

*The Real Meaning of a Mistranslated  
Biblical Verse*

Very few verses of the Bible are as well known as one in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus, “And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” (*Leviticus* 19:18) So it pains me to tell my coreligionists that the meaning of the original Hebrew text is quite different.

Sometimes I feel that I ought to accuse Christians of deliberately popularizing the false translation, even if the earliest Greek rendition supports what they have done. But at least we owe them thanks for making the verse universally known. They did this so well that most Jews think that the verse is derived from the New Testament.

In any event, so important a command merits more thought than we have given it. Because it sounds so good, we forget that it is impossible to perform it. And would God have commanded what mankind cannot fulfill? The Torah never commands us to do that which is beyond our capacity. Is the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself therefore meaningless, or are we misreading it? Needless to say, the latter is the more correct answer.

Furthermore, the rabbis found other verses that permit men to give priority to the saving of their own lives. This would contradict the notion that we must love our neighbor as we love ourselves. If we have the right to prefer our own survival to the survival of others, then we are not loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. Is the Bible contradicting itself?

The correct interpretation is that given by Maimonides (*Hilchot De’ot* 6:3) and other medieval commentators. We are commanded to love for our neighbor that which we love for ourselves. That which we want for ourselves we should wish for our neighbors as well - wealth and health, things and status, reputation and peace of mind, all the blessings that human beings usually crave. We must not begrudge others what we enjoy. From the correct in-

terpretation come the two general rules: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you and do not do unto others what you would not have others do unto you.

In effect, the verse is urging us to help all mankind be blessed. If we ourselves can contribute to that end, so much the better. If we cannot, then at least we should not begrudge others as we would not want to be begrudged if we had fared better.

For me the strongest argument is to be found in the 34<sup>th</sup> verse of the same chapter. Identical language is used there. First, we are told to treat the stranger in our midst as an equal, then to love for him what we would love for ourselves. It is inescapable that the verse is calling for the equality of the citizen and sojourner in our midst. It is not a plea for self-sacrifice but rather for the elimination of the difference between First and second-class citizens.

Why Christianity could not fathom this for 2,000 years I do not know. Did its teachers maliciously avoid reading the verse properly so that Jews would not be given equal status with them in their society? Or is an infidel of a lower breed than a stranger so that discrimination could be justified that way?

In any event, I feel very strongly that the time has come to stop quoting the incorrect translation of a verse which only prompts its rejection.

However, the correct translation gives us a goal which we can fulfill. We do not have to place it beyond the reach of humans. We need only promote equality and we have to our credit the performance of the mitzvah. And this is the way Jews see all the commandments. They can be performed by all men. One does not have to be superhuman to do the bidding of the Torah. The Torah was given to humans for humans - even in human language - and within our reach is total obedience.

So much for the text itself. However, its timeliness in international affairs is a good reason for giving it the look I am suggesting. What is one of the principal areas of Jewish concern today if not the almost congenital incapacity of nations to want for Jews what they want for themselves? They want their peoplehood recognized, but the peoplehood of Jews is a concept they don't grasp. They loathe accepting it.

I remember 40 years after V-E Day how difficult it was for me to make this point to American diplomats and generals. And now

that there is a Jewish State, how difficult it is for them to tolerate its doing what other states do without any opposition whatever. Everyone knows that there is a double standard in the United Nations - one for all states and another for Israel. Equality of status - in rights and duties - is the rule for all but the Jewish State. They simply don't wish for us what they wish for themselves.

The same reluctance to give us equal status is especially to be found in the academic world. And Jews in academia are not even sensitive to their second-class status. Perhaps this is so because they themselves helped to create the condition. True, today they find employment - unlike the period between the world wars. But why, one asks, is Jewish civilization of less importance in the world of the intellectual than Egyptian, Greek or Roman civilization? Does Egyptian civilization play a greater role in the lives of the people of the west than Jewish civilization, the Bible and all of its values? And did the Greeks or Romans contribute more to the development of British and American political institutions than the law of Moses? Why then should Jewish civilization count only as a prelude to Christianity and not warrant in its own right the place in academia that other civilizations enjoy?

To me it seems crystal clear. The nations of the earth do not want for Jews what they want for themselves. They will quote the incorrect translation of the immortal verse in speeches and perorations. It is safe to do that. No one need take it seriously. But the correct meaning of the verse would demand a different pattern of behavior. And for that Jews must want - and wait - and wait.

As John Galsworthy once said, "From the Jew I have learned to wait." This is the existential situation of our people - to hope and wait for the Messiah.