

The Talmud in Tractate Shabbat tells several legendary tales of Hillel the Elder. Perhaps the most famous tale tells of a would-be convert who approaches Shammai, a contemporary of Hillel. The man offers to convert, but he insists on one condition; that Shammai teach him the entire Torah, while he (the convert) would remain standing on one foot. Shammai who did not suffer fools pushed the man away and refused the man's offer. However, Hillel who is described as a man of legendary patience acquiesced to the man's condition and agreed to teach the man the entire Torah while he stood one foot. Hillel then explained to him that the essence of the Torah is, "All that you would not want done to yourself, do not do to your friend. The rest is just commentary; go and learn it."

The Maharsha, R. Shmuel Edilitz, in his commentary on Talmud wonders why Hillel quoted this precept in a negative form rather than the positive. Hillel should have quoted the verse from this week's Torah portion that reads "Love thy neighbor as thyself." This beautiful verse encapsulates far more than just not harming another, rather, it beautifully expresses in a positive fashion how we must create a space in our hearts to love the world around us. Why did Hillel ignore this beautiful and profound verse when teaching this new student, instead choosing an almost childlike and simplistic warning?

The Gerrer Rebbe, Rav Yitzchak Meir Alter explains that the world around us can certainly relate to the concept of not harming another. It is universally accepted that one should not kill, rob, or even slander another. However, Judaism demands something completely and entirely different. We are enjoined to view another as our very own selves. We are not simply warned against harming another, we are expected to have a profound and passionate love for those around us. In this mindset the thought of harming another is not even a remote possibility. Just as we love ourselves and could not even fathom bringing pain on ourselves, how could we possibly hurt another. Harming a loved one is simply illogical and incomprehensible.

Prior to this man's conversion he could comprehend the universal directive against harming another, however, to comprehend this unique and strictly Jewish perspective of loving one another, that was impossible for this man. Hillel wisely only taught the man what he would be able to understand. However, Hillel let him know that the man has more to learn; he must learn the commentary. When he would convert and adopt the Jewish faith he would need to learn to love humanity, not just not harm it.

For the last two weeks I have been privileged to accompany our seniors on the annual March of the Living. Spending a week in Poland, our students saw what happens when one fails to care about humanity. Not only did the Nazis have no regard for humanity, but even most of the civilized world did not care enough to protect us. However, this week in Israel our students have seen how much love every Jew has for one another. We have spent virtually the entire week singing and dancing with one another. We have locked arms in solidarity, held hands in friendship, and embraced one another with a passionate and committed love for one another. This never ending love is the essence of our faith and the secret of our miraculous existence.

Shabbat Shalom
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