Correspondence

Biblical Love

To the Editors:

James A. Diamond has once again put students of the Bible and of Jewish thought in his debt with a subtle and penetrating reading of biblical texts about love ("Love's Human Bondage: A Biblical Warning," Azure 44, Spring 2011). Studded with sparkling insights, Diamond's essay discovers in the Bible a stark warning:

> Passionate, unrestrained love, when directed toward other human beings, is fraught with danger. As such, it is safer for it to remain in the religious or spiritual domain. For only by making God the ultimate object of our desire, the Bible seems to say, can we ensure that love will serve as the positive, life-affirming force it was meant to be.

Diamond's study should be read as a corrective to what I take to be, sadly, a more widely accepted reading of the commandment to love God with all one's heart, all one's soul, and all one's might (Deuteronomy 6:5). One might expect that a belief in one God who created all human beings in the divine image would lead to a universalist ethic, according to which all human beings are equal in the eyes of God, and equally beloved by him. One might also expect that a messianic belief grounded in such a view of humanity would lead to a view of the messianic era as one in which all human beings stand equally before God.

But, as it turns out, many Western monotheists have managed to avoid the universalist consequences of the notion that all human beings are created in the divine image, often by arguing that if there is only one God, then there is only one "approved" way of approaching him. Anyone who seeks to approach him in any other way is often seen as being excluded from communion with God, and even as less than fully human.

Overall, classical Judaism resisted this pernicious temptation rather more successfully than did classical Christianity and Islam (by finding, for example, a place in the world to come for *hasidei umot haolam,* the righteous among the nations, and never saying that there is no salvation outside of the synagogue). But the *halachic* tradition interprets the biblical commandment (repeated, as Maimonides reminds us, thirty-six times in the Bible) to love the stranger or foreigner (*ger*) in a very restrictive fashion, namely as loving proselytes as an instance of the

broader commandment to love one's fellow (Jew).

From the medieval period onward, the restrictive, particularist reading of the nature of God's love for humanity has come to dominate much of traditional Jewish discourse. A variety of figures (R. Judah Halevi being perhaps the most moderate of them) have found ways to limit the scope of God's interest and love to Jews alone, and even to argue that Gentiles are not really or fully made in the image of God (as did, for instance, the Maharal of Prague, the Baal HaTanya, and a whole host of other Kabbalists). Maimonides in the twelfth century and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook in the twentieth (at least, as he is read by interpreters such as Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun) stand out as bright exceptions to this dreary rule.

Purposely ignoring Jewish particularists, Diamond has presented a compelling alternative perspective on the Jewish Bible. He rescues Judaism from some of its darker urges and reminds us that the Torah—given in the wilderness and not in the Land of Israel—is ultimately addressed to *all* human beings, all of whom are created in the image of God, all of whom are beloved by God, and all of whom should be the objects of our concern—as Jews, and as human beings.

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To the Editors:

James A. Diamond's excellent essay is a much-needed corrective to many presumptions about love in the Bible that either idealize it as the cure for all ills (a view often buttressed, erroneously, by rabbinic tradition, with its ascription of "Love your neighbor as yourself" [Leviticus 19:18] to Hillel the Elder) or reduce it to discussions of vassal treaties and the like. Examining key biblical passages about love, Diamond instead highlights the extent to which love for another person in the Bible is deemed problematic.

He offers, for instance, a fresh and persuasive reading of the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) and of other love scenes in the biblical text. He shows how often love between humans, as depicted in the Bible, either threatens the loss of self or generates conflict. Only love for God is proffered unambiguously as a desideratum. Diamond also shows compellingly that, according to the Bible, only by loving God do we not *lose* our humanity, but rather recover it. This perspective,

Diamond contends, is the exact reverse of some current notions of love (as expressed by William James, but found as well in more recent writings) in which love of God is seen as dangerous and prone "to expel human love."

Moreover, Diamond shows how even the most touted celebration of passionate love, namely that of Song of Songs, in fact expresses grave suspicion about such love. The Song, he argues, illustrates the danger of self-surrender; it is replete with warnings and concludes with the insistence on autonomy. As Diamond rightly notes, interpreters have long resisted this message, implying instead that the narrative ends with a union between the lovers, and not, as it in fact does, with their separation.

I heartily concur with most of Diamond's arguments throughout his essay. But I would suggest a slightly different way of looking at one of the issues that he usefully addresses. In his analysis of Song of Songs, Diamond highlights the tension between two models of human interaction—giving of oneself and autonomy—and draws a firm line between them. He correctly illustrates the ways in which the Song reiterates the dangers of passionate human love, underscoring the risk of fusion and loss of self. But the text's overarching messages are not about the need to abjure love in order to secure autonomy. True, it acknowledges love as a great power, and like all great powers, it must be handled with care. And, yes, the Song does end with the beloved dismissing her lover. But it may overstate the case to say that her concluding statement is a final "desperate plea to preserve her autonomy before becoming submerged into her lover." The terms of endearment with which the beloved dismisses her lover in the final verse should provide a clue as to their ongoing intimacy. Less than a "desperate" fight, the woman's concluding words—and the Song as a whole—recognize cycles of union and separation as essential dynamics of human love. In this context, one may wish to read Francis Landy's eloquent study *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (1983), in which he highlights the paradoxical drive toward both unity and separation as necessary dynamics of human growth, and the ultimate message of the Song. Learning to negotiate this necessary tension is useful not only for exploring human bonds (between individuals as well as in sociopolitical contexts), but also for reflecting on the human-divine relationship. The rabbis who cast the Song as an allegory of

the love between God and Israel have indeed inscribed this more complex allegiance to God and self as a worthy paradigm.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi
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To the Editors:

The thesis of James A. Diamond's stimulating and well-crafted article is stated succinctly in the first paragraph: "In matters of love… the biblical *dramatis personae* have a decidedly poor track record." There is no question he is right. Whether one looks to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Jacob and his sons, David and Bathsheba, or Solomon and his many wives, one finds discord, deceit, favoritism, uncontrolled lust, or simple neglect. As Diamond observes, few love relations in the Bible have happy endings. His conclusion: "For only by making God the ultimate object of our desire… can we ensure that love will serve as the positive, life-affirming force it was meant to be."

Anyone familiar with the last few chapters of the *Guide of the Perplexed* will find that Diamond's conclusion accords with that of Maimonides. According to the *Guide* 3:51, prophets are defined as people who turn wholly to God, and reject everything other than God. Thus, the patriarchs and Moses became so preoccupied with God that they begrudged the time they spent with other people, or on the daily routine of eating, sleeping, washing, etc. In Maimonides' view, they served other people in a perfunctory manner, "with their limbs only," because inwardly their heart was turned to God. Repeating a rabbinic legend, Maimonides goes so far as to say that Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were "kissed into heaven" because their love for God was so strong that they did not direct their thoughts to anything else.

It also accords with Plato. In the *Symposium*, *eros* is identified as the pre-eminent life-affirming force. While it may begin with a powerful attraction to another person, Diotima makes clear that even if one is united with that person, the gratification one gets will ultimately prove unsatisfying. Why? As Diotima gets Socrates to see, eros seeks to possess the good itself, and not just an instance of it. Not only that, but it seeks to possess the good *forever*. Translated into biblical terms, her position amounts to the claim that only God can satisfy the longing that energizes love. The comparison with Song of Songs as a metaphor for Israel's love of God follows immediately.

Despite the considerable weight behind the view that love of God

trumps every other kind, I want to call attention to a powerful thrust in the opposite direction—not one that proceeds from the writings of a philosopher, but one that is articulated directly by God. According to Genesis 2:18: "It is not good for man to be alone." The importance of this claim can best be grasped from its context. At the beginning of the story, Adam is blessed with knowledge, immortality, and an unmediated relationship with God. According to Maimonides (*Guide* 1:2), his knowledge was metaphysical in nature, since, prior to tasting the forbidden fruit, he had no awareness of the distinction between good and evil. In Platonic terms, he could possess the good forever.

On my reading, it is as if God is telling us that this is not enough: Adam needs a partner. Although the fact that his partner is created from one of his ribs is sometimes understood to imply subordination, I take it to imply affinity. *Pace* Levinas, the woman is not a mysterious "other," but in every sense an equal ("Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh," Genesis 2:23), who will help Adam with his work. But their relationship is more than economic. The Bible goes on to say that Adam will cling to his wife and they will become one flesh. I take "one flesh" not as a reference to mystical union, but as a euphemism for sex. Even in paradise, where metaphysical knowledge can be found in abundance, there is a need for sexual fulfillment—in fact, for sexual fulfillment without shame. The ensuing tragedy is not just that Adam and Eve defy God, but that when God confronts him, Adam separates himself from Eve: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree" (Genesis 3:12).

Note: It is not the strength of their attachment to each other that causes the downfall. Rather, it is caused by disobedience to God. Nor is there any suggestion that the attachment between Adam and Eve is but one step in an ascending hierarchy of love. What the story seems to be saying is that partnership between human beings, and the need to cling to someone else, is so essential that nothing—not even God—can take its place. After all, it was God's suggestion to create a partner for Adam, not Adam's.

I take this to mean that the idea of loving God with such force that one serves other people "with his limbs only" is suspect. While it is true that love stories in the Bible rarely, if ever, have happy endings, the moral is not that there is something inherently wrong with the attachment of one human being to another, but that the examples that the Bible offers of such an attachment are flawed. So, for that matter, are the examples of

human attachment to God. Abraham loves God, but sacrifices his relationship with Sarah and Isaac in the act of proving it. Moses loves God, but is not given the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. David loves God, but cannot build the Temple. In the end, every instance of love is flawed, no matter what its object. As I read the Bible, it is saying not that genuine love is impossible to achieve, only that its achievement in either divine or human form remains an aspiration.

Kenneth Seeskin
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James A. Diamond responds:

Menachem Kellner is certainly right to point out that one of those ideological legacies of Maimonides' thought that breaks the mold of religious exclusivism and supremacism is its remarkable universalism. Despite some inconsistencies here and there (not surprising for anyone familiar with his writing style), Maimonides was absolutely clear on a definition of humanity. In delineating its goals, he set forth for humanity a mandate that defies ethnic, cultural, and religious barriers. There is, he maintained, no *Jewish* God, but rather a Being that is the ultimate source of all being, whose truth is the same for all. There is also no Jewish human being *qua* human being. Although Jews might possess a particularly beneficial guide in the Torah, their lives' mission is shared by all human beings, who are tasked with striving for an ethical and intellectual perfection that favors no particular genetic constitution or heredity. This is made clear at the very outset of Maimonides' magnum opus, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, where the "image" (*tzelem*) of God in which human beings are created is identified with reason and thinking, the exercise of which cultivates one's own humanity and advances the interests of humanity as a whole. Human beings find their common ground with the divine not in Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, or any other religion, but instead in thoughtfulness—or, in other words, in that which *transcends* the particularist ritualistic frameworks that are the cause of so much divisiveness.

What is striking, however, is that Maimonides' philosophical universalism seamlessly translates into halacha—the quintessentially parochial embodiment of Judaism—precisely in his formulation of the primary *mitzva* to love God. And like any halachic obligation, Maimonides provides the concrete parameters for the proper performance of this mitzva. Yet fulfilling this command decidedly does *not*

require the unbridled passion that has led religions to bare their swords against those who do not share that same passion. Rather, it is achieved by a comprehensive appreciation of *all* of creation and its inhabitants through *understanding*. Maimonides' halachic formulation dovetails with the principal message of my article regarding the dangers inherent in unrestrained love—namely, that of self-abnegation, which can all too easily result in the sacrifice of other selves as well. Worshipping God out of love, Maimonides states, is to "do what is true because it is true" (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 10:3), and thus the motivation for loving God is not the ardor shown in turn by the beloved, but simply the "truth." Finally, Maimonides draws a direct proportionality between love and knowledge, since "one only loves God with the knowledge [with which] one knows him; according to the knowledge will be the love" (Laws of Repentance 10: 9). In a spectacular subversion of the potential for fanaticism that a blinding passion for God can engender, Maimonides makes *reason* the measure of that love. And, finally, if the measured pursuit of reason is what perfects the human "image" of God, then it follows that the love of God entails the refinement and development of one's own humanity.

The eminent biblical scholar Tamara Cohn Eskenazi sees Song of Songs as presenting a more complicated view of love than my more binary (either/or) one, specifically between the self-effacement that passionate love poses and the autonomy its suppression preserves. Though I agree with Eskenazi that love indeed involves the opposing impulses of absolute unity and separation at one and the same time, the Song seems to me to portray a relationship that is so wracked by the painful struggle between these two forces as to caution against love's ultimate consummation between the lover and the beloved. The danger of self-surrender looms so menacingly that the woman cannot *but* plead with her beloved to abscond, rather than suffer a life abdicated to another. Perhaps underlying what I have considered the Song's warning against a "love that is as strong as death" is the biblical concern with the ethical implications of such an all-consuming love. Allowing the self to become absorbed in the object of one's love not only is to live through the other, but is tantamount to a negation of self-worth.

Eskenazi's elegant depiction of "cycles of union and separation as essential dynamics of human love" must, however, be taken into account when grappling with the meaning of relationships in the biblical texts. She articulates

concisely what may underlie the great Medieval biblical exegete Nahmanides' conception of the evolution of the human being from a solitary creation in Genesis 1 to two separate entities in Genesis 2. Nahmanides sees the "not good" of solitary man as an existential malaise resulting from his being a single composite entity of male and female—a "bi-gendered" Adam, the epitome of human "union." He explains how the verse "I will make him a helpmate opposite him" (Genesis 2: 18) is a response to that problem. God realizes that "it is good that the mate stand opposite him, so that he can see it and either separate from it or unite with it according to his will" (commentary on Genesis 2:18). What is problematic about Adam's original, androgynous condition is that it entails a permanent state of unity between the male and female, and the lack of a *choice* on the part of either to form or sever a relationship with the other. The "good" of the human species is that there can be both union *and* separation between the sexes, each instigated by an independent exercise of will—as Eskenazi puts it, those "cycles of union and separation" that are vital to the dynamics of human love.

Kenneth Seeskin begins by identifying my position on the biblical mandate of loving God with the Maimonidean ideal of Moses, whose love of God culminated in a kind of disembodied state: His body was physically involved in sociopolitical affairs, but his mind solely focused on God. However, the thrust of my argument was to endorse not this ideal, but rather that of Abraham, the only biblical persona characterized as God's "lover" (Isaiah 41:8). What that passion instigated, in Maimonides' view, was not a violent missionary crusade, in which others were forced into becoming equally impassioned lovers, but rather a campaign of reason, debate, and systematic pedagogy, all with the aim of forming a "nation that knows God" (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1:3). His love did not promote a formal religion or a kind of fanaticism, but, on the contrary, realized itself in others' enlightenment, in their delight in coming to "know" the true God. The danger I described—an unrestrained love in which one can all too easily lose oneself in others—applies equally to a relationship with the divine. Child sacrifice is an extreme logical culmination of such an impassioned love, in which others become expendable in the act of worshipping an object of desire. Lest one assume that such an ethically abhorrent love for God has long been relegated to the ancient past, one need only consider the contemporary phenomenon of

children sent out with suicide belts and subsequently valorized by their parents as supreme lovers of God.

Seeskin's critique of my position rests on what might be the profoundest of biblical assertions: "It is not good for man to be alone." This divine declaration can mean many things in terms of relationships, including love, but in the "one flesh" created by the union between man and woman, love is conspicuously absent. Seeskin quite correctly interprets the "one flesh" state as a metaphor for the sexual act—the closest enactment of physical union possible—but again, love plays no role here, at least in the Garden of Eden's idealized anticipation of it. My conclusion, then, is that the "not good" of man's primordial solitary state lies in its being devoid of any social, political, and sexual dimensions, but not of love. Here I am partial to the midrashic interpretation of the "not good," cited by Rashi, in which man's unique solitude may lead to his confusing himself with a divinity: Just as God is unique above, so man is unique below. This, I believe, is precisely the danger the biblical text comes to warn us about. Love can be so absolute and so overwhelming as to lead to the idolization of another human being, which was the problem with man's solitary state to begin with. That same danger applies to a love that is so eviscerating to one of the parties that, in the end, all that remains is once again a solitary individual.

Halachic Reform

To the Editors:

I fully agree with the sentiments expressed in the important essay "Halacha's Moment of Truth," by Evelyn Gordon and Hadassah Levy (Azure 43, Winter 2011). However, we would do well to remember that we must not have overly high expectations of halacha. Like any other legal system, halacha cannot solve all problems the way we would like it to. The reason is not any failing on the system's part, but the very nature of the problems themselves: When religious, moral, or social values conflict, there are no easy solutions. The ultimate values by which men live cannot be easily reconciled. One cannot reconcile full liberty with full equality; the full liberty of wolves can't be resolved with the full liberty of sheep. Justice, mercy, knowledge, and happiness will all, inevitably, collide. Thus, a perfect solution to all human problems—i.e., of how to live—simply doesn't exist. Utopian solutions, attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable, are by

definition incoherent. The most we can hope for, in such matters, is a fair compromise, a workable trade-off: How much equality, how much liberty? How much justice, how much mercy? How much kindness, how much truth? These compromises are bound to be made.

The same is true of attempts to find solutions for halachic problems. Halacha straddles the thin line between what we want it to *be* and what we are able to *do*, between the wishful "ought" and the realistic "is." It demands authenticity and personal connection one day, conformity and obedience the next. As such, it incorporates norms and behavior patterns that do not always accord with man's ideals and dreams.

The great halachists, who struggle to strike this delicate balance, are themselves part of the alleged problem. They are thus highly competent to decide on matters of halacha, not in spite of, but *because* of their human limitation. Halacha is, first and foremost, a human system (albeit rooted in the divine word), embodying human contradiction and human constraints. It therefore takes humans, not angels, to determine it.

At the same time, halachists must also realize their own limitations. They do not possess absolute knowledge, for the simple reason that—unlike scientists—they do not deal with impartial conditions. Theirs are the questions of human life, to which ideal answers do not exist. Once they (or their followers) forget this fact, and assume the mantle of infallibility, they are no longer in the world of halacha. *Lo bashamayim hi* (Deuteronomy 30:12), God tells us, the Torah is no longer in heaven. Halacha is, and must necessarily be, imperfect, since life can never be perfect. It is precisely for these reasons that halachists do have the power to make the changes for which Gordon and Levy's essay calls. But as long as they hold to their unrealistically utopian vision of halacha, they will not dare to make the changes that are needed. How, after all, could one compromise on the ideal? But there is no ideal, they must realize, and absolute answers do not exist. The most they can do is offer guidelines as to the best possible trade-offs.

This is no tragedy, either: It is God who set up these paradoxes and who demands that man live under these imperfect conditions. This, essentially, is what halacha is all about. Yet, in their great love for it, halachists do not realize that they have missed the woods for the trees. Their task is not to tend to an individual shrub; it is to plant forests.

In asking for both religious authenticity and conformity, fairness and justice, the need for religiously

committed conversions and the need for Jewish unity, the sanctity of the *shmita* year and the economic well-being of farmers, halacha nearly collapses in its attempt to satisfy all. The structures it builds are not the castles of security they are declared to be. They are bridges, dangling loosely and precariously balanced.

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