YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

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**Shiur #15: Loving God (V): Love Will Follow Automatically**

**Introduction**

Rambam writes in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*:

The third *mitzva* is that we are commanded to love God – that is, to contemplate and closely examine His *mitzvot* and His works in order to understand Him, and through this understanding to achieve a feeling of ecstasy. This is the goal of the *mitzva* to love God. As the *Sifrei* states: “From the statement, ‘You shall love the Lord your God,’ can I know how to love God? The Torah therefore says, ‘Take to heart these words with which I charge you this day’ (*Devarim* 6:6), i.e., that through this you will understand the nature of He who spoke and brought the world into being.” From this it is clear that contemplation will lead to understanding, and then a feeling of enjoyment **and love will follow automatically**. (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 3)

This passage begs the question: What causes love to follow “automatically”? When we get to know people, we often begin to respect them for their intelligence, their sense of enterprise, their character, or their knowledge. But there is no guarantee that holding someone in high esteem in any of these ways will necessarily lead to love!

We can suggest various answers to this question by addressing the essential nature of love – and, more specifically, of loving God – that is expected of us. As a rule, the more we distance the term “love” as it relates to God from the emotion called “love” that is familiar to us from our interpersonal relationships, the easier it will be to comprehend the idea that love of God will follow automatically. By examining the following interpretations, we will ascend through the various levels of loving God through developing a perspective that is at once sophisticated, precise, pleasing, uplifting and exciting.

**The Desire to Fulfill *Mitzvot* and Do God’s Will**

In the previous *shiurim*, we presented a *midrash* that Rashi cited:

“You shall love” – Perform His commandments out of love. The one who acts out of love cannot be compared to the one who acts out of fear. If one serves his master out of fear, when the master sets a great burden upon him, this servant will leave him and go away. (Rashi, *Devarim* 6:5)

This same idea is implied in *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* as well: “The root of this *mitzva* is known – that one cannot fulfill one of God’s *mitzvot* properly without loving Him” (*Sefer Ha-Chinukh*, Commandment 418). It seems from here that the main point of the *mitzva* of loving God is to enable one to fulfill the *mitzvot* in a more complete fashion. One can only fulfill the *mitzvot* wholeheartedly if one performs them through love, understanding the importance of listening to God’s commands.

This is also implied in the verse from the Ten Commandments: “But showing kindness to the thousandth generation of **those who love Me and keep My commandments**” (*Devarim* 5:10). Here, too, it seems that “those who love me” are equivalent to those who “keep My commandments.”

Based on this, the concept of love is not primarily a command to develop one’s emotional love, but rather to develop a deep, internal understanding of God’s commands and the readiness to obey them out of a sense of obligation, will, and fulfillment.[[1]](#footnote-1)

One can attain this understanding through contemplation of the universe and of the Torah and its *mitzvot*. It is an understanding of the principles of the *mitzvot* and the foundations of human existence. When man recognizes “He who spoke and brought the world into being,” love will follow automatically. In other words, this will happen when man understands **the justness of the *mitzvot*** – that obeying God’s commands is the true “right and good” in the world.

A person who is ready and willing to perform the *mitzvot* is similar to a person who does the bidding of his loved one. According to this approach, this is how a person can be considered one who loves God.

Shadal went so far as to remove this *mitzva* from its simple meaning – a straightforward command to love God – viewing it as an injunction to obey all of God’s commands:

I will now return to the topic of loving God, and I will say that since the divine Torah saw fit to speak in the language of human beings, and to paint a picture before us of a living God who feels anger and desire, love and hate and the like, it would be proper to portray in this way a man who loves God or hates Him. One who is “ever mindful of the Lord’s presence” and **whose inner thoughts are primarily directed at giving pleasure to Him by following His laws, His rules and His *mitzvot*** – this is called one who loves God. And one who is not “mindful of the Lord’s presence” and does not hesitate to do that which is abhorrent before Him, who constantly seeks out new abominations for sinning – he is called one who hates God. And loving God is not a specific *mitzva*, but it includes all the *mitzvot*; **a command does not apply to the very act of loving**. (Shadal, *Devarim* 6:5)

It seems, however, that there is no need to be so extreme as to eliminate the *mitzva* of loving God altogether. One can understand that this is a unique *mitzva* to obey God’s will after **understanding the justness of His *mitzvot* and His Torah**.

Through this understanding, one “does what is true because it is true” (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:2).

**Knowing God and Comprehending God**

A careful examination of Rambam’s language in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, as well as of the passage from the *Sifrei* that served as the basis for his explanation, will lead us to the understanding that loving God amounts to recognizing God, knowing God, and comprehending God.

We read in the *Sifrei*:

I do not know just how one is to love God. Hence Scripture goes on to say, “Take to heart these words with which I charge you this day” … **for thus will you recognize Him who spoke and brought the world into being**, and you will cling to His ways.[[2]](#footnote-2) (*Sifrei*, *Devarim* 33)

The *midrash* views the verse “Take to heart these words…. Impress them upon your children. Recite them…” (*Devarim* 6:6) as commenting on the previous verse, “You shall love the Lord….” One can attain the love of God by studying the Torah and by contemplating the *mitzvot*. Through this process, one can recognize his Creator, His desires and His wisdom. This is the love that is expected of us.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In accordance with the above passage, Rambam wrote the following in *Moreh Nevukhim*, in dealing with the various meanings of the word *lev* (“heart”):

As to the passage: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,” I explain “with all your heart” to mean “with all the powers of your heart.” That is, with all the powers of the body, for they all have their origin in the heart. And the sense of the entire passage is: **Make the knowledge of God the aim of all your actions**, as we have stated in our commentary on the Mishna and in the *Mishneh Torah*. (*Moreh Nevukhim* 1:39)

In the past, we have stressed that interpersonal love develops out of the knowledge and recognition of the other, including his characteristics, traits, talents, intelligence, and deeds. While all of these aspects are certainly important for creating love, they are insufficient. Even when knowledge and recognition exists, the emotion of love will not necessarily develop.

It seems that because of this, we must define love of God differently from how we define interpersonal love. Love of God is the knowledge and recognition itself, which create a thirst for greater knowledge and comprehension, for a greater understanding of the works of God through the creation, the Torah, and the *mitzvot*.

In *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, Rambam emphasizes that this is a natural response to contemplation of the universe: “He will… yearn with tremendous desire **to know His great name**, as David stated: ‘My soul thirsts for God, the living God’ (*Tehillim* 42:3)” (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2).

In *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Rambam makes this same point in connection with contemplation of the *mitzvot*: “To contemplate and closely examine His *mitzvot* and His works, **in order to comprehend Him, and through this comprehension to achieve a feeling of ecstasy**. This is the goal of the *mitzva* to love God” (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 3).

Based on this approach, the expression “and you will cling to His ways” that appears at the end of the *midrash* is a natural result of a person’s thirst for a greater knowledge of God. The ecstasy that Rambam describes accompanies the knowledge and comprehension of God.

This interpretation of the *midrash* fits with Rambam’s position. Rambam quotes the *midrash*, but leaves out the phrase “and you will cling to His ways,” indicating that according to Rambam, love of God lies in the knowledge and comprehension themselves.

However, based on Rashi’s commentary on the verse, it seems that he understood that clinging to God’s ways is actually the form of love that is expected of us. Rashi writes: “‘These words’ – What is this ‘love’? It is that these words shall be upon your heart, **and through this, you will come to recognize the Holy One, blessed be He, and will cling to His ways**” (Rashi, *Devarim* 6:6). This formulation leads us to conclude that Rashi views clinging to God’s ways as an expression of love. This interpretation fits with the first fundamental approach to loving God that we presented in this unit: that the love that is expected of us refers simply to performing certain actions that express the human desire to obey our Creator’s commands. These actions can be performing *mitzvot*, as we indicated above, or clinging to God’s ways, as Rashi presents here. These ideas are explicitly reflected in the verse: “If, then, you faithfully keep all these words that I command you, loving the Lord your God, **walking in all His ways and holding fast to Him**” (*Devarim* 11:22).

In contrast, as we have said, Rambam’s position is that the knowledge and comprehension of God represent the love in which we are obligated. Therefore, Rambam establishes at the end of *Hilkhot Teshuva*:

One can only love God **[as an outgrowth] of the knowledge with which he knows Him. The nature of one’s love depends on the nature of one’s knowledge. A small [amount of knowledge arouses] a lesser love. A greater amount of knowledge arouses a greater love**. Therefore, it is necessary for a person to seclude himself in order to understand and conceive wisdom and concepts **that make his Creator known to him according to the potential that man possesses to understand and comprehend**,[[4]](#footnote-4) as we explained in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:6)

**Admiration and Appreciation of the Divine Power**

Rambam writes in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*:

When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know His great name, as David stated: “My soul thirsts for God, the living God” (*Tehillim* 42:3). (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2)

This contemplation of the universe, which demonstrates to man the power and greatness of God’s wisdom, arouses in him feelings of awe and a thirst for more knowledge. Then, as he stands in awe of God’s power, he recoils as he realizes his own cosmic insignificance:

When he [continues] to reflect on these same matters, he will immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited wisdom before He who is of perfect knowledge, as David stated: “When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers… what is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him” (*Tehillim* 8:4-5).

The gap between man and God is what intensifies the feeling of awe that one experiences when encountering the infinite wisdom of God. Through this violent emotional process of alternating love and fear, the person remembers, on the one hand, the concept of “What is man that You have been mindful of him,” and on the other hand the concept of “You have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty” (*Tehillim* 8:6). A powerful and incomprehensible feeling of admiration toward the divine wisdom intensifies in the person’s soul. This feeling can alternatively be described as an intense longing for God, the source of wisdom.

Rambam later adds:

When a person contemplates these matters and recognizes all the creations, the angels, the spheres, man and the like, and appreciates the wisdom of the Holy One, blessed be He, in all these creations, he will add to his love for God. His soul will thirst and his flesh will long with love for God, blessed be He.

He will stand in awe and fear from his humble, lowly, and base [nature] when he compares himself to one of the great and holy bodies, how much more so when comparing himself to the pure forms that are separate from matter and do not share any connection with it. He will see himself as a vessel full of embarrassment and shame, empty and lacking. (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 4:12)

Another expression of the awe a person experiences upon recognizing the yawning gap between divine power and human insignificance is found in *Tehillim*:

I praise You, for I am awesomely, wondrously made; Your work is wonderful; I know it very well. My frame was not concealed from You when I was shaped in a hidden place, knit together in the recesses of the earth. (*Tehillim* 139:14-15)

The sense of wonder that King David – the sweet psalmist of Israel – experiences upon contemplating the wondrous acts of God, and the feeling of “I am wondrously made” that accompanies “I know it very well” and “I was shaped in a hidden place, knit together in the recesses of the earth,” puts a person in a position of thankfulness and amazement. On the one hand, he is thankful for having received so much from God – “I praise you, for I am awesomely, wondrously made” – but he is also stunned by what he has not yet managed to understand and comprehend, as the continuation of the Psalm states: “How weighty Your thoughts seem to me, O God, how great their number! I count them – they exceed the grains of sand; I end – but am still with You” (*Tehillim* 139:17-18). Radak comments on these verses:

“How weighty Your thoughts seem to me, O God” – The meaning of “weighty” is that one cannot comprehend them… The meaning of “Your thoughts” is… Your intentions in creation.

“How great their number!” … This refers to the number of principles… that is to say, the number of the principles of Your intentions in creation is great; all the more so the details.

“I count them” – When I come to count them I am unable, because “they exceed the grains of sand.”

“I end – but am still with You” – Because of how much I think about them, I dream about them when I sleep, and when I wake up I find that I am still with You, meaning, in thoughts of Your wonders. (Radak, *Tehillim* 139:17-18)

R. Shlomo ibn Gabirol’s great poetic work, “*Keter Malkhut*” (“The Royal Crown”) opens with a verse from this chapter in *Tehillim*:

Your work is wonderful; I know it very well.

Yours, Lord, are greatness, might, splendor, triumph and majesty.

To You, Lord, belong kingship and preeminence above all.

Yours are riches and honor: Yours are the creatures of the heights and the depths.

They bear witness that they perish, while You endure.

Here, ibn Gabirol attempts to crown God as King of the world through contemplation of His works as the Creator, highlighting the difference between the eternal God and ephemeral, mortal man (“that they perish, while You endure”).

By referring to the wonders of creation and pointing to the incredible merit that man has in his ability to know and understand even the smallest sliver of the divine wisdom that is embedded in all of existence, ibn Gabirol is able to express the powerful sense of closeness that he feels toward God. This is expressed in the fact that the poet addresses God directly, in the second person, a type of interaction that demonstrates the intense closeness between him and God, as well as the real, tangible presence of the Creator in his world. The awe of the divine power that ibn Gabirol displays is accompanied by his sense of responsibility to publicize God’s presence and teach others throughout the world to recognize it. It may be that they too will be able to come closer to God, to become excited and to love God.

The poem later continues:

You are great, and compared with Your greatness, all greatness is humbled and all excess diminished.

Incalculably great is Your being,

Superber than the starry heaven,

Beyond and above all grandeur.

And exalted beyond all praise…

Who shall know the secret of Your operations?

For You have provided the body with the means to do Your work,

And You have given it eyes to see Your signs

And ears to hear of Your tremendous deeds,

And thought to understand the fringe of Your secrets,

And a mouth to declare Your praise,

And a tongue to proclaim Your might to all comers,

Even as I today, “Your servant, the son of Your maidservant,”

Am declaring according to the feebleness of my tongue.

A shadow of a shade of Your sublimity,

For these are but a fraction of Your ways.

How great is their number,

“For they are life to him who finds them.”

By them, all who hear of them may recognize You,

Even if they cannot see the face of Your splendor.

For whoever has not heard of Your might,

How can he recognize Your divinity,

And how can Your truth enter his heart,

And how can he fix his thoughts on Your service?

This is how a person’s awe of the power of God’s wisdom embedded in His creation, in the Torah and in the *mitzvot* – at least in the part that is revealed to us – truly appears.

**Conclusion**

If we delve deeper into the matter, we will discover that for every single detail of the creation, we encounter only a small section of the great and vast divine wisdom that encompasses the entire world and beyond. The same is true of each and every *mitzva*: We see only a small glimmer from the infinite divine power in each one.

Furthermore, we are not speaking of a partial view as opposed to a full, all-encompassing view, like a candle’s relationship to its light (“For the commandment is a candle, the Torah is a light” [*Mishlei* 6:34][[5]](#footnote-5)) or like the relationship of one who gazes at a point to one who gazes at a wide expanse. Rather, ours is a deep contemplation through which we learn to discover that the entire universe is merely a façade, an external garment for the divine wisdom and power. Even the great, immense, hidden light is itself merely a garment: “Wrapped in a robe of light, You spread the heavens like a tent cloth” (*Tehillim* 104:2).

Beyond the light lies the Hidden God. “The heavens declare the glory of God”: When the heavens, the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars declare, as it were, the glory of God, they actually conceal twice as much as they reveal. We begin to understand that the great light, which is indescribably brilliant, is a light that no man can truly contemplate. A person’s eyes are blinded the instant they come in contact with this light.

At that moment, the person stands in amazement upon attaining the insight that deters him from further attempts at controlling or understanding this realm. His yearning to know God grows stronger the more that his knowledge grows, as Rambam emphasizes. His soul grows more ecstatic with every additional amount of understanding that he achieves, with every new picture that the eyes of his limited human intellect can envision.

A person stands up and attempts to penetrate to the heart of the matter, beyond the garment, beyond the façade, aspiring to know and to draw closer. As he does this, he is simultaneously conscious of the inevitable distance that must exist and of his fear of the great fire. Back and forth – love and fear.

In the next *shiur*, we will discover an additional level within loving God. Through it, we will discuss what our overall relationship with this *mitzva* should be.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. This understanding of the *mitzva* of loving God is similar to Ramban’s explanation of the *mitzva* of loving one’s fellow man, which is primarily concerned with the desire to benefit others. The same is true in the case of loving God, according to this approach; it is a *mitzva* that is concerned with the desire to follow the Torah and the *mitzvot* of God. See also the interpretation of Shadal, who compares the two *mitzvot* explicitly. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It seems to me that according to this approach, the expression “cling to His ways” is already the result of loving God, as loving God in this way necessitates that one cling to His ways. The love itself, in contrast, is the knowledge and recognition that stem from contemplating the Torah and the *mitzvot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The question posed in the *midrash* – “I do not know just how one is to love God” – does not refer solely to choosing a path to attain a love of God, but also examines the nature of that love itself and attempts to define it: “For thus will you recognize Him who spoke and brought the world into being.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the parable recounted in *Sota* 21a. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)