

AHAVAS HASHEM: FOR THE LOVE OF G-D

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

One of the constant commandments that can be performed at any moment of one's life and even by thought alone is ahavas Hashem, love of G-d. This has to be "with all your heart, all your soul and all your resources" (Deuteronomy 6:5). See also ibid 11:1, 13; ibid 30:16, 20)

The highest level of divine worship - indeed the cornerstone to all religious life - is to love G-d.

This love overflows to the Torah study and to mitzvah observance. Indeed, this love ranks as the greatest quality a Jew has and the highest level of divine service humanly possible (Rabbeinu Bachya, Chovovs Halevovos, Shaar HaAhavah). What does "love to G-d" mean? And how can man become a constant fount of love flowing out to his Creator?

Works of literature repeatedly tackle the emotions of love and how it defines relationships. Songs and poems have been composed to convey expressions of love (or lost love).

But what exactly is love?

In truth, love defies an easy definition. It roughly translates to the intense feeling and affection felt by someone towards another "subject". (It is inappropriate to apply this to an "object", e.g. "I love meat" - which is just an expression of self-love). One is attracted and given over to the attributes, qualities, values and essence of the other. To perpetuate this love, it cannot be "defined" or based upon outer, ephemeral factors such as wealth, beauty, power etc, things that are destined to fade over the horizon.

Where there is genuine love then there is the fusion of the inner self with another. Indeed, one's beloved becomes the point of reference to his "identity". This leads to a life-long commitment and pathway towards altruism (the ethicists observe how the word hav, "to give" is related to the word ahavah, "love") his life playing out as a "giver" rather than a "taker".

Someone who is lovesick cannot think of anything else. All his thoughts - without exception - are focused upon his beloved. He is infatuated. He finds it impossible to remove his beloved from his mind every for a moment.

The love of G-d sees man's soul passionately drawn after its spiritual essence. It may be exiled onto this world and encased in a physical body. But the soul longs to unite itself with G-d.

In fact, the Jew is passionately in love with G-d. He is lovesick. All of his thoughts and every moment of his existence is devoted and focused on G-d. He willingly devotes every fiber of his life in the worship of his Master and stands ready to relinquish life itself to sanctify G-d's Name (Talmud, Berachos 61b). Any activity outside this obsession is rightly dismissed as meaningless and irrelevant (Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 10:3).

His identification exists only for G-d. For the chosen nation, everything revolves around his "Lover": G-d.

Knowing that he cannot possibly function or live without this relationship, the Jew becomes one with his Beloved G-d. However this love is not based upon irrational emotions. It is a well thought-out matter, one of man's inner convictions upon grasping the magnificence of His creation (See Rambam, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 2:1-2). And it increases exponentially the more man grasps his indebtedness to G-d for the gift of life and all the benevolence he has showered upon his creations.

This expression of ahavah leads to becoming echad, one with G-d - the words ahavah, "love" and echad, "oneness" share the same numeric value. This is encapsulated in the Shema - we first affirm Hashem as our One G-d and continue with the instruction: "You shall love Hashem your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your resources" (Deuteronomy 6:5). And G-d reciprocates by showering His love upon us. (Indeed, the two-way relationship between G-d and Israel also acts as a template for the love of husband and wife).

Our love of G-d is not just "another" form of the love. It underpins our existence and identity.

Judaism is an all-consuming, highest form of love - the outgrowth of our one love of G-d which finds expression in our mitzvah performance. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and **Torah.org**.