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ROSH HASHANA

Avraham's Ahava at the Akeida

Rav Kook, elucidating the *mida* (trait) of *Ahava* (love) in *Midot Hara'aya* devotes two passages to the love of God. He wrote the following in the fourth piece:

"The flame of the holy fire of the love of God is always burning in the soul. It is this that warms the spirit and illuminates life; the delights it yields are endless, there is no measure by which to assess it. And how cruel is man toward himself, that he allows himself to be sunk in the dark abyss of life, troubles himself with petty considerations, while he erases from his mind this that spells true life, that is the basis for all that gives meaning to life..." (*Midot Hara'aya, Ahava* #4)

The obligation for a Jew to develop a love of God is perhaps most famously and prominently expressed in the Torah in the recitation of the *Shema*: "And you shall love Hashem, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your possessions." (Devarim 6:5). Rav Kook, in describing love of God, emphasizes the natural or free flowing love that is organic to man in

his relationship with his Creator. According to Rav Kook, an exquisite example of such a love can be seen in Avraham's relationship with God and is revealed most powerfully in the episode of *Akeidat Yitzchak*.

What was Avraham's state of mind when he faced the challenge of the *Akeida*? Rav Kook argued that every act of Avraham reveals his passion and love for his Master. A few examples from Rav Kook's pen on Bereshit 22:3: "Avraham rose early in the morning" because he slept soundly the night before, secure in the knowledge that he was submitting to God's will. "He saddled his donkey," taking meticulous care of every detail before setting out, in order that he could carry out his task promptly and

efficiently. "He split the wood," leaving nothing to chance by having the wood ready for immediate use when the time would come. (*Siddur Olat Re'iyah*, 1:86)

In Rav Kook's mind the classic episode of the *Akeida* takes on a central

place in Jewish life because it is paradigmatic of authentic Ahavat Hashem where a Jew is driven by his love of God to fulfill any and all of His instructions.

THE RAMBAM'S PASSION

The unbridled and effusive love of God which we find in the writings of Rav Kook has its source in much earlier authorities. Although we often think of the Rambam's outlook emphasizing the rational and logical



Rav Asher Weiss shlit'a

approach, it is noteworthy to see the language that the Rambam employs to describe the ideal attainment of *Ahavat Hashem*:

“What is the proper degree of love? That a person should love God with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love for God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick.” (*Hilchot Teshuva* 10:3)

The Rambam elaborates on this halacha and notes that this lofty level is not easily achieved, but it should remain the bar that we seek to attain, even if we only inch a bit closer to this degree of closeness and attachment to God.

RAV KOOK'S SINGULAR AHAVAT HASHEM

Rabbi Charlop, the dear friend and close confidant of Rav Kook, recalled the following incident, which epitomizes Rav Kook extraordinary love of God:

“In the summer of 5681 (1921), Rav Kook went to Har Tuv for a few days of rest and respite. One day I visited him there, and we discussed lofty matters until late at night. The next morning I noticed that the Rav was late for his prayers. More unusual though; before we began to pray I saw him approach the innkeeper and engage in a conversation about gardening, discussing which fruit trees grow best in the region. This was quite uncharacteristic of the Rav, for he never engaged in other activities before praying.

His tardiness and the conversation left me baffled, so I conjured up the nerve to ask him for an explanation. This was his answer: “This morning, my heart was ablaze with a burning thirst for the Living God. So much so that I was afraid my soul would expire when I prayed. I was, therefore, compelled to lower the flames of my sacred fervor by diverting my thoughts to tangible, practical matters (An Angel Among Men, Raz, p.289).



A TEST OF YOUR LOVE

How does one gauge the requisite amount of love for God that one must strive to attain? After all, it is something quite difficult to measure. When the Torah commands that a Jew love God in the opening passage of the Shema, it says that the love should be "with all your heart, with all soul, and with all your *me'odecha*. The term *me'odecha* is a difficult word to translate. We commonly translate it to mean possessions, based on Rashi's comment that one should be willing to place their money towards the service of God. (Rashi, *Devarim* 6:5)

Rashi, however, offers a second explanation of the word *me'odecha* and he relates the word to *mida* (a measure): "with each and every measure that He measures out to you, be it with a measure of goodness, or be it with a measure of punishment..." (Ibid). In other words, in times of joy do we feel the joy of God's benevolence and blessing? And conversely, in times of pain and suffering, are we able to maintain a bond and dependence and feel that God is our anchor, even in the midst of suffering?

YOUR FAVORITE PASUK

Rabbi Shay Schachter, a well-respected rabbinic leader in New York, related that he once escorted the eminent *posek*, Rav Asher Weiss, to a talk he was giving to high school students (at the D.R.S. Yeshiva). Rav Asher Weiss opened the floor to questions and a young man asked

him, “What is your favorite *pasuk* in *Tanach*? He answered that it comes from the book of Tehillim: “*Tzamah nafshi le’lokim l’kel chai...*” My soul thirsts for God, the living God...” (Tehillim 42).

It is highly significant to consider that an individual renowned for mastering virtually all of Torah learning, and who is one of the world's foremost decisors of *halacha* chose this distinct verse, of every verse in the sacred writings, expressing a deep and abiding love of God.

LOVING HASHEM AND YOU

How should every individual assess their own growth in the area of Ahavat Hashem (loving God)? Perhaps the first step is to recognize that one's experience of love will vary from person to person. There is no single measuring stick that applies to every person equally.

The Chafetz Chaim suggested the following sagacious advice in this regard based on the verse in the Shema about loving Hashem:

“Hashem is not overbearing with his creations. He demands of each one to serve Him with his ability. And just as we have poor people and wealthy people, strong people and weak people, so too, people have different personalities. There are those who can serve Hashem and achieve a very high *madreigah*, and there are those who cannot achieve such a high *madreigah*. And that is why it says in the Torah, “you shall love Hashem with all **your** heart, and all **your** soul.” It doesn't say with “heart and soul,” but rather “with **your**

heart and **your** soul.” This means that as much as you can achieve, that's how much you are obligated to serve Hashem, each person based on his ability and personality.” (Chofetz Chaim Al HaTorah - Va'etchanan, translated in Pathway of Aliyah, Lopiansky, p. 208)

In a word, the Chafetz Chaim teaches that to a large degree the mitzvah of Ahavat Hashem is subjective and personal to every individual. There is no absolute measure in fulfilling this obligation. Each person strives to attain heights in this precious endeavor but we must recognize that every person is different and each individual will experience it according to their capability, life experiences, and temperament.

ENHANCING OUR AHAVAT HASHEM

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter was once walking through the streets of a European city when he began to feel extremely thirsty. He walked into a restaurant and ordered a cup of water. When he finished his drink, he walked over to the counter to pay, and was shocked at the astronomical bill they handed him.

“All I drank was a cup of water,” he said.

“True,” replied the manager, “a cup of water doesn't cost much. But when you drink it in this restaurant you are paying not only for the water. You are also paying for the ambiance.”

Rav Yisrael later told his student that this story provided him with an answer to a long-standing question he had. When we drink water, we recite the blessing, “*Shehakol nihiyeh bid'varo* - Everything was created through his utterance. Why do we make such a broad statement when thanking Hashem for some water? Shouldn't such an impressive *beracha* be reserved for something more significant?

“The restaurant manager answered my question,” said Rav Yisrael. “We are not thanking Hashem only for the water. We are thanking him for the ambiance.” (The 6 Constant Mitzvot,

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Heimowitz, p182).

Rav Yisrael Salanter teaches us that we can maintain our love for Hashem on a more constant basis by speaking about Hashem and expressing gratitude for the multitude of blessings that surround us. Reciting a *beracha* is an opportunity to think about Hashem and the favor he grants us. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the Talmud instituted that a Jew recite one hundred *berachot* each day. The more focus we place on our reliance on Hashem and the continual goodness that He provides, the more love we will feel for Him.

LESSONS FOR LIFE:

- Look for God in the world. Open your eyes to discover the Creator through His creations.
- Concentrate on the words “God of Avraham” in the *Shemoneh Esrei*. Think about how Avraham came to perceive God and

how he exquisitely led his remarkable life manifesting irrepressible love of God.

- Take a nature walk today and admire God’s world. ■

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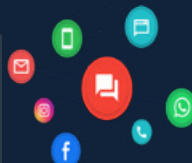
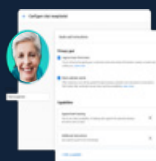


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