

To love Hashem, your G-d, and to serve Him with all your heart. (11:13)

The *mitzvah* of *ahavas Hashem*, loving the Almighty, is recorded in the Torah thirteen times. (Interestingly, the *gematria*, numerical equivalent, of *ahavah*, love, is 13. Another word that has such a *gematria* is *echad*, one. True love transforms two people into one. When we love Hashem, we abrogate ourselves, thus becoming completely attached to Him.) In the previous *parashah*, the Torah teaches that this love must extend to: *b'chol levavcha*, with all your heart; *b'chol nafshecha*, with all your soul (life); and *b'chol me'odecha*, with all your material assets. *Chazal* add their own interpretation to these three expressions of love. The Torah mandates us to love Hashem with our "all" – all of that which is important to us. The devotion and dedication our people have shown to Hashem define our history. We are here only due to this love that we harbor for the Almighty. We have two ways in which we can manifest our commitment: with pride; or with action. In both instances, a person does what is expected of him. In order to be filled with pride, however, one must act out of deep love.

A Jew from Russia boarded a bus in Yerushalayim and took a seat next to *Horav Kluft*, a grandson of the *Steipler Gaon*, *zl*. During the course of their conversation, the Jew mentioned that he had once served in Joseph Stalin's army. (Stalin was the accursed Russian dictator during World War II.) On his first *Erev Yom Kippur*, he sought a way to circumvent working on the holiest day of the year. He claimed that he was unable to work due to a toothache. He went to the infirmary where his tooth was extracted without Novocain. He fainted from the extreme pain – but he was permitted to take the day off to rest. Although he was in excruciating pain that entire day, the joy in not having to transgress *Yom Kippur* more than ameliorated his pain. He was able to spend the day in solemn prayer to Hashem. This overrode any pain.

When *Rav Kluft* expressed his great admiration for this *Yid*, the man said, "Do not be impressed. I am a simple Jew!"

The man's stop was called, and he got up to say goodbye to the *Rav*, who gave him a warm handshake. The man responded in kind and beamingly smiled at him. *Rav Kluft* noticed a gaping hole in the man's smile. His upper front teeth were missing. When the man observed *Rav Kluft's* surprise, he said, "Please forgive my toothless smile; I was in Stalin's army for four years, and I used the same excuse each *Yom Kippur*."

The *Spinka Rebbe*, *Horav Yaakov Yosef Weiss*, *zl*, was no stranger to *tzaros*, troubles. He witnessed his wife and children slaughtered by the Nazis, and he rebuilt his life. He remarried and was blessed with a second family. He re-established the *Spinker Chassidus* in Bnei Brak. Tragedy struck again – and again, as his eldest son succumbed to the dread disease. Years later, another son was killed in a car accident as he and others returned from the *Baba Sali's* funeral. When asked (during the *Shivah*) how he has been able to maintain his spiritual composure after having

sustained so many tragedies, he replied with complete equanimity, “If *Hashem Yisborach* can put up with me, if He tolerates my deficiencies, I am able to accept what He metes out to me.”

How does one achieve such an exalted level of love for Hashem? Loving Hashem unconditionally with all one’s heart is a profound spiritual journey. I use the word journey, because it does not happen overnight. It involves deepening one’s connection through prayer, Torah study, *maasim tovim*, good deeds altruistically performed, and constant striving to align one’s will with the *ratzon*, will, of Hashem. It is a lifelong pursuit of cultivating faith, trust and devotion. Last is gratitude to Hashem. Fostering an attitude of gratitude for all Hashem’s blessings is essential for acquiring love. By recognizing and acknowledging the abundance in one’s life, he demonstrates love for Hashem. Actively engaging in what is expected of a Jew will engender love for the One Who gives us everything.

How can we be commanded to love? Love is an emotion. Either one feels the love, or he does not. The *Baal HaTanya* explains that intrinsic to the Jewish psyche is an internal love for Hashem. We unfortunately do not always express this love, because we become sidetracked with impediments such as adversity. We become consumed with anxiety, followed by anger and then possibly grief, which blind us from thinking rationally. When we are unable to think cognitively, to see past the veil of ambiguity, we often forget that there is a rhyme and reason for what is happening, that Hashem in His infinite wisdom is manipulating events for a good cause.

The *Belzer Rebbe* takes an alternative approach, referring to the *pasuk* in *Mishlei* 27:19, *Ka’mayim panim el panim kein lev ha’adam el ha’adam*, “As water reflects a face back to face, so one’s heart is reflected back to him by another.” Human nature dictates that, when we feel someone’s outpouring of love towards us, we reciprocate love. In other words, we love those who love us. In order to generate our love for Hashem, we should stop to think how much He loves us. He does so much for us. Indeed, our very existence and everything connected with it, are from Hashem. True, certain moments of adversity in life invoke questions and even angst, but we fail to acknowledge the “before” and “after.” Our issue is with the “present.” If we can acknowledge that everything comes from Hashem, our loving Father, we should likewise accept what might be called “tough love” in contemporary parlance.

A yet loftier level of *ahavas Hashem* exists. The *Chafetz Chaim*, *zl*, had a son, *Rav Avraham*, *zl*, who was the apple of his eye. A *talmid chacham* without peer, his diligence in learning was matched by his profundity upon plumbing the depths of a *sugya*, topic. Having a brilliant mind, coupled with exemplary character traits, he was destined to become a *gadol b’Yisrael*, Torah giant, who would illuminate his generation. Sadly, that was not to be, as he was *niftar* in the prime of his life. The *Chafetz Chaim* said about him that he doubted that there was anyone else in the generation compared to him in his natural performance of acts of *chesed*, kindness. In his youth, he studied in Volozhin together with *Horav Isser Zalmen Meltzer*, *zl*, and *Horav Baruch Ber Leibowitz*, *zl*, both of whom became *gedolei hador*. They, too, stood in awe of *Rav Avraham*.

Rav Avraham was *niftar* on *Shabbos*, *Kislev* 20, 1892, after a short illness. His father was out of town to attend to the printing and editing of his *sefarim*. He knew nothing of his son's passing until *Motzoei Shabbos* when he received a telegram instructing him to return home immediately. The *Chafetz Chaim* was hosted by Rav Yitzchak Grodzenski, with whom he shared the contents of a dream he had had Friday night. In his dream, he envisioned a *Sefer Torah* on fire. Understandably, this was a bad omen, resulting in the *Chafetz Chaim* leaving for home with a heavy heart.

In the interval, the family of the *Chafetz Chaim* were in a quandary when to make the *levayah*, funeral. Should they wait for the saintly *Chafetz Chaim*, who surely would want to accompany his son on his last earthly journey? On the other hand, they took into consideration the negative impact the funeral might have on his health. They decided to conduct the funeral the next morning – come what may. One after another, *Roshei Yeshivah* and *Rabbanim* eulogized the deceased. The *Chafetz Chaim* had not yet arrived. They could not delay any longer, and they prepared to make their way to the cemetery. As they were walking, they saw a cloud of dust, as a carriage was quickly approaching. The *Chafetz Chaim* alighted from the carriage, took one quick look, remembered his dream and realized the tragedy that had occurred.

The *Chafetz Chaim* walked over to the *aron*, coffin, tore *kriah*, and recited the accompanying *brachah*. He then took out a small *Tanach* that he carried with him whenever he traveled, and he began to learn *Parashas Shemini* which deals with the tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu, Aharon *HaKohen's* two sons. A few minutes passed, he put the *Tanach* back into his pocket, looked up at the sky and commenced his eulogy.

“*Ribono shel Olam!* You commanded us to love You with all our heart. The heart should be completely filled with your love. Apparently, until today I have not fulfilled Your mandate. Until today, I had also made a place in my heart for my son. He was such a special scholar and saintly human being, that I loved him also. While it is true that loving a *talmid chacham* is tantamount to loving Hashem, I cannot say that every corner of my heart was devoted to loving only You, Hashem. Now, I can! My heart now overflows with love only for You!”