

ACHAREI MOS (LEVITICUS 16:1-20:27)

A Torah Crash Course

2006 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

A Torah lifestyle is very complex. We are required to fulfill 613 Biblical Commandments. Then there are rabbinic injunctions, and countless customs that have developed over the centuries. It is impossible for one person to fathom it all.

The Talmud (Shabbos, 31a) tells us about one person who tried.

“Shammai,” called out the Gentile to the famous rabbi, “I will convert to Judaism if you will teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.”

Shammai, great scholar and righteous man that he was, was not a man who was known for tolerating mockery. He threw the guy out. The questioner decided to try to bring his challenge to Hillel instead.

“Hillel,” he said. “I will convert to Judaism if you will teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.”

Hillel took him seriously. It was a deal. Hillel converted him and taught him a verse from this week’s Torah reading: “...*Love your neighbor the way you love yourself...*” (Leviticus 19:18)

“Anything that is hateful to you,” Hillel explained, “don’t do to your neighbor. That’s it. That’s the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now, go study the rest.”

Nice story. But is it accurate? Why did Hillel humor this man with his ridiculous question? And, did he answer him correctly? Is it true that 612 Commandments are simply a commentary on the Mitzvah of loving your fellow man?

To be sure, it is a great Mitzvah to love one’s fellow. We must be kind and considerate. We must visit the sick and feed the poor. We must not steal. But what does that have to do with the Mitzvah of wearing Tefillin and not eating cheeseburgers?

The Kli Yakar gives us some additional insights into the request of the prospective convert, and Hillel’s seemingly incomplete response. The Gentile wasn’t coming to make fun. Rather, he wanted to have a simple, general rule that would encapsulate all of Torah thought. He was looking for a single, easy-to-

remember concept that would remind him of everything else. He wanted one rule, one “leg” upon which all of Torah law and philosophy stand.

Hillel’s response, at first glance, seems to contradict a different “leg” quoted elsewhere in the Talmud. (Makos, 24a) Various prophets are quoted as breaking down the Torah’s Commandments to eleven, six, three, and two general principles. Finally, the Talmud quotes the prophet Habakkuk, who based the entire Torah on one principle: *The righteous will live by his faith.* (Habakkuk, 2:4)

So who is right? Hillel, who summarizes the Torah with, “. . . *Love your neighbor the way you love yourself* . . . ,” or Habakkuk, who sums it all up as “*the righteous shall live by his faith*”?

The Kli Yakar explains that there is no contradiction. The Mitzvahs of the Torah are divided into two categories. There are Mitzvahs that are purely between man and G-d. When I recite the Grace after Meals or refrain from eating pork chops, that’s between G-d and me. Sometimes I may be inclined to fulfill the Commandment, and sometimes I may not be. Yet either way, I should do it due to my belief in G-d. (Or, as Habakkuk, would say, because “*the righteous will live by his faith.*”) Other Mitzvahs deal with the relationship between man and his fellow. I am not permitted to steal from you, and I am not permitted to say negative things about you. Sometimes I may be inclined to fulfill the Commandment, and sometimes I may not be. Yet either way, I should do it due to my obligation to fulfill Commandments between man and his fellow. (Or, as Hillel would quote, because of “. . . *Love your neighbor the way you love yourself*,,,”)

So why did Hillel only give half an answer? He seems to have told the Gentile why we must fulfill Commandments between man and his fellow, without addressing why we should fulfill Commandments between man and G-d!

This would appear to be a very dangerous statement. Many people celebrate the Torah’s requirement of respecting others. (And so they should) At the same time, however, the Torah’s ritual requirements often end up ignored as old-fashioned and irrelevant. Doesn’t Hillel seem to support this approach by pushing “*Love your neighbor*” and skipping “*the righteous should live by his faith*”?

The Kli Yakar answers that Hillel actually presented the Gentile with two “legs.” The verse Hillel quoted, “*Love your neighbor the way you love yourself* . . . ,” concludes with the words, “. . . *I am G-d.*”

The prospective convert asked Hillel to give him a shortcut to understanding all of Torah values. Very simple, responded Hillel. If you are tempted to harm another person in any way, remember to “*Love your neighbor the way you love yourself*”; don’t do anything to someone else that you wouldn’t want done to you. If you don’t understand why you should keep Kosher or Shabbos, or not wear clothes made out of linen/wool mixtures, remember that “. . . *I am G-d*”; have faith in G-d; He knows what He’s doing.

There, you have it – a Philosophy of Torah Crash Course. Two concepts to live by: Love your neighbor and have faith in G-d. If you spend every day delving into these two concepts, you will have no alternative but to live according to the Torah.

Two concepts: Love your neighbor and have faith in G-d. That's it! The rest is commentary.

Now, go learn the rest!

Have a great Shabbos.

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