

Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus
by Lois Tverberg
Chapter 3: *Shema*: Loving God with Everything You've Got

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In elaborating on Deut 6:5/Mark 12:30's command to love God with one's whole heart, soul and strength, Tverberg quotes from Maimonides and Rabbi Spitzer. What do these quotes say about the way we should love God?
2. The Song of Songs has traditionally been interpreted as an allegory of the love between Christ, or God, and the Church, or Israel. The same Rabbi Akiba whom Tverberg described as reciting the *Shema* at his martyrdom said at the council of Jamnia in 90 AD, "All the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." The SoS was the most frequently interpreted book of medieval Christianity, making it a much more prominent text in their lives than ours. The contemporary rabbi Shalom Carmy went so far as to say, "Holiness is synonymous with intimacy; that is what the Song of Songs tells us, in a way unique among the books of Jewish Scripture."

The allegorical reading of SoS is not without its difficulties, however. For this reason, some have turned to the writing of St. John of the Cross, whose *Spiritual Canticle* rewrites the SoS in a way more amenable to allegory. Read the following excerpt from *Spiritual Canticle*. How might the SoS, or Hosea [a book steeped in the love (*hesed*) of God] or other love poetry for God help you explore more deeply your love for God?

We shall go at once
To the deep caverns of the rock
Which are all secret,
There we shall enter in
And taste of the new wine of the pomegranate.

There you will show me
That which my soul desired;
And there You will give at once,
O You, my life!
That which You gave me the other day.

The breathing of the air,
The song of the sweet nightingale,
The grove and its beauty
In the serene night,
With the flame that consumes, and gives no pains.

3. Tverberg points out that "in Hebrew, the heart (*lev* or *levav*) doesn't just describe your

emotions; it also refers to your mind and thoughts as well” (46). As an example of this mental devotion to God she points to Orthodox rabbis' memorization of the Talmud and Scripture. This is in keeping with Jesus' command for true disciples to “remain” (*meno*: abide, continue, remain) in his word (John 8:31).

Scripture memorization is a tradition in various parts of the church as well. William Wilberforce recited Psalm 119 while walking from his home to Parliament. One modern believer, who has memorized Philippians and 1 Timothy was asked how he accomplishes this. He responded that each day he simply recites what he's memorized so far, then adds a verse, remaining with that verse until it too is memorized.

How have you employed Scripture memorization? Have you found it useful? Is this really an important component of loving God with your mind?

4. Jesus employed Scripture memorization when engaging in spiritual warfare with the devil in the wilderness. In this way, Scripture memorized as an act of loving devotion to God and discipleship in following Jesus serves as a primary defense in spiritual warfare, in identifying the lies of the enemy. Dennis McCallum writes of this,

According to studies... the average evangelical's knowledge of Scripture today is negligible. As our popular churches continue to offer entertainment and light topical teaching geared to the lowest common denominator, the penalty is that Christians are not learning the Bible adequately. Most longstanding Christians today know some Bible stories and often a few pet proof-texts, but little more. Most don't even know basic Christian doctrine, and few could declare to you the truth in the midst of spiritual battle. To know what God says about your situation or the concept with which you're dealing, you have to learn the Bible at a much deeper level than most Christians in the west have done. (*Satan and his Kingdom*, 100)

- (a) Satan is described in Scripture as the “accuser of the brethren” for his attacks with lies and accusations which poison our love for God with resentment and mistrust and undermine our trust in God's love for us. When you experience thoughts accusing you of sins for which you have already confessed and repented of, what verses do you turn to?
 - (b) How have you found Scripture memorization useful in repelling the attacks of the enemy or resisting the influence of the world? How might this be seen as a recollection of God's love for us?
5. [Read Paldiel's account of Tadeusz Soroka.] In trying to understand what might motivate the acts of extreme altruism on the parts of the Gentiles who helped the Jews during the Holocaust, Mordecai Paldiel writes,

We submit that the teachings of *hesed* and *gemilut hasadim* ['Righteous among the Nations'] as all-encompassing, universal principles can help us resolve this enigma. *Hesed*... is an attribute whose origin some Jewish sources trace back to the divine

person—to the very root cause of Reality and Being. As undiluted and unconditional love, it is the Creator's indispensable gift to life—its medicine and sustaining power. Its presence is not felt in everyday, mundane times, although it is there for life could not subsist without it. In exceptional times, such as the Holocaust, it crystallizes and assumes form for all to behold...¹

Tverberg draws upon *hesed* as another way to understand the love commanded in the *Shema*. What distinctive aspect of the love we are to have for the Father and one another does this term add?

6. The word *me'od* in Deut 6:5 is translated in the NRSV and NASB “might,” in the KJV and NIV “strength,” in the *Common Jewish Bible* “resources,” and in *The Message* “all you've got.” The *Jewish Study Bible* echoes Tverberg's second meaning for *me'od*: “While the word's basic meaning is 'might' or 'strength,' it was understood as 'wealth' or 'property' both at the Qumran and in early rabbinic literature.”

How does this perspective differ from the common Christian notion, based on the “first-fruits” concept of the OT, that we give the first, best portion of our possessions to God, and use the rest for ourselves (and in fulfillment of our responsibilities)? How does Tverberg explain love of God with “all our increase”?

7. While the greatest example of Christian love is found in Jesus, perhaps the most eloquent description of it is in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

What elements of this can be applied to our love of God?

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Fun fact: Many first-century rabbis took the command to obey one's parents as the greatest of the commandments. (Keener's commentary on Matthew, p. 530.)

¹ “*Hesed and the Holocaust*,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* **23** (1986), 90.

Outline

1. Illustration—Viktor Frankl thinks of his wife and feels bliss: “In his darkest hour, love for his wife filled him with such joy that he grasped why the angels could spend all eternity in worshipful love of God.” This is an example of love with heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength. Christ's sacrifice is another example of such holistic love.
2. How do you command love? Quote from Miamonides about love of God being like a heartsick lover unable to think of anything else. (Again, an example about emotions, not actions.) Quote from Rabbi Spitzer again saying this love for God is monomaniacal (reminiscent of NT Wright's love quote). But Hebrew “ahavah” describes not just the emotion but also the actions associated with it, meaning: to act lovign toward, to be loyal to. We love enemies, too.
3. “With all your heart”--“heart” refers not just to the center of emotions but also to the mind or thoughts. She takes this as meaning we should study and even memorize Scripture.
4. With all your life
5. *Hesed*: long -acting love
6. Me'od—loving God with your “very.”