

Sparks

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CAN YOU REALLY LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOUR SELF?

After reading this essay, you'll never look at yourself — or others — the same way again.

The actor Kirk Douglas once told me that when people compliment him on a performance, they often tell him how great he was at losing himself in the part. "You just became Vincent Van Gogh! You were so wonderful." And he answers, "No, you lost yourself in the part. I can't afford to lose myself in the part. I have to pay attention to the director, to the cues. I have to hit the mark just right so the action is in the camera frame. I must stay aware that I am an actor acting a part."

So a good actor plays his part, but he doesn't get lost in his part. He can't even begin to think he is the character he is playing. On the other hand, it is not like he doesn't embrace that character with a tremendous amount of love and give everything he's got to play that character to the best of his ability. But he doesn't get lost in the part and start to think he is in fact Van Gogh, or Napoleon, or the President of the United States, or a serial killer or whatever.

Similarly, you — the soul — are playing a character. You must always be aware of that. We are each playing a character, and it is important that we not confuse the "self" with the character.

Another way of putting this is to compare your character to a garment. So you see a man in a white uniform running down the street holding a net. Well, you might guess he works for an insane asylum. The garment indicates the role he is playing but not who he is. He might then go home and then put on some sweatpants, and go out running again, but now he is an athlete.

Your garment is never your essence. The clothes you wear are not you, they are on you. Similarly, your character is not your "self." So you must never confuse the two. You must know the difference.

You do not have a soul. You are a soul. But you have a character. And you—the self—are a soul, a ray of G-d—the Source of all self—our shared Greater Self.

When you are trapped in your ego, you end up doing a lot of harm in many ways. Just as you identify yourself with your career, or your emotions, or your opinions, so you identify others with just their egos and personas and you never connect with them as souls.

The Torah teaches "Love your neighbor as yourself," but if you cannot love your "self," you cannot love the "self" in someone else.

So you say, "How's it even possible for me to love my neighbor? I don't even like him. I can't stand his dumb ideas and he talks too much. Love him? No way. At best, maybe I can force a smile when he comes around."

When the Torah says love your neighbor as yourself, it doesn't mean that you have to love your neighbor's ideas, nor opinions, nor actions, and certainly not his clothing.

Love your neighbor as yourself means you can hate his ideas, be annoyed by his talk and his walk, but still love that person.

We are commanded to love each other, and we can love each other, because we are not the characters we play. Each one of us is a soul, a ray of the Great "I."

I am commanded to love your "self" in the same way as I love my "self," because we are both rays of one shared Great Self, the Soul of our souls — G-d. Notice how that sentence in the Torah ends: "Love your neighbor as yourself, [for] 'I' am G-d."

I need to get beyond my ego, and I need to see beyond your ego. Then I can love you, and help you get beyond your ego too. Then, we can work together to fix and improve the characters we are each playing, and thereby let the light of G-d — the Supreme Self shine through us.

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