

Judaism is About Love

By Rabbi Susan Leider

Parshat V'ethanan

Of the many books on my physical and digital shelves, one particular title stands out to me today, in light of *Parshat V'ethanan*: Judaism Is About Love by Shai Held.

How can you be commanded to love?

Now, just the very fact that such a book has to be written at all is probably a testament to the reality that when we think of Judaism, we think of law, not love. This, even though the prayer, which is the closest text we have to a creed, contains the words commonly translated “and you shall love – *v’ahavta*,” which flows from the *Shma*, all a part of today’s *parashah*.

The commentators in our tradition have long struggled with *ve-ahavta* as a commandment to love. We are not commanded to love our parents, but rather to honor them, so why are we commanded to love God? For some of us, it impossible on so many levels. First of all, what if we don’t believe in God? And even if we do, how do we love on a being that isn’t human? And what if we don’t buy the concept of being commanded at all? And if we do believe in it, how can love be commanded anyways? Doesn’t love arise spontaneously from the heart?

Before we can fathom what it might be like to love God, we may want to turn to human relationships, the first place we learn about love, well before we can imagine

loving God. This is how it unfolds, ideally, as children: we experience and feel love from our families and then are able to love others as we grow and mature.

When I think of love in human relationships, I think of one of my favorite books: The Love Prescription, by psychologists John Mordechai Gottman and Julie Schwartz Gottman, who happen to be married to each other. For the past fifty years, they have been studying the building blocks of love, and they have even founded the “love lab.” In their work, they describe a concept they call “a bid for connection.” This is how they describe it:

“We have opportunities for meaningful connection constantly-but we miss them. We don’t know exactly what we’re looking for, and we don’t know how important these seemingly small, fleeting, insignificant moments can be . . . what we are doing in these quick moments is making what we call “bids for connection.”

What is a bid for connection? . . . It is *an invitation to connect*. It may be eye contact, a smile, a sigh, an ask for help or attention, or even saying good morning/night. Maybe they read something out loud to you, saying, “Hey, listen to this.”

People with whom we are in relationship with, make bids for our attention all the time. And we have a choice in how or if we respond.

According to the Gottmans, we have the choice to turn toward, turn away or turn against. When we turn toward (very similar here to the concept of *teshuvah* in Jewish tradition), we respond positively to the bid for connection. When we turn away, either

we ignore the bid or simply don't notice it. When we turn against, we respond irritably or angrily, and shut down the opportunity for connection at all.

So the first part of their "love prescription" is to turn toward, and to do this frequently, by initiating or responding to bids for connection.

It all sounds simple, but of course, it is not. It demands that we are aware and pay attention to our partner, to small cues, and that we have presence and energy to respond to the bid for connection.

To relate the Gottmans' concept to the "command," to love God, we might view the statement of the *Shma* as a bid for attention. God says, "I am here, I am one – make me a central part of your life."

In our tradition, the great Hasidic commentator, the Maggid of Mezritch, is aware of this tension regarding the idea of commanding love and suggests a different take on it. Instead of reading the *Shma* as a rigid commandment that describes what must take place, he suggests, as do the Gottmans, in The Love Prescription, that we see it as an invitation to what may happen in the future. When we take the essence of "*Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*," to heart, we open up the possibility in the future that we will come to love God, '*v'ahavta*.' Read this way, the Maggid of Mezritch sees the *V'ahavta* as an assurance, rather than a command. If you really take the truth of the *shema* into your heart, the result can be love. So maybe it is better for us to think of the translation of "*V'ahavta*," as you will love vs. you shall love – seeing it less as a commandment and more of a divine invitation, a bid for connection. And the rest of the *V'ahavta* paragraph continues from there:

וְקִוִּיָּמָד: וְנִשְׁכַּחֲךָ בְּלִדְרֵךְ וּבְלִכְתָּךְ בְּבֵיתְךָ בְּשַׁבְּתְךָ בָּם וְדַבַּרְתָּ

You will be so excited by this love that you will talk about it all the time, sitting in your house, on the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

עֵינֶיךָ: בֵּין לְטֵטֶפֶת וְהֵנִי עַל־יָדְךָ לְאוֹת וּקְשָׁרְתָם

You'll write your Lover's name on your arms and between your eyes, so you won't forget it!

וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ: בֵּיתְךָ עַל־מְזוּזוֹת וּכְתָבְתָם

You'll be scribbling it on your doorposts and on your gates!

But the Divine invitation is not simply issued and then everything falls into place. No, that would be too easy. It takes some steps and some commitment to behaviors that can lead to love and the *v'ahavta* names some of those – talking about Torah, teaching our children, *tefillin*, *mezuzah* – all bids for connection with the Divine.

The Divine makes bids also

The Gottmans' concepts relate beautifully to process theology: the idea that the Divine is not coercive in our lives, but rather persuasive. Process theology emphasizes becoming and changing, rather than permanence and uniformity.

So if the Divine presence is not coercive, then how does the Divine persuade us?

There is a beautiful teaching by the Kotzer Rebbe that helps us understand how this happens:

"And these words... shall be on your heart." Why doesn't the Torah say "in your heart," but rather "on your heart?" [The tradition, or God] doesn't make so heavy a demand on a person [as to demand that we keep the words "in" our hearts]. What is required of a person? - That the words should be placed in readiness *on top* of his/her heart, and at a time of favor and mercy, when the heart is opened up for a brief moment, the words will enter into it.

The Divine Lure

So when is our heart open so that the Divine can persuade us? It happens through an immediate perception or intuition, that is integrated with our own past, personality, character, talents, and possibilities. We can discover the Divine through prayer, meditation, therapy, nature, study, *mitzvot* (divine invitations aka ‘commandments’), and a host of other paths . . . all of which are complementary rather than mutually exclusive, as Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson teaches us.

Don’t Miss the Bid

The forces against love are strong. We look out into the world, and we see fear, isolation, doubt, destruction, and deception. We are often encouraged by leaders to look outside ourselves and blame others, rather than reach inside to our own potential for wise discernment and compassionate action. The case for the *V’ahavta* and the divine lure of *Shma* is more powerful and important now than ever. Shai Held, the author of Judaism is About Love (yes, that one still on my bedside table) reminds us: “Restoring love to its proper and authentic place in Jewish understanding is urgently necessary.” *Parshat V’ethanan* aligns with this intent and urges us not to conclude that love is an empty cliché or a marketing slogan. It is a *mitzvah*, a divine invitation that beckons us on this *Shabbat* and indeed every morning and every night.