

Positive Judaism Study Guide #3: Love and Kindness: Personal Transformation and Change

“Personal transformation can and does have global effects. As we go, so goes the world, for the world is us. The revolution that will save the world is ultimately a personal one,” said author, Marianne Williamson. Marianne teaches us that personal change has a local and a global effect, on ourselves and on the people and world around us.

In the words of Rudolf Steiner, “only a person who has passed through the gate of humility can ascend to the heights of the spirit.” Rudolf suggests that personal transformation requires a high dose of humility which are strengths that develop authentic human connections. Treating all people with humanity and expressing love and kindness to all is an expression of high social intelligence and leads people to a greater sense of well-being and positivity in their lives. This guide explores the value of humanity, love, kindness, and social intelligence as pathways to positivity and well-being.

| Humanity | Interpersonal strengths that develop authentic human connections and friendship: love, kindness, social intelligence |
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| Love/Ahavah | Valuing caring and reciprocal relationships. Able to share and to be in genuine relationship with others. |
| Kindness/Chesed | Able to be compassionate, nurturing, caring, and generous with others. Able to do good deeds altruistically. |
| Social Intelligence/ Chochma Chevratit | The capability to effectively navigate and negotiate complex social relationships and environments. Having common sense. |

1. Humanity

And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Rabbi Akiva said: This is an all-embracing principle in Torah). I am the Lord.

On the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself,” The Rambam teaches that this is the basis for many of the rabbinic mitzvot such as visiting the sick, comforting mourners, caring for the dead, providing a dowry for the bride, escorting guests, performing burial rites, rejoicing with bride and groom and helping support them with necessary provisions (Hilchot Avel 4:1). This best articulates the positive trait of “humanity” whose core characteristics include love, kindness, and social intelligence.

2. Love and Kindness

Great is the virtue of gemilut chasadim (love and kindness) because it is one of the thirteen attributes ascribed to God. As it is written: “Adonai, Adonai. . . long suffering and abundant in kindness (rav chesed).” -Exodus 34:6

“Hear oh Israel! The Eternal is our God, the One God. You shall love the Eternal your God with all your **hearts** (l’vavcha) and with all your soul and with all your might” - Deut 6:4-5

“I hereby declare today, with heaven and earth as my witness, that I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, that you and your descendants may live -Deuteronomy 30:19.

3. Intelligence

The One Who had provided man with intelligence certainly expects that we use our (social) intelligence to legislate such basic laws without which life on earth would become intolerable, anarchic. We must view our common sense as a messenger from God, an instrument that acts as a protection against man experiencing all kinds of harm and problems in his life on earth. When man commits violence against his fellow man this reflects an absence of common sense. -Radak on Genesis 20:6:2

* Optional Discussion Questions

1. The Talmud says that “one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah (good deed).” Does this work in reality?
2. The authors of a Jewish wisdom text wrote, “the world is built on three things: Torah, prayer, and acts of love and kindness.” Why do you imagine that “love and kindness” is one of the pillars of the world?
3. Jews are known as the People of the Book. How does this cultural notion lead a person and/or a community to flourish and increase well-being.
4. The Shema is the central statement of Jewish belief and comes from the Torah (Deut 6:4). Can a person be commanded to “Love God?” What does this teach us about love?