

Notions of Divine and Human Love in Jewish Thought: An Interview with Warren Zev Harvey

"To say that the paradigm of love is Creation is not merely to say that love is activity, not passivity, an idea already found in Aristotle. It is to say much more. For if the paradigm of love is God's creative activity, then love is an expression of strength, not weakness, and of perfection, not imperfection. Love is power. This contradicts a popular philosophic notion, which goes back to Plato, that love results from weakness, imperfection and privation: one loves what one lacks. According to this notion, found in various forms in different Greek and medieval philosophers, it is always the imperfect who loves the perfect, and the Perfect One does not love at all. ... In opposition to these Platonic and Aristotelian views on love, [Hasdai] Crescas presents in *Light II*, 6, 1, a concept of love based on power and perfection. He does not deny Aristotle's thesis that God is the ultimate Object of love, but he is much more concerned to establish that God is the ultimate Lover."

(Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas*, 108–109).¹

AG: One common feature of the Greek philosophic tradition and the Hebrew Bible is the association of God with love. Yet how they conceive the loving relationship is quite different. Aristotle describes God in the *Metaphysics* as an unmoved mover who causes the motion of the rest of the cosmos without himself moving. God causes the motion of the cosmos by being the object of love of all other beings, but has no need to love others: "The final cause, then, produces motion as being loved, but all other things move by being moved."² Contrastingly, the Hebrew Bible presents a God who actively loves humanity and expresses that loving relationship through enacting covenants (ex., Deut. 7:7–8, Hos. 11). The nature of this relationship is expressed in the famous statement that "the LORD did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people—for ye were the fewest of all peoples—but because the LORD loved you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore unto your fathers" (Deut. 7:7–8). This form of compassionate love at times appears to transcend the deserving or merit of the other partner in the agreement.

Throughout your career, you have written and taught extensively on this theme. I am interested to know, according to your research, how have Jewish philosophers in both the medieval and modern period reconciled the

¹ Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1998), 108–109.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924, repr. 1953), 12.7, 1072a27.

two conceptions of the loving relationship? How do they answer why God loves humanity and how humans fulfill their part in the relationship? What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of these different paradigms that have formed?

WZH: Thank you, Alex, for a thoughtful and challenging question about love in Greek and Hebrew thought. Now, the Greeks had four words for love: *agápe* (used for "true love" or love of God), *philia* (used for love among friends or love of wisdom = *philosophia*), *storgē* (familial love), and *éros* (passionate love). The Hebrews had three words for love: *ahavah* (the general term), *hesheq* (passionate love), and *hesed* (love that derives from strength, often translated as "loving-kindness"). Roughly speaking, "*ahavah*" parallels the first three Greek terms; *hesheq* parallels *éros*; and *hesed* has no parallel. When Jewish philosophers speak about our love for God or God's love for us, it is important to see which Hebrew term they have in mind.

Let's begin with Maimonides, the most influential of Jewish philosophers. He discusses the biblical commandment to love God "with all your heart" (Deut. 6:5) in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 39. He explains that the heart is a metonymy for "all the forces of the body," and the commandment to love God is to be fulfilled by devoting all one's bodily powers to knowing God.³ The knowledge of God, which according to him is attained through the scientific study of God's creation, must be the supreme love of one's life. All the forces of the body must be part of that all-consuming desire. If one attends a physics class, one does so not for the sake of getting a degree, making money, or gaining fame, but in order to discover the wisdom of the Creator in nature. If one goes to the cafeteria to eat lunch, one does so in order that the body be healthy so that one will have strength to devote oneself to the contemplation of God's universe. Similarly, if one sleeps at night in one's bed, goes to the gym in the morning for a work-out, or enjoys sexual intercourse with one's favorite partner—it should be for the sake of making the body healthy so that one will have strength to know God.⁴ Maimonides thus has no problem with the commandment to love God with all one's heart. It is for him a commandment to channel all one's passions into the one grand passion of knowing God. Love of God, for him, is the passion that includes all passions, the love of loves.

The word used for the love of God in the biblical commandment is "*ahavah*." If Maimonides had no problem speaking of our *ahavah* (or its Arabic analogue: *mahabbah*) for God, he had a big problem speaking about God's *ahavah* (or *mahabbah*) for us. He rarely does so, and when he does it is

³ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. R. Joseph Kafih (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1977), 1:39. English translation: Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961).

⁴ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah: De'ot* (Jerusalem: Frankel, 1975-2001), 3: 2–3.

with reference to a biblical verse).⁵ For how could God have *ahavah* for us? *Ahavah* is a bodily passion and God has no body.

In speaking about our love for God and God's love for us, philosophers were often shy about using the Hebrew word "*hesheq*" (or its Arabic analogue "*ishq*"), since it was thought to be too sexual. One philosopher who was not shy about this was the Muslim Avicenna. He spoke boldly about our passionate love (*ishq*) for God, and God's passionate love for us. Maimonides followed him in speaking about our passionate love (*hesheq* or *ishq*) for God, but refused to speak about God's passionate love for us. He described our passionate love for God as purely intellectual—a love in which the human intellect frees itself from the body and conjoins with the divine intellectual overflow. This intellectual love was, in his view, the greatest *eros* conceivable.⁶

The one kind of love Maimonides allowed himself to attribute to God was *hesed*. The Rabbis of the Talmud used the word "*hesed*" to refer to acts of love that are considered *imitatio Dei*, such as clothing the naked, visiting the sick, or comforting the mourner. In these cases, the strong does an act of love for the weak—with no ulterior motive and not to satisfy a need. The paradigm of this disinterested love was for Maimonides the act of Creation by the omnipotent God who has no ulterior motives and no needs. Maimonides quotes Psalms 89:3: "The world is built on *hesed*."⁷

Plato and Aristotle taught that love derives from a need or weakness, and so the inferior loves the superior more than the superior the inferior. Maimonides agreed with them regarding *ahavah* and *hesheq*, but not *hesed*. *Hesed* is a love that derives not from need or weakness, but from plentitude and power.

By the way, Aristotle was not always careful about not attributing passions to God. It is true that in *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, he describes God as the *éromenon*, the object of the world's love, not the world's Lover.⁸ However, in the very same chapter he surprisingly ascribes *hēdonē* to God.⁹ If Aristotle's Prime Mover doesn't love, it at least enjoys.

The greatest Jewish Aristotelian after Maimonides was Levi Gersonides. He mostly accepted Maimonides' analysis of the different terms for love, but followed Avicenna regarding *hesheq*. He held that God created the world in passionate erotic love, and this love sustains all existence. In Genesis 2:2, it is said, according to the common translation, that God "concluded [*va-yekhal*] His work on the seventh day." However, argues Gersonides, this reading is impossible since God concluded His work at the

⁵ Cf. Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*: Avodah Zarah, 1:3, referring to Deut. 7:8.

⁶ Maimonides, *Guide*, 3:51.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:53.

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1072b 16.

end of the sixth day (see Gen. 2:1). He explains that the verse can be alternatively translated: God *passionately loved* His work on the seventh day" (cf. II Sam. 13:39). He uses here the word "*hesheq*" and explains that the divine *éros* animates the entire universe.¹⁰

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas, arguing against Plato and Aristotle, held that true love derives from strength, not weakness or need. He taught that God's love for human beings is greater than our love for Him, and so the Bible uses the word "*ahavah*" with regard to our love of God (Deut. 6:5, Isa. 41:8), but "*hesheq*" regarding God's love for us (Deut. 10:15).¹¹

Rabbi Joseph Albo had his own definition of *hesheq*. Like Freud, he held that true romantic love is reasonless. He defined *hesheq* as reasonless love—a love that justifies itself, that is based on nothing but itself, that is unbridled and unexplained desire, that has no rhyme or reason, and that is entirely free. This, wrote Albo, was the love of Shechem for Dinah (Gen. 34:8), this was the love of the lovers in Song of Songs, and this is the love of God for Israel (Deut. 7:7). Why did God fall in love with the Israelites, an insignificant, unruly, stiff-necked people? Albo's reply: No reason at all, simply *hesheq*.¹²

Baruch Spinoza's concept of *amor Dei intellectualis* is based on Maimonides', Gersonides', and Crescas' discussions of *hesheq*. Spinoza contradicts himself regarding the question of whether God loves the world. At *Ethics*, V, 19, he agrees with Aristotle and Maimonides that God does not; but at V, 36, cor., he agrees with Avicenna, Gersonides, and Crescas that God does.¹³

Not all Jewish philosophers have been enamored of Aristotle's description of God as the Unmoved Mover. Abraham Joshua Heschel used to say that the God is the "Most Moved Mover."

KN: In order to open up a space for you to expand upon Albo's definition of *hesheq* as reasonless love, let me cite this passage from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*:

Who would be content with a love given as pure loyalty to a sworn oath?
Who would be satisfied with the words, "I love you because I have freely

¹⁰ Gersonides, *Wars of the Lord* (Leipzig: Carl Lorck, 1866), 7:2, 8; cf. Commentary on Genesis 2.

¹¹ Hasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord* (Jerusalem: Ramot, 1989), I, 3, 5; II, 6, 1.

¹² Joseph Albo, *Book of Principles* (Tel Aviv: Mah'barot Le'sifrot, 1950), 3:37; English edition: Albo, *Book of Principles*, trans. and ed. I. Husik (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1929).

¹³ Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol.1: Ethics, trans. Edwin Curly (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 5:19; 5:36.

engaged myself to love you and because I do not wish to go back on my word?¹⁴

In your essay, “Albo on the Reasonlessness of True Love,” you refer to Sartre and De Beauvoir’s understanding of their mutual love to illustrate Albo’s view that *hesheq* is an unconditional form of love that is not cognitive, but conative, or a form of love that expresses the pure will of the lover, without depending on any specific property of the beloved.¹⁵ In this passage—even as he describes his own unconditional commitment to De Beauvoir—Sartre points out that most of us would be troubled if we discovered that we are not loved because of who we are, but because by loving us, the person who loves us expresses his own loyalty or steadfastness, his own pure will. If a form of love that is based upon the specific qualities of the beloved is unstable because it is contingent upon these qualities, isn’t a form of love that is based upon the lover’s pure will arbitrary?

WZH: I suppose it is indeed arbitrary—in the sense of depending only on free choice (*arbitrium*). Does a lover love his or her beloved because of some quality in him or her—and if other individuals have the same quality, then he or she will love them just as well? Albo is saying that lovers love each other because of some inexplicable magic between them. That’s *hesheq*!

KN: Let me introduce a second, related question, by citing the following passage from Arendt’s *The Life of The Mind*:

The Will’s freedom does not consist in the selection of means for a predetermined end ... it consists in freely affirming or negating or hating whatever confronts it ... The willing ego, when it says its highest manifestation, “*Amo, Volo ut sis*,” “I love you; I want you to be”—and not “I want to have you” or “I want to rule you”—shows itself capable of the same kind of love with which supposedly God loves men, whom he created only because he willed them to exist and whom He *loves without desiring them*.¹⁶

In this passage, Arendt refers to the Augustinian maxim, “*Amo, Volu ut sis*,” to convey her own conception of the highest form of love of which human beings are capable. What I find most interesting in Arendt’s formulation is the manner in which it conjoins activity to receptivity: the highest

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 367.

¹⁵ See Warren Zev Harvey, “Albo on the Reasonlessness of True Love,” *Iyyun, the Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (January 2000): 84: “By stating that passionate love is ‘due solely to the will of the lover,’ Albo means that it is not cognitive, but conative; it expresses the lover’s pure will, undetermined by reasons.”

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), vol. 2, 136.

manifestation of the willing ego is the *active acceptance* of another's existence, even if the other's existence unfolds in unpredictable ways over time. Might Arendt's formulation help us understand Albo's definition of *hesheq* as a form of love that expresses the lover's pure will? Lastly, if we agree that *hesheq* represents the love of the lovers in Song of Songs, how can we understand it both as the form of love that expresses God's love of Israel—a form of love that does not depend upon any specific quality of the beloved, but which is the expression of a true choice—and as the form of love that expresses our love of God? In other words: Is our love of God also the highest manifestation of our pure will? Is our love of God also an unconditional and absolutely free choice?

WZH: Yes, Hannah Arendt's definition of love is similar to Albo's. To say "*Amo, Volo ut sis*" to one's beloved is to say: I love you for your being you, not for what you can do for me. I love you for no reason except that you are you. "Love," Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*, is "unworldly."¹⁷ What does she mean by this strange statement? She means, I think, just what Albo meant when he said that true love is "reasonless." Love cannot be explained by physical or material facts, e.g., the height or weight of the beloved, the color of his or her eyes, or his or her labor or art. It cannot be reduced to the physical or the material. Love is not concerned with *what* the beloved is, but with *who* he or she is. The two lovers, Arendt writes, are *outside* the world. They are able to unite as one, contrary to the laws of physics, precisely because *as lovers* they are *outside* the physical world. There is nothing in-between the united lovers—except for the child. The child brings the lovers back into the world, for the child is in the world. The child, writes Arendt, is "the only possible happy ending of a love affair." This is what she called "the miracle of natality." The miracle is that the worldly is born of the unworldly. It is sad that Arendt, who so deeply understood the secrets of love and natality, had no children. Like Handel, she cherished the prophetic words, "A child is born unto us!" (Isa. 9:5). If Heidegger's philosophy was a philosophy of death, hers is a philosophy of birth—and birth follows from love. At the beginning of *The Human Condition*, she says that readers of the Bible can be divided into two groups: those who prefer Genesis 1:27, "God created them male and female" and those who prefer Genesis 2:7, "God made man."¹⁸ Here Arendt parts company from her admired Augustine and affirms the verse of human love and solidarity: *God created them male and female*.

You pose a profound theological question, Karin, when you ask whether the true love (*hesheq*) for God is reasonless. Albo held that God's love for the people of Israel is clearly reasonless, for we are stiff-necked and

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5:33–34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:1.

undeserving. What reason could God or anyone have for loving us? Albo, however, does not raise your question about *our* love for God. Is it possible that it too is reasonless? If we were to confront Albo with this question, he might reply as follows. God created a nasty world full of suffering and misery—a world of murders, rapes, diseases, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Albo himself, as a young boy, witnessed the massacres of 1391 in Spain, in which thousands of Jews were murdered. One might think that the God who created this cruel world does not deserve to be loved, and if we nonetheless love God, then our love for God is no less reasonless than God's love for us.

One *might* think that. Maimonides, however, did not. He held that the love for God is based on good reasons. If one studies God's universe, he taught, one is overwhelmed by God's infinite and sublime wisdom, and lusts to understand it, and this lust is the love of God. The love of God, according to him, is not based primarily on the study of history, which reveals human cruelty and stupidity, but on the study of the natural sciences, which reveals divine wisdom. This lust of the scientist to understand the universe is, in Maimonides' view, the most powerful and passionate of all loves. Maimonides boldly compared the intellectual love of God with the most intense sexual love.¹⁹ Both loves, he wrote, are totally ravishing. Just as the "love-sick" human lover has his or her beloved in mind in every act, every motion, and every thought, whether when sitting in one's room, walking down the street, getting up in the morning, or going to sleep at night; so the Bible commands us to love God with a totally ravishing love, "when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (Deut. 5:7). The love of God, Maimonides tells us, is no less ravishing than the erotic love between a man and a woman, but "even more so." Moreover, since the love of God, according to Maimonides, includes all other loves, it also includes the erotic love between a man and a woman. Sexual love has a theological dimension.

JLR: I would like to turn your attention to the question of whether or not love in Jewish thought is always particularistic, i.e., always the love of Israel for God or the love of God for Israel. You note, in your response to Alex's question, Maimonides' reluctance to attribute love, or at least *hesheq* and *ahava*, to God's relationship to human beings, although he uses these words to describe the human being's love for God. Yet for Maimonides, it is not sufficient for human beings to love God: their love for God must be rational, and come about specifically through the exercise of the rational faculty in the understanding of the law which God has given to man. Reason is not only necessary for the human being to love God properly, but that it is also necessary for the understanding and observance of *halakhah*, or Jewish law. To emphasize the role that reason plays in understanding the law, Maimonides

¹⁹ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*: Repentance, 10:3.

states that, “it is ... the doctrine of all of us ... that all the Laws have a cause.”²⁰ For the Jews, who are given divine law, the love of God involves obedience, preferably rational, to *halakha*. Does this mean that the love of God is different for Jews and non-Jews? To what extent is it possible in Jewish thought for the love of God to be conceptualized in the absence of *halakha*?

The inverse question seems to emerge when we look at God’s love for humankind as it is described in Moses’ valedictory address in Deuteronomy. Moses says: “It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set his heart on you [*hashaq Hashem bakhem*] and chose you [*va’yivhar bakhem*] but it was because the Lord favored [loved] you [*ki me’ahavat Hashem etkhem*]” (Deut. 7:7-8). If, for Maimonides, obedience to the divine Law was intimately related to Israel’s love for God, here the giving of the Law seems to be the expression of God’s love (*hesed*) for those who choose to accept it. Yet this suggests that God’s love is reserved for those who accepted the divine law at Sinai. Could you speak about some of the ways that Jewish philosophers and thinkers have addressed the question of Jewish particularism in relation to divine love? How might the concept of “chosenness,” both in terms of choosing and being chosen, allow for either particularistic or universalistic understandings of divine love in Jewish thought?

WZH: I’m happy, Jessica, that I can answer “no” to your question. Love in Jewish thought is definitely *not* always particularistic. In Maimonides’ authoritative definition of the biblical commandments to know and love God in the *Mishneh Torah*, Israel is not mentioned.²¹ It is the human being (*ha-adam*) who is commanded to know and love God. The knowledge and love of God are common to all human beings, according to Maimonides, and there is no difference between Jew and non-Jew. Similarly, Rabbi Judah Abrabanel’s magnificent book about love, the *Dialoghi d’Amore*, is a dialogue between a male philosopher, Philo, and a female philosopher, Sophia.²² They discuss the meaning of love between man and woman, between human beings and God, and between all things in heaven and earth. Love for Rabbi Judah Abrabanel is a universal principle that pervades the entire cosmos.

What about God’s love for Israel? Well, surely, it is true that according to the Bible God loves the Jewish people (Deut.7:7–8). However, He doesn’t love *only* them. As the Psalmist teaches, “the Lord is good to all and His tender mercies are over all his works” (Ps. 145:9). True, the Bible relates how God liberated the people of Israel from the house of bondage in Egypt. However, the Prophet admonishes us to remember that God is the

²⁰ Maimonides, *Guide*, 3:16.

²¹ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*: Foundations of the Torah, 1–4,

²² Rabbi Judah Abrabanel, *Dialoghi d’Amore* (Roma: Antonio Blado d’Assola, 1535),

Liberator of *all* downtrodden peoples from slavery and oppression: “Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?” (Amos 9:7). Yes, God loves Israel, and He also loves the Ethiopians, the Philistines, the Syrians, and other peoples. Spinoza well explains that God chose the Jews for national success in the Land of Israel at a particular time, and He has also chosen many other peoples for many other successes in different places and different times.²³

KN: I know that Alex, Jessica, and I would like to ask you many more questions connected to the issues that we have discussed. Yet we can save some of those questions for future conversations. In closing, let me thank you for accepting our invitation to be interviewed for the third issue of our journal, and thank you for accepting our invitation to come to Toronto and deliver the first annual “Toronto Journal of Jewish Thought Lecture.”

²³ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverstone and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ch. 3.

Bibliography

- Abrabanel, R. Judah. *Dialoghi d'Amore*. Roma: Antonio Blado d'Assola, 1535.
- Albo, Joseph. *Book of Principles*. Tel Aviv: Mah'barot Le'sifrot, 1950.
- . Translated and edited by I. Husik. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1929.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- . *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt, 1978.
- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated by W.D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924; reprinted 1953.
- Crescas, Hasdai. *Light of the Lord*. Jerusalem: Ramot, 1989.
- Gersonides. *Wars of the Lord*. Leipzig: Carl Lorck, 1866.
- Harvey, Warren Zev. "Albo on the Reasonlessness of True Love." *Iyyun, the Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (January 2000): 83-86.
- . *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas*. Amsterdam: Gieben, 1998.
- Maimonides. *Mishne Torah*. Jerusalem: Frankel, 1975-2001.
- . *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated by R. Joseph Kafih. Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1977.
- . Translated by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*, Translated by H. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.
- Spinoza. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol.1: Ethics. Translated by Edwin Curly. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

———. *Theological-Political Treatise*. Edited by Jonathan Israel, translated by Michael Silverstone and Jonathan Israel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.