

5 ways

to love your neighbor

Even before we come to the Gospel teachings about love, forgiveness, mercy, already we find their roots in the Torah. Such teachings have continued to resonate in Judaism through the centuries, such as the examples below from the Oral Tradition, i.e., the rabbinic commentaries which accompany Torah. As you read, allow them to deepen your Christian faith-response as well as your appreciation of the Jewishness of Jesus.

1. Rabbi Akiva, quoted in the *Sifra*, comments on 'Love your neighbor as yourself' by saying, 'This is a central principle in the Torah.'

2. Let a man forgive the disgrace to which he has been subjected: let him seek no honor through the disgrace of his neighbor. (*Der.Er.Z.* vi, 3)

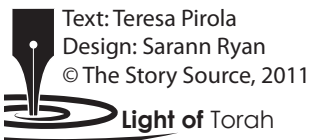
3. Rabbi Gamaliel said: So long as you are merciful, God will have mercy upon you, and if you are not merciful, He will not be merciful to you. (*T.J.Bab.K.* VIII, §10)

4. If you have something to testify to your neighbor's advantage [when he is accused], you may not keep it back. (*Sifra* 89a)

5. The Rabbis have taught: It says, 'You shall not hate your brother in your heart.' For a man might think, 'I must not strike him or beat him or curse him' [but I may hate him]. Therefore it says, 'In your heart.' (*'Arak.* 16b)

Source: Montefiore & Loewe (eds.),
A Rabbinic Anthology (NY, 1974).

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Why reflect on Torah?

"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)

How many Christians grew up with this kind of educative tape playing: *the Jews of Jesus' day were legalistic, whereas Jesus' message was one of love...* Thankfully, our Church today calls for a more enlightened catechesis. While affirming the unique claims of the Gospel proclamation, it does not pit Jesus *against* his own people. It recognizes the teaching of Jesus as grounded in the Torah, and in the traditions of his day. It recognizes that the biblical insights of the Jewish people, honed over centuries of reflection, have much to teach Christians.

Light of Torah is a tool for sharing some of these insights with grassroots Catholic audiences, in homes and parishes.

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Leviticus 19:1—20:27

Kedoshim: 'holy'



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 19:1—20:27

Chapter 19 of this week's Torah portion includes a range of laws which represent the basic teachings of the Torah. Read this chapter, noting how it echoes the Ten Commandments. Then let us focus on verse 18: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Tasting Torah

"Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 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 in *havrutah*. Then bring your observations into conversation with some of the Jewish sages* whose interpretations follow.

Touching Torah

Nahmanides (13th c. Torah scholar) views Lev. 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* (18th 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."

Depthing Torah

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 19:34 in our Torah portion 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.'*

Doing Torah

Think of a time when a decision to love did not come easily. What factors (thoughts, feelings, principles, beliefs) were at work as you sought to 'love your neighbor as yourself'?



Faith & Life

"In busy city life it is easy to ignore the human faces of passersby, of the people who serve us in shops and so on. They become faceless figures rather than human beings.

"Yet some people, like my friend Sarah, resist this tendency for anonymity. She has a way of acknowledging the personal presence of each person she meets. Whether it be the roadside worker directing traffic or the cashier in the supermarket, she always gives eye-contact, thanks them with a smile or a wave and, where possible, calls them by name."

* Sages quoted in Leibowitz, 366-372.

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