

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Eikev

“AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE STRANGER [LIT. CONVERT]...”
(DEVARIM 10:19)

Have you fulfilled your obligation?

REUVEN, A VISITOR FROM ANOTHER CITY, comes to town, and you invite him to your home for a meal. You serve him with a polite smile and tend to his needs. Have you fulfilled your obligation, as described in the broader meaning of the above *pasuk*? Let us read the commentary of the great sage Rabbeinu Bechaya (introduction to Parashas T'tzave), where he illustrates the need to help a stranger who comes to your neighborhood from his hometown. He says that the stranger is like a bird that has left his nest and is now separated from his comfortable origin and far from his spiritual foundation. Rabbeinu Bechaya tells us that we must use Shlomo HaMelech's guidance in how to treat this new arrival: "Oil and incense may make the heart glad, but genuine advice from the soul is sweetness for a friend" (Mishlei 27:9). "Oil and incense" refer to the food and smoke of cooking preparation, while the "advice from the soul" refers to the social greeting that we extend. We must not only feed our guest, but we must make him happy with a kind expression and warm words. Rabbeinu Bechaya continues to tell us that this warm reception must come from a source of love ("from the soul") for the newcomer and not as mere flattery to him.

It is understood that we must greet a new face with a smile and a pleasant greeting. But why do we have to love him? What difference does our internal emotional state make to the visitor – he hears the same words and sees the same smile either way! Furthermore, how can it even be expected of us to feel this love – we have only just met him? Doesn't it take many days, perhaps even years and much interaction to develop feelings of love for our friends? Finally, why does Rabbeinu Bechaya indicate that if our greeting does not come from the depths of our hearts than it is flattery and obsequiousness? Why can't it be *chesed* done without love, but sincere *chesed* nonetheless?

It is our responsibility to cultivate these emotions for every Jew

It is apparent from Rabbeinu Bechaya that we can indeed – in mere seconds – develop intense and genuine feelings of love for a fellow Jew. As a matter of fact, it is our responsibility to cultivate these emotions for every Jew who is new to our neighborhood. All we need to do is to vicariously feel the stranger's feelings of loneliness and deprivation. Visualize his situation as being like that bird, far away from his nest, with no place to turn for help; imagine yourself in that very same situation. If we condition ourselves to truly feel our friend's pain, we will be able to immediately turn that empathy into love. This crucial difference can be sensed by the visitor - if we fall short of this mandate, our greeting will seem like flattery: false and dishonest. A welcome that is purely external is an incomplete and, to a certain extent, empty and insincere gesture. Obviously, a meal that is offered with a less sincere greeting is better than no meal at all, but we must strive to reach the Torah's standards for every Jew.

We have the capacity to tune into the needs and pain of our fellow Jew

This is the greatness within us. We have the capacity to tune into the needs and pain of our fellow Jew and instantly love him. He, in turn, possesses the delicate sensitivity to detect whether I truly love him or not. In these summer months, as people move to new communities, or travel during their vacation period, we have an opportunity to use this powerful tool of *ahavas Yisrael*. May this instantaneous, unconditional love, be the *ahavas chinam* that helps rebuild Yerushalayim and the Beis HaMikdash.