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### A Covenantal Love

With an everlasting love You have loved the  
House of Israel Your people.  
Torah and commandments, decrees and laws  
You have taught us.

*Evening Prayer Service*

*F*or many, one of the most familiar passages in the Bible is the first part of the three-paragraph affirmation known, after its first Hebrew word, as the Shema:<sup>1</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

<sup>5</sup>You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. <sup>6</sup>Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day.

<sup>7</sup>Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup>Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead;

<sup>9</sup>inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4–9)<sup>2</sup>

In the traditional Jewish liturgy, the Shema is a critical component of the morning and evening service every day, without exception. Why was it considered so important?

Because, as the rabbis of the Talmudic period conceived it, reciting the Shema was an efficacious deed: it was the act of “accepting the yoke of the kingship of Heaven” (*m. Berakhot* 2:2). “Heaven” being a common rabbinic euphemism for “God,” the Shema is thus thought to reenact the Jew’s acclamation of God as the ultimate sovereign, and of human beings as subjects living in his realm and devoted to his service. In the words of one Talmudic authority, by reciting the Shema, one has “made him king above, below, and to all four corners of the universe” (*b. Berakhot* 13b).<sup>3</sup>

In rabbinic theology, of course, God is king whether one accepts his reign or not: among human beings, however, his kingship is fragile and easily defied. Unless the commitment to it is reaffirmed regularly, divine kingship fades and eventually vanishes from the mind. What is more, to the rabbis the reaffirmation must be verbal and not merely mental; it requires a ritual action and not merely a thought. So readily available is the sin of “casting off the yoke” (as they called it) that it must be parried continually, at least twice every day. Through the Shema, just as its first verse (Deut 6:4) implies, the people Israel (the Jews) heed the commandment to proclaim that the LORD, and he alone, is their God. “The LORD” is not quite a synonym for “God” in Biblical Hebrew. Rather, it is a rendering of the unpronounceable four-letter *proper name* of the God of Israel. He, and no other deity, is Israel’s God.

But what are we to make of the next verse, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:5)? One might think that it expresses only an option (though the ideal option), but not an obligation. For how can an emotion be commanded? How can we be required to generate a feeling within ourselves? And yet the rabbinic tradition regards this verse as a separate obligation, listing it as one of the 613 commandments it finds in the Torah. This, in turn,

raises the question of just how to fulfill this commandment. What must we do in order to love God?

Other questions, too, arise from this seemingly straightforward verse. What is the connection to the affirmation that immediately precedes it? What, that is, links Israel's acclamation of God's unique claim upon them to their obligation (not simply their aspiration) to love God? And if, as the rabbis maintained, the Shema is about the kingship of the God of Israel, how is love linked to kingship? Granted, one must serve and respect one's king, but must one also *love* him?

## LOVE AND SERVICE

Fortunately, the Bible presents several parallels to the wording found in Deuteronomy 6:4–5. Consider this one, from King Solomon's speech on the dedication of the temple:

O LORD God of Israel, in the heavens above and on the earth below there is no god like You, who keep Your gracious covenant with Your servants when they walk before You in wholehearted devotion. (1 Kgs 8:23)

The first half of this verse, with its affirmation of the uniqueness of the LORD, the God of Israel, immediately recalls Deuteronomy 6:4 ("Hear, O Israel"). In this instance, Israel is not the addressee but the speaker, professing to the LORD just what the Shema, in fact, expects them to believe. The second half of 1 Kings 8:23, however, speaks of Israel as living in covenant with the LORD, whom they serve "in wholehearted devotion," or, more literally, "with all their heart" (*bekhol-libbam*). This last expression recalls the commandment in Deuteronomy 6:5 to love the LORD "with all your heart" (*bekhol levavekha*). It would seem, then, that the two halves of 1 Kings 8:23 stand in a relation

similar to that of Deuteronomy 6:4 and 6:5. The outstanding difference, of course, is that the verse in 1 Kings says nothing about the love of God.

Or so it seems. For another passage, speaking in very similar language, mentions the love of God (that is, the love people have for God) explicitly:

<sup>9</sup>Know, therefore, that only the LORD your God is God, the steadfast God who keeps His covenant faithfully to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His commandments, <sup>10</sup>but who instantly requites with destruction those who reject Him—never slow with those who reject Him, but requiting them instantly. (Deut 7:9–10)

In these verses, too, we hear of the LORD's faithfulness in covenant, as in the verse from 1 Kings. What is different is this: whereas 1 Kings reads "[You] keep Your gracious covenant with Your servants (*'avadekha*)," Deuteronomy 7:9 speaks of his "keep[ing] His covenant faithfully to the thousandth generation of those who love Him (*'ohavav*) and keep His commandments." One text speaks of servants; the other, of lovers. "Those who love [the LORD]," it would seem, are synonymous with those who "keep His commandments," that is to say, with his "servants."

If we put all this together, we come up with an identification of the love of God with the performance of his commandments. Love, so understood, is not an emotion, not a feeling, but a cover term for acts of obedient service.<sup>4</sup> And if we apply this insight to the opening of the Shema, we can say that Deuteronomy 6:5, with its demand of undivided love, simply states the logical implication of the previous verse, with its reminder to Israel that the LORD alone is their God.

But there is something that this deceptively simple formulation does not explain. Why must the love be undivided? Surely, love, even understood as service, is eminently

divisible. A father and a mother can love all their children, and the children, in turn, can love both parents, without having to choose. An employee can have two jobs, work at each, and serve each employer with equal devotion and no conflict. Love, in other words, is not a zero-sum proposition. Indeed, in the modern world, it is not easy to think of a relationship in which either love or service (for we moderns tend to separate them) is expected to be absolute and unqualified.

Perhaps the first candidate to come to mind is one that has, happily, vanished from modern societies—the relationship of slave to master. But even that relationship, most would say, is one of service only and not of love. For the institution of slavery hardly seems to reflect or promote love, either of the slave for the master or of the master for the slave. Whatever the personal relationship between the two individuals may happen to be, the institutional dynamics seem to us to sacrifice love to service. And yet the Bible can identify love and servitude and even use the same Hebrew word (*‘eved*) to refer to the loving “servant” of God as well as to the miserable “slave.” Could it be that in reality the love of the LORD demanded by the Shema amounts to nothing more than the degrading and dehumanizing service of a person in bondage? And if not, how shall we conceive an arrangement in which love and service work in tandem, not in opposition, and can even be synonymous?

### But What Is a “Covenant”?

To address this question, we must now pay close attention to a key word in both Deuteronomy 7:9 and 1 Kings 8:23 that we have passed over, namely, “covenant” (Hebrew, *berit*).

In the Bible, for the most part, a covenant is a kind of treaty; it establishes or formalizes a relationship and spells out the obligations. A good case study is 1 Kings 5:15–26,

which tells of a covenant between Solomon, king of Judah and Israel, and King Hiram of Tyre. The arrangement with the young Solomon continues one that his father David had maintained, “for Hiram had always been a friend of David” (v. 15). It is noteworthy that the word for “friend” here (*’ohev*) derives from the root used to translate the verb “you shall love” in the Shema. The point, though, is not that David and Hiram felt any special affection for each other but rather that the two rulers stood in a mutually beneficial and cooperative relationship.

At the end of this account of Solomon’s covenant making, our text employs the term *šalom* to describe the relationship that Solomon, in turn, has established with Hiram through the covenant between the two of them. Although some translations render the word as “peace,” a sense it often has, here the English term “friendship” is preferable. There is no reason to think the two kings would have been at war without the covenant, for there had been no hostilities beforehand. What the covenant does, rather, is to continue and renew a relationship of goodwill and mutual service: Hiram will provide the cypress and cedar logs for Solomon’s projected temple, and Solomon will provide Hiram with wheat and oil on an annual basis (vv. 22–25).

If we extrapolate from this example to the “gracious covenant” that the LORD established with Israel (1 Kgs 8:23), we see that the operative framework assumes a kind of service that is far from slavery. It is, rather, a relationship of service founded not in conquest and subjugation but in good relations and mutual benefit. We can go further. Since covenant in the ancient Near East is usually a relationship between kings, Israel’s status is best seen not as that of a slave but more like that of a regal figure. Indeed, when the LORD promises Israel at Sinai that if they keep the covenant, they “shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6), “kingdom” there may well refer not to the regime but to the people, understood collectively as a

royal and sacral body.<sup>5</sup> All Israel can stand, in other words, in the position of a regal figure faithfully serving his own covenantal lord—a king, not a slave.

Because Deuteronomy is the biblical book of the love of God par excellence, much of our discussion in this chapter will focus on it and its resonances elsewhere in the Bible. It is also, not coincidentally, the book in which the first paragraph of the Shema appears. William L. Moran, who first explored the love of God in Deuteronomy in light of other ancient Near Eastern literature, lays out the behavioral implications:

Love in Deuteronomy is a love that can be commanded.... Above all, it is a love which must be expressed in loyalty, in service, and in unqualified obedience to the demands of the Law. For to love God is, in answer to a unique claim (6:4), to be loyal to him (11:1, 22; 30:20), to walk in his ways (10:12; 11:22; 19:9; 30:16), to keep his commandments (10:12; 11:1, 22; 19:9), to do them (11:22; 19:9), to heed them or his voice (11:13; 30:16), to serve him (10:12; 11:1, 13). It is, in brief, a love defined by and pledged in the covenant—a covenantal love.<sup>6</sup>

This notion of a covenantal love accounts as well for that odd indivisibility of affections to which we drew attention: Why must Israel serve the LORD alone and with all their heart? To answer that key question, we must distinguish between two types of covenant.

In the case of Solomon and Hiram, the covenant is between equals—neither king is the other king's lord—and the language that Moran identifies in connection with the love of God in Deuteronomy, the language, that is, of loyalty, service, and obedience, is absent. But the ancient Near Eastern world offers us another type of covenant, a covenant in which one party—the more powerful—is the suzerain (to use the less than ideal terminology of European feudalism) and the other is his vassal. In a letter of

one Mesopotamian king to another from the eighteenth century BCE, for example, the writer avows that he is the servant and “friend” of the recipient.<sup>7</sup> Here, too, the Akkadian word, like Hebrew *’ohev*, derives from a verb that means “to love,” and here again, service and love, so understood, are not at odds but in deep harmony.

Closer to ancient Israel in time and space is an extraordinary set of letters to the king of Egypt sent by beleaguered rulers of Canaanite city-states early in the fourteenth century BCE. In one of these letters, Rib-Hadda, the king of Byblos (a site now on the Lebanese coast), pleading with his lord to send reinforcements, asks, “Who will love if I die?”<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, in another letter to the pharaoh, the same Canaanite king describes his own subjects as “those who love me.”<sup>9</sup> Hoping the pharaoh can rescue him from the insurrection he faces, he pleads, “Half of [the city] loves the sons of ‘Abdi-Aširta [the ringleader of the rebellion], and half of it [loves] my lord.”<sup>10</sup>

Here, too, the love in question, though it may possibly reflect the subjects’ actual attitude, is a matter not of sentiment but of loyalty and readiness to serve. In the context of covenant, the alternative to love is not neutrality but rebellion. The divided heart of Rib-Hadda’s city is a dagger aimed at the very existence of the covenantal relationship.

Still another example, this one from the seventh century BCE, is especially apposite, and for four reasons. The first is that it comes from the period in which much biblical literature was taking shape—from the century, in fact, in which most historians think Deuteronomy itself was composed. Another reason is that it is in the name of an Assyrian emperor, and the language of the Assyrian vassal treaties finds especially rich resonance in the Bible in general and Deuteronomy in particular. The third is that this particular text is itself a covenant. But the most potent reason is that the love of the suzerain here is not simply presupposed or alluded to, as in the previous examples

we have examined, but instead, as in the Shema, it is commanded.

The emperor Esarhaddon, seeking to ensure that after his death his vassals remain loyal to his son and successor, Assurbanipal, phrases the key stipulation thus: “You will love as yourselves Assurbanipal.”<sup>11</sup> The analogy to Deuteronomy 6:5 is patent. In this case, were the vassals to divide their love between Assurbanipal and other suzerains—other aspiring emperors seeking to build up alliances that could threaten and eventually subjugate Assyria—then the whole point of the arrangement would be defeated.

In a related text, we find an oath that Assurbanipal, facing a revolt by his own brother, imposes on his vassals and government officials: “the king of Assyria, our lord,” they are to swear, “we will love.”<sup>12</sup> Here, too, as in the case of the Canaanite king six centuries earlier, the failure to love the suzerain means the disintegration of the alliance. The covenant requires love, and the suzerainty covenant requires exclusive love. In a covenant text from the fourteenth century BCE, a Hittite emperor puts it forthrightly to his vassal: “Do not turn your eyes to anyone else! Your fathers presented tribute to Egypt; you [shall not do that!].”<sup>13</sup>

In the case of the Shema, the suzerain who demands undivided love is not a mortal emperor but the LORD, Israel’s God, and the threat to the covenant comes not from aspiring rulers but from other gods and the very real temptation to worship them. Underlying these differences is a momentous shift from the world of diplomacy to that of theology. Now covenant is not only an instrument of statecraft between rulers but also the defining metaphor (or perhaps more than a metaphor) for the relationship of God and his people.

So far, we lack strong analogues for this shift from elsewhere in the ancient Near Eastern world.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not any come along, the shift itself is surely of the greatest importance for understanding the love of God in the Bible,

as well as Jewish (and Christian) theology more generally, including political theology. That no human ruler can claim the same degree of allegiance that God claims; that God's kingship or suzerainty relativizes all human regimes; that all human political arrangements, even the most just and humane, fall short of the kingdom of God: these are ideas that have reverberated over the centuries and into our own time.

### A Jealous God?

The exclusive or undivided love that the LORD demands of his people Israel is also, however, the source of what many today find to be one of the most problematic concepts in the Bible: the description of the LORD as “a jealous God” (Exod 20:5). Jealousy is such a base attribute that it is hard for many to respect a theological tradition that ascribes it to God, and we should therefore not be surprised to find that translators and commentators alike have long sought to deflect the criticism elicited by the Hebrew phrase *’el qanna’*. The NJPS *Tanakh*, for example, renders the expression as “an impassioned God,” and a Talmudic authority from the early third century CE glosses the phrase to mean, “I am jealousy’s God: I rule over jealousy, but jealousy does not rule over me” (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Išmael, Bahodeš* 6).

This rabbinic interpretation protects God’s sovereignty: he is not the victim of his jealousy, as we mortals are of ours, but can, as it were, turn it on and off at will. But even this leaves open the question of why he would ever want to turn it on, and with such fearsome intensity. As a Hindu student once asked me, “Why is God so jealous?”

The answer is that God’s jealousy is a response to baseless and fraudulent claims by others upon things that belong to him alone. It is analogous to the response of the victim of identity theft or adultery. (In chapter 3, we shall

explore the marital metaphor for covenant in the Bible.) Were the victim to keep silent or to grant instantaneous forgiveness, the fraud and deceit would only grow, with devastating consequences for all involved. The jealousy of the injured spouse and the anger of the person whose identity has been stolen are measures of the damage done. In the thinking that underlies the Decalogue, the “other gods” (Exod 20:3) of whom the LORD is jealous are impostors or counterfeits.<sup>15</sup> They are not the true source of Israel’s high status; it was not they who took the nation “out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage” (Exod 20:2). To allow them the position rightly held by him alone is to debase the currency of his relationship with Israel. To allow other lords into the same relationship is to ensure that it will no longer be, in fact, the same relationship. Some things can, and should, be shared. Others simply cannot.

If we are to employ the term “monotheism,” long used to describe Judaism, the only meaning the term can have within the specific context of covenant is in reference to this rigorous exclusivity of relationship. The key issue in covenantal theology is not the number of gods; texts can easily be found in the Hebrew Bible that mention other deities without implying their nonexistence. The issue is, as it were, political rather than philosophical. It has to do with loyalty and service, not with the nature of being.

To be sure, even within the Bible, there is plentiful evidence of another way of envisaging monotheism. This one speaks of the LORD’s incomparability and of his unsurpassable power: the other deities, having been bested in combat, have proven not to be deities at all in the same sense as he.<sup>16</sup> Whereas the idiom of covenant speaks of the unique relationship of the LORD and the people Israel, the idiom of incomparability has a more universal focus, in fact, a cosmic one. “For the LORD is a great God,” it hymns, “the great king of all divine beings” (Ps 95:3).

But we need not choose between the particularistic and the universal idioms of biblical monotheism. Indeed, sometimes they occur together:

<sup>5</sup>Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, <sup>6</sup>but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exod 19:5–6)

It is precisely because all the earth and the peoples on it are the LORD's that his relationship with Israel appears special and unique. Were he but their tribal deity, powerless outside their borders, his singling them out to be his priestly kingdom and holy nation would be unremarkable. The universal scope of his realm makes his special covenantal relationship with Israel all the more significant.

God's jealousy does not, however, imply that Israelites are prohibited from loving anyone or anything else. In fact, this is very much not the case.

In the theology of the Jewish Bible, and in Jewish theology more generally, the love of God is not set at odds with all other loves—only, that is, with those that infringe upon Israel's relationship with him.<sup>17</sup> In the case of the Shema, the demand to love the LORD with all one's heart in no way implies that Israelites are not to love anyone else

or that doing so is a tragic, unfulfilled act. Deuteronomy itself commands its hearers to “love the resident alien” (10:19),<sup>18</sup> as does Leviticus (19:34). And, as often noted, the outstanding Talmudic figure Rabbi Akiva, in a passage properly adduced as a parallel to passages in the Gospels about the love of the neighbor, identified “Love your fellow as yourself” (Lev 19:18) as the “great rule of the Torah.”<sup>19</sup> In the cov-

Hillel said: Be among the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving humanity and bringing them near to the Torah.

*Mishnah*<sup>20</sup>

enantal understanding of the love of God, nothing implies that the faithful and wholeheartedly devoted Israelite cannot love people or things, even passionately. The love at issue here is a quasi-political—or, to be more precise, a theopolitical—allegiance. It is a love that becomes real and attains social force in acts of service and homage.

## Law and Covenant

And what are the acts through which the covenantal love of God is fulfilled in the Hebrew Bible?

Positively, the covenantal love of God means heeding the LORD's commandments and walking in his ways. Negatively, it means scrupulously avoiding actions that signal disloyalty: sacrificing to, or invoking the name of, another god, for example; imitating the modes of worship of the idolatrous Canaanites; or following a prophet or family member who urges the worship of another god.<sup>21</sup> These negative commandments, the behaviors that an Israelite lover of the LORD must avoid, are eminently familiar to scholars of ancient Near Eastern treaties, for they are logical implications of the objective that such arrangements seek to secure—namely, the complete fidelity of the vassal and his wholehearted reliability as an ally.

In the case of the positive commandments (“thou shalt”), the matter is more complicated—and more revealing. For the structure of the Torah itself makes the norms of biblical law into stipulations of covenant. Thus, between Exodus 19, in which the LORD offers Israel his covenant and they accept it (“All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” [v. 8]) and Exodus 24, in which the Sinai covenant is solemnly and ritually inaugurated, we find collections of *laws*. These not only include the Decalogue (Exod 20:2–14), which is given in direct address, as might befit an address from a suzerain to his vassal; they also include laws cast as cases (“When men quarrel and one strikes the other . . .”

[Exod 21:18]) and dealing with a host of matters that are not addressed in ancient Near Eastern covenants—slavery with all its regulations, a goring ox, theft, kidnapping, the mistreatment of the poor and vulnerable, and much else.

Those legal norms, of course, are in many instances paralleled in other collections of law, especially those from Mesopotamia, sometimes strikingly so. What is not paralleled there (as far as we currently can know) is the placement of law within a covenantal framework.

The change is momentous. It means that the observance even of humdrum matters of law has become an expression of personal faithfulness and loyalty in covenant. Even when the commanding voice of the lord in covenant is not explicit in their grammatical structure, laws have become commandments. Israelites trying to heed those commandments and walk in God's ways face a far larger and more encompassing task than that facing a minor ancient Near Eastern king trying to maintain faithfulness to the emperor with whom he is in covenant and whom he is commanded to love.

Another way to say this, however, is that the Israelites' opportunities to demonstrate their love for the LORD are vastly more numerous, effectively encompassing the whole of their communal life. Good deeds become acts of personal fidelity, faithfulness to the personal God, and not simply the right things to do within some supposedly universal code of ethics (though they may be that as well). Conversely, bad deeds become acts of betrayal, akin (as we shall see in chapter 3) to adultery. They are not simply morally wrong in the abstract: they wrong the divine covenant partner.

What is more, some deeds are commanded or forbidden simply because such is the will of God and violating his will impairs the personal relationship between the parties in covenant; whether there is some moral logic behind his decree is, in this case, beside the point. Rabbinic tradi-

tion thus offers a startling interpretation of a common biblical word for “law” (*hoq* or *huqqah*): the rabbis tend to see it as a decree for which rational explanations are not knowable. The authority of a *hoq* lies solely in the fact that the LORD is Israel’s God, sovereign, and suzerain: “I, the LORD, have decreed it (*haqaqtiv*) and you have no right to criticize it” (*b. Yoma* 67a). Observance of such a law is dramatic evidence of the people Israel’s willing acceptance of their God’s covenantal lordship. Their relationship enables them to trust him even when they cannot comprehend his decrees.

A revealing midrash on the words “I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine” (Lev 20:26) points to a psychological implication of the covenantal ethic. It instructs Jews *not* to say that they are without any desire to practice what is prohibited to them, such as wearing garments of mixed linen and wool, eating pork, or engaging in forbidden sexual practices. Instead, they should say, “I do have the desire! But what can I do? My Father in Heaven has decreed it upon me” (*Siphra, Qedošim* 9:10). The key point, in other words, is not the preferences or values of the Jew but once again the will, however mysterious, of the covenantal lord. This is not to deny, of course, that some undergirding logic for the practices at issue may be found in a rationalist account of morality. Nor is it to deny that an explanation of seemingly bizarre practices can be readily located in the cultural code of the ancient society as an anthropologist might describe it. It is to say, however, that the Jew’s observance of the norms does not *depend* on such moralistic or social-scientific logic, but rather on the readiness of the beloved to carry out the will of the sovereign. The religious meaning of the practice is not exhausted by the values implicit in it or the social or cultural situation that called it forth. Values can exist outside a covenantal framework. In the biblical thinking, mitzvot cannot. Even when historical change has caused the underlying

He said to them: By your lives! No corpse has the power to contaminate, and no water has the power to purify. Rather, this is a decree of the Holy One (blessed be He!).

*Midrash*<sup>22</sup>

explanation for a norm, a mitzvah, to be forgotten, the covenantal theology can keep the norm alive—and meaningful.

In this context, the term “law,” often used as a synonym for Torah, can be dangerously misleading. In the modern Western world, law mostly defines a realm of freedom: my right to swing my arm ends at my neighbor’s nose. To put it another way, we tend to prioritize rights over duties. We

have some duties to the state (for example, paying taxes), but mostly our duties are derived from the guiding obligation not to infringe on the rights of others. In the Bible, by contrast, both positive and negative actions are *commanded*; “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” are both in plentiful evidence. Simply staying out of the way of others, practicing an ethic of “live and let live,” does not suffice. The king must be served; the lord in covenant must be loved. And that love must be enacted in deeds—not only good deeds in general (indispensable though they are) but the specific deeds that he commands.

The point is made pithily in a Talmudic saying: “Greater is he who has been commanded and does the deed than he who has not been commanded and does the deed” (*b. Bava Qamma* 38a). The same act, in other words, assumes greater importance—and accrues greater merit—when done in obedience to a divine directive and not simply in response to one’s own inner promptings. A good deed is surely precious, but in the larger perspective it is not the same thing as a commandment (mitzvah), even when its content is the same. There is no substitute for the covenantal relationship between God and the people Israel; deeds performed outside that very special relationship are

of a different, and lesser, character from those performed within it.

## Love and Deeds

The notion of a love demonstrated through the observance of law, even law reconceived as personal commandment, will be disappointing to many today. For surely “love,” whatever constraints it imposes on behavior, is primarily and most importantly a matter of the heart. The term describes feelings, it will be said, and not merely norms (however admirable) dutifully but impassively observed. In the context of ancient covenants, in which we have placed the demand for the wholehearted love of the LORD in the Shema, “love” would seem to be merely a metaphor, and a most inadequate one at that.

We shall soon consider the question of whether covenantal love entails only deeds and not emotions. But now it would be useful to ask whether the definition of love as a set of actions is really so unusual—or so deficient.

About thirty years ago, the sociologist Francesca M. Cancian argued that the familiar restriction of love to the realm of feelings is a gender-biased phenomenon and one that is characteristic of certain distinctly modern developments. With the emergence of the market economy, she wrote, “Work became identified with what men do for money while love became identified with women’s activities at home. As a result, the conception of love shifted toward emphasizing tenderness, powerlessness, and the expression of emotion.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, in contemporary America,

We identify love with emotional expression and talking about feelings, aspects of love that women prefer and in which women tend to be more skilled than men. At the same time we often ignore the instrumental and physical

aspects of love that men prefer, such as providing help, sharing activities, and sex. This feminized perspective leads us to believe that women are much more capable of love than men and that the way to make relationships more loving is for men to become more like women.<sup>24</sup>

Alongside the gender bias, as Cancian saw it, there was also a difference in social class. “Among the general public, love is also defined primarily as expressing feelings and verbal disclosure, not as instrumental help,” she wrote. “This is especially true among the more affluent; poorer people are more likely than they to see practical help and financial assistance as a sign of love.”<sup>25</sup> In short, in Cancian’s thinking, at least in America at the time she wrote (global generalizations are dangerous), there are distinct male and female perceptions and styles of love, and to a significant degree they correlate with the lower and upper social classes, respectively.

It bears noting that Cancian was speaking as a social scientist and mostly about gender relations in the United States. Exceptions to her generalizations surely existed then, and the question of the reliability of generalizations about gender over the course of history is, again, fraught with problems and controversy. Whatever weaknesses one may detect in her typology, however, it does offer a striking parallel to the question of love and law that we have been exploring.

If we try to map covenantal love as it appears in the Torah onto this rough grid, we would have to say that “love” is not at all an inappropriate or inadequate term for the phenomenon that we have been describing, but the love in question is more like the perception held (according to Cancian) by men and poorer people than like the characteristic perception held by women and the more affluent. In particular, Cancian’s term “instrumental help” seems a

very apt way of epitomizing the relationship of the suzerain and the vassal in covenant. At the core of that relationship stand the duties of the two parties, manifested principally in the material assistance they provide to each other. Strikingly, when Cancian writes of her subjects, “The men actually saw instrumental actions as affection,”<sup>26</sup> she could just as easily be characterizing the semantic question of how the Torah, and its ancient Near Eastern antecedents and parallels, could have described the performance of duties as love. The answer is that these sources held a concept of love that was more outward, action-oriented, and practical than the one that has come to dominate modern Western culture.

But, in truth, this sort of love is also not so unfamiliar, even in modern societies, as may at first seem the case. Our discussion has been focusing on romantic love, and it is in the context of romantic love that the factors of emotions and their expression come to the fore. In that context, a love focused on acts of service with little or no affective language would generally seem lacking (though, if Cancian is right, more so to women than to men and more so to the affluent than to the poor). But what if we were instead to speak of the love of parents and their children? In that case, it seems to me, we are more likely to speak of actions than affects. A mother and a father work extra hours to put their children through school, to pay for music lessons, or for orthodontia; parents of a rebellious and unruly adolescent quietly endure the provocations, responding as seems appropriate to the situation at hand but never simply walking away from their own child. For their part, children take on extra responsibilities around the house or a part-time job to help a disabled parent; adult children assume special burdens to assure that their aging parents are receiving good care and dwelling in appropriate quarters. In all these cases, is it not reasonable to infer

a relationship of love from the practices themselves, even in the near or total absence of verbal expressions of affection or of kisses and hugs?

Lest this analogy to the relationship of the LORD and his people Israel seem far-fetched, it is worthy of note that the metaphor of father and son, unlike that of husband and wife amply attested in the prophets (as we shall see in chapter 3), is very much present in Deuteronomy, the book containing the Shema and its commandment to “love the LORD your God with all your heart” (6:5; 11:13).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, a good argument has been advanced that the very expression with which the Shema opens, “Hear, O Israel!” (Deut 6:4), reflects a setting of parental instruction, as in these verses from Proverbs:<sup>28</sup>

My son, hear (*šema*‘) the discipline of your father  
And do not forsake the instruction of your mother.  
(Prov 1:8)<sup>29</sup>

My son, listen to my wisdom;  
Incline your ear to my insight. (Prov 5:1)

So now, sons, pay heed (*šim*‘*u*) to me,  
And do not swerve from the words of my mouth.  
(Prov 5:7)

Now, sons, listen (*šim*‘*u*) to me;  
Pay attention to my words. (Prov 7:24)

Listen (*šema*‘), my son, and get wisdom;  
Lead your mind in a (proper) path. (Prov 23:19)

None of these verses mentions the covenant of God and Israel. That subject is altogether absent from the book of Proverbs, whose focus is on universal norms and not on historical narrative. Yet Deuteronomy, too, employs the situation of a father disciplining his son in describing the relationship of the LORD and Israel in the difficult years of the wandering in the desert between the Exodus and

Moses's final address (which Deuteronomy purports to be) and in urging that the commandments be kept:

<sup>5</sup>Bear in mind that the LORD your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son. <sup>6</sup>Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God: walk in His ways and revere Him. (Deut 8:5–6)

Here, we do not find the language of love, to be sure, but we do find a father's instruction connected with the covenantal norms. Should we assume that those norms have no connection, in turn, with love?<sup>30</sup> Would it not be more reasonable to assume that (like the covenantal norms) the LORD's discipline is itself an expression of love—not romantic but parental love? For the latter is the kind of love that in ancient Israelite culture, as in our own, is characterized more by the actions it prompts than by words or gestures. Like covenantal love, it is a love that entails service.

## ACTION AND AFFECTION

I have been focusing on service as the key element in the biblical love of God for two reasons. The first is that the language of service is ubiquitous in connection with covenant, and covenant is exactly the context in which the love of God most often occurs in the Bible. The second is that the full strangeness of the biblical concept must be faced early on, lest one imagine that the love of God in the Bible (and in Judaism generally) is primarily a matter of emotion, a subjective phenomenon confined to the individual psyche. As we have just seen, in the modern West the assumption that love is a feeling is dominant. In my own teaching, I have found that when I ask my students (who are mostly in their twenties) what love is, they not only focus on feelings but also think only of romantic love. The love of parents for children, and vice versa, does not come

to their minds so readily. Even the love of country very rarely occurs to them. The modern interpretation of love as essentially erotic has left them with scant resources with which to understand the love of vassals for their lords.

Now that we have set forth the nature of covenantal love—and its inextricable association with service to the suzerain through obedience to his stipulations—we must ask whether there is nonetheless an affective dimension lurking there as well. This is not to retract any of the points made above: I am not speaking of affect in place of service, or love in place of law. I am asking whether some element of feeling is also entailed in Israel's covenantal love of the LORD as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>31</sup>

The nature of the evidence makes it difficult to give an answer. So thoroughly associated with norms of behavior is covenantal love that one might argue that they altogether exhaust its meaning in the covenantal context—in other words, that “love” in this context is a term of art for the proper behavior of a vassal, and nothing more. Such an argument is hard to refute, since it is easier to know what people say than what they feel, and in the case of the Bible, we have no way of finding out what feeling may lie behind the texts. Still, there are reasons to think that the equation of love with covenantal service alone is extreme.

One such reason has to do with the origins of covenant itself. We have been focusing on covenant as an instrument of diplomacy, and specifically as a binding agreement between an emperor and a lesser king. Especially in Deuteronomy but also throughout the Bible, the influence of these international treaties is strikingly present,<sup>32</sup> and, not surprisingly, the discovery and study of ancient Near Eastern treaties have proven enormously productive for our understanding of the biblical variant.

But covenant does not *originate* in international diplomacy. Instead, it borrows much of its character and force from something more primal: namely, from family rela-

tions. “In tribal societies,” Frank Moore Cross writes, “there were legal mechanisms or devices—we might even say legal fictions—by which outsiders, non-kin, might be incorporated within the kinship group.” He adds, “Oath and covenant, in which the deity is witness, guarantor, or participant, is also a widespread legal means by which the duties and privileges of kinship may be extended to another individual or group, including aliens.”<sup>33</sup> So understood, covenant is like adoption or, for that matter, like conversion to Judaism: it makes the outsider a member of the family.

The resonances of this in the Bible are plentiful. When Ahaz, king of Judah in the eighth century BCE, accepts vassalage to the Assyrian emperor Tiglath-pileser III, he sends a message to the latter, saying, “I am your servant and your son; come and deliver me from the hands of the king of Aram and from the hands of the king of Israel, who are attacking me” (2 Kgs 16:7). Tiglath-pileser becomes the besieged king’s father, and Ahaz accepts the obligations of service, as a dutiful son would rightly be expected to do.

Whether Ahaz felt any affection toward his new father is much to be doubted. It is far more likely that he was simply seeking relief from the two kings who were trying to topple him.<sup>34</sup> But the fact remains that his vassalage is cast as sonship. This point alone, to revert to those verses from Proverbs cited above, casts doubt on any hard division between a suzerain imposing his stipulations on his covenant partners and a father giving instruction to his son. The mixture of the two situations that we found in the language of the Shema is more natural than we may at first think.

Still closer to the point is the arrangement that Jonathan, the son of King Saul, makes with David, the man who will eventually succeed his father on the throne:

<sup>12</sup>Then Jonathan said to David, “By the LORD, the God of Israel! I will sound out my father at this time tomorrow,

[or] on the third day; and if [his response] is favorable for David, I will send a message to you at once and disclose it to you. <sup>13</sup>But if my father intends to do you harm, may the LORD do thus to Jonathan and more if I do [not] disclose it to you and send you off to escape unharmed. May the LORD be with you, as He used to be with my father. <sup>14</sup>Nor shall you fail to show me the LORD's faithfulness, while I am alive; nor, when I am dead, <sup>15</sup>shall you ever discontinue your faithfulness to my house—even after the LORD has wiped out every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth. <sup>16</sup>Thus has Jonathan covenanted with the house of David; and may the LORD requite the enemies of David!" (1 Sam 20:12–16)<sup>35</sup>

Here, Jonathan undertakes to extend protection to David, quite conceivably saving his friend's very life from Saul's murderous rage.<sup>36</sup> More important for our purposes, this act of generosity on Jonathan's part serves as the prologue to a covenant that he makes not only with David but also with David's lineage to come.<sup>37</sup> The stipulation of this covenant is that David and his descendants shall forever show the same faithfulness to Jonathan's own descendants. The term rendered as "faithfulness" in verse 15 (Hebrew, *ḥesed*) is one that we have actually seen before. It appears as the second noun in the phrase in 1 Kings 8:23, rendered above as "gracious covenant" (*ha-berit veba-ḥesed*), and in Deuteronomy 7:9, where it describes the God "who keeps His covenant faithfully." The idiom seems to be a hendiadys, that is, the use of two words connected by "and" to convey a single idea: the idea of "covenant"/*ḥesed*.

I have left *ḥesed* untranslated here because it lacks a good English equivalent, and, depending on context, such words as "love," "kindness," "generosity," and "lovingkindness" can all render it appropriately. (The last term seems to have been coined in sixteenth-century England specifically for the purpose of translating *ḥesed*.)<sup>38</sup> The same term

appears in Jonathan's stipulation to David, "Nor shall you fail to show me the LORD's faithfulness" (1 Sam 20:14), of which the NJPS correctly notes that the reference is to "the faithfulness pledged in the covenant before the LORD." As often in the Bible, *hesed* and covenant implicate each other. Having done David an enormous favor, Jonathan seeks to perpetuate throughout the generations the relationship of kindness and mutual service that the two men have. The mechanism for this is a covenant solemnized in an oath in the presence of the LORD, who will presumably enforce it.

Now, it is possible that in so doing, Jonathan has no feelings for David at all. One could, I suppose, view the two as allies pursuing Machiavellian self-interest without any genuine friendship. (How Jonathan helps himself by saving David may be difficult to see at first, though if he thinks Saul will be among the enemies David destroys, one can understand why he would want to obligate David to spare both him and his descendants.) But the next verse casts strong doubt on such a Machiavellian reading:

<sup>17</sup>Jonathan, out of his love for David (*be 'ahavato 'oto*), adjured him again, for he loved him as himself (*'ahavat-naphšo 'ahevo*). <sup>18</sup>Jonathan said to him, . . . <sup>23</sup>"As for the promise we made to each other, may the LORD be [witness] between you and me forever." (1 Sam 20:17–18, 23)

The pronouns in verse 17 are, alas, ambiguous. Contrary to the translation above, the verse never names David, and this makes it unclear at the end just who is loving whom. In principle, one might therefore interpret the verse this way: "Jonathan, out of his (Jonathan's) love for him (David), adjured him (David) again, for he (David) loved him (Jonathan) as himself (David)." But, as one commentator has recently put it, "given the reciprocal nature of true love, the ambiguity does not matter."<sup>39</sup> The point that does matter is that love motivates the formation of the covenant between the two young men, and it is difficult to view "love"

here as simply a technical term for covenantal service and nothing more.

If we extrapolate from the covenant of David and Jonathan to that of the LORD and Israel—recognizing, of course, the obvious differences—it would seem likely that the language of the love of God in Deuteronomy, too, has an affective dimension and should not be seen as only a technical term for obedience in covenant. At its foundation, to use a spatial metaphor, lies an emotional bond (about which more later); or, to put the issue in temporal terms, at its origin, predating the actual offer of covenant, there was a close personal relationship, a relationship of *hesed*. Obedience to the stipulations of covenant—which, as we have seen, came to encompass all of Torah law—is essential to the continuing relationship, but those norms are not the sum total of the bond between God and Israel, and drily and austere observing them does not do justice to it. No choice between love and law need be made, for in this case love and law entail each other.

Once we recover the affective dimension that is essential to the observance of God’s law in this thinking, we can better understand a feature prominent in Deuteronomy in general and in the Shema in particular: namely, the insistence on regular verbal repetition and the importance of visible reminders of God’s commandments. Consider again these verses from the first paragraph of the Shema:

<sup>6</sup>Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. <sup>7</sup>Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup>Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; <sup>9</sup>inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:6–9)

The “instructions”—Hebrew, *devarim*, can just as easily be translated “words”—are not simply to be carried out;

robotic observance does not suffice. They must be taken to heart, impressed upon the next generation, routinely recited, and made visible, indeed conspicuous, to the eye. As one scholar puts it, “The love of [the LORD] is not a wordless ebullience, but rather a love capable of expression, a love in words that can be repeated, not in the manner of a prayer wheel but as the inner expression of a reciprocated love. Therefore the words, namely the following commandments and prohibitions, must be ‘on your heart’ (Deut 6:6)—on the place in human beings at which God primarily communicates.”<sup>40</sup> To be sure, in ancient Israelite culture the heart was often the seat of thinking rather than feeling, but even if that is the case here, the point stands that these verses demand more than acts of outward obedience: they demand an internalization of God’s words, a continual refortification of the will to obey or, if necessary, a reorientation of the wayward self around the God from whom it has strayed.

In its more pessimistic moments, biblical literature seems to doubt that human beings can bring about the necessary internalization or refortification on their own. To adapt a phrase of Kant’s, the timber of humanity is just too crooked to straighten itself out.<sup>41</sup> To get Israel back into the mode of covenantal service therefore requires nothing less than God’s own gracious intervention, an act of divine *hesed* that replaces their hardened disposition or, as some biblical texts put it, their “uncircumcised heart,” with an orientation that facilitates the love of him.<sup>42</sup> In the days to come, one such text tells us, God will enable Israel to love him, as they should have been doing all along:

<sup>6</sup>Then the LORD your God will open up your heart and the hearts of your offspring to love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul, in order that you may live.

<sup>7</sup>The LORD your God will inflict all those curses upon the enemies and foes who persecuted you. <sup>8</sup>You, however,

will again heed the LORD and obey all His commandments that I enjoin upon you this day. (Deut 30:6–8)

This passage envisages a situation in which the people Israel, exiled and downtrodden, return to God and begin to obey his commandments anew.<sup>43</sup> Thus does their restoration get under way—with the pain of divine punishment

<sup>26</sup>And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh; <sup>27</sup>and I will put My spirit into you. Thus I will cause you to follow My laws and faithfully to observe My rules. (Ezek 36:26–27)

and the self-examination and moral reform that it provokes. But the verses quoted above tell us that this is just the beginning of the new relationship. The restoration is consummated only when God enables Israel to love him as the Shema requires, with all their heart and soul. This process of humanly initiated repentance (brought about, though, by punishment for breach of covenant) and divine intervention into the recesses of the human heart reverses everything: now it is Israel's oppressors who are punished, and Israel who fully and wholeheartedly observe their liberator and suzerain's commandments.

As the chapter in Deuteronomy containing that vision of Israel's future unfolds, it becomes clear that the vision serves a present purpose as well: to induce them to observe God's Torah now, to do their part to make the eschatological vision a current reality. And here again, it is the ready availability of the revelation, its presence in words that can be recited and thus impressed upon the heart, that is the key point:

<sup>11</sup>Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. <sup>12</sup>It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart

it to us, that we may observe it?”<sup>13</sup> Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?”<sup>14</sup> No, the word is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Deut 30:11–14)<sup>44</sup>

God’s instruction, his commandment (*mitzvah*), is not an object, but a *word*. It is something that can be heard, recited, and internalized, made one’s own. It is not an occult teaching brought from another world by a mystical adept. It is nearby and ready to be practiced, if only the heart will be opened to love God and to do his will.

I have been arguing that the language of love in the covenantal context has resonances of both service and feeling. It is not, or not usually, a mere technical usage to indicate the service that the lesser partner in the covenant owes his superior, though that service is essential to the relationship and without it the love demanded by the covenant is absent. Rather, in part because covenant is based on a more primal type of relationship, one of kin, and draws on its idiom, the affective dimension of the language is no mere metaphor. One stream of biblical literature, the Deuteronomic (from which, it will be recalled, the first two paragraphs of the Shema are drawn),<sup>45</sup> places special emphasis upon the language of love and, not coincidentally, also upon the need for recitation and internalization of God’s commandments. It would be extreme to imagine that such internalization would not involve the emotions, and centrally so.

### Love and Fear

This usage of the love of God in the framework of covenant recalls another problematic term, “the fear of God.” The two ideas appear together in one especially memorable passage: (CONTINUED...)