

Love and Awe

Parashat Tetzave – Rav Hanan Schlesinger

Love. It's about appreciation and admiration, about connection on the deepest level. It's about understanding and closeness almost to the point of unity. Love can bring us to a meeting of minds, to partnership.

The Torah instructs us to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might. But how does one come to love God? Maimonides explains that when one stands face to face with creation, with its intricacy and beauty, its exquisitely calibrated functionality, one cannot but fall in love with the Creator behind the creation. One cannot but become imbued with the most total adoration. One cannot but be swept away by an insatiable passion to understand and to search for intimacy with the Force behind it all.

But the closer one approaches, writes Maimonides, the greater the realization of the gulf between Creator and created. The more our love brings us to delve into the mysteries of His world, the more the awareness of His utter uniqueness and inapproachability envelops us. And we retreat in shame that we ever thought to consummate our love with One such as He. And then what we experience is otherness and distance.

At the same time that the Torah commands us concerning the love of God, it also commands us to experience this awe of the Ineffable. Both of these psychological states are essential to the properly balanced religious personality, and Maimonides seems to imply that ideally, our fate is to forever oscillate between the consciousness of love on the one hand, and the opposing consciousness of awe on the other.

It may be possible, however, to understand and experience the relationship between love of God and awe of God differently. Our Torah portion, Parashat Tetzave, introduces us to the eight vestments of the *Cohen Gadol*, the High Priest. Strangely, the Torah does not present them together, but rather lists six at the outset of the parasha and delays the instruction concerning



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the remaining two until later. One of these two, the *Tzitz*, that gold plate engraved with the words *Kodesh laShem*, Holy unto God, which is to be fastened upon the forehead of the *Cohen Gadol*, commands the attention of the author of the Hasidic collection of homilies called *Mei haShiloach*.

By his very nature and by virtue of his status and calling, explains *Mei haShiloach*, the High Priest is awash in Awe of the Most High. The *Tzitz*, on the other hand, represents and engenders *d'veikut*, which means intimacy, nigh near total connection. *D'veikut* is about being so absolutely wrapped up in Him so as to leave almost no room for anything else. It is a matter of consummate love of God to the highest degree possible.

The *Tzitz* is left for the end, says the *Mei haShiloach*, to indicate that what we have here is a process. Love follows awe, and supersedes it. The paralysis and distance born of awe must forever be left behind. The experience of an unbridgeable chasm between man and God is not one we are to live with forever. There comes a time in a man's life when the movement of recoiling from His presence is no longer to be cultivated in our psyche as a complement to love, but rather to be banished from consciousness.

But only at the end of a long process. Awe is a prerequisite. Love and intimacy that do not grow from awe as a plant from a seed are doomed to overstep their boundaries and lead to narcissism in which love of self masquerades as closeness to God. The dangers of such self deception are manifold. But after a lifetime of love counterbalanced by awe, there comes a time when we may allow that awe to be overwhelmed and vanquished by a sense of oneness with the One, of clinging to the Divine. Love shall then blossom to the exclusion of all else. Then we shall see with absolute clarity that our very selves and our deeds derive directly from Heaven, and we shall have no fear.



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