



# Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

## Love your neighbor

We begin with two verses: one from the Bible and one from the Babylonian Talmud.

*"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (Leviticus 19:18).

*"What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow"* (Shab. 31a)

This famous rabbinic quotation is attributed to Rabbi Hillel.

Hillel was one of the most influential Jewish sages in Jewish history. He lived at the turn of the first century CE and his teachings would have been known to Jesus.

Ponder these verses. Discuss with a friend. Then bring your observations into conversation with some of the Jewish sages\* whose interpretations follow.

Nahmanides (13<sup>th</sup> c. Torah scholar) views Leviticus 19:18 from the stance of the person commanded to love. After noting that 'one's self' is unique, distinct from every other human being, he concludes that the Torah is teaching us to overcome the human tendency to be self-centred in our loving. (For example, I might wish my colleague success, but not to the extent that he might be promoted before me!) Says

Nahmanides, "Rather, a man should wish his fellow well in all things, just as he does in his own case, and place no limitations on his love."

The Biur (18<sup>th</sup> c. Torah commentary) takes up Hillel's statement in a way that affirms human equality: "the command to respect our neighbor's feelings and interests apply to every human being without distinction."

While some views emphasize the extent to which one should love, an alternative view among the sages focuses on the principle that motivates love. That is, love your neighbor because, like yourself, your neighbor was created in the image of God. As Rabbi Akiva says in the Mishna, "Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God" (Avot 3,14).

In this view, love for a human being is motivated by respect for the divine image. What we share with other members of the human family is a special relationship with the divine. Note that this interpretation would not be so clear if the words 'as yourself' were omitted from our original verse.

This personal identification with one's neighbor is also found in verse Leviticus 19:34 where it

says: "you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." To know what it means to live as a stranger is to know (and empathize with) the heart of a stranger.

Similarly, verse 19:18 could be understood this way: Since you know what it is like to be a human being, you understand your neighbor's quest for love. Therefore love him/her 'as yourself.' •

\* See Leibowitz, 366-372.

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, Vol.1 (Jerusalem, 1993).  
Scripture: NRSV.

### For further reflection:

*"The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor (cf. Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40)."*

— *Guidelines for Implementing Nostra Aetate*, 4 (Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1974)