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THE ETHICS OF THE NEIGHBOR RABBI

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In a fifth-century midrash, *Pesikta Derav Kahana*, commenting on the first words of the Ten Commandments, *I am the Lord thy God,* some sages ask, "How is it possible that 600,000 Israelites stood at the foot of Sinai and one Voice addressed an entire people, yet every individual was convinced that the Voice was addressed to him personally?"

To this Rabbi Levy answers, "The Holy One appears to them as a mirror. A thousand might look into the mirror, but it will reflect each of them. Do not marvel at this, for God spoke to each person according to that person's capacity: Do not wonder at this, for when the manna came down from heaven, each and every one tasted it *lefi kochan*, according to their capacity: the young, the old, the sick, the healthy. So, too, with the Voice of God: 'the Voice of the Lord in its strength' means the Voice is heard according to the power of each individual. Do not be mistaken because you hear *koloth harbeh*, many voices. Know that I am He who was and is One and the same."

The mirror is one, but the reflections are many. The verse is one, but the translations are many. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wryly commented, "There is no immaculate perception."

A case in point is the verse of three Hebrew words: *V'ahavtah l'rechah kamocha*, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." How simple, how clear. How are

we to love the "Neighbor?" And who is my "Neighbor?" Not only are the interpretations different in each different tradition, but they vary within the same tradition. The "love" imperative takes on different meanings. There are rabbis who, on semantic grounds, argue that "thy Neighbor" refers to *b'nai amecha*, "the children of your people." Others go further in restricting the meaning of "Neighbor" by maintaining that "Neighbor" refers only to "good" Jews, to "observant" Jews, *achichah b'torah uv'mitzvot,"* your brother in law and observance." Those who argue for a restrictive and exclusivist interpretation of "Neighbor" are thinkers of great prominence such as Maimonides and Rashbam (Rabbi Samuel Ben Mayer of the 11th Century). In the *Likutei Amarim*, Rabbi Schnayer Zalman, the founder of Chabad, interpreted the passage most of us understand as universalistic in a highly restrictive manner.

When the Prophet Micah says, "Have we not one Father, has not one God created us all?" he refers only to real brothers, that is, to Israelites alone, for the source of their souls is in their one God.

Such a restrictive notion of "Neighbor" has serious consequences, for love is not an abstract concept, a matter of general sentiment; its consequences are concrete ethical conduct and prescribe the relationship between Jews and non-Jews. Does, for example, the "love of Neighbor" mandate that we feed the poor of the non-Jew as we are obligated to feed the poor of the Jews? Or to bury the deceased of heathens as we are commanded to bury the deceased of the Jews? Or to console the bereaved of Gentiles as we are to console the bereaved of Jews? Are we to return the lost property of non-Jews because it is biblically mandated to return the lost property of "thy Neighbor"? In the verse preceding "Love thy Neighbor," we read: "Thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor." Following Moses Maimonides for one, in his *Hilchoth Rotzeach*, not standing idly by does not include "sinful" Jews or Gentiles, for none of these is "your Neighbor."

The verse is one, the reflection is many. But the ambiguity as to the parameters of "Neighbor" led to the celebrated debate between Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Ben Azzai. Akiba proposes that the greatest principle in Judaism, the *klal gadol*, is "love thy neighbor as thyself." But Ben Azzai

senses that that is too restrictive a foundation, and sets forth a more inclusive foundation, quoting from Genesis 5: "This is the book of the generations of man. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made He him; male and female created He them and called their name Adam."

Adam was neither Jew nor Christian nor Muslim. *Adam* derives from the Hebrew *adamah*, "from the earth." The rabbis ask, "Out of what kind of earth was Adam formed?" They answered, "from black, white, yellow and red soil." This inclusive understanding of "Neighbor" is powerfully expressed in the well-known passage in *Seder Eliyahu Rabba* in the 9th century CE. In this Midrash we read: "I call heaven and earth to witness that whether one be Gentile or Jew, man or woman, male slave or female slave, in accordance with the merits of his deeds does the Holy Spirit rest on him."

Who is "thy Neighbor" we are bound to love? Is "the Neighbor" I am bound to love a saint, a believer, a co-religionist? A midrash notes that the term *reah* (Neighbor) is related to *rah* (evil). Even if a man is a criminal, sentenced to death by the court, the *Talmud Pesachim 75a* says "choose an easy death for him," the least humiliating, least painful, for "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." God and man are twins—when man is disgraced, God is disgraced.

But in terms of *Halachah* itself, in terms of legal interpretation, one could find no more bold and revolutionary change in the relationship between Jew and non-Jew than that articulated by the great Talmudic thinker Rabbi Menachim Ha-Meiri of the 13th Century. Ha-Meiri introduced a new juridical term, and with it a new legal-social status for the Gentiles who were his contemporaries and for those of later times. He speaks of *ummot ha-gedurot be-darkhe hadatot,* "nations restricted by the ways of religion." The introduction of this formulation means that all the laws of the Talmud that express exclusivism and prejudice towards the Gentile world refer only to heathens, idolaters, pagans, those whose religions are devoid of any moral faith structure. They are referred to as *akum*, idolaters. Christians are not idolaters, and the laws in the Talmud are not applied to Christians, for their faith is bound to moral law. In his

commentary on *Avodah Zarah*, Ha-Meiri, in his *Beit Habchirah*, writes with evident enthusiasm, "In our days nobody heeds these the laws of discrimination found in the Talmud, neither gaon, rabbi, disciple, hasid." The Meiri makes it clear that contemporary Gentiles are possessed of religious and moral precepts and are not to be included in this ancient discriminatory legislation. Every such contemporary Gentile is for legal purposes "to be regarded as a full Jew of all this." This overrides Maimonides' ruling that "the lost property of a Gentile may be kept" for Scripture says "the lost thing of my brothers." Ha-Meiri's inclusive thinking yielded rabbinic mandates ordaining that "Jews are obligated to feed the hungry of the Gentiles together with the hungry of the Jews; to bury the dead of the Gentiles together with the dead of the Jews; to comfort the bereaved of the Gentiles together with the bereaved of the Jews."

A Jewish moral sensibility will not tolerate the denigration of the "other." The Talmudic observation notes that "love of the stranger" appears in the Hebrew Bible thirty-six times, more than any other verse in the Torah. "God loves the stranger" refers to no other class but the stranger. As the philosopher Hermann Cohen put it, "The discovery of the stranger is the discovery of humanity."

"Love thy neighbor as thyself," *kamocha.* Some Hasidic masters pointed out that the numerical equivalent of *kamocha* is eighty-six, and eighty-six is the numerical equivalent of *Elohim*. To "love thy neighbor as thyself" is to love God. Indeed, it is to love the Divinity in ourselves. One rabbinic commentator translated, "love thy neighbor as thyself" as "love thy neighbor who *is* thyself."

What we discuss here is not academic. The issue of "thy Neighbor" is not a matter exegetical—it is a matter existential, a matter of life and death. We three of the monotheistic faiths share in common a tradition that is monotheistic, not monistic. Our texts are mirrors. They reflect ourselves, and in ourselves we discover the "other," our neighbors. We may not have catechism in common, but we have tears in common. We may not have dogmas in common, but we have fears in common. We may not have sacraments in common, but we have children in common. We must scrape

beneath dogma and doctrine to discover, one again, that the "other" is myself. If I can learn to love myself, I can learn to love you.

Religion cannot live by quotation alone. The text is not a Xerox machine. The text has a soul, a moral context. We live in an imperiled universe. We live in a global universe. Standing on the brink of an abyss, no religion is an island. Through moral interpretation, we each can and must overcome the denigration of "my Neighbor," and recall that God blew Divine Spirit into the nostrils of humanity.

Judaism, it has been said, is a tradition of minimum text and maximum interpretation. Our interpretation reflects the soul of the text. Should a text divide us, we are obligated to read it again and again, to interpret it for the sake of peace and the love of the "other." Each tradition has its text and each its interpretation. Let us encourage our interpreters to open the letters of the text and reveal its Divine spirit.