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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

FREE LOVE AND FREE HATE

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Back when the counterculture was more sexually radical than the mainstream, a popular Orthodox countermeme cited Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook as advocating "free love." It was of course clickbait. The *ahavat chinam* that Rav Kook called for wasn't about removing constraints on physical relationships. Yet the terms may not be complete homonyms.

One can interpret the "free love" movement cynically, as an effort to abolish all objective sexual restrictions. But one can also understand it more idealistically, as an effort to prevent any person from being constrained by another person's love for them. Free love meant that it was given without making any demand on the beloved.

In hindsight, it seems clear that this kind of freedom has a price, which is that the beloved cannot demand commitment from the lover. It is a transactional waiver of rights and privileges rather than a transcendent expression of relationship.

Moreover, human sexuality as a mode of relational expression may be incompatible with this kind of freedom. Aside from the practical challenges raised by the possibility of reproduction (which admittedly can often be evaded or reversed), we have not yet been persuaded, and perhaps we cannot be honestly persuaded, that commitment is not a crucial measure of the emotional depth of a sexual relationship.

But is this necessarily true outside the realm of sexuality? Alternatively, can freedom and commitment be reconciled?

Putting the phrase *ahavat chinam* into the Bar Ilan Project's database yields only one result anteceding Rav Kook (and that one result disparages it). Perhaps it was just an idiosyncratic, utopian fantasy.

But *ahavat chinam* is likely the counterpart of *sin'at chinam*, the intraJewish hatred that Talmud Yoma 9b blames for the destruction of the Second Temple. Is *sin'at chinam* also a fantasy?

The truth is that it's hard to understand *sin'at chinam* in this framework. What obligations can hatred impose on the hated, and what commitments can it impose on the hater? We should note that other definitions of *chinam* are also difficult to apply here. For example, Second Temple Jewry was rife with substantive political and religious disputes: what better justifications are there for hatred? This question has led commentators through the centuries to suggest other sins as justifications for the second Destruction. At the very least, we can't easily figure out the boundaries of *ahavat chinam* just by reversing *sin'at chinam*.

Another possible source for Rav Kook is Mishnah Avot 5:16's differentiation of dependent love (*ahavah shehi tehyah badavar*, perhaps *eros*) and independent (*ahavah she'einah tehyah badavar*, perhaps *agape*) love. Dependent love lasts only so long as the thing it depends on stays the same. It is not true *ahavah*, because as Shakespeare wrote, "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds." By contrast, independent love is everlasting.

The Mishnah illustrates this difference by contrasting the relationship of Amnon and Tamar on the one hand, and that of David and Jonathan on the other.

Amnon believes himself to love Tamar. When his lust is sated via rape, he has nothing left but hate for her. We might say that he never loved her at all, only lusted after her; and/or that his claim of love was an attempt to rationalize his desire.

But these do not seem good fits with the Mishnah's categorization of him as being in "love that depended on something." What did his love, such as it was, depend on?

David and Jonathan should be zero-sum political opponents. Each embodies the impossibility of the other establishing a royal dynasty. Yet they never act against each other. Their mutual attachment transcends any notion of self-interest.

But it seems a reach to claim that David and Jonathan's love was utterly independent. If Jonathan had betrayed David, would David still have loved him?

If we translate the Mishnah and Shakespeare into philosophic terms, we can suggest that true, independent love does not alter in response to any change in the beloved's accidental attributes. So long as the beloved retains their identity, they remain beloved. However, a change in essential attributes, i.e. those attributes which define the beloved, is tantamount to the beloved ceasing to exist.

The difference between dependent and independent love is whether the lover correctly understands which attributes of the beloved are essential. Those who love another for their physical beauty, or their ongoing flattery, or their powerful intellect, do not love the actual person. Often they expand the accidental attribute they love into a false image of the person. David loved Jonathan as he actually was, whereas Amnon loved a Tamar whose attitude toward him existed only in his fantasies.

Does that mean that Jonathan could never have betrayed David? I am leery of this idea, which suggests that in a sense Jonathan did not have complete free will. That seems too high a philosophic price for me.

It is true that Rav Dessler famously argues that not all moral choices are “live options,” to use William James’ term. Every person’s “point of choice” (*nekudat habechirah*) is different. But Rav Dessler concedes that every individual’s point of choice is movable. Every choice we make affects which future choices are live options.

So we need to decide whether a Jonathan who betrayed David would have changed so radically as to be a different person, or else explain why such a betrayal would not demonstrate that David had misperceived his essence.

A similar question emerges from the great Israeli dayyan Rav Shlomo Dichovsky’s essay “Ahavat Chinam veSin’at Chinam” (Torah Sheb’al Peh vol. 40 (5759). Rav Dichovsky excerpts parallel accounts of hatred from the Rebbe RaShab of Lubavitch and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. Here is the Rebbe Rashab:

Sin’ab results from a man’s inability to endure the (existence of the) other. The cause (of this inability) is his own being, which is significant in his own eyes . . . because of his own being, he gives no space for the (existence of the) other, because the other necessarily limits his own existence, and therefore he cannot endure it.”

And here is Rav Hirsch in Chorev:

Sin’ab is the feeling as-if the existence of some other created being stands as an enemy and an obstacle to our own existence.”

and in his Commentary on the Torah:

Ahavah seeks the sustained existence of the other . . . *Sin’ab* seeks to distance it until it ends.

The Rebbe and the Rabbiner each seem anachronistically familiar with Jean Paul Sartre’s idea that “Hell is others.” But they assume that hell is not inevitable. One can instead live in The (Truly) Good Place by diminishing the significance of one’s existence as an ego-self, or else by coming to see one’s individual existence as expanded rather than diminished by the existence of others.

Rabbi Dichovsky takes the second approach. *Ahavat chinam* is a love that sees the other’s existence as a *bonum per se*, as a good independent of anything the other does.

So we must ask, as we asked regarding David and Jonathan: Does *ahavat chinam* mean that the relationship cannot be affected by any moral judgement of the other’s choices? If my attitude toward someone else can be affected by their choices, does that demonstrate that my love for them is *tehyah badavar*?

The same question arises out of the haftorah for Shabbat Shuvah. Hoshea 14 begins with the prophet in his own voice urging the Jewish people to return to G-d (*shuvah Yisroel ad Hashem Elokekha . . . veshuvu el Hashem*). The prophet then ventriloquizes ideal Jewish statements of repentance. Finally, he ventriloquizes G-d’s response:

Erpa meshuvotam = I will heal their strayings;

Obaveim nedavah = I will love them *nedavah*;

Ki shav api mimenu = for My anger has receded from me.

What is *ahavat nedavah*? A *nedavah* is a voluntary sacrifice, and in general *lehitnadev* means to volunteer. Rashi accordingly comments: “Even though they are not fit for love (לאהבה), I will voluntarily commit to loving them (אתנדב לאהבה).”

It seems to me (and perhaps to the author of the Daf al Daf anthology to Shabbat 151b) that there is a direct line of descent from the Biblical *ahavat nedavah* to the Rabbinic *ahavah she’einah tehyah badavar* to the contemporary *ahavat chinam*. Yet Hoshea represents G-d as declaring *obaveim nedavah* only after the Jewish people repent and return to Him, which seems very much to make this love dependent on our choices. (Some midrashim even read *nedavah* as reflecting the Jews’ willingness to sacrifice themselves for G-d, so that G-d loves us because we are willing to volunteer.)

Rashi responds to this problem by suggesting that, having sinned, we cannot make ourselves worthy again of G-d’s love, so that even after we repent, He must choose freely to love us.

But with enormous hesitation, I suggest a different approach, which I believe is rooted in Yoma 86b’s understanding of this verse related to a situation in which we “repent out of love,” meaning without regard for consequences, rather than out of fear of punishment. Perhaps the verse intends to emphasize that G-d’s love for us was always *nedavah*, and that it is G-d’s underlying, unchanging love of us that enables Him to accept our repentance.

In Rav Kook’s ideal world, free love exists among all Jews, and among all human beings. Like G-d, Who voluntarily brought all other beings into existence, we should see the existence of others as necessarily expanding rather than constricting our own.

But this does not mean that we cannot hold each other accountable, or that our outward actions must always be clear expressions of love. “There is a time to (express) love, and a time to (express) hate.” Hoshea acknowledges that there are times when G-d’s expresses anger at us, so that His love is revealed only when His anger recedes.

The challenge, in private life, in religion, and in politics, is to ensure that even the most profound moral disagreements do not overwhelm our own recognition that our existence is enriched by the existence of all other human beings, and to convey convincingly to our *baalei plugta* that our deepest wish is reconciliation rather than victory.