



THE CENTRAL TEACHING

A FAMOUS STORY IN THE TALMUD CONCERNS A PERSON ASKING to be told the whole Torah while he stood “on one foot”, meaning in a brief summary. Eventually he came to the great Sage named Hillel, a descendant of King David and the leading Rabbi of his generation. How would Hillel reply to this question? Can the vast Torah really be reduced to a single statement? “What you do not like, do not do to others”, came Hillel’s answer. “That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and study.”¹

The idea that the entire Torah focuses around the theme of one’s relationship with other people is quite striking. Very often the laws of the Torah are divided into two groups: those concerning the relationship of the person with G-d, such as Shabbat observance and kashrut, and those concerning one’s relationship with other people, such as not to steal, or not to be a false witness in a legal case. Here, however, Hillel was saying, in effect, that the *whole* Torah revolves around the single principle of one’s relationship with others.

In the Sedra² this week we find this principle clearly expressed: “love your neighbour as yourself”³. It occurs among many commands about one’s behaviour towards other people, such as – in the very same verse – the demands not to bear a grudge and not to take revenge. However, it is clear that this is a teaching on a quite different level to the other commands.

If a person properly keeps this law, he or she will obviously keep the commands such as not to steal, nor be a false witness, nor bear a grudge. All the laws concerning one's relationship with other people are included in this teaching "love your fellow". Hence Rabbi Akiva said about this command: "this is a great general principle in the Torah"⁴. It is a great general principle because it includes more or less half the Torah: all the laws between man and his fellow.

However, what about the laws between the person and G-d? Hillel seems to go further than Rabbi Akiva. For Hillel, this command includes *all* Torah law. How can we understand that?

An answer given by Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the founder of the Chabad school of Chassidism, is that the intended effect of the entire Torah is to make us more sensitive to the soul, rather than just the body. The Mitzvot (laws) between man and G-d have the function of drawing G-dliness into the material aspects of life. They help us break through the barrier of appearances and connect with the G-dliness within.

This has a direct effect on our view of others. For in physical and material terms, people are divided. But as regards the soul, we are united together. The more that a person is sensitive to that unity, feeling a true love for others, the more he or she will be expressing the goal of the entire Torah. And conversely, the more that a person observes the Torah, in all its details, in a truly inward way, the closer they will come to a genuine love for others.

Hillel makes this point in another teaching, found in Ethics of the Fathers. He tells us to be like the disciples of Aaron, loving all those around us and drawing them close to the Torah⁵. We can express our love for another person through caring for them in physical terms. Yet we can also express our love by caring for them *spiritually*, helping him or her come closer to the Torah. Each of us has this power of love, with the power to give to others, both materially and spiritually. Through this love we will trigger the chain reaction leading to the goal of Creation: peace and love between man and his fellow, between nation and nation, between humanity and G-d⁶.

1. Talmud Shabbat 31a. 2. Leviticus chs.19-20. 3. Lev.19:18. 4. See Rashi to Lev.19:18. 5. Ethics 1:12. 6. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.17, p.215 ff.

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SEDRA KEDOSHIM

ON ONE LEG

"How good is your sense of balance? How long do you think you could stand on one leg without falling?"

Mr Moses was trying to get his class interested in what he was saying. That was an extremely difficult thing to do. When he asked them how long they could stand on leg there seemed to be a flicker of attention.

"Can we try it out, sir?" asked Jack Levy. "I'll stand on one leg and you time me!" "Well," said Mr Moses, "If you can balance for more than five minutes, then you'll be doing pretty well... "

"So go on, let's try!" said Jack Levy. Other boys in the class also called out. "Let's try!" "Time us!" "I've got a stop-watch!" Mr Moses banged his ruler on the teacher's desk in an attempt to restore order.

"Listen," he said. "Would you like to stand on one leg long enough to hear the whole Torah?"

The class fell silent. This sounded threatening. Alan Cohen, who was very knowledgeable about pupils' rights, was sure it was against the law.

"You can't do that, sir" he said, politely but firmly. "Well," said Mr Moses, "The Talmud tells us that there was once a man who wanted to know the teachings of the Torah very quickly. He came to the great sage Shammai. 'Teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot' he demanded."

The class relaxed. No-one was asking *them* to stand on one foot for very long. On that basis, they agreed to listen further.

“It seemed like a ridiculous request. The Torah is deep and endless, and even a lifetime of learning it is not enough. So Shammai pushed him away with a measuring stick, hinting that the only way to learn the Torah is to go step by step in a measured way.

“Then the man went to Hillel, another great Sage. ‘Teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot’ he said. Without batting an eyelid, Hillel agreed.” The class gasped unbelievably. This was very gratifying to Mr Moses. He decided that when he got home he would tell his wife how well he got the class to listen. At least for a few moments...

“Hillel said: ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. That is the whole Torah. The rest is explanation - go and learn...’”

Mr Moses gazed round the class, who were indeed all listening attentively. “Now,” he said, “how does that relate to the Sedra?”

Several of the boys knew. In fact, they all seemed to know. “It says in the Sedra, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself!’”

They were all shouting at once. “I said it first!” “I did!” “I knew at the beginning”. Suddenly Alan Cohen called everyone to order. “Be quiet, all of you! You have to love your neighbour, and that includes Mr Moses. No talking!!”

Everyone fell silent, sat properly in their seats, looking expectantly at Mr Moses. However, at that moment the bell went. As the boys filed quietly out of the room, Mr Moses looked forward to describing the lesson to his wife.

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