

## My Lesson in Unconditional Love

by Yair Yehuda

*What is unconditional love, and towards whom is it directed? A story about a surprising interfaith encounter, which leads to thoughts about our ability to act on all of humanity.*

### Introduction

The temple, as known, will be built with unconditional love, as a correction to the baseless hatred that led to our destruction. But what is the meaning of unconditional love? Who is it directed to, and what is the essential connection between that and the temple? Is this great rule evident in our consciousness and hearts? And if not, how do you raise awareness and inject it into the heart of the stone that refuses to cooperate?

About ten years ago I had the opportunity to experience 'scientific' unconditional love. To my surprise, I found myself connecting with people to whom I had no sense of commitment or mission, people to whom I had a natural sense of aversion and suspicion. Without intending to, I learned to love them deeply.

If to build a house for God - I want to build it with them. I have discovered in an experiential way that there is indeed a fundamental connection between the building of the temple (Bet Hamikdash) and unconditional love.

"It is not far away - it is in your mouth and in your heart to do it." Each of us can acquire a degree of 'unconditional love' in the appropriate contexts. As Rabbenu Bechaye says in his great work, The Duties of the Heart, "after the deeds the hearts are drawn," thus the practice of unconditional love develops and refines our self-awareness and enriches our Torah study. The encounter with the other helps us discover our unique inner essence, alongside the unique inner essence of the other. We can one make His will our will Through our encounter with the face of the other, with unconditional love, we can indeed learn to transform our will so that it is aligned with God's will.

There is an essential difference between the Torah of the Land of Israel and the Torah abroad. Over a decade long friendship and encounter with Dean Bye and studying together, I have been privileged to better understand our place as a people in the story of mankind as well as the place of the Temple and the commandments as keys to the redemption of all mankind. I believe that unconditional love is the condition and means to this redemption.

### **The beginning**

The story began when a Canadian Christian named Dean Bye had the opportunity to visit Mizpe Netofa, where I live, with a group of Christian tourists who he led on a tour



of Israel. They came to Netofa to see a family of immigrants from Canada, to experience the Aliyah experience with them. As part of the visit, they asked for an experiential tour of the Galilee that would include a meeting with residents. I was asked to act as translator at a meeting. Dean explained to us why they were seeking a personal encounter with Israelis who he said were fulfilling the words of the prophets in their lives:

- To repair their heritage - the resurrection of Israel proves that "Our ancestors possessed nothing but false gods" (according to Jeremiah 16:19), and they seek to reconnect with their authentic Hebrew roots, roots that continue to thrive only within us.
- To fulfill their destiny – they understand that the people of Israel were chosen to be a kingdom of priests in the end of days, but that also the nations have a clear destiny as mandated in the Bible. "Then they said among the nations" (Psalms 126:2). A joint fulfillment of the words of the prophets requires to dig deep into the biblical plan.
- To hear the word of God - God speaks to the fulfillers of His teachings through the Bible. They seek to hear His voice with the help of His Hebrew speaking priests, who are the keepers of ancient biblical heritage.

When Dean asked me if I would be willing to study Torah together, I was taken aback and skeptical - but I could not refuse. This was the first time I heard a Gentile speak of us as a kingdom of priests, with a calling towards all mankind. Was he perhaps a sophisticated missionary? Is Torah study with Gentiles permissible? How long can we ignore the elephants in the room, like their faith in Jesus as the only son of God? Was this kind of Christian an anomaly or perhaps a growing trend? And how can we help them if we do not understand our own role as a kingdom of priests? How can we help others to hear the word of God, when we ourselves do not hear His voice, understand our calling?

But I could not ignore the "donkey of your 'enemy' weighed down under its burden." Dean impressed me with his love of Israel and the Jewish people. He had devoted twenty years to working tirelessly for Aliyah (immigration) from the USSR and other countries. His love for Israel was unquestionable. Others warned me, repeating phrases they had learned, for example, that the love of the Gentile is conditional. But I liked Dean. It seemed that his love for Israel was truly unconditional, but still I was cautious and kept my guard.



At one point I visited Dean in Canada and spent Shabbat with him and about forty of his students. It was the Shabbat where we read the story of Balak and we studied the Torah together for about 15 hours. For the first time, I was inspired and stirred by a sense of calling to these people. I could not ignore it.

Together we studied controversial Talmudic sources regarding the Gentile who studies Torah, whether he must die or whether he is considered a high priest. We delved into sayings like, 'It is the natural law in the universe (Halacha) that Esau hates Jacob.' We sat in on conversations between Judah the Prince and Antoninus the Roman leader that occurred 2000 years ago but still feels fresh and relevant today. We focused on biblical figures who are not the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Though we talked about the 'elephants' in the room, and perhaps because we faced those elephants, the bond between us only grew stronger.

We both felt that the discourse strengthens us - each in his own faith; that our common study brings us closer to the place; that the verse 'Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace' (Proverbs 3:17) – is true.

A year later we felt the need to get out of our bubble and share with others. We gave a series of lessons together at the Limmud Conference in England. At the same time, we discovered that we are not alone. I initiated a meeting in Jerusalem, attended by a representative of the Bnei Noach tribunal of Rabbi Steinsaltz, a secular professor who was a chief scientist at the UN, an ultra-Orthodox rabbi who cultivates dialogue with Islam, and a large group of priests and a Muslim Imam from Germany named Halima.

We all met, and each participant presented a summary of his doctrine of peace. The meeting moved everyone to tears. On the eve of the meeting, Halima had a wonderful Shabbat at our home in Mitzpe Netofa. A group of friends from the community joined us for a lesson in which we learned that the story of the Binding of Isaac in the Quran did not necessarily contradict the Torah.

We decided to set up a virtual format that would allow this type of study to continue on a frequent and regular basis. Thus, eNoam was born: a small group of Jews and Christians from Canada, Israel and Africa, who meet every Sunday to study this week's Torah portion, for the past ten years.

Perhaps the best way to explain the excitement of this encounter is to highlight one

most important fact. Ours is not a one-way attempt to influence the other. Both sides in this ongoing dialogue are sincerely trying to understand our unique paths, to discover what God wants us to do in this world which He created, a world made up of different faiths and all kinds of people.

In a dialogue lasting over ten years, it was clear that this is not brainwashing or missionary activity, God forbid, but a dialogue of sincere people of faith seeking to do fulfill the words of the living Torah, both as Jews and Christians.

### **What is baseless hatred and unconditional love? About the serpent's poison and the 'Zero Sum Game'**

Baseless hatred, like a virus, endangers the whole world because it is contagious. The contagion of hatred is exponential, a pandemic which endangers the entire world. An example of this can be seen in the narrative of the destruction of the Second Temple described in the Babylonian Talmud. A chain of baseless hatred destroyed the Second Temple. The last link in this story is surprising, because God, as it were, continues the chain of baseless hatred when He promises to take revenge on Edom for the destruction of Jerusalem. The Edomite Emperor Nero, who perceives the contagious nature of the chain meets a young Jewish boy ('And I gave my vengeance on the red one (Edom) by the hand of the people of Israel' - Ezekiel 25:14).

Dean Bye taught me a great lesson in humility and unconditional love. Alongside joint projects with the Jewish Agency, Dean undertook to re-educate his Christian brethren regarding their attitude toward the people of Israel, its teachings and their role. Christian volunteers from fifty countries on five continents come to their local base in Kibbutz Beit Zera. He educates all of them to love the people of Israel unconditionally. They are in principle against missionary work. They want Jews to be Jews and Christians to be Christians, each with their own unique role and calling, much like an orchestra has different instruments with different functions. Dean speaks often as needing to know his part, his lines, so to speak, in the play so that he reads the Bible and knows the lines for his part. Each actor in this divine play has a role and his part to play if the work is to succeed. No one is threatened by the other.

In the last two years, Dean has been recognized for his work by a growing variety of great rabbis, but for decades he has acted humbly and tirelessly despite a suspicious and hostile attitude of almost everyone, Jews and Christians alike. There is no doubt that his love of Israel is unconditional, often unfortunately unappreciated.

The temple will be built from such unconditional love. Prof. Adam Grant's research on altruistic giving shows that unconditional love is a supreme value in seventy countries. Every mentally healthy person seeks destiny and meaning and giving gives such meaning. The main barrier to unconditional love is a 'zero-sum game' consciousness,

the belief that what another receives is at our expense. In our terms, the main barrier to world peace since the expulsion from heaven is, in Rabbinic language, the filth of the serpent, which gives rise to this mode of thinking.

Man was created in a reality of abundance and intimacy - God walks within the garden, and man is naked without shame. The serpent within us brings enmity and competition into the world (Genesis 3:5), a consciousness that motivates us to feel threatened by the Creator and His creatures. It is not surprising, therefore, that the brain stem, which protects us with involuntary reactions such as Fight or Flight, is called the reptilian or lizard brain.

This part of the brain protects us as part of the survival developmental process and therefore is an important part of nature - but if one stays at that stage, the next stage of development is delayed. So too in the development of the world, led by God and mankind - a world in which grace will be built (Psalms 89:3).

If only we listened to the voice of God instead of to that of the serpent, what a world that would be! The only way to do this is unconditional love, which encourages partnership instead of competition, mutual family responsibility instead of rivalry. The promised result in the Torah: abundance, freedom and endless peace, instead of 'By the sweat of your brow you will eat bread " and "You shall live by the sword."

The encounters with Dean, Halima and others have proven to me how a change of consciousness can break the chains of baseless hatred that drag us into exile, war, famine, and plague. These encounters give our existence the purpose and meaning we all long for. Because unconditional love is inherent in us, the change in our mode of thinking is not only possible but can happen relatively quickly and easily.

I could not even imagine such conclusions before I experienced it myself. It turns out that even in a self-focused generation, such viral unconditional love is possible since meaningful relationships and the sense of purpose and meaning is so necessary for all of us.

### **Torah of the Land of Israel and Torah Abroad**

In Shavuot 5779 (2009) we invited to our house, for a long weekend of Tikkun Shavuot and Shabbat night, 17 Christians from four continents - about half from Africa, about a third of them influential priests. For most Christians it was a first holiday/Shabbat experience with observant Jews. At the beginning of the gathering they were embarrassed, with a degree of mixed fear and generosity, but at the end of the Sabbath, everyone testified that the meeting fundamentally changed their attitude toward the Jews, the Covenant of Israel, and our Torah. As a result of the gathering, they came to conclusion that it is not enough to support Israel (Blessed are those who

bless you) and with some inspiration from 'Start-up Nation' they sought to learn Torah from Jews on a regular basis, and to receive from this Torah everything that was relevant to them as a way of life.

The Shavuot "Pentecost" 5779-2009 gathering demonstrated to me how the Torah of Israel can become an engine of blessing and peace in the world, in ways I could not imagine. I saw how much we must study and teach Torah in a way that is more relevant to nations and ourselves. Moreover, the prophet tells us that the day will come when we will all know how to teach and how to learn the way of God - to do righteousness and justice, in a way that illuminates the whole world with pleasantness and peace.

The nature of the Torah of the Land of Israel can be learned from the teachings of Baal HaSulam and Rabbi Kook. According to the Baal HaSulam, the name "Israel" means "that he has a direct will to God, meaning, that he has no desires of self-love, but of the love of others." The purpose of the people of Israel is to instill this consciousness in the whole world: The Israeli nation has been established as a kind of transition, through which the sparks of purification to all of mankind in the whole world until they develop and come to the point where they can understand the peace and serenity of others.

Rabbi Kook wrote similar things: 'the last purpose is not a definition of national unity alone, but is the ambition to unite all those in the world into one family .... Out of these things we see that God has made us a heart to the world in which people give up self-love and choose out of their own free will to love others. We must be aware that there are shortcomings in the balance of private love in 'limited nationality,' as it reflects the filth of the snake from which we must abstain. In order to fulfill our destiny as a kingdom of priests, we are required to elevate the limited nationalism to a place where there is unconditional love for all mankind.'

Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, Baal HaSulam, speaks of Israel and the nations as two facets that are integrated within each of us: the Israeli facet within us is all love and free giving for the sake of God's unity in the world. This facet prevents spiritual purification in the whole human race, which aims to demonstrate to the eyes of all the advantage of 'the pleasantness and serenity that lies at the core of the love of others.' Israel and the nations in its most inner meaning is also a metaphor for aspects of human nature within each human being.

The Torah of the Land of Israel cannot exist under the ruling of the filth of the serpent. Therefore, when Israel is in exile, they have the doctrine of foreign life that helps them survive - but at the cost of division, which we often experience today. But we cannot let the Torah of the exile and its mentality perpetuate the 'Sum Zero game' mindset even in the land of Israel. This consciousness is not suitable for Zion and the Temple, whose purpose is to reconcile and unite.

A profound change of consciousness is needed to move from an exile mentality to the Torah of Eretz Yisrael. The Talmud tells of Rabbis in the Diaspora who fasted for many days before immigrating to Eretz Yisrael. They needed to unlearn their exile consciousness in order to cultivate the unconditional love needed to fulfill their destiny.

The Torah of the Land of Israel today requires an abundance mentality, one that is a blessing for the whole world. This requires strong hearts. The doctrine of the Land of Israel cannot exist and develop without unconditional love for the whole world.

## **Redemption and change of consciousness**

It follows, therefore, that the key to the redemption of creation is a change of consciousness. We must believe, take in, and demonstrate that a significant core of loving others is more helpful, blessed, and powerful than self-love.

Such a change of consciousness is extremely challenging. Personally, it has taken me and my friends years to digest and internalize the worldview of the ladder owner about turning the desire to have a conduit of influence into all of our circles, from the most intimate circles of relationships and family, to community circles. When the Jewish Agency wanted to pilot a community Aliyah absorption program in our community, we stepped up to the challenge. Suddenly Dean came, and our eyes were opened to the possibility that we have responsibilities beyond the borders of the State of Israel and those who return to it.

In order to be relevant to the generations that lived in the consciousness of 'zero sum game,' sages limited the commandment 'and you loved the foreigner' to the inhabitants of justice who join the people of Israel. But the simple rationale of 'because you lived in the land of Egypt' indicates that the 26 commandments of the foreigner are intended for every member of a nation who wishes to be enveloped in the shadow of Shechinah - among his priests.

Ezekiel also foretells this, by allocating lands to those living in the tribal lands, and Isaiah's prophecy according to which "I will also take them from the priests to the Levites, said the Lord," (Isaiah 61:21) was explicitly stated about the Gentiles, and was ruled as a Halacha by Rambam at the end of the Laws of Shmita and Yovel.

The supreme root of unconditional love is inherent in every human being, because in His image God created us all. The root of the love of others is in the love of God found in every person. There is an essential connection between unconditional love and the temple in which every male is commanded to appear before God three times a year - that is, His image will be visible to all. Baseless hatred, on the other hand, means the disappearance of the image of another - and then there is no value to the temple. Unconditional love renews the vitality of the temple as a meeting between all who seek

to discover the divine image within them.

There is now a broad consensus on the need for a consciousness change. At a recent meeting attended by a highly respected representative of rabbis, it was agreed that Israel must free itself from the survival mentality and begin to think of our purpose in the world as a light to the nations. The current generation is not content with a narrow national identity; it seeks an identity that will enable connection to the whole world with broad horizons. Survival consciousness cannot supply this.

The process of mutual purification obliges us all. When studying Torah together in the right way, the need for exclusivity and the mentality of being 'your only son whom you loved' diminishes on all sides.

The serpent's filth creates imaginary conflicts that are perceived as existential on either side. When you are freed of that, you discover that there is no existential need for superiority and exclusivity, that this need impairs the ability to fit into the prophetic outline for a worldwide divine abundance. Instead of "only son" there is a loving family with mutual responsibility, without obscuring the uniqueness of each family member. Instead of one blessing there is a special blessing for each; instead of an exclusive outline for exclusive redemption, there is an outline for the redemption of all mankind.

### A practical plan for spreading eNoam around the world

In the last years, when we felt more mature, our eNoam organization has developed a virtual format and platform that aims to enable, share and encourage groups that seek to bring about such a change of consciousness in the world. We began by cultivating practical, enjoyable, ongoing, and expanding cooperation between Jews and Christians and between Israel and the Diaspora, in repairing the world according to the Bible we all share. The format includes four common workspaces, with an emphasis on Together:

- Study Together - Over the past ten years we have met about five hundred times, and in each meeting, we have been rewarded with "How sweet are Your words to my taste, *Sweeter* than honey to my mouth!" (Psalms 119:103) In order to expand the circle of participants, we will soon record taped study series with forums for ongoing feedback and discourse.

- Serve Together – Joint Social Volunteering - with initial emphasis on assisting with Aliyah and volunteering at the 'Doing Good' organization, by having mixed groups of Israelis and people from the nations, in Israel and the diaspora, in partnership. To advance joint projects around the Shemita and Africa.



- Scout/Walk/Tour Together - We have developed an application that allows participants in Israel and abroad to travel together throughout the Land of Israel, while performing in-depth missions - a kind of 'treasure hunt'. Later on, we will also add in Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), to create a grid of heritage sites with content that will allow participants in Israel, the Diaspora and nations to experience the Land of Israel and its north together.

- Sing Together - We held joint singing sessions in Israel and the diaspora, including praise sessions in synagogues on holidays, in preparation for "The houses of a house of prayer will be called for all the nations." This activity will also take place in the future in Virtual and augmented reality.

The guideline in all activities is:

He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; And what does the Lord require of you, But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?'

(Micah 6:8).

The good God demands that we humble the face of our private God as a people. So also in: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one" - God is our private God, and also the God who unites all of humanity.

Hundreds of participants in these activities experienced how much the shared learning united us instead of separating, and even evoked in us unconditional love from finding the grace in the other. How 'Walk humbly with your God' allowed us to focus on the revelation of God in the world, expressed in each of the participants. Veteran participants found that the format allows them to clarify their relationship with God in the presence of a Hebrew priest, with each side being careful about 'Cursed *is* the one who moves his neighbor's landmark.'

Of course, there are also Christians who do all of the above for their own redemptive outline, which does not match ours. But we have often found one real and in-depth pleasant encounter enough to lead them to a straight path of partnership in our outline. Our purpose and stage are to allow meaningful and varied encounters. And fluent for all, to allow each member of the nations to locate the nature of the encounters suitable for him, and to assist him in finding his way in his personal journey.

## **A concluding look**

The corona lockdown imposed this year on Sukkot prevented the nations from attending

the parade in Jerusalem, so we deployed a virtual peace tent and invited friends to an online gathering. It was the first public study meeting for us which was attended by about sixty Jews and Christians - about half of them new faces. 'Why did you come?' we asked, and the answers were enlightening - feel free to watch.

Type in: <https://youtu.be/qgJFh4HBSZA>

Our audio reading blessings open with "You shall light a New Light on Zion," followed by "Great Love, Our Love," and "The Lord our God, the One God, the Redeemer of Israel," and in the evening also: "And spread over us the Tabernacle of Your Peace." I think there is a clear outline here: an expectation of a new light, which evokes a contagious love that turns our private God into a God who unites everyone. Twice a day we declare that God loves us, and we are called to reciprocity: to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. And the promised result: redemption and peace-spreading for all who enter His sukkah together.

My late father, may his memory be a blessing, taught that the main message may be sought in the center of a book (as in Kohelet). Hence, the story of the blessings of the Shema reading begins and ends with unconditional love - God's unconditional love for us requires mutual love towards Him and towards every person who shines in His image.

Therefore, the nations are all invited to enter the same peace tabernacle, and their number is growing today. Every Sukkot we bind the four species together as a sign of our commitment to unite as one man in one heart with joy - regardless of taste or smell. Throughout the holiday we rock this togetherness to all winds, heaven, and earth - perhaps a hint that the creation and dissemination of this togetherness requires a serious shaking of all of us. We turn an altar to lower walls because God grows salvation - that is, the above process is supposed to be organic and gradual. The prophet describes this vision in the name of God armies, because the desire to integrate must be mass.

The eNoam experiment taught me that such an outline is possible - if we only believe in it and ourselves, if only we turn to the essence of the book of human history is that 'on the day God created man, in the image of God made him' (Genesis 5:1), which is indeed a greater rule than love thy neighbor, because it expresses the faith of the Creator in the aspiration of all mankind to discover and cultivate the loving divine figure planted within him. It turns out that indeed it is up to me.

We have experienced in practice how each of us can discover the depth and width of the unconditional love inherent in it. Although the work is great, and we do not have to finish the work - but we are not free of it. In the coming year, eNoam plans to focus on fostering inter-sectoral programs of volunteering, travel and singing in local schools in

Israel. Continuation programs will allow those interested to cooperate with Jewish schools in the diaspora, and with schools from the nations in Israel and around the world. The purpose of the eNoam platform is to enable everyone to contribute to the process in a space that suits them.

During the experiment I felt how many commandments suddenly took on additional dimensions connected to free will and choice. The Torah commandments became a blueprint for the fulfillment of our destiny as a kingdom of priests for the whole world.

According to Rabbi Kook, as stated, the trend of Israel and the Temple is 'to unite everyone in the world into one family.' The experiment showed us how much the destiny of kingdom of priests and holy nation is relevant and possible. When the nations of the world are interested in the commandments we are following, deeds that we are used to suddenly receive further meanings with a dimension of holiness.

We will end with the concluding blessing of our prayer, the blessing of peace: 'Peace be upon us and upon all Israel with you. We have blessed our Father all with one another in the light of Your face. For in the light of Your face You have given us the doctrine of life and the love of grace and charity and blessing and mercy and life and peace.'

God gives us a clear goal: And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' Our family circles must finally contain the whole world. 'These *are* the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.'