

WHAT IS TRUE LOVE?

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Love is the most powerful human emotion. It electrifies, inspires and exalts us. It illuminates and gives meaning to our lives. The Torah wants our relationship with Hashem to be built on a foundation of love, so that we can reach the highest levels of connection and exaltation. In this week's Torah portion, we read the Shema prayer, which we say every morning and evening. It begins with a declaration of our faith, and the rest of the paragraph sets forth the commandment of loving Hashem. The paragraph concludes with the following two precepts: "And you shall tie them things upon your arms as a sign, and as a symbol between your eyes, and you shall write them upon the doorposts of your homes and your gateways."

These precepts are more familiar to us as the mitzvah of tefillin, which we wear on our arms and our heads, and the mitzvah of mezuzah, which we affix to our doorposts. The question, however, immediately arises: What is the connection between these two precepts and the commandment of love? It would seem that these precepts fall more readily into the category of obedience than love.

The answer lies in a deeper understanding of the essential nature of true love. In contemporary society, there is a perception of love as an emotional frame of mind. We love other people as we would love a beautiful painting. It is a self-centered sensation, personal gratification rather a profound spiritual union with the object of our love. When we say we love a painting we are not implying a bond with the canvas and pigments. We are expressing our own pleasure that is stimulated by the painting. It is, therefore, not the painting that we love but ourselves. Unfortunately, this attitude may often characterize our love for other people. If we examine these feelings closely we may sometimes find that what we call love is really only attraction and self-gratification. True love, however, is a total absorption in the object of our love.

The Torah wants us to love Hashem in a spirit of true love. We have to form a complete and constant attachment to Him, to be completely absorbed in Him in all places, at all times and under all circumstances. "These things shall be close to your heart . . . when you dwell in your homes and when you are traveling on the road, when you go to sleep and when you awaken." True love is total connection.

Therefore, when we affix mezuzahs to our doorposts, when we place tefillin on our heads, close to our brains, and on our left arms, close to our hearts, we cement our close connection with Hashem and show our consummate love.

The young newlyweds had just come back from their honeymoon and were settling into married life. During the first few weeks, he went back to his normal job routine, and she spend her days setting up their new home.

One time, he returned from a particularly grueling day at the office, grabbed a quick bite, settled into his easy chair and buried his head in the newspaper. The young woman, who had been waiting for him all day, began to cry.

He looked up, surprised. "Why are you crying?" he asked.

"Because I am not so sure that you love me," she replied.

"Why should you say something like that?"

"Because I've waited all day for you. I expected you to tell me what your day was like, and I would tell you about mine. And now, you just withdraw into yourself. You sat down in your chair and shut me out."

"But can't you see I'm exhausted?" the young man protested.

"That's exactly it," she said. "Of course you're interested in me when you're relaxed and at ease. But if you truly loved me, you would be interested in me even when you're frustrated and exhausted."

In our own lives, we might do well to examine the love we feel for other people to determine if we have really achieved the transcendent state of true love. True love is what any normal parents feels for their children. No matter how much pride and gratification they derive from the children, their feelings are not self-centered but focused on the objects of their love. Is this what we feel for the other people in our lives whom we profess to love? Is this what we feel for Hashem? Let us never forget that we have the power to control our feelings. We can look at the people important to us in a new light and learn to love them with a love that is truly true. If we can rise above our self-centered impulses, we can enrich ourselves immensely and illuminate our lives. Text Copyright © 2008 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).

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