YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

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In memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah z”l,   
whose *yahrtzeit* is on 9 Tevet.

By Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom  
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**Shiur #11:**

**Loving God (I): How Can There Be a Command to Love?**

**The Different Approaches Regarding Commanding Emotions**

Following the mitzva of recognizing the oneness of God and accepting the yoke of God’s kingship, we are commanded to love God: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (*Devarim* 6:5). As we begin to examine this mitzva, we must first deal with the inherent difficulty of commanding emotions in general. This difficulty is particularly prominent when we speak of loving God, whom no human being can comprehend. As we recite in the *Yigdal* prayer, God has neither a body nor even the semblance of a body.

There are essentially two main approaches to the question of commanding emotions. The first approach argues that it is possible to demand that a person alter and control his emotions; the second approach argues that this is impossible, and any discussion regarding a command of this nature must shift to the realm of behavior and actions.

According to the first approach, it is indeed possible to command emotions. It can be demanded of a person to use the power of his intellect and his soul to develop the emotion of love. Accordingly, a person can control other emotions, such as desire and passion, as well.

In contrast, the second approach maintains that it is impossible to command emotions. Therefore, proponents of this approach interpret the mitzva to love God mentioned in the Torah as a command regarding the actions that one must take. Likewise, in interpreting the prohibition of “You shall not covet” (*Shemot* 20:14), those who follow the second approach emphasize the actions that result from a person’s inappropriate desire, as we will explain shortly.

When we speak of *mitzvot* that are directed at one’s emotions and feelings, I believe that there is room to distinguish between different levels and categories within these commands. There is a large gap between the prohibition of hatred, for example, and the mitzva of love.

As we will see below, even those who find it difficult to understand the mitzva to love on its simplest level because of the difficulty inherent in the demand to develop this emotion with respect to another person are willing to accept the prohibition of hatred (“You shall not hate your kinfolk in your heart” [*Vayikra* 19:17]) at its simplest level, which prohibits hatred within one’s heart.

If so, the Torah indeed demands that a person control his inclinations and his emotions, but a distinction is drawn between avoiding negative emotions and pursuing positive ones.

Ramban views the command prohibiting hatred as part of a wider framework of verses:

The correct [interpretation], in my opinion, is that “Reprove your kinsman” is like “Then Avraham reproached Avimelekh” (*Bereishit* 21:25). The verse says, “You shall not hate your kinfolk in your heart” – when he acts toward you against your will, but rather you should reprove him, saying, “Why did you act this way toward me?” “But incur no guilt because of him” – covering up your hatred of him in your heart by not telling him; rather, when your reprove him, he will apologize to you, or he will repent and acknowledge his sin and will achieve atonement. Afterward the verse warns that you should not “take vengeance or bear a grudge” against him regarding what he did to you, as it may be that you will not hate him, but you will remember the sin in your heart. Therefore, it warns him to wipe away the sin and wrongdoing of his kinfolk from his heart. (Ramban, *Vayikra* 19:17-18)

The Torah demands that one control one’s inclinations to hate and take vengeance.

However, with respect to the emotion of love mentioned in these verses, the *Rishonim* tend to temper and moderate the Torah’s demand, despite the seemingly clear formulation, “Love your fellow as yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:18).

Thus, Ramban continues:

The explanation for “Love your fellow as yourself”: It is an **exaggeration**, since a person’s heart cannot accept that he will love his fellow like he loves himself. Furthermore, R. Akiva already came and taught that one’s own life takes precedence over the life of one’s fellow. Rather, the Torah’s commandment is that one should love his fellow in every regard, just as he loves himself with all of his goodness. Since it does not say *ve-ahavta* ***et*** *re’akha kamokha*, [but *ve-ahavta* ***le-****re’akha kamokha*,] it is comparing them with the word *le-re’akha*. The same is true in [the verse], “You shall love him (*ve-ahavta lo*)as yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:34) regarding the stranger, meaning that these two loves are likened in his view, since sometimes one loves his fellow… but desires in his heart that he will always have more than his fellow in every [kind of] goodness. Thus, the verse commands that one’s love should not be diminished by this jealousy in his heart, but one should love with maximal goodness to his fellow, just as one would act for himself; he should not limit his love. Thus it says with regard to Yonatan, “for he loved him [David] as himself” (*Shmuel I* 20:17), since he removed the aspect of jealousy from his heart, saying, “You are going to be king over Israel” (*Shmuel I* 23:17).

Ramban is not bothered by the command itself to love one’s fellow man, but rather the demand that one love him “as yourself.” Ramban maintains that the heart cannot accept such a demand, and he thus explains the verse differently. According to him, the verse does not demand that a person love his fellow (***et*** *re’akha*), but that he love *for* his fellow (***le-****re’akha*). The Torah’s command is that one desire that his fellow receive all the goodness in the world to the same extent that he wants this for himself.

The Torah’s main goal, according to this explanation, is that one rid himself of the emotions of jealousy that prevent him from wanting the best for his fellow man. In the framework of this mitzva, the key is that one desire wholeheartedly to see every other person succeed.

Rambam similarly writes in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*:

That we are commanded to love each other as we love ourselves. I should have mercy for and love my brother as faithfully as I love and have mercy for myself. This applies to his financial and physical state and whatever he has or desires. What I want for myself I should want for him, and whatever I do not want for myself or my friends, I should not want for him. The source of this commandment is God’s statement, “Love your fellow as yourself.” (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 206)

Rambam begins by addressing the emotional aspect of the mitzva – that we should love other people as we love ourselves. This statement leads us to the understanding that the main part of the command relates to the emotion of love.

Nonetheless, it seems that the primary idea that Rambam means to convey is found in the continuation of the passage, when he speaks of various actions that one might perform to fulfill the mitzva. In order to perform these actions, one does not necessarily have to actually feel the emotion of love itself; it is enough that one have the basic desire that every person should experience goodness in every area related to his physical or financial state.

This statement is similar to an idea found in the *gemara* in the story of the non-Jew who approached Hillel. The non-Jew declared that he would convert to Judaism on the condition that Hillel would teach him the entire Torah while he stands on one foot. Hillel responded, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it” (*Shabbat* 31a). In this case as well, the emphasis is that one should not harm another person with one’s actions.

Despite the great similarity between the respective interpretations of Ramban and Rambam, it seems that Rambam tempered the mitzva of loving one’s fellow somewhat due to the fundamental difficulty with the command to experience the emotion of love toward another person.

Thus writes R. Barukh Ha-Levi Epstein, the author of *Torah Temima*, in his work *Tosefet Berakha*:

Also, we may explain that this is the intent of what is written in *Shabbat* (31a), in Hillel’s response to the convert regarding the verse, “Love your fellow as yourself,” – “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.” It is not explained why it removes the formulation from its simple meaning: “Love your fellow” – actual love. Rather, it is because the emotion of love is relegated to the heart, and it is impossible to command regarding this. Thus, it interpreted it with respect to refraining from performing harmful actions, as this can be derived [from the verse], as we explained. (*Tosefet Berakha*, *Shemot* 20)

In contrast, Ramban’s difficulty is only with the demand of “as yourself.” Therefore, Ramban was forced to make inferences and distinctions within the language of the verse, focusing on the formulation ***le-****re’akha* rather than ***et*** *re’akha*. Rambam ignored this point entirely in his commentary.

**“You Shall Not Covet”: Emotion or Action?**

The *Rishonim* addressed at length the prohibition of “You shall not covet” and its definition.[[1]](#footnote-1) Rambam enumerates two separate negative commandments in his list, the first prohibiting one from coveting an item in his heart and the second prohibiting one from the practical attempt to attain possession of it as a result.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In contrast, some of the *Rishonim* view coveting an item privately and actually attempting to attain it as one prohibition, which centers on performing the action that results from excessive desire. Thus writes *Yere’im*:

The Holy One, blessed be He, wrote in the first and last Commandments: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house… or anything that is your neighbor’s.” One who covets is called thus when he covets something belonging to his fellow and takes it against his will, and gives him money in its place; or indirectly, if he takes the item illegally. But one who covets in his thoughts, without any action, does not violate “You shall not covet.”… And it is written, “You shall not crave…” (*Devarim* 5:18): There is one meaning for these two negative commandments, and the verse used this language in order that one would transgress two negative commandments.[[3]](#footnote-3) (*Yere’im* 115)

However, the author of *Sefer Ha-Chinukh*, who followed Rambam’s approach, deals in a direct manner with the difficulty inherent in this command:

Now, do not wonder and ask: But how can it be in a man’s power to restrain his heart from longing for the treasure of every precious vessel that he may see in his fellow’s possession, when he is without and deprived of them all? How can a restriction be given in the Torah about something to which a man cannot measure up?

This matter is not so; none but wicked fools who are sinful [enough to pay] with their life would speak so. For it is indeed in a man’s power to restrain himself, his thoughts, and his longing desires from whatever he wishes. It lies in his free choice and his decision to repel his desire or draw it near in regard to all matters, as he wishes; and his heart is given over into his control.[[4]](#footnote-4) However he pleases, he may swerve it. The Eternal Lord, before whom all secrets are revealed, “revealing all his inmost parts,” sees the organs of understanding and the heart. Not one, large or small, good or bad, out of all the thoughts of a man is hidden from him or concealed from the range of His sight. He requites with vengeance those who disobey His will in their heart, but He keeps loving-kindness for thousands of generations, for those that love Him who turn their thoughts to His service. For there is nothing so good for a man as a good, pure thought, since that is the beginning of all the [good] deeds, and their end; and this, as it seems, is the significance of the “good heart” that the Sages would praise in *Masekhet Avot* (*Avot* 2:9).[[5]](#footnote-5) (*Sefer Ha-Chinukh* 416)

**The Mitzva to Love God: Emotion or Action?**

In light of all this, let us return to the mitzva to love God. Some interpret even the mitzva to love God in a way that centers on the obligation to perform certain actions, rather than to develop the emotion of love toward God. It seems that this approach is implied in a passage in the *gemara*:

Abaye explained: As it was taught:[[6]](#footnote-6) “You shall love the Lord your God,” i.e., that the name of Heaven be beloved because of you. If someone studies Torah and Mishna, and attends on the disciples of the wise, is honest in business, and speaks pleasantly to people, what do people then say concerning him? “Happy the father who taught him Torah, happy the teacher who taught him Torah; woe unto people who have not studied the Torah; for this man has studied the Torah, and look how fine his ways are, how righteous his deeds!” Of him does it say: “And He said to me, ‘You are My servant, Israel in whom I glory’” (*Yeshayahu* 49:3). (*Yoma* 86a)

Abaye explains that the mitzva to love God is a mitzva to perform actions that will cause God’s creations to love Him. When people see how wonderful it is to walk in the way of God, that this is a lifestyle that produces good, fine people, people will then love God.

Thus writes R. Barukh Epstein in the continuation of the passage in *Tosefet Berakha*:

Using this reasoning, we can explain [the passage in] *Yoma* (86a)… Do things that will cause God’s name to become beloved through your actions… It is not clear how the Talmud derives all of this from the verse “You shall love the Lord.” It is also not readily apparent why the Talmud removed the formulation of “You shall love” from its simple meaning – that one should love God, a true love, a yearning of the heart, a delight of the soul. But it is as we have said, that it is impossible to command love itself, and thus the concept of command cannot apply to it. Since it comes from the emotions of one’s heart, if one’s heart does not feel love, then a command will not be effective. Thus they explained that the command applies to actions that will cause the name of God to be beloved, as we explained, as actions can indeed be commanded.

In his commentary on *Sefer Devarim*, he adds a significant point:

It may be that they saw fit to explain here the formulation of “You shall love the Lord” in this way, and not according to the simple meaning of its language and content – as a command to love God – because love is an emotion of the heart, and an emotion of the heart cannot be commanded, since emotions are as they are, and they will not submit to any command. Thus they explained that the command applies to a positive action that one does with his body, which is something that one can achieve, and through this action the love will follow. (*Tosefet Berakha*, *Devarim* 6:5)

Here he emphasizes that the end goal is to attain a love of God in one’s emotions. But the mitzva cannot be focused directly on that goal, since it is impossible to command the heart. However, if one performs the actions that *Chazal* describe, the love will follow as a result of these actions. In the language of *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* 16 (and elsewhere): “Through actions, the hearts will follow.”

Following *Chazal*’s approach, the Torah commentaries tended to view the verse “You shall love the Lord” as a command regarding the manner in which one performs *mitzvot*. Thus explains Rashi, citing *Chazal*:

“You shall love”: Perform His commandments out of love. The one who acts out of love cannot be compared to the one who acts out of fear. If one serves his master out of fear, when the master sets a great burden upon him, this servant will leave him and go away. (Rashi, *Devarim* 6:5)

There are some who perform *mitzvot* out of fear of punishment and there are some who perform *mitzvot* out of the understanding that this is the true, correct thing to do. As Rashi explains, one who performs *mitzvot* out of love will continue performing *mitzvot* consistently.

Similarly, Ramban writes:

Our Sages explained the topic of love. They write explicitly in the *Sifrei* (*Sifrei Ekev*): Lest one say, “I am learning Torah so that I will be called a sage, so that I can dwell in a yeshiva, so that I will have a long life, so that I will merit the World to Come…” Thus it says, “You shall love.” (Ramban, *Devarim* 6:5)

Ramban’s statement is also explained along the same lines. One who performs *mitzvot* out of love does so because he understands that this is the right thing to do, and not for any worldly gain. He does the right thing because it is right.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Final Thought**

At first glance, it seems that these interpretations do not relate to the mitzva to love God as connected to the realm of emotions, but as an understanding that the way of God is the true and right path, allowing one to connect to Him and submit oneself to Him.

We will continue to delve deeper into this topic. As we will see, a more complete perspective on the mitzva to love God teaches that this mitzva has many additional levels aside from the practical side of the *mitzvot*. This mitzva also contains aspects of developing one’s emotions and bringing love to God’s creations. We will address these aspects in the upcoming *shiurim*.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. In this context, we will not cover the entire topic; we will only mention a few points that touch on the Torah’s demands of a person’s emotions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thus writes Rambam in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*:

   That we are forbidden from using our thought to think up schemes of how to acquire something that belongs to our brother. The source of this prohibition is God’s statement, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.” The *Mekhilta* says, “From the phrase, ‘You shall not covet,’ I might think the prohibition applies even if you just feel envy. But another verse says, ‘You shall not covet the silver and gold on them and keep it for yourselves’ (*Devarim* 7:25). Just as in that case the prohibition applies only when he does an action, so too here it applies only when he does an action.” (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Negative Commandment 265)

   That we are forbidden to occupy our thoughts with our desire for someone else’s property and to develop a craving for it and dwell upon it, since this will lead us to carry out a plan to acquire it. The expression used for this prohibition is God’s statement, “You shall not crave your neighbor’s house.” These two prohibitions do not have the same goal. The first prohibition, “You shall not covet,” forbids buying someone else’s belongings, whereas the second, “You shall not crave,” prohibits even having the feeling of desire and envy. (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Negative Commandment 266) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to *Yere’im*, there are indeed two negative commandments, but they both deal with prohibitions of actions; neither of them addresses coveting privately. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Even *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* maintains that a person cannot be criticized for the very existence of lust and desire, but only for his inability to control these emotions. As he writes in the continuation of the passage:

   If someone transgresses this **and sets his mind to long for something that another has**, he violates this negative precept; but it entails no [punishment of] flogging, since it involves no physical action. Yet his punishment will be very great, since it is a cause of many misfortunes, as is evident in the incident of Achav and Navot.

   It seems that this point is at the heart of Rambam’s statement in *Hilkhot Melakhim*:

   To whom does the phrase, “Is there anyone afraid and disheartened” (*Devarim* 20:8) refer? The phrase should be interpreted simply, as applying to a person whose heart is not brave enough to stand in the throes of battle. Once a soldier enters the throes of battle, he should rely on the Hope of Israel and their Savior in times of need. He should realize that he is fighting for the sake of the oneness of God’s name. Therefore, he should place his soul in his hand and not show fright or fear. He should not worry about his wife or children. On the contrary, he should wipe their memory from his heart, removing all thoughts from his mind except the war. Anyone **who begins to feel anxious and worry in the midst of battle to the point that he frightens himself violates a negative commandment**, as it is written: “Let not your courage falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic or in dread of them” (*Devarim* 20:3). (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 7:15)

   Rambam emphasizes that one violates a negative commandment only when he begins to feel anxious and worry, when he creates thoughts of fear in his heart and frightens himself.

   If so, it is clear that it is impossible to deny one’s natural initial feelings. The Torah demands that one refuse to become mired in these thoughts; rather, he must strengthen himself and have faith in God.

   In *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Rambam writes that one only violates the negative commandment when he actually flees the battle:

   The 58th prohibition is that we are forbidden from fearing the enemy at time of war and retreating before them. Rather, it is an obligation to strengthen one’s heart and stand strong in the lines of battle. A person who turns away and retreats violates this prohibition. The source of this prohibition is God’s statement, “Do not be in dread of them.” (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Negative Commandment 58)

   Note the relationship between Rambam’s statements in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* and in the *Mishneh Torah.* It may be that only when one becomes paralyzed by fear to the point that he cannot fulfill his military duty does he violate the negative commandment. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 20:14, who explains the Torah’s fundamental demand in this prohibition. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Midrash Tanna’im* on *Devarim* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also *Hilkhot Teshuva* 10, which we will discuss in the upcoming *shiurim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)