

# Love and Law

This Shabbat, we read the portion *Va'etchanan*; this portion follows the 3 Weeks of mourning which culminated with the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av. The entire tone and feeling in the soul of the traditionalist is of relief. This Shabbat is, therefore, appropriately dubbed – Shabbat Nachamu – the Shabbat of consolation from the grief of our destruction and diaspora.

The colloquial Jewish expression to speak of the deceased is *Zichrono Livrach*, May his/her memory be for a blessing. How does the memory of a loved serve as a blessing after they have passed on? If the living live their lives, while carrying the deceased's values and goodness forward, then the memory of the deceased serves as a blessing in the present. In this sense, we can serve as a blessing by honoring the many luminaries and giants of Jewish tradition; men and women whose lives were cut short because of oppressive, anti-semitic, hateful, tragic events in our history.

We need not go to a distant land or over the sea to discover the Torah. Actually, one of the key pieces of Torah text, perhaps the most famously known, oft-recited pieces of Torah, comes from our Parsha: The first paragraph of the Shema. (The other two paragraphs of the Shema come from different portions of the Torah.) This text is a mission statement of the Jewish people. The message of the first paragraph of the Shema is a roadmap the Jewish community uses to come to love God. In short, love of God comes about when we devote our 'whole heart, whole soul and whole might.' We must communicate them to our children and we must communicate them to our peers, spouse, and selves. We must think about God during sleep hours and waking hours – so at all times; we must think of God when we are home or outside the home – so in all places; and we must think bind the values upon our hearts and minds and upon our homes and cities. The path to loving God is a total personal, communal endeavor. (See Deuteronomy, 6:6–9)

In a different sense, rabbinic tradition labeled the totality of the religious experience represented in the opening of the Shema, as *Kabbalat Ol Malchut Shamayim* – the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven. (See Mishna Brachot 2:2) By reciting the Shema, by living the commandments of the Shema, we accept God as our legislator. This affirmation of faith has become associated with conversion. Though faith declaration was not originally cited in the Talmud as an essential step for the convert, later Rabbinic authorities have made the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven an indispensable part of the conversion process. (See Rambam, Issurei Biyah, 14:2)

The Shema carries both of these features – love and law. They are both essential to the Jewish spirit. Love animates the Law; Law gives direction and purpose to Love. And they bring balance each other. When the Law seems unforgiving and cold, Love reminds us of the warmth and acceptance. When Love is too ethereal and insubstantial, Law is concrete and within reach. When we say the Shema, we affirm both of these values.

The custom of parents reciting the Shema with children at bedtime is a beautiful merger of the two – parents are *horim*, in Hebrew, guides – they give us concrete direction and advice. And parents love, without question.

May this Shabbat bring consolation to our community and to the world as we try to find and affirm the love and law around us.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,

Rabbi Menashe East