

Love trumps all...

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The Book of Devarim commands the notion of ahava several times. Last week we read the first paragraph of Shema which is fundamentally based around the notion of Ahavat Hashem, the love of God¹. This week we read another²

The Rambam, Maimonides, the twelfth century talmudist and philosopher, discusses what these verses mean. In his Mishneh Torah, he states: It is a mitzvah to love and fear this glorious and awesome God³. The Rambam continues in his second law by asking how we are to do this, how can we be commanded to love something or someone when it is an emotion that is created between people, a tactile emotion. The Rambam applies a response to this by saying that when mankind looks around and sees the world, all of which was created by the almighty, he will find it in his heart to love God the same way in which he or she loves another human being. By bringing a tactile cue, a tactile response can be had⁴.

If I could suggest another thought. In amongst the commands of love for God that we have already discussed, the Torah tells us about loving the stranger⁵.

We are commanded to love the strangers amongst us, and elsewhere we are told to love our neighbour as we love ourselves in the Parasha of Kedoshim, which Rabbi Akiva notes in the Talmud is a fundamental principal of our faith. There is a concept known as Ahavat Yisrael, the love of each and every Jew.

The famous tzaddik of Jerusalem, Rav Aryeh Levin zt"l, related that, in 1929, when news of the Arab massacre in Chevron (sixty-three defenceless Jews, including many yeshivah students from Yeshivat Chevron, were murdered by an Arab mob) reached Harav Kook, zt"l, Rav Kook fainted. After coming to, he cried bitterly and ripped his garments as a sign of mourning. For a while afterwards, he barely ate or drank, and he slept without a pillow under his head. From that point on, old age crept up on him and his health began to deteriorate, leading to the illness to which he finally succumbed. Harav Yechezkel Sarne, zt"l, Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivat Chevron at the time, was not in Chevron during the massacre. He related that when he heard of the massacre he was shocked and filled with pain. After all, he had known the victims well. "But I did not faint!" Rav Kook, who did not personally know those students, reached such a high level of Ahavat Yisrael that he loved others as he loved himself. He fainted!⁶

By applying these principles of Ahavat ha Ger and Ahavat Yisrael, we gain a greater appreciation of Ahavat Hashem. The Sfas Emes found it hard to imagine that we could be commanded to love at all; how can God command us to have an emotional response when perhaps none exists. He answers that perhaps it is due to the very fact that it is inherently built into each and every one of us, that we have love for God, for our fellow Jew and for those around us. In fact Ben Azai's response in relation to Rabbi Akiva says that Veahavta lareicha kamocho, that you should love your neighbour as yourself, is zeh sefer toldot Adam, that it is a chapter in the book of mankind, an inherent value. It is as if, according to our sages, that we are coded at a biological level to love our own kind and to love God and make space in our hearts for those who are not a part of our people. It is only when outside forces come in to influence our decisions that we lose focus and hate or disdain begins to seep in.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**