

Va'Etchanan 5778

Do you ever wonder why our ancestors accepted Torah, with all of its statutes and ordinances? Our sages wondered about that. In the Torah's narrative of the receiving of the 10 Commandments, the Israelites are described in English as standing "at the foot of the mountain." In the Hebrew, the text says that they are "*tachtit heh-har*," which literally means that they are under the mountain. In one famous midrash, God suspends Mount Sinai in the air over their heads and tells them, here's the deal: Accept my Torah, or be crushed by this mountain. Midrash is always a dance involving text, reality, and imagination. The image of a mountain suspended over our heads may have worked for the author of that midrash, but the idea of living "*tachtit he-har*," beholden to a set of moral or religious laws, makes many people today uncomfortable, and the idea that we would take on a life of Torah on peril of death--at God's hand--feels anathema and perhaps preposterous, to the post-modern mind. We would rather follow a way of life that our hearts and minds tell us is good.

As a possible counterpoint to the notion of following the Torah as if we have no choice, we have the "*V'ahavta*" paragraph of the Shema that we read today, with its command to love God with all of our being—mind, body, soul, and all of our "umph—*b'chol l'vavcha uv'chol naf'sh'cha uv'chol m'odecha*." At first blush, it seems as if our emotional attachment to God will then lead us blissfully toward following the rest of the commandments. But when we look critically at the word "*V'ahavta*," "you shall love," we find that we have not solved our problem, for how can the Torah, or any doctrine, command emotion? Don't we "fall" in love, as if we have no control of it? Moreover, the "love" commanded here may not be the kind of feel-good love we thought it was. The Etz Chaim Chumash offers an interpretation of what "loving" God most likely meant in its biblical context. The "*v'ahavta*" probably is not about the love of emotional affection, but rather the love of obedience. That makes more sense both textually and historically. The Deuteronomic covenant comes from a time in the ancient Semitic world when peasants commonly entered into contractual

agreements with overlords. Viewed from the perspective of a vassal-suzerain model, the first paragraph of the Shema is telling us to obey God, starting with carrying God's words around in our minds, sharing them verbally, teaching them to our children, and placing various physical objects to remind ourselves of them. Rabbi Marc Brettler (My People's Prayer Book—The Shema..., p. 101) points out that "brit," our biblical Hebrew word for "covenant," also means "treaty." In fact, says Brettler, along with others, those ancient treaties often use the word "V'ahavta" "You shall love," or its parallel in other languages, to connote obedience. If "love" in our Shema is a technical term for acceptance of treaty obligations, then it stands to reason that if we buy in, we are party to a full-time, full-on covenant with our Creator. We place ourselves "*tachtit he-har*." We remind ourselves of our obligations to that covenant constantly, verbally and through symbols we place on our bodies, our homes, and our cities, and we carry our covenant forward through *halachah*, the practices we work out based on those commandments. As a halachic Jew, I'm down for observance of mitzvot, but the idea of loving God emotionally felt so much sweeter.

The truth is that most, if not all, of our sages did not know the biblio-historical context of the word "v'ahavta," and they make much ado over the notion of loving God emotionally. That is well and good, even if not textually accurate. But let us not overlook the importance of being *Tachtit he-har*, of being commanded no matter how we feel in any particular moment. Cultivating the capacity to be *tachtit he-har*, to be bound in commitment, turns out to be a key component of human flourishing, and it also turns out that being *tachtit he-har* has a great deal to do with *Ahava*, love, as we conventionally think of it.

Think about some of the things that people feel bound to do, that are within our control and to which we hold ourselves accountable--actions like bringing children home for a nap, walking the dog, visiting members of the community who cannot get out easily, resolving a conflict before going to bed, calling our parents, or leaving a legacy, financial or otherwise. What compels us, at least most of the time, if not love? And how much poorer would all of our lives be without the web of commitments and obligations that push us to show up for each other and allow us to fall into one

another's arms? Ideally, love and obedience are intrinsically connected. Perhaps Moshe presents the Decalogue and the *V'Ahavta* in close succession in order to underscore the relationship of commitment and love.

Let's push this idea a little further. I learned the following story from Rabbi Vernon Kurtz: A chasid once asked a *tzaddik*, "why is it customary to say *l'chaim* before reciting *kiddush*? Is it not disrespectful to bless mortals before blessing the Immortal One?" The *tzaddik* answered, "the word *V'ahavta*, you shall love, occurs three times in the Torah. It first occurs in the famous phrase, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18). The second time, it occurs in the phrase, "you shall love him—the stranger—as yourself" (Lev. 19:34). Finally, it appears in *Parashat Va'etchanan* (Deut 6:5): 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.'" The *tzaddik* continued, "And why do you think that the verse mentioning the love of God is mentioned last, after the verses about loving your neighbor and loving the stranger? Because if you do not love people, you cannot love God." (Quoted by R. Vernon Kurtz in *Encountering Torah*, p. 246).

The *tzadik* knew his Torah, and he knew his midrash, too. When the Torah gives commands us to love others, to care for others and not take advantage of them, the command nearly always ends by invoking God, telling us implicitly that God is there, experiencing our interactions with us, and expecting us to rise to the occasion.

Moreover, The Torah links caring for others to obedience to God in the very structure of the 10 Commandments themselves. A text in the *Mekhilta D'Rebbi Ishmael*, a collection of halachic midrash, draws our attention to an interesting pattern. The midrash, which, incidentally is the source for the iconography typically used when rendering the tablets of the law, comes from Rabbi Chanina b. Gamliel. He draws a conceptual links between each of the first five Commandments, which are inscribed on one tablet, with its parallel on a second tablet, and brings biblical sources in support of each pairing. I will quote some of the midrash for you in English: "How were the Ten Commandments given? Five on one tablet and five on the other. "I am the Lord your God," and opposite it "You shall not kill," whereby Scripture apprises us that spilling blood is tantamount to

"diminishing" the likeness of the King. An analogy: A king of flesh and blood enters a province, sets up statues of himself, makes images of himself, and mints coins in his likeness. After some time, his subjects upset his statues, break his images, devalue his coins — and "diminish" the likeness of the king. Likewise, Scripture equates spilling blood to "diminishing" the likeness of the King. Further, It is written in the Torah, "There shall not be unto you any other gods in My presence," and, opposite it, "You shall not commit adultery," whereby Scripture apprises us that idolatry is tantamount to adultery. The midrash brings the example of Hoshea's adulterous wife, who is compared to the Israelites. Hoshea loves his wife, and God loves the Israelites, despite their respective infidelities. Here's one more pairing of the five: It is written "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," and, opposite it, "You shall not steal," whereby we are apprised that one who steals, in the end comes to swear in vain--meaning that the thief would take God's name in vain before a court, as it is written in Yirmiyahu (**Jeremiah 7:9**) "Shall one steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely," and more.

Rabbi Chanina is saying that a proper relationship with God is contingent on proper relationships with our fellow human beings, AND proper relationships with our fellow human beings are grounded in the notion of commitment. Think back to the *V'ahavta*, and note that when we get past that split second of saying "*v'ahavta*," "you will love," the Shema really is about commitment, whether we're feeling it or not.

When we marinate all of these ideas together, we find that love and commitment swim in the same pot, and one without the other will not suffice. That reality is more significant and more difficult than it sounds. It can be challenging to balance our experience of love with following through on our commitments to the people and things we love. We can fall out of whack on either side. For example, we may be so convinced that a relationship is strong that we take our partner for granted and not give them the time and attention they rightfully deserve. Or, we may be so blinded by passion that we fail to consider our responsibilities. Conversely, we may fulfill our obligations but fail to nurture the love that obligated us in the first place.

I have observed that most people swing back and forth, from the love side to the obligation side, and that we do best when we catch ourselves--or we

catch each other, lovingly, when we have let ourselves veer too far to one side or the other. As humans, we are wired for connection, but we are not wired perfectly. We must understand that, so we can gently lead ourselves, and our loved ones, back toward love and back toward commitment. The more tenderness we can muster toward ourselves and our fellow creatures on earth, the more we will ultimately fulfill of our end of our enduring and ever-refreshing covenant with God.

On this *Shabbat Nachamu*, marking the beginning of a healing process from Tisha B'Av to the High Holy Days, let's get under that mountain of commitment and hold it up together, as a loving community. That is my prayer, to which I invite you to join me in saying "Amen."