

I like cats. I like the way they come up to you and rub against your legs. I like it when they sit in your lap and purr while you stroke them. I like the feel of their dry, rough tongues when they groom you. I like cats.

I love dogs. I love that they're always so very happy to see you and play with you. I love that they're happy when you pay attention to them but that they're also happy just to be with you. I love how dogs can pick up on your moods and just try to help you feel better when you're down. I love dogs.

I'm also a complete sucker for dogs. My friends Hugh and Pam had a dog, named Kayla, of blessed memory. When Hugh and Pam went away on vacation, Kayla would go into the kennel and refuse to eat until they came home. I couldn't handle it. So I offered to keep Kayla on their next vacation. She refused to eat for me either, so I did what any rational person would: I cooked her chicken and rice, foods so good that she couldn't refuse. Obviously. I took her for three walks a day and when she looked bored, I even took her for rides in the car. That's another difference for why I like cats, but love dogs. Cats know that they're in charge and make sure that you know it too. Dogs are perfectly happy letting you think that you're in charge.

Now, some people are the exact opposite. They like dogs, but they love cats. You know, dogs can be a little promiscuous in who they shower their love and affection on. Rub their tummies and they love you. Cats will bond more selectively and be more exclusive with their affections. That's really appealing for some people.

There are some people who don't like, much less love, dogs or cats. It's all really just a matter of personal preference and there's no arguing about it. After all, how do you consciously control your preferences, emotions or thoughts?

Let's do an experiment. Whatever you do, do not think of dancing hippos wearing tutus and toe shoes. Images from Fantasia just came up in your head, didn't they? Whatever you do, do not think of a gooey fudge brownie, still hot from the oven, covered with a melting mound of vanilla ice cream - the dark flecks of vanilla bean against the white of the cream - dripping with streaks of golden caramel sauce. You can almost taste it, almost smell it, can't you? But didn't I tell you not to think of it? Wild, isn't it, that I can control your brains just by speaking, but you can't? I'm conjuring up these images in your minds and you can't consciously stop it.

So how are we supposed to follow the central statement of Jewish faith? “*V’ahavta et Adonai Elohecha, b’chol levavcha, u’v’chol nafsh’cha, u’v’chol m’odecha.* You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.¹” How is it possible to command an emotion, a feeling, a thought? How can we follow the command to love? The rabbis saw this very dilemma of commanding an emotion and answered that we show our love of God by obeying God’s commandments. Really? The IRS commands me to pay my income taxes and I obey. I pay every last penny that they demand. I’m obeying the IRS’s commands - does that really mean that I love the IRS? No. Not so much. There has to be another answer to how we should love God.

Maybe we should start by trying to figure out what it actually means to love. You may not have known this, but there really is a technical definition of what it means to love. Love is defined as joy coming from an outside source. Joy is defined as moving from a lower state of existence to a higher state of existence. So love is recognizing that you exist at a higher level as a result of some outside source. I’ll give you a second to think about that. Think of someone or something that you truly love. Do you feel better around them? Do you feel more complete because of them? Do you exist at a greater, more expansive level because they are in your life? That’s what it is to love - you experience life at a higher level because someone or something is in your life.

Now here’s one of the difficulties with the definition of love. Normally in English the subject of the verb acts upon the object of the verb. Now, now - don’t worry. You’re not going to have to diagram sentences tonight. Much. Normally in English ‘A verb B’ has A, the subject, then the verb or the action, and B, the object. Jonny (subject) bounces (verb) the ball (object). Simple, right? Not too painful, except for those memories it brings up from elementary school. Here’s the difficulty, though: the verb ‘to love’ doesn’t follow the pattern. Let’s say Jack loves Diane. Jack (subject) loves (verb) Diane (object). But it is Diane who causes the change in Jack. Jack experiences joy because of Diane - it’s all there in the lyrics. The subject of the verb is acted upon by the object. The direction of the action is reversed. And, because the direction of the action is reversed, it gives rise to unrequited love.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:5

Shakespeare gives us many examples of unrequited love but let's look at Orsino and Olivia from Twelfth Night. Orsino loves Olivia with all his heart and sends the disguised Viola as his messenger of love:

Oli: How does he love me?

Vio: With adorations, fertile tears, with groans that thunder love, with sighs of fire.

Oli: Your lord does know my mind, I cannot love him, yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble, of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth; In voices well divulg'd, free, learn'd and valiant, and in dimension, and the shape of nature, a gracious person. But yet I cannot love him.²

Orsino is transported to higher levels by the object of his love. But Olivia, as in any great, unrequited love, is indifferent to Orsino and utterly unaffected. A loves B, but it is A who is affected - not B.

This difficult definition of love becomes even more difficult when we bring God into it. What does it mean if we say that God loves us? It must mean that God, because of us humans, experiences joy and exists at a higher level. God exists at a higher level!?! What! Heaven isn't high enough? No. No it isn't. When God first created Adam, he saw that it was very good. But then God realized: "It is not good for man to be alone."³ If we were created in God's image and God knew that it wasn't good for us to be alone, isn't that an admission that God too no longer wished to be alone. Why else would God have created us, knowing what we are capable of? So, yes, God does love us - God exists at a higher level because we exist in the world. But is God's love to be unrequited? How are we supposed to love God? How are we supposed to experience joy and live at a higher level because of God? The answer is to be found in our central statement of faith: "*V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha, b'chol levavcha, u'v'chol nafsh'cha, u'v'chol m'odecha*. You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might."

B'chol levavcha - with all your heart. To understand how we are to love God with all our hearts, we must look to one of the greatest movies ever made: The Princess Bride.

² Twelfth Night, Act 1, Scene 5

³ Genesis 2:18

“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” Today we think of the heart as the center of our emotions. I love you with all my heart. I hate him with all my heart. I emote with all my heart. The thing is, the heart in the ancient world was considered to be the seat of the intellect, not emotions. And so, when we are told to love God *b’chol levavcha*, with all your heart, we are not being told to love God emotionally, but intellectually. That is, we are to love God with an undivided intellect.

We are to know, with our minds, our intellects, that God is in the world and with that knowledge we are to perceive and think about the world differently. When we know that God is in the world and that every human being was created in God’s image, then we will think about other people differently. Does that person look strange to us? Does their strangeness frighten or disgust? Yet we know that they too were created in the image of God and suddenly we aren’t frightened but marvel at the variety of God’s creation. When we know that God is Creator and Owner of the entire world then we see our relationship to the Earth differently. We no longer see ourselves as masters and exploiters of the bounty of the Earth. Rather, we see ourselves as stewards, as caretakers, of this fragile planet for our children, for our grandchildren and for God. When we know God with a whole and undivided mind, then we look at the world with new eyes that are open to the possibility of an elevated existence. To see the world with new eyes, to think about the world in the way that God would want us, is to love God, *b’chol levavcha*, with all your heart.

U’v’chol nafsh’cha, with all your soul. Thank God we no longer live in a time when we are forced to love God with all our souls as the rabbis interpreted it. For far too many years we Jews have been persecuted and faced with the choice of publicly renouncing our Judaism or accepting death at the hands of the Greeks, the Romans, the Syrians, a variety of European Christians, the Nazis, the Soviets, etc. etc. The rabbinic interpretation of loving God with all our soul was to love God, to refuse to abandon God even at the cost of our very souls, our lives. We were to accept martyrdom rather than abandon God. Thank God we are not faced with these choices today, though our grandparents and even some of us here in this room with us today, witnessed those forced to make this choice in the last century.

For us, however, loving God *b’chol nafsh’cha*, with all our soul, has a different meaning. In fact our understanding is the same as the original *p’shat* or simple surface

meaning of *nefesh*. The soul was considered to be the seat of our emotions, our passions, our desires.⁴ Therefore, to love God with all our soul is to love God with complete spiritual and emotional attachment. This is not to say that we will always feel positively about God. No, in fact our relationship to God is the same as our other relationships. There will be times when we are in love with God and there will be times when we are angry with God. There will be times when we feel very close to God and there will be times when we feel estranged from God. There will be times when we are aware of God in our lives and there will be times when we don't give God a thought. But through all our peaks and valleys in our relationship with God, we should never allow ourselves to become detached from God.

On the contrary, our emotional attachment to God should change the way we react emotionally to the world around us. Because we love God, we should love our neighbors as ourselves. Because we love God, we should not secretly hate our kinsman. Because we love God, we should not allow our hearts to be hardened against those who are less fortunate among us. Because we love God, our emotional reactions should be better, should be greater than how we may have reacted without God in our lives. To react to the world with better, more healthy, more generous emotions, is to truly love God with all our souls.

U'v'chol m'odecha, with all your might. The traditional interpretation of loving God with all your might equates your might with your wealth. That is, we love God through the giving of charity and by conducting our business in a way that does not bring Torah or those who adhere to Torah into disrepute. Yet I think this interpretation does not go far enough, it is not broad enough. After all, why should your might be restricted only to your financial wherewithal? No, I prefer to interpret *u'vechol m'odecha* as with all of your actions, financially related or not.

When we act in this world, considering what God would want us to do, we cannot help but become better people and live at an elevated level. God would have us act with kindness and generosity. God would have us act honestly with each other and ourselves. God would have us seek fairness and establish justice. We would consider the moral course of action rather than the course that is most personally beneficial. We would

⁴ See footnote in JPS Torah Commentary on Deuteronomy, page 77.

consider the impact of our actions on others, not just ourselves. We would act in the world in a way that repairs some of the brokenness we see all around us every day.

How do I love Thee, God, let me count the ways. I love Thee with all my mind, seeing the world as You would have me see it. I see the possibilities and the positive. I see the beauty and the good. I see the greater expanse of all that could be if only I allow it. I love Thee, God, with all my passion, feeling the world as You would have me feel it. I feel kindness and compassion. I feel forgiving and gentle. I feel open and generous and grateful. I love Thee, God, with all my might, acting in the world as You would have me act. I would act for justice. I would act for mercy. I would act honestly. I would act gently. I would act selflessly. I would act to create a better world.

How do I love Thee, God? *B'chol levavcha, u'v'chol nafsh'cha, u'v'chol m'odecha.* I love Thee, God, through my mind and my passion and my actions, an integrated human being, undivided in my love. I love Thee, God, living at a higher level, for Your sake, You who are always with me.

Shana Tova.