



**Parshat Vayetze—Shabbat Thanksgiving**  
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**Love**

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Last Shabbat I was in Jerusalem for my mother in law's first yartzeit. We were gathered together in my father in law's apartment in Jerusalem, about 35 close friends and family. It was a year to the day later. She died on 2 Kislev 5777. Here we are, together, on 2 Kislev 5778. My father in law's apartment is filled with pictures of my mother in law. All the furniture, all the dishes, all the art work, are all her. But she is not there. On that first yahrtzeit, his children, grandchildren and closest friends, wonder what will he say? As always, he gets his insight from the weekly Torah portion.

My mother in law's name in Hebrew was Rachel. This morning's portion relates that when Jacob first met his Rachel, it was love at first sight, from which he received such a bolt of energy that he was able to single-handedly roll a huge stone off the mouth of a well. His love of Rachel gave him strength. My father in law observed that he fell in love with his Rachel some 71 years ago, and that their 70-year love affair filled his life with strength. Which had me thinking all week about love.

Our tradition's teaching about love is surprising. Here is the view from 30,000 feet. We are commanded to love three categories that many of us would find hard to love. And we are *not* commanded to love three categories that many of us would find much easier to love.

We are commanded to love God. For many of us Jews, that is a tough one. I remember as a kid a television game show called Match Game. The host was Gene Rayburn who would give the contestant a prompt. I blank God. Many of us might say: I struggle with God. I don't

believe in God. I cannot connect with God. I am angry at God. Many of us would have a hard time saying simply I love God.

I was speaking with a Jewish man who accompanied the 18 NFL Hall of Famers, all deeply religious Christians, who went to Israel this past summer with Robert Kraft. Robert is trying to create ambassadors for Israel, people who visit, fall in love with, and tell their friends about what is beautiful and uplifting about Israel. This Jewish man relates that he was with this group of 18 Christian Hall of Famers when they went to a Christian holy site. The officials who maintained the site explained that it was a holy place. It was important to be silent in the presence of this holiness. Signs were posted everywhere calling for silence. But what happened when these athletes got there was the opposite of silence. They broke out spontaneously into a joyous hymn about how great is our God. They were singing. They were feeling. They were exultant. They were men of faith, who loved God, in a place of faith, and their love just broke out. This Jewish man shared that he wept, for two reasons. One, the faith of these Christian men was so intense and so beautiful to behold. And two, why can't we do that? Perhaps it is the Holocaust. Perhaps it is 2,000 years of suffering before the Holocaust. For whatever reason, a people that finds it hard to love God is commanded, in the *shema*, to love God.

Here is a second category. We are commanded to love the stranger as we love ourselves for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Let's play Match Game with strangers. I blank strangers. This is a big question playing out on the world stage, and you can see how many, in our country and in Europe, respond. Based on election returns, the answers would be: I resent strangers. I keep my distance from strangers. I fear strangers. I don't trust strangers. I want strangers to go back home where they belong. In the face of that human suspicion of strangers,

the Torah does not just tell us to accept strangers. It commands us to love strangers as ourselves. We are commanded to do what is counterintuitive, if not impossible.

A third category. We are commanded to love our neighbor as ourself. *Vahavta le'reakha kamocho*. Let's play Match Game here. I blank my neighbor. I am civil to my neighbor. I watch my neighbor's house when they are on vacation. I do a block party with my neighbor. But love? Love our neighbor as we love ourselves? Counterintuitive. Maybe impossible.

So we have three categories where we are commanded to love—God, the stranger, our neighbor—where it is not easy, intuitive, or even possible to love.

And yet, at the same time, there are three categories of people that you might think the Torah would tell us to love, but it does not.

We are not commanded to love our parents. Rather, we are commanded to honor them. Or to revere them. The Talmud asks what is honor and what is revere? Both refer to deeds, not to an emotion. Revere means that a child does not sit in his parent's place or does not publicly contradict a parent's words. Honor means that a child gives parents food and drink and clothing, and helps parents get in and out when they are older and need a helping hand.

We are not commanded to love our spouse. If you look at the language of the Jewish wedding ceremony, *birkat erusin*, the blessing of betrothal, does not speak of love. It speaks of maintaining faithfulness to the one that you are marrying. This one, and only this one is permitted to you. All others are forbidden to you. At the pivotal moment under the chuppah, the blessing is for exclusivity and monogamy, not for love.

We are not commanded to love our child. Rather, *v'shninantam levanekha*, to teach our children. To teach. But nowhere does it say to love.

What a conundrum. It is hard to love God, but we are commanded to love God. It is hard to love the stranger, but we are commanded to love the stranger. It is hard to love our neighbor, but we are commanded to love our neighbor. You would think it would be easier to love our parents, our spouse, our children. But nowhere are we commanded to love them. What is going on here?

I think the Torah is taking us where we are and urging us to be our best version of ourselves. How do we get from where we are to where we want to be?

Meaning that the Torah does not need to command us to love our parents, our spouse, or our children because most of us already do. But the Torah does need to command us to love God, the stranger or our neighbor because most of us struggle with these categories. The command to love where loving is not intuitive is like that thing in geometry, the asymptote. That is the line that is always aspiring to reach the x or y axis. The asymptote never gets there. It never touches the x or y axis. But it never stops trying. And the x or y axis lets us know where to keep on reaching. We may never get to loving God, the stranger, or our neighbor. But the Torah's command impels us to keep on trying. In fact, praying the words, even words we don't entirely believe them, studying the words, even when we cannot entirely implement them, is part of the secret sauce. Here is why.

Love, according to Judaism, is not first and foremost an emotion. Love is a regimen of deeds. Love is about doing that leads to feeling.

The Talmud says *m'toch sheloh lishma bah lishma*, do deeds first, then the feelings will come. First do, then feel. First do, then feel. First do, then feel. This is a recipe for life. This applies across the board. We feel what we feel, we don't feel what we don't feel, but what does that have to do with doing? Doing has a life of its own.

Whatever love in your life needs strengthening, do it one deed at a time.

One deed closer to loving God. One deed closer to loving the stranger. One deed closer to loving our neighbor. One deed closer to loving our parents. One deed closer to loving our spouse. One deed closer to loving our child. We're not there yet, but like the asymptote, we're never giving up. We keep reaching.

The night I flew to Israel last week, I ran into a friend who lives in Newton now but was originally from Israel and was going back to Israel to be with her parents. Both of her parents are now elderly and frail. Both have physical and cognitive issues. She goes several times a year. She is with her parents all day long, from early in the morning till late at night. She is at their beck and call. I said wow, you are such a dutiful daughter. Tears began to well up in her eyes. You don't understand, she said. I am not a dutiful daughter. My parents were the most loving and amazing parents ever. I am so happy to do this. It is the least I can do. I wish I could do much more. My parents gave me everything. This is my small attempt to show them how much I love them. Their deeds of love inspired her deeds of love. That is the power of deeds.

We may not all be blessed to have what Jacob and Rachel had, a bolt of energy that flows from love at first sight. But we all have it in our power to do a lifetime of deeds, with discipline, consistency, and care, that deepen our love—for God, for the stranger, for our neighbor, for our parents, for our spouse, for our children, one deed at a time. What we do. That's what matters. What we do. That's what will drive how we feel. For what is a life anyway, what is our life, if not a summation of all of our deeds. Make them deeds of love. Shabbat shalom.