

GREMLINS AND IMPROPER ARGUMENTS

For folks interested in Torah study, tools like Bar Ilan University's Responsa Project are indispensable. Responsa Project is a massive search engine that gives me access to thousands of classic Jewish religious texts, along with myriad cross-referencing tools. Because it's loaded onto my hard drive, Responsa Project is at times subject to glitches. Or perhaps gremlins? Gremlins were the imaginary evil pests to which World War II pilots attributed technical difficulties, both minor and fatal, in their fighter bombers. According to pilot legend, these malicious creatures were, in the words of Wikipedia, "equal opportunity tricksters" who sabotaged the planes of allies and enemies alike.

A gremlin may have taken over my computer program.

I was minding my own business earlier last week, searching for a passage from the Talmud, a debate about the famous words of Leviticus 19:18: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" Afterwards, I tried to leave the program, but it froze as an error message I had never seen before flashed on the screen, accompanied by that jarring "you screwed up, buddy" ring tone which is the stuff of computer legend:

"Encountered an improper argument."

I grew terrified as I found myself drifting into ridiculous magical thinking. “Gremlin-saboteur of laptops,” I thought, “Why are you messing with my head to the point of torture? Are you, perhaps, trying to tell me that something in the argument I’ve been studying is somehow wrong?” My rational brain kept telling me, “It’s just a glitch in the software.” My desire to be visited by a truth-telling agent of God overwhelmed all sense and reason. I rationalized things this way. Whether or not that error message was coming to me from God’s great beyond, there was something -some error- that I was perhaps being challenged to consider.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

I looked at the words again. Based on close grammatical analysis of “love your neighbor as yourself” in Hebrew - *V’Ahavta L’rei-ahā Kamokha* - some Torah commentators conclude that the words don’t mean that I’m commanded to *feel* love for my neighbor; feelings can hardly be legislated. They mean that I should behave toward my neighbor in a benevolent fashion because I would naturally want reciprocity from my neighbor. In the words of the great teacher Hillel the Elder on this Torah passage: “What is hateful to you, don’t do to your neighbor.”

I'm commanded to practice reciprocal benevolence toward other people, moved by a mix of empathy and enlightened self-interest.

The Talmudic argument about the verse I was exploring took place over a century after Hillel died. One day, two of our greatest teachers, Rabbi Akiva and Shimon ben Azzai, argued fiercely: which is the most important principle of the Torah?, Rabbi Akiva, the great scholar and martyr, declared unequivocally, "*Zeh klal gadol ba-Torah*," this principle of "love your neighbor" is the greatest idea, the overarching principle of the Torah.

"Love your neighbor as yourself. What is hateful to you don't do to your neighbor."

"Encountered an improper argument."

What could be improper about Akiva's argument concerning this grand, compelling commandment to love one another?

According to the Talmud, ben Azzai begged to differ with his teacher and colleague. "Akiva," he gestured, "The greatest principle of the Torah is found in Genesis:

We are created in the image and the likeness of God."

This idea that we're created as mirrored reflections of God is intriguing. Yet at first glance, it's too passive and abstract to qualify as the indispensable bedrock principle upon which Judaism, or any way of life, is built. What was ben Azzai's point?

Encountered an improper argument.

Encountered *what* improper argument?

As I stared at the screen, the "improper argument" gradually became clear to me. "Love your neighbor as yourself" *can't* be the greatest principle of the Torah. It assumes that even if I *feel* no love for my neighbor, I can still muster some kind of empathy for him or her that will lead me to do no harm, a shaky assumption at best. It also assumes, with no factual basis, that whatever is hateful to me must be, ipso facto, hateful to my neighbor. Finally, its emphasis on one's neighbor implies geographic or in-group proximity between me and another person. Does this mean that the moment another person is no longer my neighbor in any sense, I have no duty to love him as myself?

I realized that Rabbi Akiva's argument is improper not because it's wrong but because it's incomplete. A commandment to love my neighbor ceases to have full force at the door of hopeless human subjectivity. If I feel love for you, I

might not even need a commandment to tell me to treat you lovingly. If I hate you - your skin color, your gender, your class, your ethnicity, your sex, your family, your disability, your personality, your anything – no amount of commanding, even by God, will motivate me sufficiently to truly treat you as I would want to be treated. In fact, if I despised you sufficiently, I'd probably want you to leave me alone under all circumstances, even if I needed you; and no matter how much you might need me one day, I would in all likelihood ignore you as well.

Loving my neighbor as myself is a solid principle for living a moral life in the context of close relationships, mutuality and social intimacy. Yet, in the absence of all these things, what compels me to treat anyone from among the people I don't know, don't care for, or can't stand, with civility, kindness, decency? This is where Ben Azzai's retort to Rabbi Akiva makes all the difference.

We are created in the image and the likeness of God.

Our worth is absolute, not contingent upon others' feelings for us or familiarity with us. We possess unconditional value simply because we are irreplaceable reflections of God. As such, each of us has a claim of profound moral responsibility upon the other, a claim whose validity we never have to justify. Being human means that you and I don't have to prove we possess

inherent dignity. Regardless of how our siblings in the Sapiens family feel about us, they are still our siblings, and as such, we are all each other's keepers, whether or not we know, love, like, or hate each other.

The virus threatening us is an equal-opportunity gremlin trickster, one that paradoxically possesses not a whit of moral consciousness regarding the havoc it wreaks. Its relentless scorched-lung march into the vulnerable bodies of innocent people is tragic but not outrageous, because Corona does not choose, only people do. Outrageous are the calculating political machinations of leaders who wager cynically that they can get away with allowing more people to die so they can "re-open" society, in attempts to win elections. Outrageous are the selfish voices of an as-yet-vocal minority who parade menacingly around state capitols, preaching about liberty and the pursuit of happiness, while willfully ignoring others' rights to life. Outrageous are the people who react to critical health restrictions with defiantly adolescent disdain because, "You can't tell me what to do." Outrageous are the people who defy public health procedures, continuing to congregate for religious events, even as the people of their communities die in legion numbers. They should all know better, and they all choose to act worse.

You and I know better and we choose to act better.

We choose abiding patience in staying safe, because we know that liberty and happiness mean nothing if you're not alive to enjoy them.

We choose to love our neighbor, to not do unto him as we don't want done to ourselves.

We choose to look the random unknown person on the street in the eye so that we can see the compelling, commanding eyes of God looking back at us.

We choose to roar out the error message at the people who cavalierly endanger the lives of others:

Yours are dangerously improper arguments.

Love your neighbors as yourselves.

See every person as created in God's image.

Choose life.

