

# For the Love of God—and Man

- Basil Herring.

Last week the Torah commanded us: And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. This week the Torah surrounds the love of God with rewards and punishments, inducements and sanctions, designed to “make love pay,” in a manner that is both pragmatic and material.

Today we will take a break from the headlines and current events. Instead we will speak of things more intimate, less ephemeral, more deeply personal. It is matters of the heart that I have in mind, or more precisely, the matter of love and of passion. But before anyone gets too excited at the prospect of a salacious sermon, let me hasten to set your mind at rest: it is not of romance or courtship between the sexes that I speak, but rather of endearment of a different kind and order—namely the love of, and passion for, God. And it is of that attachment of heart and mind that I would, by way of change, speak today. Of course it is not co-incidental that it is in our parshah that we find a particularly perplexing prescription regarding the love that the Jew ought to feel for God. Hence this subject, today.

Actually, the subject begins in last week’s parshah, with the statement that occurs in the first paragraph of the Shema, that Jewish credo that is the pillar of our faith: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” An imperative that is as familiar as it is absolute, and as well-known as it is unconditional—this verse obligates the Jew to love God without reservation, sans caveat, no strings attached. As recited every day by the Jew, that *ve’ahavta* makes no threats and promises nothing— it simply commands pure, unadulterated, selfless, love of God, to the point of being ready, ultimately, to sacrifice one’s life rather than serve or worship another being.

But today the Torah sings a different tune. For in this parshah, in enunciating what is the second paragraph of that same Shema, and in speaking of the love of God that is incumbent upon the Jew, the Torah introduces something else entirely. Now it surrounds the love of God with rewards and punishments, inducements and sanctions, designed to “make love pay,” in a manner that is both pragmatic and material. Thus, to paraphrase, the Torah in our parshah says: If you will listen to my commandments which I command you today to love the Lord your God and serve him with all your heart and all your soul, I will give the rain of your land in its season, that you may gather in your crops and your harvests and your animal feed, so that you shall eat and be satiated. Deut. 11:13-17

What a change and transformation! From the first paragraph with its sublime charge to aspire to unconditional love, to selfless and principled devotion to the divine, we now find ourselves reduced, or perhaps seduced, to the sorry level of a love that results from promises and threats, carrot and stick. It is as if God declares “if you will love me, then I will shower upon you many favors, but if you will love others in my stead, then ‘no more Mr. Nice Guy!’” What happened from last week to this? Why such a chasm, such a disjunction, between the two adjacent paragraphs of our defining catechism, in how they treat and teach the love of God? Why cheapen and dilute this highest of human emotions—the selfless love of God—with such debasing

sentiments, as if a man were to say to his bride “if you will really love me, then I will buy you a bigger diamond, get you a Lexus to go shopping at Bergdorf, rather than your having to take the subway to a Macy’s sale.” Is this how God would buy our love, our devotion, our fidelity? Is this the consummation of Amor Dei, devoutly to be desired?

To answer this question, I would like to refer to an explanation offered by the late Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, once expressed in Israel on a weekly radio program. In his view, these two paragraphs of the Shema reflect two divergent approaches to the religious life. The unconditional love of paragraph one is the religious ideal epitomized by Rabbi Akiva, the greatest of talmudic sages. It was Rabbi Akiva who taught that loving God with all one’s nefesh, or soul, requires a readiness to be killed for God’s sake. And as is well known, Rabbi Akiva not only taught this lesson in the study hall, he carried it out in the flesh when he was executed by the Romans al kiddush Hashem, sanctifying the name of God, through his readiness to suffer martyrdom out of love for God.

For such was the nature Rabbi Akiva’s faith: it was a love that, in the phrase of the Mishnah, was *eina teluyah ba-davar*, neither dependent on, nor conditioned by, any other considerations. He had only one loyalty—and that was to God’s will. Hence his readiness, indeed his proclivity, to undergo every deprivation—giving up the money that he should have inherited, the family life that was deservedly his, the esteem of his fellows—so as to devote himself absolutely to the love of God. Moreover, for Rabbi Akiva, there was no expectation whatsoever of a reward for his love. Faithfulness to the Divine was not to be predicated upon seeing God’s justice in return. We are to love God irrespective of whether Providence responds in turn; we make no calculus of reward and punishment—rather do we accept God’s will, and God’s love, regardless. It is enough for Rabbi Akiva that God created us, that He sustains us, that He gave us His Torah: that is enough to earn our undying, unequivocal love for Him.

But Rabbi Akiva had a colleague by the name of Elisha ben Avuya, a brilliant scholar and thinker. As the Talmud records it, this Elisha ben Avuya became an apostate who turned against God and the Torah after an illustrious talmudic career. What was the impetus to his downfall? The Talmud tells us that once he was walking in an orchard, and overheard the owner tell his son to climb a tree to reach a bird’s nest, where he was to send away the mother bird and take the eggs. The child did as he was told, and in so doing fulfilled two mitzvot of the Torah: he honored his father (*kibbud av*), and sending away the mother bird prior to taking its eggs (*shiluah ha-kan*), ironically the only two mitzvot for which the reward is explicitly spelled out by the Torah, namely to be blessed with a long and fruitful life. But as the boy climbed that tree, he slipped, fell to the ground, broke his neck, and died. Seeing this scene, Elisha cried out “where is the long life of this one?” And from that moment on, Elisha became the archetypal renegade of faith, the epitome of disbelief, his name was changed to Aher, literally “the other one, who shall in ignominy remain nameless.”

Apparently Aher— in contrast to Akiva— demanded that God reciprocate man’s love in kind, that God too be held to a measurable standard, having to justify the fate of his faithful. For Aher, man’s love cannot be unrequited, God’s justice must be perceptible, His love and protection always, or mostly, comprehended so as to be seen as in proportion to the benefits that flow from a father to his son, a mother to her daughter, or that of a mother-bird for its young. If Akiva lived, and died, by the first paragraph of the Shema, Aher by contrast staked his faith on the

second. And consequently, when in Elisha's experience, man's fate could not be reconciled with the promises of reward, his faith could not survive.

Two brilliant men, Akiva and Aher, two passages in the Torah, two divergent approaches to the religious life. And therein lies the answer to our question, as to why the two paragraphs of the Shema takes such radically different approaches: The Torah would like us to strive for the unconditional faith of Akiva—it is the preferred way, the way of the righteous, pointing to a profound if simple faith, of untrammelled love, intoxicated with the perception and presence of God. But not everyone is capable of such love, such selfless devotion, such unconditional passion—hence the Torah posits a different kind of love, one that grows out of other considerations, that is built on our fears and insecurities and a calculus of benefits provided and withheld. As Leibowitz put it,

It is to these people that the second paragraph of the Shema is addressed in our parshah. Even a believing Jew, who observes the Torah and mitzvot in the spirit of the second paragraph of the Shema is an upright Jew. But the purpose of faith is not the results which stem from the fact that there is faith, but the faith itself. And that is what the first paragraph of the Shema expresses, and it was for this that Rabbi Akiva gave his life. Notes and Remarks on the Weekly Parshah p. 173.

I would, however, add one caveat to Leibowitz's thesis: the priorities found in the second paragraph of the Shema should not be seen as inferior to the first, or as not needed by a person who truly loves God. Both paragraphs are needed, equally, and in proper balance. For if the first, that is expressed grammatically in the singular, bespeaks the individual Jew's love of God, the second paragraph, which is expressed in the plural, represents the practical commitment to lead a life of religious and ethical excellence within society, in accordance with the mitzvot of the Torah. As the late Nechama Leibowitz, Yeshaya's illustrious sister and Torah scholar, once put it, Robinson Crusoe on his isolated island can love God, but without society he cannot live a moral existence in relation to family, friends, the state, or mankind. For that to happen, be it in the realm of morality or in the sphere of avodat Hashem, the service of God, the Jew needs the second paragraph, that represents the life of mitzvah commitment. On this score, Judaism parts company with Christianity, to assert that love of God and man, no matter how sublime, rapturous, or mystical, is not enough. Love must be complemented by adherence to law and mitzvah, discipline and obligation, rules and prohibitions. And, I have no doubt, even Rabbi Akiva would agree.

It is precisely such a balance that, by way of conclusion, we encounter in the following passage that we find in the tenth chapter of Maimonides' Hilkhot Teshuvah:

Let not a man say 'I will observe the precepts of the Torah and occupy myself with its wisdom in order that I may obtain all the blessings written in the Torah, or to attain life in the World to Come; I will abstain from transgressions against which the Torah warns, so that I may be saved from the curses written in the Torah...' It is not right to serve God after this fashion, for whoever does so serves Him out of fear. This is not the standard set by the prophets and sages... Whoever serves God out of love occupies himself with the study of the Torah and the fulfillment of the commandments and walks in the path of wisdom, impelled by no external motive whatsoever, moved neither by fear of calamity nor by the desire to obtain material benefits—such a man does what is truly right because it is truly right, and, ultimately, happiness comes to him as a result of

his conduct. This standard is indeed a very high one, not every sage attained it. It was the standard of the patriarch Abraham whom God called His lover, as it says, 'and you shall love the Lord your God.' When one loves God with the right love, he will straightway observe all the commandments out of love. What is the love of God that is befitting? It is to love the Eternal with a great and exceeding love, so strong that one's soul shall be knit up with the love of God, and one should be continually enraptured by it, like a love-sick individual whose mind is at no time free from his passion for a particular woman, the thought of her filling his heart at all times, when sitting down or rising up, or when he is eating or drinking. Even more intense should be the love of God in the hearts of those who love Him.

There you have it: the ultimate *raison d'être* of the Jew, to love God with an unbridled passion, to live in His embrace, united with Him, overcoming the distance separating us from Him, and leading us to the life of mitzvah observance, and obedience to Torah and rabbinic law. Precisely paragraph one and two conjoined and inseparable Ol malkhut shamayim on the one hand, and ol mitzvot on the other.

May it be God's will that, in the footsteps of Rabbi Akiva, we find the wisdom and strength to uphold both paragraphs, both models, of the religious life as enunciated in the Holy Torah, so as to find love of both God and of man, in mutually reinforcing fulfillment of our own highest potential, as the sons and daughters of God, reciprocating His love for us, with our love toward Him, as loyal descendants of Avraham Avinu and Rebbe Akiva, united and redeemed, as faithful Jews and compassionate human beings, beloved of God and of man.