

שמחה תשמה רעים

האהובים: Rejoice Beloved Friends

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This *beracha* that is bestowed upon the young married couple as they stand under the *chuppah* (wedding canopy) encapsulates the relationship they are about to embark upon. The image of רעים האהובים, beloved friends, conjures up in our minds a similar term, “ואהבת לרעך כמוך” — “You should love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Vayikra 19:18), which the Torah uses to describe one’s interaction with his fellow man, for this is the basis for all interpersonal relationships.

Let us examine the multiple dimensions of this fundamental mitzvah in order to gain a better understanding of its application in marriage, thereby ensuring the fulfillment of the *beracha* to become “רעים האהובים.”

The Rambam in *Sefer HaMitzvos, Shoresh No. 2*, disagrees with the enumeration of the mitzvos compiled by the *Ba’al Halachos Gedolos*. According to the *Ba’al Halachos Gedolos*, each distinct act of *chesed* (kindness) is counted as a separate mitzvah. Thus, *nichum aveilim* (comforting mourners), *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick) and *hachnasas orchim* (inviting guests) each count toward the total of 613 mitzvos. The Rambam, however, maintains that there is only one mitzvah that encompasses all acts of *chesed*. All manifestations of *chesed* are fulfillments of the mitzvah of “ואהבת לרעך כמוך.” The Rambam asks, why doesn’t the Torah delineate specific acts of *chesed*? What is the Torah teaching us by incorporating the various specifications of *chesed* under the one heading of “ואהבת לרעך כמוך?”

The Navi Micha (6:8) calls out to us to perfect ourselves in our interpersonal relationships in two ways.

“עשות משפט ואהבת חסד” — “Do justice and love kindness.” What is the significance of the different verbs that are used to describe our pursuit of justice and kindness? The *Chofetz Chaim, Ahavas Chesed*, Vol. II, Ch. 1, commented that we are instructed to merely perform justice.

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Meeting out justice is not an enjoyable activity, but rather a necessity for society. By contrast, *chesed* is not performed out of a sense of obligation; rather we are supposed to love doing acts of kindness. Perhaps for this reason the Torah does not instruct us concerning specific acts of *chesed*. One would mistakenly conclude that one is “*yotzei*” (discharged of obligation) by merely performing such acts. Rather, the Torah wants us to instill in ourselves the feelings of love to one another. The essence of the mitzvah of *chesed* is this love, and therefore, the appropriate way to convey this mitzvah to us is by instructing us to love our fellow man.

Although the ultimate goal to reach in our *bein adam l'chaveiro* (interpersonal) relationships is a feeling of love and not perfunctory acts, it is these acts themselves that can help us attain this love. The *Sefer Hachinuch* No. 16 develops a theme concerning many mitzvos: “אחר הפעולות — נמשכים הלבבות” — “The hearts are drawn by actions performed.” Even if we haven’t yet reached those deep feelings of love, performing acts of love can eventually help us attain our desired goal. Thus, the mitzvah of *וואהבת לרעך כמוך* is a combination of feeling and action. Actions lead to feelings, and those feelings in turn spur us to greater actions.

The proper fulfillment of *וואהבת לרעך כמוך* serves as a model as of how *רעים האהובים*—husband and wife as beloved friends—should relate to one another. To view marriage as a mere necessity and our care for one another as only obligations that must be performed ignores the basic component of love that is the bedrock of a wholesome marriage. The deep love that develops over time must be constantly nurtured by the small demonstrations of love. The acts of *chesed* that can be performed between husband and wife enable the love to grow, thereby encourage even greater manifestations of kindness between the two.

There are other important lessons necessary for the fulfillment of *רעים האהובים* that can also be derived from the mitzvah of *וואהבת לרעך כמוך*. The Rambam in *Hilchos Teshuva*, Ch. 10, in discussing the mitzvah of *ahavas Hashem* (love of G-d), observes that *ahava* (love) and *yedia* (knowledge) go together. The way to attain *ahavas Hashem* is through *yedias Hashem*. In *Hilchos Teshuva* the Rambam emphasizes our reaching *yedias Hashem* by observing the wonders of the world around us, and in *Sefer Hamitzvos, Mitzvas Aseh* No. 3, the Rambam highlights attaining that *yedia* through the study of Torah. *Yedia* and *ahava* are so closely linked that the word used to describe the most intimate relationship between husband and wife is *yedia*. Knowledge is attained by careful listening to the other person and trying to understand their perspective. Just as *yedias Hashem* and *ahavas Hashem* require time and attention, so too *ahavas rei'im*, love of our fellow person, requires of us to spend time knowing and understanding our fellow person. The relationship of husband and wife is the greatest fulfillment of *וואהבת לרעך כמוך*. It is a lifelong privilege to truly know and understand one’s beloved partner. As the Rambam concludes *Hilchos Teshuva* concerning *ahavas Hashem*, *וואהבה*, “לפי הדעה תהיה האהבה, ” “To the degree of knowledge will be the amount of love”—our love for one another is dependent upon how much effort we invest in truly knowing each other.

Love of our fellow man is supposed to equal love of ourselves. The word “*kamocho*” is presupposing that we do, in fact, love ourselves. Just as knowledge is a prerequisite for love of others, so too is it necessary to love of ourselves. We must recognize our strengths and weaknesses to truly be able to appreciate and recognize others, thereby enabling us to know

others as we know ourselves. We must have positive feelings about ourselves before we can genuinely develop positive feelings for others. These qualities must be present in ourselves so that we are able to develop a positive, loving relationship with our spouse.

The dual term רעים האהובים refers to two distinct dimensions of the marriage relationship. Bonds of friendship and bonds of love unite a couple. It is not coincidental that friendship precedes love. A “love” without a pre-existing friendship is nothing more than a “אהבה התלויה בדבר” – “A love dependent on something external” — which can never last the test of time. The seeds of friendship are planted even before marriage. A couple that follows meticulously the halachos of *taharas hamishpacha* (laws of family purity) are given the opportunity to nourish those seeds of friendship out of the context of physical expressions of love. It is this commitment to friendship that enables the *rei'im* to become *ahuvim* once again, as Chazal describe the renewal that takes place upon the wife’s return from the *mikvah*, as compared to the experience of a bride.

Although the *beracha* of רעים האהובים is bestowed on the *chasan* and *kallah* as they embark on their life together, the actual fulfillment of these words develops over a lifetime. Nevertheless, it is never too early to plant the seeds for the blessing to reach fruition. Prior to marriage one must develop oneself as a positive, caring person. During the dating process there are multiple opportunities to be kind and considerate thereby setting the stage for the profound love that will come later. Getting to know and understand one’s prospective partner in an appropriate manner begins the lifelong knowledge that is synonymous with genuine love. The relationship of *rei'us*—friendship—is so fundamental to marriage that it is the culmination of all of the *berachos* bestowed upon a *chasan* and *kallah*. In the final *beracha*, we involve many phrases which describe the feelings of closeness the couple have for one another: ששון ושמחה ... גילה רינה דיצה: joy and gladness ... mirth, glad song, pleasure, delight, love, fellowship, harmony and companionship (ArtScroll translation). Friendship is the concluding blessing we wish the couple as they embark on life together.

Let us follow the guidelines of the Torah to properly develop and strengthen this relationship of רעים האהובים and thereby merit the *beracha* of “שמח תשמח” — “to truly rejoice” — that can only be granted by *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. May every Jewish marriage be truly blessed with the immortal words “שמח תשמח רעים האהובים כשמחך יצירך בגן עדן מקדם,” “May the beloved friends truly rejoice like You caused Your creations to rejoice in the Garden of Eden from the beginning of time.”