Parashat Kedoshim

Parashat Kedoshim contains the famous Biblical exhortation, "Love your fellow as yourself" (19:18). Scholars and thinkers of all streams have dealt with the difficulty in explaining – and certainly implementing – the straightforward meaning of this *mitzva*. How, they asked, can the Torah possibly expect an individual to love and care for his fellow in equal measure to the love he feels for himself? Even the most so-called "selfless" individual is hardly "selfless"; it is only natural for one to care for his own needs before concerning himself with the plight of others.

As noted by several writers, Maimonides' description of this *mitzva* in his *Mishneh Torah* seems to provide a clear answer. Maimonides writes in Hilkhot Dei'ot (6:3):

> Every person is commanded to love each and every member of Israel like his own self, as it is written, "Love your fellow as yourself." Therefore, one must tell his praise and be careful with his property just as one is careful with his own property and seeks his own honor.

Maimonides solves the problem by defining this *mitzva* in terms of a specific and concrete requirement: to speak of other people respectfully, and to treat their property with care. The Torah does not expect any of us to actually feel love for our fellow Jew to the same degree as we "love" ourselves. Nor is the Torah instructing that we be prepared to give to, and sacrifice on behalf of, other people as much as we take for ourselves. Rather, it admonishes us to treat others the way we would want to be treated by others. According to Maimonides, we should perhaps read this verse as, "Love your fellow as you would want him to love you," rather than "Love your fellow as you love yourself."

Maimonides' understanding of this *mitzva* likely stems from the famous incident recorded in the Talmud (Masekhet Shabbat 31a) of a gentile who came before the sage Hillel declaring that he would convert to Judaism if he could be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel replied, "That which you despise do not do unto your fellow." Rashi understood "your fellow" as a euphemistic reference to the Almighty, and thus Hillel encapsulated the Torah by admonishing that one must never disobey the Almighty, just as a person wishes not to be disobeyed. According to others, however, Hillel indeed refers to the notion of treating other people as one wishes to be treated, and Hillel summarized the entire Judaic creed in this single admonition. Maimonides perhaps understood that Hillel referred here to the obligation of "Love your fellow as yourself," and he thus concluded that this *mitzva* requires not actually loving others as one loves himself, but rather giving the same treatment to others that he would wish for himself.

Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim (Eastern Europe, 1809-1879), in his classic Biblical commentary, suggests a linguistic basis for this reading. The Torah here demands "loving" one's fellow with the expression, "*ve-ahavta LE-rei'akha*," employing the prepositional prefix "*le*" ("to"). In other instances, however, such as in the famous command, "Love the Lord your God" (Devarim 5:5), the Torah substitutes *le* with the word *et*: "*Ve-ahavta ET Hashem Elokekha*." As the Malbim demonstrates from other contexts, the term *et* serves to connect a verb with a direct object, whereas *le* is used in

conjunction with an indirect object. In cases involving the verb "to love," he explained, *et* signifies the actual emotional experience of love, such as the love demanded of a Jew towards God (as Maimonides writes in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, *mitzvat asei* 3 and elsewhere). The prefix *le*, however, when used in the context of love, indicates that we deal with a far less direct experience – namely, treatment of another person in a loving manner, rather than actual love. This nuance perhaps suggests that the Torah does not demand that one actually feel for his fellow to the same degree that he love himself, but rather that he act towards him in a similar manner to how he would want others to treat him.