

What does it mean to love God? We commit ourselves to loving God every morning and evening, whenever we recite the second line of the Shema:

וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ 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. (Devarim 6:5)

Loving God is particularly important at this time of year, when we are working on reconnecting ourselves with God through the process of repentance. But what does it mean? And how do we do it?

Rashi, in his commentary on Devarim 6:5, explains love as primarily about action, the way in which one serves God. Rashi writes:

ואהבת. עשה דבריו מאהבה, אינו דומה העושה מאהבה לעושה מיראה, העושה אצל רבו מיראה, כשהוא מטריח עליו מניחו והולך לו.

Follow God's words out of love, for one who acts out of love is not like the one who acts out of fear. One who serves his master out of fear puts down his burden and walks away if his master burdens him.

For Rashi in this comment, love is a mechanism to persuade yourself to act better. It is important to love God so as to not give up when things get too hard. Later on, interpreting the words 'with all your soul' and 'with all your might, Rashi has a slightly different emphasis:

ובכל נפשך. אפלו הוא נוטל את נפשך :
ובכל מאדך. בכל ממונך, יש לך אדם ששממונו חביב עליו מגופו, לךך נאמר בכל מאדך.

With all your soul. Even if God takes your soul
With all your might. Some people treasure their possessions more than their lives, so therefore it is said, 'with all your possessions.'

This comment is less about motivation, what brings us to serve God, but rather how far we are to be willing to go. Again, though, the emphasis seems to be on action. What it means to love God is to be willing to work with God, whatever it takes. For Rashi, loving God is something we do with our entire bodies, through our actions.

Rambam and Ibn Ezra take a different approach, that loving God is something we do cognitively, by thinking, with our intellect. Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 6:5, in the first paragraph of the Shema, writes that loving God 'with all your heart' means with all your intelligence. Rambam

writes in his Guide to the Perplexed 3:53:3 that the way we learn to love God is through learning about God. He distinguishes between fear and love: “The two objects, love and fear of God, are acquired by two different means. The love is the result of the truths taught in the Torah, including the true knowledge of the Existence of God; whilst fear of God is produced by the practices prescribed in the Torah.” So while for Rashi the way we love God is through what we do, and how far we are willing to go for God, for Rambam and Ibn Ezra the way to love God is in what we are willing to learn.

Our commentators thus offer us different possibilities. Do we love God through action or through understanding? If it is through understanding, is it through the intellectual process of figuring out truths or the experiential process of reflecting on our relationship with God?

The text of the Shema itself allows for these different possibilities and the language of loving God admits these different interpretations. There’s a midrash in Devarim Rabbah that has a fascinating suggestion as to why:

דָּבַר אַחֵר, שָׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, מָה רָאָה לֹאמַר לָהֶן כִּאֵן שָׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, רַבְּנֵי אֱמָרִי לָמָּה הִדְבַּר דּוּמָה
לְמַלְךְ שֶׁקִּדַּשׁ מִטְרוּנָה
בְּשֵׁיטֵי מְרַגְלִיּוֹת, אֲבָדָה אַחַת מֵהֶן, אָמַר לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲבָדְתְּ אַחַת שְׂמֵרִי אֶת הַשְּׂנִיָּה. כִּךְ קִדַּשׁ
הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנַעֲשָׂה וְנִשְׁמַע, אֲבָדוּ אֶת נַעֲשָׂה, שָׁעֲשׂוּ אֶת הַעֲגֹל, אָמַר לָהֶן מִשָּׁה,
אֲבָדְתֶם נַעֲשָׂה, שְׂמְרוּ נִשְׁמַע, הִוִּי שָׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל.

“Why did [Moses] see fit to say “Hear O Israel” at this point? The Rabbis say, “To what can this be compared? To a king who betroths a noblewoman with two pearls. She loses one of them. The king says to her, ‘You lost one, I will guard the other!’ So did the Holy One, blessed be He, betroth Israel with ‘Naaseh v’Nishma’ - ‘We will do and we will hear.’ They lost the ‘Naaseh’ at the Golden Calf. Moses said to them: You lost the Naaseh, guard the Nishma!”

After going through the sin of the Golden Calf, Israel lost the ability to be confident in its actions. They had said “we will do and we will understand” - do first and then understand. But their actions did not live up to this dual commitment. Instead of doing what God wanted they sinned by making the Golden Calf. So God says to them Shma Yisrael - Israel, listen and understand. You said two things: you will do and you will understand. But either one is enough to keep the covenant alive.

The Golden Calf story is our example of what repentance looks like, how to repair a relationship with God that has been broken. This midrash suggests that the ambiguity about love that we see in this parsha gives us different possibilities of where to start. Do we begin to love God with action or with understanding? Both are possible. God betrothed us with two pearls, and we can begin with whichever one we have.