

Where Heaven and Earth Kiss: The Nexus of Divine and Human Love in a Selection of Jewish Sources

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This paper is a meditation on the relationship between limited and unlimited love in Jewish sources. I use the Greek term eros that is familiar to all of us and suggest that eros or the passionate moment of openness to another bonds us both to another human being and to God. I draw upon several thinkers in Judaism that suggest a close nexus of divine and human love and ask the question: how can we reconcile the passion and immediacy that we associate with the erotic on the one hand and the Jewish matrix of mitzvot--a life shaped by rules of conduct on the other hand? Based on several references from the tradition, I raise the question "can love be commanded, and what exactly does the commandment entail?" I find 2 basic perspectives on this question: the pragmatic approach often expressed by the rabbis emphasizing the importance of correct **actions** over correct **emotions** and **intentions**; the mystical and existential approach as articulated for example by the modern Jewish thinker, Franz Rosenzweig, according to whom the emotions of erotic love, kindled in us by the divine encounter, are instrumental in leading us to love our neighbor. In the first case, proper action initiates the desired emotional state whereas in the second case, the emotional state leads to the proper action. Despite the difference in the order by which ethical deeds and love occur, both approaches render (erotic) inspiration as integral to the experiences of love of neighbor and love of God.

On the Jewish commandments of Love

The three love commandments in the Hebrew Bible: loving the neighbor, loving the stranger, and loving God employ the Hebrew word ve-ahavta "and you shall love." The root word, ahb, and the noun Ahavah, are one of several employed in the bible for love. Another noun for love is chibah. This noun, related to Achva or friendship resembles the Hebrew noun for duty-chovah. The use of the same verb suggests the possibility of the interchangeability of the verb veahavtah for both human and divine love. Furthermore, the linguistic resemblance of chiba and chovah suggests a nexus of love and duty in Jewish thought. These observations lead to the following questions: 1) in what way is human and divine love the same and in what ways do they differ? 2) Isn't love contrary to duty? And what do the commandments to love mean in a Jewish context?

To begin with, it is important to point out that the 3 love commandments in the Torah are part of the 613 commandments.¹ On one level, these love commandments cannot be thought of independently from the other commandments to which Jews are obligated.

¹ a number which on some level mocks all endeavor to count while it is also a number which (611 plus the 2 commandments heard directly from the lips of God on mount Sinai) holds great esoteric significance for it represents the numerical value of the word Torah and the sum of the days of the year and the joints in the human body.)

Regardless of their apparent elevated ethical and spiritual import, they are not presented in any distinguished fashion, nor given any special status in the biblical text but rather, are presented as equal to the other mitzvot. What then is the textual context in which they are presented?

Let's take a look at the commandment to love our neighbor. This is perhaps the best known of the biblical commandments and one, which has numerous correlates in other religious traditions. However, the verse "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" as it is generally cited does not exist in the Torah. The biblical verse actually reads: You shall love your neighbor as yourself—I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:18). The special obligation to love the neighbor is not given in a vacuum; neither does it suggest that the motive or the reason is the inherent status of the neighbor; rather, the subsequent reference to God provides the rationale for this commandment—love of neighbor is based on her status in front of God and not merely her status as a person. In other words, this commandment reminds us, not only of our obligation to our neighbor but even more so, of our obligation to God.

The second question to consider is what is the actual obligation: is it the cultivation of the **emotion** of love or the pragmatics of such love manifested in practical actions? Is it an ideal state to which we should **strive** or is it a tangible act that we must perform? In a number of sources we find that loving our neighbor as ourselves is an ideal to which we should strive. The ideal is articulated as a sincere unlimited concern for the well being of others. According to this perspective, what we are commanded to do is to **strive** to attain this emotion. Still, other interpretations emphasize that since this commandment is listed as part of the mitzvot called *kedoshim* (lit. sanctified acts, Lev. 19-20), it should not be seen as simply a good advice or a sublime ideal. Rather, it should be understood as a requirement expressed in concrete acts. We find specific actions enumerated in the Mishneh Torah that exemplify this notion of neighborly love. These include for example, visiting the sick, comforting the mourners, joining the funeral procession, providing the bride and groom with all their needs. The meaning of these actions is that what is commanded here is far from the unreachable goal of universal love; rather, what is required here is daily practical acts towards members in our community that express basic care for others.

In an effort to explicate the meaning of love your neighbor, we find in the Talmud, in addition to mitzvot "Aseh", "you shall do" (also known as positive rules), discussions of "lo ta-aseh," you shall not, or negative mitzvot. One example of a negative rule (thou shall not), is inferred from the principle of loving your neighbor as yourself. The reference is to proper sexual conduct. This is the prohibition to a husband to refrain from sexual intercourse with his wife during the day. The argument against this practice is that daylight may reveal the wife's physical imperfection; these may be offensive to the husband, turning him off from desiring her. The man is required to prevent any humiliation of his wife (thereby perhaps also protecting his own interests), thus fulfilling the dictum of love the neighbor.

In regards to the emotion of love, which is integral to the literal meaning of the commandment, the following can be suggested. While halachically speaking, it is sufficient to perform acts of love even though one may not **begin** an action with the emotion of love, it is believed nevertheless that the performance of good deeds for others may indeed **lead** to feelings of love for them. There is a well-known principle in the Torah and Rabbinic literature regarding the priority of action over motives. It is based upon the story of the Israelites' response upon receiving the commandments when they uttered the words-naaseh venishmah-we will do and we will understand. This hierarchical order of the proper action being more important than proper emotion and intention does not in any way imply that the proper intention is overlooked. This can be seen in the rabbi's elaboration of love of God.

Commandment to Love God

When we turn to the commandment to love God in Deuteronomy 6:5, we read: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." This commandment, as the commandment of love of neighbor has been subject to great many interpretations. How does one come to love God? Again, the narrative context of this mitzvah reveals its intention. Following the commandment is an explicit application: "Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.." There are several specific acts enumerated here, one being learning and educating the next generation. Indeed, a common Jewish interpretation of the commandment to love God is through learning and contemplating the teachings of Torah. This commandment is understood essentially, not in terms of the emotion of love but in terms of a concrete act. Nachmanides for example explains that one should express love of God through worship, praise, and denying other gods. Another medieval thinker, Bachya Ben Asher in his *Commentary on the Torah* explains, "The meaning of love of God is that man reflect upon His Torah and His commandments and through them apprehend God and through this apprehension delight exceedingly...he will make righteous the many." Moses Maimonides offers perhaps the most elaborate discussion of love of God where he too emphasizes the act of studying the Torah as the means to attain love of God. Incidentally, Maimonides also adds to the studying of Torah, contemplation of God's **acts** by which he means studying the natural sciences. It is understood by many Jewish thinkers that these acts can be performed, at least initially without passion and once again the goal of the commandment is an ideal. According to these interpretations, the intended **goal** of the commandment cannot be commanded; only the means to its attainment.

Eros and Divine Love

Despite the emphasis on obedience and the pragmatic aspects of fulfilling the love commandments, it is noteworthy that rational thinkers such as Moses Maimonides underscore the importance of eros in the fulfillment of the commandment to love God. Commenting on Psalm 91:14 for example, Maimonides says: "the individual is protected

because he has known Me and then passionately loved Me. You know the difference between the terms one who loves [oheb] and one who loves passionately [hosheq]; an excess of love [mahabbah], so that no thought remains that is directed toward a thing other than the Beloved, is passionate love [ishq]. (Guide III 51 129a) And in another place Maimonides states: “What is the love of God that is befitting? It is to love the Eternal with a great and exceeding love, so strong that one’s soul shall be knit up with the love of God, and one should be continually enraptured by it, like a love-sick individual, whose mind is at no time free from his passion for a particular woman.” (Hilchot Teshuvah, Chapter 10, verse 3., p. 92b)

The Rabbis too did not refrain from employing erotic references to love of God especially in the context of Talmud Torah or learning Torah. (see for example Shir Hashirim Rabbah, the midrash on the Song of Songs). Even though the commandment to love God is generally understood in concrete acts of Talmud Torah or Torah scholarship, the interpretive tradition as a whole (and not just the Kabbalah) is rich with erotic references to textualized desire or intellectual desire as integral to the act of learning.²

Love and Duty, Law and commandments in Rosenzweig’s thought

The next question regarding the love commandments is the apparent dichotomy between love and duty. Franz Rosenzweig, a modern Jewish thinker addresses the falseness of the opposition between duty and love in a number of contexts in his philosophical writings. Inspired by The Song of Songs and the paradigm of the divine lover and the beloved human, he theorizes about such issues as the love commandments and their implications for religious experience in relation to ethics. To begin with, he asks: “can love be commanded? He answers: No third party can command you to love; but the One can. The command to love can only proceed from the mouth of the lover. Only the lover can and does say, “Love me!” In his mouth the commandment to love is not a strange commandment; it is none other than the voice of love itself.” (Star of Redemption, p. 176) This idea may sound rather odd. Does a lover command love? We may think that a lover seduces, but commands? Rosenzweig is a mystical and existential thinker for whom the song of songs teaches how the dynamics of love. The Song helps to collapse the dichotomy of love and duty. ...” not, for instance, does “the” duty oppose “the” love, rather, this duty and this love thrusts aside every other duty or every other love. (Germ Cell, in B. Galli, The New Thinking, p. 60) Applying the notions of dialogue, presence, desire, focusing on the prevalence of the pronoun I and you and the present tense of the verbs in the Song, he advocates that love is an event in the present, that it is a decision, and that love is speaking itself. His conviction about the unlimited nature of love can be seen in the following statement, “the love with which man loves God becomes the supreme law of all love with which he can love man, even love to extremes-but does love recognize extremes? (N. Glatzer, F. Rosenzweig: Life and Thought p. 349)

Rosenzweig’s ideas are distinguished in the explicit way in which he emphasizes the presentness of the commandments, he states: “The imperative of the commandment makes no provision for the future; it can only conceive the immediacy of obedience. If it

² Other contexts for erotic love can be seen in the liturgy.

were to think of a future or an Ever, it would be, not commandment but law. All commandments then signifies the present moment and while every other commandment could well have been law, the commandment to love can never become a law.” (Star, p. 177)

Elsewhere, he continues to draw this distinction between the present experience of hearing God’s voice **and** what is commonly referred to as the past event of the Sinai revelation, the time of the giving of the laws to Israel. In a letter to Buber, Rosenzweig states: “Revelation is certainly not law-giving...”he came down” [on Sinai]—this already concludes the revelation; “He spoke” is the beginning of interpretation, and certainly “I am.” (On Jewish Learning, p. 118). In an essay about Jewish renewal, he states “Law (Gesetz) must again become commandment (Gebot) which seeks to be transformed into deed at the very moment it is heard.” (OJL, p. 85)

Rosenzweig sets up a new theological matrix for the meaning of duty and love. What we are called to do as Jews is not only to fulfill the commandments but even prior to it, to hear the Transcendent voice of the One who calls us to transcend ourselves and step into a relation with the other. According to him, the event of revelation or the receiving of God’s love is the awakening of the soul. Once the soul experiences divine love, it becomes capable of “loving the neighbor.” He is able to articulate theologically what recent scientific studies are beginning to show us about the relationship of eros and ethics.

He explicates the meaning of mitzvah as a living dynamic experience of being addressed. Like love itself, fulfilling a mitzvah ideally is an experience entwined with the freshness of the present. This is in sharp contrast with the formalism of law that is static, scrupulous and designated for the future. It is also not a set of universal truths applicable or obligated upon all; rather, it is meant for a particular community and particular individuals within the Jewish community. In an essay he wrote to explain his philosophical principles called “the germ cell of the Star,” he explains the meaning of duty in a Jewish context. Speaking for the particular over the universal, existence over essence, he distinguishes the Jewish from the platonic and spinozistic idea of love and duty: “because it knows that human beings in general, all things, are brothers to each other, for this reason the stoic “loves,” the spinozist loves his neighbor. Against such love that arises out of the essence, the universal, stands the other that arises out of the event, that is out of the most particular thing there is. This particular goes step by step from one particular to the next particular, from one neighbor to the next neighbor, and denies love to the furthest until it can be love of neighbor.” (Germ Cell, pp. 56-57 in Galli)

This notion of particularity helps clarify, not only his views of love but also the meaning of a mitzvah or a religious deed in Judaism. Aside from the goodness of the act itself, the action means: a **response**--this is where its great efficacy lies. Therefore we read the rabbinic statement that “greater is he who is commanded and does, than he who is not commanded and does.” (BT Kid. 31a)

On the one hand, the life of mitzvot does not rely on the awakening of religious feelings or of a special spiritual impulse. It is concerned with establishing a fixed pattern of fulfilled religious obligation. On the other hand, the very meaning and worthiness of mitzvah is that the deed is done as a response to having received the command. The worthiness of the deed is not that it is a good deed in and of itself but rather because God willed it of us. The contrast between Plato and rabbinic thinking is thus: an action is good because god wills it and not that God wills it because it is good. In this matrix of the particularity of the response to the face of the other and the voice of the commander at Sinai, lover and beloved, Chiba and Chovah, eros and selfless love are embraced.