

Judaism: A Love Story

A Theological, Ethical, and Zionist Perspective



Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

JUDAISM A LOVE STORY

A Theological, Ethical, and Zionist Perspective

Ohr Torah Stone
Maggid Books

Judaism: A Love Story
A Theological, Ethical, and Zionist Perspective

First Edition, 2025

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.korenpub.com

© Shlomo Riskin 2025

Image credit, chap. 8: Menora, Germany 1931,
Photo 12 / Alamy Stock Photo

The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case
of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 978-1-59264-696-8, *hardcover*

Printed and bound in Israel

Dedicated to my beloved Vicky,
To my wonderful wife, the love of my life,
My anchor, which gives me safe harbor!
For our very special family you take prime responsibility,
While you're also chief accountant and midnight barber.
You nurture the wounded birds, you are patient with the nerds,
Your *hesed* just continues on and on,
But of all your good deeds, the commitment which truly leads,
Are all the hours you devote to the *maḥsan*.
You're the one who did my packing, you always provide whatever
is lacking,
Whatever is accomplished would not be without you!
Your judgment is unerring, you even serve me morning herring,
And your every word is 100 percent true!
Your food is a delight, your advice is always right,
And your priorities are always set straight.
You daven with real *kavanna*, you don't put off till *mañana*,
And you're my remarkable life's partner and soul-mate.
Please grow old along with me, I hope the best is yet to be,
But even if not, we must be grateful to God Above.
We've had sixty-one years of much joy and few tears,
Filled with *nachas*, great respect, and deep love.



With much respect and admiration for

Harav Shlomo Riskin

*We are honored to be Talmidim of the Great Rav Riskin,
who has inspired us throughout our lives.
From understanding our deep relationship with Eretz Yisrael
to building a Judaism that reflects compassionate justice
and moral righteousness.*

May you continue לעולם to be a source of inspiration.

Helene and Robbie Rothenberg

Contents

Introduction xi

Acknowledgments xvii

Chapter 1

God's Love of Humanity: Giving Meaning to Life 1

Chapter 2

The Complex Romance of the Prayer Experience 23

Chapter 3

Forbidden Actions: The Roots of Jewish Morality 45

Chapter 4

Shabbat: A Sanctuary in Time 59

Chapter 5

Rosh HaShana: A New Year with the Shofar's Wails 77

Chapter 6

Yom Kippur: A Fast Day Festival? 91

Chapter 7

Sukkot: God's Homes on Earth 103

Chapter 8

Hanukka: The Victory of Light 125

Chapter 9	
<i>Purim: A Jewish Victory in the Diaspora?</i>	147
Chapter 10	
<i>Raḥamim BaDin: Kill or Convert Amalek?</i>	167
Chapter 11	
<i>The Hebrew Lunar Calendar: A Path to Freedom</i>	187
Chapter 12	
<i>Passover: The Responsibility of Freedom</i>	207
Chapter 13	
<i>Passover to Shavuot: Our Journey to Redemption</i>	231
Chapter 14	
<i>Shavuot: A Festival of Anticipation</i>	249
Chapter 15	
<i>The Ninth of Av: The Unfinished Symphony</i>	265
Chapter 16	
<i>Tu BeAv: From Destruction to Renewal</i>	277
Epilogue	283

Introduction

This is a book about love.

No, it is not a conventional love story, a romantic novel that tells the fictional story of two lovers and the zigzag, on-again-off-again path of their romance. This is rather a cosmic love story between God and Israel, the eternal nature of that love, and the mutual commitment that it demands but does not always receive. It tells of the havoc, separation, and exile that such infidelity engenders, and expresses the bliss of forgiveness, rapprochement, and renewal when the faithfulness on both sides is vindicated, as is happening in our generation – our return after two millennia to our eternal homeland – even as we are aware that even today this love still has ups and downs. It also points toward our challenge in present-day Israel to turn the “beginning of the sprouting of redemption” into a universal historic redemption which will encompass the entire world with God’s loving peace.

But do not be put off by the mystical and utopian sounds of these words. On the most basic level, this is a book about Jewish observance and the philosophy behind that observance. It is a book that follows the rhythm of the first primordial biblical week and the cycle of the seasons of the Jewish year, the festivals and the fast days which illuminate the

Hebrew calendar with rituals and observances – how they bring poetry and pageantry into everyday family life, how they infuse human existence with meaning and significance, and how they demonstrate God’s love for us and foster familial love for all humanity.

But first we must attempt to understand the nature of the world into which we were born, and – to whatever extent possible – the nature of the God who created that world. The most ancient text that deals with these issues is the Bible, given by God to Moses close to four thousand years ago according to our tradition, a book which is still a bestseller, and the foundation of Judaism, Christianity, and to a certain extent Islam. We begin our study with the biblical account of the creation of the world and, in particular, the creation by God of the human being. I believe that in order to understand Judaism, to feel its pulse as one proceeds through its ceremonies and rituals, one needs to understand what happened on that primordial “day” of the creation of the first *Homo sapiens*.

Fascinatingly, we see in our biblical sources the centrality of love in the very formation of the human being, since the first human was created in the image and from the very essence of the Divine Creator. The Hebrew word for love is *ahava*, built upon a two-letter verb form, *hav*, which means “to give” (Gen. 30:1). Hence, when it records that God created the first human being by imparting or inspiriting within him/her a portion of God’s own “image” or essence,¹ the Bible is portraying God’s initial human creation as an act of divine love, as an act of divine giving.

The Bible further states (Gen. 2:7): “And the Loving God formed the human being dust from the earth and exhaled into the nostrils of that earthen-clay vessel the soul-breath of life and the human became a ‘living being.’” Our mystical Sages (in the Zohar and the *Tanya*; see chapter 1) emphasize that one’s exhalations come from the most internal aspect of our inner beings, and the most authoritative biblical translation, *Targum Onkelos*, takes the last two words of the verse to mean רוח ממללא, translating נפש חיה as “a communicating spirit.” One of the most significant ways in which humans are qualitatively different from beasts is our ability to communicate words and ideas. When God gave

1. See Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:17. I develop the etymology and theology of this idea in greater depth in chapter 1.

a part of His essential being to us, a portion from the Divine on High (our souls), He demonstrated His love, and when God communicated His wisdom and will as to how we ought to live our lives best, He also demonstrated His love (see chapter 1). And so, the eminent philosopher/theologian Martin Buber teaches that wherever there is positive communication between people, God is to be found, especially within loving human relationships.²

Moreover, it follows that all of the mitzvot, commandments, we were given by God in the Torah (the divine biblical teaching) for us to perform, express the divine love relationship between God and His most exalted creations – the Jewish people – the forerunners and heralds of all of humanity. We are to serve as God’s partners in teaching the world the best way to live lives of meaning and commitment, and thereby serve as God’s partners in perfecting the world under God’s kingship. It is the passion aroused by this love that infuses deep meaning and motivation as we perform the rituals, celebrate the festivals, and immerse ourselves in the depths of the Torah.

Throughout my rabbinic career of nearly sixty years, I have continually been inspired by the very passion of which I speak, and especially as I see it arise in students who decide to live their lives dedicated to teaching Torah, in Jewish adults who newly begin to discover their heritage, and in Jews-by-choice, who, not born into Judaism, may have initially chosen to convert in order to embrace a Jewish partner, but after having begun to study and experience our tradition, have come to lovingly embrace Judaism wholeheartedly. This book is dedicated to all of these three groups of people, with profound admiration for their ability to feel and transmit the fire of love that lies behind all Jewish observance.

However, at the same time, I must admit that I harbor a certain sadness. I am concerned that within the circles of observant Jewry of

-
2. You will note that this explanation would interpret DNA also as the Divine Natural Association uniting all of humanity, both men and women, by everyone’s inherent “image of God – *tzelem Elokim*.” It must be understood that God is beyond gender; the Hebrew *Elohim* seems to be a masculine form and *Shekhina* is a feminine form, but adverbs like “him” and “her” are never to be taken literally when speaking of the Divine. Our kabbalistic sources attribute both masculine and feminine aspects to the Divine, who encompasses both aspects together.

JFBs (Jews from birth), the passion of which I speak is often missing. One of the greatest dangers, our Sages warn us, is that our performance of the commandments becomes one of rote. And since we often tend to take for granted that with which we grew up, and, given the many “Jewish responsibilities” that we are expected to assume, it becomes even more difficult to avoid the danger of “rote” observance which is a brand of Judaism-all-too-easy to cast off. I can only hope that this book will enable even the more observant-background Jews to see their traditions in a new light and experience a newfound passion for Torah study and mitzva experience. After all, if we do not feel passionate about Torah, we will rarely be able to transmit our heritage to the next generation! And we must remember that our most impelling command is to hand over our tradition of freedom and equality for every individual in a world of compassionate righteousness, moral justice, and universal love to the next generation, as we learn from the *Shema*: “You shall teach Torah diligently to your children,” and from Passover, the very first festival of our peoplehood: “And you shall tell it to your children” (Haggada, Ex. 13:8). It is by loving the Torah lessons of love, compassion, and righteousness that we bring meaning and, hopefully, redemption to the world.

Indeed, our commitment to transmit Jewish values and to live Jewishly is especially important for the Jews living in Israel. Truly, living the Jewish life of loving and giving, celebrating our feasts and fasts, is very much in sync with the culture and calendar of the Jewish state. But we dare never forget that the purpose of our state is to be a beacon of light for all the nations of the world, spreading the light of freedom and equality for all, illuminating the world with God’s rays of peace and love. The pathways leading to such an idyllic world lie in the words of our Torah teachings, in the Torah songs we sing as we conduct our symphony of love and dance, leading us to redemption.

But do not misunderstand my intent: Judaism does not preach the necessity of “Judaism for everyone.” Our prophet Micah (4:2–5), after quoting the words of Isaiah (2:3–4) – that at the time of universal redemption, when “the Torah will come forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem,” when humankind “will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, nation will not lift up sword against nation and humans will not learn war anymore” – posits

that “each nation will walk in the name of its god and we, Israel, will walk in the name of the Lord our God” in a world society of religio-ritual pluralism and ethical universalism (the Seven Commandments of the Children of Noah).³

I firmly believe that Judaism is a love story, a romance between ourselves and God, ourselves and Torah, ourselves and our forebears, ourselves and our future generations, ourselves and every other Jew, ourselves and every other human on the earth. And in all of these romantic partners resides the image of the Divine, the *tzelem Elokim*. To love God and to love Torah must lead to loving humanity, as I hope you will soon learn.

Like any human romance, this special romance, between person and God, between person and tradition, takes a lifetime of effort to develop. Each side must be open to enter into the romantic experience with the other, must be willing to trust the other, and at least begin to give of him/herself to the other. And likewise, every true and loving encounter between people will always include the presence of the Other, the Divine, and will be in the spirit of our sacred Torah tradition and its universal message of love to the world. It will always be (if I could be so bold as to suggest) a *ménage à trois*!

It takes time, study, and thought to develop the passion, to feel the spirit, to hear the music of this joint symphony of love. Our symphony must begin with a conversation between the individual (or individuals) and his/her “romantic partners” – Torah, forebears, other Jews, future generations, all human beings – together with God and our tradition, and with an initial experience of tasting Sabbath peace, joy, and song.

May this book inspire you to begin to develop both the love and the wisdom that are Judaism’s two great pillars. May each of us be a partner in helping to bring about that time of the complete fulfillment

3. The suggestion we are making is that the prophet Micah maintains that even in messianic times, when every nation will accept the ethical laws of the Torah, many will still retain their own religious beliefs. Micah is amending Isaiah’s messianic vision by permitting theological pluralism for the gentile nations as long as there is a universal acceptance of the ethics of the Torah. While our liturgy in the concluding paragraph of the *Aleinu* prayer clearly accepts Isaiah’s position, Micah’s openness to religious pluralism must be noted.

Judaism: A Love Story

of God's promise to Abraham: "Through you (Israel) shall be blessed all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3).

Shlomo Riskin
Efrat, Erev Shavuot 5784

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I thank the Almighty, who gave me the privilege of planting in His vineyard.

I must thank my rabbeim, chief among them Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, at whose feet I sat for seven years at Yeshiva University and who formed my most fundamental direction in talmudic learning, Jewish philosophy, and the primacy of halakha in Jewish life; Rav Soloveitchik was truly *Lamdan HaDor*. I owe a great deal to Rav Moshe Feinstein, *Posek HaDor*, who unstintingly gave me several hours of his precious time on Friday mornings for questions of *pesak* during my early years in the rabbinate at the new Lincoln Square Synagogue. And certainly, I owe much of my professional and existential calling to try to reach every Jew with love and without judgment to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Manhig HaDor*, whose counsel I sought at every important juncture of my life.

Yehi zikhram barukh.

Judaism: A Love Story

My gratitude and thanks to:

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander, president and *rosh hayeshiva*, Ohr Torah Stone, and Yinon Achiman, director general of Ohr Torah Stone, both of whom provided the encouragement and support for this book. Rabbi Edward Abramson, initiator and editor of the first draft of this book, a beloved student and a true friend who contributed many important insights. Rabbi Shalom Berger, final editor and invaluable *havruta* with whom I spent many enjoyable hours of learning, reviewing, and editing. I credit him with bringing this book to its final draft and without him this book would have never been published. David Katz, international director, for his dedication and support. Yehuda Shtauber, educational director of OTS, for his role in bringing my books to fruition. Sima Tuchman Freedman, director of communications, for her creative contributions. Rav Shuki Reich, my longstanding personal *havruta* and friend. Micky Mirvis, my executive assistant whose total dedication, commitment, wise counsel, and efficiency have enabled my multifaceted work for almost four decades. With appreciation to Helene and Robbie Rothenberg, special friends and supporters for many years.

And of course, the final product would never have been produced without the guidance and shepherding of my beloved friend Matthew Miller of Koren Publishers Jerusalem, managing editor Caryn Meltz who edited the manuscript with expertise, Tomi Mager who typeset the book, Tani Bayer who designed the cover, and Nechama Unterman and Esther Shafer who proofread the text with sharp eyes.

Chapter 1

God's Love of Humanity: Giving Meaning to Life

A WORLD OF GODLY MEANING OR A WORLD OF HAPPENSTANCE?

Judaism is essentially a template for a meaningful life meant not only for the Jews; it is rather a universal religion meant for every inhabitant of the world. Therefore, our Bible opens with God's creation of the universe, with the central figure in that universe being not the Jew, but the human being. The nature of the human being will soon become a major focus of this study, but first I must ponder the initial question of this chapter: What kind of world is it into which we were born? Is it a product of a God-Creator, Einstein's "Higher Intelligence," as it were, which itself would suggest a divine purpose to the world and to life, or is it the result of a happenstance big bang, a cosmic accident which occurred with neither rhyme nor reason? I might suggest that these two antithetical possibilities are actually verbalized by two great literary classics: the first chapter of Genesis in the Bible and the play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. After suffering a personal tragedy, King Macbeth cries out (act 5, scene 5): "[World, Life] is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." According to

Judaism: A Love Story

this view, there is no purpose, no direction, no vector to the life of an individual. Whatever happens, happens, and there is no higher design for any event, neither in the life of a person, nor of a nation, nor of the world. “Big bang” was, in truth, an accident: “In the beginning, there was happenstance.”

Very different are the opening words of the biblical Genesis, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” a veritable “headline” which dramatically transforms the “tale told by an idiot” into a premeditated world created by a Higher Intelligence, a Master of the Universe; if, indeed, there is such a Master, it stands to reason that His creation would have purpose and significance.

I experienced these two alternative worldviews many years ago in – of all places – a high school science class; specifically, in a biology laboratory. The lab instructor – who never formally told us his name but “student tradition” had for years referred to him as “The Worm” (although never to his face) – had us viewing slides of snowflakes under a microscope, taking note that each and every snowflake was hexagonal and that each flake when struck by the rays of the sun acts as a prism to refract all the colors of the rainbow – red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Each flake has a slightly different configuration of those colors and so each stands alone as a unique artistic masterpiece. As I examined each snowflake in turn, and requested slide after slide to check my observations, tears coursed down my cheeks, and I uttered again and again: “How great are Thy works, O God” (Ps. 104:24). The laboratory instructor looked at me with questioning surprise: “Riskin, what are you excited about? The ‘accident’ of the snowflake?” I then understood the sobriquet given by the students to their lab instructor. Like a worm, he was only able to look down into the dark earth, never capable of looking up at the glorious heavens of our magnificent universe.

And so, each of us has a choice – a real choice. We can choose the “tale told by an idiot” as our guideline for life, with all that it implies: a chaotic view of existence, with no internal logic, no ultimate responsibility, no divine design for a world absent of ultimate purpose and meaning. And if, indeed, there is no ultimate significance of anything, that which is generally characterized as Greek epicureanism is the best way

to live one's life: Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.¹ After all, in truth the world is not filled only with exquisite snowflakes; it also produces sudden, destructive earthquakes and debilitating genetic mutations. Perhaps it is the latter which most aptly characterize our condition on earth.

Undoubtedly, however, from an existential human perspective, it is not the "earthquake," but rather the "snowflake," that would be our preferred metaphor for the world. If we elect to follow the "snowflake" approach to life, with its echo of "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," our lives become filled with a sense of wonder, hopefully giving way to a feeling of meaningful direction, of clear responsibility for our actions, of the presence of a Director of that great orchestral piece called world, as "The old Master Painter from the far-away hills," a song from my childhood suggests.² And if, indeed, this is essentially a snowflake, and not an earthquake world, there may well be ultimate meaning and special function not only for humanity, the crown of God's creation, but even for each individual person during his/her sojourn through life. Hopefully, a study of the biblical view of the existential nature of the human being from the backdrop of a God-created

1. Although this phrase is usually assumed to be a quote from the philosopher Epicurus, it is not. A similar quote is actually found in Isaiah 22:13, wherein the prophet calls the people to repentance for their wrongdoings, lest they be killed by the enemy's army; But, instead, they decide to indulge in worldly pleasures, since they assume that they will soon die anyway. The idea is the same: Since we will eventually die, and nothing in the world really carries significance, then why not just enjoy the physical pleasures of the world with abandon? "And behold, there is joy and gladness in the slaying of cattle and slaughtering of sheep, in eating meat and drinking wine, eat and drink for tomorrow we die."
2. We are, of course, not using "snowflake" in its recent slang sense, referring to groups who think of themselves as special and delicate, to whom the usual exigencies of life do not apply. We are rather thinking of the snowflake as a metaphor for the wondrous divine Creation. Indeed, one of the names of the Divine utilized in the traditional texts of our Sages, as in the last blessing before the *Amida* in our morning prayers, is *Tzur Yisrael*, literally the "Rock of Israel." Our Sages teach us: "Do not read the word *Tzur*, which means rock or mainstay, but rather read it with a slight vocal change, *Tzayar Yisrael* – merely switching the *vav* for a *yod*, thereby changing the metaphor for God from an inanimate, unfeeling object (rock) to a sentient and sensitive Artist (Painter).

world will go a long way in directing us as to how to live a life of meaning – which is, after all, the most important quest facing each of us as we stand before what appears to be our one chance at life in this world.

**THE HUMAN BEING: ON THE ONE
HAND A COMPLEX ANIMAL**

Therefore, let us now attempt to understand from the text of the Bible the essential nature of the human being created by God. After God has created light, the seas, the world's vegetation, and the animals, the Bible states (Gen. 1:26): "And God said, 'Let us make the human being in our image, after our likeness.'" This verse cries out for interpretation. Who is "us"? Who is "our"? After all, God's unity, His Oneness, His ultimate vision of a world of compassionate righteousness and humanity redeemed is the very basis of the Bible, of Judaism, of all monotheistic faiths. The question powerfully presents itself: To whom is God speaking here?

There are many attempts at an explanation, but I am drawn to the elucidation of the Ramban (Nahmanides), Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194–1270), who wrote one of the deepest and most psychologically attuned of the traditional commentaries on the Torah.

The Ramban, in his commentary on Genesis 1:26, is of the opinion that God is addressing the animals and beasts that He created earlier on this same sixth day, or sixth epoch, of creation. He is saying to the animal world, "Let us – you, the earth and the physical aspects of creation which will come from the earth (like the animals), and I (who am completely Spirit) – combine our beings to create the human being." God is, so to speak, suggesting a partnership between heaven and earth, godliness and bestiality, within the very creation of the human being. On the one hand, this being will be part animal, circumscribed by a limitation of years and power, requiring nutrition, sexual reproduction, elimination of waste material. The human being will be instinctual, a complex animal valuing the singular importance of strength, power of domination, and physical adaptability reflected by Darwin's "survival of the fittest," and by the dictator's arrogant declarations that "might makes right" and "to the victor belong the spoils."

And it is indeed, this physical, earthly perspective of the essence of the human being which has dominated every totalitarian regime, the most notable being the ancient tribe of Amalek – Israel's historic archenemy, who attacked the exhausted Israelites newly freed from Egyptian slavery, slowly wandering through the desert in search of a resting place. Amalek attacked from behind, first targeting the weakest stragglers, the women and the children, the elderly and the infirm. In a similar way, based upon the entitlement of the powerful to enslave the weak, there developed the civilization of the hegemony of the most powerful conquerors, from Sparta to Macedonia (Alexander the Great), to Rome, to Babylon, to Persia, to the Ottoman Empire, to the Christian Crusaders, to British colonialists, to Nazi Germany, to Stalinist communism, to Moslem jihadists. And it is no surprise that such a civilization of survival of the fittest and the most powerful would glorify warfare: The Roman Classical work *The Aeneid* by Virgil, opens with the words "*Arma virumque cano*," "Of armaments and virility do I sing." And, tragically, such a vision has resulted in the bloody history of human warfare, bringing our present day to the brink of global destruction, with nuclear capability spreading throughout the world.

**THE HUMAN BEING: ON THE OTHER HAND, ENDOWED
BY AND INVESTED WITH THE IMAGE OF GOD**

While the Bible recognizes the physical, even animalistic, aspect of humans, it goes on to emphasize the true essence of the human being as emanating from the Divine: "And the Lord created the human being in His image, in the image of the Lord created He him, male and female created He them" (Gen. 1:27). Who is this God in whose image the human being is created? Moses asks this question of God in the book of Exodus (33:13): "Inform me please of Your characteristics."

And, indeed, in the very next chapter (Ex. 34:6–7) God reveals His thirteen characteristics, or names, with the first name, YHVH or Yahweh, defined as "compassionate" or "unconditional love."³ Even

3. Names in the Bible reflect characteristics, as is also true of the names of God revealed to Moses, as stated above. Referring to the first of God's revealed names,

linguistically in Hebrew, there is a striking similarity between God's Ineffable Name, spelled with the letters *yod heh vav heh*, and the word for love, *AHaVaH*, spelled *alef heh vet heh*. (Although the “v”-sound in both of these words is produced by different Hebrew letters – in God's name the *vav* and in *ahava* the *vet* – the two letters sometimes interchange, as in the case of *taava* – meaning “lust,” spelled with a *vav*, and *te'avon* – meaning “appetite” [related meaning], with a *vet*.) This similarity between the Ineffable Name of God and the Hebrew word for love is a stirring affirmation that the God of the Bible is first and foremost a God of love, with all thirteen attributes expressing differing aspects of God's love. Our Sages continue to comment (Rashi on Exodus 34:6) that the reason for the repetition of the first of the names of God is to teach that God loves us unconditionally, both before we sin and even after we sin! Here we see the unconditional character of the divine love.

And so, the Ramban continues to explain, this human being will be more than part of the animal world; this being will also be part God. That is what God is saying to the beasts: This new creature will be part you, and part Me; existentially, he will contain two aspects: a bestial human, and a celestial human, and, most importantly, the celestial human will be able to rise above the bestial human, and overpower him. A bestial being – an animal – only wants to take, to receive. He is instinctual, with a need for food, and so he preys on the weaker beings, which he kills for food. Love, which, as we have seen, is a distinctly godly characteristic, is based upon the root verb which means “giving”: *ahava*, the Hebrew noun “love,” builds upon the root verb *hav* which means “to give.”⁴

in Hebrew *YHVH* (*YeHoVaH*), Rashi, traditionally the primary commentator on the Torah, states that this name denotes the characteristic of compassionate love (Rashi on Exodus 34:7), which in Hebrew is *rahamim* and akin to the unconditional and unselfish love which a mother has for the fetus in her womb, which in Hebrew is *rehem*. Hence, the meaning of the Ineffable Name of God is definitionally “love,” even if it may not be so philologically.

4. *Hav* is the imperative form of the Hebrew root *yod-heh-vav*, a less common synonym for the root *nun-tav-nun*, “to give.” (The authoritative Hebrew dictionary *HaMilon HeHdash* [The New Dictionary] by Avraham Even-Shoshan [Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer Publishing, 1986], entry “*Hav*.”) Among the many examples of this usage in the Bible is Genesis 30:1, Rachel's emotional words to her husband Jacob, “Give

But let me go even one step further. The very picture of God's creation of the first human being expresses God's deep love, and it is this divine love that He "implants" in every human being: "Then the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the earth, 'inspired' into his nostrils the soul-breath of life; and the human became an ensouled life force" (Gen. 2:7). God took dust, representing frail and earthbound matter, and then exhaled the soul-breath of (eternal) life into the nostrils of the as-yet-not-alive earthen-clay vessel, which may have originally emerged from the dust but which was immediately gifted with the soul-breath of life.⁵ This act of God breathing His divine "soul-breath" into the human earth physicality has vast implications for the human being's fundamental quality, identity, and destiny, as we shall see.

It is fascinating that the master artist and sculptor Michelangelo, in his iconic painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, depicted, in the section "Creation of Adam," the figure of God (as a white-bearded elderly human) reaching out with his finger to touch the finger of Adam, apparently in order to impart life to Adam. Although scholars insist that Michelangelo read and reread the Bible for his inspiration, and in almost every instance his biblical paintings remain completely faithful to the biblical text, in this case his painting is completely different from the text.

I believe I understand Michelangelo; it is well-nigh impossible to reproduce the act of exhaling with paint and brush on canvas. But I might suggest that since Michelangelo was a sculptor and artist, and he therefore experienced the essence of his creativity as residing in his

(*hava*, form of *hav*) me children, or else I die." The same root – *yod-heh-vet* – is the commonly used word for "give" in the cognate Aramaic language (the authoritative Aramaic dictionary *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* by Marcus Jastrow, entry "Yehav.")

5. Take note that, in Hebrew, this verse uses a "new" word, *neshama*, which we have translated as "the soul-breath of life"; until now the biblical word for life force was *nefesh* and is used biblically for animal life. The Hebrew *nishmat hayim* contains the word derived from *neshama*, exclusively used for humans, generally translated as "soul," but very closely related to *neshima*, the word for "breath," and so we have translated it as "soul-breath."

fingers, he might naturally transfer the essence of God's creativity to His divine fingers as well.

The text of the biblical imagery however is very different, and I believe much more powerful and meaningful than the interpretation of Michelangelo. The Zohar, the mystical commentary on the Bible, precisely and faithfully transcribed that it was God who exhaled, as it were, into the nostrils of the "clay dummy" formed by the dust of the earth (representing the animal portion of the human being).⁶ In the very first chapter of the *Tanya*, written by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (the main work of Chabad philosophy, first published in 1797), he adds that "whoever exhales, exhales from within his most essential and innermost being." It follows, therefore, that there is an "actual portion of the Godhead from Above" within every human being, that God gives to every human a part of His own Self, as it were. And the *Tanya* adds the Hebrew word *mamash* – literally, meaning that the Godly may even enter the very physical and substantive part of the human, if the human so develops it. This is one of the most important foundational principles of Judaism, declaring that within every human being there resides an aspect of the divine essence, as it were, a portion of eternity and of divine spirituality.

There is no idea in Judaism more radical and consequential than this one. The classical biblical commentator Rashi, Rav Shlomo Yitzhaki of Worms (1040–1105), asks in his opening interpretation of the first biblical verse, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth": "Why did the Bible begin here with the world's creation, rather than with the first commandment given to Israel: 'Let the renewal of the moon this month of Nisan be for you as the festival of Rosh Hodesh, the New Moon' when you were freed from Egyptian slavery (see Exodus 12:2)?" After all, ponders Rashi, is the Bible not primarily a book of commandments even more than a book of theology or of history? Begin it with the first commandment in the book of Exodus!

My revered teacher and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, answers Rashi's query by explaining that, within the first verse of the Bible, there can also be found the first *commandment* of the Torah. Since

6. *Midrash HaNe'elam, Zohar Hadash* 17c.

we are created in the essence of the Divine, so are we commanded to imitate Him as much as possible (*Imitatio Dei*): we must walk in His ways (Deut. 28:9) and attempt to replicate His deeds. And so we must learn from the first biblical verse that, just as God created a world, so must we, to the best of our ability, “create worlds” within the spheres of our influence. And perhaps we may even go a step further. If indeed we are blessed with the image of God, *tzelem Elokim*, and God created an imperfect world, must we not attempt to perfect that world, to recreate that world, in the Kingship of the Divine, to walk in God’s ways by “partnering” with Him to perfect the imperfect world, to complete the incomplete world which He gave us? Our Bible deals with this as well!

**THE HUMAN BEING IS TO BE GOD’S PARTNER IN
ACTIVATING AND PERFECTING THE WORLD**

Chapter 1 of the book of Genesis tells the story of Creation with God at the center, since He is the Creator of the world. Chapter 2 retells the story of Creation, but this time, it is the human being who is at the center of the universe; without that human being, nothing can happen.

Yes, God created a world, but one which requires human beings to activate His world: “No plant of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet grown, for God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not yet a human to develop the earth” (Gen. 2:5).

And so, the Bible continues, “And the Lord God took the human being and placed him in the Garden of Eden (the primordial world) ‘to work it and to guard it’” – or, perhaps better translated as “to develop it and to take responsibility for it” (Gen. 2:15).⁷ The world that God created was potentially perfectible, completable. But without human

7. The Hebrew is לעבדה ולשמרה. The Hebrew root *ayin-bet-dalet*, in its basic form, means to work. But the same root, in a slightly different form (*pi’el*) carries the sense of “to develop, to adapt, to re-work.” The root *shin-mem-resh*, in its basic form, means to “watch” or to “guard.” But it can also take on the meaning of “to take responsibility for,” as in the well-known words of Cain, when asked by God about Cain’s brother Abel whom he murdered. Usually translated as “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9), the translation truer to the context of the verse would be “Am I responsible for my brother?”

input, it remained, at best, a work in progress, and even perhaps a negative work in progress, because from the very beginning it was a world of earthquakes alongside the snowflakes. The human being has it within his hands to turn the potential Garden of Eden into a Paradise of love and future creativity, or alternatively (God forbid) into a diabolical hell-hole of jealous hatred and wanton destruction. And indeed, the Bible itself goes on to tell us about how Adam and Eve began the process for the future continuity of life with the birth of Cain and Abel, but how the sibling rivalry between the brothers resulted in the murder of Abel and the punishment of Cain (see Genesis 4:1–15).

BUT WHY DID GOD CREATE AN IMPERFECT WORLD WITH EVIL?

The prophet Isaiah even goes so far as to seemingly attribute evil and imperfection to God Himself: “[I] form light and create darkness, make peace and create evil; I am God who does all of this” (Is. 45:7). What an amazing admission! Is God actually taking responsibility for the existence of evil in the world?!

Isaiah seems to be stating clearly what we have so far been reluctant to state unequivocally: Evil exists in the world because God created an imperfect world. And the world is imperfect because human beings, whom God created with the gift of freedom of choice, and who may well choose to act perversely, will frequently do wrong. Hence, God set the stage for humans in an imperfect world because He expects them to become His partners in perfecting themselves as well as that world. I would say that this is an epic partnership, between God and the pinnacle of His creation, the human being, who stands at the very center of the biblical view of existence. The world leaves the possibility for evil open-ended, awaiting the human being either to complete, or perfect, God’s incomplete and imperfect world, or – God forbid – to destroy the beautiful but imperfect world He created.

But where do we find in the Bible that God created humans in a world with the kind of free choice which can set the stage not only for love and creativity, but also for death and destruction? And why would a God of love create a human being who could choose to act against the

will of a God of love? And how can the human being even be expected to perfect God's world? Would this not be an arrogant act of hubris on the part of the human?

In order to answer those questions, we must first attempt to understand the most majestic verse in the entire Bible, the verse we have quoted previously: "And God created the human being in His image, in the image of God did He create him, male and female did He create them" (Gen. 1:27). It is crucial to understand how sharply this verse differentiated Judaism from the pagan religions that pervaded the ancient world. The Bible tells us that the human being was created in the image of God. The pagan world – the world of Mount Olympus of the Greeks – is the very opposite, a world in which the Greeks created their gods in the bestial image of humans, gods moved by the quest for physical power and domination, as in Zeus, the god of Power. These gods warred with each other, dominated and subjugated the weaker gods, and displayed greed, jealousy, and pettiness, a reflection of the basest of human frailties. The humans, within the Greek scheme of things, had no freedom of action whatsoever; everything on earth was determined by the gods on Mount Olympus, or by the Fates, the *Moerae*. And all the people could do was to propitiate – or bribe – them, by sacrificing even their children to those bestial gods. The pagan world truly lived in a happenstance world of earthquakes in which humans were virtually powerless.

Judaism turned that view on its head, dramatically reversing it with this one verse: "God created the human being in His image," thereby essentially endowing every mortal human being with a transcendent spark of the Eternal, with God's unconditional love, and thereby the divine ability to give, to help, to strive, to perfect – first himself, and then, naturally, the world around him.

But just as God is free, so is the human being free, free even to empower the bestial within himself, free to do what God would not want him to do. As Rav Ovadia Sforno (Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, Italy 1475–1550) comments on the word *kidmutenu* ("like our image"; Gen. 1:26): "The choice of God, blessed be He, is always toward the good" (because Goodness is the very definitional essence of "God"ness), which is not at all the case with human choice which can go either way – celestial or bestial! And so, humans have even more free choice than God, who will

always be consummate goodness. But is it not still difficult to contemplate why God would create such humans with the power to choose a path of destructive, horrific evil?

Indeed, Rav Chaim Vital (1542–1620), the leading student of Rabbi Isaac Luria, considered to be the father of Jewish mysticism, provides the answer, but first, in his masterful work *Etz Hayim*,⁸ asks an earlier question: Why did God initially create human beings at all? Is not God “All in All” in Himself, as it were? Rav Chaim Vital answers clearly and to the point: God is love, and since love is expressed by giving, one cannot give in a vacuum; one must give to “other,” those who are different from and other than oneself! God “had” to create *other* beings for whom to do good deeds, so that God could express His love by doing good things for *another* – *kedei leheitiv libruav*. And so, God created human beings in order to have a world peopled with others upon whom God could bestow His love and to whom He could express His loving goodness, His “givingness.” Thus, the world must be peopled with others who would be free even to defy God, who were not mere puppet-extensions of God, who were “others,” and might thereby do what God wouldn’t want them to do, and God must love them and even empower them!⁹

And therein lies the answer to our question: Human beings *must* have complete freedom of choice, even to do that which God would not want them to do. Only then would they be other than God and be able to receive God’s loving goodness. And what we also learn from this is that, since loving means giving, the greatest gift of all to “other” is that of freedom, of independence, the freedom to be him/herself. If a spouse only loves his/her partner whom he/she can control; if a parent only loves the child whom he/she can control, that is not real love. It is only love of self, of beings who are extensions of self – and that is not love of “other”! It is only extended self-love! Therefore, the loving God “had to” create independent human beings with free choice so that He would

8. *Shaar HaKelalim* 1.

9. In a similar vein, Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzato (1707–1746) concurs in his work *Daat Tevunot* (*siman* 18) that God is the essence of good, and that evidence of His goodness is that He *does* good, and, in order that there be those who would be the recipients of His doing good, He created human beings, other than Himself, who would even have the power to deny God and goodness.

have objects upon whom to bestow His love, objects who were actually subjects in themselves, *other* individuals whom He could truly love, because they were not controlled by Him, because they were not merely extensions of God, as it were. And so we must likewise leave room for others, just as God left room for us, believing that the Divine within us will eventually empower us to overcome the bestial, enthrone the celestial, and perfect ourselves and our world in the image of the God of love. And God's prophets have informed us within His Bible that the Jews will eventually bring blessing to all the families of the earth, because the celestial within humanity will ultimately triumph (Gen. 12:3; Is. 2).

From this perspective, we may understand how it is that the human being serves as God's partner: It is because God invited him to be His partner, and thereby gave purpose to the life of each and every human being, gave him/her a challenge and ideal that he/she must help bring to pass. As we have seen from the Bible (Gen. 2:15): "And God placed the (first) human in the Garden of Eden (the primordial world) to develop (perfect) it and to take responsibility for it." For, you see, God created an imperfect (incomplete) world, leaving it up to those whom He created in His own image to perfect and complete. God created a world with earthquakes, not only snowflakes; with potential for destruction, but, most importantly, for redemption as well! And our prophets have foretold that it is redemption which is human destiny!

IMPERFECT HUMANS CAN PERFECT GOD'S WORLD BY LOVING

And how are humans to go about perfecting the world? By doing for others what the God of Creation did for us, that is, for Adam, the first human: by loving "other," by giving to "other," by helping and even sometimes rebuking and recreating "other" – and by so doing we are strengthening the celestial human within ourselves and thereby recreating ourselves as well!

And this analogy may be taken even one step further.

As we have stated, in Hebrew the word for "love" is *ahava*. The root of *ahava* is *hav*, to give. Because the Hebrew language is holy to the Jewish people, Hebrew etymology reflects Jewish ideals and Jewish

philosophy. Thus, when we draw from its Hebrew derivation, love is an act of giving: *hav, ahava*. God gave of Himself in creating the first human being, “in the image of the Divine,” inspired by God with a portion of the Divine from Above!

This idea is exemplified and eternalized in the sexual love between a man and a woman: each *gives* of him/herself to the other, the man giving the woman his virility, his future, his seed, and the woman giving the man her body, her womb, a vital aspect of her existential being. And in this act of sexual love lies the potential for the creation of a new life-soul, a DNA, a Divine Natural Association, a combination of both parents, a child born in their image, as well as in the image of the Divine!

Hence, on the godly plane, it becomes extremely significant that God’s act of creating the first human was when He gave of His own essence, the soul-breath of His eternity exhaled into the human – “Whoever exhales, exhales from within his most essential and innermost being” (*Tanya*, *ibid.*). In doing so, He performed a deep act of love. And in the sexual act resulting in the creation of new life, every man and woman relives most dramatically the divine creation of the first human being, when God, too, gave part of Himself (as it were) to produce new life, to create humanity. In His creation of man and woman, God expressed His eternal love for humanity, and nothing can be more empowering than the knowledge that God loves us, and is also within us. And God “inspired” within the first human man-woman a portion of His divine love and even a portion of His eternity: in the human ability to bear children and grandchildren, to come together as a family with continuity from generation to generation passing on the genetic DNA, each individual lives eternally!¹⁰ Indeed, God’s gift to humans is life and love, a meaningful life of partnership with God in humanity’s glorious march toward world perfection at the end of days.

10. Take note of the fourth blessing recited for a marrying a couple under the marriage canopy: “The source of blessings are You, Lord of Love our God, King of the universe, who formed humanity in His image, in the image of His likeness, and He fashioned for humanity from His very self a building for eternity. Blessed are You, Lord of Love, Creator of humanity.”

Chapter 1: God's Love of Humanity

And so, when we love other, when we reach out to other, when we help other and hopefully help other to help himself, we are truly loving other, we are recreating other, we are perfecting other, we are doing for other what God did for Adam and Eve. And when we truly walk in God's paths, we then love other as we love ourselves, because other is also "ourselves," because we are all siblings, all of us on earth sharing the same DNA (Divine Natural Association) since we are all children of our One Parent in Heaven and we are all responsible for each other, our sibling's keeper. It is only by universal sibling love that the world will be perfected, and humanity will be redeemed.

This is the ongoing challenge for every human being: to rise beyond the bestial to reach higher to the celestial, by loving others. All of Judaism – its ideas, its commandments, its customs – are built around this concept. The Jewish people were chosen by God to "model" that challenge, and to rise to meet it.

Understanding this view of the creation of the human being, we now also understand the ramifications of the existential choice of which we have spoken. It is still the choice between seeing the world as "snowflake" or "earthquake" – between a world of meaning or a world of happenstance. But another crucial ingredient has been added: Because of the dual nature of either bestial or celestial human being which every individual must choose for him/herself, the choice of the "snowflake" becomes more meaningful and more crucial, and more possible. From a biblical perspective, the very imperfection of the world is itself God's greatest gift, because He empowers us to perfect it, because He believes that we are capable of perfecting it.

As Victor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, demonstrates (in his masterful work *Man's Search for Meaning*), it is neither the search for pleasure nor for power which is the most basic motivation impelling human activity, but it is rather the search for meaning, significance. Hence, God created an imperfect world to give humans the task of perfecting it, each of us in whatever way we can leave the world a little better because we were living in it; perhaps by a welcoming smile or gracious hospitality by making the stranger feel wanted and loved, or perhaps, within the familial context, the loving and nurturing of our children or the respect we accord our aged parents. On a larger canvas, it could be

by making great scientific discoveries, by healing the sick, by teaching Torah or by influencing for world peace.

Hence, we see that the earthquakes are also part of the divine plan, that the very imperfection of the world is the greatest gift God could give to humans: a much-needed purpose for their lives, a significance for their being, a partnership with God. And so, we find chaos and darkness within the very creation of the world so that we may make order, so that we may bring the light.

Every human being potentially has the ability to take the imperfections of the world – the “earthquakes” – and use the power of the godliness within her or him to try to perfect some aspect of that world. And, most importantly, at the same time, the Bible is telling us that God believes the human being capable of perfecting His imperfect world, capable of being His partner on earth. After all, the human being, created in God’s image, is only a little lower than God Himself. “He is only a little lower than God, and You have crowned him with glory and majesty” (Ps. 8:6). This idea provides a new meaning to what Rabbi Akiva declares: that the greatest biblical commandment is “You shall love your fellow human being like you love yourself, I am the Lord of Love” (Lev. 19:18). If the essence of God indeed is love, and the essence of love is giving to others, then it follows that every human being created in the image of God must try in some way to help other human beings. This will automatically create a more perfect world in which every human being loves and gives to others.

This is the significance of the *Aleinu* prayer which concludes each of our statutory prayers daily, as well as on the Sabbath and festivals: the messianic goal, when everyone will attempt to “perfect the world in the Kingship of the Divine,” when everyone will “accept the supremacy of Your Kingship ... on that day the Lord of Love (YHVH) will be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord of Love will be One and His name shall be One” (Zech. 14:9).

LOVE BRINGS REDEMPTION AND PERFECTION

The famous hasidic master Reb Zusha (1718–1800) was extremely spiritual and superbly sensitive to the depth of relationships between human

beings and between human beings and God. Reb Zusha once was traveling in the midst of a snowstorm and needed to seek refuge in an inn. He was forced by the storm to stay overnight. His room was freezing, and so he sat on a chair in the heated lobby, dozing on and off, within hearing distance of the bar. Two drunken peasants sat at the bar, partaking of drink after drink: "Ivan, I love you," slurred Boris. Ivan answered, deep in his cups, "You don't love me, Boris." Boris: "I'm telling you I love you." Ivan: "You don't love me." Boris: "Damn you, Ivan, I'm telling you that I love you. How can I prove to you that I love you?" Ivan: "If you really love me, then tell me what hurts me so that you can help me feel better."

Reb Zusha often remarked that it had been worthwhile to stay in those unpleasant surroundings for the night, just to have learned the lesson of love. That real love is a mutual giving – giving to other and trying to bring healing to other, redemption to other, and, in doing so, one brings healing and redemption to oneself as well.

In a word, therefore, just as the human being is created by an act of God's love/giving, the single most important act of the human being is to give love. That is the essence of the Jewish ideal and one's purpose in life.

The great Lubavitcher (Chabad) Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1902–1994) had a long-standing custom of standing for many hours, sometimes even in inclement weather, and distributing United States dollar bills to the huge throngs who came to seek his counsel and his blessing. In one of the private visits with him (*yehidut*) that I was privileged to have, I asked him for the basis of this strength-wearying practice. (The "word" was that the Rebbe wanted to make the point that if the American government thought it important to inscribe the phrase "In God We Trust" on each US dollar, how much more so should we, the Jewish people, with such a long history of fealty to the Divine, internalize the message of trusting in the Almighty.) On this occasion however, the Rebbe asked me what I thought the reason might be.

I haltingly suggested that, since the image in the minds of so many is that Rebbes *take a pidyon* (a sum of money given by the disciple for the blessing he is receiving from the Rebbe) – perhaps the Chabad Rebbe wished to demonstrate that a Jewish spiritual leader should be giving, not taking. The Rebbe responded to my suggestion with a bright

smile, the warmth of which I can still feel today. He then quoted the well-known verse “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18), translating the Hebrew to mean that you must love your friend because he is like you; just as you naturally “give” to yourself, so must you give to others. “To love,” he said, “is to give. I am trying to teach by example; if I give a dollar to someone, hopefully the recipient will likewise give to someone else, and if everyone gives to everyone, then the Messiah of Redemption will come to the world.” The world will be perfected and redeemed through humanity’s love of each other and giving to each other.

Of course, the truest giving is the giving of oneself, one’s time, one’s effort, one’s advice, one’s comfort, one’s spiritual faith, and one’s knowledge. Judaism teaches that the way to perfect the world is for each person to give within the context in which she or he lives, beginning with family, spouse, and children, then friends, then neighbors, and then as much of the world that we can reach. And just like the omnipotent Creator of the universe limited His own power by leaving room for others and empowering others to choose freely (the kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum*), so must we be willing to limit ourselves in order to help those in need. And if we look deeply into our souls, we see that our deepest joy and satisfaction comes when we help another human being who is in need, especially if we help him to help himself.

JUDAISM’S MISSION TO THE WORLD

So, in both our relationships with other people, and our relationship with God, *giving* is the key. As we now launch into the “meat” of this book, I want to expand that notion of giving. I believe with all my heart that the very essence of Judaism is to give to the world. To be sure, Judaism has its particularistic aspects. To an extent, we are a nation and a people separate and distinct from the rest of the world because of our specific communal and dietary needs and our unique calendar of Sabbath rest and national festivities. But, somewhat paradoxically, our distinctiveness and separateness are for the sake of our expressing a unique mission to all the families of the earth!

What precisely is that mission? It is clearly delineated in two sets of verses at the very dawn of our history. In Genesis 12:2–3, God

Chapter 1: God's Love of Humanity

promises Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great ... and through you shall there be a blessing to all of the families of the earth." God's promise is essentially saying that He is making of Abraham a great nation *in order that others – the whole world – can be blessed*. With amazing brevity of expression, the Torah is saying here that the whole purpose of Jewish particularism is, in fact, universalism! And so it must be, because in truth we are all living in a global village, and thereby existentially linked to each other; we do not live in isolation! And we can hardly live in peace if the rest of the world is worrying.

But what is the substance of the blessing we are to bring to the world? Six chapters later in the book of Genesis God explains (Gen. 18:18–19): "Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through him. Since I have loved him, because he is commanding his children and his household after him, to take responsibility for God's pathways, to do acts of compassionate righteousness and moral justice ..."

This is the very essence of Judaism. For the world to move toward perfection, there needs to be a blueprint for living based upon love, compassion, and righteousness. The mission of the Jewish people is to take that blueprint – the way of life that is expressed in this book – internalize it and at least impart its ethical teachings and values to all the families of the earth.

But can we really teach the world? That is a very large task. I believe we can, because I believe that God has given human beings one supreme power – the power to communicate with each other. That power was invested in the human being at that being's very inception – on the biblical sixth day, or sixth epoch, of the creation of the world. God stated for all future generations to hear (Gen. 2:7): "And the Loving Lord-God formed the human from the dust of the earth, inspirited into his nostril the soul-breath of life; and the human being became an ensouled life force," which – as we noted above – was explained by the authoritative *Targum Onkelos* to mean "a communicating spirit." This ability to communicate empowers us to give to others our most profound thoughts, our deepest feelings; it is through verbal expression that we share with others our emotions of love, our teachings of wisdom; and it was through

verbal expression of God's Torah teaching that God shared with Moses and Israel the divine will as to how we could best live our lives, how to perfect and redeem our world into a peaceful and productive Garden of Eden. At Sinai, for example, God communicated with all of Israel with sounds; it was only Moses who had developed his intellectual/spiritual capacities to such an extent that the Divine was able to share with him His divine wisdom, which Moses then interpreted for Israel in our Torah.¹¹ And so our prophets command us to be a light to all nations, the loving Lord's witnesses to the world.

And, indeed, we certainly have succeeded in imparting to a large portion of humanity the biblical Ten Commandments, teaching freedom and ethical conduct for all, and our prophetic goal of a world in which "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and humankind will not learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2, enshrined on the Dag Hammarskjold Plaza of the United Nations building in Manhattan, New York). Unfortunately, at the time of this writing, the prophetic words inscribed thereon is only lip service, not yet meaningfully put into practice by the actions of that organization of nations. But lip service is always only a first step waiting and demanding to be activated – and it is a most crucial first step without which nothing can follow. And that is precisely why our Bible – and indeed our Jewish lifestyle – is filled with commandments, prescriptions as to what we ought to do in order to live a meaningful life; the deepest feelings of love and the wisest teachings of scholars will only be significant if they are expressed in our daily actions and relationships.

As we now prepare to study the major ideas, commandments, and customs of Judaism, we must keep in mind that everything about Judaism that we will study in the coming chapters – prayer, the dietary laws, the festivals, Jewish life-cycle observances, the centrality of the Land of Israel – all have their basis in God as a Being of love, a non-controlling love that leaves us freedom of choice. It is not a system of "all or nothing." It leaves room for individual development in stages, and is understanding of individual backsliding, especially in the commandments between the human being and God. This is a function of the divine love

11. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, II:33; Berakhot 45a. See also *Torah Lights, Shemot, Yitro* (Maggid Books, 2005).

Chapter 1: God's Love of Humanity

with which God created us, and informs the Torah he lovingly taught us. And since a portion of God-on-High is existentially within each of us, if we truly will that “portion” to gain ascent, this is our guarantee that we will eventually choose a life of love and peace. Because of the centrality of love within it, Judaism is truly a romance, a romance that can give our lives meaning, significance, and faith in a glorious future. As we study the various aspects of Jewish life and Jewish practice, I pray that we sense Judaism’s romantic passion, and become inspired by the redeeming power of its love.