

PARASHAT VA'ETCHANAN

Deuteronomy 3:23–7:11

Parashat Va'etchanan continues Moses' speeches to the Israelites just before his death. He pleads with God to allow him to enter the Land of Israel, but he is refused. He warns the people against falling into idolatry; reminds them to observe all the commandments given to them; and recalls their awesome experience at Mount Horeb, where they received the Ten Commandments. Moses also sets aside Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan as refuge cities for those who commit unintentional homicide. Proclaiming that God made a covenant with the Israelites at Mount Horeb, Moses recites the Ten Commandments. The people are overwhelmed and ask Moses to recite the rest of the commandments, promising to obey them. Afterwards, Moses tells them, "Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One. You shall love *Adonai* your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Warning them against repeating their rebelliousness at Massah, Moses tells them, "Do what is right and good in the sight of *Adonai*, that it may go well with you. . . ." Finally, Moses informs the Israelites that they are not to spare the people who occupy their land nor intermarry with them. The Israelites are God's chosen and treasured people who will be loved by God if they remain loyal to God's covenant and commandments.

OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

Moses continues his last speeches to the Israelites while they are camped in a valley near Beth-peor on the east side

of the Jordan River. He tells of pleading with God to allow him to enter the Land of Israel and of his disappointment at being refused. God instructs Moses to view the land from Pisgah, a high place on the east side of the Jordan River, and to advise Joshua about conquering the land.

·2·

Moses tells the Israelites that God has given them laws and commandments by which to live when they enter the Land of Israel. They are to observe them faithfully and to teach them to their children. That will prove that they are a “wise and discerning people . . . a great nation.”

He reminds the people of the time they stood with him at Mount Horeb (Sinai). The mountain was “ablaze with flames to the very skies, dark with the densest clouds,” and God “commanded you to observe the Ten Commandments” and avoid making or worshiping idols. Moses warns them that failure to observe God’s commandments will result in their being driven from their land and scattered among the nations. If they search for God with their hearts and souls, God will not fail them or forsake the covenant made with their ancestors.

Moses speaks of the unique relationship between God and the Jewish people. God spoke to them out of the fire at Mount Horeb, liberated them from bondage, and gave them the Land of Israel. “Know therefore this day and keep in mind that *Adonai* alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other. Observe God’s laws and commandments . . . that you may long remain in the land that *Adonai* your God is giving you for all time.”

·3·

Moses sets aside three cities—Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan—as refuge places where those who have committed unintentional homicide may flee for justice.

·4·

Moses continues by declaring that “God made a covenant with us at Horeb . . . out of the fire.” He then repeats God’s words to the people, the Ten Commandments: (1) I *Adonai* am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (2) You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image. . . . (3) You shall not swear falsely by the name of *Adonai*. . . . (4) Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy. . . . (5) Honor your father and your mother. . . . (6) You shall not murder. (7) You shall not commit adultery.



(8) You shall not steal. (9) You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (10) You shall not covet.

Recalling the revelation at Mount Horeb, Moses reminds the people of their fear of the fire and their request that he receive the Ten Commandments for them. He agreed and warned them to follow God’s commandments. He told them, “Do not turn aside to the right or to the left; follow only the path that God has given you.”

Moses then instructs them: “Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One. You shall love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these commandments. . . . Impress them upon your children. . . . Recite them when you are at home and when you are away. . . . Bind them between your eyes . . . inscribe them on the doorposts of your house.”

To parents he adds, “When your child asks, ‘What is the meaning of these laws and commandments?’ explain: ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and God freed us . . . that we might be given the land promised to our ancestors. We are to observe these commandments for our survival.’”

• 5 •

Moses speaks of the Israelites entering the Land of Israel and dislodging the Hittites, Gergashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. He cautions the Israelites against inter-

marriage with these foreign people, reminding them that "God chose you to be a treasured people. . . ." Those who observe the commandments will be rewarded and those who do not will suffer destruction.

THEMES

Parashat Va'etchanan contains two important themes:

1. Deciphering the meaning of the *Shema*.
2. Loving God.

PEREK ALEF: *Can We Decipher the Meaning of the Shema?*

Of the 4,875 verses in the Torah, one stands out as the code of faith for Jews. Since the time of the Temple in Jerusalem, the words *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad*, "Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One," have been recited twice daily by pious Jews. They are among the first words taught to a young child and the last words recited at the time of death. Jewish martyrs have proudly pronounced them against forces of tyranny, and, through the centuries, they have constituted the most universally known Hebrew phrase in Jewish tradition.



Hertz

In evaluating the words of the *Shema*, Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz, once the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, writes: "Throughout the entire realm of literature . . . there is probably no utterance to be found that can be compared in its intellectual and spiritual force, or in the influence it exerted upon the whole thinking and feeling of civilized humanity, than the six words that have become the battle cry of the Jewish people for more than twenty-five centuries." (*Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, Bloch Publishing Co., 1948, p. 269)

Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, author of *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, characterizes the *Shema* as "a precious gem . . . a diamond set into a

crown of faith and proven true and enduring in human history." (pp. 1369–1370)

Despite these testimonials to the importance of the *Shema*, commentators of Torah raise questions about its meaning. And, as with other portions of Torah, they differ in their interpretations.

Rabbi Pinchas ben Hama claims that the Israelites first said the *Shema* as they were standing at Sinai; the early rabbis teach that it is an affirmation of the Jewish people's partnership with God. Other rabbis argue that the phrase "*Adonai* our God" means "God is our Source." In other words, human beings derive from God and are made "in the image of God." (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 2:31, 35)



Rashi

Rashi offers a different approach. Living in eleventh-century France, in a world of conflicting faiths, he hopes that in time human thought will evolve to the point where all human beings embrace one notion of God and achieve peace. For him the words "Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* our God, *Adonai* is One" translate into "Hear, O Israel: *Adonai*, whom we recognize as our God, will one day be accepted by all people as One, and their belief in one God will unite us as one human family."

In this view, Rashi reflects the perspective of the *Alenu* prayer recited at the conclusion of Jewish worship services. In the words of Deu-

teronomy 4:39, the *Alenu* declares: "Know therefore this day and keep in mind that *Adonai* alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other." *Alenu* then continues with the hope that all evil will be ended, that the world will be "perfected under God's rule," and that all human beings will acknowledge that "God is One." (Zechariah 14:9)

In *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook* (Chaim Stern, editor, Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York, 1975, p. 620), a more modern version of the *Alenu* mirrors Rashi's interpretation: "Eternal God, we face the morrow with hope made stronger by the vision of Your kingdom, a world where poverty and war are banished, where injustice and hate are gone. Teach us more and more to share the pain of others, to heed Your call for justice, to pursue the blessing of peace. Help us, O God, to gain victory over evil, to bring nearer the day when all the world shall be one."



Rambam (Maimonides)

For Maimonides the *Shema* is not a statement of hope that all human beings will eventually agree that "God is One" but a theological declaration that "the Cause of all existence is One." In his "Thirteen Principles of Faith," Maimonides declares that God's unity is eternal and unique, that God creates all that is and continues to create all that will be, and that God has no body or form. In other writings, he holds that God's power may not be compared to any other power known to human beings. "God is not subject to physical limitations or definitions. . . . God's power is endless."

The *Shema*, says Maimonides, affirms the unity of all that exists and will exist. God's power embraces everything. It is the primary Cause uniting the countless stars of the cosmos; the green globe of earth with its complex web of life; and the yesterday, today, and tomorrow of humanity. In the declaration of the *Shema*, Jews acknowledge that God is not mortal, not limited by human frailties, and not a symbol reducible

to stone, wood, or artistic images. God, Maimonides argues, is the One Power that creates all that is. (See Philip Cohen, *Rambam on the Torah*, Rubin Mass Ltd., Jerusalem, 1985, pp. 146-147.)



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Nachmanides sees in the words of the *Shema* a very personal statement by Moses. He points out that, in most other cases where Moses uses the words "Hear, O Israel," he follows them with "*Adonai your God*," not with "*Adonai our God*." Why, asks Nachmanides, does Moses in this particular situation choose to say *our* God?

Nachmanides speculates that Moses is concerned with appearances. God has liberated the people from slavery, has provided for their needs in the desert, and has given them the Ten Commandments. Now, in reminding the people of all God has done, Moses does not want to exclude himself. In declaring God's unity with words of the *Shema*, he makes it clear that he is including himself as a witness to God's goodness and power.

שמע ישראל, יהוה אלהינו, יהוה אחד.

Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One.

Nachmanides bases his interpretation on the actual Torah text. In the Torah text, the last letter, *ayin*, of the first word of the *Shema* and the last letter, *dalet*, of the last word are enlarged. Combined, the letters spell the word *ed*, meaning "witness." In reciting the *Shema*, Jews bear "witness" to God's unity and power. (Comments on Deuteronomy 6:4)

Rabbi Abraham Samuel Benjamin Sofer, a nineteenth-century Hungarian interpreter, also calls attention to the way in which the *Shema* is worded. The verse, says Sofer, could have been written "Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God and

is One.” Instead, the word *Adonai* appears twice. Why?

Sofer speculates that Moses meant to teach that all human experience comes from God. What we know as good and evil, our moments of joy and sadness, all our successes and disappointments, and our good or bad fortune—all are derived from God. At times, Sofer explains, there is a tendency to believe, as did many other early religious traditions, that there are gods for good and gods for evil. Contradicting this assumption, Moses tells the people: “Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* our God provides all the goodness we experience, and *Adonai* our God is the author of the harsh judgments we endure. *Adonai* is One.” (See discussion in B.S. Jacobson, *Meditations on the Torah*, p. 271.)

Contemporary commentator Rabbi Shlomo Riskin holds a view close to Sofer's. Carefully analyzing the Hebrew words *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad*, he notes that two words are used for God. The first is *Adonai*; the second is *Elohenu*. Early Jewish tradition, says Riskin, associates God's qualities of mercy and love with the word *Adonai* and God's qualities of judgment with *Elohim*. (*Elohenu* means “our God.”)

Riskin maintains that, when Moses first spoke the words of the *Shema*, he meant to clarify a significant problem faced by the Israelites and by all people as well: the problem of understanding God's unity and the way God works in our lives and in the universe. “When things go smoothly,” Riskin writes, “when one feels a warm glow of love, success, and good health, one naturally attributes this to the good, compassionate nature of God (*Adonai*). But, when sudden tragedy strikes, the death of a loved one, national calamity, an earthquake, one feels the awesome and inexplicable power of God (*Elohim*). The holy *Zohar* teaches that this seeming split in God's character is a result of our imperfect vision. If we could see more clearly, we'd understand that everything God does is done for the good of humanity. Perhaps we can't always perceive it, but how can a finite creature be expected to fathom the Infinite Will?”

The message of the *Shema*, Riskin adds, “is that, if our eyes (and ears) were truly opened, we would comprehend that everything in the

world, both the things we think of as being clearly good and those other things that frighten us with their might, emerges from a compassionate and loving God; in other words, ‘*Adonai* is One.’” Within Jewish tradition, Riskin concludes, we teach that “just as we praise God for the good so must we praise God for the evil. If we truly understand what the *Zohar* teaches, then we will understand that there is no evil.” (*Jerusalem Post*, week of August 12, 1989, p. 23)

What the Shema is for and against

The *Shema* “is against the plurality of small gods and half-gods and no gods; it is against the fragmentizing idolatry of worshiping a part for a whole. . . . It is a unity against the duality that would neatly package life into good and evil compartments and assign evil to a lesser scapegoat god, leaving to the chief god the dignity of presiding over unalloyed good. . . .”

The *Shema* “is for the common parenthood of God . . . the unity of humanity. It is for that diversity found in a family. . . . The *Shema* says: Hear, thou! God is One; therefore, God's children must be one.” (Jacob J. Weinstein, *The Place of Understanding*, Bloch Publishing Co., New York, 1959, pp. 126–127)

“Hear, O Israel . . .” means that every Jew is a member . . . of a community that extends not only in many lands but throughout history.

“Adonai our God . . .” means whatever be our condition . . . we will not . . . deny life, despair of the ultimate vindication of righteousness. . . .

“Adonai is One . . .” means this is not a universe in which evil has a chance of winning. . . . The ultimate authority, the final sovereign is not the force of army and legion but the God who in time will assert sovereignty. (Morris Adler, *The Voice Still Speaks*, pp. 372–373)

Can we truly believe, however, that “there is no evil” and that this is the message of the *Shema*? Rabbi Leo Baeck, leader of German Jewry during the Holocaust years, probes this significant ques-

tion. "The Jewish spirit has always sought to grasp the oneness of all reality. All reality, whether unfolding itself in one sphere or in the other, expresses one great unity to the Jewish spirit. . . . Only the One God exists, and, therefore, there is only one order, no matter how manifold its appearances, how contradictory its representations. . . . Within every thing, therefore, there exists an inner reality—unique, one, concealed, unfathomable, infinite, eternal—that is its foundation. . . . Everything proceeds from the One God; everything returns to the One God." (*This People Israel: The Meaning of Jewish Existence*, Albert H. Friedlander, translator, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1965. pp. 7, 14, 23)

Baeck's view seems to differ from Riskin's. It is not that there is "no evil" or suffering. Quite the contrary. The suffering of human beings and the evil they experience is real and from God. "Suffering becomes a test of human power to overcome afflictions," says Baeck. He concludes, "The wisdom of Judaism—its very history so devised it—is that it sees life as a task imposed upon human beings by God. Suffering is part of that task; every creative individual experiences it. Through suffering human beings experience those conflicts that give tragic significance to their will to fulfillment." In other words, not only is evil real but in the battle against it human beings test their strength. In reciting the *Shema*, Jews set their energies toward resolving conflicts and transforming them "into unity and harmony." (*The Essence of Judaism*, Schocken Books, New York, 1948, pp. 136–138)

While Baeck does not deny the "reality" of evil, his solution argues that God, who is all-powerful and all-knowing, actually causes evil so that human beings will be tested to triumph over it. Modern Jewish philosopher Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan disagrees. He points out that, if we say that God is responsible for evil, then we must accept that God brought on all the atrocities of history and that God is responsible for earthquakes, famine, floods, and other natural catastrophes. Such a conclusion, argues Kaplan, makes God into an evil monster!

Instead, Kaplan believes that we can resolve this difficult problem by "assuming that God's omnipotence [all-powerfulness] is not an actually

realized fact at any point of time but a potential fact." If we take into consideration that God is eternal (exists forever), then it is possible to understand "that the evil that now mars the cosmos will ultimately be eliminated" by human beings who, as God's creation, are seeking to "reduce the amount of evil in the world." Evil, therefore, is not, as Baeck says, deliberately and knowingly placed by God in our lives or in the universe as a test for human beings, but, rather, it represents an obstacle to the good that God is seeking to achieve.

Kaplan clarifies his point by answering the question: "Why did God make polio?" He writes: "God did *not* make polio. God is always helping us human beings to make this a better world, but the world cannot at once become the kind of world God would *like* it to be. When human beings make use of the intelligence God gives them, they learn more and more of the laws of health, by which all kinds of illness can be prevented or cured." In this way, concludes Kaplan, human beings help God eliminate the "evil that now mars the cosmos." For Kaplan, the *Shema* is an expression of the special partnership between God and the Jewish people in the battle against suffering and in the triumph of good over evil. (*Questions Jews Ask*, pp. 115–120)

Rabbi David Hartman also speaks of the *Shema* as an expression of the partnership between the Jewish people and God. He writes: "In reciting the *Shema*, we hear God addressing the community. The emphasis, so to speak, is 'Hear, O Israel: study, reflect, and be attentive to the revelatory message of Torah.' It is the moment of commitment of the community to God and to God's Torah. In the *Shema* . . . one captures the felt immediacy of the revelatory moment of Sinai. God invites the community to enter into the covenant."

Hartman's explanation places Moses in the position of using the words of the *Shema* to remind the people of their experience with God at Mount Sinai, where they received the Ten Commandments. Since that time, Hartman says, Jews recall standing at Sinai when they recite Moses' words. In saying the *Shema* they reenter the covenant of ritual and ethical mitzvot, pledging themselves to God "who commands a total way of life." (*A Living Covenant*, The Free Press,

New York, 1985, pp. 164–165)

Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Yanof, author of *Tze'edah u-Re'edah*, compares reciting the *Shema* to receiving a cherished love letter. "When you say the *Shema*," he writes, "it should be as if you are reading a letter from the king, which was written to you only today and which you cherish. You listen to each and every word. So should you pay careful attention to each and every word of the *Shema*." (Comment on Deuteronomy 6:6)

Throughout the centuries, Jews have recited the *Shema* as the most important expression of their faith. They have regarded the words as "love letters," but they have also argued over their meanings, deciphering various messages as if these words contained clues to understanding their relationship to God. Today, the explorations and debates continue. The declaration of Jewish faith remains a source of inspiration and challenge.

PEREK BET: *Is It Possible to Love God?*

In defining "love," psychologist Erich Fromm asserts that it is "an activity, not a passive affect; it is a 'standing in,' not a 'falling for.'" Fromm goes on to explain that "the active character of love can be described by stating that love is primarily *giving*, not receiving. . . . Giving is the highest expression of potency [power]. In the very act of giving, I experience my strength, my wealth, my power. This experience of heightened vitality and potency fills me with joy. I experience myself as overflowing, spending, alive. . . . Giving is more joyous than receiving, not because it is a deprivation, but because in the act of giving lies the expression of my aliveness." (*The Art of Loving*, Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., New York, 1974, pp. 18–19)

Following the statement of the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4, Moses commands the Israelites: "You shall love *Adonai* your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." This commandment is a cornerstone of Jewish tradition. It is recited together with the *Shema* at worship and is considered by rabbinic tradition as one of the 613 mitzvot, the commandments of Jewish practice.

The statement, however, raises serious questions. Given Erich Fromm's definition of love, is it possible to love God? What could Moses have meant by this commandment? Can "love" for either a human being or God be commanded? How is such love expressed?

Early rabbinic interpreters also struggled with these questions. In the *Tanna Debe Elyahu* (pp. 139–141), they claim that the mitzvah "to love God" is "the most important commandment of the Torah" and that it entails causing others to love God. For instance, if one studies Torah and acts honestly and fairly in business dealings, then others will say: "Look at the caring and ethical behavior of those who say they love God. Seeing the direct results of such love, they will be inspired to become lovers of God and to teach their children to study Torah and follow its commandments."

Furthermore, say the rabbis, loving God means making no distinction between the way Jews deal with Jews and the way Jews deal with non-Jews. To love God means to treat every human being with respect and to act honestly, justly, and kindly to all. Those who, by their actions, show their love for God set an example for others. It is God's influence on their lives that makes them witnesses to God's power.

Another issue raised by rabbinic commentators is the distinction between loving and fearing God. To show this distinction, they relate the story of a king with two servants. One loved the king; the other feared him. Once the king went on a year-long voyage. The servant who loved him started a beautiful garden, tended it carefully, and, when the king returned, presented him with heaping platters of fruits. The king was delighted and filled with gratitude. Seeing the grateful response of the king, the servant who feared him quickly found some dry fruits and brought them before him. Realizing that this gift was an afterthought, the king was displeased.

To love God means to know the joy of "generosity." Love leads to giving, to sharing one's creativity with another. Fear cripples our capacity to share. It drains our energies from positive efforts to efforts to protect and serve the self. In the act of loving we concentrate all our efforts to provide thoughtful contributions. We use our

talents to create "heaping platters of fruits." Loving God, say the ancient rabbis, is like all true loving, an expression of joyful and creative gratitude. (*Yoma* 86a)

Rashi also seeks to define the meaning of loving God. On the basis of comments in the *Sifre*, he argues that the Torah itself offers an explanation: To the commandment "to love God" it adds the words "with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." "With all your heart" means we should serve God with all our powers for goodness, compassion, and charity, as well as with our powers for competition, success, and physical strength. "With all your soul" means we should be ready to give our lives, if necessary, for the principles of our faith. "With all your might" means we should be willing to use our property and wealth to perform acts of charity that promote the survival of our people. Rashi concludes that "lovers of God" see the commandments of Torah as neither antiquated nor out of touch with reality; they see them as always relevant and challenging to their times. (Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:4-6)

While Maimonides agrees with the rabbis of the *Tanna Debe Eliyahu* and Rashi on many points, he clearly views the commandment "to love God" from another perspective. Charity and compassion are sufficient. For him, "loving God with all your heart" is an intellectual commitment. It is a matter of study and critical contemplation. "In the act of contemplation," Maimonides argues, "you come closer to understanding God and to reaching that stage of joy where love of God is bound to follow."

Maimonides has in mind the study of not only the commandments of Torah but also the sciences, including philosophy. "Love of God depends upon knowledge," he says. "Therefore, we should devote ourselves to understanding and becoming knowledgeable in the skills and sciences through which we develop appreciation of God and of our ethical responsibilities. It is only when we comprehend the real nature of our world and universe that we can penetrate the wisdom of God and attain to the love of God."

Loving God, however, is more than the pursuit of knowledge about Torah and "the nature of our world." Recalling the work of Abraham,

the founder of Jewish tradition, Maimonides points out that Abraham took upon himself the teaching to potential converts of the Jewish view of God and morality. In this way he brought them to a love for the one God and welcomed them as a part of the Jewish people. "He made God beloved of many people." For Maimonides it is not enough to study or perform the mitzvot with devotion. Loving God means reaching out to those without faith and bringing them in as converts to Judaism. (*Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah* 3, 6, 10; *Sefer ha-Mitzvot, Positive Commandments #3*)



Luzzatto



Leibowitz

Loving God

Those who set God before them and are exclusively concerned with doing God's pleasure and observing God's commandments will be called lovers of God . . . the love of God is not a separate commandment but an underlying principle of all the commandments. The love itself cannot be the subject of a command. (Samuel David Luzzatto. See Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Devarim, p. 65.)

Psychologist Erich Fromm observes that "the basis for our need to love lies in the experience of separateness and the resulting need to overcome the anxiety of separateness by the experience of union. The religious form of love, that which is called the love of God, is, psychologically speaking, not different. It springs from the need to overcome separateness and to achieve union." (The Art of Loving, p. 53)

The only way to attain to a real fear and love of God, to a genuine longing for God through worship, to a comprehension of God is through prayer offered with self-sacrifice and burning enthusiasm. (Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmon, as quoted in Louis Jacobs, Hasidic Prayer, Schocken Books, New York, 1978, p. 20)

An individual unable to pray is permitted to engage in telling jokes to awaken a sense of love in his mind. Perhaps, the individual will then say: "If I have laughter from such nonsense, how much more should I appreciate the delights God has given me." As a result, such a person will recite the prayers in love and awe. (Maggid of Meseritch. See Louis Jacobs, Hasidic Prayer, p. 51.)

Bachya ben Joseph ibn Pakuda, the author of *Duties of the Heart*, agrees with Maimonides that one achieves a love of God through "contemplation and study" and that the love of God is expressed by reaching out to instruct and welcome converts. He differs, however, in his emphasis. "This love," he writes, "requires that a person should contemplate the basis and principles of the commandments . . . [such contemplation] will bring much delight."

Pakuda argues that worldly concerns often prevent a person from such "contemplation" and "delight." To overcome the stress and temptations of daily concerns and the pursuit of riches, which prevent us from achieving the "love of God," he maintains that we must "retreat from worldliness, from the pleasures of the material world, and from physical desires." Those who seek the true love of God must "commune with God in solitude, dedicate themselves to God alone, trusting, craving, and serving God without any other interests." (See chap. 3; also B.S. Jacobson, *Meditations on the Torah*, pp. 263–274.)

Modern commentator Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut rejects Pakuda's notion of retreating from the world to commune "with God in solitude" as the means to loving God. Instead, Plaut returns to the suggestion of the early rabbinic interpreters that the love of God is expressed through mitzvah-deeds. "It is our attention to the mitzvot that will make us as well as others aware of the One in whose name they are performed, and, the greater our devotion and concentration upon the mitzvah and its Giver, the more likely we will be to enter into the context of pure love. . . ." Plaut concludes: "Each mitzvah done in the right spirit is an act of loving God. It can be done

everywhere and anywhere, wherever the opportunity for mitzvot exists, and it is, therefore, not exclusively the consequence of spiritual contemplation." (*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, pp. 1370–1371)



Peli

Pinchas Peli agrees with Plaut's emphasis on doing mitzvot as the primary expression of our love for God. He maintains, however, that, while the love of God results "from the awareness of the oneness of God," it is proven in the way it influences us to set an example for others.

Peli calls attention to Moses' command "to take to heart these words that I command you this day. Teach them diligently to your children. . . ." He explains that "the teaching with which we are concerned here is not done by passing on information or by preaching or issuing orders but by personal example, which by its sheer sincerity and passion should be qualified to impress our children or students. . . ." Peli writes, "Your children will be taught by the fact that you yourself practice your religion. . . . Action and thought must go together in the life of the truly religious person." (*Torah Today*, in the *Jerusalem Post*, August 10, 1985, p. 10)

Defining the meaning of love and the way it is expressed among human beings continues as a major subject of debate among students of human behavior. Is love a matter of trust, mutual respect, a sense of responsibility for one's self and others, a means of surmounting the fear of loneliness, a biological drive to maintain human survival? Is it a magical, awesome gift of God? And, if it is difficult to explain the meaning of love among human beings, the notion of loving God is equally perplexing.

For that reason, Jewish commentators continue the struggle of deciphering Moses' command to the Israelites: "You shall love *Adonai* your God. . . ." In all their discussions, however, they fail to recognize that love is not static, but dynamic. It evolves, grows, matures. The love expressed by a child is not the same as that

felt by a young adult or that achieved by an elderly person who has a life filled with experience. Love is a construct of many feelings: respect, knowledge, loyalty, caring, mercy. It is expressed in uplifting the needy, in the pursuit of justice, in the nurturing of others, in the warmth of an embrace, and in the passion shared by two human beings.

Perhaps Moses, the wise and aged leader of the Israelites, understood that love is not a single expression but rather a mysterious and wonderful gift evolving from human beings and expressed in a variety of ways. That understanding may account for his command: "You shall love *Adonai* your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." Moses may have meant that the love of God is achieved only when we develop our emerging powers of mind (heart), spirit (soul), and physical strength (might). Love of God grows, changes, and ripens. As with love among human beings, it is the achievement of a lifetime, not of a moment. For that reason, Moses commands that its cultivation be given the highest priority in every aspect of our lives.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Rabbi Milton Steinberg observes: "In proclaiming the oneness of God . . . the prophets . . . were bent on establishing the principles that reality is an order, not an anarchy; that humanity is a unity, not a hodgepodge; and that one universal law of righteousness holds sway over all human beings." (*Basic Judaism*, Harcourt Brace, 1947, pp. 42–43) Given the discussion of the *Shema* by our interpreters, what is the continuing importance of monotheism set forth by Moses and the prophets of Judaism?
2. Rabbi Leo Baeck comments: "In Judaism, love towards God is never a mere feeling; it belongs to the sphere of ethical activity." (*The Essence of Judaism*, p. 129) Do the interpreters of Moses' statement "You shall love *Adonai* your God . . ." agree? Which definition of the "love of God" makes most sense? Why?
3. Given Moses Maimonides' views on loving God, should Jews proselytize?