

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Va'etchanan-Nachamu 5779

Our Parsha contains one of Judaism's most celebrated declarations of faith - the SH'MA (6:4-9). Following the affirmation of Gd's absolute unity (6:4), the Torah proceeds to command: "And you shall love HaShem, your Gd, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your possessions." How are we to understand this behest "to love HaShem" - or, more generally, what does it mean to love another?

The Targum, who most often translates the text into its literal Aramaic, strangely enough, consistently renders the verb OHEIV, love as RECHEM, compassion. Understood this way, are we to understand this verse as requiring us to have mercy on Gd, to feel sorry for Him? Is loving someone merely a patronizing expression rooted in feelings of pity?

In attempting to appreciate the deeper wisdom behind Onkelus's translation, it is always helpful to investigate when the first time the verb ALEF-HEI-BET appears in the Torah. In the famous episode of the Akeida (the sacrifice of Yitzchak), Avraham is commanded to "take your son, your only son whom you love ..." (B'reishit 22:2). Here too, the Targum interprets Avraham's love for Yitzchak as a statement of RACHAMIM. However, to say that Avraham simply had mercy on his son does not even

begin to do justice to the profound, intensely passionate love that Avraham felt for his only child.

A fresh approach to decipher the Targum's equation of love=compassion becomes clear if we choose to understand the word REISH-CHET-MEM as also meaning a womb - RECHEM. Much like the womb is physiologically part of the woman's body, the child is experienced as being organically part and parcel of the parent's very existence. The mother's life revolves around her child. She sees herself in him; she lives for him and lets him not only share her personal existence but absorb it. As the Rav put it, "Love asserts itself in feelings of possessiveness, of inseparability from the beloved ... [It is] an expression of ontic unity, of existential compresence and community." (Worship of the Heart, pp. 134-35)

Defining love in this fashion helps us understand how it conflates with feelings of compassion. To love someone means to sympathize with another's loneliness, to recognize his cold solitude and have compassion for his sorry state of solitariness. Loving someone means to be ready to rescue that person from his melancholy aloneness and aver - nay proclaim - that he need never be companionless again. Avraham's love for Yitzchak was such that he could not conceive of life without him, so bound up was he in his son's very existence.

Indeed, the plaint of the beloved to her lover is, "Don't ever leave me!"

What does it signify then to profess love for Gd? Based upon the above, perhaps the Targum was suggesting that loving the Almighty means to have RACHAMIM, compassion for His loneliness. Possibly, the Targum was proposing that such love/compassion bespeaks of man's impassioned desire to join with his Creator, integrating into His existence, thus remedying His solitude and together realizing the eschatological vision of a redeemed universe.

For the Jew, this love / RACHAMIM compliance traditionally asserted itself in his commitment to abide by the Torah and its mitzvot, whose charge follows immediately upon the V'AHAVATA command. It was to be the Torah, that sacred covenant, which was to define this seemingly absurd empathic union of Gd and man. A union whose truth retains its existential vitality notwithstanding its paradoxical nature. Man, longs to anchor his existence in the absolute and unconditional, and in his seeking to love and relate, he eo ipso displays great compassion for his Gd, relieving His Loneliness and becoming His loyal and devoted partner.

The Sh'ma begins by declaring HaShem as One, HASHEM ECHAD. To be the Absolute One is, by definition, to be the Lonely One. To this theological pronouncement, the Jew quickly responds with V'AHAVTA, with love as compassion, as if to say, "Master of the Universe, I, though insignificant and

mortal, feel for Your painful aloneness and I stand ready to join You in covenantal embrace.

This, according to the Targum, is what it may mean to love Gd, a magnificent challenge that elevates and ennobles man and enthrones him as a bit "lower than the angels".

This Shabbat begins the seven weeks of consolation - NECHAMA - after the Tisha B'Av mourning. Perhaps the concept of N'CHAMA as well can be seen as an expression of love as understood by the Targum.

When one lonely soul merges with another, a person's sense of completion and wholeness is restored. The experience of N'CHAMA is rooted in the reciprocal compassion that two lonely people express toward one another and the comforting solace they then feel.

As such, after tragedy and destruction, HaShem consoles His people by promising He will never abandon them. And it is only with that categorical pledge of compassionate love that we are strengthened - emboldened - to optimistically greet a New Year. It is then, when the period of consolation reaches its apotheosis in the final Haftara of SOS ASIS before Rosh HaShana, that HaShem declares: "No longer shall forsaken be said of you ... for the Lord desires you ... and [as] the rejoicing of a bridegroom over a bride, shall your Gd rejoice over you!" (Yeshayahu 63:4,5)