

Love Is A Verb
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When I was growing up it would drive me crazy when my grandmother would respond to my saying “I love you” with “Show me, don’t tell me.” To clarify, this was after my siblings and I moved in with her, and she had become our guardian. When she was just my grandma, who we would go to visit, her response was a very affectionate “I love you too.” But when my siblings and I lived with her, what she meant by this response was, “I know you love me, but if really want me to feel that, then please keep your room clean, do your chores before I have to remind you, eat what I cook for you without complaining, and don’t fight with your brothers so much.” It wasn’t until I became a mother myself that I finally understood what she was trying to tell me. It’s that love isn’t a feeling, it’s a verb.

Love is what we do, it’s not just something we say.

It’s like what Golde said to Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof” when he asked his wife “do you love me?” And she responded:

“Do I love you?

For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes

Cooked your meals, cleaned your house

Given you children, milked the cow

After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?”

And he pushed, asking her again, “but do you love me?” And again she replies and says:

“Do I love him?

For twenty-five years I've lived with him

Fought with him, starved with him

Twenty-five years my bed is his

If that's not love, what is?”

In Judaism, love is exactly what Golde was talking about. It’s being in it for the long haul, about showing someone over and over again that they are there for them in the ways that really matter, not just when it’s easy

or convenient, but over and over and over again, day and day out, in good times and in bad.

In this week's Torah portion, Parashat Ve'etchanan, the second portion in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives to us words of such importance, that the Rabbis put them into our prayer services to be recited every morning and every night:

וואהבת את יהוה אלהיך בכל-לבבך ובכל-נפשך ובכל-מאדך
“And you shall love the Eternal your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be in your heart; And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them upon the posts of your house, and on your gates.” (Deut. 6:5-9)

So how do we do this? How do we show our love with all of our heart, and all of our soul, and all of our might? Through our words, through our actions, and how we show ourselves to others, how behave in front of our family, as well as those who simply pass by our homes. We show God our love by doing what has been asked of us – to be decent and kind, just and honest, everywhere and at all times, both with those who see us most closely, like our families, and even with those who we don't know or don't like.

Part of what is so striking with this passage is that we are being commanded to love. Only three times in the Torah are we given a command to love.

In Leviticus 19:18, God commands us through Moses and says: You shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; אני יהוה - I am the Eternal.

The “but you shall love” tells us that the opposite of love is being vengeful and holding a grudge against others.

A little later in Leviticus chapter 19:34, God continues: But the stranger who dwells with you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; אני יהוה אלהיכם - I am the Eternal your God.

From this verse we learn that loving someone means treating them as we would like to be treated, treating them as though they are of our clan or our family, even if they are not.

Both of these commands include a little something extra that is also worth paying attention to. When the Torah says “אני יהוה - I am the Eternal” – it’s like a parent saying “because I said so.” And when the Torah says “אני יהוה אלהיכם - I am the Eternal your God” – it’s like your dad saying “because I’m your father and I said so, so don’t argue with me if you know what’s good for you!”

In other words, these phrases are a way for the Torah to emphasize that this is not only important and non-negotiable, but it also gives us insight of what types of behavior is of particular importance to God.

But in these week’s portion, it’s not God talking, it’s Moses. Moses, is the one urging us to not only obey God’s laws, but to do more than that, to love God. So what does Moses mean when he says:

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ:
“And you shall love the Eternal your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

He’s telling us that it’s not enough to simply perform the mitzvot, what also matters is how we do it. For instance, if I come home on a Friday afternoon and my children have set the table for Shabbat and my husband is preparing the meal, and I didn’t ask any of them to, I feel loved, because they have thought about what matters to me, and they did it, not for any reward, but because they knew that it would make me happy, and feel loved. And that is what it means to show someone your love. It is showing them that what matters to them, matters to you, and you show them that love through your actions, and not just your words.

So how do we know what God wants? Remember how I said some commandments are followed by the words “אני יהוה - I am the Eternal” or “אני יהוה אלהיכם - I am the Eternal your God” – that is one of the way we know what matters to God.

Those two phrases usually go after commandments about how we are supposed to treat the most vulnerable amongst us, or the people for whom we find it difficult to extend the same decency that we would extend to our own family, or want shown to us, in other words not only our neighbors and the stranger, but also the poor, the widow, and the orphan, the downtrodden and the oppressed.

This is how we show God our love with all of our heart, with all of our soul, and with all of our might, by treating others as God would want us to treat them, every day, morning til night, when we rise up until we lay down, inside our homes and when on our way. And doing so not because we receive any benefit from it, but because it is simply the right thing to do.

In the Ve’ahavta, Moses also commands us to mark our doorposts with these words, in other words to put up a mezuzah, on our doors and on our gates, a visible reminder not only for us, but also a sign for anyone who walks by to know that it is a Jewish home.

And this idea is not unique to us. During the Depression hobos would put marks on peoples fences, buildings trees, or pavement as a way to communicate to other hoboies coming that way after them. For instance, a cross meant “angel food” (or that food would be served to hobos after a sermon). A triangle with hands meant that the homeowner has a gun. A square missing its top line — meant that it was safe to camp in that spot. A spearhead was a warning to defend yourself. Two shovels meant that work was available, and on and on.

And there are similar stories about pre-Civil War America and the Underground Railroad, about signs and symbols for those who knew how to decode the symbols to know that the house was a safe place for them.

In truth, most people who see a mezuzah on a door have no idea what it is, or what it symbolizes. Like the Hobo signs and the Underground Railroad, it's really a sign for those who are within that group. And for me, and I assume for many Jews, when I see a mezuzah on a house or apartment when I'm traveling or someplace unfamiliar, it serves as a sign to me that that place is somewhere I would be safe, a place where I would be welcomed, a place where I can assume that my values are shared.

I'm also always very mindful when someone comes to my door and comments on, or asks about, the mezuzah, it is a reminder to me not to be rude or brisk, but to put my best self forward, knowing that this person might judge both Judaism and other Jews by the way I behave.

And that is also a way that I show my love to God, by trying to behave as a good ambassador, just like when I was a kid and knew that my family would be judged by how I behaved in public. Because I cared about them, I was mindful of my own behavior, so they wouldn't be affected negatively.

So does praying mean that someone loves God? I don't know, but I know that when someone comes to services because someone they care about is there to say Kaddish, and they want to support that person, that is loving God.

Does keeping kosher means that someone loves God? I don't know, but I think that when that person fights for the people who grow and make or serve our food to have a living wage and have safe work conditions, that is loving God.

Does saying you believe in God mean that you love God? My childhood rabbi taught me that you can say you love God but treat your fellows humans unfairly or with contempt, and that means you are not actually loving God. But if you say you do not believe God, and yet you treat your fellow human being with kindness and with compassion, then you are behaving as though you love God, whether you believe in God or not.

It is not God who demands our love, it is Moses who understands that we need to behave as though we do. Because after 40 of leading the Israelites, Moses understood that what matters most is not what we say, but what we do. Because love is a verb, it's demonstrated, over and over again, and it's not just about what we do, but how we do it, it's about intentionality and thoughtfulness. Words are cheap, actions however speak volumes.

Moses doesn't tell us just to love God, but to love God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" – because that is how a person demonstrates love, with the fullness of their being, their words, their actions, and their intentions.

Do most of our fellow congregants believe in God? Probably not, and I'm not sure that I really want to know, or that I really care, that is between them and the Holy One, and not for me to judge. But I certainly hope that they behave as though they do.

I want to conclude with the beautiful words of Congressman John Lewis, of blessed memory, it is from the piece that was published in the New York Times yesterday. Congressman Lewis's theology rooted in love, love of his Creator, and of his fellow human beings, he had an unshakable faith in what is possible. He wrote:

"When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide."

Ken yehi ratzon – may this be God's will. And let us all say, amen!