

Love Disrupts the Norm

Why do we do this to ourselves? Last night we waited until 10pm before saying our evening prayers, and then we went home and had dinner. Then after dinner, we came back and studied until 4:00 am, before proceeding with the lengthy holiday service without having slept at all. It's insane. Why do we put ourselves through such trauma?

It's a custom that developed in response to a midrash about the giving of the Torah.

In Exodus 19:11, Moses told the people, "Be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people."

OK, so let's analyze this plan. The plan is for the people actually to see God come down on Mount Sinai. For this plan to work, the people will already have to be at Mount Sinai before he gets there. I mean, the instructions are pretty clear: "Be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people." With such clear instructions, what could go wrong? Except for one thing: he didn't tell them what time.

It turns out Hashem was extremely punctual. He was so excited by this meeting, he did not want to wait a minute longer than he had to. This was his big debut in the world. He had already been waiting for twenty-six generations!

OK, in Exodus 19:16, the moment arrives:

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בַהֲיִת הַבְּקָרָה...

And it was on the third day *as it became morning*...

The Hebrew here makes it clear that we are talking the exact moment morning started.

And it was on the third day as it became morning there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud on the mountain, and an intense shofar sound, and all the people—*who were in the camp*—trembled.

Wait, where were the people? At Mount Sinai? No, the verse emphasizes that the people were still in the camp. The next verse says:

Moses brought the people out from the camp to greet God, and they stationed themselves at the bottom of the mountain.

They missed the biggest moment in human history! They had one job: to be ready to see God come down on the mountain. And they missed it. They overslept. The sages say this fumble explains Isaiah 50:2, and I particularly like the impact of how David Stern translates it:

Why was no one here when I came? Why, when I called, did nobody answer? (Isaiah 50:2)

That sounds pretty bad, but here's a midrash (Pirkei DeRebbi Eliezer 41) that provides the people's side of the story:

Rabbi Chanina says: During [Sivan,] the third month, the daytime is twice as long as the night.

OK, hold on a second. That means 16-hour days and 8-hour nights. Sunset at 8pm, sunrise at 4am, gives you eight hours of night. Adjust for daylight saving time, sun goes down at 9pm and comes up at 5am. Yep, checks out.

Rabbi Chanina says: During [Sivan,] the third month, the daytime is twice as long as the night. [At Mount Sinai,] the Israelites slept until two hours into the day [after sunrise], because sleep on Shavu'ot is sweet, and the night is short.

OK, so they slept until 7:00 am, two hours after sunrise. Not unreasonable. What time did you guys get up this morning? The midrash continues:

Moses went and entered the Israelite camp, waking the Israelites from their sleep and telling them, "Get up from your sleep! Look, your God wants to give you the Torah! The bridegroom wants to bring the bride into the bridal chamber to give you the Torah!" The time came, as it says, "Then Moses brought the people out [of the camp to meet God]" (Exodus 19:17), and the blessed Holy One even emerged to greet them. As a bridegroom comes out to greet a bride, the blessed Holy One went out to greet them and to give them the Torah, as it says [in Judges 5]: "Hashem, when you went out from Seir, [when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. The mountains quaked before Hashem, even Sinai before Hashem, the God of Israel]." (Judges 5:4-5)

This midrash envisions the Revelation at Sinai as a wedding. Hashem was like a groom, sweeping in to claim his bride and consummate the marriage. And even though she had fair warning, she was not prepared—in fact, she was asleep when he showed up.

This brings to mind the parable our Master told, recorded in Matthew 25:

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." (Matthew 25:1-6)

Perhaps Yeshua was alluding to a midrash about Mount Sinai like the one we just read.

To be fair, maybe the Israelites didn't realize that a wedding was the metaphor for our situation. We didn't realize yet how deeply Hashem loved us and how eager he was to connect with us. But now we know. And unlike most big mistakes you make in life, this is one we actually have the chance to relive and fix. It's like the movie Groundhog Day, except more like Groundhog Year. We get to do it over again and fix our mistakes, year by year. Maybe that's why the custom of staying up all night is called in Hebrew לִיל שְׁבוּעוֹת, "fixing the night of Shavuot."

Sometimes finding out someone loves you is what makes you love them back. And when you love someone, sometimes you do crazy things, like staying up really late.

Be Ready

I've taken every teaching opportunity I have had to work through a list of character traits found in 2 Peter chapter 1. It's been over a year now, but we have finally made it. This list of character traits Shimon Keifa provides fits well within Judaism's long tradition of personal improvement. Probably the most famous of all Mussar texts is Mesillat Yesharim, or The Path of the Just, which is an expansion on a similar list found in the Mishnah, at the end of tractate Sotah:

Rabbi Pinehas ben Ya'ir says: Torah study leads to care in the performance of mitzvot. Care in the performance of mitzvot leads to diligence in their observance. Diligence leads to cleanliness of the soul. Cleanliness of the soul leads to abstention from all evil. Abstention from evil leads to purity. Purity leads to piety. Piety leads to humility. Humility leads to fear of sin. Fear of sin leads to holiness. Holiness leads to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead.

I found this progression to be an interesting parallel to our list found in 2 Peter 1, starting in verse 5:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Master Yeshua the Messiah. (2 Peter 1:5-8)

I started the process of expanding on this list during the counting of the Omer last year, a time when we intentionally refocus ourselves on personal growth as we count the days to Shavuot. This year during Parashat metzora, it finally clicked for me why the sages see the seven weeks of the counting of the omer as a purification process. It's not a weird kabbalistic thing; it's hinted at right in the Torah.

There is only one other place in the Torah where we are instructed to count days. In Leviticus 15, a man or woman who is unclean due to a discharge has to count seven days of purity. In preparation for Shavuot, the Torah has us repeat this purification count seven times—not just counting to 49, but counting to seven over and over again. Hashem is cleansing us from layer after layer of impurity until we are ready to meet him under the chuppah at Mount Sinai. Incredible.

Incidentally, Shimon Keifa's list also has seven steps, once you notice that he doesn't count faith as the first step but as the starting point. So now it's Shavuot and we have arrived at the seventh and final gate of our journey. And where is it leading us?

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Master and Savior Yeshua the Messiah. (2 Peter 1:10-11)

As we've gone through this list, it has been amazing how well each quality has dovetailed with the parashah or season we happened to be in, even though I did not orchestrate it to be so. And what better time than Shavuot to arrive at the final stop in our journey, at the gate of love.

Last time, we covered the trait called brotherly love. But today we are talking about the ultimate love: love for Hashem.

The Greatest Commandment

Yeshua called love for God “the greatest and foremost commandment” (Matthew 22:38). This commandment can be found immediately following the first line of the Shema. Many of us know it by heart:

שמע ישראל יהוה אחד:

Hear, O Israel, Hashem is our God; Hashem is one.

ואהבת את יהוה אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאדך:

Love Hashem your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.

(Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

Rashi brings the interpretation of the sages that “with all your heart” means you love him both with your good inclination and with your evil inclination. “With all your soul” means even if he takes away your soul, meaning you are called to die as a martyr. And “with all your might” means with all your wealth and all the resources at your disposal. Each one of those interpretations could easily be a lesson of its own.

At any rate, it's important to keep in mind that loving God is not merely a biblical principle, a godly value, or a spiritual ideal. Loving God is a mitzvah; it's one of the 613 commandments of the Torah. It's a mitzvah just like keeping kosher is a mitzvah, or like building a sukkah is a mitzvah, or like counting the omer is a mitzvah. You should be asking yourself: what are the parameters for this mitzvah? How do I know if I love God in a way that satisfies my obligation?

Ahavat Hashem: loving God. Not only is loving God a mitzvah, the rabbis¹ enumerate it as one of the six constant mitzvot—commandments that apply at all times every day.

The Torah itself affirms the foundational status of love of God. Moses includes it among the primary duties of Israel in Deuteronomy 10:12-13:

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good? (Deuteronomy 10:12-13)

¹ Sefer HaChinuch, opening letter.

So if this is such an important mitzvah to observe, we should focus our attention and energy to understanding and observing it.

What is Love?

The idea of love as a commandment sometimes throws people off. How can love, an emotion, be commanded? We typically view emotions as something that happens to us, not something we do. An involuntary reaction.

One answer could be that love is not an emotion at all; it is simply the acts of obedience and loyalty. It's not about what you feel, but what you do. I used to hold an approach like that. But I quickly ran into the problem that every rabbi, sage, or commentator said otherwise. Love is indeed about what you feel. The fact that we are commanded to love implies that our initial assumption about emotions is false. It *is* possible to cultivate a feeling.

If love is a feeling, let's describe it. What are the features of love?

The primary feature of love is the desire for a continued and deepened connection. When you love someone, you desire that relationship to build and grow stronger and closer.

Another important feature of love is the desire to bring joy, pleasure, happiness, and satisfaction to the other. Regardless of any other tangible reward, it makes you feel good simply knowing that what you did made the other person happy. No personal expense is too great, because the value of seeing the other person's happiness outweighs everything else.

A third feature of love is that when you love someone, that person occupies your thoughts. When you are not with them, your mind drifts to memories of when you were with him or her. You relate all your experiences to this person, imagining how he or she would react to what's happening around you. This is why it's so meaningful when someone says, "I am thinking of you."

A fourth feature of love is commitment and loyalty. You don't give up on this person, no matter what challenges threaten the relationship. You fiercely defend the recipient of your love, taking their side against all attacks and accusations, even at the expense of your own harm.

These four features map well onto our relationship with Hashem. When we love Hashem, we desire a deep connection with him. We want only to bring Hashem joy. Our thoughts are constantly with Hashem as we attempt to see the world through his eyes. And we are fiercely committed to him no matter what trials come our way.

When you understand love this way, it makes sense that love would be paired with keeping commandments. Every commandment is an opportunity to deepen your connection with Hashem. Fulfilling his will pleases him. Keeping a commandment, especially when no one else is looking, demonstrates that your thoughts are occupied with Hashem. And it demonstrates your unwavering allegiance to him. As the Apostles teach: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments" (1 John 5:3).

In all, love is largely a certain kind of desire. Hashem commands us to cultivate that desire for him.

Love vs. Fear

Another important frame of reference to understanding love of God is its role as a complement to fear of God. Ahavat Hashem and Yirat Hashem, love and fear of God, are frequently paired and contrasted, as they describe one's motivation for obedience.

The distinction is fairly simple. Fear of Hashem, in this context, means being concerned with the personal consequences of your actions. Obedience results in reward. Disobedience brings punishment. Fear of Hashem means being concerned with what you stand to gain or lose as a result of what you do.

Fear of Hashem is a good and valid motivation to serve him. The Scriptures tell us all about the rewards of serving God. Our master Yeshua spoke constantly about receiving rewards.

But it is not the ultimate motivation. The higher level of motivation is love of Hashem. When you are motivated purely by love, then the only reward you seek is the knowledge that you have made Hashem "smile," so to speak. A saying that encapsulates this idea is, "I don't want your World to Come. I only want you." And yet a person who serves Hashem out of love does not lose out on reward. I could quote many verses to this effect, but in the interest of time, I will not.

The irony in an expression like "I don't want your World to Come, I only want you" (and this is just my personal perspective) is that when the veil is lifted from our eyes and we exist in the world of truth, personal reward and the pleasure of Hashem will completely converge. They will become one and the same. If I'm right about this, it implies that the dichotomy between love and fear of Hashem is a strange artifact of this world, caused by Hashem's concealment.

But both fear of God and love of God are important mitzvot in this life. You need to have both. In my analysis, it tends to be in this world that people who discover faith later in life begin with love and need to learn fear over time, but people raised with faith begin with fear and need to learn love. But in any case, we can all stand to grow.

The Love Dilemma

With every other character trait on our list, I have attempted to persuade you to adopt it by telling you all about its benefits, the problems it solves. "Here is how perseverance helps you," or "Here is how having a good heart will solve a problem." When it comes to love of God, this approach presents me with a special dilemma. Because if you decide to love God because of some kind of benefit, or to avoid a negative consequence, then it's not love at all, it's fear! What can I say to convince you if I can't lure you with rewards?

All I can offer you is this: you were created to love God. That is why Hashem made his universe and why he put you in it. He did all this because he wanted to love you and to be loved by you. This makes me think that within every single person, somewhere, there is a desire for that love. Love is your purpose for existing.

Achieving Love

Love is an emotion, a desire, and yet somehow, it is not merely an involuntary reaction. It's something that you can cultivate and initiate as an act of will. How does one achieve love of God?

To Know is to Love

The Rambam makes an important observation:² One can only love God to the extent that you know God. Your love of God will be directly proportional to your knowledge of him. Therefore, Rambam says, you should singularly direct your efforts into understanding and comprehending anything that provides wisdom, insight, and knowledge into your Creator, to whatever extent you as a person have the capacity to understand and grasp.

There are two primary sources of revelation of God. One is through creation. How do you learn the love of God from creation? First, go out and contemplate. Touch grass. Look at the sky, the stars. Look at the ocean or Lake Superior. Visit the Grand Canyon. Get a telescope. Read an astrophysics textbook and learn about relativity and the extent of the known universe. Get a sense of how expansive the universe is—wait, no scratch that, you can't—gain a sense of how you can't even comprehend the scale of the universe. Look at some things up close: plants, animals, minerals. Learn how body systems work. Get a microscope. Research a little about the weirdness of the universe at quantum scales. Do it in whatever way that's fun for you, whether that means sightseeing, hiking, watching documentaries, or whatever. Contemplate the universe, its unfathomable scale, and its vast array of inhabitants until it blows your mind and provokes a sense of awe and amazement. Realize that after all this study and contemplation, you still only have access to an infinitesimal fraction of the universe, the bulk of which is completely unknown and unknowable by humans. And that this vast universe is a dramatic exercise in Hashem's humility, in that this tiny, finite space does a poor job representing his greatness, but since our minds are so small, it will have to do the trick.

Step two: realize that after creating this unfathomable universe and after its existence for quite some time, Hashem decided it was incomplete. It needed one more thing, and that was you. He specifically wanted you in this universe; in fact, the universe was created so that you could be in it. He thought about what you would be like, and made you that way, because that was the person he wanted to love and to be loved by. Knowing this can inspire great love for Hashem.

Loving God requires knowing him, and there is no greater way to know Hashem than through his Torah. By that I of course mean the Torah of Moses but also everything that derives from that—which includes the prophets, the Messiah, the sages, the commentaries, the Psalms, midrashim, halacha, gospels. Delve deep into Torah, and you will know Hashem in the fullest way possible. Learn how he conducts his world. Learn his will and wisdom. Learn his attributes. Learn his miracles and redemptions. Learn his desires and plans for the future. Learn his deep thoughts and his passionate expressions. All these are anthropomorphisms—attempts to understand Hashem

² Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 10

by applying human concepts—but nonetheless, they give us a little something to grasp onto. Through Torah study, you can grow to love the Torah and also love Hashem as you get to know him.

But a word of caution: while creation and Torah are excellent ways to know Hashem and be moved to love him, it won't work unless you're doing it for the right reasons. There are smart people that study creation all day long, and academics that write lengthy papers about the Bible, and both can be far from love of God.

In fact, a purely intellectual knowledge can even distance a person from God by inflating the ego. As Paul told the Corinthians:

This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. (1 Corinthians 8:1-3)

In other words, knowledge is not about facts; it is about a relationship. One big difference is that an intellectual will study the Torah all day long, and yet have no intention to obey any of it. But the apostles teach:

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. (1 John 2:3-5)

So always remember why you are seeking to know God—so that you can grow in loving him. And make sure that in addition to studying, you are taking time for contemplation: rolling it around in your head, letting it fill you with wonder and appreciation.

Gratefulness

Another excellent way to grow in the love of God is through gratitude. Take an inventory of the kindnesses that your Father in heaven has lavished on you. From big things, like children or miraculous acts of salvation, to small things that happen every day: a good parking space, pleasant weather, or a tasty meal. Think about the potential negative paths your life could have taken, had Hashem not intervened. Think of the people he has brought into your life. Consider the spiritual revelation he has made available to you. Recognize that all good things come from him.

Also think about his mercy and forgiveness to us. Consider Yeshua's parable of the two men with canceled debts. "Which of them will love him more?" (Luke 7:42) he asked. The one for whom he canceled the larger debt.

Contemplate his goodness to you and you will realize how much he cares not just for humanity, but he cares specifically for you. When this realization takes root in you, you will naturally begin to love him for it. As John wrote: "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

Giving to Love

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, who wrote the classic book *Strive for Truth*, makes an important observation about love: we do not give to others because we love them; we love because we give.

We naturally love ourselves. When we invest in someone else, that person has a part of us in them, and we naturally love that part of us. That is why a parent's love for his or her child is so natural.

This principle can apply to your love of Hashem. Your life is his anyway. Give it to him. The more you give him of yourself, the more you will love him.

That means that the more time and effort and resources you put into serving Hashem sincerely, the more you will love him.

Evidence of Love

Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda, a famous rabbi from the golden era of Spain in the 11th century, wrote a classic mussar book called *The Duties of the Heart*. Whereas Shimon Keifa lists seven steps along the path to the kingdom, Rabbeinu Bachya outlines ten gates. But like Shimon Keifa, Rabbeinu Bachya concludes his list with love of God. He does a tremendous job explaining what it is and how to achieve it. In this text he also provides a list of signs that a person is exhibiting love of God.

When you love God:

- You abandon everything that distracts you from serving Hashem.
- Love and fear of God are visible in your facial expressions.
- If you love God, you not affected by other people's reaction when you tell others to do what is right and not to do what is wrong, whether they praise you or make fun of you for it.
- If you love God, you are willing to give up your life, your body, and your money to do his will.
- When you love God, you can't stop talking about him.
- If you love God, you make sure to say, "God willing," before talking about your future plans.
- If you love God, you sensitively guide others in the path of righteousness. For the merit of one who keeps the commandments is nothing compared to the one who instructs others to do the same.
- If you love God, you celebrate when you succeed in righteousness, and you mourn and grieve when you commit sins.
- If you love God, you pray at night and fast during the daytime.
- And finally, if you love God, it fills you with joy that you know him and can do things to make him happy.

To this excellent list I would add an extremely important sign of love of God taught by the Apostles: when you love someone, you also love their children. Your love of God will be made clear through your love of others.

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:20-21)

Love Disrupts the Norm

Let's get back to the question I started with: why do we do this to ourselves? Why did we all take off work today? Why did we stay up so late last night? Why do we sit through hours of prayers and readings? Why do we spend so much money on these holidays? The answer is: because we are in love. The sages have a saying. You can tell when a person is in love, because:

אהבה מקלקלת את השו"רה

“Love disrupts the norm.”

How do we know that Abraham loved God? Genesis 22:3 says, “Abraham got up early and saddled his donkey.” The Midrash Rabbah (Bereshit Rabbah 55:8) points out that Abraham was a wealthy man. Did he not have a servant who could do that for him? But “love disrupts the norm.”

“Then Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen” (Genesis 46:29). Surely Joseph, the viceroy of Egypt, could have had someone else prepare his chariot—but “love disrupts the norm.”

Love of God is not just dedication to religious life. It's not just a decision to be observant, whatever that might mean. It is love: it is an emotion, a spiritual state, a deep-seated desire to know and be known, to unite and connect, it is passionate resolve to be eternally bonded and committed. Love makes any expense, any sacrifice, worthwhile. Love disrupts the norm and leaves you staring into someone's eyes when any sane person would be sleeping.

On this holy day of the revelation of God's love, I want to bless you, and please bless me back, that Hashem should pierce your heart with his love, that a fire of love for him would flame up in response, filling you with passion and desire for him and nothing else. And that by doing so you would be brought closer than ever to gates of his eternal kingdom. Chag sameach.