Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Vaetchanan

Standing on the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses recounts the revelation at Mount Sinai. He repeats the Ten Commandments and warns that prosperity must never lead them to forget the One who redeemed them from Egypt. The parsha also contains the Shema, the declaration of God's unity traditionally recited twice each day.

Heart, Soul, and Might

This week's portion, Vaetchanan, is the source of one of Judaism's most foundational texts: the Shema. While the first verse (Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one) is perhaps the most well-known, it is followed by a paragraph known as "*VeAhavta*," which means "you shall love." The opening verse of *VeAhavta* reads:

דברים ו׳:ה׳ וְאָהַבְתָּ אֵת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל־מְאֹדֶךָ׃	**Deuteronomy 6:5** You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

- **What is your relationship with the Shema, if any? Does it bring up any associations for you—or perhaps none at all?**
- **Is it really possible to command us to love God? How can the Torah require an emotion?**
- **If someone watched your life for a week, what do you think they conclude you love most?**
- **Why do you think the verse specifies that one should love God with their heart, soul, *and* might? What does each element add?**

One interpretation of this verse appears in the Mishnah. The first major work of rabbinic literature, the Mishnah consists of teachings transmitted over hundreds of years and was compiled by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi around 200 CE.

משנה ברכות ט:ה חַיָּב אָדָם לְבָרֵךְ עַל הָרָעָה כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהוּא מְבָרֵךְ עַל הַטּוֹבָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר **(דברים ו)** וְאָהַבְתָּ אֵת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדֶךָ. בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ, בִּשְׁנֵי יְצָרֶיךָ, בְּיֵצֶר טוֹב וּבְיֵצֶר רָע. וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ, אֲפִלּוּ הוּא	**Mishnah Berachot 9:5** One is obligated to recite a blessing for the bad **that befalls him** just as he recites a blessing for the good **that befalls him**, as it is stated: "And you shall love the Lord

נוֹטֵל אֶת נַפְשֶׁךָ. וּבְכָל מְאֹדֶךָ, בְּכָל מָמוֹנֶךָ. דָּבָר אַחֵר בְּכָל מְאֹדֶךָ, בְּכָל מִדָּה וּמִדָּה שֶׁהוּא מוֹדֵד לְךָ הֱוֵי מוֹדֶה לוֹ בְּמִאוֹד מְאוֹד.	your God with all your heart and **with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). "**With all your heart" **means** with your two inclinations, with your good inclination and your evil inclination**.** "With all your soul" **means** even if God takes your soul. "And with all your might" **means** with all your money**.** Alternatively, **"**with all your might" **means** with every measure that He metes out to you, **good or troublesome,** thank Him.

- **What do you think it means to serve God with the evil inclination?**
- **Why should we praise God for the bad things in our lives? Have you ever experienced something painful that, with time, took on a different meaning?**
- **Of the two interpretations given here of "with all your might," which one resonates more with you and why?**

We can compare the Mishnah's interpretations to that offered by Ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra was a medieval Spanish Torah commentator, poet, philosopher, and grammarian, most famous for his biblical commentaries. He too explains the difference between the heart, soul, and might:

אבן עזרא על דברים ו:ה **בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך:** הלב הוא הדעת והוא כנוי לרוח המשכלת כי היא המרכב' הראשונה וכן חכם לב קונה לב: **נפשך:** היא הרוח שבגוף והיא המתאו' וכחה נראה בכבד: **מאדך:** מטעם מאד מאד והטעם לרוב אהוב אותו בכל מה שתוכל ותהיה אהבה גמורה בלב:	**Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 6:5** **With all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might:** The heart refers to knowledge. It is another term for the spirit of intelligence, for the heart is its first residence. The same applies to *wise-hearted* (Ex. 36:1) and to *He that gets a heart* (Prov. 19:8). **Your soul:** This refers to the spirit, which is in the body. It is the spirit which lusts. Its power is manifest in the liver. **Your *might:*** *Me'odekha* (*your might*) means very very much. It means that you should love Him to the utmost in any way you can. Your heart should be totally committed to the love of God.

- **Nowadays, we typically associate the brain with knowledge, not the heart. What might Ibn Ezra's different set of associations teach us about how he viewed human nature?**
- **Ibn Ezra writes that *"*with all your might" means that one should love God "to the utmost in any way you can," suggesting that each person expresses love in their own way. What is a personal way you have of showing your loved ones you care about them?**

The Talmud, a record of generations of rabbinic debate about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation compiled between the 3rd and 8th centuries, offers a different approach to the verse. While echoing ideas in the Mishnah, the Talmud adds an additional layer: the verse uses multiple different phrases in order to speak to different types of people.

סנהדרין עד א דְּתַנְיָא: רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר: "וְאָהַבְתָּ אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדֶךָ". אִם נֶאֱמַר "בְּכָל נַפְשְׁךָ", לָמָּה נֶאֱמַר "בְּכָל מְאֹדֶךָ"? וְאִם נֶאֱמַר "בְּכָל מְאֹדֶךָ", לָמָּה נֶאֱמַר "בְּכָל נַפְשְׁךָ"? אִם יֵשׁ לְךָ אָדָם שֶׁגּוּפוֹ חָבִיב עָלָיו מִמָּמוֹנוֹ, לְכָךְ נֶאֱמַר "בְּכָל נַפְשְׁךָ". וְאִם יֵשׁ לָךְ אָדָם שֶׁמָּמוֹנוֹ חָבִיב עָלָיו מִגּוּפוֹ, לְכָךְ נֶאֱמַר "בְּכָל מְאֹדֶךָ".	**Sanhedrin 74a** It is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Eliezer says: It is stated: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). If it is stated: "With all your soul," why is it also stated: "With all your might," which indicates with all your material possessions? And if it is stated: "With all your might," why is it also stated: "With all your soul"? One of these clauses seems to be superfluous. Rather, this serves to teach that if you have a person whose body is more precious to him than his property, it is therefore stated: "With all your soul." That person must be willing to sacrifice even his life to sanctify God's name. And if you have a person whose property is more precious to him than his body, it is therefore stated: "With all your might." That person must even be prepared to sacrifice all his property for the love of God.

- **Rabbi Eliezer reads *VeAhavta* as speaking differently to different people, addressing each person according to their values. What do you think of a framework, religious or otherwise, that accounts for individual differences in that way? Might that kind of personalization have limits?**

- **Rabbi Eliezer assumes that different people struggle with different sacrifices. What do you think would be hardest for you to give up for something you believed in?**

Many centuries after the sources above, the English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) wrote one of her most famous poems, "How Do I Love Thee?" (Sonnet 43). This poem, although written for Browning's future husband, echoes many of the ideas which this sheet has explored.

How Do I Love Thee?
How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

- **What are some connections you notice between Browning's poem and the sources above?**
- **What is one line or phrase from the poem that stands out to you? Why?**
- **Have there been moments when you felt an especially strong emotional connection to God—or you felt emotionally distant from Him?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Of the various approaches presented in this sheet, which interpretation of the verse resonates most with you, and why?
2. If you were explaining this verse to a friend who knew nothing about Judaism, what would you say it is really asking of us?
3. Some Jews have the tradition to recite this verse, along with the rest of the Shema, every morning and evening. How might the ideas in the verse take on different meanings at the beginning versus the end of one's day?
4. The Torah does not shy away from stories of pious people who question God; for example, Abraham famously challenges God over the fate of Sodom, yet he remains deeply devoted. Based on what you've learned here, where is there room

for doubt and questioning in the relationship the *VeAhavta* describes?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Vaetchanan, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Vaetchanan page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find great material on Sefaria's Vaetchanan topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Shema, *VeAhavta*, Love, and Love of God.

While this sheet focused on the second half of the verse, the first half is also worth thinking about: what might it mean to be commanded to *feel* something? If you are interested in seeing what commentators have written on this section, you may enjoy exploring the resources available on Sefaria at this link.

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