to do.

The hardest time to keep this is when we see something unfavorable in ourselves or in our partner that we would love to change. Rather than responding with criticism or put downs, we recognize, as the *Meor Eynaim* teaches, that “if we see something unfavorable in ourselves, we do not hate ourselves but that unfavorable thing. How we

² The Prayerbook of the Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria)

are in ourselves is how we respond to our fellow.”³ If we respond to our personal limitations with compassion and kindness, so should we do with our significant other.

Jeffrey and Sara, my blessing for you is that your love continues to blossom each and every day and that you remain one another's רעים אהובים best friends, always looking out for the other and letting your love conquer any challenge that comes your way in life. I also know that you will continue to stand by one another, providing confidence and bolstering the other up in times of need. In remembering that your relationship with one another is what is truly most important, much more so than the particular disagreement or issue at hand, may you strengthen your true love each and every day. In addition to being each other's partners, always remember that you are best friends and then your marriage will thrive. Mazal Tov! So as to crystallize the joy each of us feels in this moment, I ask that you turn with me to Page 838 and continue responsively.

³ Meor Eynaim on Chukkat