



Treating Your Neighbor As Yourself

Submitted by: Jenny Epstein, MA, DTR

Subject Area: Jewish Ethics

Target Age Group(s): Pre b'nei mitzvah (6th and 7th graders)

Abstract

Students grapple with “the golden rule” using situations that emulate real-life dilemmas. Each student imagines his/herself in several hypothetical situations, determines what he/she might do in each situation, and discusses why. This step in the learning validates students’ present value schemas. Then the instructor asks a surprise question: if the tables were turned, what would you want the other person in the scenario to do for you? This lesson aims to teach ethics with a style that avoids prescriptive right and wrong answers and instead encourages personal choice.

Materials

Three scenarios, printed for each student to read. Text of three scenarios included in additional resources. Instructor could also choose to add additional scenarios.

Procedure

1. Break students into pairs
2. Ask each pair to read scenario together.
3. Each person gets a chance to describe what he/she would do in the scenario, with the partner simply listening. Take turns.
4. Come back to the larger group.
5. Each pair shares with group what they described.
6. Now ask group to return to pairs.
7. Verbally change scenario so tables are turned. (For example, in first scenario: Now your bike has a flat tire, and your sibling discovers it. What would you want him/her to do?)
8. In pairs, students take turns discussing what they would want the other person to do for them.
9. Return to larger group.
10. Share findings.
11. Repeat above for each of three scenarios.
12. Return to large group for discussion.

Once the group shares what they would each want of their neighbor, the instructor is in a position to introduce more deeply the parts of loving thy neighbor that might not be so easy. The teacher allows students to grapple with this basic tenet of Torah, and explore more deeply how it might inform their processes of making real-life decisions. As a last step, the instructor might choose to invite students to share real-life situations in their own lives in which a loving-thy-neighbor dilemma arose.



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Questions to Consider

- 1- Do these scenarios remind you of a real-life loving-thy-neighbor dilemma you've been in? Please describe.
- 2- Why do you think treating your neighbor as yourself is called the Golden Rule?
- 3- Why is it so central to Jewish law?
- 4- Can you think of a way that the Golden Rule, if applied, could help our community?

Comments and Feedback

There are two resources that will be very relevant to your discussion. The first is the text in Leviticus that instructs us to love our neighbor. If the class is advanced, you may want to discuss the preceding line in Leviticus (19:17) which instructs us also to rebuke our neighbor. Ask the class the question: How can I rebuke my neighbor, and at the same time love him/her as myself?

The second resource is the story of a man who asks Rabbi Akiva to summarize the Torah while standing on one foot. Akiva says, essentially, to love your neighbor as yourself, and that the rest is commentary.

Each of these texts is provided in the resources below.

Bibliography/Additional Resources

1. Three scenarios for class
2. Text from Leviticus
3. Torah on one foot story

Resource #1

Three scenarios

Every morning, you try to leave for school on your bike ten minutes early so you can hang out with your friends before the bell. One morning, you are psyched to be leaving at the right time to see your friends before the bell. Just then you notice that your sister has a flat tire. She goes to a different school, but she also bikes there. She would be late if she had to walk. She's still in the house getting ready. What do you do?



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You are in the lunch line at school. A kid you really don't like cuts in front of you in line to be with his friends. You let your friends cut sometimes too, but this guy really makes you mad because he doesn't even ask you if it's OK before he cuts. What do you do?

You have an agreement with your neighbors that you will shovel their sidewalks every time it snows. They always leave \$5 in an envelope in your mailbox after you shovel. One day, it snows while they are away at work and you are away at school. But when you get home, you notice that the sidewalks are already shoveled. When your neighbors come home, they assume you have shoveled the sidewalks for them, and they leave you \$5 in an envelope. What do you do?



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Resource #2

LEVITICUS 19:18

“You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

Resource #3

Torah On One Foot

At one time the heathens wanted to make fun of the Torah, and of the rabbis. They asked one another:

"Are all rabbis as kind as Hillel? Are all Jewish teachers as good as Hillel? Are all rabbis as patient as Hillel?"

So one of them said:

"I shall go and find out." He came to Shammai, also a famous rabbi, and cried:

"Your Torah, your wonderful Torah--I can learn it while I stand on one foot. Rabbi Shammai, you teach it to me while I stand on one foot." You see, he was just making fun of the Torah.

Now what do you suppose Shammai did? Do you think he had patience with a man who was making fun of the Torah? Who ever heard of learning the whole Torah while standing on one foot? The rabbis had spent all their lives in studying the Torah and even then they were not sure that they knew all of it.

Rabbi Shammai took a stick and shouted angrily:

"Get out of here, you scoffer! Do you think I have time to waste on people who mock our holy Torah?" The heathen ran away. He thought he would go to Hillel and see what Hillel would do.



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All out of breath, he came to Hillel's home. Hillel thought the man had come for something very important. So Hillel said:

"What is the matter, my good man?" And the heathen answered:

"Teach me the Torah while I stand on one foot."

Of course Hillel, too, saw that the heathen was scoffing, but calmly and patiently he said:

"You want to learn a great deal quickly, don't you? Very well, I shall teach you the Torah while you stand on one foot. This is our Holy Torah: 'What is hateful to you, do not do unto others.'"

The heathen forgot that he had come only to jeer.

"Does it mean that the heathens and the Jews and all of us are brothers? Does it mean that we must be kind to one another like brothers?" asked the heathen, wonderingly.

"That's it, my son. That's the meaning of the whole Torah. All the rest is only an explanation of that. Go, go, my son. Go and study it," said Hillel kindly.

"When may I come for another lesson?" asked the heathen humbly.