

Love Your Neighbor?


Nahma Nadich

FOR THOSE OF US who do not identify as Orthodox Jews, the unquestioning and indiscriminating fulfillment of mitzvot is not necessarily a *sine qua non* of our daily lives. As free moral agents in an open society, we seek to create deep and personal connections with mitzvot that will render their fulfillment meaningful. I, like others, am invariably drawn to mitzvot that resonate with my values and provide inspiration. I was blessed to be raised in a home where the proud and joyful observance of mitzvot was woven into the fabric of our family's life. I find comfort in the emotional wisdom of mitzvot that offer structure in a chaotic world by infusing the sacred into the rhythm of daily life. Perhaps on the simplest level, my observance is reinforced by the sheer power and beauty of ritual.

As someone deeply committed to a universal notion of humanity, I would have thought that the Torah's ethical interpersonal mitzvot would resonate soundly with my values and I would absorb them seamlessly into my life. I am humbled to admit that this is not the case. What is more basic to our tradition (and to the traditions of other faiths) than, "Love your neighbor as yourself" — a commandment to

want and expect for others the same as for oneself? How could anyone quibble with that? But the lines preceding this verse raise the bar. Not only are we commanded to love, we are forbidden to hate, to take revenge, or to bear a grudge. Herein lies my struggle with what would have seemed a resonant mitzvah. Like anyone else, I shudder to think of myself as a spiteful bitter person. But when I'm hurt, how tempted I am to nurse a grudge, to relive another's incomprehensibly thoughtless behavior? What better way to avoid examining my own flaws and to reaffirm my sense of righteousness?

I reassure myself by understanding this as a trap that human nature makes all but inescapable. But there may be an even greater danger for those of us whose life work is the pursuit of deeply held convictions. Firmly committed to the principles of social justice and equality, how do I relate to those whose perspective and worldview differ from my own? How do I manage to debate without degrading, to disagree without judging?

"Love your neighbor as yourself" is a fundamental Jewish principle. And one likely to continue guiding, inspiring, and confounding. 

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Honor

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MY AUNT MINA used to say "Talking about your family in public is like blowing your nose and wiping it on your face." Then, in private, she'd launch into another story about her awful oldest sister, my beloved grandmother.

How do I approach the mitzvah to honor my father and mother? Can I grapple with it, without wiping snot all over my face? In my mother's seventh month of being pregnant with me, my father started having an affair with my mother's best friend. He told her about the affair, but not who he was having it with, and it was to her best friend that my mother turned for comfort. In the sacred space of the womb, a place people like to think is a safe private sea, I had nowhere to turn. My parents' marriage survived till I was eight,

when another affair finally destroyed it.

Honor my father? The one who appeared on stray Sundays? Who said, when I was sixteen and came at him in rage for what he'd done and for who he wasn't, "You have two choices. I can be your best friend. Or I can be nothing." I picked best friend, a tribute to hope in the breast of a teenager, and a tribute to the way that I numbed myself to years of pain.

Honor my father? I loved him till the day he died, and 20 years later, now the age he was when he started dying, I love him still. He was funny and charming, and could play the guitar and harmonica at the same time, taught me how to use a dark room, how to paint, took me on endless trips to museums and introduced me to music that I still love and still play. Love him, yes. But honor him? I don't think so. 