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Rosh Hashana Day 1- 5774

## I AM MY BELOVED'S AND MY BELOVED IS MINE

A well-known British poet wrote:

“Love, love, love  
All you need is love  
All you need is love  
All you need is love, love  
Love is all you need.”

This is a beautiful sentiment, but what exactly did John Lennon mean when he sang, “All you need is love?” Who or what are we supposed to love, and is love all we really need?

Last year, members of our congregation began to meet once a month after services to discuss that morning’s Torah portion. In July, when we read *parashat Va-etchanan*, the topic was “Love in the Tanakh,” the Hebrew Bible. We began with the well-known verse from Deuteronomy, the verse right after the *Shema*, “Hear O Israel, *Adonai* is your God, *Adonai* is unique.

וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשֶׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֵדֶךָ:

You shall love *Adonai* your God with all your heart and with all your soul

and with all your might.” (Deut. 5:4-5)

We engaged in a long, multifaceted, and fruitful discussion, but in the end I still wondered: “What does it mean to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might?”

The word *ahava*, love, appears often in the Bible. However, it means different things in different contexts.

One of the first times we learn about *ahava* is in a romantic love story. When people think about marriage in ancient times, they usually frame it much as did playwright Joseph Stein in “Fiddler on the Roof,” which was based on the tales of Tevye and his daughters, by Yiddish author Shalom Aleichem.

In the show, Tevye turns to his wife, Golde, and asks, “Do you love me?” Golde responds, “Do I what?” After several further entreaties Golde finally says,

“Do I love him?  
For twenty-five years I’ve lived with him  
Fought with him, starved with him  
Twenty-five years my bed is his  
If that’s not love, what is?”

**Tevye:** Then you love me?

**Golde:** I suppose I do

**Tevye:** And I suppose I love you, too

**Both:** It doesn’t change a thing

But even so  
After twenty-five years  
It's nice to know”

This is the Tina Turner view of traditional Jewish marriage “What’s love got to do with it?” Absolutely nothing! The general perception is that in the ancient world, Jewish marriages were arranged for family reasons or to improve social status, but not for love.

However, If we go back to one of the earliest marriages in the Bible, we see that love has absolutely everything to do with it!

Abraham wanted his son, Isaac, to marry a girl from his ancestral homeland in Aram-naharaim. He sent his servant Eliezer to search for a fitting match. Eliezer selected Rebecca, a distant relative and a woman whose greatest personal quality was her *chesed*, her goodness, kindness, and generosity.

After she, and not her father, consented to the marriage, Eliezer accompanied Rebecca back to Canaan. As they approached the Israelite encampment, Rebecca saw Isaac walking in a field. She asked Eliezer,

מִי־הָאִישׁ הַלֵּוֹךְ הַהַלֵךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה לְקָרְאֵנוּ

“Who is that man walking in the field toward us?” The servant answered,

הוּא אֲדֹנָי

“That is my master,” whereupon the modest Rebecca lowered her veil to cover her face.

As soon as Isaac spotted her, even with the veil, it was love at first sight.

וַיְבִיֵאֵהָ יִצְחָק הָאֵלֶּהָ שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־רֵבֶקָה וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיְאַהֲבֶהָ

וַיִּנְתְּם יִצְחָק אַחֲרַי אִמּוֹ:

“Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother’s death.” (Gen. 24)

How’s that for romance? You could write a book about it! Contrary to Golde’s response to Tevye’s question: “Do you love me?” “I suppose I do,” Isaac loves Rebecca with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might.

This is the kind of love found in *Shir Hashirim*, the Song of Songs, also found in the Bible. *Shir Hashirim* is a love poem about two lovers longing, or perhaps lusting, for each other. The Song of Songs kicks the romantic meaning of *ahava*, of love, up a notch. In *Shir Hashirim*, the beloveds’ desire for each other is not only romantic, it is erotic:

“You have captured my heart,  
My own, my bride,  
You have captured my heart

With one [glance] of your eyes,  
With one coil of your necklace.  
How sweet is your love,  
My own, my bride!

[...]

Sweetness drops  
From your lips, O bride;  
Honey and milk  
Are under your tongue;  
And the scent of your robes  
Is like the scent of Lebanon

[...]

אֲנִי לְדֹדִי וְעַלֵּי תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ:  
I am my beloved's,  
And his desire is for me.

Come, my beloved,  
Let us go in the open;  
Let us lodge among the henna shrubs  
Let us go early to the vineyards;  
Let us see if the vine has flowered,  
If its blossoms have opened  
If the pomegranates are in bloom.  
There I will give my love to you.”  
(Song of Songs: 7)

Pretty racy stuff! No, we definitely do not teach the Song of Songs to our Torah School students!

You may wonder: What is *Shir Hashirim*, the Song of Songs, doing in the Bible? Why is this erotic masterpiece included in the *Tanakh*, the most

sacred of all Jewish literature? It sounds more like a tale out of the Arabian Nights or a paperback romance novel.

The Rabbis of the Talmud tell us why the Song of Songs is in the Bible. *Shir Hashirim* is included in the *Tanakh* because it is an allegory of the love between God and Israel.

“Hark! My Beloved!  
There He Comes,  
Leaping Over Mountains,  
Bounding Over Hills.”

Rabbi Judah says, “The voice of my beloved . . . this refers to Moses.”

When he came and said to the Israelites, “In this month you will be redeemed,” they said to him, “Our lord Moses, how are we going to be redeemed? And did not the Holy One, blessed be He, say to Abraham, And they shall work them and torment them for four hundred years. (Gen. XV 13)...? But leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. The reference here to mountains and hills in fact alludes to calculations and specific times. ‘He leaps’ over reckonings, calculations, and specific times. ‘And in this month you are to be redeemed.’ This month is the beginning of months (Ex. 12:1).”

Even if you didn’t follow the details, you get the gist. When the Song

of Songs talks about the lover leaping over mountains and hills, what it is really talking about, say the Rabbis, is God shortening Israel's years of slavery in Egypt. God so loves the people Israel that he is willing to shorten their time of servitude, despite God's earlier decree that they would spend 400 years toiling in Egypt.

How does this interpretation inform how we are to love God? The rabbis are suggesting that our love of God should not be solely intellectual and that even emotional love is not enough. Our love of God should border on the erotic, at least in the sense of the coming together of two personalities in spiritual union. Our desire to know God and to be one with God should make us lovesick, overshadowing and distracting us from every other aspect of existence – at least according to the *kabbalists*.

*Yedid Nefesh*, often sung before the beginning of the service on Friday night, is a poem written by the *Sfat* kabbalist Rabbi Elazar Azikri in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This is how the poet expressed his deep desire for God:

יְדִיד נֶפֶשׁ אָב הַרְחָמֵנוּ, מִשְׁךְ עֲבֹדֶךָ אֶל רְצוֹנֶךָ.

Beloved of the soul, Father of compassion,  
draw Your servant close to Your will.  
Like a deer will Your servant run  
and fall prostrate before Your beauty.

To him Your love is sweeter  
than honey from the comb, than any taste

At the end of our *Shabbat* morning service we sing *Shir HaKavod* by Rabbi Judah HeChassid, who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He expressed similar sentiments:

אֲנֵעִים זְמִירוֹת וְשִׁירִים אֲאַרֹג, כִּי אֵלֶיךָ נַפְשִׁי תִעְרֹג.

I will sing sweet psalms and I will weave songs,  
to You for whom my soul longs

And when I offer blessing, to me Your head inclines:  
accepting it as spice, fragrant and fine.

May my prayer be to You sweet song.  
For You my soul will always long.

Rabbi David Wolpe writes in “The Healer of Shattered Hearts”: ‘God loves you.’ That phrase may strike the modern Jewish ear strangely, but it is authentically and originally a Jewish concept. The love of god for human beings is deep and rich in Jewish tradition...(p. 70)

“The most renowned paragraph in the Jewish prayer service [the *Shema*] adjures us to love God. Without the love, the foundation of Judaism crumbles. More than that—without that love our lives can totter and so can the world we live in. Without it we seem to lack direction and soul.”

(p. 171)

Many of you know Amparo Goldman, one of our most faithful congregants. She comes to *shul* every *Shabbat* and participates in almost every class and educational program we hold. No matter what the topic, whether it is about keeping *Shabbat* or asking why it is important to remain Jewish, Amparo always makes the same basic comment: Judaism and life are only significant if you feel God's Presence in your life, if you feel God's nearness, warmth, and support, and if you respond with your love to God in return.

I envy Amparo. She feels God's nearness every day of her life. She knows what it means to "love *Adonai* your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." You can hear it in her voice when she speaks and in her eyes when she prays. She and God share an intimate relationship.

I struggle to feel that closeness, that immediacy. I am by nature and nurture a rationalist. While that may be intellectually rewarding, it can be spiritually impoverishing. I wish I felt God's Presence as intimately as does Amparo and my rabbinic *kabbalistic* ancestors and contemporaries.

How do we moderns come to love God? How do we learn to long for that which we can neither see nor hear? How do we love God if we are not

even sure that God exists?

Rabbi Reuven Hammer wrote, in “Entering Jewish Prayer”: Fear, awe, and respect may be part of the human attitude toward God, but love is the strongest motivation and the one that will endure even under the most difficult circumstances. **How one achieves it is another question.** The sages thought that constant reiteration of the Torah might help and the proof of love was to be found not in abstract feelings but in the conduct of life:

‘Take these words to heart, for thus you will recognize He who spoke and the world came into being, and you will cling to His ways.’” (p. 124)

The rabbis of the Talmud seem to be suggesting that one way to come to the love of God is through the love, study, and practice of God’s word. It is through the study of Torah and the performance of *mitzvot*, both those that honor God and those that honor God’s creatures, that we come to know the Creator.

I, perhaps, will never have that intimate close relationship with God of which the mystics speak. I, perhaps, will only rarely feel the longing for the Divine that was expressed by the lovers of the Song of Songs.

But that won't stop me from continuing to seek God's Presence and God's love with all of my heart and all my soul and with all my might. And if the best way to do this is to study Torah, observe *mitzvot*, and perform *gemilut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness to uplift my fellow human beings, then at least the journey itself will be worthwhile.

And who knows? Perhaps through my intimacy with God's word and God's will, I too, may one day arrive at the relationship with God that was expressed in *Shir Hashirim*:

אֲנִי לְדֹדִי וְדֹדִי לִי

“I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.”