



# DVAR TZEDEK

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## Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim 5775

By Rabbi Benjamin Adler

May 2, 2015

A few years ago I was at a meeting of rabbis listening to a talk by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of more than a dozen formative works on Jewish ethics, literacy and history. He began by asking us this question: “What are the three commandments ‘to love’ in the Torah?”

The first two were easy for the rabbinical crowd: in the Shema we are told to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”<sup>1</sup> We all knew the second commandment as well, which comes from this week’s *parasha*, Acharei Mot - Kedoshim: “Love your fellow as yourself.”<sup>2</sup> The third commandment of love was less obvious, and also appears in our *parasha*: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.”<sup>3</sup>

This final occurrence of the commandment *ve’ahavta*, “you shall love,” was most difficult for us to remember, in part, because we do not hear it said as frequently. The Shema and the commandment to love our fellow are both found in the siddur, and so they have become a daily part of the Jewish consciousness. The commandment to love the stranger is given equal weight in the Torah, but it has not made its way into the daily prayers of the Jewish people.

In addition, the commandment to love the stranger is particularly challenging to fulfill. How can we be commanded to love someone we don’t even know? What does fulfilling this commandment entail? How do we love the stranger?

The verse in Leviticus does not provide an answer, but the commandment also appears in Deuteronomy, and there, we are told that God “upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing.”<sup>4</sup> Following the principle that we must imitate God, our love for the stranger is demonstrated by giving tangible benefits to these people.

The great medieval commentator Rashi offers a powerful insight into the mitzvah of loving the stranger, which elevates the mitzvah beyond the giving of material needs. Following the Talmud,<sup>5</sup> Rashi teaches that God reminds us that we were once strangers in the land of Egypt so that we will never subject our fellow human beings to such a “blemish” or “defect” in their own experience.<sup>6</sup> In Egypt, we were considered outsiders, and as a result were shunned and turned into slaves. We cannot treat those outside our communities in such a callous way, because that would

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 19:18

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:34

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 10:18

<sup>5</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 59b

<sup>6</sup> Rashi on Leviticus 19:34

simply perpetuate onto others an injustice done to us. This principle is a foundational building block of Jewish social justice—allowing our historical experience of otherness and oppression to guide us in the ethical treatment of others.

Rashi's interpretation of this commandment, to avoid subjecting others to an experience of oppression we experienced, is echoed in the work that AJWS is doing around the world. Rather than simply provide people with material things we might think they require, AJWS listens to the voices of people in need and supports them in pursuing their own visions for creating thriving and just communities. This process of listening and partnership dissolves any potential for the notion of otherness in the "stranger." Organizations that receive grants from AJWS are friends and partners.

The *mitzvot* of love in the Torah express our universe of obligation. We must love God, the source of all blessing in the world, and we maintain loyalty to the principles and values expressed in God's word, the Torah. These high ideals drive us, but they are not enough. Our love of principles must be balanced by a love of real life human beings, both members of our community, and people outside it, who may live halfway around the globe. Perhaps that is the reason God commands us to love the stranger. Ultimately, we are meant to transform people we do not know into friends. After all, we were all created in the image of God.

The relationships we build with the "other" not only bring more love into the world, they also bring more justice. If we truly follow the mitzvah to love the stranger, one day there will be no "others," only partners in creating a more just and perfect world.



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