



Compassion and Love in Jewish Mystical Sources

Dr. Eitan Fishbane

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Dr. Fishbane has been a member of the Seminary faculty since 2006, participating in governance through his service on the Faculty Executive Committee, the Rabbinical School Council, the faculty committees of the Gershon Kekst Graduate School and the Department of Community Engagement, and as advisor for BA and MA concentrators in Jewish Thought. Actively involved in the mentoring of PhD, DHL, rabbinical, and undergraduate students, Dr. Fishbane seeks to integrate advanced scholarship and the cultivation of contemporary spiritual meaning. From 2017-2020, he served as Division Chair for Jewish Mysticism at The Association for Jewish Studies. Before coming to JTS, he served on the faculties of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion and in the Department of Religion at Carleton College. Dr. Fishbane was recently appointed as Review Editor for Jewish Mysticism at *Marginalia Review of Books*.

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Passages from *Sefer Shenei Luhot ha-Berit* translated by Eitan P. Fishbane

<p><u>Sefer Shenei Luhot ha-Berit, Sha'ar ha-Otiyot, 2</u></p> <p><i>You shall love the Lord your God</i> (Deut. 6:5). And it is [also] written, <i>You shall love your neighbor as yourself</i> (Lev. 19:18). Behold these two loves are joined and united through the oneness of God be He blessed, for thus do we conclude [the blessings for the <i>Shema</i>] with the words "He who chooses His people Israel with love" and "He who loves His people Israel," and utter the verse of unity. And after this [an exclamation of] the love of God, <i>You shall love the Lord your God</i>. The Ten Commandments also conclude [with the words] <i>that which belongs to your neighbor</i> (Ex. 20:14).</p>	<p>ספר השל"ה הקדוש - שער האותיות - אות ב"ת - בריות</p> <p>(דברים ו, ה) 'ואהבת את ה' אלהיך, וכתיב (ויקרא יט, יח) 'ואהבת לרעך כמוך'. הנה מחברות אלו שתי אהבות, (ומתייחדים) [ומתיוחדות] על ידי אחדותו יתברך, כי כן אנו מסימין 'הבוחר בעמו ישראל באהבה', 'ואהב עמו ישראל' (ברכות ק"ש), 'ואומרים פסוק היחוד, ואחר כך אהבת השם יתברך, 'ואהבת את ה' אלהיך', גם עשרת הדברות מסימין 'אשר לרעך' (שמות כ, יד; דברים ה, יח).</p>
<p>...[A person] will be complete in all of his [ethical-religious] qualities when he loves his friend as himself...And if he loves his friend as himself, all the more so will he love the Holy Blessed One who acts with freely given love [love with no thought of return] toward him; the truest love...For <i>You shall love your neighbor as yourself</i> is the leg upon which the world stands; indeed, <i>You shall love your neighbor as yourself</i> is that which causes <i>You shall love the Lord your God</i>.</p>	<p>תמצא רבא דמצות הם תלויים באהבת חברו כמוהו, כל מצות צדקה, ולקט שכחה ופאה, תרומות ומעשרות, ומשא ומתן באמונה, ואסור רבית, והרבה כיוצא בהם, אחר כך כמעט כל המדות, הרחמים והחנינה וארף אפים ורב חסד, ולידונו לכף זכות, ושלא לעמד על דם רעך, והרחקת רכילות ולשון הרע, והוצאת דבה, ולצנות, וקנאה, ושנאה, ונטירה, וענין כעס ורצון, ורדיפת הכבוד, ומדות אלפי אלפים כיוצא בהן, שיקיים רב מצות עשה ולא יעבר על רב לא מעשה, ויהיה שלם בכל המדות פשיאהב לחברו כמוהו. ואף מה שלא שיה בין אדם לחברו, כמו מאכלים אסורים, וחמץ בפסח, וכיוצא בהם, יקיים בקל וחמר, אם יאהב לחברו בעצמו, קל וחמר יאהב להקדוש ברוך הוא העושה חסד הנם עמו, חסד של אמת, והוא אדון העולם, ובגדו הכל יתברך שמו, הרי 'ואהבת לרעך כמוך' הוא הרגל שהעולם עומד עליו, הרי 'ואהבת לרעך כמוך' הוא הגורם 'ואהבת את ה' אלהיך'.</p>

<p>One who is bonded [or 'cleaved'] to [the attribute of] peace, and fulfills <i>You shall love your neighbor as yourself</i>, he is then called by the name of God. As it is written in the <i>Sifrei</i>, "in the time to come, the righteous will be called by the name of God. For <i>You shall love the Lord your God</i> is intended [or 'directed'] toward <i>You shall love your neighbor as yourself</i>. [A person] who fulfills one, fulfills the other, and when the love and cleaving of God is upon him, then he is called by His [God's] name. For the name of the Holy Blessed One is "Peace."</p>	<p>והדבק בשלום, ומקיים 'ואהבת לרעך כמוך' (ויקרא יט, יח), אז יהיה נקרא בשם ה', כדאיתא בספרי (עקב מ"ט) שלעתיד יהיו נקראים הצדיקים בשם ה', כי 'ואהבת את ה' אלהיך' (דברים ו, ה), מכון ל'ואהבת לרעך כמוך', המקיים זה מקיים זה, וכשאהבת ודבקות השם עליו, אז נקרא בשמו, כי שמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא 'שלום'.</p>
<p>For love of neighbor is integrated with the love of the Holy Blessed One; the magnitude of the obligation to love the neighbor is for the sake [or 'honor'] of the love of the Holy Blessed One. That is, [a person] should recall that he is made in the supernal image and likeness, and the portion of the soul that dwells within him is a divine portion from above. Thus are we called "Assembly of Israel," for we are all assembled and united together in the secret of his blessed unity.</p>	<p>כי אהבת רעך משתלב עם אהבת הקדוש ברוך הוא, כי גדל חיוב אהבת הרע הוא לכבוד אהבת הקדוש ברוך הוא, דהיינו שיזכר שהוא עשוי בצלם ובדמות עליון, וחלק הנשמה שבו היא חלק אלוה ממעל, ועל כן נקראים אנהנו 'בנסת ישראל', כי פלגו מכנסים ומתחדים בסוד אחדותו יתברך.</p>
<p>According to the sage, Rabbi Avraham Yagel: These two loves are the two pillars of the Torah, and so it is fitting that they resemble one another. And just as love of God is [to be performed] with all of one's heart, soul, and might...so too in love of [one's fellow] creatures... <i>With all of your heart</i>—that is to say that one should not hate any person in one's heart. As it is written (Lev. 19:17), <i>Do not hate your brother in your heart</i>. Hatred in the heart mainly comes from jealousy... <i>With all of your soul</i>—that is, even though your friend is not your equal in [ethical-spiritual] attributes, you nevertheless are obligated to tolerate him and [even] love him for the sake of God who made him this way... <i>With all of your might</i>—[overcome] the hatred that befalls those of the same tradecraft... A given artisan should think [instead] that all derives from God, all wealth and honor...</p>	<p>והתקם הר"ר אברהם נגל (לקח טוב דף ז.ז): וְלִהְיוֹת שִׂשְׁתִּי הָאֱהָבוֹת הָאֵלוֹהִים שְׁנֵי עֲמוּדֵי הַתּוֹרָה, רְאוּי שִׁיחֵיו דּוֹמִים זֶה לְזֶה. וְכִמוֹ שֶׁאֲהַבַת הַמָּקוֹם הִיא בְּכָל לֵב וְנַפֶּשׁ וּמֵאָדָּה, רְצוֹנִי לוֹמֵר, כִּי לְקַיֵּם מִצְוֹת ה'... צָרִיךְ לְהִתְלַהֵב בְּנַפְשׁ מִשְׁלֵהֶבֶת הָאֱלֹהִים וְהִירָאָה הַפְּנִימִית, עַד שֶׁאֶפְלוּ אָדָם נוֹטֵל נִשְׁמָתוֹ לֹא יַעֲבֹר מִפְּקוּדֵי ה' וּמִצְוֹתָיו... כֵּן בְּאַהֲבַת הַבְּרִיּוֹת יִהְיֶה שֶׁלֹּשׁ אֵלֶּה. כִּיצַד, 'בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ', הֵינּוּ שְׁלֹא לִשְׂנֹא שׂוֹם אָדָם בְּלִבְךָ, כִּמוֹ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ויקרא יט, יז) 'לֹא תִשְׂנֵא אֶת אֶחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ', וְהַשְׂנָאָה שֶׁבְּלִבְךָ רַבָּה בְּאֵה מִחֲמַת הַקְּנָאָה, וְגִדּוּלָהּ הַשְׂנָאָה הַבָּאָה מִחֲמַת הַקְּנָאָה... 'בְּכָל נַפְשְׁךָ', הֵינּוּ אֵף עַל פִּי שֶׁחִבְרָךְ אֵינּוּ שׂוֹהַ בְּמַדּוֹת פְּנִיפְשָׁךְ, חֵיב אֵתָהּ לְסַבֵּל אוֹתוֹ וְלֶאֱהֹב אוֹתוֹ, בְּעִבּוֹר ה' שֶׁפָּכַח בְּרָאוּ... הַמִּין הַשְּׁלִישִׁי מִהַשְׂנָאָה, הִיא הַבָּאָה מִחֲמַת דְּרָרָא דְּמִמוֹנָא, וְזֶהוּ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שם) 'בְּכָל מְאֹדְךָ', וְכִזּוֹ הַשְׂנָאָה, גַּם כֵּן אוֹתָהּ הַנוֹפְלֵת בֵּין בְּעֵלֵי הָאֲמִנִּיּוֹת, שֶׁכָּל אֶמֶן שׂוֹנֵא כְּנִי אֲמִנּוֹתוֹ (בראשית רבה פל"ב ס"ב), וְעַל דְּרָרָה הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה גַּם כֵּן מִזְהָרִים אָנוּ. וְכִשְׁיִחֹשֵׁב הַבְּעַל אֲמִנּוֹת שֶׁהִכֵּל מֵאֵת ה', הַעֲשֶׂר וְהַכְּבוֹד, וְאֵין אָדָם נוֹגֵעַ בָּמָה שֶׁמוֹכֵן לְחִבְרוֹ (יומא לח ב), לֹא יִשְׂנֵא לְבַעַל אֲמִנּוֹתוֹ, אֲדַרְבָּה יֵאָהֵב אוֹתוֹ מִפְּנֵי הַדְּמוּתוֹ אֵלָיו.</p>

THE PALM TREE OF DEBORAH

— **IMITATE YOUR CREATOR.** Then you will enter the mystery of the supernal form, the divine image in which you were created. If you resemble the divine in body but not in action, you distort the form. People will say of you: "A lovely form whose deeds are ugly." For the essence of the divine image is action. What good is it if your anatomy corresponds to the supernal form, while your actions do not resemble God's? So imitate the acts of Keter, the thirteen qualities of compassion alluded to by the prophet Micah: "Who is a God like you, delighting in love? You will again have compassion upon us. You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea."

— You should desire the well-being of your fellow creature, eying his good fortune benevolently. Let his honor be as precious to you as your own, for you and your fellow are one and the same. That is why we are commanded: "Love your neighbor as yourself." You should desire what is right for your fellow; never denigrate him or wish for his disgrace. Just as God desires neither our disgrace nor our suffering, because of our close relationship with him, so you should not desire someone else's disgrace, suffering, or ruin. You should feel as bad for such suffering as if it were your own. Similarly, rejoice over another's good fortune as if you were basking in it.

God does not behave as a human being normally behaves. If one person angers another, even after they are reconciled the latter cannot bring himself to love the one who offended him as he loved him before. Yet if you sin and then return to God, your status is higher. As the saying goes, "Those who return to God occupy a place where even the completely righteous cannot stand." So when you return to God, and God restores the divine presence to you, his love for you is not the same as before but all the greater. This is the meaning of:

"You will again have compassion upon us." God will increase his compassion, mending us, bringing us closer.

This is how you should behave toward your fellow human being. Do not bear a grudge from the anger you felt. When you see that he wants to make up, be much more compassionate and loving than before. Say to yourself: "He is like one of those who return to God, unrivaled by even the completely righteous." Cultivate a more intimate relationship with him than with those who have been completely righteous with you, who have never offended you.

[These are some of the qualities by which you resemble your Creator. The sublime qualities of compassion have a precious characteristic: just as you conduct yourself below, so are you worthy of opening the corresponding sublime quality above. Exactly as you behave, so it emanates from above. You cause that quality to shine in the world.]

THE QUALITY of humility includes all qualities, since it pertains to Keter. Although Keter transcends all the other qualities, it does not exalt itself; on the contrary, it descends, constantly gazing below. Its emanator constantly gazes into it, bestowing goodness, while it gazes at those beneath.

God nourishes everything, from the horned buffalo to nits, disdaining no creature—for if he disdained creatures due to their insignificance, they could not endure for even a moment. Rather, he gazes and emanates compassion upon them all. So should you be good to all creatures, disdaining none. Even the most insignificant creature should assume importance in your eyes; attend to it. Do good to whomever needs your goodness.

YOUR FOREHEAD should not be tense at all but rather always resemble the forehead of the Will, so that you soothe everyone. Even if you come across angry people, soothe and calm them with your goodwill. For the forehead of the Will

constantly accepts and soothes the harsh powers, reintegrating them. So should you soothe those overwhelmed by anger. Induce them with goodwill, drawing on great wisdom to extinguish their anger before it transgresses the boundary and causes damage, God forbid. Model yourself on the Will, which emanates from the wondrous wisdom in the forehead of the Ancient One, from where it soothes everything. Derive the power to be genial with others. If your character is somewhat harsh, people will not be soothed. This is why the Mishnah teaches: "If the spirit of people delights in someone, so does the spirit of God."

Your ears should always be tuned to hear the good, while rumors and gossip should never be let in, according to the secret of sublime listening. There, no harsh shouting enters, no tongue of evil leaves a blemish. So listen only to positive, useful things, not to things that provoke anger.

Your eyes should not gaze at anything disgraceful. Rather, they should always be open to notice those who suffer, to be compassionate toward them as much as possible. When you see a poor person suffering, do not close your eyes in the slightest. On the contrary, keep him in mind as much as you can; arouse compassion for him—from God and from people.

[Your face should always be shining. Welcome each person with a friendly countenance. For with regard to Keter Elyon, the supernal crown, it is said: "In the light of the king's face is life." No redness or harsh judgment gains entrance there. So, too, the light of your face should never change; whoever looks at you will find only joy and a friendly expression. Nothing should disturb you.]

Your mouth should produce nothing but good. The words you speak should be Torah and an expression of goodwill. Never generate angry or ugly words, curses, or nonsense. Let your mouth resemble the upper mouth, which is never closed, never silent, never withholding the good. Speak positively, always with benevolent words.]

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All of these good qualities gather under the banner of humility, each one constituting a limb in Keter above. When you wish to draw near to the upper worlds, to resemble God, to open the fountains to those beneath, you must become proficient in these chapters.

It is impossible, of course, to conduct yourself according to these qualities constantly. Accustom yourself to them little by little. The essential quality to attain, the key to them all, is humility, for this is the very first aspect of Keter, under which all the rest are subsumed. If you constantly strive to attain this quality, all the others follow in its wake. For the first quality of Keter is that it considers itself as nothing in the face of its emanator. So, too, you should consider yourself as actually nothing. This will lead to the attainment of all the good qualities.

I have found an effective potion for the cure of pride. This consists of training yourself to do two things. First, respect all creatures, recognizing in them the sublime nature of the Creator, who fashions human beings in wisdom and whose wisdom inheres in each created thing. Second, train yourself to bring the love of your fellow human beings into your heart, even the wicked, as if they were your brothers and sisters, even more, until the love of all human beings is firm in your heart. Love even the wicked, thinking: "I wish that they were righteous, turning back to God, making themselves desirable to the Omnipresent." In this way your heart will turn toward the good, and you will train yourself to contemplate the various good qualities.

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✓ How SHOULD you train yourself in the quality of Hokhmah, Wisdom?

Supernal wisdom, though concealed and transcendent, spreads over every single thing that exists. Concerning this, it is said: "How manifold are your works, O God! In wisdom

you have made them all." So should your wisdom be accessible to all. Teach people what will be useful to them, according to each one's capacity, pouring out to each as much wisdom as you can. Don't let anything deter you.

Wisdom has two faces. The upper face turns toward Keter; not gazing below, it receives from above. The second face, the lower one, turns below to gaze at the sefirot, emanating its wisdom to them. You too should have two facets. The first is your aloneness with God, to increase and refine your wisdom. The second, to teach others some of the wisdom that God has poured out upon you. As Wisdom emanates to each sefirah according to its dimensions and need, so should you emanate to each person according to the dimensions of his mind, whatever he can handle, what addresses his needs. Be careful not to give more than the mind of the recipient can hold, to prevent any mishap, just as the highest sefirah does not exceed the limits of its recipient. ✓

Let your compassion extend to all creatures, neither despising nor destroying any of them. For Wisdom spreads over all created things: mineral, vegetable, animal, and human. Each was created in Wisdom. Do not uproot anything that grows, unless it is necessary. Do not kill any living creature, unless it is necessary.]

HOW SHOULD you train yourself in the quality of Binah, Understanding?

By returning to God. Nothing is more important, for this corrects every flaw. As Binah, Understanding, sweetens all powers of judgment, neutralizing their bitterness, so should you return to God and correct each flaw. If you meditate on returning every day, you stimulate Binah to illumine each day. In consequence all your days join in returning, that is, you integrate yourself within Binah, who is called Returning. Each day of your life is adorned with the mystery of supernal return.

Do not say that returning is good only for the holy portion within you; the evil portion, too, is sweetened, in the manner of this quality. Do not think that because you incline toward evil there is no remedy. This is false. If you do well, rooting yourself in Returning, you can ascend there through the goodness rooted there. For the root of every supernal bitterness is sweet; you can enter through this root and make yourself good. Thereby you transform the bad deeds themselves into good; your intentional sins turn into merits. The misdeeds you committed have been accusing you from the Left Side. Once you return completely, you raise those deeds and root them above. Those accusers are not annihilated but ameliorated, rooted in holiness.

HOW SHOULD you train yourself in the quality of Hesed, Love? The basic way you enter the mystery of Hesed is by loving God to the extreme, not abandoning devotion for any reason at all, since nothing attracts you in the least, compared to loving God. So first attend to the demands of your devotion; the remainder of your time is for whatever else you need.

"Who is a *hasid*? One who acts in love toward God." In expressing love to creatures here below, intend that you are mending up above, after the same pattern. You thereby bestow love on God.

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