



“You Shall Love the Lord Your God”
by David Silverberg

Parashat Vaetchanan includes the first paragraph of the daily *shema* prayer (6:4-9), the second verse of which begins, “*Ve-ahavta et Hashem Elokekha*” – “You shall love the Lord your God.” The concept of “love” in relation to God seems to difficult to understand. “Love” is used in several different meanings, and even its primary meaning, as a strong emotional bond towards someone or something, refers to a wide variety of different experiences and relationships. But none of them, at first glance, seem applicable to the Almighty. And yet, not only does the Torah here enjoin us to “love” the Almighty, Maimonides lists this obligation as one of the Torah’s 248 *mitzvot ase-*positive commandments (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot, ase* 3). It is noteworthy that Maimonides excludes from his listing of the commandments the Torah’s generic warnings about proper conduct and observance. The fourth of the fourteen rules by which he determined the 613 commandments of the Torah dictates that general admonitions that do not entail a precise requirement or prohibition are not to be listed. With this in mind, his decision to include love of God in this list becomes all the more striking. According to Maimonides, the Torah here introduces a particular obligation, and not merely a poetic reference to the general sense of loyalty and devotion demanded of the Jew.

This week we will examine Maimonides’ approach to this *mitzva*. As we will see, he leaves us with different impressions regarding the precise demands of *ahavat Hashem* (love of God) in different places in his writings, and various attempts have been made to reconcile these differences.

Two Passages in *Mishneh Torah*

Maimonides defines the obligation of *ahavat Hashem* twice in his halakhic code, *Mishneh Torah*, approaching it from two very different angles. In the second chapter of Hilkhhot Yesodei Ha-Torah (*halakha* 1), Maimonides poses the question, “What is the means of loving Him and fearing Him?” He immediately responds:

When a person contemplates His great, wondrous actions and creations, and through them beholds His inestimable and boundless wisdom, he immediately loves, praises, glorifies and experiences a great longing to know the Great Name, as [King] David said: “My soul thirsts for God” (Tehillim 42:3).

Thus, one comes to “love” God through the study of nature. In the next paragraph, Maimonides informs his readers that for this very reason he chose to devote a number of chapters here, towards the beginning of *Mishneh Torah*, to scientific material, which does not directly relate to Halakha. He presents this information, he explains, because basic scientific knowledge is what leads a person to experience *ahavat Hashem*, as required by this *mitzva* of “You shall love the Lord your God.”

Maimonides returns to the concept of *ahavat Hashem* later, in the tenth and final chapter of Hilkhhot Teshuva (*halakha*5):

What is the proper kind of “love”? It is that one loves God with great, immense, abundant, very powerful love, to the point where his soul is bound with the love of God, such that he thinks of it constantly, like those who fall lovesick, that their minds are not free from the love of that woman of whom one thinks constantly – as we were commanded, “[You shall love the Lord your God] with all your heart and with all your soul...”

Here, Maimonides speaks of *ahavat Hashem* as an emotional state, rather than in terms of a required mode of conduct. Whereas in Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah *ahavat Hashem* demands studying God’s handiwork, in Hilkhot Teshuva Maimonides describes this concept as a genuine experience of love that overtakes and consumes a person’s mind.

The resolution between these two passages is clear, and it emerges from a careful reading of Maimonides’ wording in introducing his remarks in both contexts. Recall that in Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah he began his discussion with the question, “What is the means of loving him...,” whereas in Hilkhot Teshuva he addresses the question, “What is the proper ‘love’?” Very simply, in one context he determines the practical measures required by the *mitzva*, whereas in the second he speaks of the desired result. Practically speaking, the obligation of *ahavat Hashem* requires a person to study the natural world as a means of developing a sense of love for God. In Hilkhot Teshuva, Maimonides describes for us the experience for which one ought to strive; the way this is accomplished is through the intellectual engagement described earlier, in Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah.

Torah Study and Scientific Study

As noted by several writers, Maimonides adds another element to the obligation of *ahavat Hashem* in defining this *mitzva* in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*:

We are commanded with regard to loving Him, may He be exalted, meaning, that we must contemplate and look upon His commandments, ordinances and actions so that we comprehend Him and experience utmost delight in the comprehension of Him. This is the essence of the required love.

In this passage, Maimonides focuses on the study of not scientific knowledge, but Torah knowledge. Although here, too, he speaks of contemplating the Almighty’s “actions,” which very likely refers to scientific study, he very clearly emphasizes Torah study as the means of achieving *ahavat Hashem*. In Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, as we saw, Maimonides makes no mention of Torah study in conjunction with the *mitzva* of loving God, indicating that one achieves love solely through contemplation of the physical world. In *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, by contrast, he mentions study of God’s laws even before the study of nature, perhaps suggesting that Torah learning constitutes the primary means of attaining genuine love of God.

The earliest work (to my knowledge) that addresses this discrepancy is *Kinat Soferim*, a commentary to *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*. The *Kinat Soferim* claims that in truth, as Maimonides writes in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, one must contemplate both the natural world and the divine law to arrive at *ahavat Hashem*. As it so happens, however, there exists a separate obligation of *talmud Torah*, to engage in Torah study each day. Independent of the pursuit of *ahavat Hashem*, a Jew must in any event allocate time for Torah learning, and Maimonides devotes a section of *Mishneh Torah* – Hilkhot Talmud Torah – to explicating this and related requirements. Since Maimonides had to address the laws of Torah study in a separate context, dealing with the independent obligation of *talmud*

Torah, he felt it unnecessary to mention Torah learning amidst his discussion of *ahavat Hashem*. Therefore, in introducing the concept of *ahavat Hashem* in Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, Maimonides mentions only the importance of scientific contemplation, since Torah study he discusses independently, in explaining the laws of the *mitzva* of *talmud Torah*.

Several contemporary scholars, however, have suggested other approaches to reconcile this seeming contradiction. Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch (of Yeshivat Ma'aleh Adumim in Israel, a prominent scholar of Maimonides), in his *Yad Peshuta* commentary to *Mishneh Torah*, advances an explanation by identifying different stages in a person's intellectual growth. As we observed earlier, in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* Maimonides mentions first the study of the divine law as the catalyst to *ahavat Hashem*, and then adds scientific contemplation. This sequence corresponds to Maimonides' emphatic warning later in Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah (4:13), that before embarking on intensive study of study and philosophy, one must first "fill his belly with bread and meat," meaning, one must study "the explication of that which is forbidden and permissible, and the like." He explains that a study of Halakha sets a person in the proper direction needed for advanced scientific and philosophic contemplation. Therefore, the quest for *ahavat Hashem* must proceed in this sequence: a study of God's law, followed by scientific study. This accounts for Maimonides' formulation in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*.

In *Mishneh Torah*, Rabbi Rabinovitch argues, Maimonides addresses a simple, practical problem: how can one be inspired to engage in the intricate and often arduous study of Torah law? The mental energy demanded by the field of Torah study can be mustered only by those with a keen recognition of its inherent sanctity and genuine longing to draw nearer to their Giver. From where will the student draw this inspiration? Maimonides' answer is that a basic overview of scientific knowledge, general familiarity with the wonders of the natural world, can infuse a person with the spiritual thirst necessary to draw him to the study of Halakha, which, in turn, lays the groundwork for in-depth scientific learning, which is the means to achieving *ahavat Hashem*. Therefore, in *Mishneh Torah*, where Maimonides presents all of Halakha in a clear and concise manner, he opens with several chapters devoted to rudimentary science and astronomy, in an effort to wet a student's appetite for further knowledge of the Creator, a pursuit which begins with a knowledge of Torah law.

Rabbi Rabinovitch's explanation resembles that of *Kinat Soferim*, in that they both interpret the passage in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* as formulating the essential requirements of *ahavat Hashem*, and read *Mishneh Torah* in terms of the practical manifestation of these requirements. According to *Kinat Soferim*, mentioning Torah study in the context of *ahavat Hashem* was practically unnecessary, as it is in any event addressed independently. Rabbi Rabinovitch claimed that in *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides follows the practically necessary program, consisting of a dash of science followed by a thorough study of Halakha, which together constitute the prerequisite for scientific contemplation towards attaining *ahavat Hashem*.

The Scholar and the Layman

A much different approach is taken by Rabbi Norman Lamm ("Maimonides on the Love of God," *Maimonidean Studies*, vol. 3), who attributes this discrepancy to a basic distinction between the masses and the intellectual elite. According to Rabbi Lamm, Maimonides understood that the Torah has different expectations from these two groups of Jews:

The average man is expected to observe all the actional commandments – the Halakha – in all their details. These actions, plus the summary of otherwise profound philosophical ideas concerning God that the Torah offers ever so briefly, are enough to give this average person the wherewithal to conduct his life in an orderly, moral, and civilized manner and with an awareness of the basic ideas that distinguish Judaism. The *mitzvot* will guide him and her onto the right path, consistent with such a person's intellectual capacity. The elite, however, whose curiosity and intellectual ability raise them beyond the ordinary, are expected to strive for a far higher standard, much beyond the limits set by the Torah for the masses. Such a person must aspire to understand the most refined conceptions of the Deity and His attributes.

Once we accept this premise, it stands to reason that the required pursuit of *ahavat Hashem* will assume different forms for these two groups. For the masses, who are expected to observe Halakha and become familiar with the rudiments of Torah philosophy, *ahavat Hashem* demands that they probe primarily that framework and thereby experience love of God. The accomplished scholar, however, must work beyond this limited scope of intellectual activity, and experience *ahavat Hashem* at a higher standard, through rigorous study of scientific and philosophical disciplines.

This theory can easily resolve the seeming inconsistency in Maimonides' definitions of the obligations of *ahavat Hashem*, once we assume that the different contexts address different classes of people. Indeed, Rabbi Lamm argues, Maimonides speaks to different audiences in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* and in the opening section of *Mishneh Torah*. *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, which presents an overview of all the Torah's commandments, is, as Rabbi Lamm describes it, the Maimonidean "popular work," granting the unlearned masses exposure to the entire range of the divine law, in a concise and accessible format. And although *Mishneh Torah*, too, seeks to explicate the details of Halakha such that it comes within reach of the unseasoned commoner, nevertheless, the first chapters of its opening section – *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* – are exceptional in this regard. In the fourth chapter (*halakhot* 10-11), Maimonides indicates that the scientific subject matter revealed in this section represents the essential content, albeit in very simplified form, of the esoteric scientific and metaphysical disciplines, the study of which he explicitly reserves for the intellectual elite. It thus stands to reason that he wrote these chapters primarily for a scholarly audience, and he therefore naturally defines *ahavat Hashem* in this context in accordance with the demands it imposes upon the upper academic echelons of the nation. Namely, he describes the pursuit of *ahavat Hashem* as demanding intensive probing of the natural world, beyond familiarity with Torah, which this *mitzva* demands of even the commoner.

Besides reconciling the conflicting passages, this theory resolves yet another difficulty otherwise inherent in Maimonides' approach, as it brings the *mitzva* of *ahavat Hashem* within reach of all members of the Jewish people. Shemuel David Luzzato (*Shadal*, 19th century, Italy), in his commentary to the verse, "*Ve-ahavta et Hashem Elokekha*," strongly criticized Maimonides' definition of the obligation, claiming that it imposes unrealistic demands upon the vast majority of Jews. Torah law, *Shadal* strongly asserted, is directed towards scholar and layman alike, and its observance must be possible even by those who spend their days working for a livelihood and tending to families. It is inconceivable, *Shadal* insists, that even a single demand of the Torah should require withdrawal from occupational activity, and mandate full-time involvement in academic pursuits. Nor may withdrawal from professional life be perceived as the Torah's ideal, with worldly occupation being relegated to the unfortunate lot of the intellectually disadvantaged. Torah observance – even at the ideal standard – must

accommodate the layman's schedule and capabilities, and cannot be restricted to the occupants of the ivory towers of higher learning.

According to Rabbi Lamm's theory, Maimonides is not in disagreement with this basic premise. He, too, demands of the layman no more than that which can be integrated into a life of professional activity. *Ahavat Hashem* for the masses requires allocating time for Torah study – and some scientific study – in an effort to achieve a degree of emotional attachment to the Almighty. The more rigorous demands articulated in Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah represent the manifestation of this *mitzva* with respect to the scholar, who must apply himself more diligently in the relevant disciplines to attain *ahavat Hashem* at a higher standard, resulting from a more profound understanding of the wonders of creation.

In truth, this theory appears in a slightly different form in an earlier source – the *Ha'amek Davar* commentary to the Torah, by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (“Netziv,” 19th century, Lithuania-Poland). Netziv notes that Maimonides invokes this injunction – “You shall love the Lord your God” – in yet another context, as well – in the fifth chapter of Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, where he addresses the requirement of martyrdom. Maimonides points to this verse, which demands loving God “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might,” as a source for the halakhic concept of *yeihareig ve-al ya'avur*, that one must surrender his life to avoid violating the three sins of idolatry, adultery and murder. Loving the Lord with all one's “soul” means the willingness to give one's life in protection of His honor. Indeed, the Talmudic sage Rabbi Akiva cited this verse as he allowed the Roman authorities to flay his skin with iron combs rather than comply with their ban against Torah study (*Berakhot* 61b). Seemingly, then, *ahavat Hashem* demands not any kind of intellectual activity in an effort to develop an emotional bond with God, but rather a willingness to make the supreme sacrifice when one's faith is put to the test.

Netziv therefore contends that the masses are not enjoined to “love” God through intellectual engagement at all. (Needless to say, the separate, universally binding obligation of *talmud Torah* requires every Jew, regardless of background and prior academic achievement, to engage in daily Torah study.) In both *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* and *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides directs his remarks strictly to the academically inclined reader. For the commoners, *ahavat Hashem* demands not “love” in the emotional sense, but rather unwavering devotion and unshakeable faith. It enjoins the individual to commit himself so steadfastly, that he would be prepared to surrender his life in defense of the Almighty's honor. It is only the intellectual elite who are bound by the secondary interpretation of “*Ve-ahavta et Hashem Elokekha*,” requiring the study of Torah and the natural world to the point where one is consumed by genuine love for God.

Of course, this approach fails to account for the discrepancy between *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* and the earlier passage in Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, the former emphasizing the study of Torah, the latter, scientific and philosophical inquiry. Netziv does not provide any explanation for these different formulations, both of which, in his view, are addressed specifically to the scholar.

At first glance, distinguishing between the religious responsibilities of the commoners and the elite reflects an exclusive quality of the Torah, indicating that it speaks primarily to scholarly circles, and is less interested in the layman. Of course, nothing can be further from the truth. To the contrary, interpreting the Torah's message as providing different guidelines to different groups of people emphasizes its inclusive nature, that the Jewish nation in its entirety bears the burden of religious responsibility and devotion. All members of the nation are enjoined – and not merely advised – to observe, study and inquire, only at different levels. Although Maimonides might

recognize different standards for different groups, his understanding of Torah law demands the active participation of all people, irrespective of background and orientation. All Jews must “love” the Almighty, in one form or another, as the Torah demands, “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”