

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חירות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## WE LOVE HIM; WE LOVE HIM NOT. WE LOVE HIM...

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The phrase *l'ahavah et Hashem Elokekha* appears in Devarim 30:16, and then again in Devarim 30:20. These verses are the bookends of a parashah, or stanza, so the redundancy appears blatant. But the prefix *lamed* of *l'ahavah* may turn out to be a homonym, or even a pun, so that the stanza actually conveys a dramatic spiritual development. Properly understanding that development may be a *sine qua non* for fulfilling the imperative, found in verse 19, to "choose life."

Verse 15 opens with G-d declaring that He has placed before us this day

אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב

וְאֶת־הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת־הָרָע:

the life and the good  
and the death and the bad

Verse 16 opens with

אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם

that I am commanding you this day

Does G-d mean that He is commanding us both life and death, both good and bad? Presumably not. Therefore, the commandments must be what follows, with verse 16 only establishing a context. What follows is *l'ahavah et Hashem Elokekha*.

We can reasonably translate verses 15-16 as follows

רְאֵה

נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם

אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב

וְאֶת־הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת־הָרָע:

אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם

לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

לְלַכֵּת בְּדַרְכָּיו וּלְשַׁמֵּר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקֵּיהֶם וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו

וְחַיִּית וְרַבִּית

וּבְרַכְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה בֹּא־שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

See!

I have placed before you this day

the life and the good

and the death and the bad

(in) that I am commanding you this day to love Hashem your

G-d -

to walk in His ways and to observe His *mitzvot*, His *chukum*,  
and His *mishpatim*-

and (if you observe them), you will live and multiply,  
and Hashem your G-d will bless you

in the land to which you are coming there, to possess it.

*L'ahavah* here means "to love," and to love G-d means to walk in His ways and observe His *mitzvot*, *chukim*, and *mishpatim*. There seems to be no obligation here to feel or inculcate the emotion of love toward G-d, but rather to express that emotion through proper action. It may even be enough to act **as if** one is feeling that emotion.

Remember that G-d placed before us both life and death, the good and the bad. He did that by commanding us to act in certain ways. Obeying His command brings life, multiplication and blessing; verses 17-18 make explicit that disobedience brings destruction and shortened life, or perhaps national exile. Connecting life to multiplication suggests that it has a straightforward physical meaning.

In verse 19, G-d calls Heaven and Earth to witness – and to be prepared to testify if necessary – that

הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ

הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְלָלָה

the life and death I have placed before you

the blessing and the curse

The introduction of witnesses may just be an intensification of G-d's opening declaration. But the change from good/bad to blessing/curse opens the possibility that the meaning of "life" has also changed.

In verse 17, G-d commanded us to love Him, and life is the **consequence** of our obedience. In verse 19-20, the relationship between love and life seems much more complex and multivalent.

וּבְחֵרַת בְּחַיִּים

לְמַעַן תַּחְיֶה אִתָּה זָרַעְךָ:

לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

לְשִׁמְעַ בְּקוֹלִי

וּלְדַבֵּק־בִּי

כִּי הוּא חַיִּיךָ וְאַרְךָ יָמֶיךָ

לְשִׁבְתָּ עַל־הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לְאַבְרָהָם

לֹא־בָרָהֶם לִיצְחָק וְלִיעֲקֹב לָתֵת לָהֶם:

You must choose life

so that you will live, you and your seed,

*l'ahavah et Hashem Elokekha*

to heed His voice

and to cleave to Him

because that/He is your life and the length of your days  
to settle on the ground that Hashem swore to your ancestors

—

to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov —

to give them.

We are **commanded** to choose life; life is a **motive** for  
and a **consequence** of that choice; and that choice, or  
perhaps G-d the Commander, is our life. All this is  
confusing enough: but what's love got to do with it?

In verse 17, love was reducible to observance; it was  
about external expression, not internal state. In verse 20,  
love leads to *dveykus*/cleaving, which is generally a metaphor  
for an internal state.

*Dveykus* the internal state is independent of love. For  
example, in Genesis 34:3 Shekhem's *nefesh* cleaves to Dina  
after he rapes her, and **then** he loves her (in some sense).  
Men abandon their parents and cleave to their wives, while  
Ruth cleaves to her mother-in-law after her husband dies;  
love is not mentioned explicitly in either context.

A beraita on Nedarim 62a offers an interpretation of  
verse 20.

לאהבה את ה' א-להיך

לשמוע בקולו ולדבקה בו—

שלא יאמר אדם:

אקרא - שיקראוני חכם;

אשנה - שיקראוני רבי;

אשנן - שאהיה זקן ואשב בישיבה,

אלא - למד מאהבה, וסוף הכבוד לבא,

שנאמר: קשרם על אצבעותיך כתבם על לוח לבך,

ואומר: דרכי דרכי נועם,

ואומר: עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה ותומכי מאושר.

*l'ahavah et Hashem Elokekha*

to heed His voice and cleave to Him —

(meaning) that a person should not say:

I will read — so that they will call me the title *Chakham*;

I will recite — so that they will give me the title Rabbi;

I will teach (or sharpen) — so that I can be a *zaken* and sit in  
the academy.

Rather — learn out of love, and in the end the honor will  
come,

as Scripture says: *Bind them on your fingers; write them on the  
tablet of your heart;*

and it says: *Her paths are paths of pleasantness;*

and it says: *She is a tree of life for those who grasp her, and those  
who support her are enriched.*

The obvious shift from verses 15-16 is that love is  
expressed in study rather than in action. The subtler but  
equally crucial shift is that *l'ahavah* translated as “out of  
love.” Verses 19-20 now say that we must choose life out of  
love of G-d. Love is an internal state, a **motivation**. Not  
only that: love — at least the kind of love that leads to *dveykus*  
— is an exclusive religious motivation. Learning out of love  
means learning with no other motive.

This creates a paradox. Love of G-d entails the belief or  
knowledge that He is just, which means that He will reward  
you for expressing love toward Him. The nature of a just  
reward is to be something you genuinely and properly desire.  
How, then, can human beings serve G-d without the reward  
becoming part of their motivation? But religious love is  
defined by its jealousy; it cannot coexist with other motives.

The *beraita* reflects this paradox. We are not supposed to  
learn for the sake of being honored, but if we are to learn  
out of love, if we are to find G-d worthy of love, we must  
believe that honor will come.

This paradox is at the heart of Sefer Iyov. G-d wants to  
know that Iyov serves Him out of love and not, as Satan  
asserts, out of self-interest. But He can only find that out by  
at least seeming unjust, and would Iyov love an unjust G-d?  
Should he?

The same dynamic drives Akeidat Yitzchak. G-d can  
only find out whether Avraham serves him purely out of  
love by demanding that he sacrifice Yitzchak. Very likely  
Avraham cannot serve G-d purely out of love so long as  
Yitzchak lives, because he cannot stop himself from  
considering Yitzchak's interests when making decisions,  
even if he can disregard his own interests. But if Avraham  
actually sacrifices Yitzchak, he will cease loving G-d. There  
is a Heisenberg principle at work; G-d can be loved, or  
know that He is loved, but not both. When G-d places life  
and death before us, He reminds us of His power over us;  
and pure love generally cannot exist in awareness of power.  
But to love someone *means* giving them emotional power  
over you!

What may square the circle is perfect faith that He will  
never use that emotional power, never demand proofs of  
love that are not in our best interests. Perhaps that is  
*dveykus*.