

A man walks into the car store wanting to buy a car. He pays the man at the counter and the salesperson says, "All right, just come back in 10 years to pick one up." The man replies, "Morning or afternoon?" The dealer says, "Well, 10 years from now, what difference does it make?" The man replies "Well, the plumber's coming over in the morning."

What? Not funny?

Well, let's look at the context of the joke. It goes back to the time of the former Soviet Union when 1 in 7 Soviets owned a car and you actually had to pay for it 10 years in advance.

Now think about the joke again:

The joke is not about the car at all, but the failure of Soviet society as a whole...some workers' paradise!

Context matters.

How about the scientist who was giving an interview and said, "My findings are meaningless if taken out of context." The next day, an interview appeared in the newspaper with the title: Scientist claims "Findings are meaningless."

Here, the joke lampoons the danger of taking a statement out of context, to create a different impression, a different point, or to defame a person. In our society, the ability to show only part of a statement on video, or only quote part of a statement, destroying the context, has made many no longer trust our news sources. The consequences of changing the context to support one's own personal or political agenda is becoming increasingly dangerous in our society.

This morning, I want to tell you one last joke, a Biblical joke that I don't think you will find funny and perhaps even deem pointless.

A Rabbi and an Astronomer are sitting at a bar. The Astronomer looks at the Rabbi and says, "You know Rabbi, I don't know much about Judaism, but can't we say that all religion can be boiled down to 'Love your neighbor as yourself'?" The Rabbi replied, "You know, I don't all that much about astronomy, but can't you say that the whole field can be boiled down to 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star'?"

Was I right - not funny, no point? I knew this already because I field tested it this week. Told it to two groups and not even a smile.

Once you know the context, I am betting that you will see it differently. And the context just happens to be this week's Torah reading of Kedoshim.

This morning, I want to look at those three words that the astronomer offered to the Rabbi as the essence of religion: *V'ahavata L'reicha Kamocha*. From the perspective of the scientist, these 3 words are nothing more than a meaningless aphorism. Not all that different than lines like "Love is all you need", or "Love makes the world go round", or "Love is a many-splendored thing" Sounds good; it's just that I don't know what it means.

"Love your fellow as yourself."

What can it possibly mean?

Can I actually love another person as I love myself?

Yes: I can say that in terms of my wife and children, my family, and those close to me.

But that is not what the Torah says. It says *Reicha*, your fellow.

Can I love my fellow, a person I barely know, or don't know at all, as much as I love myself?

Can we expect Yael and Scott, whose upcoming marriage we celebrated this morning, to feel the same love for someone on the street as they feel for each other?

If the Torah is speaking about love as a feeling, as an emotional response to another person, then I really don't think that it is possible.

If it is not that, then what is the Torah talking about?

How shall we understand it?

Context matters.

The answer can be found if we read these 3 words, *Ve'ahavta L'reicha Kamocha*, in context by examining the verses that surround it:

ויקרא יט:גג לא תעשוק את רעהך ולא תגזול לא תלין פעלת שכיר אתה עד בקר.... יט:טו לא תעשו ענול במשפט  
לא תשא פני דל ולא תהדר פני גדול בצדק תשפט עמיתך. יט:טז לא תלך רכיל בעמיה לא תעמד על דם  
רעה אני ייחנה.

Lev 19:13 You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.... 19:15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. 19:16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am YHWH.

What is the love of *V'Ahavta L'reicha Kamocha*?

Love, then, is not an emotion, but rather refers to treating one's neighbor justly—the manner you might treat someone whom you do love, who you care deeply about.

Who is *re'echa*?

In the Aitz Hayim Chumash, which uses the new JPS translation, *re'echa* is your fellow. Does it mean your fellow man, as Robert Alter translates it? Does it mean your fellow citizen? Does it mean your fellow Jew?

Again, context matters:

ויקרא יט:יז לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך הוכם תוכים את עמיתך ולא תשא עליו חטא. יט:יח לא תקום ולא תטר את בני עמך ואהבת לרעהך כמוך אני ייחנה.

Lev 19:17 You shall not hate **your brother** in your heart; you shall reprove **your kinsman**, and not incur guilt because of him. 19:18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of **your people**, but you shall love **your neighbor** like yourself; I am YHWH.”

Most contemporary scholars agree that the “neighbor” (רע) in Leviticus 19 refers to fellow members of the Israelite or Judahite community.<sup>[2]</sup> Although the word itself does not necessarily refer to Israelites, the context here is determinative: *re'echa* means your fellow Israelite or Jew.

What have we learned so far?

First, that the love of *V'ahavta L'reicha Kamocha* is not the love that I feel for my wife and my children, or my family. Rather, it is an action that reflects love and respect. That is, treating others as you would want to be treated: with respect, with justice, with caring.

We have also learned that the *Re'echa* is your fellow Israelite.

So, does that mean that Jews only care about other Jews, as so many anti-Semites have claimed?

Again, reading the verse in context makes all the difference.

Looking just a few verses later, the Torah speaks of the *Ger*, who in this case is a resident alien, a non-Israelite living in the land of Israel.

ויקרא יט:לג וכי יגור אִתְּךָ גֵר בְּאַרְצְךָם לֹא תוֹנוּ אֹתוֹ. יט:לד כְּאַזְרַח מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לְכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם וְאַהֲבַת לֹו כְּמוֹד כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאַרְץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי יְיָ הוֹדֵה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

Lev 19:33 When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress him. 19:34 The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native born among

you; you shall love the alien like yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt;  
I am YHWH your God.

Love the *ger*, love the resident alien. Empathize with their plight as you were *gerim*: you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

So much for Jews only caring about themselves. I defy you to show me another example from the ancient world where a people's god or gods command them to love a non-citizen. Please show it to me.

This canard that has been leveled against the Jew, that Jews are clannish, that Jews care only for themselves, that you can't trust a Jew, based upon a verse taken out of context, has proved to be a serious danger to Jews.

So why, you may ask, does the Torah first command that you will love the *Re'cha*, your fellow Israelite, and then speak of the love for the *Ger*, the resident alien, in another verse? Why not combine them and avoid the confusion?

Here, the Torah seeks to teach a profound lesson. One must move from the particular to the universal. Unless I can love my family first, I cannot understand what it means to act in loving ways to those who are most like me, my fellow citizens. Then, if I can act in loving ways toward them, I can move to a more universal understanding of the term, to those who are not like me but deserve to be treated with love, with respect, with caring and justice. In short, if I have not learned how to love those who are closest to me, how can I expect to love those who are not? In context, the power and meaning of these 3 words becomes clear:

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמֹדֶךָ אֲנִי יְיָ הָנֹה

So, a Rabbi and an Astronomer are sitting at a bar. The Astronomer looks at the Rabbi and says, "You know, Rabbi, I don't know much about Judaism, but can't we say that all religion can be boiled down to 'Love your neighbor as yourself'?" The Rabbi replied, "You know, I don't know all that much about astronomy, but can't you say that the whole field can be boiled down to 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star'?"

In other words, only a fool would reduce astronomy to a children's rhyme. The more you look, the more complex it becomes. So, too, with this seminal verse of the Torah, the crescendo of a Parasha that begins:

[ויקרא י"ט:ב'](#)

(ב) דַבֵּר אֶל־כָּל־עַדַּת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

[Leviticus 19:2](#)

(2) Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy.

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ.

“And you will love your fellow as yourself” is the great aspirational ideal of a truly holy society. What is thought to be an empty aphorism by the scientist in the joke offers a profound approach for a moral and caring society, a holy society in the biblical age and in our time as well.

Now, it may not be the funniest joke, but the point that it makes is important.

This is why Rabbi Akiba, why one of our greatest Rabbis, said this:

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ, רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר זֶה כָּלֵל גְּדוֹל בַּתּוֹרָה

“Love your fellow as yourself”—Rabbi Akiva says: “This is the great principle of the Torah.”

But then again, Rabbi Akiba knew the context and now you do, too.

And that, my friends, is no joke!

Shabbat Shalom.