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חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

LOVE, POWER, AND RELIGION

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Fear of commitment is a real thing. For men, perhaps even for women. Perhaps even for the Master of the Universe, if it were possible to say such a thing? What would that even mean?

Fear of commitment can have two very different causes.

The conventional notion is that it reflects concern that things will turn out badly. Maybe s/he will grow bored of me, maybe s/he has hidden character flaws that I won't be able to deal with, maybe s/he will really miss their freedom and be unable to make the necessary compromises and sacrifices.

Maybe I'm projecting, and the real risk is that I'll grow bored, etc.

The less-realized cause is unwillingness to live with uncertainty. What if I spend my life with someone who never loved me as much as I love them? What if I never find out, but much of my happiness was based on an illusion?

This second kind of concern is the basis of many tragedies, in which one party keeps setting up tests of love for another to reassure themselves that they are truly loved. But love is not always pass-fail, not always predictable, and sometimes the exercise of demanding proof of love is a self-undoing process.

All this is made much more complicated when the relationship involves power. Does the side with power really love the other, or merely enjoy their dependence? Does the dependent side love the other more than instrumentally?

Telling someone you love them gives them power over you; they know that you are dependent on their affection. So telling someone you love them paradoxically makes it impossible to know with certainty that they truly love you.

The fraught dynamics of power and love are the basis of the narrative of Sefer Iyov. G-d is confident of his relationship with Iyov, but Satan points out that he should not be: "Does Iyov fear G-d for nothing?"

Since G-d has given Iyov all his heart's desire, it may be that Iyov's relationship with G-d is purely instrumental. So Satan (k'b'yakhol) convinces G-d to make Iyov suffer, to test his love.

Documentary critics note that the poetic/philosophic heart of Sefer Iyov seems unrelated to its narrative frame. The frame is about this test; the fifty chapters of dialogue between Iyov and his friends and ultimately G-d never mention the possibility of a test. They conclude that the frame and heart must have been written by different authors.

In his play A Masque of Reason, Robert Frost exposes the shallowness of this contention. "It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning," he writes. If Iyov ever considers the possibility of a test, then he might serve G-d only to receive the reward for passing, and so the test would prove nothing.

No one who has read Sefer Iyov can be tested to see whether they love G-d. Unless the test involves taking something away that no reward could possibly replace, like an only beloved son born to a miraculously rejuvenated wife. At the Akeidah, G-d and Avraham test each other. Whoever commits first will never know for sure that they are loved. In the end, G-d spares Avraham the demonstration. So Avraham learns that G-d does truly love him, and G-d once again cannot know if Avraham's love is absolutely unconditional.

All this is a long winded introduction to Parshat Vayetze, and the relationship of Yaakov Avinu with G-d. Each of them makes regular statements of commitment that are hedged about with conditions, with Divine and Human "ifs," as I've detailed in previous years' divrei Torah. Yaakov seeks to have a relationship with the G-d of his father Yitzchak, who was exempted from future tests by his participation in the Akeidah, even though he was not the one tested. G-d deflects him to the path of his grandfather Avraham.

One fascinating instance of this is G-d's statement in Bereishis 28:15

וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי עֹמֵךְ
וְשָׁמְרְתִיךָ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֵּלֵךְ
וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ אֶל-הָאֲדָמָה הַזֹּאת
כִּי לֹא אֶעְזָבְךָ
עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם-עָשִׂיתִי
אֶת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ:
Behold I am with you

I will guard you in everything you go through

I will return you to this earth

Because I will not leave you

Until that I have done

What I spoke to/about you.

The obvious question is: But what about after G-d has done what he spoke? Will He leave Yaakov then?

There is no obvious answer. Sefat Emet suggests that G-d can only make absolute commitments to non-tzaddikim, whose behavior can be removed from the framework of immediate virtue/consequence. In other words, he can only make absolute commitments to those who do not love Him. For His words about Yaakov to come true, however, Yaakov must become a tzaddik, and beloved.

The rishonim on the whole give more pedestrian answers. Bekhor Shor, for example, writes:

יש "עד" שאין לו הפסק,

כמו מעתה ועד עולם (מיכה ד'ז).

אף כאן אינו אומר: 'כשעשה אעזבך';

אלא: "כי לא אעזבך עד אשר אם עשיתי", ולא משם ואילך.

*There is a word "until" that does not imply a break
as in the verse "from now until forever" (Micah 4:7).*

*So too here, it does not say "When I do it I will leave you,"
but rather "because I will not leave you until I have done" – nor
thereafter.*

A different approach to the same end is offered by RaDaK:

כי לא אעזבך עד אשר אם עשיתי –

אם כן, לא יעזבנו לעולם,

כי ההבטחה לו כל ימיו לעולם ולזרעו אחריו.

Because I will not leave you until I have done –

If that were so, God would not leave him ever!

*because the promise was to him for all his days evermore and to his
descendants after him*

But the interpretation I focused on this year is that of Minchat Yehudah:

כי לא אעזבך –

פרש"י ז"ל: המבקש לחם הוא נעזב,

שני לא ראיתי צדיק נעזב וזרעו מבקש לחם.

וק';

שהרי מצינו ר' חנינא בן דוסא שלא הי' לו אלא קב חרובין מערב

שבת לערב שבת,

גם צדיקים הרבה שהיו עניים!?

וי"ל

ד"ראיתי" ר"ל זלזלתי,

כמו אל תראוני שאני שחרחרות,

וה"ק "לא ראיתי" =

לא נראה בעיני שיהא הצדיק נעזב ועני

כמו לעות אדם בריבו ה' לא ראה.

ואע"ג שגלגל הוא החוזר בעולם

שצדיק נעזב כשנולד במזל עני.

Because I will not leave you –

*Rashi explains that one who must seek bread is abandoned,
as Scripture writes For I have not seen a righteous person
abandoned*

But this is difficult

*because we find that Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa had only a peck of
carobs each week,*

and many tzaddikim were poor?!

We can answer

*that the meaning of I have not seen is "I have not disparaged,"
as when Scripture writes do not "see" me that I am swarthy
and this is the meaning of I have not seen –
that it has not seemed proper to me for a tzaddik to be abandoned and
poor*

*as Scripture writes to cause injustice to a man in his grievance
Hashem never "saw"
even though it is a wheel that keeps turning round in the world
so that the tzaddik is abandoned when born under an astrological
indication of poverty.*

Minchat Yehudah argues that G-d's promise to Yaakov is that He will empathize with his misfortunes, not that He will prevent them. In other words, He will truly love him, and hope to be loved in return, even while surrendering His capacity to utterly control Yaakov's life. Therefore, "until" cannot be setting an endpoint, because love is not conditional; G-d will love Yaakov for as long as it takes, and eventually what He promised will come true. A core drama of the rest of Sefer Bereishis is whether Yaakov can acknowledge G-d's love without demanding the exercise of His power.