

The argument has ensued for as long as there have been Jews.
WHAT is the greatest principle in all of Torah?
Though many commandments vie for contention,
Most all agree—Rabbi Akiva wins hands down.
It makes perfect sense, then, that if this holiest day of our year
Could leave us with one supreme, parting message,
Tradition would select as our YK Torah Take-Away
Leviticus 19, The Holiness Code...with its core, Akiva's absolute: verse 18...
“*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”

The real question is WHY?

For if it's beyond obvious, why hammer it home: of course, we need to love our neighbor,
especially if we anticipate that respect—that kindness—that love in return.
And yet the commentaries go crazy unpacking
these three not so simple Hebrew words.

1. VAHAVTAH...*And you shall love...* So the ALTER of SLOBODKA reminds:
“Just as you love yourself instinctively, without need for rationale or justification,
so should you love others, even without a reason.”

That is, Love unconditionally

2. L'REY-ACHA...*Your neighbor...* Rabbi S.R. HIRSCH points out:
“The text adds the prefix “L” meaning “to” or “towards”...It is not our neighbor but that
which pertains to our neighbor we must love. We are not obliged to love his personality,
but to love his welfare as if it were our own...to keep him from pain, as though we
were threatened. Even if he is unlikable, we must still exhibit love for his well-being.”

So then, **Love unconditionally your neighbor's well-being...**

3. KAMOCHA...*As yourself...* The KOTZKER REBBE wonders:
“Is falling in love with yourself so commendable. Rather, to keep the love of self in
check, you must extend that love—in kind—to your neighbor.”

THUS, fully unpacked, our core commandment would read something like:

**Love unconditionally your neighbor's well-being,
for that love will save you from yourself.**

...How we understand and treat the other is not alone a benchmark of our character.

For us as Jews,

it is the saving grace that helps manifest God's Presence in our lives.

This day is all about ATONEMENT, but how is it attained?

At its most basic, our aim is to be AT-ONE, with our world and the people who fill it.

And yet We know, that is much easier said than done.

Before Reb Isser-Zalmen would deliver his weekly Torah-teaching to the
student body of his Yeshivah, he'd first go into a small room next to the
study hall and close the door behind him. Every week, like ritual, the same.

Once, one of his students, curious to understand the Rabbi's halachic preparations peeked in to see what his teacher was up to...
To his surprise, he saw Reb Isser-Zalmen pacing back and forth, repeating aloud over and over again:

"V'Ahavtah L'Reyacha Kamocha...Love your neighbor as yourself."

No commandment is more crucial, and none more difficult to make real.

As a sophomore in High School, I had a somewhat offbeat favorite film, one I saw 4 times with my friend Mersh, a true Mel Brooks' classic. Set in the late 19th century Wild-West, "Blazing Saddles" featured Cleavon Little as the newly-appointed sheriff, Hoping to clean-up the degenerates from the lily-white town of Rock-Ridge, Which was highly improbably if not impossible because Sheriff Bart was Black. Knowing he couldn't go it alone, the dynamic duo—Black Bart and his newly befriended sidekick, a washed-up gunslinger, the Waco Kid, played by the real Willy Wonka, Gene Wilder, face-off against the town.

As the action builds, Black Bart, dejected by the prejudicial response of the citizenry of Rock-Ridge is consoled by his friend, the Waco Kid. "What did you expect? 'Welcome Sonny. Make yourself at home? Marry my daughter?'...Bart, you've got to remember that these are just simple farmers. These are people of the land. The common clay of the new West. You know...morons."

With an almost post-Civil Rights sensibility,
Wilder, a clearly sympathetic Jewish character,
innately understands how ridiculous the prevalent racist bias.

As the story reaches its final showdown, Black Bart & the Waco Kid are up against what seems a beyond-imagining onslaught: not alone the desperadoes from all around, but gathered behind them, an array of Nazi Stormtroopers along with a mass of white-robed Klansmen, torches in hand.

Of course, the film, written by Brooks and a small team, most notably Richard Pryor, who Brooks claims wrote all the Jewish jokes, in 1974, was meant as a comedic cinematic satire. Never in his wildest nightmares did Mel Brooks imagine such a scene as that which he spoofed as the film's finale, over 40 years later coming to life.

Charlottesville, August 13, 2017...

The scene is surreal.

What we know deep in our bones, as Jews:

this is a hatred whose horror we have seen/felt before...

The question of a statue was a sidelight. The white-supremacists and neo-Nazi's marching on Charlottesville in mid-August had one aim in mind:
That their venomous hate might instill fear and incite violence.
Make no mistake. Armed neo-Nazi's and hooded Klan-members, torches in hand, shouting: "Sieg-Heil, Blood & Soil...Jews Will Not Replace Us"
conveyed their abhorrent message loud and clear.
There is no room for equivocation.
And as morning dawned, over 400 white-supremacists continuing their rallying cry, met by well over 1,000 counter-protestors, face to face clashes leading to violence,
And with an act of vehicular homicide,
multiple injuries and the senseless death of Heather Hyer...
On that same Saturday AM, as neo-Nazi's and assorted racist protestors amassed at Emancipation Park, just a block from CBI—Congregation Beth Israel,
The hate landed very close to home...
As the President of the local Reform congregation wrote incredulously,
"This is 2017 in the United States of America."

I recall back in late 2008
the euphoria supporters exhibited with Obama's 1st-term election.
A couple of mornings after that stirring, inspired acceptance speech
in the President-elect's home turf, Chicago's Grant Park,
I sat having breakfast at the diner with my friend Wayne,
aka Bishop Powell of the largely Black Pentecostal Strait Gate Church...
A clergy colleague passed our booth and elatedly made some comment about
Living now in a "post-racial America." We both smiled, but as he walked away,
Wayne turned to me and said: "Post racial? Jeff, where's he been livin'.
I'm more nervous now than ever!"
In that hope-infused, idealistic message,
President-elect Obama called for collective change:
"So, let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility,
Where each of us resolves to work harder and look after not only ourselves,
but each other."

WHAT is the 'Republic for which we stand?'
'One nation...indivisible'...Patriot's pride means putting the other person first.
But loving your neighbor has never come easy....

Back in January 1963, a fateful year for America,
The keynote address at the first National Conference on Religion & Race,
in Chicago, was delivered by none other than prophetic presence,
Colleague at heart with Dr. King, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Leaving no one in doubt that his discourse was indeed a divine demand, here's his opening:

“At the first-ever conference on Religion & Race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses' words were, “Thus says the Lord, Let my people go!” While Pharaoh retorted, “Who is the Lord that I should heed? I will not let Israel go!” The outcome of that summit meeting has not yet come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The Exodus began, but it is far from complete... Let us dodge no issues; let us yield no inch to bigotry... “Religion & Race” HOW can the two be uttered together?

To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart; to remember that humanity as a whole is God's beloved child. To act in the spirit of race is to tear asunder; to dismember the flesh of a living humanity... Few of us realize that racism is man's gravest threat to man—the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason.”

On that Sabbath Saturday morning in Charlottesville last month, An elderly woman approached the Temple President who was standing watch alongside the armed security guard out front. She was in tears, relating that as a Roman Catholic, she felt compelled to stand with the Jewish community. So together they stood, symbolically sheltering the entrance... After a few minutes, the woman turned to the Congregational President and asked: “Why do they hate you?” And, as he wrote, “I had no answer to that question we'd been asking ourselves for thousands of years.”

As a sophomore at B.U. in 1978, during my Literature of Memory seminar w/Prof. Wiesel, A few of us approached at the end of class with questions.

One woman, who'd eventually become a Presbyterian Minister urgently asked: “Throughout the centuries, even to this day, Jews always bear the brunt. Why are they so hated?”

I did not imagine Wiesel would directly respond, but with mournful eyes, he sighed and spoke: “Don't you see? We are hated because, as Jews, we keep one obligation above all: To be the conscience of humankind.”

When any people is oppressed, we feel the pain.

When some are bound in chains, we are all enslaved.

When the hateful deny the humanity of some, we counter hate with love for all.

When victims of human indignity are silenced, we become their voice.

In that 1963 address, Heschel asked the rhetorical question:

“How many disasters do we have to go through to finally realize that all of humanity has a stake in the liberty of any and every person?”

More than fifty years later, the call echoes: “*Love your neighbor as yourself...*”

But it all depends on just who you decide **is** your neighbor.

The divisiveness of today's common discourse which encourages a take-sides, blunt-edged blame the other attitude seems to reflect a far deeper concern:

That for some, at the core of our country's psyche, lies a pathological misperception:

*"That all men and women are **not** created equal."*

Such a premise leads to insidious bias which brings social bifurcation; the building of walls—religious, racial, ethnic barriers real and repugnant, that erode the foundation of our nation, not to mention the covenant we share.

The roots of racism are complex, and its manifestation is multilayered with multiple factors, from economic disadvantage and social disenfranchisement, often to a historical revisionism, painting an alternate/strangely colored reality

Yet its upshot is ultimately the same, as Heschel asserted:

"This is not a white man's world. This is not a colored man's world.

It is God's world. And no person has a place in this world who tries to keep another in his place."

So just who is "*your neighbor*"...?

We tend to identify ourselves by what makes us unique, distinct, unlike the other. We see what's on the outside, which often frames our judgement.

NYU Psychology Professor Jay Van Bavel's research recognized what we inherently understand: We exhibit an "implicit bias" driven by our human tendency to divide the world into groups. And our first response is to favor those to whom we are somehow connected [the US] and to consequently disfavor those with differing affiliations or self-distinctions [THEM]...Nothing drastic here.

If we share the same team loyalty, club membership, college allegiance, religious denomination, the connection can lead to a belonging that creates tight-knit community.

But, as we have witnessed...tribalist tendencies can grow into a triumphalism which does not alone draw group distinctions, but discriminates and divides the world.

With the NFL the latest case-in-point,

Taking sides on the question of players' pose during the National Anthem, Pointing Presidential fingers have obscured the purpose in the first place:

To protest racial inequality in our country; to demand "justice for all."

In his book, [American Covenant—A History of Civil Religion](#),

Yale Prof of Religion Phillip Gorski brilliantly traces

the divergent positions that have struggled since the Puritans to dominate our nation's discourse:

on one side of the spectrum, Religious Nationalism—a hyper-patriotism

that imagines the United States as a divine instrument of ultimate salvation, and Radical Secularism—a fervent anti-faith libertarianism that asserts individual rights as supreme.

Rejecting both extremes, advocating a renewal of “the vital center” in order to solidify the foundation of our nation, Gorski puts forth *American Civil Religion* as the antidote to bridge the great divide.

The call of urgency in his conclusion couldn’t be more timely:

“Rebuilding the vital center will not be easy, but it is imperative...It protects the rights of the minority. It allows for a divided government. It establishes a system of judicial review. In a word, it requires compromise...If we fail to build the vital center through this collective, multigenerational project...it will mean the end not only of American Democracy...but of the American creed itself:

e pluribus unum—out of many, one.” [*American Covenant*, Gorski, Princeton Univ Press, pgs 222,233]

Our nation’s Constitution is a covenant where difference is embraced;

Where that which makes us distinct is far less significant than that which binds us together.

“*V’Ahavtah L’Reyacha Kamocha...*” [*Love your neighbor as yourself.*]

No commandment more crucial...

Yet, unpacking its demand on the most personal level we come to understand:

It is grounded not alone in how you see the other,

But, more principally, how you see your ‘self’...

I’ve been seeing the ads on TV for some time, and have long thought about it

After all, who wouldn’t want to discover: Who am I, really?

Of course, my self-identifiers are pretty indisputable:

White—Jewish—[Red Sox Fan] American, at least for the last four generations.

But what about before?

Who are the ancestors that enabled all of me to be?

So, following the lead last summer of Rabbi Josh Hammerman,

This summer I sent away for the kit: My Heritage DNA.

Swab your cheek; spit in a test tube, and magically find out who you’re made of.

I wasn’t so much interested in ethnic origins or genetic predispositions,

As much as the mash-up which is uniquely me....

Well...Operative assumptions affirmed: I am primarily

Bellarusian, Russian, Ukranian, Hungarian—Ashkenazi/East European Jewish...

But, surprise, surprise: I am also a fraction Middle Eastern and Irish!

Call me a smorgasbord, a hybrid human...

The end result of such “origins analysis” brings a crucial realization:

“Race” is a deeply flawed concept, as it is a highly questionable means of classification.

With theories dating back to pre-biblical days, the idea of what makes us different, and why, has been widely pondered over the past two millennia...

The first recorded scientific classifications of humans into distinct races, published in a French Journal in 1684—divided the world into four quarters, thus providing species-labels for human difference.

Distinction seemed to make us who we are...

By the 18th century scientists included observations pointing to head size correlating to brain function, an obvious determinant of the measure of human character...

Talk about a trumped-up claim!

And though some researchers of the 19th and early 20th centuries understood race as a social construct, it may well have been Charles Darwin who helped clarify our common origin, demonstrating that physical characteristics, so often seen as a base for race—facial features, skin color, physiological structure... were superficial determinants with no discernable value!

Thus, the ultimate realization, as if we need to spend \$79.99 [plus shipping & handling] ...We are all one human family.

Genetically speaking, all human beings are 99.998 % the same!

Is .002% of difference worth such a fuss?

YET, old hatreds die hard.

Every day, people are judged by the color of their skin,

The accent of their voice, the clothes of their culture, the rites of their religion,

Rather than by the content of their character.

Even among us, bigotries are often unconsciously imbedded...

25+ years ago, one summer Sunday morning at the Paul family breakfast table,

Our weekend getaway back home in Haverhill, when the boys were 5 or 6,

As Papa lovingly made bagels for the crew, the discussion turned to Susan's

old high school gang. Reminiscing about hanging out in the "clubhouse"

she mentioned a name to which her Dad replied, "Oh, the Schvartz."

One of the boys asked, "The what?"

With fiery eyes Susan glared at her father, "Daddy, we don't talk like that!"

Her father, among the most generous, caring people I have ever known,

had no clue what he'd done wrong.

But the Yiddish for "Dark/Black" came along

with generations of derogatory stigma, even if unintended.

And because my wife was defiant in her defense of the dignity of every human being,

Because she refused to countenance even the slightest prejudice,

Even from her Dad, she spoke up.

Do we?...

At a Muslim summer Youth Camp founded in 1963,
run today by 2nd generation Asifa Landes—a Law Prof at Berkeley,
smores and songs take a back seat to its core purpose:
providing a confessional space for deep anxieties about being openly Muslim
in America...Overcoming e-mail threats that forced the directors to move the campsite,
and to no longer publish the actual camp address in any camp materials,
the hope is to create a safe-haven against the persistent discrimination and hate
which every one of these kids face simply trying to grow up in these United States.
Implementing a creative learning program across the camp's units
[much like our URJ summer camps]
I was thrilled to discover this summer's learning theme,
A direct citation from the Quran which served as their guiding teaching,
And which should sound very familiar:
"Love for your brother what you love for yourself."
Our Muslim brothers and sisters; couldn't be more neighborly!

Which brings to mind perhaps the ultimate model [in the purest sense possible]
For making this most central & sacred commandment real...
Clad in a zipper cardigan, unlacing his dress shoes and slipping on sneakers at the
start of each show, I always wondered why I was so taken with Mr. Rogers?
[It certainly was not his set, nor the sophistication of his puppetry!]
Originating on the CBC in 1963, this year celebrating its 50th on American TV,
Mister Roger's Neighborhood was unique because this Presbyterian Minister
turned TV personality/producer spent each half hour episode by removing the "wall,"
speaking directly to kids about the real feelings and fears they faced.
But we knew inside—he was speaking to us all.
Wrapping up the show with his signature sign-off,
"You make each day special just by being you..."
Rogers made the world safe, manageable, by transforming it into a neighborhood.
Above all, he perceived his highest calling to be 'Kindness'
as his words to the graduating class at Middlebury College back in 2001 attest:
*"I believe that appreciation is a holy thing; that when we look for what's best in the
person we happen to be with at the moment, we're doing what God does.
So, in appreciating our neighbor, we're participating in something truly sacred."*
Fred Rogers points to the part of the verse we usually leave off,
The final phrase, which underscores the ultimate rationale for its fulfillment.
"You shall love your neighbor as yourself...ANI ADONAI—I am Adonai"
WHEN we extend our hearts to embrace people not because we know them, not even
because we like them, but because we understand, they need our helping hands...
WHEN we see beyond the distinctions and appreciate the other

not in spite of their differences, but because of them...

Celebrating the 99-plus % we have in common,

we are doing nothing short of making God's Presence manifest.

Back in 1963, on the 15th of September when I turned 5,

Four little girls, but a few years older, were killed while attending Sunday School in the Birmingham Baptist Church bombing—murdered because they were Black.

The Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the funeral sermon.

Consider yourself an inheritor of their legacies...

“These children—unoffending; innocent and beautiful—were victims of one of the most heinous crimes ever perpetrated against humanity.

Yet they died nobly.

They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for...human dignity.

So, they have something to say to us in their death.

They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows....

They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred...

They have something to say to a federal government that has compromised with shamefully undemocratic practices...

They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution...

They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about WHO murdered them, but about...the way of life which produced the murderers...

They say to us that in spite of the darkness of this hour we must not despair...

Their deaths say to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly

to make the American dream a reality.” [Eulogy for the Martyred Children, Rev Dr M.L.King Jr.]

We all share in that dream-deferred...

So we understand, our YK Torah Take-away is homework meant for every single day.

Being AT-ONE with our world only happens when our lives are committed

to the impassioned work of conquering the hate that so often seems to fill it...

On Nov 5th we'll share a late afternoon Dessert-Dialogue here in the Garden Room with members of the Strait Gate Church, to talk about the hatreds we have/still face—and the courage it takes to confront that hate with love...

But don't wait till then to reach out to that person you'd likely label “other”

Yet who could become sister or brother...

Its about hearing someone else's story, and sensing, somehow, its speaking to you.

Loving our neighbor starts when we listen with open hearts...

Winning the Tony Award for Best Original Score last June,
the inordinately talented Lin Manuel Miranda composed a sonnet, an ode to his wife,
an outcry against the Orlando night club massacre,
rampage against the LGBTQ community,
But meant this day as impetus for us to realize the ultimate purpose we each play.
*...We chase the melodies that seem to find us
until they're finished songs and start to play.
When senseless acts of tragedy remind us
that nothing here is promised, not one day.
This moment is proof that history remembers.
We live through times when hate and fear seem stronger.
We rise and fall and light from dying embers.
Remembrances that hope and love live longer.
And love is love is love is love is love is love is love cannot be killed or swept aside.
As sacred as a symphony, Eliza tells her story and fills the world with music love and pride.*

May our everyday mantra be Akiva's absolute,
Empowering us to realize:
We bear prime responsibility for transcending the hate,
Combatting the prejudice still so prevalent,
By reaching out, by speaking out, by standing up,
By celebrating difference, and, in so doing,
making our world more a neighborhood.
Not a global initiative nor a political platform;
Rather this is a call, for today and every tomorrow,
To see the world with neighborly eyes by making kindness our calling card.
...For facing our New Year
by turning to face & embrace people so different,
yet really, almost the same,
we are not alone fulfilling our Covenant's supreme command,
But, connecting one another through the hearts and hope we share,
We are saving our world,
person by person by person by person by person by person by person.
And through the Godlike power of our love, we are saving ourselves as well.
So, with the Ultimate DNA Designer's Guiding Hand, may it yet be.....

AMEN