

The Negative Formulation of the Commandment to Love

(Source: R. Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, *Derekh Mitzvotekha*, 29a)

The statement of Hillel, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor" (*Shabbat* 31a), requires explanation: Why did he formulate (the commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself") negatively, instead of the positive way that it appears in Scripture (Lev. 19:18)--and as Onkelos translates it?

The answer is that Hillel's words are a deeper explanation of the mitzvah to love one's neighbor. The principle that a person does not see his own faults does not mean that he is totally unaware of his faults. On the contrary, a man can see and understand the depths of his inferiority better than any one else, for another person can view him only with his eyes (i.e., from without) whereas he sees into his own heart. What it means, rather, is that his failing does not occupy his attention to any great extent, and it is as if it did not exist at all, because of the great love with which he loves himself. "Love covers all transgressions" (Proverbs 10:12). This self-love covers all the faults of which he is aware, thus not permitting his knowledge to exercise him emotionally. That is why his knowledge of his own faults does not occupy a place of prominence in his mind--he is insensitive to his own faults because they are overwhelmed and suppressed by this great (self-)love which "covers all transgressions" and encloses him.

When another person sees and understands his fault, this angers him greatly, even though he knows that it is true... because the friend acknowledges this weakness as substantial and worthy of note, whereas what he himself recognizes in himself is covered up by his (self-)love. His ire is directed at his friend for exposing his fault, ignoring the love which covered it up thus making it virtually invisible, and now it appears real and significant.

That is what is meant by "what is hateful to you"--this exposure which is hateful to you, do not do to your friend. Do not "see" his faults and transgressions, whether social in nature or between man and God, and thus turn them into hard realities. Instead, let your love (for him) be so great that it "covers all transgressions" and does not permit them to emerge from (abstract) knowledge to attention-getting reality. He must be as one who is possessed of great and wondrous longing for his friend, which issues from the very depths of his soul, such that any evil he may have done to him despite the love he bore him means nothing to him and is nullified in the presence of the great love that he has for him.