

CHAPTER 10, LAW 3 - CRAZY FOR G-D

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

How is the appropriate love [one should have for G-d]? It is that one loves G-d a great, excessive, extreme, and exceedingly intense love until his soul is bound with love of G-d and he is constantly preoccupied ('shagah') with his love.

This is as a lovesick person whose mind is not free from the love of the woman he is constantly preoccupied with -- whether when he sits down, he gets up, or he eats and drinks. Even more than this is the love of G-d in the hearts of those who love Him. They are constantly preoccupied with Him, as G-d commanded us '[And you shall love the L-rd your G-d] with all your hearts, with all your souls and with all your wealth' (Deut. 6:5). This is as King Solomon said metaphorically, 'For lovesick (lit., 'sick with love') am I' (Song of Songs 2:5). The entire Song of Songs is a metaphor for this concept.

This week's paragraph continues the discussion of this chapter. Up until now the Rambam has been discussing the concept of loving G-d. Ideally, we should serve G-d not out of a fear of punishment or in anticipation of heavenly reward, but out of a love for and devotion to our Creator -- out of a burning desire to fulfill the wishes of our Beloved.

In this law the Rambam describes the love we should feel for G-d more graphically. And he can think of no more apt an analogy than a man head over heels in love. This is precisely how the truly pious person relates to G-d: He can think of nothing else his every waking moment. He eats, he sleeps, he goes about his business with the thought of his Beloved in his head. He is overwhelmed with emotion; his mind is in the clouds. In the words of King Solomon, "for lovesick (lit., 'sick with love') am I (Song of Songs 2:5).

(It's curious that the Song of Songs appears to the unlearned to be an ordinary love song, perhaps sung by Solomon to one of his many wives, and having virtually nothing to do with religion. But in fact, it is the perfect metaphor for man's love of G-d -- and G-d's for us. Love of G-d, rather than some dry intellectual connection, is actually a rapturous emotional experience. It is man's strongest passions -- on an infinitely more profound level, but lacking nothing in fervor and intensity.)

An interesting aside is that -- as we all know -- when we're overwhelmed with love for another, we have that little image of our lover in our head constantly -- as if he or she is going along with us, watching our every move. The interesting thing is that when we're in love with another human being, she isn't **really** there in our head watching us. But G-d is. When we love G-d and constantly feel He

is with us -- well, He actually is. He is watching over us and is interested in our every act. And our lives will be so utterly enriched and transformed if we only let Him in.

I should also add what we pointed out last time, that even all of this said, our devotion to G-d cannot be founded upon love alone. As we learned from Abraham, dedication to G-d based on love alone is precarious. It will wax and wane with my fluctuating emotions. And even more fundamentally, such devotion stems from myself and my own discretion: Since **I** love G-d I will serve Him. Rather, service of G-d must be predicated upon the 100% solid bedrock of fear -- of submission to an all-powerful Deity whether I'm in a loving mood or not.

Yet even so, what energizes the relationship from day to day is love. That provides all the zest and excitement in the relationship. And as the Rambam tells us this week, with true love I will never be able to get G-d out of my heart and mind.

To me, the most curious issue with the Rambam this week is how appropriate really is it to be so lovesick for G-d? We know how disruptive such a state usually is. A person who is head over heels utterly loses focus on and interest in everything else in life. His head is in the clouds. He can't eat (or he overeats), he cannot go about his ordinary business. Everything else in his life screeches to a sudden halt as he becomes overwhelmed with infatuation for the object of his obsession.

The Rambam likewise aptly describes such a state as being love-"sick" -- if not physically so (which he certainly might be -- in constant state of jitters, digestion not working well, etc.), such a person is certainly very emotionally imbalanced (and vulnerable?).

I have a few suggestions as to why being lovesick for G-d is not as unhealthy as feeling the same towards another flesh and blood. First of all, a person lovesick for another pines for him or her every moment they're apart. He can think of no one and nothing else. With G-d, by contrast, the reality of being apart is not relevant. As we observed with the imagery of having your beloved with you in your head, G-d really is with us at all times. It is not imaginary. Thus, rather than longing for our lover, we can enjoy our closeness to G-d at all times. And we can further build on that relationship by serving our G-d and living our lives as He wishes.

A slightly different way of putting it is that being that G-d **is** with us at all times, we might as well just live with that reality. Unless we block out what we know in our hearts to be true, we must accept that our infinite G-d is a constant presence in our lives. And we can either be terrified by that reality or we can be enamored with it. G-d loves us and cares for us -- and He is always there with us. But of course, He demands much from us as well. Living with G-d most certainly ups the stakes of life, and requires serious work. But if we're honest about it, we should not be able to get G-d out of our minds. It is up to us whether we see this as a happy reality or a fearful one.

But there is a more positive -- more healthy -- way of viewing all this.

Anyone who lives and appreciates the Jewish lifestyle knows that there is no more rewarding way to

live. It's wholesome, it's emotionally satisfying, it's intellectually stimulating. It consists of strong family units and community structure. It contains the perfect mixture of rigid rules and free expression, of concrete ritual and personalized growth. Although this beauty is not necessarily evident to people on the outside (and occasionally to those within who just follow the rules), people who truly live the Torah life (and have some understanding of what it's all about) downright **love** it.

When we think about, this should not really surprise us. The same God who created the world gave us the Torah as His instructions for living in it. Naturally, He knows exactly man's needs -- how much pleasure we require, how much discipline, how much rigidity, and how much free expression -- as well as how much these vary from individual to individual. Observing the Torah is not only our ticket to the World to Come. It equally provides us with the perfect recipe for fulfillment in this world.

But there is an inherent danger in all of this. It is all too easy to fall madly in love with Judaism -- and to forget the God who commanded it all. A person can be so sated, so exhilarated with Torah study and mitzvah (commandment) observance that he falls in love with that -- and forgets the God who is behind it all. You can be a practicing Orthodox Jew and just be **happy** -- forgetting that G-d has anything to do with it.

There is a cryptic Talmudic passage (Baba Metziah 85) which discusses the sins of the many righteous Jews who lived at the time of the First Temple's destruction. What were they doing wrong which warranted the Temple's destruction? Explains the Talmud, they did not recite the appropriate blessings before studying Torah (based on Jeremiah 9:12).

Now why in the world would the Jews of that time have neglected such a basic -- as well as simple -- task as reciting the blessings before Torah study? There is an obligation to do so! And assuming the Jews of the time were doing everything else properly (since it appears from the Talmud that this was their only fault), why would they skip this one simple obligation?

My teacher R. Yochanan Zweig explained as follows. Why do we recite a blessing before performing a mitzvah? As a statement that we are doing the following act because G-d told us to do so. The basic text of most blessings is, "Blessed are You, our G-d... who has commanded us in..." Rather than doing the good deed because we feel it is a nice thing to do, we proclaim that ultimately we are doing it because it is G-d's will.

And this is where the righteous Jews of the First Temple period failed. They possessed the same fault we described just above. They were so fulfilled from and exhilarated with Torah study that they found themselves studying the Torah for its own sake. They simply fell in love with the Torah's wisdom -- so much so that they forgot the G-d who commanded them to study it. They could not get enough of understanding the Torah, forgetting that it is only truly a means to understanding G-d.

This is the meaning behind their not blessing beforehand. It is quite possible that the Jews of the time did technically recite the blessings, but in their hearts their main intention in studying the Torah was for its own sake. They did not study as the blessing stated -- because G-d commanded them to

do so. Their Torah study was not a means of connecting to G-d but of connecting to His wisdom.

We can now return to our original question. Isn't it terribly unhealthy to be lovesick for another -- even for G-d? Doesn't it disrupt ordinary living, making it impossible to live healthily and productively? Doesn't such an obsession cause life to utterly fall apart?

The answer is that love of G-d is not an emotion which takes us away from fulfilling living. It is actually an emotion which **stems from** our love of life. We live life fully and productively -- and translate that excitement into a love for G-d. Everything about life -- our joys, our devotion, our struggles and challenges -- is perfect and meaningful, and cause for intense enjoyment. (I know, virtually none of us live the Torah lifestyle so fully as to live on such a constant high. But G-d did give mankind the tools for ultimate fulfillment. I should also reiterate that as the Jews of the First Temple era, it is all too easy to become enamored with the Torah lifestyle but fail to translate that info a love for G-d.) Thus, rather than love of G-d being some fixation which distracts us from ordinary living, it actually evolves from a fulfilling and meaningful way of life. We live life to the fullest -- all the while being crazy about G-d.

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