

CHAPTER 10, LAW 1 - LOVE AND SELF-DECEPTION

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

"A person should not say, 'I will fulfill the mitzvos (commandments) of the Torah and study its wisdom in order that I receive the blessings written in the Torah or so that I will earn the life of the World to Come. And I will abstain from the sins forbidden by the Torah in order that I will be spared from the curses written in the Torah or that I not be cut off from the World to Come.'

"It is not proper to serve G-d in this manner for one who does so serves out of fear. This is not the high level of the prophets nor of the wise. The only ones who serve G-d in this way are the unlearned, the women, and the children -- whom we instruct to serve [G-d] out of fear until their understanding increases and they serve out of love."

After spending much time discussing the concepts of reward, punishment and the World to Come, the Rambam in this chapter discusses the motives we should have in serving G-d. On the one hand, as we were recently taught, the heavenly rewards in store for the worthy are unimaginably great -- beyond even what the human mind -- in man's current state -- can comprehend. Yet here the Rambam teaches us that we must not serve G-d in order to receive those rewards -- and certainly not for the smattering of blessings we might receive in this world.

Rather, continues the Rambam, one should serve G-d out of love -- out of a devotion to do the will of his Creator. In the coming weeks the Rambam will describe more fully what love of G-d actually means. How does one "love" an infinite, unknowable Being? Can we build a loving relationship with Him in the manner we would with another human being?

For now, however, I would like to make a different observation. There is a very fundamental quandary which arises when we attempt to serve G-d out of love. We are taught not to serve G-d for the anticipated reward, but rather as an act of love. Yet we know that that reward is coming. If so, we are basically being asked to ignore what we know will be -- to train ourselves not to think about it -- and only then can we serve G-d properly.

To me this seems a very strange arrangement. In the back of our minds we **do** know reward is coming. Yet we are asked to suppress this knowledge, to act as if it isn't so. It seems a very curious form of mind control: Ignore what you know to be true and only then will you be serving Me properly. Does this mean that someone who is not so schizophrenic will not be a good servant of the L-rd?

The simplest answer is basically yes. We are told to ignore what we know in our hearts to be the

case. But it is not simply a mind game. As the Rambam will explain in future laws, loving G-d is such a powerful, overwhelming emotion that one who experiences it can think of little else. It is hardly a great act of omission for a lovesick person to forget everything else on his mind. If we truly love G-d, we will want to serve Him period. It will matter little to us that He will reward us in kind. All we want ourselves is to make our Beloved happy.

My teacher R. Yochanan Zweig saw a much deeper message in this. There in fact **is** a dilemma here -- serve G-d out of pure love, ignoring the reward you know He will bestow. But in fact, if not for that reward we would not be **able** to serve G-d out of love. Let us explain.

Our relationship with G-d is in many ways not so different from our relationship with other human beings. Let's say I have a friend (or spouse) whom I care for and give to selflessly. I devote myself to his needs and do everything for him. But the friend never does anything for me in return -- nor does he so much as acknowledge any of the acts I've done for him. Do I have a "relationship" with such a person? Do my acts for him increase my closeness? No -- that is no relationship. It is self-sacrifice. Doing for another who never does back for you is not devotion and does not build closeness. It is a one-way relationship -- in fact not a relationship at all. It will leave me feeling wasted and empty.

As an interesting aside -- perhaps getting a bit ahead of ourselves, this explains why intimacy is the highest expression of love in a marriage. Both parties give pleasure to each other at the same time. Giving to another is a wonderful expression of love. But as we have seen, if it is not reciprocated, at a point it is not giving at all, but just wasting and sacrificing myself. Conversely, receiving from the other is wonderful, but if I never reciprocate, the giver will equally feel betrayed.

Marriage -- the highest human relationship achievable to man -- contains both elements at once. Each party gives much to the other -- not in the expectation of but with the active knowledge that the other does for it as well. In intimacy these two elements come together at once -- in the highest expression of sharing known to man.

Based on this reasoning, it becomes evident just how significant one's intentions are during intimacy. If I am focused on giving pleasure to my spouse -- knowing at the same time that it is reciprocated, then it is a truly high form of giving -- without the possible residual sense of unrequited love. If, however, I am focused on the pleasure I am taking, it is an act of selfishness -- perhaps only somewhat ameliorated by the awareness that I am giving pleasure at the same time. The exact same action. But it can be a beautiful act of giving and sharing or a viciously selfish one of taking. As always, in the truly profound challenges of life, it all depends on our intentions.

There is yet another tangential issue I should address -- the parent-child relationship. Parents give selflessly to their children for years on end -- yet they love them dearly. The Talmud states it dryly: "The love of the father is for his children; the love of the children is for the children **they** have" (Sotah 49a). For years children give virtually nothing back to their parents. Why do parents instinctively love their children so? Isn't it self-sacrifice, unrequited love?

The answer is that in fact, giving to another greatly increases our love for and attachment to that person. The more we invest of ourselves into someone else, the more we feel a part of ourselves to be in him. Yet, this is true only to a degree. If a child comes of age and still exhibits no gratitude towards his parents -- as well as providing no "nachas" returns on their investment by never making anything of himself, the love will become strained. In fact, after years a parent may suddenly blow up at the child who never does anything in return. In spite of the many years of love and devotion, at the very same time a pent up sense of resentment and unrequited love slowly builds up in the parent. In the end -- once the parent feels it is time for the child to come into his own, the relationship may slowly turn into one of nagging and resentment, or of outright anger and disgust. Love relationships are powerful indeed. And they can never be one-way.

(An exception is giving to another who you know can never fully give back to you, such as a disabled child -- or a pet or plant for that matter. We love and feel attached to anyone and anything we invest in -- and simply lower our expectations of what we hope to receive in return. On the one hand, the lower expectations do not diminish our love, yet on the other, the relationship is of a different sort. To the degree that I cannot receive in return, my relationship is one of caring and stewarding, rather than a two-way reciprocal one.)

Getting back to our relationship with G-d, we are presented with the same fascinating dilemma. We should be overcome with love of our G-d and want nothing other than to serve Him and fulfill His wishes. Reward should make no difference. Yet all of this would be crushing if we did not at least **know** our service will be repaid in kind. The Talmud (Nedarim 62a; see also Rashi to Deut. 11:13), in explaining the verse "to love the L-rd your G-d" (Deut. 30:20), writes that one should study Torah not in order to be called "sage" or "rabbi", but out of love. The Talmud then concludes, "And in the end, the honor will come." Do not **serve** for that reason, but know that all the honors and pleasures of the world are the rightful due of G-d's special servants. And we need to know that. For we would not -- **could** not -- **really** love our G-d if we did not know that He loves us too.

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