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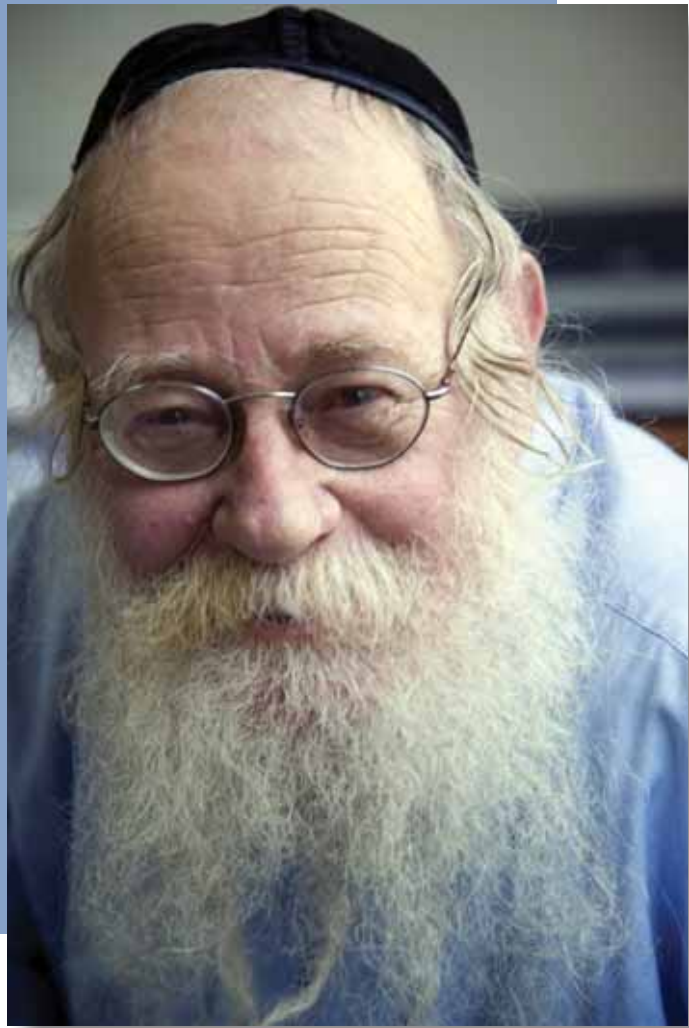
Religions

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Charity and Compassion: Interreligious Perspectives



A Conversation *with* Rabbi Steinsaltz



Patrick Laude: What are the Hebrew words that would best encapsulate the meanings of love and compassion in religion? What do these words suggest?

Rabbi Steinsaltz: The Hebrew words for love – *ahavah* – and compassion – *rahamim* – are used in the language in a general way, namely, there is no linguistic distinction between the use of the words in a religious sense and in a secular sense; moreover, the terms are not always confined to humans but sometimes are used even in regard to animals.

There is a general distinction between love and compassion, although the root

of the word *rahamim*, compassion – *rhm* – also carries the meaning of love (a similar word is found in other Semitic languages too). In many cases, the difference between the words is that the term “love” is used towards one who is of equal or higher status, while “compassion” is connected with whoever is of equal or lower standing. In the broadest sense, there is a certain linguistic and intrinsic difference between the two words: love contains an element of wanting something, while compassion is mostly connected with the notion of giving. There are, however, other distinguishing features between the two words when used in a purely religious sense, vis-à-vis God (and in Biblical and post-Biblical thinking this love is mutual and expressed both

ways – from God to man and from man to God), as it assumed that the human ability to love God is, in itself, a mark of Divine grace, of God loving this person; while when used in the human sense they may as well be one-sided.

PL. What is the specifically Judaic perspective on human love, i.e. conjugal love, but also friendship?

RB. As stated before, the meaning of the word “love” is very general, and therefore the main distinction between love in the religious sense and in the general sense is not the power and depth of the emotion, but in its subject.

In common usages the word “love” may sometimes be downgraded to mere liking or plain desire; but the general meaning of love contains two elements: the wish to be closer to the subject of love, and the wish to give more and more to this subject. In this sense, love in the human context may be more specific, or more confined, than Divine love, but essentially is not different from it. In fact, in many Jewish sources the love relationship goes both ways: on the one hand, love between human beings is seen as derived from Divine love; and on the other, human love is often used as a symbol for Divine love.

Friendship, in a fullest sense, is not considered different from love, even though in practice it expresses itself in different forms and ways than conjugal love, for instance. On a deeper level, friendship that does not contain the element of love is not considered true friendship, but only a mutual agreement to work together, or at least not to harm each other.

PL. What are the main lessons about love and compassion to

be found in the Talmud?

RB. In the Talmud – which is a compilation of the Oral Law and is much more detailed and elaborate than the Scriptures – love and compassion are treated in a very detailed way. In fact, in Talmudic or even pre-Talmudic times a new term was coined: *Gemilut Hasadim*. This term has no adequate translation into any other languages, and its various loose translations are not very enlightening. On the whole, *Gemilut Hasadim* is a very generalized notion of charity. But while charity is connected with giving financial help to the destitute, *Gemilut Hasadim* is the general admonition to help other people in every sphere of life and give them every kind of help they might need. Unlike charity, which is mostly to poor people, *Gemilut Hasadim* is for everybody who needs assistance, even temporarily or subjectively, regardless of whether the receiver is poor or rich.

In this sense, *Gemilut Hasadim* bears the fullest meaning and is the actual expression of the term “compassion”, which literally means “to feel with somebody else,” whenever that person has any problem. *Gemilut Hasadim* involves a very large set of instructions and advice, and the important place that this set of instruction occupies in Jewish life is reflected in the Talmudic saying, that *Gemilut Hasadim* is one of the three pillars upon which the world stands (*Pirkei Avot – Ethics of Our Fathers* 1:2).

On a more theological level, all acts of *Gemilut Hasadim* are a part of the very general notion of *imitatio Dei*. Indeed, in many cases it says that a certain deed is not just a good deed which is beneficial for society, and that a certain intention is not only right in the sense that it is a positive mindset and a state of spiritual devotion, but that according to Scripture it is the way in which God Himself acts.

The importance of *Gemilut Hasadim* is such, that sometimes not only whatever is directly connected with “good deeds,” but practically the entire body of commandments and instructions that deal with our world (not necessarily those of direct worship) is seen as included within *Gemilut Hasadim*, since any good deed that is done by people (including some rituals) is seen as a way in which people give something in order to make the very structure of the world higher and nobler. Doing all these deeds it is part of sanctifying the universe. In this sense doing good deeds, giving and helping others, saying pleasant things etc., goes beyond the realm of human needs and is part of the general notion that doing positive acts toward everything – animals, plants, and even inanimate objects – is also an act of *Gemilut Hasadim*. According to this view, the act of doing anything positive, whatever its object, is considered a display of mercy and compassion, and therefore has an aspect of Divine worship.

PL. Has Kabbalah something specific to teach us about love?

RS. In the world of Kabbalah there is a further distinction between love and mercy. The basic idea is that love, on any level, stems from within and is fundamentally non-judgmental. Very broadly speaking, love – or its outward manifestation as *Chesed*, which is the attribute of goodness as well as showing goodness – can be seen as defining one of the main powers in the world, which is an emotion or deed that flows from within out unto the world in general, to specific objects within it, and most specifically to people. This force may be seen as the centrifugal power of the universe, whereby things go from the center (or the self, in human terms) to the periphery: giving, embracing, sharing, keeping the world in balance. Parallel to it is the

centripetal power of constraint, *Gevurah*, the power that works from the periphery inwards and which keeps a certain equilibrium in existence.

According to this view, Mercy, *Rahamim* (or *Tifereth*, in Kabbalistic terminology), is seen as a combination of the centrifugal and centripetal powers, because Mercy is not only an outburst of an inner feeling, but also a reaction to the outside existence. The object of love may be anything and anybody, and a gift of love is not meant to fulfill any lack in the object; rather, it is an expression of the innermost drive: to love, to give. Mercy, on the other hand, although it too contains the notion of giving and sharing, is judgmental, because it starts with the notion that somebody or something is in need, is lacking. Fulfilling such a need is an act of mercy, but mercy is invariably a response or reaction to something which is seen as a lack or a blemish. Whereas love is based on an inner drive to give, to be closer, regardless of whether the recipient actually needs anything, Mercy starts out from the recipient, from the object, and is an attempt to fulfill a want. In this sense, Mercy is more defined and more “objective” than love; that is why it is seen as a very central power: judgment treated with love.

In fact, some Jewish sources say that the name of the Lord (Y-H-W-H) is the name of the attribute of Mercy, which is the centre point, that combines both the inner self and the outer existence. Human beings may feel mercy most strongly when they encounter pain and suffering; but in the eyes of the Lord the whole world, being intrinsically confined and incomplete, deserves mercy. This is how the verse “and His mercy is on all His deeds” (Psalms 145) is understood: all creatures, even the Archangels, deserve this kind of mercy. Mercy in people can be felt towards anybody (or

anything) that is suffering for whatever reason. Love has in it a certain amount of respect for and appreciation of the beloved, while mercy does not have this limitation; the farthest and the lowest can equally be objects of mercy.

PL. Considering the ternary of “Abrahamic religions”, some writers have associated hope to Judaism, charity to Christianity and faith to Islam. How do you see the specificity of Judaism in relation to these three “virtues,” and particularly in relation to charity, or more broadly to love?

RS. If I were to make such a succinct definition of these three religions, I would do it very differently – namely, by relating more to the core ideas and self-understanding of these religions, rather than by attaching a slogan to each. I think that even linguistically, and surely historically, Islam is the religion of acceptance of yoke and subjection to God (as far as I know, this was how Muslims and Islam defined themselves in the beginning); Christianity is mostly about Divine redemption, and Judaism is overwhelmingly theocentric, as it concerns itself mainly with being connected to God and doing His will. In this context, charity is a very broad view of everything. The general aim of life is to fill gaps, to give, to mend whatever exists, from the inanimate to the human beings. Nobody and nothing is complete, and making things better is our way of continuing God’s creation. Charity towards human beings, then, is basically the same thing: it is the attempt to fulfill the lacunae of existence in whatever way; sometimes it can be done with a coin, sometimes with a compliment.

PL. It has also been written that Judaism is more centered on fear of God than on love and knowledge of God. How would you respond to this view? How do you see the relationship between fear and love, knowledge and love in Judaism?

RS. Judaism deals both with love of God and with fear of God; however, in order to define it properly it should be stated that Judaism as a living religion is unique among world religions in that it is very much concerned with the knowledge of God. There is a huge drive in Judaism to attain more and more of this knowledge. Furthermore, in Judaism there has never been a defined group or caste of “the knowledgeable ones”; on the contrary: everybody – young or old, rich or poor, scholarly or ignorant – is expected to be knowledgeable, although there always will, of course, be differences between individuals, and there will always be those who are more capable of studying and gaining knowledge, and others who for many reasons cannot do that to an equal degree. In fact, the Messianic dream of Judaism, which is also the very last and summarizing sentence in Maimonides’ Code of Law, is: “for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Isalah 11:9). The act of attaining this knowledge is considered not only the fulfillment of a wish, but an act of worship.

PL. Is there a universality of Judaism, and how would you define or suggest it?

RS. In Judaism, there are two aspects. One is the particular duties and commandments that are pertinent only to Jews,

while the other is a very clear view of a universal religion which is the dream and desire of Judaism to share with the world. The commandments of this universal religion are formalized as the Seven Noahide commandments (those which pertain to all of Noah's descendants – namely, every human being). They are general precepts about faith and behavior which are the common human heritage: belief in God, prohibition of murder, adultery and incest, creating a just society, and caring for the well-being of all other creatures. This "religion of Adam," of humanity, is seen as the ideal way of life for humanity in general, and therefore spreading it (but not the commandments that pertain particularly to Jews) is seen as an ideal.

PL. How do you understand interfaith dialogue from a Jewish perspective? What is/are its goal(s)? What are its prerequisites? What are its pitfalls and limits? What can Jews bring to interfaith dialogue?

RS. Interfaith dialogue can be a positive deed, if it is done with care, understanding and sensitivity. Its main goal is, mostly, listening and getting to know each other. The pitfall of such interfaith dialogue may be in all kinds of missionary attempts, in which the other is seen as lacking something essential that does not make it possible for him to attain fulfillment and redemption. Judaism can share some of the many treasures it has accumulated in its more than 3000 years of existence, some of which can surely be useful and helpful for others. In its essence, Judaism is not a missionary religion, and this fact can surely contribute to creating a better, saner relationship with other religions.

PL. Some important intellectual figures in Judaism defined the relationship of Jews with other communities as a "confrontation" (not in the negative sense of the term but in the general sense of "being confronted" by alterity); what do you think of this assessment?

RS. The confrontation of Judaism with other communities stems from the assumption that the Jews shouldn't be different. However, difference does not necessarily mean animosity or hatred; it is just the acknowledgment of the fact that religions, like individuals, are different. Love between man and woman begins with the acknowledgment of difference. Difference, then, may be one of the main forces that create love. But the desire to enforce uniformity – by force, by laws, by temptation – creates a negative response. Confrontation is sometimes just the natural reaction to an invitation such as "You have to join us." In those places where the notion of difference was accepted (e.g., India), there was also no feeling of confrontation.

PL. Given the highly politicized and sensitive context that surrounds the relationship between Abrahamic faiths, and particularly Muslims and Jews in the modern world, what would you say to a Muslim about your faith that may help him or her understand the Jewish point of view?

RS. It is a great pity that the relationship between the Abrahamic religions is connected to politics. In the long run – as can

be seen from any examination of the existing problems between Muslims and Jews – these problems are based on misunderstandings and on creating justifications for hatred. The modern combination of nationalism and religion can be lethal, both psychologically and literally. The first and obvious results appear at first in hating and fighting a real or imaginary enemy. But in a very consistent way it develops into a toxic mixture which destroys both nation and religion. Hopefully, this phenomenon will subside, even though many people with short-sighted views try to fan the fires instead of quenching them. The main thing to say to Muslims about Judaism is to offer them to gain a better, more comprehensive view of the Jewish faith. Hatred is so often based on ignorance and prejudice, both of which can be cured by trying to know more, to understand better.

