

Love to Our Future Friends by Avner de-Shalit

1. Introduction

There is a well-known proverb, known as a Golden Rule in the Jewish tradition: Thou Shalt Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself (Leviticus 19:18). But the original in Hebrew is slightly different: “You should love to your friend as yourself.” So we are to love *to* and not just love, and we are to love to *our friend* rather than *our neighbor*. What does this proverb mean for our time? And how does it help us understand our obligations to future generations?

2. Your Friend as Yourself

What is meant by the demand to love to your friend *as yourself*?

It’s possible that “love to your friend as yourself” means that you should love your friend as much as you love yourself. Or maybe it means that you should love your friend in the same way that you love yourself. But it seems to me that both interpretations are implausible. For one thing, it seems odd that the proverb would set up self-love as a model of loving. Human beings naturally desire the pleasures of life and despise suffering. But that desire for pleasure is not really about love; it’s about an excessive regard for your own advantage and your own interests.

Another interpretation is that “love to your friend as yourself” means that you should think of your friend as a human being like yourself, because she or he was born in the image of God, as you were. The proverb would then read: “You should love to your friend because your friend is as human as you are.” But how does this common humanity call us to love? If we are to love people because of their humanity, how are we to distinguish the love for our friends from the love for every other human being? If we were to love all of humanity, surely love would lose its meaning as an *exclusive* emotion.

Maybe “love to your friend as yourself” advises you to love your friends because they are part of you. This interpretation is consistent with other similar biblical expressions. For example, the Israelites were ordered to treat the proselytes as citizens and to “love them *like yourself*” because “*you were proselytes*” (Genesis 19:34). This makes sense; aren’t we all in some way formed by our friendships, and our friends formed by us? Thus, your friend is “as you” because your friend is, in actual fact, part of you.

3. Love and Love To

What is meant by “love” here?

Surely, this is not the usual sense of love. The love experienced by couples, say, or by parents for their children, cannot be dictated. Even if you are ordered to love somebody, you

cannot *control* your feelings of love and hate. So you cannot be expected to obey this order, if love is understood as a feeling.

However, you can be obliged to have a certain attitude to others in matters that can be reflected upon, because you have to *decide* to do as you are told. Perhaps the term “love to” here means to hold a very deep sense of care and respect.

To see that this is a feasible interpretation, think of the following: in contrast to “loving to,” loving is a feeling that happens in the mind, perhaps even secretly. It does not require an *interaction* between the lover and the beloved. However, “love to” is a transitive verb; it requires an interaction that involves care and respect. Care and respect have to *be shown* toward someone. Part of caring and respecting a person is to show this with your actions and talk about it. By that means, you construct an atmosphere of care and respect. I therefore suggest that “love to” your friend means “show deep care and respect” for your friend.

So, “you should love to your friend as yourself” means that you should show deep care and respect for your friends because they are part of who you are.

4. Friendship: Self and Friends

But in what exact respect are your friends part of you?

A person is more than a body or a mind, but rather an entire set of experiences, thoughts, expectations, and memories. You are, in this sense, your ideas. This sounds simple. But what does it mean?

When I say that I have an idea, I mean two things. First, that I hold an idea in my mind. Second, that I have reason to believe that the idea I hold in my mind is true. To reach such a conclusion, I must challenge this idea against all possible criticisms, analyze it, weigh it against other ideas, and so on. Furthermore, in order to challenge an idea intensively I must put the idea to the critique of other people because otherwise I might fail to see all possible challenges.

What is important is that you should put these ideas to the critique of your *friends* rather than just any person. That is because part of believing an idea is true involves looking at who holds it. Indeed, whenever you look for guidance, you look for the wise person (as in the case of a philosophical dilemma), the experienced person (as when you are planning for a long journey), or the skillful person (as when you must fix a broken-down car). The same is true for ethical positions. If you face a moral question, you look for guidance from the people you appreciate as moral people in general, or with whom you often agree when it comes to moral dilemmas—in other words, to your friends. We think highly of people if they hold certain ideas, but we also think highly of ideas if they are held by people we care for and respect. [1]

Consequently, since your ideas are part of you, and since your friends are part of your ideas, your friends are part of you as well. As the old adage goes: “Tell me who your friends are and I’ll tell you who *you* are.”

5. Friendship with the Not-Yet-Born?

But what about future people? Can they be called our friends? Are they part of who we are? Must we therefore *love to* them, treating them with caring and respect?

Certainly, we could want them to be our friends in the sense that we want them to think highly of us and like us. In that sense, future people might be our friends. But in another sense, they must be. As I consider how I should live, I can think of how my descendants will reflect about what I do now and I can imagine whether they’ll like me. Such a practice is in fact a way of treating future persons as if they were my friends.

It is true that when I ask myself what future people will think of me, I do not do it with *all* future generations, but rather with the few I can imagine. For example, I can do this with my grandchildren (who are not yet born) or with a future generation in my village. However, if I do this with “my” future people, and you do this with yours, and she does this with hers, then we as a community or indeed as humanity can reach in practice a situation where we seriously feel that future people are our friends, who constitute ourselves. In other words, when we do something, when we decide on a policy, or when we hold certain ideas, we’ll consider also how future generations might think of this policy or these ideas, and whether they will approve, because each one of us will have his or her future person-friends. In this way, we fulfill our obligation to “love to our friends—even our friends in the far future—as ourselves.”

Notes

[1] It is in this sense that Paul Wadell claims that friendship is an important factor in enabling people to acquire virtues; simply by encountering another person, we learn about virtues. See his *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989). This is, of course, an Aristotelian theory. See book 8 of the Nicomachean Ethics.