

EXPANSION OF THE SELF



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT ACHAREI-MOS-KEDOSHIM
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What is love? We usually relegate its exploration to the arts, but there are psychologists who conduct scientific research to try and better understand this allusive concept. One theory of love which has some empirical backing was presented by a married couple, Arthur and Elain Aron in the 1980's. Their theory, the self-expansion model of love, has two primary components. One component is that we are generally motivated to expand our sense of self by entering into relationships with others, which helps increase our own potential and effectiveness. The other component is that in this drive to expand ourselves through relationships, other people become included to some extent in our own sense of self. We expand our own identities to include others.

There are two fundamental directives in *Parshat Kedoshim* that greatly impact our religious and ethical lives: be holy (*kedoshim tihyu*) and love your fellow like yourself (*ve-ahavta le-reiacha kamocho*). Both are broad in scope, coloring numerous interactions and influencing many decisions. Yet, both holiness and love are abstract and complex concepts that defy easy definition. What does it really mean to be holy? What does love entail? Is it really realistic to expect us to love another person as much as we love ourselves? In his introduction to his Talmudic work, *Sharei Yosher*, Rabbi Shimon Shkop presents a fascinating analysis that intertwines these two commandments in a way that relates to love as being an expansion of the self.

One of the difficulties in fully understanding what it means to be holy, is that the *pasuk* states that we should be holy because G-d is holy (Vayikra 19:2). Whatever the definition of holiness we present, it must account for the ability to describe G-d as holy as well. The *midrash* adds a curious insertion into the text, where after commanding us to be holy, G-d asks rhetorically, "Perhaps you may think that you could be as holy as I am?" That is impossible, for "My holiness is greater than your holiness." If we follow the *midrashic* reading, our definition of holiness must also contain a hierarchical component of G-d's holiness being greater than our own.

Building off these two points, Rabbi Shkop argues for a definition of holiness, which encompasses no less than “the entire foundation and root for our life’s purpose.” Holiness can be defined as existing and acting in complete dedication to helping others. As such, G-d, Who created and directs this world for the sake of others, with no “personal” benefit, serves as the ultimate paradigm of holiness.

Yet, as the *midrash* makes clear, we can never reach such a level and nor should we even aspire to such an intense degree of holiness. G-d created us with an ego. We are all self-interested. The commandment of “loving your fellow like yourself” is formulated by Hillel in the negative: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to someone else.” This is because, Rabbi Shkop argues, that when it comes to bestowing positive benefits, it is fitting for us to prioritize ourselves. In addition, Rabbi Akiva teaches us that our lives take precedence over our friends’ lives, so that we should prioritize saving ourselves before others. While we need to avoid harming others, we otherwise come first.

The challenge becomes balancing these two concepts that seem to be pushing in different directions. On the one hand, we are egoistic and focus on the self, and on the other, we are holy and do for others. The key to reconciling these concepts, Rabbi Shkop suggests, lies within our definition of self or “*ani*.” Our starting point is with a self-absorbed “*ani*,” which only cares about the physical self. We can then expand the definition of self to include our spiritual elements. A step further would be to include our family members within our senses of self, and continue to expand to include the Jewish people, and even the entirety of creation within our definition of self.

To be holy, is to do for others. To ignore self-interest is delusional. We must start with a healthy and developed self, whose psychological and physical needs are prioritized, but we strive to not stop there. We work to expand our definition of self, to care and help as many others as we can, aspiring to be as holy as humanly possible.

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