



## Parashat Mishpatim

Parashat Mishpatim introduces several prohibitions concerning the proper treatment of the weaker members of society, such as the poor, proselytes, widows and orphans. With regard to proselytes, the Torah writes, "You shall not abuse or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt" (22:20). Later in the Torah, in the Book of Devarim (10:19), the Torah not only admonishes that we refrain from taking unfair advantage of foreigners, but demands that we "love" them: "You shall love the foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt."

Maimonides, in the *Hilkhot Dei'ot* section of *Mishneh Torah* (6:4), addresses the relationship between the obligation to "love" a proselyte and the more famous *mitzva* of "*Ve-ahavta le-rei'akha kamokha*" – "Love your fellow as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18) – which obligates "loving" all members of *Am Yisrael*. First, he simply writes that the obligation to love a proselyte involves two *mitzvot*: the standard *mitzva* to love one's fellow Jew, and the additional *mitzva* to love a foreigner. Maimonides then adds, "He commanded loving a foreigner as He commanded loving Himself, as it says, 'You shall love the Lord your God' (Devarim 6:5)." The treatment demanded of a Jew towards a newcomer exceeds that which is required towards other Jews; when dealing with a proselyte, one must display the type of respect and consideration with which he relates to the Almighty Himself, above and beyond the respect and love shown to all other Jews.

How might we explain this equation? Practically speaking, how does the required treatment of a convert differ from the treatment one must afford other Jews?

A fascinating approach to this question is taken by a contemporary writer, Rabbi Yaakov Kopel Schwartz, in his work *Yekev Efrayim* (a work on Nachmanides' Torah commentary). Rabbi Schwartz notes a subtle but fundamental difference in Maimonides' description of the obligation to love one's fellow Jew, and the corresponding obligation to love the Almighty. When it comes to "Love your fellow as yourself," Maimonides writes, "There is a *mitzva* upon every person to love each and every member of Israel... Therefore, one must speak his praises and care for his property as he cares for his own property..." Maimonides requires that one love his fellow Jews and as a result of that love speak of them fondly and admirably. In describing the obligation to love God, by contrast, Maimonides writes (in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2) that one must study and contemplate the Almighty's wondrous work as a means of arriving at the love of God. Rather than giving praise as a result of love, one must work towards love by studying His world.

This distinction, Rabbi Schwartz suggests, perhaps sheds light on the comparison Maimonides draws between the required love of God and that required towards a convert. The *mitzva* to "love a proselyte" demands making the effort to identify his admirable qualities. As most new arrivals from other lands and peoples do not immediately leave a favorable impression, one is obligated to seek and probe a foreigner's character and find his praiseworthy attributes. Just as one must study the Almighty to arrive at genuine *ahavat Hashem* (love of God), so does the Torah demand that one specifically look for the admirable qualities of the foreigner to develop a sense of affection and fondness, despite the emotional barrier that one instinctively erects between himself and those of foreign cultures.

Rabbi Schwartz notes that Maimonides himself appears to have followed this instruction, in his famous letter to Ovadya the Proselyte. Maimonides spares no words of praise for Ovadya, describing him as "our master and teacher, the intelligent Ovadya." This seemingly overstated compliment to Ovadya is perhaps better understood in light of his view regarding the obligation to "love" proselytes. Specifically the lower status generally associated with foreigners requires added

focus and attention onto their fine qualities. In this sense, the treatment one affords a convert must correspond to the kind of love and affection required towards the Almighty Himself.