

One of the most fundamental precepts of Judaism is the commandment to love G-D. In fact its source is the opening line of the first paragraph of Shma, V'ahovta. As it says quite explicitly "You shall love Hashem your G-D with all of your heart." Yet, this requirement seems to be implausible to mandate, if not impossible to fulfill. How can we be forced to love someone or something; that is an unfair expectation? Can we legislate emotions like love or hate? In addition, Judaism is a religion of action, thoughts and emotions are not usually considered fulfillment of Mitzvot, nor punishable actions, so how can we be commanded to love G-D?

While this subject is discussed ad infinitum and many philosophers have offered various approaches to this question, a comment by the Gerrer Rebe (R. Yitzchak Meir Alter) on this week's Parsha is quite illustrative as a blueprint of precisely just how one can reach this elusive love of G-D.

As the saga of Yosef and his brothers continue in this week's Torah portion, Yosef eventually reveals himself to his family. Afterwards, he is joined by his entire extended family including his elderly father, Yaakov. The Torah describes in great detail the emotional reunion between Yosef and his father. The Torah tells us "And Joseph made ready his chariot, and went up to meet Israel his father, to Goshen; and he presented himself unto him, and fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while." As Yosef had not seen his father for 20 years one can certainly feel the emotions of this tearful reunion. Yet, why are we only informed about Yosef falling on his father's neck and crying, what about Yaakov? He is finally reunited with his son, why was he not crying as well?

Rashi in his commentary on the verse explains that at that moment when Yaakov was finally reunited with his son and Yosef is crying, Yaakov was reciting Shma. However, he does not give us any explanation as to why he was reciting Shma. In addition, if Yaakov was reciting Shma, why was Yosef not reciting Shma?

The Gerrer Rebbe and the Maharal offer similar explanations to Yaakov's recitation of Shma at this precise moment. At the moment that Yaakov saw his son and recognized that what he had thought was the greatest tragedy of his life was not actually a tragedy, but a salvation. When he finally understood that G-D had indeed come to his rescue, he was overcome with a love and appreciation for G-D. He channeled that incredible love for his long lost child to G-D, he dedicated the most emotional moment of his life to G-D by reciting the Shma at that moment.

There are monumental moments in our lives; some good some bad. Shma is how we as Jews express and channel those moments to G-D. It is the complete dedication of our very existence to G-D. Yet, it is not only during those incredibly emotional moments that we channel ourselves to G-D. The bigger challenge is to do that on a daily basis. Even during the day to day Mitzvot, if we do them with the right energy, passion, and commitment they too are an expression of love and dedication to G-D. At the moment that Yaakov was reciting Shma, Yosef did not. Instead he was performing the Mitzvah of Kibbud Av Vaem, honoring one's father and mother. While that may sound like an ordinary mundane Mitzvah, but any mitzvah done with awareness, intent, and focus is also truly an opportunity to express our love for G-D. He did not to recite Shma to express his love for G-D; his commitment to his father already expressed it for him.

Yaakov and Yosef teach us two paths to reach the same desired outcome, love of G-D. Whether it is dedicating the most emotional moments in our lives or making the daily commitments, love of G-D is a difficult state to reach, yet it is the most rewarding and powerful place to be.

Shabbat Shalom

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