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Understanding  
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Rabbi Blech

it says "with all your soul," why does it say "with all your might"? And if it says "with all your might," why does it say "with all your soul"? If there be a person whose body is dearer to him than his wealth, therefore it says "with all your soul." If there is a person whose money is dearer to him than his body, therefore it says "with all your might." [Sanhedrin 74a]

Before we can analyze the talmudic text properly, it becomes evident that the translation of *ve-khol meodekha* as "with all your might" is not what the Sages meant. Indeed, "might" has nothing to do either with the context or the root of the Hebrew word. Furthermore, if we are given degrees of love necessary for our relationship with God and are told on the second level "with all your soul," meaning unto death, what room would there subsequently be to be told "and with all your might"?

What does *meodekha* refer to? "If there is a person whose wealth is dearer to him than his body—therefore it says *ve-khol meodekha*." *Meod* in Hebrew means very, excessive. Wealth is excess. The Talmud perceived a remarkable series of steps implicit in the love relationship between the Jew and God.

**The Problem of "And Thou Shalt Love"**

Jewish philosophers long ago recognized the difficulty posed by the vaguely worded commandment "And thou shalt love." It was not simply the poet E. B. Browning who asked, "How do I love thee, let me count the ways." Love, after all, is an emotion, Judaism is concerned, as we have indicated, with Halakhah, a way of life, with deed and with action. What should the practical response to the command "And you shall love the Lord, your God" be?

The text itself defines it by means of three phrases. Three, of course, is a significant number in Judaism, as we are taught at the conclusion of the Hagadah in the famous prayer linking major numbers to basic concepts. "Who knows one?" asks the text, and responds, "I know one. One is our God in the heavens and on earth." One always stands for the Almighty. The number two is associated with the tablets on which the Decalogue was given; the number three with our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is

indeed striking that Rabbi Ya'aqov Ben Asher (1270–1340), the biblical commentator known as *Ba'al HaTurim*, suggests that the very word *VeAHaVTa* (that you shall love), with its letters rearranged, spells the Hebrew word HaAVoT—the Fathers.

ואהבת = האבות

Hence, the Hebrew command contains the solution to the problem of its vagueness. How shall you love? Precisely because the mitzvah is unclear, God gave us three paradigms, or Patriarchs, to define the ideal love relationship. It is to them that the three phrases apply, in proper sequence. “With all your heart” was Abraham. “With all your soul” was Isaac. “With all your wealth” was Jacob.

#### The Love of Abraham

The prayers a Jew recites every morning offer a brief review of Jewish history. We begin by quoting a section from Nehemiah (9:6–7), in which he recounts the founding of our faith with the story of Abraham. “You are the Lord alone. You created the Heavens and the Heavens of Heavens and all their hosts, the earth and all that is upon it, the seas and everything that is in them. And You bring life to all and the hosts of the Heavens bow to you. You are the Lord, God, who chose Avram and took him out of Ur Kasdim, made his name Avraham. And You found his heart faithful before you.”

When the Bible chooses to identify Abraham’s greatest virtue, the unique trait that earned him the name change from Avram to Avraham (the latter defining his mission as the father of many nations), the phrase is “And You found his heart faithful [*ne’eman*] before You.” For the heart is the source of faith. The Bible constantly relates the two: *lev ne’eman*, a faithful heart.

Abraham was the one who grew up in the home of Terah, the idol maker. He witnessed paganism first hand. Yet he destroyed the idols of his father and traveled from place to place to bring personal witness to the reality of monotheism.

To worship God and to love Him, it is obvious one must first believe in Him fully. It is not enough to suggest that there may be a God. Total commitment demands unwavering certainty. If you

proclaim "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One," then you must love Him "with all your heart." What is involved? A love as powerful as the one shown by the Patriarchs. The first one, Abraham, is the living illustration of the command to love God "with all your heart."

#### The Love of Isaac

There are illustrations in biblical books of the Binding of Isaac, the scene in which Abraham brings Isaac to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah. Some picture an old man carrying an infant in his arms to be brought up for slaughter. That image is not true. Our Sages relate that Isaac was 37 years old when that incident took place. Hence, it was not simply Abraham who was tested. Isaac was already a thinking adult capable of choosing his actions; Isaac knew that he was being taken to serve as a personal sacrifice to God. When the Torah tells us "And the two of them walked together," the implication is they walked as one, in mutual recognition of what would transpire, both equally prepared for acceptance of the incomprehensible commandment, "And bring him up there as a sacrifice."

True, the Torah introduces this story with the words "And it came to pass after these things that God did prove Abraham" (Genesis 22:1). Why call it "The Test of Abraham" if Isaac was the one who knowingly and willingly would have to offer his own life? The answer is a profound and yet simple truth: Jewish thought teaches that it is a far greater test to force Abraham to kill than to ask Isaac to be killed. Isaac would die once. Abraham, had he been allowed to carry out the commandment, would have subsequently spent a lifetime of everlasting pain, for which death would have been a far preferable alternative.

Be that as it may, it was still Isaac who had to be prepared to die. He was ready to do so. Thus, in the biblical sequence illustrating the Patriarch's love of God, if Abraham was able to believe with his entire heart, then the next step is a love "with all your soul," i.e., a readiness to offer one's soul back to the One Who gave it. Simply put: if you believe in something fully, you must be prepared to die for it.

When Rabbi Akiva, one of the Ten Martyrs selected by Rome

for public execution, knew that he faced his last moments on earth, he smiled even while enduring the most painful torture. When his students asked him how he could possibly accept his affliction in such manner, he said, "I rejoice because all my life I recited the words *U-vekhoh nafshekha* [with all your soul] and could not be certain if ever the time came for me to demonstrate my willingness to fulfill them, that I would be able to do so. I thank God that I have found within myself the spiritual power to demonstrate my love for God, with all my soul." With his last breath, Rabbi Akiva recited the *Shema*, and at the word *Ehad* (one) his soul left the earthly sphere to be rejoined with the Creator.

#### The Love of Jacob

Believe in Him. Be prepared to die for Him.

And what else?

Jacob made a great discovery. According to our Sages it happened on Mount Moriah, the very spot on which the Temple would eventually be built.

Jacob made the discovery when he fled from home in fear of his brother Esau, who had threatened to slay him.

Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon the place and tarried there all night because the sun was set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head and laid down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder was set up on earth, and the top of it reached to Heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. [Genesis 28:10-12]

What is the meaning of that remarkable dream of a ladder, a ladder rooted in the earth, and its top reaching to the Heavens? The Baal HaTurim suggests a fascinating correspondence in the numerical value of the word for "ladder" in Hebrew, SuLaM [סלם, ס (Samekh) = 60, ל (Lamed) = 30, מ (Mem) = 40 = 130]. Two other Hebrew words have precisely this total. MaMoN [ממן, מ (Mem) = 40 × 2 = 80, נ (Nun) = 50 = 130], wealth and SiYNaiY [סיני, ס (Samekh) = 60, י (Yod) = 10, נ (Nun) = 50, י (Yod) = 10 = 130]. What a remarkable trilogy. What could they possibly have in common?

The answer is the symbolic content of the dream. On the very spot that would one day become the site of the Holy Temple, Jacob was taught that the essence of Judaism is the merging of earth and Heaven. Humanity's role is not, as in Christianity, to forsake this world. "My Kingdom is not of this world" is the teaching of Jesus. Judaism commands that it is our role rather to sanctify the world. A man does not become a saint if he takes a vow of poverty. He becomes holy if he uses his wealth to enhance and sanctify the presence of God on earth. The angels of God ascend and descend the ladder—the very ladder numerically equivalent to wealth and to Sinai itself. For Sinai means to find a way in which to bring the angels of God up and down in a mutual interchange between earth and Heaven.

What is money, holy or profane? The Midrash gives us the answer in the explication of the verse concerning God's commandment to Moses: "This they shall give, everyone that passeth among them that are numbered, half a sheqel, after the sheqel of the Sanctuary" (Exodus 30:13). God stressed *this* they shall give, illustrating with the actual coin, because Moses was baffled by a command he did not understand. Yet what was so difficult about that commandment? Why did it cause confusion in Moses' mind? Our Sages explain that what Moses could not grasp is that for the construction of the Sanctuary itself, God commanded something as seemingly secular as half a sheqel. How could money be introduced into the Holy of Holies?

"God then showed him His sheqel, a coin of fire." What does the Midrash mean? How can a coin of fire solve a problem? And did Moses have to be shown the picture of a coin in order to know what God was talking about?

The explanation is profound. If you, Moses, cannot believe in the relevance of a coin, then let me illustrate with a coin of fire. Fire is to be the symbol of money. Fire destroys, but it also creates. Fire may burn, but it can also cook, warm, and serve the most beneficial purposes. So, too, is wealth. Precisely because it has this quality, it becomes doubly holy. When we choose to use a potentially destructive object in a positive and productive manner, we have learned the secret of true holiness.

It is a concept we find similarly expressed through a symbol used on the High Holy days. Why is the shofar the vehicle for

bringing us to repentance? What is there about the horn of an animal that may be linked to spiritual rebirth? The horn is one of the four major causes of damage produced by animals. We, too, may at times allow ourselves to be possessed by our animalistic nature, but the shofar tells us to take the potentially destructive horn and transform it, thereby to become holy.

Hasidim have suggested that the word for coin, MaTBeiA (מטבע), may be read in Hebrew as MiTeVA (מטעב), which means nature. It is the world around us. When God told Moses "Take a coin of fire," He taught us that we may find opportunities for great holiness from and in the world about us. Like fire, a coin may be creative or destructive. The potential for both exists; the choice is in our hands.

Symbolically, Jacob's dream is also about Sinai and the proper use of material blessings. The metaphor of the ladder at Mount Moriah unites these themes. The Christian crucifies the flesh in order to rise above it. The Jew sanctifies the flesh in order to elevate it. The Christian, at least in theory, condemns wealth and takes a vow of poverty. The Jew controls wealth and seeks to utilize it in a way that will make the world a better place by spreading the message of Sinai.

Jacob had the dream and immediately after that: "And Jacob vowed a vow saying, 'If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God; and the stone which I have set up for a pillow shall be God's house, and of all that Thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto Thee'" (Genesis 28:20-22).

The concept of tithing (*ma'aser*) comes from Jacob. It appears immediately after he had the vision of the ladder. Why would he speak of something as mundane as money immediately after experiencing the most sacred vision of his life? Because that very vision enabled him to comprehend that one can serve God and one must serve God even "with all your wealth."

Money should not be renounced. It should be used correctly. Wealth is not to be rejected; rather, it should be used for its capacity to strengthen God's presence.

All this Jacob understood. All this is the necessary third step in the proper expression of love between humankind and God. A Jew

must love God with a full heart, be prepared to die for Him, and even be willing to live for Him. The greatest challenge of all is to give not only of one's self, but even of one's possessions.

### The Three Love Mitzvot

In the *Shema*, the very same paragraph that commands love and illustrates it with three phrases corresponding to the Patriarchs, concludes by demanding we perform a number of specific mitzvot:

וקשרתם לאוה על-ידך והיו לטטפת בין עיניך: וכתבתם על-מזוזות ביתך ובשעריך:

"And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes and thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house and upon thy gates" (Deuteronomy 6:8-9). If we love God we will fulfill these laws. How many are there? We might be tempted at first glance to say two: phylacteries (*tefilin*) and mezuzah. Yet careful reading indicates that there are in fact three, because the phylacteries are divided into two parts. There is the part placed on the head and the other placed on the hand. They are in fact viewed as separate commandments. If one cannot for some reason put on the *tefilin* for the hand, one must nevertheless use the one for the head.

The very same passage that teaches us we must love God in three ways concludes with the requirement for three rituals. Why three? And why precisely these three? Because it becomes obvious that these three are directly linked to the three methods of indicating one's love and allegiance to God.

"And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand." The Talmud deduces that the hand meant is the left one. And exactly where is the placement to be? Again, tradition teaches us, "on your hand opposite the heart" (*keneged ha-lev*). Indeed, was not the first of the three love expressions "with all your heart"?

First we bind a small box, halakhically called a *bayit* (house)—a metaphor for the site where family love is expressed—opposite the heart. It is the first step.

Second, another box is attached to the forehead: "And they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes." This corresponds to the command to love God, "with all your soul," not simply to believe but even to die for one's object of love.

The phylacteries for the head are not placed directly between the eyes. That would have been on the bridge of the nose. The Oral Law, however, teaches us that the proper place is in fact on the hairline between the eyes, i.e., positioned in the center, moving upwards from the point of the bridge of the nose to the top of the skull. It is halakhically referred to as the place where, in an infant, we can feel the throbbing and movements of the brain (*maqom she-moho shel tinok rofes bo*).

How do we know that the words *bein einekha* do not actually mean "between the eyes"? The Sages employ a method of analogy known as *gezerah shavah*, a principle allowing us to understand the true meaning of the text in one place from its amplification in another. The phrase "between your eyes" does appear elsewhere in the Torah. It is in connection with a law concerning an improper response to death.

"Ye are the children of the Lord, your God. Ye shall not cut yourselves, nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead" (Deuteronomy 14:1). Pagans would rip out their hair when they were confronted with the incomprehensible tragedy of death. To this very day, tearing one's hair at the roots is symbolic language for total frustration. If something makes no sense and there's nothing we can do about it, ripping the hair from our head gives vent to our impotence and intellectual limitations.

Jews are not permitted to rip the hair from their head. To do so would mean a surrender to pessimism, anger, and finally a disagreement with the will of God. "Ye are the children of the Lord, your God." A child must understand that parents never willingly harm their children. Death may be incomprehensible to us. But if you believe that you are children of the Lord, then He must surely love us. He is wiser. And on that very spot where our brain first begins to indicate its movement, and where human capacity for thought is demonstrated, we place a symbol of God's presence to show that God is above human intelligence. For that reason, on the very place where pagans rip out their hair as a sign of both

frustration and condemnation, the Jew places his phylacteries in recognition of a Superior Intelligence who rules the world.

There is nothing more incomprehensible than the moment of death. It is incomprehensible when God tells Abraham to take Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice. It is incomprehensible that Rabbi Akiva faced torture and death at the hands of the Romans. And yet "with all your soul" means that a Jew must be prepared to demonstrate a love for God even in the most incomprehensible way of all, by giving up one's very soul.

"With all your soul" really means "even when it doesn't make sense, even onto death." The phylacteries placed upon the head make the same statement. We thereby declare that God is wiser than we are, that whatever happens has a purpose.

"And thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house and upon thy gates." A house is not only a man's castle, it is the most potent external definition of his wealth. We may live in a slum or a suburb. We may own a hut or a mansion, a hovel or an estate. Whatever we have as our haven must be marked by a mezuzah at its portal. A mezuzah makes a powerful statement. Not only myself, but everything I own, is subservient to God. In the final analysis everything really comes from Him.

If phylacteries demonstrate the allegiance of my heart and my mind, my readiness to believe and even to die, then the mezuzah visibly illustrates my third major commitment, "with all your wealth."

The three ways to love God are suggested paradigmatically by the three Patriarchs. They are more clearly given halakhic form by the three mitzvot that conclude the "love" paragraph: phylacteries of the hand, of the head, and the mezuzah.

### Which Is the Source for Martyrdom?

We are now prepared to analyze the laws of martyrdom, determined in Lod by talmudic sages centuries ago, more carefully.

Which phrase of the three—"with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your wealth,"—is significant for the rabbis sitting in the attic in Lod and trying to determine the mitzvot for which one must be prepared to give up one's life? Clearly, the only one of the three is "with all your soul."

Why didn't the Talmud simply quote this phrase to show there are times when we must be ready to die? Why did the Talmud continue with a discussion including "with all your wealth"?

The Talmud was obviously troubled by the sequence seems to give the lie to our interpretation of "with all your soul." If, in fact, the second phrase teaches us that we must be prepared to die for our belief in God, how could there conceivably be a third phrase? What more need be added to convey the extent of our commitment? If one has to die for God, is it conceivable that yet another commandment is required to take it further?

The talmudic answer recalls the most famous taunt recorded in the history of radio. When the robber broke into the home of Jack Benny and confronts him with the line "Your life or your life!" the response is a considered silence. Silence leads the audience to laughter progressively intensifying as the robber dawns that Jack Benny could not make up his mind as to what to choose. It is laughter that confronts a profound practical truth. There are in fact people ready to die for a cause, but not to live for it. There are people who treat their money with more care than they treat their health, their bodies, or their lives.

I will never forget the emotional high of the days in 1947 when Israel fought for survival and then succeeded in retaking Jerusalem. Members of my congregation came to me in the opening days of the Six Day War and begged to be allowed to find some way to join the Israeli Army. They were ready, they told me, to die for their people. I pointed out that untrained civilians could not fight in a war. They could, however, give financial support. They could offer their wealth, if not their bodies. Strangely enough, the more difficult to achieve. The very people who had been willing to offer their all with regard to life were not prepared to do so financially in a significantly comparable manner.

Can *bechol nafshekha* really mean "with all your soul" unto death, if there is still a phrase after it? Yes, indeed, said the Talmud. "If there is a person whose body is dearer to him than his wealth, therefore it says 'with all your soul.' If there is a person whose wealth is dearer to him than his body, therefore it says 'with all your wealth.'" Both phrases are necessary in addition to the phrase "with all your heart," the commandment for total belief. Belief alone is insufficient. One may believe in many