Preface: Judaism Is About Love

Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a

R. Simlai expounded: The Torah begins with an act of lovingkindness (hesed) and ends with an act of lovingkindness. It begins with an act of lovingkindness, for it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them,” and it ends with an act of lovingkindness, for it is written: “And He buried him [Moses] in the valley.”

I. Loving and “Firgun”

1. Leviticus 19:17-18 (New JPS translation)

17 You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord.
2. Nahmanides (1194-1270) on Leviticus 19

This is hyperbole, for a human heart is not able to accept [a command] to love one’s neighbor the way one loves oneself. Moreover, Rabbi Akiva has already come and taught, “Your life takes precedence over the life of your fellow.” Rather, the commandment of the Torah means that one is to love one’s fellow in all matters, as one loves all good for oneself. It is possible that since it does not say “and thou shalt love ‘et rei’akha’” but rather ‘le-rei’akha’ [literally, love “for they neighbor”] and similarly it states with reference to a ger, and thou shalt love ‘lo’ (for him) as thyself, that the meaning thereof is to equate the love of both [himself and his neighbor, or himself and the ger] in his mind. For sometimes a person will love his neighbor in certain matters such as material wealth, but not wisdom and similar matters. And even if he loves him in all matters, he will want his beloved friend to gain riches, properties, honor, knowledge, and wisdom— but not to the same extent that he has, for there will always be desire in his heart that he should have more of these good things than his neighbor has. Therefore Scripture commanded that this vice of jealousy should not exist in his heart, but instead a person should love for his fellow to have an abundance of goodness to the same extent that he does for himself, and he should place no limitations upon his love for him. It is for this reason that it is said of Jonathan’s [love for David], for he loved him as he loved his own soul, because Jonathan had removed [altogether] the attribute of jealousy from his heart, and he said [to David], and thou shalt be king over Israel, etc.
II. Turning Memory into Empathy and Suffering into Love

1. Exodus 23:9
   You shall not oppress a stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.

2. Leviticus 19:33-34
   When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your native-born; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.

3. Deuteronomy 10:17-19
   For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

III. What Does Cleaving to God Look Like?

1. R. Yehezkel Levenstein, Or Yehezkel, vol. 4, pp. 155
   “The human being was created only to find delight in the Lord and to bask in the radiance of God’s presence” (Messilat Yesharim, chapter 1). The whole purpose of the human being is only...
to delight in the divine presence. Indeed, basking in the divine presence is not limited to the next world; the righteous merit basking in the divine presence even in this world. When the righteous merit the attribute of hǝsed—an attribute that is one of God’s own attributes—in its wholeness, then they are basking in the divine presence in this world, in that they merit God’s own attributes.

IV. Serving Lunch to Our Enemies?

1. Proverbs 25:21-22
If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; If he is thirsty, give him water to drink. You will be heaping live coals on his head, And the LORD will reward you.

“if your enemy is hungry, feed him bread; and if he is thirsty, give him water.” Said R. Hama bar Hanina: Even though he intended to kill you, yet he arrived hungry or thirsty in your house, feed him and give him water. Why? “For you will be heaping live coals upon his head, and the Lord will reward (yeshalem) you”—do not read ‘will reward you’ but rather ‘will bring peace between him and you (yashlimenu lakhir).’