

Parashat Eikev 5773, 2013:

Rabbi David Etengoff

*Understanding Ahavat Hashem (The Love of G-d)*

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The Torah obligation to love the Holy One blessed be He is stated nine different times in the *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (Five Books of the Torah). Quite intriguingly, every instance of this *mitzvah* is found in *Sefer Devarim* – including four separate occurrences in our *parasha*:

And now, O Israel, what does the L-rd, your G-d, demand of you? Only to fear the L-rd, your G-d, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, and to worship the L-rd, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul (10:12) [Therefore] you shall love the L-rd, your G-d, keep His charge, His statutes, His ordinances, and His commandments, all the days. (11:1) And it will be, if you hearken to My commandments that I command you this day to love the L-rd, your G-d, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul (11:13) For if you keep all these commandments which I command you to do them, to love the L-rd, your G-d, to walk in all His ways, and to cleave to Him (11:22) (These, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) codifies this commandment in the following formulation: “It is a *mitzvah* to love and fear this glorious and awesome G-d, as [Deuteronomy 6:5] states: ‘And you shall love G-d, your L-rd’ and, as [Deuteronomy 6:13] states: ‘Fear G-d, your L-rd.’” (*Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah* 2:1, this and all *Mishneh Torah* translations are by Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Many of us understand what it means to love a fellow human being. Yet, how can finite man learn to love infinite G-d? How can man begin to know Hashem, so that he may love

Him? These questions seem paradoxical in their very nature. Here, too, however, the Rambam provides a ready answer:

What is the path [to attain] love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [G-d's] great name, as David stated: "My soul thirsts for the L-rd, for the living G-d"[Psalms 42:3]. (Ibid. , 2:2)

In sum, by encountering and appreciating Nature in all of its myriad power and beauty, and by studying Hashem's holy Torah, man "will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [G-d's] great name."

To what extent ought we to "yearn with tremendous desire to know G-d's great name?"

Maimonides answers this question in prose worthy of the most inspired poet:

What is the proper [degree] of love? That a person should love G-d with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of G-d. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick. [A lovesick person's] thoughts are never diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her; when he sits down, when he gets up, when he eats and drinks. With an even greater [love], the love for G-d should be [implanted] in the hearts of those who love Him and are obsessed with Him at all times as we are commanded [Deuteronomy 6:5: "Love G-d...] with all your heart and with all soul." King Solomon suggested this concept [Song of Songs 2:5] when he stated, as a metaphor: "I am lovesick." [Indeed,] the totality of the Song of Songs is a parable describing [this love]. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 10:3, with my translation emendations to enhance readability)

To summarize the two key elements in the Rambam's presentation: "A person should love G-d with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of G-d," and man must be so obsessed with his love of the Almighty that his waking moments are dedicated solely to Him and recognition of His glory.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, while singularly influenced by the rationalism of the

Rambam, chose as well, to describe man's yearning for Hashem in Kabbalistic metaphors:

Man approaches God at a rapid pace, where all his being, beset by the torment of fiery longing, is tensed toward the encounter with his divine lover. He is swept away by the surge of his yearning and carried aloft to the Infinite. Man's being draws him with enchanted supernatural cords toward his God, who is the source of being. (*And From There You Shall Seek*, translation, Naomi Goldblum, page 69)

At this point we have:

- Established that *ahavat Hashem* is a *mitzvah m'doraita* (Torah obligation)
- Examined the affective and cognitive triggers that lead one to love G-d
- Demonstrated the unlimited desire and longing for Hashem that one is obligated to nurture within the deepest recesses of his being.

The key word and concept in the act of fulfilling *ahavat Hashem* is *ahavah* (love). Love, after all, is an emotion, and like all emotions, it is definitionally subjective in nature. If that is the case, are there means of expressing love for G-d that are universally accessible by all? Once again, Maimonides provides us with a practical guide for this perplexing question:

The Sages of the previous generations declared: Should one say: "I will study Torah in order that I become wealthy, in order that I be called a Rabbi, or in order that I receive reward in the world to come?" The Torah teaches [Deuteronomy 11:13]: "[If you are careful to observe My commandments...] to love G-d;" [implying] that all that you do should only be done out of love. The Sages also said: [Psalms 112:1 instructs:] "Desire His commandments greatly." [Desire His commandments] and not the reward [which comes from] His commandments. In a similar manner, the great Sages would command the more understanding and brilliant among their students in private: "Do not be like servants who serve their master [for the sake of receiving a reward]." Rather, since He is the Master, it is fitting to serve Him; i.e., serve [Him] out of love. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 10:4)

Herein the Rambam provides us with a clear roadmap for actualizing the commandment of *ahavat Hashem*. The essential point is clear: One is obligated to serve Hashem and

perform His *mitzvot* precisely because He, in His supernal wisdom, commanded us to do so. In other words, while all commandments surely have their reward, ideally one does not fulfill a *mitzvah* to receive the same – but instead seeks to demonstrate his love and affection for the Almighty purely by fulfilling His will.

The most famous verse pertaining to *ahavat Hashem*, “And you shall love the L-rd, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means,” does not appear in our *parasha*. Instead, it is found in Parashat Vaetchanan as the second verse of *Shema Yisrael*. Fascinatingly, Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Asher (1269-1340, known as “the Tur”) notes that the Hebrew word, “*v’ahavta*” (“and you shall love”) contains the same letters as “*ha’avot*” (“the Forefathers”). Furthermore, he demonstrates, via textual proofs, that loving Hashem “with all your heart” was uniquely fulfilled by Avraham, “with all your soul,” was preeminently realized by Yitzhak, and “with all your means,” was one of the hallmarks of our father, Yaakov. Therefore, if we strive to emulate the lives of Avraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah, we will surely be on the proper path of authentically fulfilling *ahavat Hashem*. With Hashem’s help may this be so. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here:  
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