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The Imp of God: Can God Command Us to Love Him?¹

Leonard J. Aronson

An imp haunts me. He mocks at my piety and scoffs at my religiosity. Twice a day in my prayers I fulfill my obligation to recite Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might," and twice a day the imp taunts me unmercifully. "How can God command you to love Him?" he sneers at me. "Can love be commanded, demanded, coerced, or compelled? You can fall in love, but can you be pushed, pulled, legislated, or admonished into it?" And then the imp, who is not above delving into the popular commentaries in order to suit his own purposes, drives the dagger home. "How can Hertz² boast that this is the first instance in human history that love was demanded in any religion? Didn't he understand that love cannot be imperiously decreed? Doesn't God Himself understand it?"

The imp is so cruel and so right. I confess to the imp that what he says is true, that love can only arise spontaneously out of a desire and readiness, whether conscious or unconscious, to fall in love. The Rabbis recognized that emotions cannot be dictated by God when they said, "Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for the fear of Heaven." Just as God cannot dictate that we fear Him, so He cannot dictate that we love him.

I suspect that the imp likes to haunt me because he knows how vulnerable my professional work makes me to his barbs. He knows how often I am confronted in psychotherapy with a patient whose psychopathology is rooted in an unconscious rebellion against parents who have coercively and manipulatively demanded love. The patient has almost invariably developed a passive-aggressive personality disorder marked by negativism, mistrust of all authority, passive obstructionism, and covert self-destructiveness. How sad that the parents should reap such a harvest! How sad that the patient should go through life so crippled emotionally and so self-defeating! And how difficult is the slow path of insight along which I must lead the recalcitrant and untrusting patient! The failures that so often occur with these patients make me very sensitive to the hidden note of coercion, manipulation, and demand that so often lurks in the expression of love.

And if, perchance, my professional frustrations should prove insufficient to make me a ready victim for his mockery, the imp has another trick up his

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sleeve. He lies in wait for me with a brief fantasied scene that he injects into my reverie whenever he wants to demolish my resistance. In this scene, an ardent suitor approaches a woman whose love he is eager to obtain. He hands her a dozen roses and announces imperiously, "You shall love me totally and without reservation." The woman, stunned and bewildered, turns away. And the imp, victorious as usual, whispers to me gleefully, "Quod erat demonstrandum."

William Moran

The purpose of this paper is to answer the question: how can God command us to love Him? We shall attempt to infer the answer of the modern biblical scholar, of the psychoanalyst, and of the modern Jewish philosopher. I use the term "infer" advisedly, for it is surprising to learn how rarely the issue is raised as a problem. Indeed, only one writer (Franz Rosenzweig) of those reviewed in this paper asks the question explicitly. In the cases of the others, we will have to deduce how they might answer the question.

Let us start with the modern biblical scholar. He would probably inform us that it is all a matter of semantics and of ancient legal terminology. William L. Moran,³ who has explored the ancient Near Eastern background of the love of God in Deuteronomy, notes that there are two differences between the prophetic idea of the love between God and man as exemplified in Hosea and the notion of love found in Deuteronomy. First, Hosea speaks of God's love of Israel, but never of Israel's love of God, whereas in Deuteronomy it is the latter that is crucial. Second, in Hosea God's love of Israel is either that of a husband for his wife or of a father for his son, whereas in Deuteronomy there is no similar analogy, neither to the marital nor to the filial-paternal love relationship.

Moran suggests that Deuteronomy's idea of love is based on a different concept than that of Hosea. Love in Deuteronomy is a covenantal love. Since it is rooted in a legal contract, and not in romantic or familial emotions, it is intimately related to loyalty and service and is expressed in an unqualified obedience to the demands of the Law. Therefore, says Moran (as if he had anticipated our question), "Love in Deuteronomy is a love that can be commanded."

Moran then proceeds to demonstrate that there are Near Eastern covenant texts, from the eighteenth century B.C.E. down to the seventh century B.C.E., where the word love is used to describe the loyalty and friendship joining independent kings, sovereign and vassal, and king and subject. For example, the vassals of the Assyrian monarch are told in one text, "You will love as yourselves Assurbanipal," and in another text they proclaim under oath, "The King of Assyria, our lord, we will love."

Thus, the biblical scholar would answer our question by telling us that we have interpreted the commandment to love God in too modern a fashion, that the call for love is really a call for loyalty and obedience, and is highly legalistic in nature. We acknowledge his answer and express our apprecia-



tion for his scholarship, but we are not satisfied. In our Jewish hearts, we know that the love commanded in Deuteronomy is more than just loyalty; that it is the kind of love that bespeaks deep emotion and deep passion. "The entire religion of the Jews," says Pascal, "consisted only of the love of God." So we press on to the psychoanalysts for their answer.

Theodor Reik

Of the psychoanalysts, Theodor Reik⁴ has written about love with the most passion. Out of his exploration of the psychodynamics of love, we can attempt to arrive at a psychoanalytic answer to our question.

Reik defines love, in contrast to sex, as a passionate interest in another's life or personality. Romantic love begins with an internal disquiet, a displeasure in oneself, a sense of personal inadequacy which characterizes the situation. What pushes the individual to love is really an effort to escape from internal discontent. This discontent is the failure to live up to the demands that we make on ourselves, to come up to the expectations of our ego-ideal. The beloved person is a highly-admired person who becomes a substitute for the ideal ego of the lover. Two people who love each other are interchanging their ego-ideals, seeing in each other the fulfillment and perfection of their own inadequacies. That they love each other means that they love the ideal of themselves in the other one. And just as the beloved becomes the embodiment of the ego-ideal of a single person, so God is the supreme and universal ego-ideal of a tribe, of a nation, and of a great part of mankind.

And yet, says Reik, internal self-discontent is only one prerequisite for love. Loving is impossible without a certain self-esteem and self-respect. He who is not even a little friendly to himself cannot be a friend to anyone. One must get along with oneself moderately well if one is to get along well with others. Indeed, he who is convinced that nothing in himself is lovable cannot love, just as the narcissist who is totally satisfied with himself cannot love. It is a person's attitude towards himself which is decisive, whether he can muster the courage to conquer his self-discontent enough at least to try to love. He who wants to love has to become tolerant towards his own hostile and aggressive thoughts and impulses. He has to pardon himself (there is no license here for putting the impulses into action) before he can be affectionate towards another. Only a mature person can pardon himself.

From this understanding, we can infer that Reik might answer our question by stating that God is not trying to be dictatorial in his commandment that we love Him. Rather, God is a kind of celestial psychoanalyst who is giving us three important messages. First, don't be self-satisfied and narcissistically content. Set high moral standards for yourself to which you aspire, and strive to achieve these standards even if it inevitably leads to a sense of internal discontent which can only be overcome through love. Second, accept yourself as basically lovable even while you are discontent with your imperfections. Do suppress your evil impulses (in Hebrew terminology, *יצר הרע*), but don't condemn yourself for harboring them and, indeed,

seek to sublimate their raw power into socially constructive channels. When you fulfill these two requirements, then you will have achieved the potential for a loving relationship and you will be ready for the third message: choose God as a love object, as an ego-ideal. For it is in God's twin attributes of compassion and justice that man finds the model for his moral strivings and the fulfillment of his moral deficits.

Erich Fromm

Erich Fromm⁵ is a more eclectic psychoanalyst than is Theodor Reik, and what he loses in passion he makes up in comprehensiveness. Fromm discusses parent-child love, brotherly love, motherly love, erotic love, self-love, and love of God. He states that the basis for our need to love, regardless of the object involved, lies in the experience of separateness and the resulting need to overcome the anxiety of separateness by the experience of union. The love of God springs from the same need to overcome separateness and to achieve union.

One cannot achieve the love of God through thought, says Fromm. The only way that it can be grasped is through the experience of oneness. The love of God is neither the knowledge of God in thought, nor the thought of one's love of God, but the act of experiencing the oneness with God.

This leads to an emphasis on the right way of living as the road to the love of God. All of life, every bit of it, must be devoted to the knowledge of God, but a knowledge not of right thought, but of right action. This emphasis, says Fromm, is found in the Jewish religion, where the stress, especially since the beginning of the common era, has been on the right way of living, *halakhah*.

So Fromm, the psychoanalyst, turns out to be a halakhist at heart. We can infer his answer to our dilemma as follows: "You shall obey God's *halakhah*, and in the process of acting in a proper manner you will find the love of God which is the union with God." With the exception of the last phrase, this is the same answer to our dilemma that many a bona fide halakhist would give. But Fromm's concept of union with God is faulty, for Fromm fails to see that in Jewish philosophy (and even in Jewish mysticism), there is no concept of union and oneness with God but only a concept of drawing close to God. Feeling the lure of philosophy, therefore, we turn to the modern Jewish philosophers for an answer to our dilemma.

Hermann Cohen

Hermann Cohen⁶ is a neo-Kantian, and we are therefore not surprised to find that to him Judaism is a religion of reason. To Cohen, revelation is essentially the creation by God of reason in man. Yet, for all his preoccupation with reason, Cohen has a strong concern with the nature of love in Judaism. His basic view of love is not too different from that of Reik, for he defines sensual love as loving the ideal person (analogous to Reik's ego-ideal). Man's love of God is not, as in sensual love, the unchaste desire to be united





with Him, but it is similar to sensual love in that it seeks the ideal. Man's love of God means the incessant reaching out for God. It is the love of the ethical ideal. It is a love of the archetype of ethical conduct.

Cohen takes us directly to the commandment in Deuteronomy 6:5 that is the subject of our investigation, and for a moment we entertain the expectation that he will raise the question we have raised. Our hopes are dashed, but he does proceed to provide us with what is essentially an answer to our question. Cohen reminds us that the commandment to love God follows immediately after the "Hear, O Israel", and it is to be understood only in the closest connection with the unity and the spiritual uniqueness of God. The commandment that we love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our might means that it is the unity of the person from whom love is demanded that is being stressed. In no sense, says Cohen, should this commandment be understood as involving instinctive sensual desires which could also be directed to human beings. The whole man, out of his innermost self, out of all the directions of his consciousness, must bring forth the love of God. This love of God is not just a duty of the heart, but it is the duty of the unity of man, and therefore primarily of the spirit.

Now exactly what does Cohen mean by the spirit? By spirit Cohen means will, and by will he means knowledge. Cohen has already told us, in another context, that knowledge is a condition for the reverence of God and, more particularly, the condition for the love of God as well. It is the spirit of knowledge that constitutes the bond between God and man.

We now have Cohen's answer to our question. The true relation of man to God is an attitude of the will which expresses itself in love. Will, unlike love, is not a spontaneous emotion which is beyond the power of the individual to summon. The individual controls his will, and therefore he can choose either to accept or to reject God's commandment to love Him. From the vantage point of the human will, there is nothing alien about the commandment in Deuteronomy 6:5, precisely because the commandment can be fulfilled if only one wills it. We respect Cohen's consistency in maintaining that reason is the measure of everything, even as we feel deprived of something vital, something human, in his concept of the love of God.

Martin Buber

Martin Buber,⁷ as the existential philosopher of encounter between the *I* and the *Thou*, is in a position to provide us with an answer that is less cerebral than that of Cohen. Buber sees the Bible as essentially a dialogue between the *I* of the speaking God and the *Thou* of the hearing Israel. The dialogue relation, which Buber sees as the underlying reality of human existence, is the very foundation of biblical faith. Here it is God who speaks first and man who responds in a genuine and authentic manner.

Buber tells us that it is the love of God which allows us to love our neighbor. The biblical ethic of human relations resides in our love of God. The man who loves God, says Buber, loves also those whom God loves.

But how can man, we ask, love his fellow man unless he is capable of viewing him as an authentic *Thou*? The *I* in man must encounter the *Thou* in his fellow man in order for true love to develop, rather than the exploitative type of an *I-It* relationship. Where does man learn the difficult but necessary art of regarding another person as a *Thou* and not as an *It*?

Buber would answer that it is only in learning to view God Himself as an authentic *Thou* that man develops the capacity for seeing another being as a *Thou*, which he then applies to his fellow human being. From this point of view, Buber would interpret Deuteronomy 6:5 not as a dogmatic commandment but as an invitation to man to love Him as a genuine *Thou* so that man can similarly love his fellow human being. The typical biblical position of God as *I* and man as *Thou* is therefore reversed in Deuteronomy 6:5. Now man becomes the *I*, and God becomes the *Thou*. God says to man, in effect, "Come, let the *I* in you love the *Thou* in Me, and in the process you will learn to love the *Thou* in your fellow man." In this assumed response of Buber we have foreshadowings of the highly personalistic God of Heschel, and so we turn to him now.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

The God of Abraham Joshua Heschel⁸ is a God of pathos. To Heschel, God possesses not merely intelligence and will, but also emotion. God does not deal with the world in a state of calm detachment. He relates to man and to the world in a personal and intimate way. He is moved and affected by what happens in the world, and He reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath. God's pathos denotes not an idea of detached and remote goodness, but of loving care. God is concerned about the world and man, and He is willing to be intimately involved in history. Man, therefore, is relevant to God, for man can make God suffer and feel rejected, or make God feel loved and accepted. Thus, man not only searches for God, but God also searches for man. God is unwilling to be alone, and He has chosen man to serve Him and, hopefully, to love Him.

I use the term "hopefully" deliberately, because Heschel would say that God is (in a metaphorical sense) lonely for love, that He needs our love, and that He hopes that we will love Him. If we have been shocked by the coercive nature of the commandment to love God in Deuteronomy 6:5, it is because we have misunderstood it as a demand rather than as a plea. Heschel would say that it is indeed a plea, a plea made by a lover to his beloved, a plea that conveys the idea of "Love me; I need you." That it is worded in the language of a commandment ("You shall") is simply a figure of speech connoting intense need. In our everyday speech and in our poems and songs, we have many examples of this. Note, in the excerpt that follows from "Annie's Song" by John Denver, how the imperative "come" is really a plea:

Come let me love you,
Let me give my life to you,

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Let me drown in your laughter,
 Let me die in your arms.
 Let me lay down beside you,
 Let me always be with you,
 Come let me love you,
 Come love me again.

Franz Rosenzweig

There arrives a magical moment in the otherwise tedious study of philosophy when one suddenly comes across an anguished question posed by a perplexed philosopher which entirely reflects one's own confused state of mind. After that, the philosopher in question ceases to be a remote figure of awesome and unapproachable intellect and becomes instead a human being of flesh and blood with whom one can commune. From that moment on, one becomes a lover of philosophy.

Such a moment occurs in our study of Franz Rosenzweig,⁹ for we discover to our delight that he explicitly asks the same question that has agitated us in this paper. Rosenzweig's question reads as follows:

What is this commandment of commandments? The answer to this question is universally familiar. Millions of tongues testify to it every evening and morning: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might." Thou shalt love — what a paradox this embraces! Can love then be commanded? Is love not rather a matter of fact and of seizure and of a bestowal which, if it is indeed free, is withal only free? And now it is commanded!¹⁰

Excited by this happy discovery, the reader rushes on to find the answer, only to discover that the reply is buried somewhere out of reach in the murky depths of Rosenzweig's poetic but seemingly unfathomable prose. But the prize is such that one presses on, and comprehension is finally attained.

The key to understanding Rosenzweig's answer lies in recognizing that Rosenzweig is writing about Revelation as if it were a highly eroticized love scene between a man and a woman, using concepts of masculine and feminine roles which might evoke denunciations of sexism if he were to pen them today.

In this Revelation *qua* love scene which Rosenzweig is depicting, God is in the role of the active, assertive, and dominant male. Mankind takes the role of the passive, expectant, uncertain, submissive female. In the encounter between the two, mankind as the female awaits a signal from God as the male, a signal that will permit her to trust God and to be receptive to His love for her. Therefore, God is really saying in Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God because you can trust that the Lord your God loves you." God's love of mankind is a manifestation of His being and an expression of His power, but mankind's love of God is based on God's love of mankind. Mankind is passive; the mutual relation between mankind and God has its origins in God, who is the active partner.

Mankind, having received a signal from God (Deuteronomy 6:5), now reacts by requiting God's love and thus promotes the mutual relationship,

which from the human side rests on trust in God. The key concept here is trust. Trust, says Rosenzweig, is mankind's attachment and loyalty to Him whose desire is in mankind.

We now have Rosenzweig's answer to our question. In Deuteronomy 6:5, God is not commanding us to love Him. Rather, He is signalling to us, as an assertive and supportive and compassionate male suitor might signal to his passive and somewhat frightened female beloved, that we can trust Him, that we can take the risk of opening ourselves up to Him and permitting ourselves to return His love. And lest the reader doubt the highly eroticized male-female imagery that Rosenzweig is employing, let us note Rosenzweig's use of statements like "God's first word to the soul that unlocks itself to Him is 'Love me!'" and "the soul thus spreads itself wholly before God."

Uneasy satisfaction

The imp has grown silent during the writing of these words. I listen intently for the stirrings and rustlings that usually announce another one of his mischievous sallies against me, but there is not a sound to be heard. I peer expectantly around me, but he is nowhere in sight. I search the shadows and listen to the echoes, but there is no trace of him.

I am surprised to find that I am uncomfortable without him nearby. I miss him. I am alarmed at his absence. I try to reassure myself. I tell myself that he is probably off in a corner somewhere, sulking. Surely he has withdrawn from me in a state of pique because his desire for attention has been frustrated.

And then it comes to me that the imp is not simply piqued, but that he feels useless and unneeded when my mind is entirely at peace and my faith in God is entirely untroubled. It dawns on me that he actually needs to goad me, that he feels unfulfilled when he cannot harass me with doubts about God, forcing me to struggle for my faith and earn it through effort and choice, rather than through unreflective subservience. And I find myself wondering if that is his impish way of fulfilling the commandment to love God. □

NOTES

1. I express my appreciation to Prof. David W. Silverman of The Jewish Theological Seminary faculty for his suggestions in regard to this paper.
2. Joseph H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1977), p. 770.
3. William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 25 (1963), pp. 77-87.
4. Theodor Reik, *Of Love and Lust* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1949).
5. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).
6. Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, English translation (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Company, 1972). See also Nathan Rotenstreich, *Jewish Philosophy in Modern Times: From Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).
7. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, English translation (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937). See also Will



Herberg, *The Writings of Martin Buber* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1956).

8 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956)

9. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, English translation (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970) See also Rotenstreich *op cit*

10 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

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Attah Kiddashta:

A Poetic Midrash on Genesis 2:1-3¹

Mayer I. Gruber

First attested in the eleventh century *Mahzor Vitry*, the following poem appears in most subsequent versions of the fourth benediction of the Sabbath *amidah*:²

*attáh kiddáshta et-yom-ha-shevi' í lishmékha
takhlít ma'aséh shamáyim va-áretz
uverakhtó mikkól hayyamím
vekiddashtó mikkól hazzemaním
vekhén katív betoratékha³*

The poem consists of five lines, the first two of which contain four stresses each, and the last three of which contain three stresses each, as indicated by the accent marks in our transliteration. The metric pattern attested here is well-known from the Book of Jeremiah.⁴ Nevertheless, current prayerbooks print the five lines as though they were prose.⁵

The poem should be translated as follows:

You hallowed the seventh day for Yourself,
The end of the Creation of the heavens and the earth.
And You blessed it more than all the days,
And You hallowed it more than all the festivals.⁶
And so it is written in Your Torah.

As an introduction to the recitation of Genesis 2:1–3, this poem is a most ingenious interpretation of those verses. The biblical verses read as follows:

There were ended [the labors of making] the heavens and the earth and all their array.
God ended on the seventh day His work, which He had done, and He desisted on the seventh day from all His work which He had done
God blessed the seventh day, and He hallowed it, for thereon He desisted from all His work which God created for doing.

The point of this passage is that the end, i.e., the culmination and the purpose of Creation, was the blessing and hallowing of the Sabbath, which took place on the seventh day. The centrality of the Sabbath in the Creation story found in Gen. 1:1–2:3 is obscured by those who emend Gen. 2:2 to

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