

CHAPTER 10, LAW 2 - ABRAHAM'S DEVOTION

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

One who serves [G-d] out of love studies Torah, [performs] the mitzvos (commandments), and goes in the paths of wisdom not because of any factor in this world, nor because of fear of the consequences or to receive good; rather, he does what is right (lit., 'the truth') because it is right, and in the end the good will come regardless.

This is an exceedingly high level; not [even] every wise man achieves it. This was the high level of our forefather Abraham, whom God called "the one who loves Me" (Isaiah 41:8), because he served only out of love. This is the high level G-d commanded us [to aspire to] via our teacher Moses, as it is stated, 'And you shall love the L-rd your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your possessions' (Deut. 6:5). And once a person loves G-d appropriately, he will naturally (lit., 'immediately') perform all the mitzvos out of love.

In the last class the Rambam discussed the motives a person should have in serving G-d. He wrote that only a relatively shallow person serves G-d in order to earn reward or avoid punishment -- even in the next world. Rather, the true servant of G-d serves out of love -- out of the simple devotion to fulfill the wishes of his Creator.

Last week I diverged from the Rambam's basic point to introduce a critical counterpoint. We must serve G-d entirely for His sake -- out of a love for and devotion to Him rather than for anything we receive in return. This is true, but if we would not at least **know** that G-d rewards us in kind, it would all be for naught. As my teacher R. Yochanan Zweig explains, doing for another when the other does not do for me in return is no relationship. It is self-sacrifice. If we would not be aware of the fact that G-d **does** reward us, our service would not be a building of a relationship with G-d -- which we will fully enjoy in the World to Come. It would be a pathetic, slavish obedience to an uncaring Deity. Subjugate yourself -- crush yourself -- before G-d's will just because He said so. And much as in an unhealthy, unrequited human relationship, such self-sacrifice would neither build us as people nor increase our closeness to G-d.

Thus, although we must not serve G-d **because of** the reward, it is critically important that we know that G-d **does** reward. Only with that underlying foundation can our love-relationship with G-d even begin.

Looking now at this week's law, this principle relates to the Rambam's text in two important ways. The Rambam writes that one should serve G-d out of the strong sense of commitment that it is the

right thing to do. And, adds the Rambam, "in the end the good will come regardless." This is as we wrote -- and in fact employs almost the exact language of the Talmud and Midrash we cited last week. No matter how noble and lofty your intentions are in serving G-d, you had better know that He will reward you -- big time. Otherwise, in spite of (or perhaps because of) all your hard work, the relationship would be dead.

The Rambam concludes that this level is exceedingly difficult to achieve; even greats fail to reach it. This is in part because serving another -- even G-d -- so selflessly is daunting. But it is also because of the dilemma we discussed last time. If we **do** know -- as we must -- that G-d rewards us, it is very difficult to utterly remove that awareness from our consciousness. Closeness to G-d in the World to Come is our souls' greatest desire. How can we be told that the reward for keeping the mitzvos (commandments) will be all we could possibly dream of -- and then forget it all when we serve G-d? Thus, for the vast majority of us -- unless we're so completely overwhelmed with love of G-d that we can think of nothing else -- it's almost not possible to serve G-d entirely for His sake.

This is likewise why the Rambam writes this week that serving G-d out of love requires an extremely strong sense of doing what's right because it is right. It requires a very strong ability to control our emotions -- following truth because it's truth, and not for any other reason in existence.

The Rambam points to Abraham as the quintessential example of a man who served G-d out of love. Scripture itself ascribes to Abraham the accolade "My beloved." Abraham loved G-d and G-d loved him.

Now if we would venture why Abraham deserved such a distinguished honorific, no doubt one act would come to mind -- the binding of Isaac. We can imagine no greater act of love and devotion to G-d than that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his own son because of G-d's command. Abraham's love for G-d was greater than his instinctive love for his own son; he was willing to part with his entire future simply because G-d told him so.

But as a matter of fact, what I just wrote was completely false (though it probably had you all going...). And it will give us an important insight into the true meaning of love when we examine just why.

At the end of the story of the binding (Genesis 22:12), after Abraham successfully passes his challenge, G-d sends His angel to Abraham to tell him, "...for now I know that you are one who **fears** G-d" (emphasis mine). The binding of Isaac was a test of Abraham's fear of G-d, not his love. What is the difference?

We will define more fully what love of G-d means in coming weeks, but I will start with the following simple definition. We love a person (or G-d) when we like and admire everything we get to know about him. Love is built on common feelings and values -- when we can relate to the other's sentiments and emotions. They are our type: they share our feelings, emotions and interests.

(Note that I'm describing love in a more platonic sense. In male-female relationships, some of the same emotions are at play but with a powerful complementary aspect. But beyond our scope -- and also something I've never quite figured out...) ;-)

Abraham, initially through his intellect but ultimately through personal experience, discovered a perfect G-d -- one who was merciful, caring, exacting but entirely fair in judgment, and who created the world as a complete act of kindness. G-d naturally possesses all of the perfect qualities imaginable to man. Everything Abraham was able to discover about G-d he loved. G-d's inner qualities are perfect. His governance of the world are an ideal mixture of justice and forbearance, specially geared to enable man to discover G-d without being overwhelmed by Him.

As Abraham came to discover and know G-d, his love and admiration for Him only grew. What was not to love? G-d's essence and His laws are absolute perfection. Abraham felt an inner yearning to know and draw closer to this Being of ultimate sublimity.

But then came the Binding of Isaac -- which turned everything Abraham knew about G-d on its head. G-d commanded Abraham to do an act which ran contrary to everything Abraham understood -- and had been preaching to the world -- about G-d. "Do a cruel and senseless act -- simply because I said so. No caring G-d who values human life above all. No merciful G-d who abhors human sacrifice, who wants man to **live** for Him rather than die for Him. Forget it all. Just listen to Me -- because I said so. And in fact, ruin your entire career of teaching mankind about G-d. Instead of the loving G-d you have been preaching to mankind, I want you, the very preacher, to perform the most abhorrent, despicable act of moral debasement before me -- to serve Me as an angry god demanding human sacrifice -- just because I commanded it."

This was not a G-d man could love. Man could crush himself and slavishly follow such a G-d. But he could not love Him. If religion means demoralizing self-effacement -- "Crush yourself before Me and obey My every wish" -- man could perhaps **do** that for his G-d. But that was not a G-d man could **love**.

But it was all a test. And Abraham passed.

In truth, such was not the G-d of Israel. He does not desire human sacrifice nor that man perform senseless, destructive acts just because He said so. But Abraham, in passing his test, demonstrated a willingness to follow G-d under all circumstances. We do not serve G-d only because His commandments make sense to us or their observance makes us feel good. We do so from a sense that He is our Master and we must obey Him no matter what. We are His slaves, created by Him only in order that we serve Him in the manner He wishes. We may love Him in all His perfection and as a child loves his parent, but we also fear Him as a slave fears his master.

At the start of the story of the binding, G-d says to Abraham "**Please** take your son" (Genesis 22:2). The Talmud (Sanhedrin 89b) explains the "please" as G-d urging Abraham to pass this final of his ten tests (see [Pirkei Avos 5:4](#)), for if not, the first nine would be meaningless. Why would they be

"meaningless"? Isn't receiving a final grade of 90 pretty good?

The answer is that up until now Abraham had demonstrated only his love of G-d. His trials were difficult, but none of them changed his basic understanding of who G-d is. And passing tests because of love only goes so far. I love and am devoted to G-d -- and so I will do difficult acts for Him. But say my love wanes -- as love always does -- or I am asked to perform acts which I don't feel demonstrate my love? Is my dedication to G-d unwavering, or does it depend on what makes sense or feels good to me?

Abraham, in passing his final challenge, showed his undivided devotion to G-d. Neither this trial nor the first nine were passed out of love -- because serving G-d made Abraham feel good about himself or they were just agreeable with his personality. Such service ultimately stems from the doer -- **I** love G-d and cleaving to my perfect Creator is my ultimate pleasure. They may even be seen simply as sensible, understandable acts once one gets to know G-d in all His greatness. But more fundamentally, they are **my** acts of devotion, not true acts of submission.

Rather, Abraham, with all of his love, served G-d out of total obedience -- out of fear. He submitted to G-d whether it made any sense to him or not -- not because he saw in G-d perfect wisdom and commandments, but simply -- or not so simply -- because G-d said so. And when we think about it, one without the other is meaningless. Love is wonderful but it stems from myself and does not carry with it the total, unquestioning obedience we must have for our Master. Conversely, fear is necessary but does not engender the love-relationship we must ultimately have with our Creator. Beneath it all Abraham feared G-d. And because of that he was able to love Him too.

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