

A Divine Poem of Love

The full moon of Elul shines bright and full, calling to mind the month's meaning accessed through acrostic in the letters of its name. *Aleph-lamed-vav-lamed, Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*. "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (Song of Songs 6:3). Yes, the Day of Judgment draws near, but we approach it with the promise of forgiveness, born out of the steadfast commitment between God and God's people. After all, the notion that God cares at all about our actions is itself a sign of love.

And so, even though Christianity has worked hard to trademark divine love, it's impossible to ignore at this season of return a message of truth even older than Rosh Hashanah itself: God loves you. Embedded throughout Deuteronomy, including in this week's *parashah*, there can be no better paving for our path to the Days of Awe.

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First, let's be clear: To speak of God's love is to speak of a metaphor. And it is a metaphor not only in our modern, scientific minds, which have rightly rejected the image of God as a person who acts more or less like you and me. I'd like to suggest that God's love has always been a metaphor, crafted ingeniously in the language of our tradition to inspire us to live lives of covenantal faithfulness.

The rhetoric of Deuteronomy is on full display in this week's Torah portion. The *parashah* promises blessings and curses in relation to our acceptance or rejection of God. The communal blessings and curses suggest that womb and loom and tomb are all subject to God's will, which in turn responds to our behavior on earth. Their descriptions are poetic and intense, conveying through literary artistry what lived experience cannot provide. Poignantly, the curses are to be *לְאוֹת וּלְמוֹפְתִים*, "For a sign and a wonder," (Deut. 28:46), which also describes in this week's *parashah* the Ten Plagues in Egypt (see Deut. 26:8). God is shown to give signs, and their mythic invocation serves as its own reminder of our connection to God and the responsibility that connection entails. In other words, whether the plagues were "real" or whether God will "really" send blessing or curse, the text gives voice to a truth beyond the physical world, that our actions matter, and our memory of those actions matters as well.

The literary genius of the text goes on. We read this week the famous passage assigned to be recited when appearing at the temple with the firstfruits of your harvest. Though composed centuries after the purported events it describes, the text closes the reader's gaps, drawing us to the text, to one another, and to God:

⁵...My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very

populous nation. ⁶ The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. ⁷ We cried to the Eternal, the God of our ancestors, and the Eternal heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. ⁸ The Eternal freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and wonders. ⁹ God brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Deut. 26:5b-9).

Note the deft transitions from “my father ... went down to Egypt” to “the Egyptians dealt harshly with us” to “God brought us to this place.” The speaker travels through time, migrating from primordial origin to mythic salvation to established settlement in the land of promise. The text is open and timeless, and it can be said whether I was born into the covenant or converted, whether I’m standing on the soil of ancient Israel or far abroad, whether I’m making the prescribed offering or reciting the words at a Passover meal. The drama of the text draws me in, gives me a voice, and settles my mind into the message it hopes to impart.

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And that message is a message of love. Indeed, we also find, nestled amid the blessings and curses, a kind of wedding vow between Israel and God. The passage begins:

Today, you affirm that the Eternal is your God, that you will walk in God’s ways, that you will observe God’s laws and commandments and rules, and that you will heed God’s voice (Deut. 26:17).

And then, using reciprocal, parallel language, the text continues:

And today, the Eternal affirms you to be, as God promised you, God’s treasured people (v. 18).

אַתִּי-יְהוָה הָאֱמִירָתְךָ הַיּוֹם ... וַיְהוָה הָאֱמִירָךְ הַיּוֹם.

Today, you affirm the Eternal; and today, the Eternal affirms you.

This mutual commitment lies at the heart of the covenant and expresses in beautiful simplicity the raw vulnerability of genuine relationship. We hear echoes of God’s voice in the Prophets:

אֶהְבֶּתִּי אֶתְכֶם אָמַר יי, “I love you, says the Eternal One” (Malachi 1:2).

“I love you with an everlasting love; and I will always remain true to you”
(Jeremiah 31:2).¹

“Because you are precious in My sight, My presence is with you, and I love you.
... Be not afraid, for I am with you” (Isaiah 43:4-5).²

These are metaphors, yes, but that doesn't diminish their power. These words inspire us to imagine our lives *as if* loved by the Creator of the Universe. How would you act if that were really true? We know God won't actually rain curses on your head if you don't do the right thing; but there nevertheless *is* a “right thing,” and our moral behavior matters. What we think of ourselves and what we do matters. We don't want to disappoint the one whose concern for us never ends; and we do want to pursue the highest values and aspirations of a tradition whose ultimate concern is the ineffable source of all who, wondrously and magnificently, pierces the veil of everyday life to enliven our spirits with a sense of purpose and personal worth.

This is what it means to be loved by God and to affirm, in turn, that we yearn to heed God's voice. The poetry of the Torah and the High Holy Days has one common refrain: God loves you, God wants what's best for you, and God wants you to work to bring it about. As Elul bends toward the New Year ahead, may we open our hearts to this message of love; and may we reach our hand out to the Creator who wants to hold it.

¹ ואהבת עולם אהבתיו, על-כן משקתיו חסד.

² מאשר יקרת בעיני נכבדת, ואני אהבתיך ... אל-תירא כי אתך-אני reading נכבדת as “My presence is with you.”