

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik wrote, "Anyone who says that Judaism commands the individual to love God but does not promise reciprocal love is a heretic." ("And From There You Shall Seek") While much divrei Torah focuses on our development of Ahavat Hashem, this essay explores the reality of Hashem's love for us and the importance of our knowing it and feeling it.

The Holy of Holies by Yisrael Kashkin

God loves you. Did you know this? I ask because I suspect that some people do not know it, not about themselves. He loved the *Avos* and *Imahos* perhaps. But me? People may know that Hashem has rules and that He gave Torah to study. They may know about *olam haba* and *gehenom*, but they don't know that God loves them.

Each morning we say the *bracha* "*ahava raba*," which describes Hashem's abundant love for *Klal Yisrael*.¹ Each night we say the *bracha* "*ahavas olam*," which describes His eternal love.² In the *Amidah* we say that Hashem "brings a redeemer to their (the *Avos*') children's children for His name's sake in love." In the *Shabbos* morning *Amidah* we say "for You gave it (the Sabbath) in love to Israel Your people." These are special *brachas* about love. We say these, but we may not take them to heart, don't know how to take them to heart, for they may seem to conflict with the difficult parts of our life experience.

Moreover, our sense of God's love is affected by our human encounters. As a representative of Hashem on earth, a Jew's behavior is a reflection on Hashem. While our sense of Hashem and His characteristics ideally should be independent of that of any human encounters, the reality is that human encounters affect our sense of God. In our generation, the influence of the decaying society around us has degraded our social interactions.

But our sense of God is effected even more so by our portrayal of Him. Do we talk about His kindness and love? I heard Rav Shlomo Brevda say in a *shiur* recently that yeshivas need to teach the subject of *emunah*. You could hear the frustration in his voice as he said it as if this is not being done. Rav Avigdor Miller said "*Yiras Shamayim* actually means nothing but *Emunah* because to fear Heaven, you must first have a Heaven."³ You could rephrase this to say that one cannot be a *Yor'e Hashem* without a sense of Hashem. I would suggest that otherwise you just have fear for fear's sake. Rabbi Miller explained as follows:

Just as there is no true *Bitachon* (trust in Hashem) without *Yir'ah*
(fear of Hashem), so also is there no true Fear (Awareness) of

¹ Siddur, Blessings preceding *Kriyas Shema*.

² Siddur, Blessings preceding *Kriyas Shema*.

³ R' Avigdor Miller, Tape #207, "Reward of Emunah," in *Simcha Minute* (Lakewood, NJ: Yeshiva Gadola Beis Yisrael, 2012) p. 103.

Hashem unless one recognizes that He desires to do kindness. One who fears Hashem but does not know that He desires kindness is the same as the one who believes in Hashem and thinks that He has a body or is otherwise limited, for both believe in what is untrue.⁴

Rabbi Miller offers these words in his commentary on the verse “The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His loving care.” (Tehillim 147) According to Rabbi Miller, the absence of the conjunction “and” between the two clauses indicates that “these are not two different categories but one.” Fear of Hashem must always go hand in hand with a sense of Hashem’s love and kindness.

I suspect today that some people follow *halacha* without having much feeling of Hashem and His love for each Jew as being at the center of this *halacha*. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik observes, “There are many who observe the precepts with their hands, with their feet, and/or with their mouths....but there are few indeed who truly know the meaning of the service of the heart!”⁵ Rabbi Soloveitchik identifies a cause:

Much of this is due to the current religious atmosphere, suffused with shallow pragmatism; much is caused by the tendency towards the ceremonialization – and, at times, the vulgarization – of religion.⁶

We need *emunah* to go along with our *halacha*. We need to teach principles of *emunah*.

Rabbi Miller gave classes on *emunah* for fifty years. He talked about the purposefulness of each creation in the world, of the rain, of the wind. Following the exhortation of the *Navi'im*, the teachings of Rabbeinu Bachya’s *Duties of the Heart*, and the *halacha* of the Rambam, he described the Divine wisdom within nature and showed the miracles all about us. Look for example at a tree. A tiny little seed mixed with dirt, light, air, and water produces a 200 foot tower of wood so strong that you could take a hammer to it day and night for a month and barely put a dent in it. Miracles are all around us in the form of trees and Hashem puts them in our yards all for the purpose of awakening our hearts to Him, His wisdom, His power, and His love. The creation reflects Hashem’s kindness and love. As Rabbi Miller said, “Hashem put into the parents an attitude of *Rachamim* (tender love) for their little child. *Rachamim* the father and mother have towards their child is Hashem’s doing, so it’s really Hashem’s love for that child.”⁷

⁴ R’ Avigdor Miller, *Praise My Soul*, 504 in “*Peninim* on the Torah,” *Parshas Lech Lecha*, 5773.

⁵ R’ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, pp. 97-8, in Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility* (New York: OU Press and Urim Publications) p. 97.

⁶ R’ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “*Ahavat ha-torah u-Geulat Nefesh ha-Dor*,” 419 in Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, p. 97.

⁷ R’ Avigdor Miller, *Ohr Avigdor*, “*Shaar Habechinah*”, in *Simcha Minute*, p. 51.

We hear often today about children at risk, about young Jews whose Torah observance is in jeopardy. All kinds of remedies are employed. I wonder if we try often enough to teach principles of *emunah*. Do we stand for a moment with the young person who is struggling and say simply “God loves you. He is on your side. He wants to help you.” I suspect this would yield powerful results.

Often we portray God as the great punisher. We threaten in His name without offering any broader context. At times I imagine Him saying, don’t do me any favors with that kind of talk. This is not to deny or decry the fact of Divine judgment, but it is to assert that any Divine judgment must be placed within the overall context of God’s love for us. Of all Hashem’s gifts, the greatest of them is that of free choice for it gives us a vehicle for personal accomplishment.⁸ The Malbim commented that our creation in the Divine image is best evidenced in our possession of free choice between moral and immoral behavior.⁹ In the Mishnah, Rabbi Akiva said, “Beloved is man for he was created in the image of God. As a gesture of special love, it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God.”¹⁰ Free choice and the judgment and punishment that are necessary for it are also expressions of Hashem’s love for us. Said Rabbi Miller, “There are all kinds of *Middos* (qualities) of *Chesed* (kindness). Even strictness is a *Midda* of *Chesed*. And Hashem is using all of them on us.”¹¹

Some of us untie the concept of punishment from the whole system of free choice and from the Divine love that sits beneath it. So we teach punishment, we teach rules, but we take it out of its proper context. We teach the commandment to love God without stressing its implication that God loves us too. As Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote, “Anyone who says that Judaism commands the individual to love God but does not promise reciprocal love is a heretic.”¹² Rabbi Miller said “Hashem loves Yisrael more than a mother loves her child. He loves each Jew intensely.”¹³

A middle-aged man told me recently that he went to yeshiva for years and never heard much in the way of concepts of *emunah*. He said he learned some *musar* but found it geared mostly towards self-correction. He hadn’t learned that God loved him. He hadn’t been taught how to see God and His kindness all around him and he operated for decades with the resulting deficiencies. When he did finally learn his life became music.

Some people may operate under the notion that the concept of God’s love is a Christian thing. But like many of the positive concepts found in gentile society, its true origin is with us.

⁸ R’ Avigdor Miller, Tape #458, “Free Will of Man.”

⁹ Malbim, *Commentary on the Torah*, Bereishis 1:26.

¹⁰ *Pirkei Avos* 3:18. Translation by R’ Johnathan Sacks, *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers and OU Press, 2011).

¹¹ R’ Avigdor Miller, Tape #579, in *Simcha Minute*, p. 61.

¹² R’ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “And From There You Shall Seek” in *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, p. 105.

¹³ R’ Avigdor Miller, “Rabbi Avigdor Miller Speaks, Volume II, (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 2004), p 177.

What's Christian is to say that God's love obviates the *halacha*, Heaven forbid. In reality, God's love makes the *halacha* a necessity for through it we connect to God and serve Him. As the *bracha* says, "With an eternal love You have loved the house of Israel. Torah, *mitzvos*, decrees, and ordinances You gave us."¹⁴ What's Christian is to say that a religion can consist of no concept other than God's love.

Sadly, the Christian overemphasis on the concept gave us suspicion of it. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has commented that this is one of the tragedies that Christianity perpetrated against the Jewish people. In trying to not sound Christian, we came to focus on our love of Hashem, creating the impression of a one way love. In reality, this love is a two-way street.¹⁵ *Golus* hurts us not only by poisoning us with *traife* ideologies but by scaring us from our own proper ones. However, one may wonder as well if perhaps the popularizing of the concept of God's love by gentiles is intended to remind us of its importance. All that happens in the world is to benefit *Klal Yisrael*.¹⁶

One may wonder why the *Chumash* doesn't talk more about God's love given that it is the foundation upon which rests all of Judaism. We'll note that the *Chumash* is economical with words and will teach postulates and central practices of Judaism with only a few verses or even a single verse. Examples include *Shabbos*, *Olam HaBa*, *Tefillin*, the soul, and the Oral Torah. Certainly, we see references to Hashem's love as in "because the Lord God loves you" (Devarim 23:6) and "God desired your ancestors for love of them" (Devarim 10:15). We see it in the *Navi* as in "He is distressed in all of their distress, and the angel who goes before Him redeems them in His love and compassion" (Isaiah 63:9) and "I have loved you, says God... and I love Jacob" (Malachi 1:2).¹⁷ We see it in the Mishnah as in "Beloved are Israel for they are called God's children. As a gesture of special love, it was made known to them that they are called God's children."¹⁸ The Mishnah as Oral Torah was given at Sinai along with the written Torah, the *Chumash*. We see ubiquitous references to God's lovingkindness (*chesed*) in *Tehillim*, particularly chapter 136 which says 26 times "His lovingkindness is eternal." However, given the primacy of Hashem's love, one might expect to see it even more, particularly in the *Chumash*.

I can offer a few answers. One comes from Rabbeinu Bachya's explanation of why the *Chumash* describes Rosh Hashana as being only "*Yom HaTru'ah*" (day of blowing) and does not mention that it is a day of judgment. Rabbeinu Bachya explained that the *Chumash* keeps hidden matters of the soul, such as judgment, because people may misunderstand them. The subjects are too lofty. Said Rabbeinu Bachya, "One of the mystical aspects of the legislation is that nowhere

¹⁴ Siddur, Blessing before *Kriyas Shema*.

¹⁵ Heard from Rabbi Jeffrey Saks who had a personal communication with Rabbi Steinsaltz on this subject.

¹⁶ R' Avigdor Miller, Rejoice OYouth in Simcha Minute, 13 *Cheshvan* 5772.

¹⁷ Sources from R' Joseph Soloveitchik, "And From There You Shall Seek" in *The Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, pp. 104-5.

¹⁸ *Pirkei Avos* 3:18. Translation by R' Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*.

does the Torah spell out matters relevant directly to the soul.” According to the Rabbeinu Bachya, this is a general principle of Torah.

The reason that the wording of the paragraph is more enigmatic than any other paragraph dealing with the festivals is that it deals with fundamental aspects of our religion. You will find that the more mystical the subject matter the Torah deals with the more enigmatic does the written Torah verbalize this. Take as an example the commandment to put on phylacteries. The only words that we find about this in the written Torah is the verse in Exodus 13,16 “they (the phylacteries) shall be as a sign on your hand and as a symbol on your forehead.” Were it not for our Oral Tradition, we would not have the faintest idea what these phylacteries should be made of, what they should contain, what colour they should be, etc., etc. We would not even be sure what parts of the body exactly these phylacteries should be worn on. We have a similar problem with the commandment of *tzitzis*, the fringes to be worn on the corners of the four-cornered garments. The written Torah is very sparse with its information although our sages describe the commandment as equal in weight to all the other commandants combined (*Menachot* 43).¹⁹

Rosh Hashana as a day of judgment, *Tefillin*, *Tzitzis*, and the soul are all essentials of *Yiddishkite* and the *Chumash* presents each of them enigmatically and reticently due to their esoteric nature.

Similarly, Rabbi Miller proposes that the Torah’s handling of the subject of the Afterlife works according to this rule.

Just as no attempt was made in the Scriptures to describe the true nature of Hashem, so there was no attempt to portray the nature of the existence of the Afterlife...Because the Afterlife is identical with G-d’s true splendor, both subjects are treated with reverent reticence.²⁰

Again, the *Chumash* only hints at lofty subjects. God’s love certainly can be characterized as a lofty matter of the soul, and so the *Chumash* doesn’t emphasize it in the manner that we might expect. As the Ramchal explained, Hashem’s intention in creating the universe was to bestow

¹⁹ Rabbeinu Bachya, Commentary on Torah, Leviticus 23:24, translation by Eliyahu Munk (Brooklyn: Lamda Publishers).

²⁰ R’ Avigdor Miller, *The Beginning* (New York: Gross Brothers Publishing, 1991) p. 286.

good on others.²¹ His love is tied up in His nature about which, according to Rabbi Miller, the *Chumash* does not elaborate in detail.

Perhaps also love is simply presented *b'tznius*, modestly, as it is a matter of emotional intimacy. The American mentality might struggle with this idea for here people wear their hearts on a sleeve. But in Judaism we tend to keep the holy and the intimate under cover where it lasts longer. Rabbi Soloveitchik explained as follows:

From childhood, I was taught to control my feelings and not to display what was taking place in my emotional world. Father z"l used to say: "The holier the feeling, the more intimate it is, the more it needs to be buried in the depths...."²²

In explanation of the idea, Rabbi Soloveitchik compared a person's emotional life to the *Kadosh HaKadoshim*, the Holy of Holies, in the Temple. The *Kadosh HaKadoshim*, the holiest site in the universe, is accessible only to the *Kohen Gadol* and only on Yom Kippur. It is hidden behind a curtain, modest, protected from the profanities of humankind. Rabbi Soloveitchik explained further that excessive revelation of emotions puts those emotions at risk before others who may misapprehend them. He said, "If a man is full of joy and happiness, let him reveal his feelings to God...but let him not exhibit them to others, lest a stranger's look desecrate his Holy of Holies." So too perhaps it goes with God Himself.

Perhaps, we see this idea again in Rabbi Soloveitchik's explanation of *Megilla 27b* where Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua answers his students' question as to why he lived such a long life. He offers as one answer that he never recited the *Birchas Cohanim* without first preceding it with a blessing. Rabbi Soloveitchik wonders why this would be distinctive. Wouldn't every Cohen precede the *Birchas Cohanim* with a blessing as is customary today? Rabbi Soloveitchik answers that we can conclude that Rabbi Elazar created this *bracha*. Since the *Birchas Cohanim* is said in the context of the blessings of the *Amidah*, there is no requirement to recite a specific blessing upon it. However, Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua created the special blessing that we now use "Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to bless the nation Israel with love." Said Rabbi Soloveitchik, "This is not a blessing on the mitzvah per se, but a request for the Priestly Blessing to be accompanied by love. The love of the Kohen for Israel is a prerequisite to the Priestly Blessing and a sufficiently important principle to merit a special berakha."²³ My question is, why did Rabbi Elazar not answer his students' question by saying that he never recited the *Birchas Cohanim* without first blessing the nation with love. Why say only that he never recited it without a blessing. I propose that the answer is that the Gemara, like

²¹ Ramchal, *Derech Hashem*, Chapter One

²² R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Be-Seter u-ve-Galui", p174 in Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, p. 101.

²³ R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, p. 874.

the *Chumash*, speaks of love *b'tzniut*, with modesty. Once again, “The holier the feeling, the more intimate it is, the more it needs to be buried in the depths.”

I propose also that the idea of Hashem’s love was self-understood by Jews of old, such that it need not be emphasized or detailed with words. As the *Midrash* teaches, “*Derech erez kadma l’Torah*,” proper conduct precedes the Torah.²⁴ The Mishnah says, “If there is no respect, there is no Torah.”²⁵ As Rabbi Miller wrote about the concept of the Afterlife, “...the Afterlife was considered a self-understood matter, which was the necessary result of belief in G-d.”²⁶ There are certain principles without which the Torah is not operable. They are assumed and necessary preconditions for Torah observance. They are “self-understood.”

The love between God and His people (and this means every individual person) likely works similarly. This was established by the *Avos* and *Imahos*, at *Yetzius Mizrayim*, at *Har Sinai*, in the *Midbar*, and in countless encounters over the millennia. For our righteous ancestors, life was built on this mutual love. They transmitted the feeling as part of the *mesorah* in everything they did. Tragically, the emotional and experiential elements of the *mesorah* are difficult to transmit in an epoch as turbulent as ours, in a climate where the world at large infiltrates our lives as never before in our history.²⁷ Rav Yerucham Levovitz, the *Mashgiach* of *Yeshivat Mir* used to say, “We cannot imagine the greatness of our grandmothers.”²⁸ This greatness had many facets, but one piece of it would be their love of Hashem and their sense of Hashem’s love for the Jewish people. How strong was this love? One only gives up his life for someone he loves and countless Jews did that countless times. What’s there to talk about?

One is reminded of the exchange between Golde and Tevya in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* where two old world *yidden* from the *shtetl* examine the new fangled concept of declaring one’s love explicitly. Tevya had just learned that his daughter was marrying a poor tailor “for love.” Struggling with the concept, he says, “It’s a new world. A new world. – Love. – Golde, do you love me?” She is mystified by the question for as a hard-working *balabusta* she has taken care of Tevya and the family for twenty-five years. “I’m your wife,” she offers as an answer. He persists with his question until reflecting further on her decades of labor for Tevya and the children she says finally, “I suppose I do” to which he responds “Then I suppose I love you too.” They conclude in unison, “It doesn’t change a thing. But even so, after twenty-five years, it’s nice to know.”²⁹ Evidentially, for Golde and Tevya, love was expressed in action, commitment, and duty, not mere words. Perhaps, explicit expressions of love are needed in our narcissistic era

²⁴ Vayikra Raba.

²⁵ *Pirkei Avos* 3:21. Translation by R’ Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*.

²⁶ R’ Avigdor Miller, *The Beginning*, p. 286.

²⁷ See Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, Chapter 8 for a discussion on Rabbi Soloveitchik’s observations regarding how people “experience” Judaism in our era and the challenges in conveying feeling and experience to students.

²⁸ R’ Avigdor Miller in many places.

²⁹ *Fiddler on the Roof*, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick.

where dedication among people, even family members, is no longer a given. Thus, today we are given to repeated declarations of love in an attempt to gain emotional security. For our grandparents, this was unnecessary.

Sometimes the repeated declarations of love in our era actually serve as counterfeit currency for love. We all know of numerous cases where people announce their love for their children, spouses, siblings, or friends but fail to back up the announcements with action, with self-sacrifice, and with concern. Talk, after all, is cheap. Sometimes the people who speak the least do the most. The love is in their actions. Rabbi Miller pointed out that the *Chumash* begins and ends with *chesed*, God's lovingkindness. It begins with the creation of the world, which is for man's benefit and then once people are on the scene with the production of clothes for Adam and Chava. It ends with the burial of Moshe. And not only that, everything in between is *chesed* as the entire Torah is meant for our benefit, our achievement, and our protection. As *Mishlei* says, "I have given you good instruction; do not forsake My Torah."³⁰ Rabbi Miller said, "The Torah is a wall which protects the Jew."³¹ The whole Torah is *chesed* for *Am Israel*. As the Mishnah says, "Beloved are Israel, for they were given a precious vessel (the Torah). As a gesture of special love, it was made known to them that they were given the precious vessel through which the world was created."³² The whole Torah constitutes a gift and expression of love even if the word 'love' itself doesn't appear on every page.

In *Masechta Yadayim*, Rabbi Akiba said that while all books of the Torah are holy, *Shir HaShirim* is the "Holy of Holies." *Shir HaShirim* is a cryptic book, an allegory of love right from its first words "thy love is better than wine" to its last "Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a gazelle or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices." Like the book of Job, it is largely a dialog and its flow and message are mysterious. Maybe this presentation is necessary given its theme and the Jewish preference for modesty in matters of deep emotion and intimacy. Rabbi Miller explained that *Shir HaShirim* is unique for its explicit expression of Hashem's love of the Jewish people and "this subject of Hashem's love for our nation is the holiest of themes." Said Rabbi Miller, "All of the songs are holy, but *Shir HaShirim* is an allegory of a love between Hashem and His people. It is the Holy of Holies."³³

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³⁰ *Mishlei* 4:2, translation by R' Johnathan Sacks, *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, p. 692.

³¹ R' Avigdor Miller, *Sing You Righteous*, in *Simcha Minute*, p. 58.

³² *Pirkei Avos* 3:18. Translation by R' Johnathan Sacks, *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*.

³³ R' Avigdor Miller, *Gems from Shir HaShirim*.