

God's Beloved: A Defense of Chosenness

Meir Soloveichik

One of Judaism's central premises is that God has a unique love for the Jewish people, in the merit of its ancestor Abraham, whom God loved millennia ago. This notion may make many readers uncomfortable, as they may feel that a righteous God would love all human beings, and therefore all peoples, equally and in the same way. Nevertheless, the notion of God's special love for Israel must be stated and understood, for without it one cannot comprehend much that is unique about Judaism's moral vision.

There is no question that to speak of the Jews as a "chosen nation" is to speak of their being charged with a universal mission: Communicating the monotheistic idea and a set of moral ideals to humanity. In designating Israel as a "nation of kingly priests" and a "light unto nations,"¹ God, according to the medieval exegete Obadiah Seforno, commanded the Jews to "teach to the entire human race, so that they may call in the name of God, to serve him together."²

It is, however, often overlooked that the doctrine of Israel's chosenness also contains a strongly particularistic idea: That God chose the Jewish

people for this mission out of his love for their forefather Abraham. The book of Deuteronomy is unambiguous on this point:

To you it was shown, so that you might know that the Eternal, he is God; there is none else beside him... *And because he loved your fathers, therefore he chose their seed after them, and brought you out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt*; to drive out nations from before you, greater and mightier than you are, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day.³

The Tora later states that God's love for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was then bestowed upon their children:

The Eternal did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all peoples. *But because the Eternal loved you*, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, has the Eternal brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.⁴

God loves the Jewish people because they are, according to Seforno, "the children of his beloved."⁵ If the Jews are chosen to serve for all eternity as a light unto the nations, it is because God, in the words of the theologian Michael Wyschogrod, "sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved."⁶ This unique, preferential love that is bestowed upon Israel, even when it sins, is often depicted in the prophets as being familial in nature: When God describes in the book of Jeremiah how he sustains Israel in its exile, he says, "I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, in which they shall not stumble; for I am a father to Israel."⁷ The Jewish people also beholds God as a merciful mother: "As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you,"⁸ he assures Israel. So, too, in the book of Isaiah, does God respond to Israel's fear that "God

has left me and forgotten me” after the destruction of the First Temple by asking, “Can a woman forget her suckling child, refrain from mercy on the child of her womb?”⁹

Here a powerful contrast emerges between the respective scriptures of Judaism and Christianity. The God of the Hebrew Bible, while a benevolent ruler of all nations, is described as bestowing a preferential love upon Israel. Or, as Rabbi Akiva explains in the Ethics of the Fathers, every man is beloved, “for he was created in the image of God,” yet even more beloved is Israel, “for they are called the children of God, as it is written, ‘you are children to the Lord your God.’”¹⁰ The Gospels, on the other hand, do not focus on God’s love for Israel, and speak instead of a God whose love is universal: Jesus redeemed a sinful humanity, John informs us, “for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”¹¹ God’s loving election is now no longer focused on the children of Abraham, but on the world. Everyone, Jesus argued, may be counted among God’s elect: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”¹² Paul, in like manner, authors an epistle addressed to “all that be in Rome, *beloved of God*, called to be saints.” In God’s loving election, Paul argues, “there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek,” and all “are one in Christ Jesus.”¹³

This, then, is the debate that has divided Jews and Christians for two thousand years: Is God’s covenantal devotion universal or exclusive? The question relates not only to how we understand humanity’s religious obligations. The quality of God’s covenantal love is inextricably intertwined with the most profound questions about the kind of love that human beings are supposed to feel. The difference between the Jewish and Christian views about divine love, it will emerge, reflects a no less profound disagreement about what, exactly, it means to love.

II

Perhaps the most influential theologian to reflect on the nature of divine love in the past century was the Swedish thinker Anders Nygren. Nygren's central work, *Agape and Eros* (1953), begins by describing the different depictions of divine love found in Jewish and Christian Scripture; Nygren notes that while "in Judaism love is exclusive and particularistic," Christian love "overleaps all such limits; it is universal and all-embracing." In explaining the Christian perspective, Nygren contrasts human love, which he refers to as *eros*, with *agape*, the Greek word used by the New Testament to refer to God's love of man. A human being loves his beloved, according to Nygren, because he is drawn to some aspect of the beloved, something which he finds worth loving. God's *agape*, however, is "unmotivated"—that is, it is bestowed regardless of the beloved's worth and value. It is a love that demands nothing in response, no return on the emotional investment. Nor is it grounded in anything particular about the human being. Rather, God bestows love upon all humanity out of pure generosity. Unlike human love, Nygren concludes, God's love "has nothing to do with desire and longing."¹⁴

God's love is altogether spontaneous. It does not look for anything in man that could be adduced as motivation for it. In relation to man, divine love is "*unmotivated*." It is this love, spontaneous and "unmotivated"—having no motive outside itself, in the personal worth of men—which characterizes also the action of Jesus in seeking out the lost and consorting with "publicans and sinners" In Christ there is revealed a divine love which breaks all bounds, refusing to be controlled by the value of its object, and being determined only by its own intrinsic nature. According to Christianity, "motivated" love is human; spontaneous and "unmotivated" love is divine.¹⁵

In support of this assertion, Nygren points to the Christian obligation to love your enemies. In the Gospels, Jesus instructs his followers to love even the egregiously evil, for all human beings are equally loved by God:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.¹⁶

It is precisely because divine love is unmotivated, Nygren argues, that God's *agape* is bestowed upon saint and sinner alike. Thus God's love, as depicted by Jesus, makes no distinction between Hitler and Stalin, on the one hand, and Mother Teresa on the other. After all, Paul's doctrine of original sin depicts a wretched humanity mired in moral depravity, from which only Christ's death on the cross can extricate it. Paul argues that all human beings enter this world evil at heart, all are enemies of the Lord, and all are thoroughly unworthy of God's love—yet all are recipients of God's love, nevertheless.¹⁷

It is wrong, Nygren insists, to say that God loves the righteous *because* they are righteous. For God loves no one because of who he is; rather, he loves all *despite* who they are:

When God's love is shown to the righteous and godly, there is always the risk of our thinking that God loves the man on account of his righteousness and godliness. But this a denial of *agape*—as if God's love for the "righteous" were not just as unmotivated and spontaneous as his love for the sinner! As if there were any other divine love than spontaneous and unmotivated *agape*! It is only when all thought of the worthiness of the object is abandoned that we can understand what *agape* is.¹⁸

God, therefore, according to Nygren, cannot love humanity as human beings love each other. His love could not possibly be grounded in a specific, love-worthy aspect of his beloved. It is instead an ethereal, un-human, unmotivated love that God bestows upon humanity. “To the question, ‘Why does God love?’ there is only one right answer,” Nygren concludes: “Because it is his nature to love.”¹⁹

Judaism, in contrast, argues against such a sharp distinction between divine and human love. After all, man was created in the image of God; the way we love is a reflection of the way God loves. Thus, as with human love, God can desire to enter into a relationship with us; he can indeed be drawn to some aspect of our identity.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Bible’s depiction of God’s love for Abraham. God’s motivation in electing Abraham has long been subject to speculation. Some theologians, such as Wyschogrod, suggest that the Bible is deliberately obscure about God’s reasons for loving Abraham, for love is often unexplainable.²⁰ Yet traditional Jewish exegetes have argued that God states quite clearly why he loved Abraham, and why he chose him to found a righteous family:

And the Eternal said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do— seeing that Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Eternal, to do what is just and right; that the Eternal may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him.²¹

It was precisely, then, because of Abraham’s love of “what is just and right,” and his desire to communicate these principles to his children, that God chose him to father a nation that would communicate these principles to the world. The medieval commentator Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi) argues that in these verses, God is not merely explaining why he chose Abraham, but why he longs for and is drawn to him:

For I know him: A loving phrase, such as “known to her husband,” “does not Boaz know us,” “and I shall know you by name,” and the essential meaning is one of knowing, for one who loves a person draws him near and knows him and recognizes him. [God thus says:] And why do I [draw Abraham close] to know him? Because he commands his children regarding me to keep my ways.²²

This, then, is the Jewish understanding of Abraham’s election: God fell in love with Abraham because he loved Abraham’s desire to found a faithful and righteous family. God was drawn to Abraham’s character and his hopes for the future. Most importantly, God *desired* to enter into a covenantal relationship with Abraham—to make Abraham’s family his own family, Abraham’s dream his own dream, and Abraham’s children his own children. In forging a covenant with Abraham, God expressed his desire to be, along with Abraham, a father to the Jewish people, and it is on this familial basis that God’s love for Israel is founded.

Throughout the Bible, God declares that when Israel imitates its ancestor Abraham and pursues righteousness—such as during the reigns of David, Hezekiah, and Josiah—God will bless and strengthen Israel. When Israel fails to live up to Abraham’s legacy, such as during the reigns of Jeroboam and Manasseh, then a betrayed God will punish Israel. Nevertheless, God emphasizes throughout the biblical texts that even when Israel is punished, it will never be fully abandoned. God will stand by Israel as a father stands by his children, in expectation that the Abrahamic trait of pursuing righteousness and justice will ultimately prevail.²³ While the God of the Gospels bestows love freely upon all, Hebrew Scripture speaks of preferential love, but conveys thereby the following extraordinary notion: God loves man *because* of who we are, not *despite* who we are.

We can now understand the distinct approaches of Judaism and Christianity to divine love. If God’s love is unmotivated—if it is not grounded in anything unique about us, but granted freely to an otherwise doomed and wretched humanity—then divine love by definition cannot be exclusive,

and must be universal. If, on the other hand, God loves human beings because he is drawn to something unique about them, then his love must be particular, and cannot be universal. That is to say, God finds something unique about an individual or a people that he does not find in another individual or people. As Wyschogrod writes:

Undifferentiated love, love that is dispensed equally to all, must be love that does not meet the individual in his individuality but sees him as a member of a species, whether that species be the working class, the poor, those created in the image of God, or whatnot.... The divine love is concrete. It is a genuine encounter with man in his individuality and must therefore be exclusive. Any real love encounter, if it is more than an example of the love of a class or collectivity, is exclusive because it is genuinely directed to the uniqueness of the other, and it therefore follows that each such relationship is different from all others. But difference is exclusivity because each relationship is different, and I am not included in the relationship of others.²⁴

A love directed at all humanity that is not grounded in one's unique identity, Wyschogrod concludes, is a love "directed at universals and abstractions rather than real persons." A child who is loved by his father only with universal, "unmotivated" love, and not because of anything unique about him—such as his shared kinship or his unique virtues—could correctly claim that he has not truly been loved. In a similar fashion, God loves human beings because he is drawn to them, and therefore God approaches man in all his uniqueness. And in approaching every member of the Jewish nation as an individual, and in loving what makes him unique, God cannot ignore one important facet of this nation that makes it stand out: Its Abraham-ness, the fact that its members are the descendants of Abraham, in whom both God and Abraham invested so much hope. God approaches Jews as a lover who "sees the face of his beloved in the children of his beloved."

III

At this point the objection may understandably be raised: Does this mean that Judaism rejects the equality of man before God? Can a Jew indeed affirm the democratic ideal, according to which “all men are created equal” on account of rights “endowed by their Creator?” The answer is that while Judaism argues against the universality of God’s love, it does insist upon the universality of God’s *justice*, and affirms the equality of all men before it. While love requires focusing on one’s beloved in his or her absolute individuality, justice involves looking beyond individuality, to what we all share as members of humanity. Thus one would assume that a father who does not love his child for his own unique attributes does not truly love him, but a judge who favors his son over another because of the ties of kinship acts unjustly.

In one of the most famous passages in the Bible, Abraham appeals to God in the book of Genesis on behalf of the doomed residents of Sodom. He does not focus on God’s love for all humanity; he does not ask God to love the Sodomites “as you have loved me.” Rather, in pleading for Sodom, Abraham stresses a very different attribute of the Almighty:

Then Abraham approached him and said: Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?²⁵

In invoking God’s justice, Abraham insists that while God must punish the wicked, he must also reward the innocent and the righteous; God

need not love the denizens of Sodom, but he must act justly toward them. In other words, God's love may be bestowed more on some than on others, but God's justice is equally bestowed on all. For if love is truly love—that is, if it takes into account everything about the identity of the person being loved—justice is the opposite; one acts justly only if he takes nothing personal or familial into account in bestowing justice on another. Thus, what Paul asserted about God's love may be rightfully applied, in the Jewish view, when discussing God's justice—that indeed, “there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek.” All are judged only according to their merits.

In Christian writings, however, God makes no substantive distinction between love and justice, nor can he be drawn to love some human beings to the exclusion of others. God cannot make distinctions in love because God is identified entirely with love. Put another way, in the Christian view, *God acts only out of love, because he is love*. Christian Scripture states it explicitly: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, *because God is love*.”²⁶ As Peter Kreeft, an influential Catholic theologian at Boston College, has argued, the Christian God is understood to identify so deeply with love that all of his other attributes are driven by it:

Without qualification, without ifs, ands, or buts, God's word tells us, straight as a left jab, that love is the greatest thing there is. Scripture never says God is justice or beauty or righteousness, though he is just and beautiful and righteous. But “God is love.” Love is God's essence, his whole being. Everything in him is love. Even his justice is love. Paul identifies “the justice of God” in Romans 1:17 with the most unjust event in all history, deicide, the crucifixion, for that was God's great act of love.²⁷

Nowhere in Hebrew Scripture is God identified with love—nor, for that matter, with justice. His justice is not love, and his love is not justice. While the God of the Gospels is one who “so loves the world,” and indeed *must* love all the world, Abraham's God, who loves preferentially and on

account of individuals' uniqueness, remains also the "judge of all the earth," who must "do justice" unto all. If we wish to be loved by God, we must come to terms with the fact that his relationship with each of us will be different; but we must also realize that before God's justice, all are truly equal.

But this Jewish response to the reduction of all of God's actions to love goes even deeper. When theology places love above justice, then justice itself is often rendered theologically impotent. In order to understand this point, it is helpful to examine the relation of election to salvation. Many verses in Christian Scripture imply that only those who profess faith in Christ will be saved from eternal damnation, regardless of any independent measure of justice or righteousness. This is expressed through the metaphor of the narrow gate: When, for example, Jesus is asked in the Gospel of Luke whether many will be saved, he replies: "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and not be able."²⁸ In Matthew, Jesus expresses similar sentiments: "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."²⁹ "Many are called," Jesus adds, "but few are chosen."³⁰ "Taken in their obvious meaning," writes Cardinal Avery Dulles, the most influential Catholic theologian in America, "passages such as these give the impression that there is a hell, and that many go there; more, in fact, than are saved."³¹ Indeed, it was on account of verses such as these that the Catholic Church for centuries held that only baptized Catholics, those who have taken part in God's loving covenant, are given the chance to avoid damnation.

For Judaism, on the other hand, the rewards of the afterlife are not linked to God's covenantal love, but to his justice. God loves preferentially and elects the family of Abraham, but God's justice demands that all who live righteous lives be rewarded in the hereafter. "The righteous of the Gentiles," the Talmud informs us, "have a portion in the World to Come."³² While not all are loved by God in the same way, we are all held accountable for our actions, and are rewarded for a life well lived. The Talmud even depicts Rabbi Yehuda the Prince as informing the pagan Roman leader

Antoninus that he, too, would merit a share of the World to Come.³³

In the twentieth century, Dulles notes, a new line of Catholic thought developed, represented by the writings of theologians such as Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. These thinkers suggested that because God loves every member of humanity, and because all of God's attributes are ultimately founded upon his love, perhaps *everyone*, even evildoers such as Hitler and Stalin, are ultimately saved, and enjoy the beatific vision of the afterlife.³⁴ This, too, Judaism rejects, insisting that God's justice, which is an attribute separate from his love, demands that evildoers be held accountable for the lives they have led. Indeed, the Mishna lists several evil figures—both Jews and non-Jews—who one can be certain are eternally damned.³⁵

"These three remain," Paul reflected in his letter to the Corinthians, "faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love."³⁶ He does not mention justice, which for Jews is no less important than love. Moreover, it was Abraham's belief in the importance of godly justice that earned him God's love in the first place. A believing Jew, it seems, can indeed endorse the democratic principle of equality, which itself is originally expressed in a biblical verse: "And God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him."³⁷ While human beings are each unique, and therefore loved differently by God, all those created in God's image stand equally before the justice of their Creator. In this sense, all men truly are created equal.

IV

We are now in a position to examine the major implications of the respective understandings of divine love in Judaism and Christianity. The first concerns the kind of love that human beings are enjoined to feel towards one another. For Christians, men ought to love with absolute *agape*, with unlimited love. "God's *agape*," Nygren notes, "is the criterion

of Christian love. Nothing but that which bears the impress of *agape* has a right to be called Christian love.”³⁸ In proving this point, Nygren points to Jesus’ instruction to love the wicked as they are loved by God. “If you love them that love you, what thank have you?” Jesus asks. “For even sinners love those that love them.”³⁹

Judaism, however, insists that preferential, exclusive love is not a concession to human selfishness but an imitation of the divine. This endorsement of preferential love among human beings can be seen most vividly in the Bible’s depiction of the friendship between King David and Jonathan, Saul’s son. When the two part, never to see each other again, they pledge a bond of eternal love that has long been regarded as the archetype of friendship in the Jewish tradition:

David arose out of a place toward the south, and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed himself three times: And they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded. And Jonathan said to David, Go in peace, seeing that we have sworn both of us in the name of the Eternal, saying, the Eternal be between me and you, and between my seed and your seed for ever.⁴⁰

Jonathan dies on the field of battle, together with his father Saul. David, after Saul’s death, ascends the throne of Israel and fulfills his pledge:

And David said, Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, *that I may show him loyal love for Jonathan’s sake?* And there was of the house of Saul a servant whose name was Ziva... And Ziva said to the king, Jonathan has yet a son, who is lame on his feet... Then King David sent, and fetched him... Now when Mefiboshet, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, was come to David, he fell on his face, and bowed down to the ground. And David said, Mefiboshet. And he answered, Behold your servant! And David said to him, Fear not, for I will surely show you loyal love for Jonathan your father’s sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your father; and you will eat bread at my table continually.⁴¹

David's supremely preferential love for Jonathan is thus extended to his son Mefiboshet. Mefiboshet did not earn David's love; but David loves him all the same. David sees Jonathan's face in that of his son, and because of this David and Mefiboshet are forever bound in a kinship of love—much as God sees Abraham in the face of every Jew. At the same time, however, David is depicted as a just king. He is praised by the Bible as one who “performed righteousness and judgment”⁴² to all his subjects, and as such “the Eternal was with him.”⁴³ Love between human beings, it would seem, is meant to be hierarchical. One is called upon to show preference for one's friends and family, even as one is obligated to be equally just to all.

Now, the question may arise: If Mefiboshet has done nothing to earn David's love, and if indeed that love is granted without regard for anything that Mefiboshet has said or done, in what sense is David's love really addressed to him in particular? Is this not in fact the opposite of the sort of preferential love we discussed earlier? At first glance, it may indeed seem more reminiscent of Nygren's “unmotivated” love, which loves without regard for the specific qualities of the individual.

In truth, however, the two loves are polar opposites. For while in the Christian view, God's love is universally bestowed, possesses no desire or longing, and stems purely from God's essence that is itself love, David's regard for Mefiboshet, like God's love for the children of Abraham, is filled with longing. His love for Jonathan is so profound that he looks for him even in the latter's children. It is a possessive love, one which may not flow from Mefiboshet's own deeds but nonetheless reflects a crucial part of who Mefiboshet, and no one else, truly is: The son of Jonathan. Perhaps Mefiboshet has done nothing to deserve David's love. Yet he is and remains a child of a father, and that leaves an indelible mark on his own unique essence. It is this uniqueness that wins David's love, just as it is the uniqueness of the Jew as a child of Abraham that becomes the basis of God's own love.

These differing attitudes can be found throughout centuries of Jewish and Christian theological reflection. In approaching Jewish and Christian understandings of love, it is useful to study the striking contrast between

the writings of two nineteenth-century contemporaries: Soren Kierkegaard, the foremost Protestant thinker of his time; and Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, known as the Netziv, who was the dean of the most important talmudic academy of his age, the Yeshiva of Volozhin. Both drew on their respective traditions in writing their reflections on the biblical obligation to “love your neighbor.”⁴⁴

Drawing on Jesus’ parable, Kierkegaard contrasts neighbor-love, which he defines as loving someone solely because that person is a human being, with what he calls “preferential love,” the love of one’s family, friend, or spouse. Neighbor-love, he argues, is distinguishable from preferential love in that it is predicated not on personal affection or selfish need, but solely on religious duty. “If it were not a duty to love,” Kierkegaard writes, “then there would be no concept of neighbor at all. But only when one loves his neighbor, only then is the selfishness or preferential love rooted out and the equality of the eternal preserved.”⁴⁵ Neighbor-love, he continues, is certainly superior to preferential love, in that one’s love is impartial; it is not linked to the object of that love. Instead, one’s focus is only on the obligation to love the neighbor:

Let men debate as much as they wish about which object of love is the most perfect—there can never be any doubt that love to one’s neighbor is the most perfect love. All other love, therefore, is imperfect in that there are two questions and thereby a certain duplicity: There is first a question about the object and then about the love, or there is a question about both the object and the love. But concerning love to one’s neighbor there is only one question, that about love. And there is only one answer of the Eternal: This is genuine love, for love to one’s neighbor is not related as a type to other types of love. Erotic love is determined by the object; friendship is determined by the object; only love to one’s neighbor is determined by love.⁴⁶

A different approach can be found in the Netziv’s commentary on Leviticus. He begins by citing Maimonides, who in his *Laws of Mourning*

interprets the obligation to “Love your neighbor as yourself” as commanding us to love others “as we ourselves hope to be loved by them.”⁴⁷ Berlin stresses the wisdom of Maimonides’ interpretation by noting that the obligation to love our neighbor “as ourselves” cannot mean that we must love our neighbor’s life as *much* as we love our own; for no one is expected to sacrifice his own life to save that of a neighbor. The Netziv then takes this a step further: Because we must love as we hope to be loved, then the obligation of neighbor-love obligates us to love preferentially. For one naturally expects to be loved by one’s son or brother more than by another; the verse in Leviticus obligates one to return that love in a similar manner. As he writes:

As yourself: It is impossible to interpret this simply, as it is known that one’s life comes before that of his neighbor. Rather, Maimonides explained [the verse] in the Laws of Mourning to mean, *as you would desire to be loved by your friend*. And it is obvious that a person would not foolishly think that one’s neighbor would love him as much as himself, rather to the extent that is worthy based on the degree of relation and propriety. Based on that standard you are obligated to love human beings.⁴⁸

Preferential love, according to this view, is not wholly distinct from neighbor-love, but is rather an essential part of it. Nor does the command to “love your neighbor” demand that we see all human beings equally; on the contrary. If God has a family that he loves above all, then the only way to love correctly is to love as God loves. Kierkegaard, however, insisted that the superior form of love is of an impartial form, and to love impartially is to disregard anything unique about the object of love. Interestingly, Kierkegaard, in noting the uniqueness of every member of humanity, describes these differences as “earthly” and “temporal.” Neighbor-love, he asserts, demands that we look beyond these differences to the spiritual equality that lies within:

Christianity... allows all distinctions to stand, but it teaches the equality of the eternal. It teaches that everyone shall lift himself above earthly

distinction... Distinction is temporality's confusing element which marks every man, but neighbor is eternity's mark on every man. Take many sheets of paper and write something different on each one, then they do not resemble each other. But then take again every single sheet; do not let yourself be confused by the differentiating inscriptions; hold each one up to the light and you see the same watermark on them all. Thus is neighbor the common mark, but you see it only by help of the light of the eternal when it shines through distinction.⁴⁹

Judaism, on the other hand, insists that distinction is not merely "earthly" or "temporal," but is itself the foundation of God's love for us, and therefore an essential part of our love for others. Judaism believes that to love someone as an individual in his or her totality is to focus squarely on that distinctiveness. At times one's love for another is founded upon an essential, though unearned, part of their identities, such as a shared kinship, just as God's love for Israel is based on its shared kinship with Abraham. But this does not alter the fundamentally hierarchical, preferential aspect of this love. It is this kind of love which, in the Jewish view, forms the model for all human relations.

V

Yet if God expresses a familial love toward Abraham's family, and this preferential love represents an ideal form of love, then a further implication of the Jewish approach to love is that the institution of the family is especially sacred. In this regard one of the most important differences between Judaism and classical Christianity emerges. Stanley Hauerwas, the renowned American Christian theologian, once noted the following:

Nothing distinguishes Christians and Jews more dramatically than our understanding of the family. Put simply, Christians are not bound by

the law to have children. We must acknowledge that we are children by appropriately honoring our parents, but to honor our parents does not mean that we must make them grandparents. The stark fact of the matter is that Jesus was neither married nor had children.... What Jesus started did not continue because he had children but because his witness attracted strangers. Christians are not obligated to have children so that the tradition might continue; rather we believe that God through the cross and resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit has made us a people who live through witness. In other words, the church grows through the conversion of strangers, who often turn out to be our biological children.⁵⁰

The point is not, Hauerwas assures his readers, that “Christians are antifamily or antichild”; but that individual Christians are not necessarily called to marriage. In other words, Hauerwas concludes, “family identity is not at the core of our identity as Christians.”⁵¹ Indeed, the catechism of the Catholic Church confirms that while the family is the moral bedrock of society, nevertheless the choice to avoid marriage and family is a legitimate one. The catechism notes, without criticism, that “some forgo marriage in order to care for their parents or brothers and sisters, to give themselves more completely to a profession, or to serve other honorable ends. They can contribute greatly to the good of the human family.”⁵²

For Jews, by contrast, the election of a family, and the godliness of preferential love, makes childbearing and child-raising a form of religious devotion. This, for several reasons. First, if true love of a human being necessitates “a genuine encounter with man in his individuality,” then the raising of children schools one in the art of truly loving. A fascinating law in the Talmud mandates that in order to serve on the Sanhedrin—in order to be considered qualified to judge one’s fellow man, a candidate must have children; for parenthood teaches one to love someone not merely as a member of a class but as a truly unique individual.⁵³ Second, as Hauerwas points out, if it is Abraham’s seed that is elected, then Judaism’s redemptive mission to

the world depends upon the continuity of Jews. In Wyschogrod's words, by refusing to have children, "the Jew refuses to replenish the seed of Abraham and thus contributes to thwarting God's redemptive plan."⁵⁴

Yet there is a third, perhaps more important reason why familial love is integral to Judaism. If the Jewish people are indeed *banim lamakom*, members of God's family, then the raising of children is essential to one's own relationship with God. In bestowing, or receiving, parental love, all Jews come to comprehend the covenantal love that God has for them as members of the Jewish nation. For the Jew, to raise children is to replicate God's passionate, parental love for every member of the assembly of Israel.

The distinction between the classical Jewish and Christian teachings on the family finds expression in myriad ways, but perhaps the most striking is in their respective attitudes towards the relationship of the clergy to the institution of family. Upon ordination, for example, the priest is ordered to renounce family life as an earthly distraction from the love of God, and "to observe chastity and to be bound forever in the ministrations of the altar, to serve who is to reign."⁵⁵ This renunciation is drawn from the writings of Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians:

He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Eternal, how he may please God. But he that is with a wife is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife: And he is divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin think on the things of the lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit. But she that is married thinks on the things of this world, how she may please her husband. And this I speak for your profit, not to cast a snare upon you, but for that which is decent and which may give you power to attend upon the Eternal without impediment.⁵⁶

This is not to say that Christianity is opposed to family life; on the contrary, Christian society has always provided one of the most important defenses of the traditional family as a bulwark of human society. At the

same time, however, it is significant that on the highest level, the service of God is seen by classical Christianity as conflicting with the creation and maintenance of a family. The priest and nun are chaste, for they must forsake the distractions of family life in order to serve God.

For Judaism the opposite is the case. Even those who have consecrated their lives to the service of God are obligated to marry and to bring children into the world. The archetypical priest, Aaron, is depicted as a family man, and indeed passes on the priesthood through his progeny. As opposed to the Christian approach, in Judaism the priest is to love preferentially and partake of the same forms of family as the rest of God's beloved. Perhaps the most important example appears in a striking passage in the book of Leviticus, which obligates the priests who serve in the Temple to attend to the burial of their close family members, even as their sanctity prevents them from attending any other funerals.⁵⁷ Maimonides takes this a step further. In his view, not only are the priests required to set aside the concerns of purity for the sake of their loved ones, but in so doing they set the example from which all the laws of mourning are derived. In other words, it is from this extreme case that all Jews can understand what it means truly to mourn our loved ones:

How weighty is the commandment to mourn! On its account, concern about the impurity from his deceased relatives is put aside, so that he might tend to them and mourn for them, as it is written, "except for his kin that is near unto him, for his mother... for her he shall defile himself." This is a positive commandment, and if the priest does not wish to defile himself, he is made to do so against his will.⁵⁸

The holiness of the priests does not prevent them from loving preferentially; on the contrary. *The priests are archetypes of preferential love and family life.* By loving and serving all Israel, but loving their immediate kin in a unique way, the priests learn, and in turn teach Israel, that to love means that our love must be individuated. The example of the truest love, the love that defines the ideal way in which man should treat his fellow, is

not in the universal, undifferentiated, unmotivated *agape*, but in the overwhelming longing and preferential concern that is the core of family life. It is the family that teaches us the meaning of love. And it is the institution of the Jewish family in which the divine love of Abraham's children, the chosen nation, is fully manifest.

VI

During the most difficult moments of their history, through centuries of exile, the Jewish people were sustained by an enduring faith. Yet the question of how they were sustained—what it was, exactly, that gave them the strength to preserve their identity in the face of unfathomable challenges—remains something of a mystery. Some have suggested that the secret lay in their system of laws, which provided a stable political and social framework for the preservation of their communities. There is truth in this, yet one suspects this answer is insufficient: Other peoples have failed to survive dispersion despite a set of practices deeply rooted in tradition. Others have suggested that what sustained the Jews was a belief in the Jewish historical mission—the idea that the Jews were placed on earth to communicate God's message to humanity. But again, one wonders whether an abstract mission is enough to give life to a persecuted and exiled people beyond a single generation, or whether it is more likely that most Jews would readily abandon such a mission in exchange for personal security and opportunity.

Rather, in studying the legends and liturgical poetry composed over these terrible centuries, one discovers a theme that appears time and again in theological expressions of Jewish grief. It is the belief in a God who bestowed upon the Jewish people a special love, and who continues to love them still; a God who appears to his people as the *shechina begaluta*: A divine Father who

accompanies his children in their exile, comforting and consoling them. The Jews who endured the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the pogroms expressed belief in a God who so loved the Jews that he made their joys his joys and their suffering his suffering. One midrash reads as follows:

The relationship between God and the Jewish people is like the relationship between twins. When the head of one aches, the other feels it, too. Therefore, we see that the Holy One said to Moses, ‘I am with him in distress’ (Psalms 91:15) and again, ‘In all their afflictions, he [God], too, was afflicted. (Isaiah 63:9) Are you not aware that I am wracked with pain when Israel is wracked with pain? Take note of the place from where I am speaking to you—from the midst of a thorn bush. I am, as it were, a partner in their pain.’”⁵⁹

It is worth noting that in composing passages such as these, Jews rejected one of the central philosophical tenets of Maimonides. In his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides argued that any anthropomorphic description of the divine is merely language inserted for the weak-minded, and offers nothing of theological significance to the philosophically sophisticated. Biblical descriptions of God’s emotions—of his love, his anger, his sadness—are merely “attributes of action.” To speak of God as loving the Jews is not to ascribe the feeling of love to God; rather, the Bible merely means that God acts benevolently toward the Jewish people. It is therefore blasphemous, Maimonides declared, to compose prayers and religious reflections that speak of God in an anthropomorphic manner. While God may at times speak anthropomorphically in revelation, we ourselves are not allowed to speak anthropomorphically of God, whom we cannot, and therefore should not, attempt to comprehend.⁶⁰

Maimonides’ approach was rejected by those persecuted Jews who spoke not only of a God who bestowed loving actions upon them, but who *loved* them, and who was deeply pained by their suffering. God, in the Bible, tells the Jews that he loves them and that he is “with them in distress.”⁶¹ This

could not be theologically insignificant. Some of the composers of these midrashim acknowledged that their sentiments were doctrinally unsettling, but insisted that the Bible allows for such descriptions of the divine.⁶²

When the Holy One saw them [exiled from Jerusalem], immediately [we read]: “And on that day did the Eternal, the God of Hosts, call to weeping and to lamentation, and to baldness, and girding with sackcloth.” *Had the verse not been written, one could not have stated it.* And they went weeping from this gate to that, like a man who deceased lies before him, and the Holy One wept, lamenting, Woe for a king who prospers in his youth and not in his old age.⁶³

It is not unreasonable to suggest that this, indeed, was the key to Jewish survival: The belief that the individual Jew must maintain his Jewishness because he is the beloved of God. This belief found expression not simply in creed but also in Jewish practice. The dedication of generations of Jews to Jewish law was not out of a blind sense of duty, but out of a firm belief that these laws were the expression of the Creator’s special love for the Jewish people, and their betrayal would be a betrayal of that love. It is this belief, perhaps above all else, which sustained Jewish communities through the hardships of exile, persecution, and pogrom. And it may still.

Meir Soloveichik is an Associate Fellow at the Shalem Center, and a Contributing Editor of AZURE. He is the Assistant Rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in Manhattan, and is currently working on his doctorate at Princeton University.

Notes

1. Exodus 19:6.
2. Seforno on Exodus 19:6.
3. Deuteronomy 4:35-38.
4. Deuteronomy 7:7-8.
5. Seforno on Deuteronomy 7:8.
6. Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1996), p. 64.
7. Jeremiah 31:8.
8. Isaiah 66:13.
9. Isaiah 49:15.
10. Mishna Avot 3:18.
11. John 3:16.
12. Matthew 28:19.
13. Romans 1:7, 10:12.
14. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), p. 201.
15. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, pp. 75-76.
16. Matthew 5:43-45, 48.
17. "While we were still sinners," Paul writes, "Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" Romans 5:8-10.
18. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p. 77.
19. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p. 75.
20. Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*.
21. Genesis 18:17-19.
22. Rashi on Genesis 18:19.
23. Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, p. 64.
24. Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, p. 61.

-
25. Genesis 18:23-25.
 26. I John 4:7-8.
 27. www.peterkreeft.com/topics/love.htm.
 28. Luke 13:24.
 29. Matthew 7:13-14.
 30. Matthew 22:14.
 31. Cardinal Avery Dulles, "The Population of Hell," *First Things* 133 (May 2003), pp. 36-41.
 32. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Repentance 3:4; Sanhedrin 108a.
 33. Jerusalem Megilla 3:2.
 34. Cited in Dulles, "Population of Hell," pp. 36-41.
 35. See Sanhedrin 107b, 111b.
 36. I Corinthians 13:13.
 37. Genesis 1:27.
 38. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p. 92.
 39. Luke 6:32-33.
 40. I Samuel 20:41-42.
 41. II Samuel 9:1-3, 5-7.
 42. II Samuel 8:15.
 43. I Samuel 18:12.
 44. Leviticus 19:18.
 45. Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 58.
 46. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 77.
 47. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Mourning 14:1.
 48. *Ha'amek Davar*, Leviticus 19:18, s.v. *ve'ahavta*.
 49. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 97.
 50. Stanley Hauerwas, "Christian Ethics in Jewish Terms: A Response to David Novak," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Peter Ochs, David Novak, Michael Singer, David Sandmel (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2000), p. 138.
 51. Hauerwas, "Christian Ethics," p. 139.

-
52. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 2231.
53. Sanhedrin 36b; see Rashi, s.v. *zaken*.
54. Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, p. 254.
55. See Catholic Encyclopedia, “Celibacy of the Clergy,” at www.newadvent.org/cathen/03481a.htm.
56. I Corinthians 7:32-35.
57. Leviticus 21:1-2.
58. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Mourning 2:6.
59. Shemot Rabba 2:5.
60. Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (New York: Dover, 1956), 1:26, pp. 34-35.
61. Psalms 91:15.
62. For an elaboration on this point, see Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering,” in *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Living* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2004), pp. 140-142.
63. Lamentations Rabbati, Petihta 24.