

"The Jewish perspective on Biblical love"

Rabbi David Rosen, International Director of Interreligious Affairs, AIC

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The Hebrew language, and thus the Hebrew Bible, has a number of different words for love. "*Deus Caritas est*" expounds on the distinction between the Greek terms *eros* and *agape*. Yet there does not appear to be a Hebrew equivalent for *eros* (though there are general words for desire.) This in itself is instructive, for the first term relevant to "love" that we encounter in the Torah (the Pentateuch) is indeed in a carnal context. However it is the word "*yada*" from the verb "*lada'at*", meaning to know. It is used in relation to the bond between the first human couple "and Adam *knew* Eve his wife and she conceived and bore him Cain" (Gen.4:1). The use of this term in this context, in addition to its physical aspect, may be understood to indicate that while there are various forms of knowledge, these are overwhelmingly external, providing image and data. However these do not provide the intimacy of connection. Such inner knowledge, in effect love, is not primarily dependent on external information, but rather on the intimacy of experience.

This may also be deduced from the fact that the word "*yada*", to know, is used in relation to the intimate union with the Divine, as with Moses' theophany in Exodus chapter 33 (verses 13 and 17); and thus Deuteronomy 34:10 refers to Moses' uniqueness in having "*known* God face to face" (see also, Exodus 33:11.) The children of Israel are accordingly commanded to strive to know God (e.g. Isaiah 43:10.Hosea 6:3.Proverbs 3:6)

As the Encyclical indicates, the main Hebrew word for love is "*ahavah*". This term is indeed used in both a physical and a metaphysical aspect. As *Deus Caritas Est* observes, these are not perceived as contradictory in the Hebrew Bible, on the contrary. However the sages of the Mishnah emphasize the idea of a higher human love when they declare that "any love that is dependent on a physical factor, when that factor is no more, the love is no more; but (that love) which is not dependent upon a physical factor never ceases. (An example of) what is love that is dependent on a physical factor is (that of) Amnon and Tamar. And (an example of) love that is not dependent on a physical thing is the love of David and Jonathan." (Avot,5:16)

The Hebrew Bible of course emphasizes the importance of love of God and love of fellow human beings. However, Jewish tradition, certainly going back to the Second Temple period

and especially under the Pharisees, perceived these as *supreme* goals. Thus Jesus' emphasis of the commandments in the Pentateuch "and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18), precisely express rabbinic teaching.

Accordingly Rabbi Akiva declared the greatest of the commandments to be "and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" ; and the above text from Deuteronomy regarding love of God which opens in the preceding verse with the words "*Shema Yisrael*", "Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God the Lord is One", became the central Jewish liturgical recitation. As *Deus Caritas Est* notes, this proclamation of love of God was "the daily prayer of the pious Jew" and expresses "the heart of (the Jewish People's) existence"

(To be precise, the observant Jew recites these verses and the following four, in other words Deuteronomy 6:4-9, together with Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41, in the daily prayers every morning and evening.)

The Jewish sages highlight the inextricable link between love of God and neighbor in the very fact that the full text of Leviticus 19:18 is "and you shall love your neighbor as yourself, **I am the Lord**".

The renowned Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague (16c.) expounded on this above idea stating that "Love of all creatures is also the love of God; for whoever loves The One, loves all the works that He made. When one loves God, it is impossible not to love His creatures. The opposite is also true. If one hates the creatures, it is impossible to (truly) love God who created them" (Netivot Olam, ahavat hare'a, 1)

And the great rabbi and kabbalist Isaiah Horowitz, echoed this explaining that "the love of God and our fellow human beings is ultimately the same thing, as God is One and all is from Him"; and he added that precisely because the human being is created with the Divine spark in him or her (the kabbalistic concept of the Divine Image) the love of one's fellow is literally the love of God. (Shnei Luchos Habrit 44b-45b)

The inextricability of these loves is already reflected in the discussion between the first century rabbis Akiva and Ben Azzai (Genesis Rabbah 24:5; and Sifra Kedoshim, 4) regarding which Biblical text qualifies as the supreme rule of the Torah, the Pentateuch (which for Judaism, is the Divine *ipssisima verba*)

As already mentioned, Akiva identifies Leviticus 19:18 as the great principle. Ben Azzai adds that the highest principle is that every human person is created in the Divine Image (Genesis 5:1,2.)

Some have seen this as a discussion between a more particularist position and a more universal one. However none of the sages of the Mishnaic period emphasizes this Biblical teaching that

all persons are created in the Divine Image more than Akiva, so it makes sense to understand that Akiva's intention was also universal in emphasizing love of neighbor.

What Ben Azzai appears to be adding is simply that the Biblical command to love one another, flows directly from the idea that the human being is created in the Divine Image. If one truly loves God, then one loves the Divine image - the essence of each and every human person.

For this reason Rabbi Tanhuma adds to the discussion that any act of disrespect towards another person is an act of disrespect towards God Himself, "for in the Image of God He created him".

Social imperatives therefore flow precisely from love of God. Accordingly, the midrashic work Tanna dbei Eliyahu (section 28) understands the commandment to love God, to require that "you shall make the name of God beloved to all creatures by righteous conduct toward both Gentiles and Jews."

Jewish tradition understands the injunction to love God in its broadest sense to mean loving all God's words, His Torah (Revelation) and commandments (TB Rosh Hashanah 4a); and living all aspects of life accordingly (TB Men. 43b).

This love is also understood as being willing to give one's life for Him, for His way, for the observance of His commandments (Mekhilta, Yitro, 6, on Exodus 20: 6; Sifre, Deut. 32; TB Berachot 54a).

Yet love of God is to be seen not only in martyrdom and moments of great sacrifice, but as already indicated above all in our daily ethical behaviour – in the words of the Talmud:- "receiving offense without resentment; hearing condemnation without answering back; to act purely from love, and rejoice even in trials as tests of pure love" (TB Shabbat 88b; TB Sotah 31a.)

Accordingly, the sages of the Talmud see the commandment of love of God as fulfilled through *Imitatio Dei*, cleaving to God out of love, expressed in living in accordance with the Divine Attributes. They declare (TB, Sotah 14a):-

"just as God clothes the naked, as it says, "And God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" (Genesis 3), so you should also clothe the naked. The Holy One Blessed be He visited the sick, as it is written: "And God appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre" (Genesis 18), so you should also visit the sick. The Holy One blessed be He comforted mourners, as it is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son" (Genesis 25), so you should also comfort mourners. The Holy One blessed be He buried the dead, as it is written: "And God buried him (Moses) in the valley" (Deuteronomy 34), so should you also bury the dead."

This idea is summarized in the words of Abba Shaul, (TB, Shabbat 133b), "just as He is compassionate and merciful; so you be compassionate and merciful."

Implicit in these injunctions is the fundamental truth spelt out in *Deus Caritas Est* that the Biblical call to love God, is an overwhelming manifestation itself of the truth that God loves man.

Indeed the very fact that the human person is created in the Divine Image is seen in itself as a manifestation of Divine Love. A related Hebrew term for love is the word "*chibah*". Using this term, the sages of the Mishnah declare (Avot, 3:14) "beloved is the human being for he is created in the Divine Image, (and) even greater love has been (granted to him, in that it has been) made known to him that he has been created in the Divine Image."

This love of God for His creatures is manifest supremely in His forgiveness.

Because "there is not a man on earth who does not sin and does only good" (Ecclesiastes 7:20), we would all be condemned by our failures. God's unlimited love and compassion cleanses us from our sins when our contrition is sincere. Indeed, Jewish tradition viewed Temple sin offerings purely as an outward manifestation of genuine confessed penitence (Lev. 5:5-6; Num. 5:6. See also Psalms 32:5; 38:19; 41:5; Lamentations 3:40), reflecting the concept known in Judaism as "*teshuvah*", from the root "*shuv*" meaning, return (see Joel 2:12-14.) It expresses the idea that the human person is inherently goodly and Godly, i.e. seeks to be with God and live accordingly, but inevitably because he is human and because he is endowed with the Divine gift of free will, he makes mistakes and is invariably corrupted.

However in order to be back with God, all a person has to do is to be sincerely contrite for his errors and thus return to God who in His unlimited love accepts the sinner and erases his guilt. "As I live says the Lord God, I do not desire the death of the wicked; but that the wicked returns from his (evil) way and lives; return, return, from your evil ways, why should you die (members of the) house of Israel" (Ezekiel 33:11)

This concept of "*teshuvah*" as flowing from God's love for His creatures occupies a central place in rabbinic thought and teaching.

However love for and from God does not just apply to the individual person. It is above all manifest in the Hebrew Bible, in relation to the collective.

Indeed the "*Shema*" - this declaration of faith in the One Creator and Guide of the Universe with its imperative of love for God - is not just a personal declaration, but above all the affirmation of the Community of Israel's faith and choice. It is thus an expression of covenantal love.

In the words of the sages (Tosefta, Sotah 7:10) God said to Israel:- "you have made me a unique object of your love in the world, therefore I will make you a unique object of My love in the world."

The Covenant as an expression of Divine Love is made explicit in Deuteronomy 4:37:- "and because He loved your Fathers, He chose his seed after him...", and in chapter 7 verse 8, "because of the love of God for you and because of His fulfilment of His oath which He swore to your Fathers" (see also Deuteronomy 10:15.)

Abraham is described by God in the words of Isaiah specifically as the one who loved God, “and you Israel, my servant Jacob who I have chosen, the seed of Abraham who loved me “(Isaiah 41:8).

Accordingly Deuteronomy 7:13 states “...He has loved you and blessed you and multiplied you.”

Indeed, the recitation of the “*Shema*” in the Jewish liturgy is preceded in the daily prayers by an extended blessing thanking God for His great love manifest in his election of Israel, giving them His Revelation and Commandments to observe and delight in, “by virtue of our Fathers”.

This brings us to another word in the Hebrew Bible of great significance that means love and more - the word “*chesed*”.

It is difficult to translate, because it really has no precise equivalent in our languages. English versions usually try to represent it with such words as "steadfast love," "mercy," and sometimes "loyalty". Bishop Myles Coverdale of the fifteenth century translated it well as "loving-kindness." Yet this too cannot do full justice to the word

It appears in the Hebrew Bible in relation to inter-personal relationships and correct human conduct (e.g. Micah 6:8. Zechariah 7:9), and indeed is used in Jewish tradition in the Hebrew term “*gmillut chasadim*” ,to denote all the above mentioned ways and deeds of human kindness that precisely reflect Divine love.

Above all however the word is used in the Hebrew Bible in terms of Divine pathos –particularly, forgiveness - a manifestation of “the love of God who forgives”, as stated in *Deus Caritas Est*.

God’s “*Chesed*” is a gratuitous love that endures beyond any sin or betrayal and graciously extends forgiveness.

Norman H. Snaith (in *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, London (1944) states that “ the nearest New Testament equivalent to the Hebrew “*chesed*” is charis (grace), as Luther realized when he used the German *gnade* for both words.”

While this concept of love does concern forgiveness for the individual as already mentioned, above all it is used in relation to God’s covenantal relationship with Israel. Accordingly the word often appears together with the word “*brit*”, covenant (e.g. Deuteronomy 7:9 and 12. I Kings 8:23. Daniel 9:4. Nehemiah 9:32. II Chronicles 6:14.) The theological importance of the word “*chesed*” is that it stands more than any other word for the attitude which both parties to a covenant should maintain towards each other.

The love of God is manifest by the People in their fidelity to the commandments revealed to them in love; and God’s everlasting faithfulness is above all manifest in His unlimited love, compassion, forgiveness, and His promise regarding the eternity of Israel even when Israel fails to live up to the high standards of its covenantal responsibilities.

Israel's failures will bring their consequences - even exile (Leviticus 26:14-41), but will never lead to complete destruction, for God remains eternally faithful to His Covenant and returns them again to the land of their Fathers (Leviticus 26: 42,44,45) as manifestation of His "*chesed*".

Indeed after the two greatest debacles of the children of Israel in the wilderness, the sin of the golden calf and the people's failure of faith with the evil report of the ten spies, Moses elicits Divine forgiveness not only by appealing to the Divine Covenant with the Fathers (Ex. 32:13), but by appealing to the Divine Attributes of compassion, tolerance, and bounteous "*chesed*" and truth; (of He who) keeps His "*chesed*" for the thousands (of generations)....(Chapter 34:6,7. See also Numbers 14:18,19.)

The idea of this "*chesed*" by which God refuses to wash his hands of wayward Israel, resounds throughout the writings of the Hebrew Prophets.

"with eternal "*chesed*" I will have compassion on you says your Redeemer the Lord.... Though the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, yet My "*chesed*" for you will not depart and My covenant of peace shall not be removed, says your God who has compassion on you (Isaiah 54:8,10.)

"He will not maintain His anger for ever for He desires "*chesed*". Give truth to Jacob, "*chesed*" to Abraham as you swore to our Fathers in days of old (Micah 7:18.20)

"for though He has caused grief, He will have compassion according to the abundance of His "*chesed*" (Lamentations 3:33)

"And He will remember His covenant and be appeased according to His loving kindness ("*chasadav*") (Psalm 106:45 .see also Psalm 107:1)

"And I will betroth you to me forever; and I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice and "*chesed*" and mercy ... "(Hosea2:21)

Thus the predominant use of the word reflects God's unlimited mercy that guarantees His faithfulness to the covenantal contract. For this reason the Greek translators of the Hebrew used the Greek *eleos* (mercy, pity) as their regular rendering, and Jerome followed with the Latin *misericordia*.

The loving-kindness of God towards Israel is overwhelmingly undeserved on Israel's part. If Israel received the proper treatment for the occasions of her failure to walk in God's Way, there would be no prospect for her of anything but destruction, since God's demand for right action never wavers.

Yet despite the strict demands for righteousness and observance of His commandments, the prophets and the rabbis after them, were sure that God's love for his elect people is stronger still.

This of course raises the question of the relationship between Divine justice and Divine loving mercy. There are two principle names for God in the Hebrew Bible. One is “*Elohim*” and related forms of the word, which is understood in Jewish tradition to reflect the Divine Attribute of Justice. The other name “*YHVH*” (which religious Jews do not pronounce and rather use the term “*Adonai*” (Lord) for religious purpose, and “*HaShem*” (the Name), for colloquial use) is understood as reflecting the Divine Attribute of Mercy. These are seen as the two essential Divine characteristics and accordingly also reflect the Transcendent nature of God on the one hand, and His Imminent nature on the other.

The very concept of “*teshuvah*”, the guarantee of Divine forgiveness for the penitent; and the idea of God’s eternal covenant that always give Israel another chance, as it were - which manifest His “*chesed*”; demonstrate the Divine preference for Mercy over Justice, notwithstanding the fundamental importance of the latter.

As reflected in the Bible, Judaism teaches that God’s love and mercy always have the upper hand over His judgement.

In fact, the rabbis picturesquely describe God as having His own personal prayer which is: “Let my (attribute of) Mercy overcome my (attribute of) Judgment, so that I may deal with my children beyond the strict limits of judgment (TB, Brachot 7a.)

Divine Judgment is overwhelmed by Divine love and mercy, by God’s “*chesed*”.

Indeed, as indicated in Psalm 89:3 it is this Divine “*chesed*” that guarantees the future of the whole world. It is God’s love that sustains our entire cosmos; and so I conclude my remarks with the refrain that is repeated scores of times in the book of Psalms: “*hodu l’Adonai ki tov ki l’olam chasdo*” “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His “*chesed*” endures forever”.