

The *Sholosh R'golim* and the Three Kinds of Love

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Sukkot is a holiday that does not stand alone on the Jewish calendar. It is part of a trilogy. Together with Passover and Shavuot it concludes the group known as the *Sholosh R'golim*—three festivals which are linked into a thematic unit.

The three historic holidays share a number with profound significance in Judaism.

We're all familiar with the penultimate prayer of the Haggadah that alerts us to the connection between numbers and concepts. "Who knows one?" asks the text, and responds, "I know one. One is our God in the heavens and on earth." The number two is identified with the two tablets on which the Decalogue was given. The number three is a reminder of our patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The linkage is not meant to be gratuitous. It is the key to a profound insight of our sages: *Numbers resonate with hidden meanings—they are often meant to serve as codes for profound concepts.*

*Three times in the year all your males shall appear
before the Lord God.*

Exodus 23:17

שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים, בְּשָׁנָה יִרְאֶה, כָּל זָכוֹרָה, אֶל-פְּנֵי
הָאֱדֹן ה'!
שְׁמוֹת כֹּהֵן

This verse is the source for the proper observance of the pilgrimage festivals. Three times a year Jews were commanded to make their way to the Temple in Jerusalem. Three—just like the number of patriarchs. On the simplest level the link between the *Sholosh R'golim* and the *Avot* is obvious: The three festivals are meant to commit the Jews to the teachings of their three founding fathers.

But that alone is no more than a superficial understanding of the relationship between Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot and the patriarchs. To truly appreciate the intimate connection between them we need first to analyze another grouping of three that finds a prominent place in the Torah and in Jewish tradition. Its source is the mitzvah, recited twice daily as part of the Shma, that demands of us nothing less than the total love of God.

“Love God”—How?

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your wealth.

Deuteronomy 6:5

ואהבת, את ה' אלקיך, בכל-לבבך ובכל-נפשך,
ובכל-מאדך.
דברים ו:ה

Biblical commentators long ago recognized the difficulty posed by this vaguely worded commandment. Love, after all, is an emotion. Judaism is primarily concerned with halachah, with deed and with a way of life. How is love to be transformed into action? What will demonstrate the extent of our commitment? How do we prove our passionate devotion?

The Torah follows the commandment to love God with three phrases: “With all your heart, with all your soul and with all your wealth.” Here is a start to resolving our inquiry. But for clarity we need more than words. Ideally we would be served best by illustrations.

And because the number of phrases meant to shed light on our responsibility is three, we have our first clue to the way we are meant to fulfill the mitzvah of love of God.

The three phrases—with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your wealth—correspond to the three ways in which the patriarchs demonstrated their complete commitment to God. As the *Ba-al HaTurim* (Rabbi Ya’akov ben Asher) on that verse brilliantly pointed out, the Hebrew word for “and you shall love,” with but a slight rearrangement of its letters, is the same as the Hebrew word for “the ancestors”: **ואהבת. אותיות האבות**

This is how the verse in the Torah commandment contains the solution to the problem of its vagueness. How shall we love God? Precisely because the mitzvah is unclear, the Torah alluded to three paradigms—the lives of the three patriarchs—to define the ideal love relationship. It is to them that the three phrases apply, in their historic sequence. “With all your heart” was Abraham. “With all your soul” was Isaac. “With all your wealth” was Jacob.

The Love of Abraham

The daily morning prayers offer a brief review of Jewish history. We begin by quoting a selection from Nehemiah. The prophet quickly moves from the story of creation to the founder of Judaism:

You are the Lord alone. You created the heavens and the heavens of heavens and all their hosts, the earth and all that is upon it, the seas and everything that is in them. And you bring life to all and the hosts of the heavens bow to you. You are the Lord, God, who chose Abram and took him out from Ur Kasdim, and made his name Abraham. And You found his heart faithful before you...

Nehemiah 9:6–8

אתה הוא ה', לבדך אתה עשית את
השמים שמי השמים וכל צבאם הארץ
וכל אשר עליה הימים וכל אשר בהם,
ואתה מחיה את פלם; וצבא השמים,
לך משתחוים. אתה הוא, ה' האלקים,
אשר בחרת באברם, והוצאתו מאור
כשדים; ושמת שמו, אברהם. ומצאת
את-לבבו, נאמן לפניך ...
נחמיה ט:ו-ח

For this biblical summary of Abraham’s greatness, one trait alone is singled out as the unique virtue that earned him the name change from Abram to Abraham, defining his mission as the

father of many nations: “And you found his heart faithful (*ne’eman*) before you.” The heart is the source of faith. The Bible constantly relates the two. To have unswerving commitment is to have a *lev ne’eman*—a faithful heart.

Abraham was the one who grew up in the home of Terach, the idol maker. He witnessed paganism firsthand. He fearlessly destroyed the idols of his father and traveled from place to place to bring personal witness to the reality of monotheism.

To worship God and to love Him, it is obvious you must first believe in Him fully. It is not enough to suggest that there *may* be a God. Total commitment demands unwavering certainty. If you proclaim “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one,” then you must be prepared to shatter the false gods of your surroundings and to renounce the idols of your contemporaries. True love begins with a love as powerful as the one shown by the first of the patriarchs who was the living illustration of the commandment to love God “with all of your heart.”

The Love of Isaac

Some illustrations of the biblical story of the binding of Isaac portray an old man carrying an infant in his arms, ready to sacrifice his son in unquestioning obedience to God’s commandment. That image is not true. Our sages relate that Isaac was 37 years old when the biblical incident took place. The meaning of the story therefore is not merely about a test of Abraham’s faith. Isaac was already a mature, thinking adult capable of choosing his own response. Isaac knew that he was being taken to serve as a personal sacrifice to God. When the Torah tells us (Genesis 22:6) “and the two of them walked together,” the implication is that they walked as one, in mutual recognition of what would transpire, both equally prepared to fulfill the incomprehensible commandment.

True, the Torah introduces the story with the words “And it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham” (Genesis 22:1). Why call it “the test of Abraham” if Isaac was the one who knowingly and willingly would have to offer his own life? The answer is a profound and yet simple truth: Jewish thought teaches that it was a far greater test to force Abraham to kill than to ask Isaac to be killed. Isaac would die once. Abraham, had he been allowed to carry out the commandment, would have subsequently endured a lifetime of everlasting pain, for which death would have been a far preferable alternative.

Be that as it may, it was still Isaac who had to be prepared to die. He was ready to do so. Thus, in the biblical sequence illustrating the patriarchs’ love of God, if Abraham was the one who showed us what it meant to believe with his entire heart, then Isaac demonstrated the next dimension of love. It is a love that ascended to the level of “with all your soul,”—a readiness to offer his soul back to the one who gave it. From Isaac we learned the mitzvah of martyrdom. And from Isaac we learned the great truth that if you believe in something fully, you must be prepared even to die for it.

When Rabbi Akiva, one of the 10 martyrs selected by Rome for public execution, knew that he faced his last moments on earth, he smiled while enduring the most painful torture. In response to his students who asked him how he could possibly accept his affliction in such manner, he said:

All of my life I recited the words ‘with all your soul’ and could not be certain if ever the time came for me to demonstrate my willingness to fulfill them, that I would be able to do so. Now that I have the opportunity, I shouldn’t fulfill it?

Berachot 61b

כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה בכל
נפשך - אפילו נוטל את נשמתך,
אמרת: מתי יבא לידי ואקיימנו, ועכשיו
שבא לידי לא אקיימנו?

ברכות סא:

Rabbi Akiva managed to merge Abraham’s faith, with all his heart, to Isaac’s willingness to accept martyrdom, with all his soul.

The Love of Jacob

Believe in Him. Be prepared to die for Him.

What else could there possibly be?

It was Jacob who made a great discovery about the ideal way in which we are meant to serve God. It happened on Mount Moriah, the very spot on which the Temple would eventually be built.

Jacob had just fled from his home in fear of his brother Esau. Going to sleep at the site which would many years later assume such significance as the place of ultimate sanctity, Jacob had a dream:

He dreamt, and behold a ladder was set up on earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold the Angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

Genesis 28:12

וַיִּחְלֶם, וַהֲנִיחָהּ סֵלֶם מֵצֵב אֶרְצָה, וְרֵאשׁוֹ,
מֵגִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִמָה; וַהֲנִיחָהּ מִלְּאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים,
עֲלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ.
בראשית כח:יב

What was the meaning of this heavenly message? Jewish commentators identify the symbolic content of the dream with the essential message of Judaism. Indeed, the gematria of the Hebrew word for ladder, *sulam*, is identical to the word Sinai, the mountain on which God gave us the Torah—130. The ladder of Jacob’s dream linking heaven and earth was meant to demonstrate that service of God doesn’t call for the renunciation of all that is earthly; humanity’s role is not to forsake this world but rather to sanctify it.

Christianity would teach that “my kingdom is not of this world.” Those who seek to be holy would be counseled to cut themselves off from society, to enter a monastery, to renounce the pleasures of this world and to prepare themselves only for the next. Love of money was viewed as the root of all evil.

Not so in Jewish teaching. A man does not become a saint if he takes a vow of poverty. He becomes holy if he uses his wealth to enhance and sanctify the presence of God on earth. The angels of God ascend and descend the ladder—the very ladder which in Hebrew is numerically equivalent not only to Sinai but also amazingly enough to *mammon*, money—because what God asks of us is to find a way to bring about a mutually beneficial merger between heaven and earth, to infuse the profane with the sacred so that every part of creation can bring greater glory to God.

Symbolically, Jacob's dream was about Sinai and the proper use of material blessings. The metaphor of the ladder was meant to illustrate the ideal of holiness representing harmony between heaven and earth. The Christian crucifies the flesh in order to rise above it. The Jew sanctifies the flesh in order to elevate it. The Christian condemns wealth and takes a vow of poverty. The Jew controls wealth and seeks to utilize it in a way that will make the world a better place by spreading the message of Sinai.

Immediately after Jacob dreamt the dream, the Torah tells us:

And Jacob vowed a vow saying, if God will be with me ... then of all that thou shall give me I will surely give the 10th unto Thee.

Genesis 28:20 – 22.

וַיִּדְרַם יַעֲקֹב, נֹדֵד לְאֹמֵר: אִם-יְהִיָּה אֱלֹהִים
עִמָּדִי ... וְכָל אֲשֶׁר תִּתֶּן-לִי, עֲשֵׂר אֶעֱשֶׂרְנוּ
לָךְ.

בראשית כח:כ-כב

The concept of tithing comes from Jacob, the Jacob who just had the vision of the ladder. Why would he have spoken of something as mundane as money immediately after experiencing the most sacred vision of his life? *Because that very vision enabled him to comprehend that one can and one must serve God even “with all your wealth.”*

Is it necessary for the Torah to command loving God with one's possessions after it has already told us we must be prepared to die for Him? Remarkably enough, the Talmud tells us there are those whose money is dearer to them even than their bodies (see *Sanhedrin* 74a). It is not enough to be willing to die for a cause; harder still is the strength to continue to live for it by sacrificing one's wealth and possessions.

The three love commandments take us back to our three patriarchs. They serve as paradigms, living illustrations from our past to serve as role models for our relationship with the Almighty.

The Love of Passover—“With All Your heart”

Let us now turn back to the *Sholosh R'golim* and see how this set of three resonates with the “love messages” of the three patriarchs. We will discover that the calendar is yet another way in which we are meant to reaffirm the commitments of the *Avot* as they exemplified the meaning of true love.

Passover was the first step in our relationship with God. Its purpose was to achieve belief:

And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Exodus 14:31

וַיִּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה, אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה'
בְּמִצְרַיִם, וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם, אֶת ה' וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ, בֵּה',
וּבְמֹשֶׁה, עַבְדּוֹ.
שְׁמוֹת יָד: לֹא

Passover is the key to the first commandment focused on faith:

I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.

Exodus 20:2

אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית
עַבְדִּים.
שְׁמוֹת כ: ב

Why did God bring 10 plagues upon the Egyptians before he took the Jews out of Egypt? Could He not have started with the most severe one first and do away with the need for the nine others? And why when Pharaoh was ready to comply and let the Jews go, did God harden his heart? God needed every single one of those plagues in order to bring destruction upon the 10 major idols of Egypt, just as Abraham shattered the false gods in the shop of his father, so that the Jews who left Egypt would know of a certainty that Hashem alone is God.

The message of Passover is *emunah*—complete and total faith—“with all your heart.” Small wonder then that the Midrash tells us that when the three angels came to visit Abraham, Abraham was observing the holiday of Passover, although it was many years before the event it commemorates even took place.

The Love of Shavuot—“With All Your Soul”

The acceptance of Torah at Sinai coupled belief to total commitment, even at the possible cost of one’s life. The Jews stood “*under* the mountain”—God lifted the mountain over their heads and said if you obey the commandments, well and good, but if not I will drop the mountain upon you and you will not survive. Commitment to the law had consequences.

Some of God’s commandments at Sinai were as incomprehensible to human understanding as the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah. Indeed, there is a midrash that mount Moriah itself was moved to the range of Sinai so that the story of the *akedah* be inextricably linked with *kabbolat Ha’Torah*:

Where did Sinai come from? R. Yosi said, it was uprooted from Mount Moriah, like the challah (tithe) removed from dough, from the place where Isaac our forefather was bound. The Holy One, Blessed Be He said: Since Isaac their forefather was bound on it, it is proper for his children to receive the Torah.

Midrash Tehillim no. 68

וסיני מהיכן בא, אמר ר' יוסי מהר
המוריה נתלש, כחלה מעיסה, ממקום
שנעקד יצחק אבינו, אמר הקדוש ברוך
הוא הואיל ויצחק אביהם נעקד עליו
נאה לבניו לקבל עליו את התורה.
מדרש תהלים מזמור סח

Sinai and Shavuot, with its allusion to the need to emulate Isaac’s willingness to offer one’s life for God, add the component of “with all your soul” as the second message of the pilgrimage festivals.

The Love of Sukkot—“With All Your Wealth”

Sukkot is the festival of the harvest. It is the time when Jews of old found themselves with the greatest wealth. Their granaries were full; they felt themselves rich beyond measure.

And with wealth came all the dangers of excessive material blessing. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses warned the people: “But Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked” [32:15]—unbounded riches often create great and unmanageable temptation. Wealth can lead us to greed just as much as it can bring us closer to God.

Sukkot is the time when we are commanded to leave our homes, a key symbol of our possessions, to live in a fragile hut. It is meant to remind us that no matter our amount of our wealth, we live under the rule of the one above in the heavens who is ultimately responsible for

all of our blessings. The book from the Bible we read is Kohelet—written by Solomon, the wisest and wealthiest of all men—who shares with us his conclusion that:

This is the last word: all has been said. Have fear of God and keep his laws because this is right for every man. God will be judge of every work, with every secret thing, good or evil.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

סוף דְבַר, הַכֹּל נִשְׁמָע: אֶת-הָאֱלֹקִים יִרָא וְאֶת-
מִצְוֹתָיו שְׁמֹר, כִּי-זֶה כָּל-הָאָדָם. כִּי, אֶת-כָּל-
מַעֲשָׂה, הָאֱלֹקִים יִבֶּא בְמִשְׁפֵּט, עַל כָּל-נַעֲלָם: אִם-
טוֹב, וְאִם-רָע.
קהלת יב:יג-יד

The festival of the harvest is the time for us to put our possessions into proper perspective. It is the moment when we need to define the correct relationship between our faith and our finances. It is the holiday on which we need to dream Jacob’s dream of the ladder in order to create the bridge between our bountiful goods here on earth and our spiritual values from heaven.

No wonder, too, that the very first mention of Sukkot in the Torah is in connection with Jacob:

And Jacob journeyed to Sukkot and built himself a house and made booths for his cattle; therefore the name of the place is called Sukkot.”

Genesis 33:17

וַיַּעֲקֹב נָסַע סֻכּוֹתָהּ, וַיִּבֶן לוֹ בַּיִת; וַלְמִקְנָהוּ
עָשָׂה סֻכּוֹת, עַל-כֵּן קָרָא שְׁם-הַמָּקוֹם סֻכּוֹת.
בראשית לג:יז

How appropriate as well that the biblical reading for Sukkot comes from Deuteronomy chapter 14, beginning with the words “And tithes you shall surely tithes” [verse 22]—the mitzvah first practiced by Jacob in the aftermath of his dream of the ladder. This after all is the holiday dedicated to the proper fulfillment of the third and final love commandment —“and with all your wealth.”

Three patriarchs, three ways in which we are bidden to express our love for God, and the *Sholosh R’golim*, the three pilgrimage festivals, all share in developing the identical theme of how to fulfill the mitzvah of וְאָהַבְתָּ, to love God. The patriarchs are the paradigms of history. The three phrases that follow the love commandment are the guidelines incorporated into our daily prayers. The *Sholosh R’golim* are the annual reminders brought to us by the calendar. And every year, when we complete the cycle and absorb its threefold message, we know that we have brought into our lives *zman simchotenu*—a time for rejoicing.