

Parshat Va'etchanan: Shabbat Nachamu How to Love God: Shema as a User's Manual Rabbanit Lisa Schlaff, Class of 2021

This week, we revisit a d'var torah written by Rabbanit Lisa Schlaff in 2020.

In this week's parsha, Parshat Va'etchanan, we encounter one of the most familiar passages in Jewish liturgy — the first paragraph of Shema (Devarim 6:4-9). Let's take a moment, though, to imagine this passage through a less familiar lens— through the eyes of the people hearing it for the first time. As part of his final speech to Bnei Yisrael at the culmination of their journey through the desert, Moshe commands them:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Interestingly, this is the first time the notion of loving God appears in the Torah. To the desert Jew who knew of God through the splitting of the sea, the thunder and lightning of matan Torah, mass plague, and bread falling from the sky, this was a shocking statement. “You must fear God” — yes. “You must be in awe of God” — certainly. “You must love God” would have been an incomprehensible command.

And so, as Bible professor Jeffrey Tigay suggests, the first paragraph of shema makes it clear that loving God is not an abstract emotion, but is grounded in the concrete observance of mitzvot. The commandment to take the mitzvot to heart: “And these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart,” can be read as a direct explication of what it means to love God. Building upon this idea, it is possible to read the entire first paragraph of shema as a user's manual for how to love God. Let's give it a try.

We are first commanded to internalize the mitzvot — to literally take them to heart. In the context of the Jews in the desert, this meant the mitzvot Moshe is about to present to them in his final speech. It is significant that everyone is included in this command. Moshe is not speaking only to the elite, only to the priests, or only to the men. All of Yisrael must place the mitzvot upon our hearts. Once we have internalized the mitzvot, we are then able to teach them to our children. On an airplane, we must put on our own oxygen mask before placing one on our children. We need to fortify ourselves with mitzvot prior to passing them on. The word used in explaining how to educate our children is v'shinantam — repeat them. We show our love of God not through speaking of mitzvot when the occasion arises, but through constant

conversation — conversation that will feel repetitive. We show our love of God through mass universal education in mitzvot.

Where are we supposed to speak about mitzvot? “When you sit in your house and when you walk on the road,” —that is, everywhere. There is no distinction between private space and public space; loving God means that all space is to be filled with conversation about mitzvot. When are we supposed to speak about mitzvot? “When you lie down and when you rise” — that is, all the time. Loving God means that all time is to be filled with conversation about mitzvot.

After being instructed to speak about the mitzvot everywhere and all the time, we are commanded to literally bind the mitzvot on our bodies — “bind them as a sign on your hand.” This physical binding, on top of our constant conversation about mitzvot, is a further expression of our love of God. Once we have placed the mitzvot upon our bodies, the next step is to “write them upon the doorposts of your house.” The mitzvot are to be placed on our doorposts, in our liminal spaces. When we are exiting one reality and entering another, we need to be reminded of the mitzvot. Lastly, the mitzvot are to be placed “upon your [city] gates.” The mitzvot are to be projected beyond our own homes and broadcast very publicly. Once we have internalized the mitzvot, and shared them with our children, we share them with the community.

The project of loving God involves engaging as individuals, as members of a family, and as members of a community. Returning to the Jews in the desert, the command to love God is no longer amorphous or jarring; it is grounded in very concrete action items. We express love to our children not only by saying “I love you” but by sitting on the floor and playing puzzles with them. We express love to our parents not only by saying “I love you” but by doing the food shopping when needed. And to God, we might not say “I love you” at all, but we fill our lives with daily ritual—everywhere and all the time—that is a powerful expression of love. On this Shabbat Nachamu, may we find comfort in our own constant and repetitive expression of this love

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