



A DIVINE STANDARD



פרשת אחרי מות - קדושים



Parshas Kedoshim contains one of the most quoted maxims in Jewish life, "וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי הוּא" - *You should love your fellow Jew as yourself- I am Hashem.* Rashi asserts that Rabbi Akiva maintained that this is a "כְּלַל גְּדוּל בְּתוֹרָה" - a fundamental rule of the Torah. How are we to love our friends as much as we do ourselves? Is this humanly possible? Secondly, Ramban asks how does Rabbi Akiva say in the Gemara (Bava Matzia 62a) that if two people are traveling and there is only enough water for one of them to survive, the person in possession of the water should drink it, even at the expense of the other. The primary obligation is to himself, "חֲנִיךָ" - your life takes precedence! How can this be reconciled with the Torah's mandate to love our friend as ourselves? Ramban answers that the Torah's edict is not referring to life itself. Rather, Hashem expects that we desire for our friends the same level of *achievement* and success *as* we do for ourselves. Our hearts are to be wide open to our fellow Jews so that we speak positively of them, champion their honor, and value their money as we do our own. This is alluded to, says Ramban, in the word "לְרֵעֶךָ" - to your fellow Jew, as opposed to "אֶת רֵעֶךָ." The Torah is referring to that which belongs to your friend - not your friend's life itself. When a potential convert appeared before Hillel and asked to be taught the whole Torah on one foot, Hillel answered him with the Aramaic equivalent of our *posuk*, "that which is hateful to you do not do to your friend. This is the whole Torah and the rest is commentary- go and learn it." (Shabbos 31a) Is this to imply that a Jew can override a Torah injunction if he forgoes his sensitivities – if it is not hateful to him? May a Jew speak *loshon hara* against his friend if he doesn't object to his friend doing the same against him? The answer is a resounding no. Hashem sets the standard of right and wrong, of our ethics and of our morals. This is why our *posuk* ends with the two words "אֲנִי הוּא" - *I am Hashem.* In the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, these two words, "clarify that these teachings have nothing to do with selfish considerations or expediency. They are ordained strictly as consequences of a true awareness of G-d."

Herein lies the source of an objective, Divine standard of ethics and morality. No individual can determine what is good or what is bad without employing the eternal Divine yardstick of our Torah *Hakedosha*.

In my earlier years of education, I had a student whose father, unfortunately, was very ill. Sadly, it was necessary to put him on life support by which a respirator enabled the patient to breath. Without it he could not survive. After a few days, the girl approached me and said that the doctor wanted to "pull the plug," saying that her father could then end his life "in dignity." I told her that the doctor's mandate was to sustain life, and he was never given a license to terminate it. We believe in the sanctity of life (קְדוּשַׁת הַחַיִּים), and we do not have permission to determine what quality of life is worth living. There is nothing more "dignified" than following the will of life's Manufacturer. The patient remained on the respirator and, unfortunately, lived only a short while longer. I would like to believe that my brief talk affected the family's course of action.

On a much lighter note, I remember the anger I felt when one of my teachers in elementary school perpetrated an obvious wrong. This particular teacher (whose name I remember well) marked an "X" in her marking book each time a child misbehaved. After a few weeks of a child accumulating "X's," either the parent or principal would be notified. My seat was right in front, next to the teacher's desk, affording me a "box seat" to all the teacher's transactions. On one particular afternoon this teacher lost her temper and started berating one of my friends. She immediately opened her role book, and next to my friend's name, started to mark one "X" after the other until the entire line was full. She then called in the principal and showed him "all the X's" that my friend had ostensibly accumulated over the past few weeks. I was furious at this miscarriage of justice, which I quietly witnessed. A half a century has passed, and I still remember the indignation which I felt towards an authority figure who could be so untruthful.

Being honest and ethical is what Hashem expects from all of us, all the time.

Standards of morals and ethics have been set by Hashem; They are not subject to change by mortal men.

Point of Discussion
How have you overcome compromising an ethical Torah standard ?