

Shabbat Behar-Behukotai 5786
No More Important, No Less Worthy
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Shabbat Shalom.

The following is from a real conversation with my child.

“Dad, who do you love the most? Me or my brothers?”

(Sound familiar?)

“I love you and your brothers all the same! You're all so special to me.”

“I know. (Whisper) But who do you *really* love the most?”

It's the nature of children to wonder about their parent's love. But kids have not lived long enough to fully understand: that a parent's loving heart can expand with every child. That a parent can be disappointed with a child - even angry - and still in that same moment love them no less. That a parent loves a child simply because they are, not because of what the child does.

What parents instinctively know about children, adults sometimes forget about one another.

The Talmud asks an ethical question about whose life is worth more (BT Bava Metzia 62a). “Rabbi Yohanan teaches: ‘Imagine two people are walking in the desert, and only one of them has a water bottle. If they split the water, it's insufficient for each, and both will die. But if one of them drinks, it's enough to live on to reach a settled area. That person will live. What should they do? Ben Petora teaches: “Better that both should drink and die so neither sees the death of the other.” But Rabbi Akiva teaches that the one holding the water bottle should drink it. He quotes a verse from this morning's Parsha, Behar: “Your brother shall live with you” (Lv. 25:36). That is, *your life* takes precedence over the life of the other.”

Ben Petora, who says both should drink, may be thinking of the Golden Rule, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lv. 19:18). This indicates that you must treat another person as your equal. How can one live if they cause the death of another?

But Rabbi Akiva, who says the bottle holder should drink, emphasizes a different verse: “Your brother shall live *with you*.” He is *not* more important than you. But *you* should drink because of chance, simply because you happen to hold the water bottle. Isn't it better that one person should live than none?

I love that the Talmud preserves both responses, because both are correct in some fundamental way. We value both self-worth and equal worth. But Jewish Law has to pick a winning opinion, and that is Rabbi Akiva: The person with the water bottle should drink it to save his life. Here we are not judging who is more *deserving* based on age, or family situation, or value to society. We are affirming that our own life is valuable, and when we have the opportunity to save our own life, we must.

Judaism teaches here that *nobody* is more important than you are. *Nobody* is more worthy or deserving of love than you are. It has nothing to do with fame, wealth or achievements, or lack thereof. But simply because your worth comes from your being, from being created in G-d's image, teaches Genesis.

But that's not the end of the conversation. There's another story in the Talmud that adds a second voice (BT Sanhedrin 74a): We know there is a law that a person may not murder an innocent person to save his own life. Killing in self-defense is permitted, but outright murder is not. "There's a story about a person who came before Rabba and said: A local official said to me: "Go kill so-and-so, and if you don't, I will kill you." What shall I do? Rabba said to him: "It is better that the official should kill you than you murder an innocent person. Who is to say that your blood is redder than his, that your life is worth more than the one he wants you to kill? Perhaps that man's blood is redder."

Here Rabba affirms that one may not murder another person because *your life* is not worth more than his. Whereas the water bottle story sounds similar, that is ultimately about actively saving your life while *indirectly* ending another. Either two people die or one. While this example about murder speaks about *directly* ending a life; only one person will die here. But the larger point is that you are not inherently more valuable than another person. Your blood is not redder. Rich or poor, able-bodied or disabled, Jewish or not: the other person is of equally inherent worth.

Judaism teaches here that you are no more important than anybody else. *Everybody* is worthy and deserving of the love that you too deserve. Because our worth comes from our being, from being created in G-d's image.

Put these together and we understand the following words from the great sage Hillel: "*Im Ein Ani Li Mi Li? Uchsheani L'atzmi Mah Ani?* If I don't stand up for myself, who will? But if I care only about myself, what am I?"

Each of us may feel unworthy at different moments, when we are in the company of certain people. Hillel reminds us: stand up for yourself. There is only one You. Use your voice. And each of us may feel self-important at other moments, when we are in the company of certain other people. Hillel reminds us: Don't be self-centered. You are just one of billions. Care about others too.

One afternoon years ago I had finished my rabbinical school classes for the day in New York City. I was walking back to my apartment on the Upper West Side when I realized that my professor was walking down Broadway at the same time. So we walked together and made small talk. After about five blocks, we saw a homeless person on the street. This man was wearing dirty clothes that didn't fit, looked like he hadn't showered in a long time, and was half asleep. Honestly, it was uncomfortable to look at him. My teacher stopped, handed him a dollar, and looked him straight in the eye. "What's your name, sir?"

He perked up: "I'm Tony."

With a genuine smile, my teacher said: "Tony, have a great day."

Tony suddenly came to life, eyes opening wide, face brightening up. He said "Thank you!" in a way you could tell he really meant it.

And then my teacher and I kept walking and making small talk, him continuing as if nothing had happened. When in fact he had just taught me something extraordinary: how to see every single person as an equal.

Sadly, every city gives us opportunities to decide whether we will look past homeless people or truly see them. But that means we too have the opportunity to lift them up. Their blood is equally red as ours. Giving them a dollar or a snack goes far. But looking them in the face, asking for their name, and saying their name does something else. It gives them dignity. It reminds them that they too have a name and a voice. That they too are worthy. When you do this - and I hope you will - they will look at you the way Tony looked at my teacher.

Parents know from instinct and experience that they should love all their children equally. Simply because they are our children. Today's Torah reading reminds us: "Your brother shall live with you." We are to consider each other brothers. To our own eyes, strangers may appear new and unfamiliar. But from the eyes of our collective parent, G-d, we are all siblings. As G-d's children, we are all equally deserving of love.

Shabbat Shalom.