

God Loves You and Me

Shabbat Ki Tavo 5783

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“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” I bet you did not expect me to begin my sermon **that** way! Some of our congregants grew up singing that song. Others have heard their children sing it, in some cases to the parents’ chagrin. Even those of us who were raised Jewish, with only Jewish family members, are familiar with the song. And, perhaps, we have wondered why there is no Jewish equivalent. “God loves me, this I know, for the Torah tells me so?”

Perhaps it’s not that simple, or at least it doesn’t seem that way, when it comes to Jewish theology.

From Kindergarten through high school graduation, I went to St. John’s School in Houston, an independent school, only loosely affiliated with the Episcopal church next door. We would have chapel in that church’s sanctuary every Wednesday, though the speakers were rarely its priests. Instead, a variety of clergy, including our rabbi, would speak there each year.

One Wednesday, when I was in fourth grade, the pastor of Houston’s First Baptist Church was the speaker. He told the assembled school community that the “God of the ancient Hebrews” was a harsh and vengeful God, and that Jesus had come to replace that strict, unforgiving justice with love. Here’s where one might interject that only a person destined to become a rabbi would remember a fourth grade theological problem a half century later.

I was offended, but I also had no idea what the pastor was talking about. In all of my nine and a half years of paying attention in Religious School and at services, I had never heard that our God was harsh or unloving. That Baptist preacher had no idea what he was talking about. Or so I thought.

My parents called our rabbi, and he explained. Christian theology often teaches exactly what the pastor proclaimed. The God of the “Old Testament” had established rules by which the people were required to live, with the threat of severe punishment should they stray. Jesus, by contrast, lovingly offered forgiveness and had sacrificed his own blood to remit the sins of all believers. Christians have the right to their own theology, the rabbi explained, but not to define ours. He promised to speak with the pastor about the impact his words would have on Jewish children, and my parents called the school.

What I don't remember our rabbi doing, though, was telling my parents what we **do** believe about God's love. What **does** the Torah teach? Does the God of ancient Israel, our God, love us?

Reading this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, we might not be convinced. God, we are told, will bless the Children of Israel if they observe God's commandments, the *mitzvot*, but will harshly curse them if they do not. Deuteronomy 28 is one of the Torah's longest chapters, at sixty-nine verses—fourteen devoted to blessings, while the remaining fifty-five elaborate on the threatened curses.

Our prayer book, by contrast, views the *mitzvot* differently. The blessing immediately preceding the *Sh'ma* is called *Ahavat Olam*, “Everlasting Love.” God, our liturgy affirms, bestows love on us with the gift of Torah, *mitzvot* to guide our lives. Just as healthy and appropriate parents provide rules and expectations with the hope of shaping their children into good and worthy adults—that is, because the parents love their children—so does God provide Torah so that we might live our lives fully and positively.

That theme will reappear in just over a week's time, as we will welcome the New Year on Rosh Hashanah Eve. We will recite the stirring and familiar words of *Avinu Malkeinu* and hear its music. Perhaps we would overlook what we mean when we call God by those two names, *Avinu Malkeinu*, Parent and Sovereign—or, in the poetic rendering of *Mishkan HaNefesh*, “Almighty and Merciful.” God is like a parent, promulgating and enforcing laws to better God's children through discipline. But God isn't only a loving parent. God is also the Sovereign of the universe, responsible for order in the world. Justice and mercy must exist in balance.

God would prefer to be loving. In a striking Talmudic passage, our sages imagined that God prays these words: “May it be My will that My mercy will overcome My anger towards Israel for their transgressions, ... and may I conduct myself toward My children with the attribute of mercy, that I may approach them [without undue focus on] the letter of the law.”ⁱ

The rabbis who shaped Judaism out of the rubble of the destroyed Jerusalem Temple did not imagine the harsh God of strict justice described by that Baptist preacher at St. John's School Wednesday chapel fifty years ago. Instead, they understood that God had an **obligation** to exact justice but a **preference** to respond to the people with love.

Early in this week's portion, before those blessings and overwrought curses, we read a paragraph familiar to us from the Passover Haggadah: “My father was a

fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried out to the Eternal, the God of our ancestors, and the Eternal heard our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The Eternal freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents, bringing us to this place and giving us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”ⁱⁱ We aren’t told that the Israelites **did** anything to deserve liberation. God loves them, saving them when they cry out, just because they are God’s children. God loves us, that we know, for the Torah tells us so.

We are currently observing the Hebrew month of Elul, a time of contemplation preceding the High Holy Days. It has been said that the name of the month might be viewed as an acronym, composed of the first letter of each of the four powerful words from the biblical Song of Songs: *Ani l’dodi v’dodi li*, “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine.”ⁱⁱⁱ The sages reject the notion that Song of Songs, a book of Hebrew love poetry, describes physical attraction between two human beloveds. Instead, they understand it as describing the love affair between God and the Jewish people. At this season, God beckons us to return in repentance to our God who loves us and wants us to be the best human beings we can be, faithful to the essence of Torah. At this season, we pray that God will respond to us, flawed though we be, with unconditional love. Let us all feel the power of God’s love, at this season and always.

Amen.

ⁱ T.B. *Berachot* 7a.

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 26:6-10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Song of Songs 6:3.