

# On the Love of God

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*"The heavens declare the glory of God.  
And the firmament showeth His handiwork."*

Psalms XIX, 2.

*"The ultimate result of your knowledge of God should be the confession and conviction that of His glorious essence you are completely ignorant. If you form in your mind or imagination a picture or representation of the Creator, strive to investigate His being; and then you will be convinced of His existence, and all likenesses of Him will be rejected by you. so that you will find Him through reasoning alone."*

Duties of the Heart  
"The Unity of God," Chap. 10.

It is the goal of all Talmudic knowledge to lead one to the love of God. It would be important therefore to clarify what exactly is meant by the love of God. On the surface the Biblical injunction to love God would seem self explanatory; indeed most of the world has understood it that way. To the Sages of the Talmud, however, it presented a great difficulty. "How," they asked, "could one love God?"<sup>1</sup>

The problem is rooted in the Judaic concept of God. God is not merely non-physical, He is non-knowable. We may know Him only via His creation. The blessing of "Boruch SheAamar" formulated by the early Talmudists, states simply therefore, "Blessed be He that created the universe." God is the underlying source of all phenomena. He is the reality behind all realities. As Maimonides states, "if one would entertain the idea that He does not exist he would *ipso facto* be positing that nothing else exists."<sup>2</sup> But while the manifestation of His existence is everywhere, the nature of His existence or His essence remains unknowable.<sup>3</sup>

The sages therefore justifiably asked, how is one to love that of which he has no definitive idea? Love, it would seem, requires the conception in one's mind of some object or entity. The impossibility of forming such a concept either in the imagination or the intellect<sup>4</sup> would seem to render the love of God impossible. (That no concept of God may be formed is the most fundamental principle of Judaism.)

The pagan religions attempt to satisfy the imagination by offering it some image to behold. For Judaism this is idolatry<sup>5</sup>: "Take therefore great heed to yourselves for you saw no image on the day that the Eternal spoke to you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire."<sup>6</sup>

The Sages resolved this dilemma with a very special formulation. As Maimonides in paraphrasing their words states, "when a person ponders His great and wondrous works and creations he immediately loves, praises, and extols and is filled with a great desire to know the Supreme Being... and when he contemplates these things he immediately is drawn back with great reverence and he realizes that he is a small insignificant unenlightened creature standing with a frail intellect in the presence of a Being Who is perfect in knowledge."<sup>7</sup>

1 Sifre on Deuteronomy VI, 6.

2 Maimonides. Laws Concerning the Fundamentals of Torah. Book 1. Law II.

3 That God is unknowable is the Basis for His name the Shem Hameforsh being ineffable. The Talmud states in Kiddushin 71A, "The Holy One Blessed be He said, Not the way I am written am I to be read. I am written with YHVH and I am read with ADNY." If man were to pronounce the sacred YHVH he would think that he comprehends the Creator. He. therefore pronounces the ADNY which means my Master to signify that he is speaking in human terms. If, on the other hand, the name was written ADNY man would ascribe human characteristics to the Creator. The double formulation teaches man that as a human being he must relate to God but cannot know His essence.

4 See Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, Book 1, Chap. LII.

5 This is what the Sages meant when they stated that the goal of the entire Torah is the abolition of idolatry, i.e., To relate to God without any physical medium. See Talmud Horayos 8A/also Maimonides' "Code" Laws concerning Idolatry, Chap. II. Law IV.

6 Deuteronomy IV, 15.

7 Maimonides, Laws Concerning the Fundamentals of Torah Chap. II, Law II.

Love of God is defined by the Sages not as the love of an object in the ordinary sense but rather as an inner yearning and longing for the source of all knowledge and perfection. It is an awesome experience which carries with it both fear or reverence, and love. It consists in being drawn towards a Being whom one knows only through His manifestations.

This experience, the Sages maintained, is one which ensues naturally when the human mind contemplates nature. Albert Einstein gave an interesting and very similar expression of this experience. He stated, "Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe, a spirit vastly superior to that of man and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble."<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Einstein himself experienced a religious emotion which he felt was at the root of all science. "The finest emotion of which we are capable," he stated, "is the mystic<sup>9</sup> emotion." "Herein lies the germ of all art and all true science." "To know that what is impenetrable for us really exists and manifests itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty whose gross forms alone are intelligible to our poor faculties, this knowledge, this feeling... that is the core of the true religious sentiment. In this sense... I rank myself among profoundly religious men."<sup>10</sup> Based upon this Einstein had wished to form a cosmic religion.<sup>11</sup>

Actually, Einstein's concept of a cosmic religion is one aspect of Judaism. It is formulated in the first blessing that precedes the diurnal recital of the Shema, "...and in His goodness renews every day continually the work of creation. How great are Thy works oh Lord You have made them all with wisdom, the earth is filled with Your acquisitions. The King who alone is exalted from all eternity, who is praised and glorified and uplifted from the beginning of time."<sup>12</sup> And again in the evening form of this blessing we have who with His word brings on evenings, with wisdom open up gates (of heaven) and with understanding changes the times and alternates the seasons and arranges the stars in their watches in the sky according to His will." This blessing represents man's appreciation of the Creator via the beauty and wisdom of the universe.<sup>13</sup>

The second blessing expresses the second aspect of man's appreciation of God viz. via the Sinai Revelation. Here God appears to man as a teacher, one who gave man his greatest gift, God's philosophical system, through which he can attain his perfection. "You have loved us with a great love... for the sake of our forefathers who trusted in You and whom You taught statutes of life so too be gracious to us and teach us." "Give into our hearts (comprehension) to understand and be intellectually creative to listen to learn and to teach..."

The first blessing expresses God's general providence, the second His specific providence, i.e., His intervention with natural law to teach man the true way of life. The first blessing represents the realm in which scientific man approaches the Creator. The Torah scholar approaches God, in addition, through the realm of the second blessing, i.e., the study of God's Law.

In the first blessing God seems remote and distant. too great, too exalted, to be concerned with man's fate. In the second He appears as a close and loving teacher very much concerned with man's welfare. Those who know God through the study of science alone (as Einstein) conclude that God is not concerned with man's small and insignificant world. For them the idea that the Creator of the universe is also a personal God seems absurd.

The Psalmist, in fact, agrees that this conclusion is a natural one. He states therefore, "When I see Your heavens the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars which You have established. What is man that You shall remember him?"<sup>14</sup>

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8 Albert Einstein, *The Human Side*. Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffman, p. 33

9 The word mystic is not to be taken in the ordinary sense. *Ibid.* p.39

10 Albert Einstein. *The Man and His Theories*. Hilary Cuny. p 149

11 Einstein. *The Life and Times*. Ronald W. Clark. pp. 516-517, See also the reaction of religious leaders to Einstein's suggestion.

12 The idea that God renews the work of creation continually is not a denial of the Laws of nature but rather an assertion that the existence of these laws is totally dependent on His will which is constant.

13 The Talmud states in the Tractate Sabbath. 75A. Rabbi Joshua the son of Levi says in the name of Bar Kappara whoever is capable of studying astronomy and doesn't do so in reference to him the passage says (Isaiah 5, 12) and at the work of God they do not look nor did they behold the work of His hands."

14 Psalms VIII, 4,5.

The two aspects of our perception of God seem contradictory,<sup>15</sup> and that is precisely as they should appear. Judaism does not reconcile this contradiction; the Psalmist has given it full endorsement. Any other attitude would be indicative of arrogance and egocentricity.

The two manifestations of God must always be perceived as existing in opposing spheres. These two spheres can never be brought together, for doing so would be presupposing a knowledge of God's essence which is unattainable:<sup>16</sup> "For man cannot see [know] me and live."<sup>17</sup> Whereas the scientific investigator would conclude that the God of the universe is not a personal one, the Talmudic philosopher would conclude that His very essence precludes the possibility of drawing such a conclusion. Having the Sinaic tradition at his disposal, he holds firmly to both spheres and lives humbly with the apparent paradox.

Man's love of God is integrally bound with his striving towards an understanding of God's creation both through the knowledge of nature and the knowledge of His Law, which are infinite. It is a movement towards the unknowable. "The whole world is filled with His Glory," and yet we do not know "where is the place (source) of His Glory?"<sup>18</sup> It is for this reason that the Psalmist likens man's reaching towards God to a search, when he says, "The Lord looked forth from the heavens upon the children of man to see if there is any man of understanding that is searching for God."<sup>19</sup> It is in this search that man finds his greatest fulfillment.

*A person should take extreme care concerning the precept of mezuzah as it is an obligation upon everyone at all times, so that whenever one enters or leaves his home he will encounter the declaration of God's unity Blessed be His name and will be reminded of the love of God.. He will be aroused from his slumber and his preoccupation with the vain and the temporal and will realize that nothing endures forever except the knowledge of the Creator of the universe. He will then immediately be restored to his right senses and will walk in the ways of the righteous. Our sages have said, "He who has phylacteries on his head and arm, fringes on his garment and a mezuzah on his door may be presumed not to sin, for he has many reminders of the true ideas." These, then, are truly the angels which protect one from going astray as it is stated, "The angel of the Lord camps around those that fear him and delivers them."*

Maimonides, Code of Law, Laws of Tefilin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah, Chapter 6, Law 13.

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15 We are not using the term "contradiction" in a strictly logical sense. Nowhere does Judaism teach that one must accept something inherently illogical or contradictory to human observation. (Such an injunction would, of course, be logically impossible. for if one is to deny one's senses or innate reason he could by the same token deny the very receiving of that injunction or its necessary implications. He would thus be caught up in a logical circle.) Indeed, the Sinaic revelation is based on observation and acceptance of human sense perception and reason. All appeals on its behalf by Moses and the prophets are always, therefore, appeals to reason as is clearly indicated in innumerable Biblical texts and especially underscored in Deuteronomy IV. What we mean here is a contradiction in terms of human affect. Human intuition, however, is a notoriously unreliable instrument for determining reality as even the most cursory study of the history of science reveals.

16 It is one of the themes of Maimonides' Guide to demonstrate that the resolution of certain philosophical problems would *ipso facto* involve a knowledge of God's essence which is impossible.

17 Exodus XXXIII, 20.

18 Kedushah Service of Sabbath.

19 Psalms XIV, 2.