# 5 Ways the Torah Trains Us to Love Our Enemies

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You're driving down a highway and see a car broken down on the shoulder. As you slow, you recognize the vehicle. It belongs to the colleague who undermined your project last quarter, the one who took credit for your work in front of the entire team. You remember the sting of that meeting, the way your stomach dropped when you realized what was happening. The instinct is immediate: keep driving. At best you feel indifference. At worst, a flicker of satisfaction at their misfortune, a quiet sense that they deserve this small humiliation. Someone else can stop.

Parshat Mishpatim intervenes at exactly this moment. The location of the intervention matters. The command appears in what scholars call the Torah's "civil code," surrounded by laws about damages and court procedure, embedded among practical regulations rather than lofty declarations of holiness. "If you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping him, you shall surely help him."

The verse does something remarkable in a single breath. It acknowledges your desire to look away. It names the relationship as adversarial. It even uses that phrase "you would refrain," as if the Torah can see your foot hovering over the accelerator, ready to speed past. And then it asks you to stop anyway. By placing this emotional demand alongside property laws, the Torah suggests that a functioning society requires more than legal compliance. It requires people capable of overcoming personal animosity when the situation demands it.

But what does it actually take to become that kind of person? And what happens to us when we force ourselves to act against every instinct telling us to keep driving?

**1. The Priority of the Unloved**

You're walking down a road and you see two animals struggling under their loads. One belongs to your closest friend. The other belongs to someone who wronged you. Maybe deeply, maybe recently, maybe in a way that still stings when you let yourself think about it. Every instinct says to help your friend first. The relationship is warmer. The gratitude will be genuine. And frankly, why would you extend yourself for someone who hurt you?

The Talmud rules otherwise. If you encounter both situations at once, you help the enemy first. The reasoning the Gemara gives is striking: *k'dei lachof et yitzro*, to subdue the inclination. The primary concern here isn't the donkey. The donkey will be helped either way. The question is what happens inside you during the helping. Will you remain someone whose resentments call the shots? Or will you become capable of overriding them when something more important is at stake?

This tells us something about what the Torah thinks law is actually for. The commandment in Exodus 23:4-5 doesn't pretend hatred is absent. The text explicitly names the other person *sona'acha*, your enemy. Jewish law isn't asking us to deny what we feel or to pretend we've achieved some spiritual equanimity we haven't actually reached. It's asking us to act despite the feeling. The feelings are acknowledged; they just don't get to be in charge.

Jonathan Haidt's metaphor in *The Righteous Mind* captures this well: The conscious mind is a rider sitting atop an elephant of automatic emotional response. When you see your enemy's car broken down, the elephant leans away hard. The rider might know better, but the elephant is so much bigger. What the halachic system does, through repeated practice, is strengthen the rider.

This is what Dr. Joshua Coleman gets at when he talks about estrangement. The gravitational pull away from someone who hurt us is real, and pretending otherwise helps no one. What the tradition asks is not that we stop feeling the pull but that we walk toward them anyway, trusting that something happens in the walking, something we couldn't manufacture by waiting for our feelings to change first.

There's a quiet radicalism here. The Torah doesn't promise that helping your enemy will feel good, or that reconciliation will follow, or even that your enemy will notice what it cost you. It simply insists that you are not the person your resentments would make you, and the only way to prove that is to act as if it's true.

**2. Action Precedes Emotion**

We carry around a quietly destructive assumption about how virtue works. We believe we need to feel compassion before we can act compassionately. First comes the warm feeling in the chest, and only then does kind behavior follow. If we don't feel it, wouldn't acting kindly be hypocritical?

The Torah inverts this completely. The Hebrew of Exodus 23:5 uses an emphatic construction, *azov ta'azov*, you shall surely help. The doubling of the verb conveys urgency and absoluteness. This isn't a suggestion contingent on your emotional state. It's a command that operates regardless of how you feel about the person standing in front of you, sweating and frustrated beside their struggling animal.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* articulates a principle that runs throughout his understanding of mitzvot: *acharei ha'peulot nimshachim ha'levavot*, our hearts follow our actions. We shape our character not primarily through feeling the right things but through doing the right things repeatedly until the feelings catch up. A person who waits to feel generous before giving tzedakah may wait forever. A person who gives regularly, even reluctantly at first, gradually becomes generous. The physical motion generates the emotion it appears to require.

Modern psychology took centuries to rediscover what the *Chinuch* knew. Behavioral activation, a therapeutic approach documented in Martell and colleagues' guide, works with depressed patients on this insight. The old assumption was that we fix thinking first, then behavior follows. Behavioral activation flips this. Patients engage in meaningful activities before feeling motivated. The mood change follows the action.

Dr. Moshe Koppel describes halacha as a language of action, a system where the doing constitutes the identity. You become a person of compassion not by cultivating compassionate feelings in meditation but by performing compassionate acts until they become second nature, until they become who you are. Maimonides codifies this in practical terms: When faced with both a friend's animal and an enemy's animal requiring assistance, you must help the enemy first, precisely to subdue the inclination that would have you choose comfort over growth.

There's something liberating in this, if we let it sink in. We don't have to wait until we're ready. We don't have to resolve our ambivalence before we act. The tradition seems to understand that waiting for emotional readiness is often just a sophisticated form of avoidance, and that the readiness we're waiting for may only come, if it comes at all, on the other side of the action we've been postponing.

**3. The Power of Shared Burden**

There's a small word in the verse that changes everything. The command is to help *immo*, meaning with him, not for him. You cannot call a tow truck for your enemy and drive away feeling virtuous. You cannot pay someone else to do the work while you maintain your distance. You must get your hands dirty alongside the person you'd rather avoid, working shoulder to shoulder, grunting under the same weight, sweating in the same sun.

The Talmud's discussion zeroes in on this word. The owner of the struggling animal cannot sit down and say, "The mitzvah is upon you; do the work yourself." He must participate. The rabbis understood that helping someone is one thing; working alongside them, sharing the strain and the relief when the load finally settles, is something else entirely. You cannot outsource reconciliation. The healing happens in the shared effort.

The famous Robbers Cave experiment helps explain why shared effort has this power. Muzafer Sherif brought two groups of boys to a summer camp and let intense rivalry develop. When researchers tried to reduce hostility through pleasant shared activities, the conflict actually intensified. The boys threw food at each other. What finally worked was something Sherif called superordinate goals. The camp's water supply broke, and both groups had to work together to fix it. A truck got stuck and required everyone's strength to free it. In these moments of necessary cooperation, the animosity began to dissolve. The boys couldn't maintain their hatred while depending on each other.

The donkey provides exactly this kind of superordinate goal. Eitan Hersh observed that bridging divides requires shared projects and joint effort toward goals that matter to both parties, not just dialogue or good intentions. The Torah understood this long before the research confirmed it.

And maybe this is why the verse specifies *immo* so carefully. The Torah isn't interested in you performing a mitzvah while keeping your enemy at arm's length. It's engineering an encounter. Two people, one burden, no way to help without getting close. Whatever happens between you and your enemy in that moment of shared strain, the Torah seems to trust that it will be harder to hate someone after you've lifted something heavy together.

**4. The Internal Enemy**

The command to help the donkey of one who hates you forces us to examine what that hatred does to us internally. Why does animosity toward certain people stick so persistently? You've probably noticed this in yourself. Years pass. Circumstances change. The mention of a certain name still brings a flush of irritation. The person we resent may have moved on entirely, but they continue to take up space in our minds, consuming emotional resources we could spend elsewhere, on people we actually love, on projects that actually matter.

Often hatred functions as a form of attachment. We are bound to the person we despise by the very energy we invest in disliking them. They live rent-free in our heads, and we keep renewing the lease.

Traditional rabbinic teaching complicates this picture. Not all negative feelings toward others are baseless or forbidden. If you witnessed someone commit a genuine wrong, you may have legitimate grounds for your animosity. The Talmud explores scenarios where hatred has valid origins. This raises a harder question: If there are cases where animosity is justified, why does the obligation to help remain? The resolution that emerges from the tradition suggests that even when negative feelings have valid origins, the Torah doesn't want them to harden into permanent rupture. You might be right to be angry. You're still not permitted to let that anger calcify into the kind of person you become.

Gayle Kirschenbaum shares her experience of forgiving an abusive parent, a journey that took decades and extraordinary courage. The work of releasing resentment, she explains, is often more about freeing yourself than exonerating the other person. When we refuse to help, when we drive past the broken-down car with that small bitter satisfaction, we remain captive to our own animosity. The grudge we carry harms us more than it could ever harm them.

This isn't easy to accept, especially when the hurt runs deep. Research by Roy Baumeister demonstrates that our capacity to override automatic impulses operates like a muscle, one that can be exhausted. It costs something real. The Torah asks us to spend this expensive energy not to benefit our adversary but to liberate ourselves.

A necessary caveat: The obligation does not extend to situations of genuine danger. The principle of *pikuach nefesh*, as codified in *Shulchan Aruch*, takes precedence. You are never required to place yourself in harm's way.

But for the ordinary enemies most of us accumulate, the colleague who wronged us, the family member who hurt us in a way we haven't let go of, the former friend we haven't spoken to in years, the Torah's guidance stands. And perhaps what it's really asking is whether we want to be free. The resentment feels like armor, but it's actually a chain. The person who hurt us holds one end, and we've been gripping the other so tightly we forgot we could let go.

**5. From Enemy to Brother**

Something remarkable happens between Exodus and Deuteronomy. The same law appears in both books, but with a change in language worth pausing over.

In Exodus, the text speaks of *sona'acha*, your enemy. In Deuteronomy 22:1-4, the parallel passage uses familial language, *achicha*, your brother. The obligation is identical: Help the fallen animal. But the relationship has been renamed.

The Sifrei Devarim 225 explains that Exodus uses "enemy" to teach that you must help even against your own inclination. But traditional commentators have drawn a further inference: The relationship itself may change through repeated acts of assistance. The enemy in Exodus becomes the brother in Deuteronomy, not through a change of heart that precedes action, but through the accumulated weight of shared labor.

The psychological mechanism at work here has a name: the Benjamin Franklin effect. Franklin noticed something counterintuitive when a political rival became friendly after Franklin asked to borrow a rare book from his library. Research by Jecker and Landy confirmed the finding: doing a favor for someone makes you like them more. Our minds strive for consistency. We cannot easily hate someone we just helped, so we adjust our attitude to match our action.

The Torah's vision here is hopeful, but we should be honest about its limits. Sometimes the enemy remains an enemy. Sometimes you help someone and they don't become your brother; they remain the person who wronged you, now with a functional donkey. The tradition doesn't promise transformation as a guaranteed outcome. What it promises, perhaps, is that you won't be the obstacle to transformation. You will have done your part. Whether they meet you halfway is not yours to control.

And yet. The shared sweat of lifting a fallen burden does accomplish something that arguments and apologies cannot. The word for enemy in Exodus was never meant to be permanent. It names where we start, not where we have to stay. Whether we arrive at brotherhood depends on more than our own efforts, but we'll never know what's possible if we keep driving past.

### Questions for Reflection

1. **Think of a relationship in your life that is currently strained. What would be the modern equivalent of helping with their donkey, a concrete, shared task rather than an abstract gesture of goodwill?**
2. **The Talmud prioritizes helping an enemy over a friend specifically to subdue the inclination. Where in your life are you choosing the comfort of helping people who already like you over the harder work of helping those who don't?**
3. **When have you experienced helping someone you resented and found your feelings shift afterward? When have you helped and found that nothing changed? What do you make of the difference?**

*This project is made possible with support from the Simchat Torah Challenge and UJA-Federation of New York. Learn more about the Simchat Torah Challenge and get involved at their website.*