



## D'var Torah Parashat VaEtchanan – Aug. 17, 2024

By Robbie Fein

Before I begin, I should note that it's not often that we sing a song on lifting the Torah with the composer of the song present, but that's what happened today since Joel Sussman wrote Nachamu. Perhaps I should have done this Drash on the Haftara as a result, but I'm too much of a math geek to give a drash on a Haftara that includes the line: כְּפַלְיִם בְּכָל־חַטָּאתֶיהָ -- double for all her sins. After all, two times a negative number is still a negative number, but it's all ok because the great singer Hanan Ben Ari says: בסוף זה הלחן ולא המילים In the end, it's the tune, not the words. Joel only wrote the music – not the words.

The great Israeli singer Idan Raichel writes in his famous love song Ahava Kazo,

אַהֲבָה כְּזוֹ כִּבֵּר לֹא מוֹצְאִים

A love such as this is found no more. He goes on to describe love as something incredibly hard to grasp תְּמוֹנוֹת בֵּין שְׁקֵט בֵּין מְלִים

Images between silence, between words

לֵב שֶׁבוֹר הוֹפֵךְ שִׁירִים

A broken heart becomes songs

Silence becomes a melody.

Today, I want to talk a little bit about a very large topic – what does it mean to **love God**. Perhaps the best place to start is the first paragraph of the Shema, which we read in today's Parasha.

וְאַהֲבָתְךָ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל־מְאֹדְךָ:

You shall love your God יהוה with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

That text teaches us essentially that we need to love God intensely – with all our heart and night. And, we need to teach it day and night. So, we need to love God a lot and proclaim it a lot, but the Torah here does not provide us much guidance as to what love of God means.

Shai Held in his book Judaism Is about Love seeks to define Love of God by studying how the Rabbis interpret Biblical verses and derive laws from them. Based on hundreds of pages of analysis, he seeks to define what love of God means. I've got 10 minutes.

Near the end of his book, Held relies on a couple of sentences in today's Parasha. We read:

For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is our God יהוה whenever we call?

Or what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?

Let's see if we can employ Held's method to develop a clearer sense of how to guide our lives.

A good starting place, it seems to me, would be to find a definition of another kind of relationship, if not a loving relationship. We have exactly that kind of guidance with respect to friendship relationships. In Pirkei Avot, we are instructed Kaneh L'cha Chaver – find yourself a friend. Maimonides in his commentary explains --based on Aristotle's analysis -- three different kinds of friendship. The highest level of friendship is the Rabbinic notion of the Chaver – study partner. To Maimonides, there is no higher relationship than that of the Chavruta – the study relationship designed to understand Jewish texts and law. The second highest is what most moderns would consider the closest form of relationship

– the relationships we have with our family and our dearest friends. The final form of friendship is what Maimonides calls a beneficial relationship that would apply to everyone in society. It's not that we would become friends with everyone, but we would be open to friendship with anyone. The notion here is that it's impossible to create a legal system that covers all social encounters. If, however, we are open to relationships with anyone who comes our way, we can establish relationships of trust that enable society to function without the impossible task of creating a legal system that covers all possibilities.

I think we can use this kind of typology to a notion of love of God. Before we get there, let's see if Idan Raichel's song can provide us some additional guidance.

כָּמוֹ יָרַח מִתְמַלֵּא וּמִתְרוֹקֵן

אֶתְּהָ קָרֵב וּמִתְרוֹחֵק

אֶבֶל הַלֵּב נִשְׁלִי יוֹצֵא אֵלַיךְ

Like a moon, filling up and receding,

You come close and move away,

But my heart goes out to you,

Can we reconcile this notion of a waxing and waning relationship, one that moves close and away with the instructions of the Shema – that we need a persistent and strong relationship with God. The answer lies in our hearts reaching out to God. Even if we can't always express our love of God, can we always be open to the possibility as Maimonides instructs us?

Now, let's see if we can combine Maimonides' notions of friendship with Held's method. In doing so, we'll use some texts not covered in his book. The first is the personal mediation that we say in the Amida while the Shaliach Tzibbur is repeating Modim Anachnu Lach. Near the end we say Lishmor Chukeya v'La'Asot R'tzonecha – to observe God's laws and do his will. That's a pretty tall order, no? How are we to know God's will? Similarly, in today's Parasha, the text tells us to observe the laws and then in the next sentence we are told V'asita Hatov v'HaYashar b'einei Hashem – we are to do what is good and appropriate in God's eyes. Again, how are we to know what God wants us to do?

Let's look at Ramban's commentary on this sentence:

Our Rabbis base a beautiful Midrash on this verse, arguing here that the Torah urges us to seek compromise and act beyond the letter of the law.... Now this is a fundamental principle in our culture because it would have been impossible for the Torah to mandate a response to every circumstance that might arise in a person's life.

Ramban then provides five examples of going beyond the law of the Torah. Actually, he just cites the five Biblical laws and you have to know enough Torah and Halacha to understand how the Rabbis read more into the Biblical laws. All of the principles relate to the holiness code in Parashat Kedoshim. Let's look at just one of them.

That is Lo T'kaleh Cheresh – do not curse the deaf. Ramban in his commentary on this sentence in Parashat Kedoshim asks why does it not say that you can't curse anyone. His point: if you curse someone who can't even hear you, it's obvious that you extend the law to people who can hear – in other words, everyone.

Ramban's examples show the Rabbis going beyond the letter of Torah law to create Rabbinic law. They do so because we need to be open to doing more than the law requires. That's like Maimonides' third kind of friendship – being open to a relationship with anyone.

Consider also what they are doing. They are essentially imitating what God does in giving us laws. They are using their creativity to make new law. I think this also allows us to understand Maimonides' highest form of friendship – the Chavruta relationship. If that relationship for Rabbis allows them to imitate what God does, we can understand why Maimonides views that as the strongest form of friendship. And, perhaps we can then view that as a way to love God by Imitating God, no?

That brings us to the last text that I want to cite. It is one that Held refers to without really discussing – Sheva Brachot – the 7 Wedding blessings. He does have an extensive discussion of the Rabbinic literature suggesting that the people of Israel are in a marital relationship with God. Of course, that’s an excellent analogy for a loving relationship, but I think we need to take it one step further.

I’ve shared this learning about Sheva Brachot before, but I’ve never seen the connection to love of God before. This teaching came to us under our Chuppa from our dear friend, Rabbi Peretz Rodman. The last two blessings focus on happiness. The last bracha concludes with the blessing of the one who makes happy the groom **with** the bride. The prior blessing says bless the one who makes the groom and bride happy. Before doing that the text beseeches that the bride and groom be exuberantly happy as the happiness in the Garden of Eden. This is a primordial happiness. I would submit that the the happiness of the last bracha is a happiness that we normally associate with celebrations of all kinds of lifecycle events. Being happy as in the Garden of Eden in the sixth bracha is not something that we can describe so easily. I believe that it asks us to find happiness that can only be found with a sense of togetherness based on the paradigmatic togetherness of Eden.

If we analogize that to love of God, loving God means forming a partnership and relationship with God, but how do we do that? I think the answer lies in something we can control – our relationships with others in this world and not the primordial world. That requires us to go beyond the letter of the law as Ramban points out. In our tradition, this can be done by anyone. It’s most powerful when Rabbis extend their findings to Rabbinic law that applies to all, but **it is also powerful when we as individuals go beyond legal obligations to make the world a better place.** That requires us to be open to friendship with all as in Maimonides’ third kind of friendship – not just those closest to us. Is there an emotional element to this as Held says. I believe so because without the emotional connection, it is exceptionally difficult to maintain a persistent and strong commitment to these societal actions.

On the other hand, we are human beings and persistence does not mean that we can do this all the time. So, Idan Raichel provides the guidance – c’mo yareach mitmaleh u-mitrokein – like a moon that fills up and recedes. We must hope that the times when the feeling recedes is useful. It gives us the energy to fill it up again and pursue our course of loving God. To put it simply, every day can’t be Yom Kippur and every night can’t be the Pesach Seder.

You may have noted that I haven’t said anything about Maimonides’ second level of friendship – of those closest to us. I believe that loving those closest to us is also a way of expressing love of God, but that’s going to have to wait for another Drash. One hint on that for someone who wants to take on that topic next year. In modern Hebrew, when you combine the verb L’hitchanen with Bifnei, it means beg. So, the question is what kind of relationship it takes to beg someone. That could be an interesting Drash, but not today.

So, how do we love God? We do so by continuing to find the optimal path for living with other people – finding love, feeling love, and acting creatively and imitating God in going beyond the letter of the law to find a higher and better place. Perhaps that’s the place where Idan Raichel finds a love in which:

שְׁתִּיקָה הוֹפְכֶת לָהּ לְמַנְגִּינָה

Silence is turned into a melody.

Shabbat Shalom.