

Parshat Va'etchanan: For God's Sake

- Basil Herring.

For God's Sake

Today I shall not talk about politics or war, not the condition of the Jews, nor the current state of the family; not even of one or another of the many ethical issues that confront us as Jews and Americans. We will, for once, avoid the pressing issues of the day, the headlines and the newsmakers and the assorted crises. Instead we will take a break, and speak of one particular mitzvah, probably the most important one of all, a mitzvah that is much spoken of, but too little understood, and even less practiced, even by those who are considered observant. My hope, in addressing this mitzvah, is to achieve a better understanding of, and heightened sensitivity to, the spiritual life—that all too often maligned and overlooked commodity. What is the mitzvah of which I speak? It is that which the Latins refer to as Amor Dei, “the love of God,” as it appears in this parshah, in the words that the Jew recites faithfully at least twice a day, ve’ahavta et Hashem Elokekha: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your means.” But before your eyes glaze over, and you settle back into your seat for a fifteen minute snooze or day-dream, in anticipation of a sleep-inducing lesson in old-time religion from the pulpit, let me hasten to assure you that I have no intention of underwhelming you with the usual platitudes and bromides connected with the subject. I mean to say that the subject is a deadly serious one, with very specific and concrete parameters as far as the halakhah is concerned, such that unless they are carefully understood and followed, much of our observance of the rest of the Torah and mizvot, can be fundamentally flawed and deficient. So please keep awake, and bear with me, so that together we can explore a mitzvah which is as inspiring as it is essential, and as demanding as it is transcendent.

Clearly the Torah tells the Jew to love God with all the means at his or her disposal. But, beyond the pious words, how do you love a God Whom you sense, but cannot see, touch, or understand; Whose word you read in Scripture, but Who does not communicate with you personally in any conventional sense of the term; Whose ways are mostly inscrutable, often vexing but always profoundly challenging? Let me share with you the words of the great Maimonides on the subject, for they are instructive, nay essential, to our understanding of the matter.

The proper love of God is a love which is extraordinarily great and powerful, to the point that one's soul is completely bound up in the love of God, constantly preoccupied with it, just as one who is lovesick and unable to take his mind off a particular woman, thinking of her all constantly, whether he sits, stands, eats or drinks. Even more than that should be the level of love of those who love God, constantly preoccupied with it, just as it says “with all your heart and all your soul.” It is as King Solomon said to God, ki h'olat ahavah ani, “I am afflicted with love.” Hil. Teshuvah 10:3

The point is spelled out even clearer by the medieval Sefer ha-Hinukh, who writes: “one who transgresses the commandment to love God, and fixes his thoughts on material matters, pursuing the vanities of this world for reasons other than for the sake of heaven, and just so as to enjoy worldly pleasures or to acquire respect in this duplicitous world, without intending to benefit or strengthen the good and the righteous, that person forsakes this positive commandment, and incurs great punishment.”

Thus it is that a Jew, every Jew, by this mitzvah is commanded to become preoccupied with God: to think of Him constantly, to seek out God's will, to make furthering God's will one's first priority in all things, to make one's choices guided ultimately by what they will do for the sake of God. To love God, therefore, means that when a Jew labors to make a living, he must do so with the implicit goal that he can acquire the means to serve God the better; when she marries and raises a family it is in the end analysis because God's will is thus furthered and fulfilled; and when we relax on our patio or on the beach, the unspoken but implicit desideratum is, is not by any means simply to enjoy the good life as conventionally defined, or to receive the encomia and accolades of our friends, but rather to be the better refreshed and invigorated so as to implement the imperative le'taken olam be' malkhut shaddai, literally to transform the world under the imprimatur of the kingdom of heaven. What the Rambam teaches us in these pregnant phrases, is that the proper *raison d'être*, the grounds par excellence for living, and if need be, dying as a Jew, is in all things, to act "for God's sake." For God's sake we are born, and for His cause do we struggle to succeed; for God's name do we live and love, and for His glory do we help our friends, support our causes, pay our dues. The Jew carries God in his heart and in his head, wherever he goes, whatever he does. And He does it, not blindly or mechanically, but because he loves God so. And that, parenthetically, is why the observant Jew always wears a yarmulka that publicly identifies him, in whatever he does, as a servant of God, yarmulka literally denoting *yarei malkhut*, one who fears God, and bears His yoke in this world.

Does this mean that a Jew must properly become an other-worldly character, obsessing to the point of distraction over God to the exclusion of all else? The answer, as Rabbeinu Bachya explains this mitzvah, is an emphatic no: the commandment is not *ve'davakta* but of *ve'avavta*. Not one of inseparable, exclusive embrace, but one of abiding love. *Ahavat Hashem*, love of God, can simultaneously embrace many things and multiple relationships: toward a spouse, a child, a fellow Jew, or a dear friend. Loving God and loving man are not mutually exclusive; if anything they can reinforce each other. It is true that God is described in our parshah as a "jealous God," but that is only when those other so loved are elevated by the Jew to the status of gods.

But the abiding question is how one achieves such a love of God. How do you cultivate the seeds that will grow into one's becoming what can only be called "a God-intoxicated personality." Whence the inspiration that will lead to a life lived always and again for God's sake? Here too we can turn to the brilliance of Maimonides, as it illuminates our spiritual horizon even eight centuries after his death.

When a person meditates on God's actions and wondrous creatures, seeing from them His wisdom that is endless and unfathomable, one is immediately moved to praise, and is filled with a great lust to know the great and awesome God. As David sang, "my soul thirsts for the living God." ... And when a man contemplates God heavens and earth, seeing the wisdom of God in all the creatures, his love for God grows, his soul thirsts, and his flesh longs to love the Almighty, may He be blessed. Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah

But there is a second source of the love of God, as far as Maimonides is concerned.: not in the contemplation of creation, but in the study of God's words and commandments. In Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mizvot*, #3 describes the commandment to love God as follows:

The command to love God requires that we contemplate and know God's commandments and

actions, until we know God Himself, and come thereby to enjoy the highest pleasure, which is the required love of God. And the Sifri says “We would not know how to love God, but we learn it from the Torah which follows the command to love God immediately by saying “These things which I command you this day shall be on your heart,” i.e., we come to love God by internalizing God’s commandments...”

Thus for Maimonides, here as in his Guide for the Perplexed, there are two avenues to amor Dei: the study of nature, and the study of Torah. Both are the work and the word of God; both reflect in some small measure God’s infinite wisdom. And not just His wisdom, but His sublime, supernal, goodness. Subsequent rabbinic thinkers took different approaches, including some who said that it is only via contemplation and study of the Torah that real knowledge of God’s will and wisdom can be uncovered, in direct, unmediated fashion. And indeed in our own time, there are many in the orthodox world to our right who increasingly denigrate the study of nature and science, seeing the love of God only germinated in the study of Torah. Sad to tell, some of them even attack and denigrate, sometimes bitterly, institutions such as Yeshiva University, for their willingness to study and teach not only Scripture but science too, so-called Mada as well as Torah. Whatever be the rationale for the rejection by such people of the study of science, clearly Maimonides favors it. Not as an end in itself, but as an entirely legitimate, nay mandatory, means to acquiring the love of God, through His wondrous creation, both in deed and in word.

But however we come to it, it is clear that the words of the Shema, that daily catechism of the faithful Jew, as here encountered, summon us to cultivate a love of God that is tantamount to a burning passion for the divine. We are challenged, each and every one of us, without exception, to discover God in this world, be it to seek Him out in the words of His holy Torah, or to contemplate this week’s mind-boggling spectacle of a celestial meeting between Jupiter and a disintegrating comet, or for that matter to stand in utter amazement at man’s God-given ability to place the entire body of 3000 years of scriptural and rabbinic literature on one or two 4 inch wide CD-Rom computer disks, able to locate and cross-reference all of it within 5 or 10 seconds by subject or word, to be flashed anywhere in the world via E-mail or Internet. How remarkable that in our own time there should be such a confluence of both aspects of the divine wisdom: Torah as well as science; His word as well as His deeds, Revelation given unparalleled access via computer technology. Is there any end to the wondrous works of God? How God-intoxicated King Solomon or Maimonides would be in our time! Unfortunately, however, for too many, the spiritual antennae have become so desensitized, that they fail to convert that knowledge into the awe and love of God, to live in a state of radical amazement at God’s wondrous ways. Instead they can only question and doubt God when occasionally something goes dreadfully wrong, and, being only human, we cannot comprehend or explain. How sad for them, and for us.

Let us therefore rediscover the love of God. Let us long with a burning passion and an unquenchable thirst for the divine, to recognize the transcendent in what is otherwise mundane. So that, on this Shabbas Nahֶamu, this Sabbath of divine consolation for the travails of exile that have separated us from God, God may respond to our love for Him, with a new revelation of His eternal love for us, to bring us closer to His Shekhinah, or divine presence, redeem us body and soul from the distances that have separated us from Him and we from each other. And on this Shabbas which is also Tu Be’Av, the 15th of Av, that day that symbolizes love and marriage, in the fullness of the moon, as celebrated in ancient Judea, may our love for each other be the

paradigm for true Ahavat Hashem, with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all the means at our disposal. Let's do it—for God's sake!