YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

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This shiur is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot* Amelia Ray and Morris Ray   
on the occasion of their ninth *yahrtzeits*   
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray

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**Shiur #20: Loving God (X): With All Your Soul**

**Introduction**

We read in the *Sifrei*:

“With all your soul” (*Devarim* 6:5) – Even if He takes your soul. And similarly, it says: “It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long, that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered” (*Tehillim* 44:23). R. Shimon ben Menasya says: Now, how is it possible for a person to be killed every day? Actually, the Holy One, blessed be He, credits the righteous as if they had been killed every day.

Shimon ben Azzai says: “With all your soul” – You should love Him until your soul is sucked dry. R. Eliezer says: If it is said, “With all your soul,” why is it also said, “With all your might” (*Devarim* 6:5)? And if it is said, “With all your might,” why is it also said, “With all your soul”? There is a certain kind of person who prefers his health to his wealth – this is why it is said, “With all your soul.” And there is a certain kind of person who prefers his wealth to his health – this is why it is said, “With all your might.” (*Sifrei* 32)

We read further in a *beraita*:

“You shall love the Lord your God.” It has been taught: R. Eliezer says: If it is said, “With all your soul,” why is it also said, “With all your might”? And if it is said, “With all your might,” why is it also said, “With all your soul”? There is a certain kind of person who prefers his health to his wealth – this is why it is said, “With all your soul.” And there is a certain kind of person who prefers his wealth to his health – this is why it is said, “With all your might.” R. Akiva says: “With all your soul” – even if He takes your soul.[[1]](#footnote-1) (*Berakhot* 61b)

From the language of the *beraita*, as well as from that of the *Sifrei* above, it seems that there is a dispute among the *Tanna’im* regarding the homiletic interpretation of the phrase “With all your soul.” While according to R. Akiva’s view, it is clear that a person must sacrifice his life for the sake of the love of God,[[2]](#footnote-2) according to R. Eliezer’s view, the meaning of the verse is that every person is obligated to love God with every fiber of his being.

R. Eliezer’s statement is reminiscent of how the *Tanakh* describes King Yoshiyahu: “There was no king like him before who turned back to the Lord **with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might**, in full accord with the Torah of Moshe” (*Melakhim* II 23:25). In the context of this verse, “with all his might” means that Yoshiyahu tried with all his might to uphold God’s will and to follow the instructions of the Torah. In light of this, we can explain that R. Eliezer was referring to the same meaning of the expression: a person is obligated to try with all his might to achieve the love of God, using the full force of his soul. Based on this approach, the expression “with all your soul” in *Devarim* is not referring to the tension between loving God and preserving one’s own life.

It may be that R. Eliezer’s position on this matter is identical to that of R. Yishmael in a passage in *Sanhedrin*, which states that whenever there is a conflict between loving God and preserving one’s life, the value of life wins out:

R. Yishmael said: From where do we know that if a man was instructed, “Transgress and you will not be killed,” he may transgress and not be killed? … From the verse, “[You shall keep My laws and My rules,] by which man shall live” (*Vayikra* 18:5) – but not die by them.[[3]](#footnote-3) (*Sanhedrin* 74a)

However, it is this very passage that seemingly posits that R. Eliezer requires one to sacrifice his life in the case of a conflict:

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon ben Yehotzadak: By a majority vote, it was resolved in the upper chambers of the house of Nitza in Lod that in every [other] law of the Torah, if a man is commanded, “Transgress and you will not be killed,” he may transgress and not be killed, except in the case of idolatry, adultery, and murder…. They ruled as R. Eliezer. For it has been taught: R. Eliezer said: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” If it is said, “With all your soul,” why is it also said, “With all your might”? And if it is said, “With all your might,” why is it also said, “With all your soul”? If there is a certain kind of person who prefers his health to his wealth – this is why it is said, “With all your soul.” And if there is a certain kind of person who prefers his wealth to his health – this is why it is said, “With all your might.” (*Sanhedrin* 74a)

According to this passage, R. Eliezer’s statement refers to the obligation to sacrifice one’s life for the sake of loving God, or, in other words, to avoid idolatry. As Rashi comments, “Meaning that one will not substitute idolatry for Him” (Rashi, *Sanhedrin* 74a, s.v. “*ve-ahavta*”).

In light of this passage, Maharsha was forced to backtrack from the possibility of interpreting R. Eliezer’s statement according to the first approach that we suggested:

R. Eliezer also maintains that it is referring to taking one’s soul, as proven in *Perek Ben Sorer* (the eighth chapter of *Sanhedrin*). **And R. Akiva, who said, “‘With all your soul’ – even if He takes your soul,”** **came to explain R. Eliezer’s statement,** that you should not claim that R. Eliezer was not referring to taking one’s soul or sacrificing one’s life. One might think that one is merely required to cause himself to toil with his whole body, as in, “who turned back to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might,” which clearly does not refer to [Yoshiyahu] sacrificing his life… And since here it is more reasonable to explain the verse according to its simple meaning – taking a life – we explain here that this is what “with all your soul” means. (Maharsha, *Berakhot* 61b [*Chiddushei Aggadot*])

However, it seems that Rambam maintains that the obligation to sacrifice one’s life rather than violate the prohibition of idolatry is based on R. Akiva’s derivation alone:

What is the source that even when there is danger to life, these three sins should not be violated? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” – **even if He takes your soul**.” (Rambam, *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 5:7)

According to the interpretation of the commentary *Avodat Ha-Melekh*, Rambam indeed acknowledged a dispute between R. Akiva and R. Eliezer, and it was only R. Akiva’s position that requires one to sacrifice his life, not R. Eliezer’s position.

The Vilna Gaon (*Shenot Eliyahu*, *Berakhot* 61b)also followed this approach, and thus was forced to explain unconvincingly that the passage in *Sanhedrin* only cited the beginning of the *beraita*, but it was primarily referring to R. Akiva’s position that came after. The Vilna Gaon even emended the text of the Talmud so that it would read, “They ruled as R. **Akiva**,” instead of “as R. **Eliezer**,” as our version reads.

In practice, it is unclear why the passage (according to the simple understanding of it) would cite R. Eliezer as the main proponent of the position requiring that one sacrifice his life, rather than R. Akiva, who states this explicitly.

Therefore, it seems that, according the passage in *Sanhedrin*, there was actually a fundamental dispute between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva, despite the fact that they both acknowledge that one must sacrifice his life rather than violate the prohibition of idolatry. R. Eliezer maintains that it is a person’s obligation to cling to divine service and not to substitute idolatry for it, even at the cost of one’s life. In contrast, R. Akiva views this obligation as part of the fulfillment of loving God. In other words, one must express and emphasize his love of God even when his life is being taken from him.

Thus, R. Eliezer views the verse as the source for the obligation to sacrifice one’s life rather than worship idols. R. Akiva, however, maintains that the value of sacrificing one’s life rather than engaging in idolatry needs no source; it is simply obvious. The purpose of the verse in question is to demand that a person love God even at the moment when He is taking his life.

This approach of R. Akiva expresses itself in the story of his death, as described in the Talmud:

Our Sages taught: Once the wicked government issued a decree forbidding the Jews to study and practice the Torah. Pappus ben Yehuda came and found R. Akiva publicly bringing gatherings together and occupying himself with the Torah… Soon afterward, R. Akiva was thrown into prison…. When R. Akiva was taken out for execution, **it was the time for *keri’at Shema***,[[4]](#footnote-4) and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the yoke of God’s kingship. His disciples said to him: “Our teacher, even to this point? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, “With all your soul” – even if He takes your soul. I said: When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfill it? He prolonged the word *echad* until he expired while saying it. (*Berakhot* 61b)

It seems that when R. Akiva’s disciples asked him, “Even to this point?” what they meant was, “Even now, when God is taking your life, you accept upon yourself the yoke of His kingship with love? It is enough that you are sacrificing your life for His sake!”

R. Akiva responded that the primary meaning of the verse demands that a person love God precisely when He is taking his life. Throughout his life, R. Akiva longed for the scenario described in the verse to become relevant for him so that he could fulfill the *mitzva*, until he expired while accepting God’s yoke with love.

In the *Yerushalmi* as well, R. Akiva’s position is cited as interpreting the verse to refer to fulfilling the *mitzva* of loving God at the very moment that God is taking one’s life. Thus, R. Akiva is recorded as stating to the wicked Roman procurator Turnus Rufus:

All my days I have read this verse and I would be troubled, saying: When will I have the opportunity to fulfill all three of them – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” I have loved Him with all my heart and I have loved Him with all my possessions.[[5]](#footnote-5) But will all my soul I have not yet experienced. Now that the opportunity for [loving God] with all my soul has come and the time for *keri’at Shema* has arrived, I will not change my mind. Therefore, I will recite it joyfully. As soon as he finished saying this, he expired. (*Yerushalmi* *Berakhot* 9:5)

R. Akiva did not know if he would have the fortitude to love God even at the moment of truth when his life was being taken from him. When he succeeded in this, he smiled and his soul departed from him in a state of total purity.

This understanding of the respective positions of R. Eliezer and R. Akiva differs, as we have said, from the first understanding of R. Eliezer’s position. According to that explanation, the primary purpose of the verse is to demand that a person serve God and love Him with every fiber of his being. This understanding is expressed very clearly in the *Tosefta*:

R. Meir said: [The verse] says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” – with your two inclinations, with the good inclination and with the evil inclination. **“With all your soul” – even when He takes your soul**, and it says further, “It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long”[[6]](#footnote-6) (*Tehillim* 44:23). Another interpretation: “With all your soul” – **with each and every soul that He created within you**, as it says, “Let my soul live” (*Tehillim* 119:175), and it says, “All my bones shall say, ‘Lord, who is like You?’” (*Tehillim* 35:10). (*Tosefta Berakhot* [Lieberman] 6:7)

The first position in the *Tosefta*, that of R. Meir, is R. Akiva’s position. The second position, it seems, is parallel to the position of R. Eliezer according to our understanding, that one must love God with every fiber of his being – “All my bones shall say, ‘Lord, who is like You?’”

The passage in the *Sifrei* cited above mentioned the position of Ben Azzai as well: “You should love Him until your soul is sucked dry.” The *Sifrei* also cites the view of Ben Azzai – “you should love Him until your soul is sucked dry.” This may be interpreted as referring to loving God until the physical power of one’s soul is sucked dry. In addition, it may be that the verse demands that one strengthen his prayers[[7]](#footnote-7) and his overall divine service by exhausting every fiber of his being.

Alternatively, Ben Azzai’s statement may mean that one must love God for one’s entire life, until the moment one’s soul departs. However, Ben Azzai was not referring to the departure of one’s soul in the same context as R. Akiva’s “even when He takes your soul,” but rather in the context of a natural death. The primary point of Ben Azzai’s statement is that one must love God throughout one’s whole life.

For the positions that derive the obligation to sacrifice one’s life from the verse “You shall love…” we must ask what kind of self-sacrifice the Torah had in mind. Was the verse referring solely to sacrificing one’s life rather than engaging in idolatry, or was it referring to any transgression?

We will not discuss the laws of self-sacrifice at length in this discussion, as these laws do not relate directly to the matter at hand.[[8]](#footnote-8) It will suffice to examine the story of R. Akiva, who gave his life in order to fulfill the *mitzva* of Torah study, not to avoid one of the three most severe prohibitions. It is possible that since it was a time of religious persecution, there was an obligation to sacrifice one’s life for the sake of other transgressions as well.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, it seems more likely that according to R. Akiva’s position, there are two fundamental principles governing the laws of self-sacrifice.

First, self-sacrifice has a dimension of obligation that relates to the severity of the transgression in question. The level of severity that justifies self-sacrifice only exists in the three most severe transgressions, or any transgression in a time of religious persecution or a case of forced public transgression (due to the *mitzva* to sanctify God’s name).

However, there is a second form of required self-sacrifice that relates to the *mitzva* to love God. Nothing may be permitted to get in the way of a person’s expression of love for God. In my opinion, not every person is obligated in this type of self-sacrifice. Rather, it is a kind of special allowance for one who feels a boundless love of God pulsing within his soul.

As we have said, various *Rishonim*, including Rambam (who cited R. Akiva’s statement, “even when He takes your soul” in relation to self-sacrifice[[10]](#footnote-10)), understood that R. Akiva is referring to the obligation to sacrifice one’s life. These *Rishonim* maintained that, indeed, a person must only sacrifice his life under the conditions described in the passage in *Sanhedrin*.

However, if we understand that only R. Eliezer is actually referring to self-sacrifice, whereas R. Akiva is referring to the aspect of the *mitzva* of loving God, there emerges an essential distinction between the two positions. R. Akiva’s position is that a person is expected to love God with all his soul. A person can sacrifice his life in other situations as well, as long as the love of God burns within him.

This fits well with the general approach of R. Akiva, who declared that “all the Writings are holy, but *Shir Ha-shirim* is the Holy of Holies.” R. Akiva promotes an uncomplicated version of loving God: We must love God through thick and thin, unhindered by any limitations.[[11]](#footnote-11)

According to Rambam’s understanding, loving God is a means of fulfilling the principles of faith and Halakha. Therefore, one may only sacrifice his life in order to avoid transgressions whose observance constitutes the crowning glory of human commitment to God. In contrast, R. Akiva maintains that the value of loving God stands on its own. It is an intense, unparalleled love, whether it is in the context of idolatry, the *mitzva* of Torah study, or even the *mitzva* of prayer (as in the case of Daniel, who sacrificed his life over the *mitzva* of prayer).

A person’s love for his God is like a man’s love for his wife. A man is willing to sacrifice his life for his wife’s sake, expressing his love for her at any cost.[[12]](#footnote-12) “For love is fierce as death” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 8:6).[[13]](#footnote-13)

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. See also the language of the *mishna*:

   A person is obligated to bless [God] for the evil in the same way as for the good, as it says: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.” “With all your heart (*levavekha*, lit. ‘your hearts’)” – with your two impulses, the evil impulse as well as the good impulse. “With all your soul” – even if He takes your soul. (*Berakhot* 54a)

   It is inferred from this passage that one is obligated to love God even when God acts according to His attribute of justice and takes his soul. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See below for a more fundamental clarification of R. Akiva’s statement. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Ran, *Avoda Zara* 9a (Rif pages). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This supports our argument as well, as the main innovation of this approach is expressed in the *mitzva* of *keri’at Shema*, when we accept the yoke of God’s kingship with love. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the *Bavli*, R. Akiva interprets the verse somewhat differently: “‘With all your might (*me’odekha*)’ – with every measure (*midda*) that He measures for you, you must thank Him extensively.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See the passage in the *Sifrei* that we cited above, which mentions the position of R. Shimon ben Menasya, who disputes this position, explaining that God credits the righteous as if they had been killed every day. It seems that R. Shimon ben Menasya understands that the verse is not referring to the obligation to sacrifice one’s life, but rather to the power of the love that the righteous display toward God, such that God considers it as if they have sacrificed their lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Ben Azzai’s position in the above *Tosefta*, which interprets this statement as a reference to prayer. We will address the connection between the *mitzvot* of loving God and prayer in an upcoming *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the parallel passages in *Sanhedrin* 74a and *Pesachim* 25a, as well as the commentaries of the *Rishonim* there. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Maharsha, *Berakhot* 61b (*Chiddushei Aggadot*). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 5:4, which prohibits sacrificing one’s life to avoid violating other transgressions. Also see the commentary of *Kesef Mishneh* there:

    Our master maintains that when they said in the *gemara*, “One should transgress and not be killed,” it means that he must transgress so that he will not be killed. But many righteous [authorities] maintain that if he was killed and did not transgress, it should be considered a righteous act. It seems that they interpret “One should transgress and not be killed” to mean that one is permitted to transgress so that he will not be killed. *Nimukei Yosef* wrote that even according to our master’s view, if one is a great, pious and God-fearing person, and he sees that a particular transgression is rampant in his generation, he may sanctify God’s name and sacrifice his life even for the sake of a minor *mitzva* so that the nation will see and learn to fear God and love Him with all their hearts. (*Kesef Mishneh*, *Yesodei Ha-Torah* 5:4)

    According to our approach, this represents a different form of self-sacrifice, one that derives from the love of God that burns intensely within a person’s heart and soul; this kind of self-sacrifice is an expression of that powerful love of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “If a man offered all his wealth for love, he would be laughed to scorn” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 8:7). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. According to R. Akiva’s position, the question arises whether “One’s own life comes before the life of one’s fellow” applies to a husband and wife as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It may be that the root of this concept of love derives from the first great lover, Avraham. According to the Midrash, Avraham provoked Nimrod by breaking his idols, leading Nimrod to cast Avraham into the fiery furnace. Avraham’s love of God was boundless; he wanted to eliminate all traces of idolatry from his midst at any cost. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)