

Better Than the Day of Birth: Reflecting on David Flusser's Interpretation of the Love Commandment on the 25th Anniversary of His Passing

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9 October 2025

<https://www.jerusalemerspective.com/31263/>

In my own small archive of memories of David Flusser I remember once coming to his modest Jerusalem home for a lesson, not realizing that David was sitting Shiv'a (i.e., he was in mourning) for his brother who had just passed away. When I arrived David stood up and said to those who had come to comfort him: "My student has arrived. Now I will teach him!" In light of this memory I can think of no better way to honor the memory of David—*l'ilui neshama* ("for the elevation of his soul")—than to reflect on some of his most important teaching with you.

David Flusser left this world on September 15, 2000, which also happened to be his 83rd birthday. Friends called to wish him a happy birthday, only to learn that it had become the day of his passing. The coincidence of David's birth and death taking place on the same day of the year calls to mind a saying of Kohelet: *The day of death is better than the day of birth* (Eccl. 7:1).

A [midrash](#) on these words from Kohelet reads:

הַכָּתוּב: טוֹב שֵׁם מִשְׁמֶן טוֹב יוֹם הַמָּוֶת מִיּוֹם הַיּוֹלָדוֹ (קהלת ז, א). אָמְרוּ לְשִׁלְמָה, מֵהוּ טוֹב

שם משמן טוב. אמר להם: בשעה שאדם נולד, אין הכל יודעין מי הוא. נפטר בשם טוב, משפיע מעשים טובים, באין ישראל מטפלין עמו, עושין עמו גמילות חסד. מכריזין שבחם ואומרים: פלוני זה כמה צדקות כמה תורה כמה מצות עשה, משפכו תהא עם הצדיקים.

Scripture states elsewhere: *A good name is better than precious oil; and the day of death than the day of one's birth (Eccles. 7:1)*. They asked Solomon: Why is a good name better than precious oil? He replied: When a man is born, no one knows what he will become, but when he leaves this world with a good name, good deeds become abundant because of him. The Israelites attend him, they perform deeds of charity, they extol him with praises, and they exclaim: "How righteous was so-and-so, and how wholeheartedly he fulfilled the law and performed good deeds." May his sleep be with the righteous. (Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu, The End of Parashah *Ki Tissa Vayakhel*, Siman 1; trans. Samuel A. Berman)^[1]

Good deeds throughout life "anoint" a person's name with honor—like the fine olive oil once used to consecrate Aaron and his descendants for service to God.

Another version of this midrash teaches that the truest good deeds are done quietly by the humble, hidden in the flow of daily life. Only after such people are gone do we feel how deeply their acts shaped our world. As we notice the beauty of daylight only when night surrounds us, so too we grasp the true worth of a loved one only when their light is no longer with us.

ויום המות מיום הולדו (קהלת שם), יום מיתתו של אדם, מיום שנולד בו, למה ביום שנולד בו אין אדם יודע אם מעשיו יפים אם לא אבל כשהוא מת הוא מודיע מעשיו לבריות.

(**Ecc. 7:1**, cont.): AND THE DAY OF DEATH THAN THE DAY OF ONE'S BIRTH, (i.e.) the day of one's death <is better> than the day on which one was born. Why? On the day on which one is born, no one knows whether his deeds will be worthy or not; but when he dies, he makes known his deeds to humankind.

ויום המות מיום הולדו. אמר ר' לוי למה הדבר דומה לשתי ספינות שהיו בים מלאות סחורה, אחת באה ואחת הולכת, אחת שהיתה באה היו מקלסין אותה, עמדו להם מיהים, אמרו למה אתם מקלסים לזו, ואין אתם מקלסים לזו, אמרו להם לזו שבאת אנו מקלסין, כי אנו יודעים שהלכה בשלום ובאה בשלום, אבל זו אין אנו יודעים מה היא עתידה לעשות, כך כשאדם נולד, אין בני אדם מכירין מעשיו, כשנפטר מן העולם הן יודעים מה

(**Eccl. 7:1:**) AND THE DAY OF DEATH THAN THE DAY OF ONE'S BIRTH. R. Levi said: To what is the matter comparable? To two ships which were at sea full of merchandise. One was coming and the other was going. The one which was coming they praised. <Those who> stood by them were amazed. They said: Why are you praising this one when you do not praise the other one. They said to them: We praise this one which came back, because we know that it went away safely and came back safely; but as for the other one, we do not know what it is going to do. Likewise, when someone is born, no child of Adam knows about his <future> deeds. When he has departed from the world they do know what his deeds were. Ergo: AND THE DAY OF DEATH THAN THE DAY OF ONE'S BIRTH. (Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Vayakhel 1; trans. John T. Townsend, 1989)^[2]

In this midrash, a life well-lived is like a ship returning safely to port, its hold full of precious cargo. Only then can we truly celebrate, because we see the journey is complete and the treasures have arrived. The ship just setting out, like a newborn child, is still a mystery—its fate unknown, its cargo untested. Death, then, is not an end but the safe arrival of the voyage—for those who can gratefully receive the legacy of their loved one's deeds, and go on to continue and multiply them.

One of the most remarkable aspects of David Flusser's legacy that I would like to enlarge upon is his expansive application of the Great Principle of the Torah, which is classically stated as follows:

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ, זֶה כָּלֵל גָּדוֹל בַּתּוֹרָה

And you shall love your neighbor as yourself—for he is as you are. This is an all-embracing principle of the Torah. (Sifra, *Kedoshim* 4:12)

Flusser, however, paraphrased the commandment as follows: וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ שֶׁהוּא כָמוֹךָ ("And you shall love your neighbor because he is as you are"). To understand why Flusser choose to emphasize the nuance שֶׁהוּא כָמוֹךָ ("for he is as you are"), we need to return to the full passage in the tannaitic midrash

Sifra:

לא תקם ולא תטר את בני עמך—נוקם אתה ונוטר לעכו"ם. ואהבת לרעך כמוך—רבי עקיבא אומר זה כלל גדול בתורה. בן עזאי אומר זה ספר תולדות אדם—זה כלל גדול מזה

“You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the children of your people”: You may take revenge of and bear a grudge against others (idolators). “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself”: R. Akiva says: This is an all-embracing principle in the Torah. Ben Azzai says: (Bereshith 5:1) “This is the numeration of the generations of Adam”—This is an even greater principle. (Sifra, *Kedoshim*, Chapter 4:12)^[3]

In this passage we encounter varying approaches to how “love your neighbor” is to be interpreted. Since “your neighbor” in the second half of the commandment (Lev. 19:18) corresponds to “the children of your people” in the first half, the straightforward sense of the commandment could be taken quite literally: “You are obligated to love only your fellow Jews,” whereas with respect to idolaters one might deem it permissible to “take vengeance.” This approach is represented in the first anonymous opinion. Rabbi Akiva, however, chose to emphasize the second half of the verse, elevating it to “an all-embracing principle in the Torah.” Ben Azzai, on the other hand, wished to view even the command to love one’s neighbor through the lens of another all-embracing principle: that all human beings are essentially alike in their humanity.

Such a narrow reading of the love commandment as the one proposed in the anonymous opinion can lead to terrible consequences in the history of religious wars—both within Judaism itself and in the related religions of Christianity and Islam. I recall David Flusser explaining to us in a seminar what drives a religious sect that hates all who believe differently: “They are driven by a love born of hatred! They hate those who are unlike them—those outside their sect—so intensely that they even love one another.” I think this demonic “love woven from hatred” also makes the lives of the sect’s own

members unbearable: they continually suspect one another that someone is merely pretending to be a loyal member while in fact believing and thinking otherwise. When this syndrome affects a small group, it endangers those nearby; but when it involves millions, the whole world suffers.

David Flusser, who personally experienced the Nazis' antisemitic hatred in occupied Prague on the eve of the [Shoah](#), understood this all too well. I believe that Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai—two great sages of Israel—knew this as well, for their generation had endured the *ḥurban*—the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem. Therefore, Ben Azzai does not in fact reject Akiva's maxim; he clarifies it. He insists that the all-embracing principle must be interpreted through the lens of the fact that every human being belongs to the same family—descending from Adam and created by God, with Adam as His image. In this context, Ben Azzai's view highlights that all human beings—as sons and daughters of the first man, Adam—are brothers and sisters.

In the face of such human tragedies—when the very foundations of the soul are shaken and even the belief in the ontological God-likeness of the human being is tested—there is only one experiential answer: Deepen your love for your neighbor, for he, like you, was created out of divine love—*You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am YHVH* (Lev. 19:18).

Therefore, in view of David Flusser's interpretation of this verse, I see not so much a dispute between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ben Azzai, but rather an expansion of the commandment to love “the children of your people” so that it embraces all the “children of Adam.” For we are all brothers and sisters, sharing one common father, Adam, here on earth, and we are all created in the image and likeness of our Father in Heaven.

This is precisely where the exchange between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai

finds its resolution in the following mishnah:

לפיכך נברא אדם יחיד, ללמדך, שכל המאבד נפש אחת [מישראל], מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו אבד עולם מלא. וכל המקיים נפש אחת [מישראל], מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו קיים עולם מלא. ומפני שולם הבריות, שלא יאמר אדם לחברו אבא גדול מאביך.

Therefore, Adam the first man **was created alone, to teach you that** with regard to **anyone who destroys one soul [from the Jewish people, i.e., kills one Jew], the verse ascribes him blame as if he destroyed an entire world**, as Adam was one person, from whom the population of an entire world came forth. **And** conversely, **anyone who sustains one soul [from the Jewish people], the verse ascribes him credit as if he sustained an entire world**. The mishna cites another reason Adam the first man was created alone: **And** this was done **due to** the importance of maintaining **peace among people, so that one person will not say to another: My father, i.e., progenitor, is greater than your father**. (m. Sanh. 4:5).^[4]

I have placed the words “from the Jewish people,” which appear in Sefaria’s edition, in brackets because David Flusser once pointed out to us that there are manuscripts of the Mishnah in which this phrase does not appear. These variant readings of m. Sanh. 4:5 preserve the tension between two poles. In my judgment, the reading without the ethnonym—“whoever sustains a single soul is accounted as though he sustained an entire world”—is closer to the original thrust of the mishnah, since the mention of Adam naturally points to the idea of one soul from Adam, humanity’s common ancestor. This is reinforced by the continuation of the mishnah: “so that one person will not say to another: My father is greater than your father.” According to this logic, the sons and daughters of Israel are, first and foremost, sons and daughters of Adam. Variant manuscript readings of m. Sanh. 4:5—namely, with and without the ethnonym “of Israel” (מיִשְׂרָאֵל [*mi-yis-rā’ĒL*], which Sefaria rendered as “from the Jewish people”)—also preserve this tension between two poles: people’s responsibilities toward their own ethnic and/or religious community and toward all humankind.

How do we find balance between these two poles on this stormy ocean of

life? This is what I learned from David Flusser—to examine all sides of the dialogue between generations of teachers and students, to see the truth without regard for faces or languages, and thus to keep my moral compass aligned.

On this path, it was important for David Flusser to hear also the voice of one ancient pilgrim from Galilee to Jerusalem—Jesus, son of Joseph and Miriam. Jesus found a most elegant and active way to fulfill the Torah commandment to love one’s neighbor, which he illustrated in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

In Luke 10:25–37, an expert in the law asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Pointing him back to the Law, Jesus asks the Torah expert his opinion. The Torah expert cites Deut. 6:5 (“Love the Lord”) and Lev. 19:18 (“Love your neighbor”), but then presses: “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus answers with a story: a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked by robbers and left for dead. A priest, and likewise a Levite, also going down from Jerusalem,—presumably returning from Temple worship or pilgrimage—saw the man and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, traveling the same road, had compassion on the man, tended his wounds, brought him to an inn, and paid for his care. “Which of these three proved a neighbor?” Jesus asked. The Torah expert replied: “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus told him: “Go and do likewise.”

The point of Jesus’ parable stings: even after an intense religious experience in Jerusalem, the priest and the Levite failed to act, while the Samaritan defined “neighbor” by deeds of mercy.

The Levite and the Jewish priest, as well as the gravely wounded pilgrim, all fell under the active demand of the commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” On the other hand, the merciful action of the Samaritan who

rescued the Jewish pilgrim was not considered to be “one of the children of your people” (Lev. 19:18). But only the Samaritan correctly applied the term “neighbor” to the pilgrim who was left for dead. The Samaritans, too, preserve this commandment in the Samaritan Pentateuch. Perhaps it was this very commandment that moved the Samaritan in Jesus’ parable to rise above the age-old religious rivalry between Jews and Samaritans.^[5] Perhaps the parable itself may well have had a real-life event at its core.

I heard about a similar act of compassion between religious “rivals” from a Jewish man I met in Israel who had survived the Shoah. He was saved by Catholic nuns who sheltered him from the Gestapo in their convent for nine months—273 days—sharing his peril and risking their own lives. The Mother Superior decided to hide him after hearing the parable of the Good Samaritan read in her church.

In any case, Jesus transformed the ancient debate over “Who is my neighbor?”—whether it meant only the sons and daughters of Israel, or all the sons and daughters of Adam—from an intellectual argument into a matter of concrete moral action: “Go and do likewise.” He teaches that every person is summoned, in a sense, to become a co-worker with God in recognizing and treating the other as a neighbor through the active fulfillment of the commandment to love.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:43-48). In other words, whether the children of one people—or even of Adam—we are called to remember that, first and foremost, we are children of God.

Love in action transforms our world:

Ἔσεσθε οὖν ὑμεῖς τέλειοι ὡς ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τέλειός ἐστιν

Therefore, be complete [τέλειοι] (in love), as your heavenly Father is complete [τέλειός]. (Matt. 5:48)^[6]

Is this not the finest interpretation of Moses' command: to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your being, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18)?

I cannot help recalling David Flusser's favorite line from Avot de-Rabbi Natan; it underscores that love of neighbor is the foundation of all the commandments—without it, deeds lose their living meaning.

ר' שמעון בן אלעזר אומר בִּשְׁבוּעָה גְדוֹלָה נֶאֱמַר דָּבָר זֶה וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֵךְ כְּמוֹךְ אֲנִי יְהוָה בְּרַאֲתִיו אִם אַתָּה אוֹהֵב אֲנִי נֶאֱמָן לְשֵׁלֶם לְךָ שָׂכָר טוֹב וְאִם לֹא אֲנִי דִּין לְפָרוֹעַ

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: “This was stated as a great oath: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am YHVH.’ [God says:] ‘I created him; if you love him, I can be trusted to grant you a good reward; and if not, I am the Judge who will exact payment.’” (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, Version A, 16:4)

Such a way of living turns one's entire life into a school of learning ([bet midrash](#)) before the living God—a lifelong process of study that neither painful wounds nor even death can bring to an end. That death is neither the end of a person's good deeds nor of his teaching reminds me that according to *Peninei Halakhah*^[7] the day of a scholar's death can be cause for celebration for his disciples:

ולכן יום פטירת צדיק מן העולם הזה דומה לנישואין, שהוא זוכה באותו יום להתקשר באופן שלם עם השכינה, ונעשה מתורתו אור גדול בעולמות העליונים, ומתוך כך אף תלמידיו וממשיכיו שבעולם הזה יכולים להתקשר יותר אל עומק תורתו וסודותיו. ועל כן נהגו התלמידים העומדים על עומק העניין הזה לערוך הלילה ביום פטירת רבם הצדיק שגילה סודות התורה.

Therefore, the day that a righteous person dies is like a wedding, because on that day he can consummate his connection to the [Shekhinah](#), and his Torah becomes a great source of illumination in the supernal realms.

Consequently, his disciples and successors in this world can better connect to the depth of his Torah and esoteric teachings. Therefore, disciples who understand this deep idea customarily celebrate a *hilula*^[8] on the day their righteous master, who revealed the Torah's secrets, died. (*Peninei Halakhah*, Zemanim 5:2:5)^[9]

For me there is a special resonance in this text for my teacher David Flusser because he was born and passed away on the same day of the year. This unique coincidence allows me to regard the twenty-fifth anniversary of his passing not solely as a day of loss, but also as the day that gave him to the world. This anniversary of David Flusser's death marks the completion of his story and reveals the goodness of his name in all its fullness and radiance.

Notes

- [1] Text and translation according to https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma%2C_Vayakhel.1.3?lang=bi.
- [2] Text and translation according to https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma_Buber%2C_Vayakhel.1.3?lang=bi.
- [3] Translation according to <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/224482.21?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>.
- [4] Translation according to https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Sanhedrin.4.5?lang=bi&with=Commentary&lang2=en.
- [5] See John 4:20–24 for Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman about the proper place to worship God, and Luke 9:51–53 for the episode in which the Samaritans refused to receive Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem. See also Jonathan Ben-Dov, "An Altar on Mt Ebal or Mt Gerizim? — The Torah in the Sectarian Debate" [https://www.thetorah.com/article/an-altar-on-mt-ebal-or-mt-gerizim-the-torah-in-the-sectarian-debate?utm_source=chatgpt.com].
- [6] On the Hebraic background of this verse, Joshua N. Tilton, "Perfect Children," *WholeStones.org* (March 4, 2017) [<https://wholestones.org/>]

[7] *Peninei Halakhah* (“Pearls of Halakhah”), R. Eliezer Melamed — launched 1993; 22 vols.; online; Eng. trans. since 2014 (e.g., *Laws of Shabbat* Vol. 1, 2016).

[8] *Hilula* (Aram./Heb. הִלּוּלָא, “celebration”)—a joyful commemoration of a tzaddik’s *yahrzeit* (day of passing), marked with prayer, study, charity, and often pilgrimage to the grave; e.g., Lag BaOmer, the *hilula* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

[9] Text and translation according to https://www.sefaria.org/Peninei_Halakhah%2C_Zemanim.5.2.5.

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