

“Thou Shalt Love the LORD thy God”
An Analysis of the *Sifre* on Deuteronomy, Piska 32

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Introduction

Piska 32 of the *Sifre* on Deuteronomy¹ struggles with a difficult theological question: how is Israel to love a God whom she is commanded to fear? This question is in fact twofold; there is the issue of the seeming contradiction between love and fear and the issue of how one demonstrates love to God. The piska itself focuses mostly on the latter, except for a short discussion of fear at the beginning. The verse dealt with by the piska is Deuteronomy 6:5, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”² This verse takes on special significance as the second verse of the *Shema*, which begins in Deuteronomy 6:4, the most important proclamation of faith in both historical and contemporary Judaism, and the closest analogue to a creed in Jewish use. It is interesting that the rabbis offer no commentary in the *Sifre* on this fact, although the *Shema* has been recited twice daily by practicing Jews since well before the rabbinic era. In fact, the commentary on Deuteronomy 6:4, in Piska 31, discusses the recitation of the *Shema*, yet nothing is said in either piska about the role of Deuteronomy 6:5 in the *Shema*. This seems to be a feature of the fact that the piska is an exegetical midrash, focused on Biblical exegesis, in this case, on a word-by-word basis, and therefore less oriented towards context. Thus, the principal concern the rabbis address is the threefold command to love with “heart,” “soul,” and “strength,” thus, how it is that one must actually act or think in loving the LORD.

¹ *Sifre: a Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*. Trans. Reuven Hammer. Yale Judaica Series 24. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986. p. 58-62. The *Sifre* is essentially the Midrash on Numbers and Deuteronomy.

² Deut. 6:4 NIV, from *Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition, New International Version*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994. Biblical quotations are given as in the *Sifre* where possible, but the full verse does not appear there in this case. The only differences are “Thou shalt” at the beginning, and “thy” instead of “your.”

“Thou shalt love the LORD thy God”³

The Piska itself opens with interpretations of the first portion of Deuteronomy 6:5, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.” The first explanation offered is that one must follow God’s commandments as an act of love, for one acting this way “receives a doubled and redoubled reward,” in contrast to one acting out of fear. Here, the rabbis note the contrast between this verse and Deuteronomy 10:20, “Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, Him shalt thou serve.” The midrashist also notes the key feature of this contrast, that “only in regard to God do we find love combined with fear and fear combined with love.”⁴ The rabbis do not comment, however, on the oddity of commanding love from a people; to the rabbinic mindset, serving God and performing *mitzvot*, or commandments, are themselves acts of love, so service and love are inseparable. Thus, the command, which seems so strange to modern readers, was understood by the rabbis as merely stating the necessity of following God’s commandments.⁵

The only other explanation offered for this portion of the verse is to “make him [God] beloved to humanity, as did our father Abraham.” This is an interpretation of the verse as a command to proselytism, something not often seen in Judaism, especially after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. The rabbis cite Genesis 12:5, “and the souls that they had gotten in Haran.” Key to this verse is the understanding of “soul” as “physical body”; the two were identical in the minds of the midrashist. Thus, when the writer observes that it is impossible to give a soul to a gnat, he means it is impossible to “build” a gnat in a physical sense. Thus, he concludes that Abraham and his family acquired souls for God in the sense of converting people to Judaism, the only possible way to “get souls,” and brought them “under the wings of the

³ Deut. 6:4a. I have divided the verse into four parts, since this is how it is done in the midrash.

⁴ *Sifre*, 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Shekinah.” Of course, Judaism as an institution did not fully exist until the revelation at Sinai, but the midrashist interprets the conversion to belief in YHWH as sufficient to make the converts a part of the future covenant in the same sense as Abraham.⁶ The interesting feature of this interpretation is that it overlooks the plain sense of the verse in favor of a more symbolic meaning. The full verse of Genesis 12:5 reads, “He [Abraham] took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people [souls] they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.”⁷ The plain sense of this verse is that “souls,” or “people,” is referring to slaves or bond-servants that Abraham acquired. While most likely still understanding the verse in this sense, the rabbis add to their interpretation the concept of proselytism, seeing different layers of meaning in the same words.

“With all thy heart”⁸

The midrash then begins to analyze the latter three portions of the verse, beginning with the words “with all thy heart.” The first explanation offered, and arguably the most theologically interesting, is that the verse commands one to love God with both the good and evil tendencies of the human mind. This raises another question: how can one show love to a holy God with one’s evil thoughts or temptations? Frequently, the Hebrew Bible portrays sins and temptations as driving individuals away from God. Unfortunately, this midrash is only two lines in length, and so the midrashist offers no clues to this understanding. Still, the most likely explanation is that the midrashist means to perform acts of love for God even out of one’s evil tendencies. That is,

⁶ Sifre, 59.

⁷ Gen. 12:5 NIV.

⁸ Deut. 6:4b.

one should redirect temptations and evil inclinations into something positive, such as Torah study.⁹

Another interpretation is that one should love God “with all the heart that is within you; your heart should not be divided in regard to God.” That is, one should love God without reserve; there should be no portion of your heart that does not love God or resists loving Him.¹⁰

These two explanations for “with all your heart” offer views that are very similar on a superficial level, but very different in meaning. The contrast is made between the profoundly theological idea of loving God with or through one’s temptations to sin and loving God unreservedly. While the latter seems a fairly obvious interpretation of the Deuteronomy 6:5b, the former does not. Unfortunately, neither midrashist explains himself nor offers support for his position in the piska, so any further discussion of their intentions is pure speculation.

“With all thy soul”¹¹

The rabbis proceed to analyze Deuteronomy 6:5c, “with all thy soul.” The first interpretation follows from the above observation that the soul was equated with the body in rabbinic thought. Thus, the rabbis’ explanation, “even if God takes away your soul,” carries none of the meaning of a phrase such as “losing your soul” in the modern sense, but merely means, “if God takes away your life,” an inevitable feature of human existence. This understanding comes from Psalm 44:23, “For thy sake are we killed all the day; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” R. Simeon ben Menasya, noting that an individual cannot be killed each day, declares that God “credits the righteous as if they were slain daily.” That is, one should love and follow

⁹ *Sifre*, 59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Deut. 6:5c.

God to the point of martyrdom, if necessary, but at the same time, God credits the righteous as if they had already done so. This interpretation, though, depends on reading the Psalms verse as referring to an individual, while in fact it says “we.” The plain sense of the verse is that the people are being persecuted severely and that a portion of the population is killed regularly. R. Simeon most likely overlooks this intentionally for the sake of making his point, but this could also reflect an understanding of “we” as referring to the individuals of a community reading the Psalm in a liturgical setting; that is, as something read collectively, but with individual meanings. Regardless, the essence of the interpretation is that martyrdom is a valid way of showing love to God.¹²

Likewise, R. Simeon ben Azzai interprets the verse as “love Him until the last drop of life is wrung out of you,” which could mean either to love God all one’s years on earth or refer again to martyrdom.¹³ These two interpretations have similarities, but, again, are distinct. While the first indicates that one should love God to the point of martyrdom, the second indicates, on a first reading, only that one should love God until death. This does not automatically imply martyrdom, yet the concept of *kiddush hashem*, or “sanctification of the name,” which is also the Hebrew word used for martyrdom, although not fully developed during Tannaitic times, mandates that one be willing to be martyred for the sake of the love of God rather than forsake Him.

¹² *Sifre*, 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*

“With all thy might”¹⁴

The fourth and longest section of the piska struggles with the apparent repetition between “all thy soul” and “all thy might.” Again, this reflects the midrashic understanding of “soul” as “life” or “body”; otherwise, there is less confusion. The rabbis offer two primary interpretations: that “might” refers to wealth, and that “might” refers to all situations one may encounter, particularly “chastisements.” The first is supported only by R. Eliezer, who suggests that “with all thy soul” speaks to those who place physical well-being above over wealth, while “with all thy might” is directed to those who do the opposite. R. Eliezer thus reads “soul” as “body” and “wealth” as “earthly power.” That is, one should love God without regard for one’s own life or possessions, regardless of which of these one values most. The command of Deut. 6:5 is therefore to love God with one’s mind, body, and wealth - that is, both the abstract and concrete aspects of one’s existence.¹⁵

Rabbi ‘Akiba offers the second interpretation by playing on the words “might” (Hebrew *me’od*) and “measure” (*middah*). That is, ‘Akiba sees the “might” of Deuteronomy 6:5d as a reference to “whatever measure God metes out to you, whether of good or of punishment.” ‘Akiba calls the comparison between “soul” and “might” an “inference from the major to the minor,” thus, “might” is a kind of special case of “with all thy soul.”¹⁶ One should love God with all one’s “soul,” or life, regardless of how one fares or is treated by God in that life. ‘Akiba draws comparisons with Psalm 116, which tells us that David repaid God for “His bountiful dealings toward me [David]” by “lift[ing] up the cup of salvation, and call[ing] upon the name of the LORD.”¹⁷ Likewise, David “found trouble and sorrow, but I [David] called upon the name of

¹⁴ Deut. 6:5d.

¹⁵ *Sifre*, 60.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ps. 116:11-13. Only verses 12-13 are quoted by ‘Akiba, but Hammer provides verse 11 for context.

the LORD.”¹⁸ Thus, ‘Akiba claims, the psalmist tells us to call upon the name of the LORD, regardless of one’s actual situation. Rabbi ‘Akiba gives a lengthy extension of his argument, citing Job’s rebuke of his wife, “Thou speakest as one of the impious women speaketh. Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10). Likewise, according to ‘Akiba, the generation of the flood “accepted” God’s punishment, “whether they liked it or not.” ‘Akiba calls this “reasoning from the minor to the major: if one who is vile during good times is well behaved during punishment, should not we, who are well behaved during good times, be well behaved also during punishment?” Thus, Job meant that his wife should “speak like one of the impious women.” While this argument certainly has appeal, the parallel between Job and the victims of the flood is rather poor. The generation of the flood did not “accept” destruction, but, rather, had it forced upon them; Job, in contrast, accepted his sufferings as part of God’s will and refused to curse God for them. Thus, ‘Akiba’s argument about those who are “vile during good times” does not hold, nor does his interpretation of Job’s comments. Still, this reflects the playful nature of midrash; Rabbi ‘Akiba argues his case by drawing from seemingly unrelated passages in the Bible, reversing the normal interpretation of the passages from Job, but with the full understanding that he has done so. In this way, ‘Akiba seeks to find connections throughout the Bible and to expound general principles from Scripture as a whole.¹⁹

Rabbi ‘Akiba continues, declaring that “one should rejoice more in chastisement than in prosperity, since it is suffering that brings forgiveness of sins. R. Eliezer ben Jacob takes up this topic, noting Proverbs 3:12, “For whom the LORD loveth He correcteth, even as a father the son in whom he delighteth.” R. Eliezer then claims that it is suffering itself which causes a father to

¹⁸ Ps. 116:3-4. This is in contrast to the NIV, which translates Ps. 116:3b-4 as “I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, save me!’ ” Here, ‘Akiba is reading the Hebrew as a single statement, rather than dividing it as the NIV does, to make his point.

¹⁹ Sifre, 60.

delight in his son, a rather absurd conclusion. Normally, one would assume that a father disciplines a son because he loves him, and not the reverse. R. Eliezer deliberately stretches the superficial meaning of the verse to support R. 'Akiba's argument. Likewise, R. Meir enters the discussion, citing Deuteronomy 8:5, "And thou shalt consider in thy heart, that as a man chasteneth his son, so the LORD, thy God, chasteneth thee." From the first part of the verse, R. Meir concludes that individuals know what sins they commit, and, if they consider it, will realize that God's punishment is just and proportionate.²⁰

The rabbis remain focused on suffering, as R. Jose ben R. Judah claims, "Precious are chastisements," since the divine name is associated with any who suffers in the verse quoted by R. Meir. R. Nathan ben R. Joseph continues this line of argument, suggesting that, since the same phrasing is used of the covenant to bring Israel into "a good land" in Deuteronomy 8:7, there is also a covenant between God and Israel regarding chastisements. That is, punishment for sins is as certain as the entry of the Israelites into the land of Canaan.²¹ Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai agrees that chastisements are precious, but offers another explanation; according to R. Yohai, God gave three gifts to the people of Israel, and each is linked to chastisements. The first gift is the Torah, as evidence of which R. Yohai says, "[the proverbs of Solomon are for the purpose] to know wisdom and chastisement" (Prov. 1:2), and "Happy is the man whom Thou chastisest, O LORD, and teachest out of thy Torah" (Ps. 94:12). Here, R. Yohai understands "wisdom" as meaning the Torah, so the gift of the Torah comes also with chastisements. The second gift, the land of Israel, follows from Deut. 8:5-7, "The LORD, thy God chasteneth thee....For the LORD, thy God, bringeth thee into a good land." Again, R. Yohai understands this as evidence that the land of Israel is given only with accompanying chastisements. The third gift, the world-to-come,

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Sifre*, 60-1.

R. Yohai derives from “The commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light, and reproofs of chastisement are the way of life” (Prov. 6:23). R. Yohai derives “the road that leads a man to the world-to-come” from “the way of life.” That is, chastisements are what leads a man to the Messianic age.²²

The midrash continues on the theme of chastisements as R. Nehemiah again takes up the idea that chastisements lead to the forgiveness of sins, citing Leviticus 1:4 and 26:43. R. Nehemiah actually claims that punishment appeases God more than sacrifice, since punishment has a greater impact on the individual. R. Nehemiah quotes Job 2:4, “Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life.” That is, since one’s own well-being is more valuable than one’s wealth, the loss incurred by punishment provides more effective atonement than a sacrifice.²³ The phrase “precious are chastisements” is also attributed to R. ‘Akiba in a discussion held when R. Eliezer was ill. Reportedly, R. ‘Akiba offered this wisdom after his companions offered only useless words of praise. R. Eliezer, intrigued, extracts an explanation from R. ‘Akiba, who demonstrates that teaching and labor were insufficient to turn Manasseh, one of Israel’s worst kings and an idolater, to God. Rather, Manasseh was captured, bound, and taken to Babylon as punishment for his sins. Only after this punishment, he “besought his God” (2 Chron. 33:12), and was then restored by God to his throne.²⁴ Hence, it was God’s discipline of Manasseh that indirectly restored him to God’s favor, rather than sacrifices or words of wisdom from Hezekiah, his father.

Finally, R. Meir attempts to summarize the debate somehow by restating and rephrasing several of the key arguments of the piska. First, R. Meir explains Deut. 6:5a-b as a command to love God as Abraham did, citing Isaiah 41:8, in which God calls Abraham “my friend.” “With

²² *Sifre*, 61.

²³ *Ibid.*

all thy soul” (Deut. 6:5c) means to love God as Jacob did, who was willing to die for God (Gen. 22:10). Finally, R. Meir continues the word play on “might” (*me’od*), saying that one should “thank him (*modeh*) as did Jacob” in Genesis 32:11, which reads, “I am not worthy of all the mercies and of all the truth, which Thou hast shown unto Thy servant...” Thus, R. Meir ends the piska with a play on words and a rare attempt to synthesize the discussion into a single concrete statement.

Conclusions

Piska 32 consists mostly of exegesis of Deuteronomy 6:5, attempting to understand how one can be commanded to love God, and how such love can be demonstrated. More importantly, the midrash struggles with the threefold command; not only must one “love the LORD, thy God,” but one must love Him with “all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might.” Thus, the first three portions of the verse receive relatively little treatment, while the fourth is discussed at some length. For comparison, the discussion of Deut. 6:5d, “with all thy might,” is nearly three times the length of Piska 33, which discusses Deut. 6:6. At the same time, it is interesting that the verse receives so little treatment in Judaism, when a variation on it has become the chief commandment in Christianity: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”²⁵ This is, in fact, itself a midrashic statement on the *Shema*, yet the difference in importance credited to Deuteronomy 6:5 demonstrates the pervasiveness of the split between early Christianity and Judaism. While the midrash explores the verse in reasonable detail, it

²⁴ *Ibid.* ‘Akiba cites 2 Chronicles 33:1,10-13 and Proverbs 25:1 as historical references.

²⁵ Mark 12:29-30 NIV.

seems likely that it is an incomplete record of the rabbinic discussion. The two commentaries on “with all thy heart” (Deut. 6:5b) for example, total only four lines of text, or two sentences. Neither is attributed to a specific rabbi, nor is either connected to other verses of Scripture. The discussion of “with all thy soul” is likewise very brief, in striking contrast to the overwhelming commentary on “with all thy might.” It is certainly possible that the discussion is presented in the *Sifre* in its entirety, and that it did not fully develop until the rabbis reached the third part of the verse, but this seems unlikely.²⁶ Even the discussion recorded in the *Sifre* demonstrates the adeptness of the rabbis in explaining a fairly simple verse by means of word play, parables such as the story of R. Eliezer and R. ‘Akiba, and connections to all parts of the Bible. Still, as complex as the analysis is, the rabbis actually agree as to the basic meaning of the verse: that one should love God in all actions, be they commandments, temptations, illness, or any situation in which one finds oneself.

²⁶ The completeness of the *Sifre* is an unresolved question; regardless, this single piska may well be an incomplete record.

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