

The Biblical Heritage Center's
DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

Following the journey of the memes of the Bible from their original cultural & historical origins to their influence in our world today.

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The Greatest Commandment

By Jim Myers

It is clear that the leaders of the Pharisees and Sadducees were very interested in Jesus' position on issues that were important to them. In an encounter with a lawyer, who was also a Pharisee, that Jesus was asked the question that members of all of the other Jewish sects would have been very interested in knowing his answer. The question was this – "Which commandment is the greatest commandment?" Below is Jesus' response.

You shall love YAHWEH your ELOHIYM with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. *This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* On these two commandments hang all the Torah and the Prophets.¹

Jesus chose a popular method of teaching used by many rabbis to construct his answer above. He quoted two verses from different very well-known sections of the Torah and combined them to make a point. The key to unlocking what Jesus said is to accurately understand what "love" meant to him and his culture.

"Love presupposes a concrete inner disposition based on experiences and events, but it must also include conscious acts done in behalf of the person who is loved or the thing that is preferred."²

Love is not a passive emotion in the Hebrew language. Love requires actions in the highest, most passionate degree.³ God's love for mankind is understood by what He has done – acts -- for mankind. The author of the Gospel of John summed up the Jewish meaning of love in his famous verse – "God so loved the world that He gave . . ."

The first verse Jesus quoted in the answer above is one of the most well-known in Judaism called the *Shema*. It is read every week in synagogues around the world and is found in Deuteronomy chapter six.

These are the commands, decrees and laws YAHWEH your ELOHIYM directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them **may fear YAHWEH your ELOHIYM** as long as you live **by keeping all his decrees and commands** that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.

The section is introduced with a statement that is very important – “These are the commands . . . YAHWEH your ELOHIYM directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. . .” **YAHWEH gives commandments to specific people at specific times.** He gave Moses the commandments for the tribes of Jacob and their descendants to live by in their new homeland. They had been living in Egypt for many years, and before that they lived in Canaan. The patriarch of the tribe, Abraham, came to Canaan from Mesopotamian. If YAHWEH had not intervened and given Moses the Torah, what would they have based the laws needed to live in their new land on -- a combination of Egyptian, Canaanite and Mesopotamian laws and beliefs?

The opening section of the *Shema* is followed by --

Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as YAHWEH *the* ELOHIYM of your ancestors, promised you.

Why does YAHWEH give commandments? The answer to this question is extremely important. The answer is found in the first commandment YAHWEH gave.

And YAHWEH *the* ELOHIYM commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the Tree of the Knowledge of TOV and RA you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

YAHWEH gave the commandment to *protect, preserve and enhance the quality of life* of the man. The commandment was given not only to save the man from death, but also the lives of his partner and their future offspring. It was the only command needed in the Garden at that time.

Now let's continue with the remainder of the *Shema*.

Hear, O Israel: YAHWEH our ELOHIYM is One. **And you shall love YAHWEH your ELOHIYM with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.**⁴

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. . . Fear YAHWEH your ELOHIYM, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other ELOHIYM, the ELOHIYM of the peoples around you; for YAHWEH your ELOHIYM, who is among you, is a jealous ELOHIYM and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land. Do not put YAHWEH your ELOHIYM to the test as you did at Massah (Ex. 17:7).

Be sure to keep the commands of YAHWEH your ELOHIYM and the stipulations and decrees he has given you. Do what is right and good (TOV) in YAHWEH's sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land YAHWEH promised on oath to your ancestors, thrusting out all your enemies before you, as YAHWEH said.

In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws YAHWEH our ELOHIYM has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but YAHWEH brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes YAHWEH sent signs and wonders — great and terrible — on Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land he promised on oath to our ancestors.

YAHWEH commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear YAHWEH our ELOHIYM so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before YAHWEH our ELOHIYM, as He has commanded us, that will be our **righteousness.**"

This section makes it clear that the way one loves YAHWEH their ELOHIYM is by **doing** His commandments and **teaching** them to their children. Now let's turn to the second verse Jesus linked to the *Shema* to create his answer above.

You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall in any wise rebuke your neighbor, and not allow sin upon him. You shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but **you shall love your neighbor as yourself.** I am YAHWEH.⁵

In Judaism "neighbor" is inseparable from "man" because ELOHIYM created mankind "in His image," therefore no human being could be excluded.⁶ The

presence of another person also brings one in the presence of the image of ELOHIYM. This creates a remarkable picture if you think about – *the image of ELOHIYM encountering the image of ELOHIYM*. The bottom line in Jesus' message is that to love the image of ELOHIYM is to love YAHWEH your ELOHIYM – and don't forget that love is an action.

Let me say it again, as pointed out above, love consists of doing concrete acts, not by internal feelings or emotions in the Jewish culture. What concrete acts constitute acts of love of your neighbor? The answer is provided by the context of the verse Jesus quoted from Leviticus 19. Interestingly, the section is a list of prohibitions, which define what love is not. These acts are acts of hate.

Do not **steal**. Do not **lie**. Do not **deceive** one another. Do not **swear falsely** by my name and so profane the name of your ELOHIYM. I am YAHWEH.

Do not **defraud** or **rob** your neighbor. Do not **hold back the wages** of a hired worker overnight. Do not **curse the deaf** or **put a stumbling block in front of the blind**, but fear your God. I am YAHWEH.

Do not **pervert justice**; do not **show partiality to the poor** or **favoritism to the great**, but judge your neighbor fairly. Do not go about **spreading slander** among your people. Do not do **anything that endangers your neighbor's life**. I am YAHWEH.

Do not **hate** a fellow Israelite in your heart. **Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge** against anyone among your people, but **love your neighbor as yourself**. I am YAHWEH.

Now look at the things highlighted in bold above and ask one question – **What would ELOHIYM want his image to do?** If a person witnessed another “image of ELOHIYM” doing any of these things what would ELOHIYM want him to do? He provided the answer with a command -- “rebuke him frankly” – which is also an act of love. If one is aware of someone committing a sin, but says nothing, that is an act of omission and is an act of “hate.” It is also a sin, which makes the sinner share in the guilt of the person who should have been “rebuked.”

Rebuke means to speak out to the person candidly in order to give him the opportunity to justify his conduct or to make amends for it. Rebuke implies that every member of the community has the duty to speak out, not remain silent, when he witnesses his “neighbor” committing a sin (great or small). He must do his part, by speaking with him, again, and again if necessary, so the sinner may, if possible, gain insight into his conduct and mend his ways. Make sure you

clearly understand that the only person spoke to is the sinner – not everyone else.

The focus of Jesus' message was literally "saving lives" by *providing what was needed to preserve, protect and enhance the quality of life of those in need*. The need may have been food, water, clothing or rebuking. Jesus did not invent this message and other Jewish teachers also taught it. Today, this is still the highest moral and spiritual value in Judaism and is called "*pikuach nefesh*" (*saving of human life*).

In Judaism, human life is essential and so *pikuach nefesh*, the obligation to save a life in jeopardy, is considered a major value to uphold. This obligation applies to both an immediate threat and a less grave danger that has the potential of becoming serious. *Pikuach nefesh* is derived from the biblical verse, "Neither shall you stand by the blood of your neighbor".⁷

According to *pikuach nefesh* a person must do everything in their power to save the life of another. . . It is also permissible to travel on Shabbat to save a person's life. Maimonides declared that a Jew should take the individual, even if a gentile is present, in order to encourage "compassion, loving-kindness and peace in the world."⁸

The preservation of life [*pikuach nefesh*] is considered to be of paramount importance, surpassing virtually all of the other commandments of the Torah. One may and must violate Yom Kippur or the Sabbath, eat non-kosher food, etc. if there is the slightest chance that human life may be preserved or prolonged.

Judaism rejects the notion of unlimited personal autonomy. Our bodies and our lives are not our own to do with as we will. They are temporary bailments given to us by G-d for a specific purpose and duration which only G-d can terminate and just as we don't have the moral right to kill or harm others, we don't have the moral right to kill, maim, or injure ourselves or to authorize other persons to do those things to us.⁹

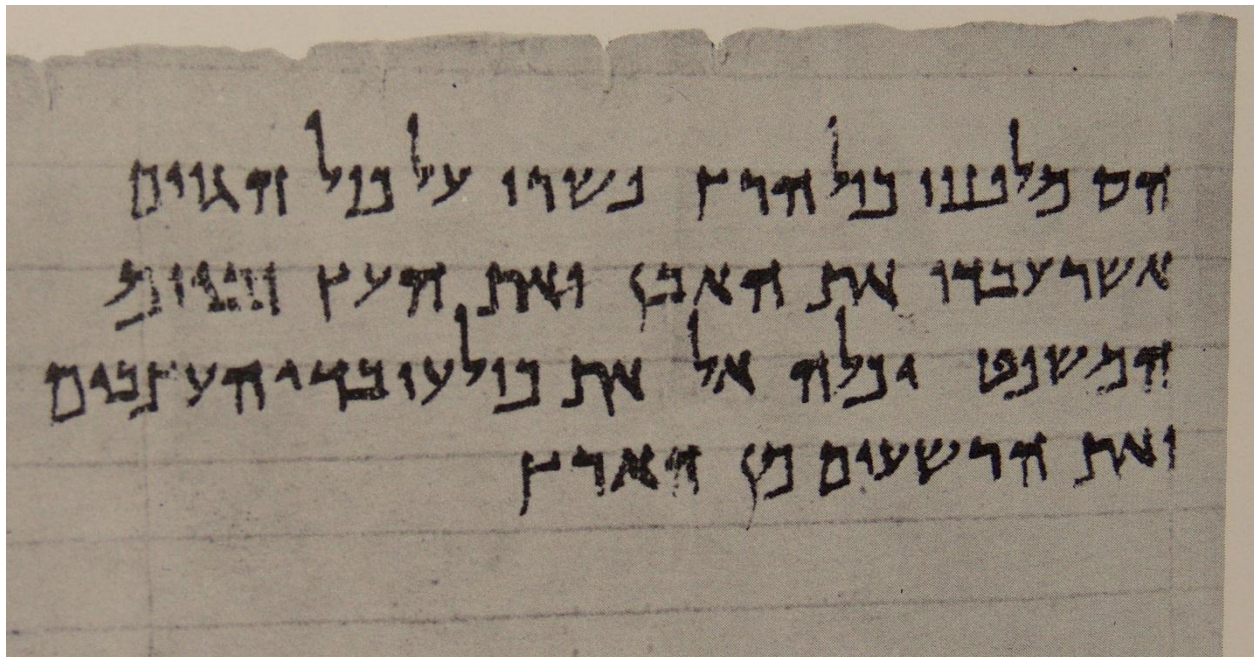
If the acts of *pikuach nefesh* are measured by ELOHIYM's TOV Standard they will meet its requirements – *acts that are beautiful and pleasing to the eyes; acts that are functionally complete; acts that protect, preserve and enhance the quality of life*.

By combining the two commandments to create his answer, Jesus made them inseparable. A person could not do one without doing the other, according to

Jesus. The importance of weaving them together would have been clearly understood by the example that Jesus gave next.

On these two commandments
hang all the **Torah** and the **Prophets**.

The **Torah** and the **Prophets** are the first two sections of the Jewish Bible. In order to understand the point that Jesus made we must understand how the scribes wrote the Hebrew texts. When a parchment was ready to write on, faint horizontal lines were engraved into it in order to keep the lines of text straight. Vertical lines were also drawn to mark the margins. They then hung the letters from the horizontal lines. This is easily seen in the picture below of the *Pesher to Habakkuk* (1QpHab) scroll found at the Dead Sea.¹⁹ Don't forget, the Hebrew language is written from right to left. ← ← ←



Jesus compared the two commandments to the lines on the above scroll. It is the thing that supports all of the letters of the Torah and the Prophets, according to Jesus. Those lines are the concrete acts of love done for ELOHIYM which produce concrete acts of love for one's fellowman. One cannot love ELOHIYM without loving his neighbor. No matter which law in the Torah is being considered, how it is carried out must also take into consideration how it will affect his fellowman.

It should be noted that the Jewish Bible commands people to "love" when the word for "love" does not appear in a passage. Below are two examples:

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and YAHWEH will reward you. (Prov. 25:21)

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey (which has) gone astray, you shall bring (it) back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under his burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it, you shall help him lift it up" (Ex. 23:4).

It is precisely in such deeds of love that the command to love can be seen in a proper perspective, which means that the attitude of love is what God expects. Love is not merely a demand which a humanitarian spirit makes on a man, but it is rooted in the divine command of God for people "to love."

By the time Jesus was teaching in the Late Second Temple Period, a number of Jewish sects had been formed – some estimate the number at 28. The three largest were the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. Each had produced their own interpretations of the Torah's laws, and some had come to be viewed as equal to, or greater than, the words recorded in the Torah.

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. . . . So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?" . . . And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! (See Mark 7:1-13)

The traditions of the Pharisees were not about whether a person should or should not wash their hands; it was about **how** they should wash them. Jesus addresses other "tradition" in Matthew 23:

You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.' (v. 16)

You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.' (v. 18)

You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the Torah—justice, mercy and faithfulness. (v. 23)

You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. (v. 25)

However, it should also be remembered that Jesus instructed his followers to do what the Pharisees taught, but with qualifications.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the Torah and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. (vv. 1-4)

The ancient synagogues had a special seat, called Moses' seat, in which the person teaching the weekly Torah portion sat. While sitting in that seat the focus was upon the biblical text, not sectarian traditions. The point that Jesus made was that when the Pharisees stepped down from Moses' seat they didn't do what they had just taught.

Debates over the different traditions divided the Jewish people and placed a greater burden on the shoulders of the poor, the widows, and the orphans. The traditions diverted attention away from doing the acts of love that would have been done. Jesus and other Jewish teachers recognized that this situation could only be corrected by creating SHALOM.

(Jesus said) "Blessed are the SHALOM makers, for they will be called sons of ELOHIYM. Blessed are those who pursue TZEDAQA, for they are the kingdom of God."¹⁰

Hillel said, "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving SHALOM and pursuing SHALOM, loving your fellow-creatures, and drawing them near to the Torah."¹¹

Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel said: On three things the world is sustained: on truth, on judgment, and on SHALOM, as it is it says (Zechariah 8:16): "Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make SHALOM."

SHALOM is translated "peace" in most English translations, which for many English speakers means "the absence of war or strife." The Hebrew word SHALOM means something very different -- "wholeness and completeness."¹² The three quotes above agree that creating SHALOM was the highest priority of their teachers.

Jesus taught that his disciples should “pursue TZEDAQAH,” while Hillel taught his disciples to “pursue SHALOM” and linked it to “loving your fellow-creatures.” Those listening to their words 2,000 years ago knew they were saying the same thing. ***The only way to “pursue TZEDAQAH” was by doing acts of love, which would thus create SHALOM.*** The Jewish Jesus viewed his mission as the creation of a community that he called “The Kingdom of Heaven (God).” ***It was a community of people who understood that they were “the image of ELOHIYM” on the earth.*** Their mission was to restore His creation by using the creative powers God had given them to do concrete acts of love and be the creators of SHALOM.

The importance of the two commandments, which Jesus declared were the greatest commandments, is clearly reflected in his message concerning the final judgment that will be held when the “Son of Man” comes.

Then ***the King will say*** to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me’ . . . “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, ***whatever you did for one of the least of these*** brothers and sisters of mine, ***you did for me.***”

God is referred to as the “king” in many parables and rabbinic teachings. Mankind is of the utmost importance to God and what happens to each individual is so important to Him that it is the criteria for determining the eternal destiny of each person. This creates a truly universal standard that can be used to judge anyone, regardless of their nationality or religion. Notice that neither tribe nor beliefs were a consideration. ***BHC***

¹ Matthew 22:37-40

² Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament edited by G. Johannes Botterock and Helmer Ringgren, translated by John T. Willis; © 1974 William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Vol. 1 p. 105.

³ Ibid, p. 106

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:1-4

⁵ Leviticus 19:17-18

⁶ Encyclopedia Judaica; vol. 11 col. 530.

⁷ Leviticus 19:16

⁸ Mishneh Torah, 2:3

⁹ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/pikuach_nefesh.html

¹⁰ Matthew 5:9-10

¹¹ Avot 1:12

¹² http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/27_peace.html

July Memorials

In Loving Memory

**MARJORIE
NEELLEY
PITNER**

**December 30, 1914
July 17, 2007**

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Their Remembrance

May their memories inspire us to seek those qualities of mind and heart which they shared when we walked life's journey together. May we help to bring closer to fulfillment their highest ideals and noblest strivings.

May their memories deepen our loyalty to those things which we valued and shared -- faith, love, peace and devotion and our biblical heritage. As long as we live, they too will live; for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor Reflections - The New Mahzor - The Prayer Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**FANNIE EDNA
GRAHAM
WARD**

**July 15, 1891
July 10, 1982**

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

Remembering those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. It is our privilege to honor them by the **BHC Memorial Garden and Memorials** which are printed in this newsletter. The Memorial Garden is on the website at <http://www.biblicalheritage.org>. Please visit it the next time you are on the Internet and stop back by often. If you would like to add your loved one to this section, send the information to us. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. Remember those who have meant so much to you with a BHC Memorial.

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