YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**YOM KIPPUR 5784**

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In memory of Batya Furst z"l Niftera 28 Elul 5765.
Dedicated by her family.

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***Ahavat Hashem* and *Teshuva***

**By Prof. Alan Jotkowitz**

**The Road to Love and Fear**

The Rambam writes in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*:

What is the path [to attain] love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [God's] great name, as David stated: "My soul thirsts for the Lord, for the living God" [*Tehillim* 42:3].

When he [continues] to reflect on these same matters, he will immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited wisdom before He who is of perfect knowledge, as David stated: "When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers... [I wonder] what is man that You should recall Him" [*Tehillim* 8:4-5]. (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2, trans. Eliyahu Touger)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rabbi Norman Lamm explains:

First, there is according to Maimonides, a common origin, even method, for the two religious emotions of Love and Fear: the contemplation of the cosmos. Such deep reflection on creation leads to two apparently divergent religious affects: *ahavat Hashem* and *yirat Hashem*. The two, Love and Fear, are different but they are fundamentally linked to each other and one cannot discuss, let alone understand, the one without the other.

Second, Love and Fear differ in that each is the mirror image of the other: Love of God is a centrifugal motion of the self as man, overwhelmed by the wisdom revealed in the marvels of creation, seeks to reach outward and upward towards the Creator the better to know him. Fear of God is the precise opposite: overwhelmed by the greatness of the Creator, man traumatically realizes his own unimportance, his marginality, and his very nothingness, and in a centripetal psychological motion pulls inward and retreats into himself.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rabbi Lamm is certainly correct that the Rambam views love and awe as mirror images of how a person relates to God, but it is important to note that the Rambam in *Yesodei Ha-Torah* is dealing with an *intellectual* appreciation of God, not an emotional one. Love and awe are not mirror images from an emotional perspective; that would be love and hate. It is also hard to imagine how an *intellectual* appreciation of the wonders of God's universe and wisdom would lead to such a strong *emotional* response as love. But the Rambam does make the point that in order to fulfill both *mitzvot* – love and awe of God – one must contemplate "His wondrous and great deeds and creations” and appreciate “His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison." Love and awe do not come to a person automatically; one must put in the time and effort to appreciate God's majesty and greatness.

The Rambam also defines fulfillment of the mitzva of loving God:

What is the source [which teaches] that even when there is a danger to life, these three sins should not be violated? [*Devarim* 6:5] states: "And you shall love God, your Lord, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." [The words "with all your soul" imply] even if one takes your soul. (*Hilkot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 5:7)

Love of God requires that one is willing to sacrifice one's life for Him. The Rambam is teaching that fulfilment of the mitzva goes beyond intellectual appreciation; it sometimes needs to be translated into concrete action.

R. Eliyahu Mizrachi articulates an important question behind many discussions of this commandment: "How can a command apply to something a person has never seen or comprehended"?

Shadal addresses a similar question in his explanation of the verse:

Loving God then is not a separate mitzva, but includes all the *mitzvot*. Love itself cannot be subject to a command. Similarly, “love the stranger” “and love your fellow as yourself” – the intention with them is that we should make an effort to do what will be beneficial to them and make an effort to refrain from actions that will hurt them or anger them. (Shadal’s commentary on *Devarim* 6:5)

The Rambam himself seems to address the issue that so bothered Mizrachi and Shadal in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*. "Can I know how to love God?" The Rambam explains:

**The third mitzva** is that we are commanded to love God (exalted be He), i.e., to meditate upon and closely examine His *mitzvot*, His commandments, and His works, in order to understand Him; and through this understanding to achieve a feeling of ecstasy. This is the goal of the commandment to love God.

[We can see that meditation is the way to create this feeling of love from] the *Sifri:* "From the statement, 'You shall love God your Lord' – can I know how to love God? The Torah therefore says, 'and these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart'; i.e., that through this [meditation about His commandments] you will understand the nature of 'the One Who spoke, and thereby brought the world into being.'"

From this it is clear that meditation will lead to understanding, and then a feeling of enjoyment and love will follow automatically [since the second verse explains the way to reach the goal of the previous verse].

Our Sages also said that this mitzva includes calling out to all mankind to serve God (exalted be He) and to believe in Him. This is because when you love a person, for example, you praise him and call out to others to draw close to him. So too, if you truly love God – through your understanding and realization of His true existence – you will certainly spread this true knowledge that you know to the ignorant and the foolish.

[We see that this mitzva includes spreading love for God to others from] the Sifri: "'You shall love God,' i.e., make Him beloved among the creatures as your father Avraham did, as it is written, 'The souls that he made in Charan.'”

The meaning of this Sifri: Avraham, as a result of his deep understanding of God, acquired love for God, as the verse testifies, "Avraham, who loved Me." This powerful love therefore caused him to call out to all mankind to believe in God. So too, you shall love Him to the extent that you draw others to Him.

**The fourth mitzva**is that we are commanded to establish in our minds fear and dread of God (exalted be He); that we not be calm and nonchalant, but be constantly concerned of imminent punishment [for misdeeds.]

The biblical source of this commandment is God's statement (exalted be He), "You shall fear God your Lord."[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, the Rambam adds an additional element in the path to achieving love of God: not just studying His world, but studying His *mitzvot*. He also compares love of God to love of a dear friend – a relationship which does not include any element of fear stemming from the same origin, in the language of Rabbi Lamm.  The Rambam also tells us how one fulfills the mitzva: through spreading the word to others. Here, the love is directed outward, as one cannot help sharing what one has found with others.

**Love vs. Fear**

The Rambam discusses this mitzva in one other place, and here too the formulation is different. He writes at length in the tenth and final chapter of *Hilkot Teshuva*:

(1) A person should not say: "I will fulfill the *mitzvot* of the Torah and occupy myself in its wisdom in order to receive all the blessings which are contained within it or in order to merit the life of the world to come."

"[Similarly,] I will separate myself from all the sins which the Torah warned against so that I will be saved from all the curses contained in the Torah or so that [my soul] will not be cut off from the life of the world to come."

It is not fitting to serve God in this manner. A person whose service is motivated by these factors is considered one who serves out of fear. He is not on the level of the prophets or of the wise. The only ones who serve God in this manner are common people, women, and minors. They are trained to serve God out of fear until their knowledge increases and they serve out of love.

(2) One who serves [God] out of love occupies himself in the Torah and the*mitzvot* and walks in the paths of wisdom for no ulterior motive: not because of fear that evil will occur, nor in order to acquire benefit. Rather, he does what is true because it is true, and ultimately, good will come because of it.

This is a very high level which is not merited by every wise man. It is the level of our Patriarch, Avraham, whom God described as, "he who loved Me," for his service was only motivated by love.

God commanded us [to seek] this rung [of service] as conveyed by Moses, as [*Devarim* 6:5] states: "Love God, your Lord.'' When a man will love God in the proper manner, he will immediately perform all of the *mitzvot* motivated by love.

(3) What is the proper [degree] of love? That a person should love God with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick. [A lovesick person's] thoughts are never diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her; when he sits down, when he gets up, when he eats and drinks. With an even greater [love], the love for God should be [implanted] in the hearts of those who love Him and are obsessed with Him at all times as we are commanded [*Devarim* 6:5: "Love God...] with all your heart and with all your soul." This concept was implied by Solomon [*Shir Ha-shirim* 2:5] when he stated, as a metaphor: "I am lovesick." [Indeed,] the totality of *Shir Ha-shirim* is a parable describing [this love].

(4) The Sages of the previous generations declared: Should one say: "I will study Torah in order that I become wealthy, in order that I be called a Rabbi, or in order that I receive reward in the world to come”? The Torah teaches [*Devarim* 11:13]: "[If you are careful to observe My commandments...] to love God,” [implying] that all that you do should only be done out of love.

The Sages also said: [*Tehillim* 112:1 instructs:] "Desire His commandments greatly." [Desire His commandments] and not the reward [which comes from] His commandments.

In a similar manner, the great Sages would command the more understanding and brilliant among their students in private: "‘Do not be like servants who serve their master [for the sake of receiving a reward].’ Rather, since He is the Master, it is fitting to serve Him;" i.e., serve [Him] out of love.

(5) Anyone who occupies himself with the Torah in order to receive reward or in order to protect himself from retribution is considered as one who is not occupied for God's sake.

[In contrast,] anyone who occupies himself with it, not because of fear, nor to receive a reward, but rather because of his love for the Lord of the entire earth who commanded it, is one who occupies himself for God's sake.

Nevertheless, our Sages declared: A person should always occupy himself with the Torah even when it is not for God's sake, for out of [service which is] not [intended] for God's sake will come service that is intended for God's sake.

Therefore, when one teaches children, women, and most of the common people, one should teach them to serve out of fear and in order to receive a reward. As their knowledge grows and their wisdom increases, this secret should be revealed to them [slowly,] bit by bit. They should become accustomed to this concept gradually until they grasp it and know it and begin serving [God] out of love.

(6) It is a well-known and clear matter that the love of God will not become attached within a person's heart until he becomes obsessed with it at all times as is fitting, leaving all things in the world except for this. This was implied by the command [*Devarim* 6:5: "Love God, your Lord,] with all your heart and all your soul.”

One can only love God [as an outgrowth] of the knowledge with which he knows Him. The nature of one's love depends on the nature of one's knowledge! A small [amount of knowledge arouses] a lesser love. A greater amount of knowledge arouses a greater love.

Therefore, it is necessary for a person to seclude himself in order to understand and conceive wisdom and concepts which make his creator known to him according to the potential which man possesses to understand and comprehend, as we explained in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*.

There are several points to note about the Rambam’s analysis of the proper way to serve God in this chapter. First, he places it in *Hilkhot Teshuva* following a discussion of reward and punishment in chapters eight and nine. Notwithstanding the existence of reward and punishment, the Rambam teaches that one’s service of God should not be focused on these results, as such service is based on fear, not love.

In this formulation, serving God out of love is contrasted with serving Him from fear, and is vastly superior. The equivalence between the two that we saw in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* is missing in *Hilkhot Teshuva*. This conception of fulfilling the mitzva through service is closer to Shadal's understanding .

**Loving God in *Hilkhot Teshuva***

The chiastic structure of the chapter is also interesting. In the first *halakha*, the Rambam discusses doing *mitzvot* because of fear, and in the second *halakha*, he discusses doing them out of love. The fourth *halakha* discusses learning Torah from love, and the fifth discusses learning Torah because of fear. In the middle, the third *halakha*, the Rambam defines what love *is*, and here the relationship between man and God is described as one between lovers.

This presentation is difficult to understand for two reasons. First, why did the Rambam split his discussion of serving God through love and fear into *mitzvot* and learning Torah? Second, why is the split marked with this metaphor for the relationship between God and the Jewish People?

The Rambam is teaching that one can have a relationship with God based on the Master-Subject model, and nonetheless, one should serve with love as opposed to fear. But the third *halakha* teaches that it is also possible to have a special relationship with God patterned on the *Shir Ha-shirim* metaphor of lovers. This relationship is consecrated through Torah study; therefore, before discussing the learning of Torah with love, the Rambam had to first define the relationship of two lovers.

Another question remains: Why did the Rambam wait until *Hilkhot Teshuva* to define exactly what love of God is? Shouldn’t he have defined it in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, where he states the mitzva and first discusses how to achieve it?

With his formulation, the Rambam is teaching a profound lesson. Unique among *mitzvot*, love of God depends on *teshuva*. The Rambam describes a Jew’s relationship with God as a relationship between lovers, and romantic love is based on exclusivity. Sin is a betrayal of one's relationship with God; thus, *teshuva* is a prerequisite for building a relationship with God that could be compared to the relationship between lovers. Note that the call for others to love God, found in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, is not relevant to the love of God described in *Hilkhot Teshuva*; though one can certainly share a friend, a lover is exclusive.

Not only is love of God dependent on *teshuva*, but the process of *teshuva* is the only way to reach the level of love of God described so beautifully by the Rambam. *Teshuva* is not simply about forgiveness from sin but is about forming a loving relationship with God. The most natural place to define love of God, therefore, is in *Hilkhot Teshuva*.

In the second *halakha*, the Rambam mentions our forefather Avraham as an example of serving God with love, and teaches that "this is a very high level which is not merited by every wise man." However, when it comes to the level of love described in the third *halakha* – "until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick" – he offers no human role model, but simply states that this love is portrayed through metaphor in *Shir Ha-shirim*. One wonders if this level of love of God is humanly possible. Perhaps it is only possible in the world to come, where "the righteous will sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence" (*Hilkot Teshuva* 8:2). This might be another reason the Rambam only describes this highest level of loving God in *Hilkhot Teshuva*,after his description of the world to come, and not in its proper place in *Hilkhot* *Yesodei Ha-Torah*.

**A Third Pathway to Love**

If it is possible for man to reach that level of love of God in the mundane physical world, it can only be through the study of Torah. If the Rambam in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* says one can love God though the study of nature, and in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, by studying his *mitzvot*, in *Hilkhot Teshuva* the Rambam emphasizes the centrality of Torah study in man's quest to love God – for the Torah is the truest reflection of God's presence in our world. As the Vilna Gaon beautifully expressed:

What is the concept of covenant? It is similar to one who loves another but is unable to embrace him. Because of this situation, the [lover] gives the beloved something [AJ: the Torah] that expresses his feelings for his beloved. This gift keeps them connected and bound together. And even though he is not present, all of his thoughts are placed in this object.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This is how the Rambam answers the question of the Mizrachi, "How can a command apply to something a person has never seen or comprehended"? It is known through the study of His Torah, which is a kind of love letter from Hashem to his beloved.

And this is the message of the sixth and last *halakha* in the chapter, which echoes the all-consuming love in the third *halakha*:

It is a well-known and clear matter that the love of God will not become attached within a person's heart until he becomes obsessed with it at all times as is fitting, **leaving all things in the world except for this**. This was implied by the command [*Devarim* 6:5: "Love God, your Lord,] with all your heart and all your soul.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This also reminds us of how the Rambam described the *teshuva* process in the beginning of *Hilkhot Teshuva* (2:2):

What constitutes *teshuva*? That a sinner should **leave his sins** and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart never to commit them again as [*Yeshayahu* 55:7] states "May the wicked abandon his ways...."

Before "leaving all things in the world except for this [loving God]” can be achieved, one has to first "leave his sins."

**Love and Fear in *Teshuva***

Another distinction between love and fear is found in the Gemara:

Great is *teshuva*, for one's intentional sins are counted for him as unwitting transgressions…

Is that so? Did not Reish Lakish say: Great is *teshuva*, for one's intentional sins are counted as merits?...

This is not difficult: one is out of love; the other out of fear. (Yoma 86b)

Many have wondered why the Rambam omits this distinction between *teshuva* based on love and *teshuva* based on fear in his detailed *Hilkhot Teshuva*. But this distinction is in fact there, hiding in plain sight. The first chapters of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, which focus on sin and punishment, relate to repentance from fear, while the last chapters, which focus on our relationship with God, are based on repentance from love, as the Rambam so beautifully expresses it using the metaphors of *Shir Ha-shirim*.

Rav Lichtenstein explained that there are two aspects to *teshuva*: moral and religious. Perhaps moral *teshuva* is related to *teshuva* from fear, and religious repentance is motivated by love and the desire to have a relationship with God.

The moral aspect of *teshuva* focuses on the sinful act as an incarnate, evil reality…the religious impact of sin, with reference not to the act but our relationship to the Almighty.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We can also see the connection between *teshuva* and love and fear in the structure of the *Mishneh Torah*; *Hilkhot Teshuva* is the indispensable gateway into the next book of the Rambam, *Sefer Ahava*.

Taking a broader look, as we approach the High Holidays, we might note that Rosh Ha-shana can be described as a day of *teshuva* from fear, and Yom Kippur as a day of *teshuva* from love.

1. All Rambam citations are from the translation of R. Eliyahu Touger, with occasional minor edits, unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Norman Lamm. “Maimonides on the Love of God” in *Maimonidean Studies* Vol 3. Edited by Arthur Hyman. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1992, p.133. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Trans. Berel Bell, available at Chabad.org, with minor edits. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Elijah ben Solomon. *Sefer Yetzira* 1:8, Vilna, 1828. Quoted in: *Eliyahu Stern the Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The chapter essentially has two endings: the fifth *halakha*,which ends *Hilkhot Teshuva* (and the chiastic structure within chapter 10),and the sixth *halakha*, which ends *Sefer Mada* as a whole. These two endings also allude to a more profound question. Which is the ideal way to reach the level of love for God that was described in the third *halakha*? Through the ideas expressed in *Hilkhot De’ot* and *Yesodei Ha-Torah,* and the intellectual journey of Avraham Avinu that is so eloquently described by the Rambam (*Hilkhot Avodat Kochavim* 1:3)? Or through the Torah God gave to Moshe?

In the thought of the Rambam, Avraham is recognized as the original Philosopher, and Moshe Rabbeinu is the lawgiver. This dichotomy is also hinted at in our chapter, where the Rambam writes, as quoted above:

One who serves [God] out of love occupies himself with the Torah and the *mitzvot* and walks in the paths of wisdom for no ulterior motive: not because of fear that evil will occur, nor in order to acquire benefit. Rather, he does what is true because it is true, and ultimately, good will come because of it.

This is a very high level which is not merited by every wise man. It is the level of our Patriarch, **Avraham,** whom God described as "he who loved Me," for his service was only motivated by love.

God commanded us [to seek] this rung [of service] as conveyed by **Moses**,as [*Devarim* 6:5] states: "Love God, your Lord.'' When a man will love God in the proper manner, he will immediately perform all of the *mitzvot* motivated by love. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:2)

We see a progression from Avraham, the server of God, to Moshe, the lawgiver.

The word *ahava* (love) appears 25 times in chapter ten. At the end of the chapter, the Rambam notes, “The first book has been completed and it is the Book of Knowledge [*Sefer Mada*].” This closing brings us back to the beginning of the book: "The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom" – in Hebrew, *yesod ha-yesodot ve-amud ha-chakhmot*. The first four letters of this phrase spell out the Tetragrammaton, whose numerical value is 26. If the theme of our chapter is love of God, we might look for a 26th mention of *ahava* to match this number – and we find it in the verse with which the Rambam introduces *Sefer Ahava*, immediately following *Sefer Mada* and *Hilkhot Teshuva*: "Oh, how I **love** Your Torah; it is what I discuss the entire day" (*Tehillim* 119:97).

The verse connects love with Torah, and itself contains 26 words – perhaps to teach us that ultimately, love for God can be found and expressed by studying His Torah.

It is also interesting to note that Rabbeinu Bachaya ends his classic work, Chovot Halevavot with a chapter on Love of God, which is also the tenth chapter of the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Aharon Lichtenstein. *Return and Renewal*. Jerusalem, Israel: Maggid Press, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)