

THE MEANING OF LOVE

Eighth Day Pesach/Yizkor 5779

I.

What makes *Shir ha-Shirim*, the Song of Songs, so striking is that it is the strongest articulation of love found in Tanakh. Unlike the other glimpses of the concept we read elsewhere – barely a few verses if we're lucky – *Shir ha-Shirim* gives us eight chapters, totaling 117 verses, devoted to the topic. It seems like the perfect place to turn to to discover Judaism's approach to love.

Except that it isn't.

Because, while *Shir ha-Shirim* may talk about lovers, that does not make it a book about love. Passion, infatuation, and obsession are much clearer themes. The key words of this *megillah* include *chimmadi*, “desire,” and *te'oreru*, “arousal.” And when the word for love, *ahavah*, does crop up, the context makes clear that it is more synonymous with craving than love itself.

It turns out that, for all its potential, *Shir ha-Shirim* ends up being the poorest articulation of love found in Tanakh. And so, if we want a better understanding of love, we have to turn to those other glimpses of the concept found elsewhere. And, perhaps, the best source is one of the best-known verses in the Torah, part of the *Shema* found in *Sefer Devarim*.

II.

At first glance, it seems striking that God can command us to love Him:

וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deut. 6:5)

How can we understand an obligation to love God? The reality is that we misunderstand the term *ahavah*. As Newton's own Jon D. Levenson – a professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School and member of Beth El – has pointed out in his aptly named book *The Love of God*, the term appears just a chapter later once again:

וַיִּדְעֵתָּ כִּי־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים הָאֵל הַנֶּאֱמָן שֹׁמֵר הַבְּרִית וְהַחֲסֵד לְאַהֲבָיו
וּלְשֹׁמְרֵי מִצְוָתוֹ [מִצְוֹתָיו] לְאַלְף דָּוָר:

Know, therefore, that only the LORD your God is God, the steadfast God who keeps His covenant faithfully to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His commandments. (Deut. 7:9)

Here, the meaning appears clearer. Those who love God are juxtaposed with those who observe God's laws. And this is expressed most clearly in the prayer made by Shlomo *ha-Melekh*, King Solomon, in his prayer at the dedication of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵין־כְּמוֹךָ אֱלֹהִים בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל־הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת שֹׁמֵר
הַבְּרִית וְהַחֲסֵד לְעַבְדֶיךָ הַהֹלְכִים לְפָנֶיךָ בְּכָל־לֵבָם:

and said, “O LORD God of Israel, in the heavens above and on the earth below there is no god like You, who keep Your gracious covenant with Your servants when they walk before You in wholehearted devotion. (1 Kings 8:23)

Here, there is no mention of *ahavah*, but there is the same phrase as in the *Shema – bechol libam*, “with all their hearts” – as well as the mention of God being *shomer ha-berit ve-hachessed* and the general theme of God being the sole God of the Jewish people and His loyalty to those who worship Him. It's pretty clear that Shlomo is channeling Moshe's speech from *Sefer Devarim* and all he switches is one term: *ohavav* for *avadav*, those who love God to those who serve God.

III.

Ahavah, love, says Tanakh, is neither the passion of *Shir ha-Shirim* nor the romance of a typical Disney movie, it's about service, it's about loyalty. God does not demand that we feel a specific emotion towards Him, but that we serve Him – that we show our loyalty and devotion to Him.

And there is no more important time to remember the Jewish definition of love than when we say *Yizkor*. Because what defined our loved ones' relationship to us was their devotion. A parent's willingness to go beyond their comfort zone for us, a spouse's support, a sibling's defense, a grandparent's pride, a child's appreciation – all of these typify the *ahavah* spoken of in Tanakh. And, as we recall their blessed memories today, we think of their *ahavah* for us.