


# *Shofteem*

## *Love, Destruction, and Morality*

 One of the major problems confronting American society today is the false idea that love is the most important of all values in life. According to this view, we must sacrifice everything in order to receive love. Love conquers all. Admittedly, love is a very important value but, according to Judaism, it is not the highest value. Love can be very destructive and very selfish.

We all know that we have been born incomplete and that we need to do or receive something in order to become complete. Judaism postulates that in order for us to become complete, we must assume responsibility for ourselves, for others, and for our community. If we assume responsibility for ourselves, for others, and for our community, we will feel fulfilled.

That's why marriage is the happiest occasion in Judaism because when a couple marries, it is not love which sanctifies the marriage; it is the willingness of each of the partners to assume responsibility for each other which sanctifies the marriage. Each of them now has the opportunity to do deeds of loving kindness for each other every day. It is true that it is love which brought them together, but it is not love which sanctifies their marriage, or which will cause it to endure. It is the willingness to be responsible for each other which, according to Judaism, sanctifies their marriage and will cause it to endure.

Love must always be subordinate to morality. You cannot have love without the fear or reverence of G-d. A G-d-fearing man or woman in Judaism is not a person who sits and prays all day or even learns all day. This person could or could not be a G-d-fearing person. What distinguishes a G-d-fearing person is that even when he knows that he can get away with doing something evil, he will not do it because he knows there is a G-d, and he will not use his power over others to force them to do a demeaning or uncalled-for act. An employer who knows that his employee cannot get another job will not make unjust demands on his employee by having him work long hours or take a pay cut knowing that the employee cannot refuse; or a person in authority will not make sexual demands on a woman whom he knows cannot say no because, otherwise, she will lose her job or her father will be arrested, etc.; or a major professor will not ask a student to

babysit or mow his lawn for free, knowing that student cannot refuse if he wants to get a Ph.D. Being moral is a higher value than love. As Micah said, we must first "act justly," then we should "love kindness and walk humbly with the Lord." A person who throws justice out the window in the name of love is acting abominably.

We all saw a clear demonstration of this at the recently concluded Susan Smith trial. The prosecution contended that Susan Smith drowned her two children because the man she loved, who was not the father of the children, told her that as long as she had these children, he could not pursue their relationship. She felt she needed his love. Receiving love was the highest of all values, she believed, and she acted accordingly, drowning her two children. This is not a unique case. We see how mothers step aside and let their children be abused by their stepfather or by her boyfriend or even by their own father and say nothing or do nothing because how can they lose the love of their man? I remember how when I was 10 years old this point was driven home to me. This memory has seared my consciousness ever since then. I remember attending a birthday party for another 10-year-old who had a younger brother who was age 8 1/2. As part of the birthday party each of us was called upon either to sing or play an instrument or read a poem and the little 8 1/2 year old wanted to participate, too. His father looked at the boy and said, "Sure, you can participate, but first you have to take off your shirt." Then before the boy was to sing his song, his father told him to lift up his arm and pretend his voice was coming out of his armpit. He did and everybody laughed. Even his mother laughed. The boy was so mortified that he ran out of the room. I never went back to that house again. That incident left such a bad taste in my mouth. I remember meeting that woman ten years later. She asked me why I never came to her house, since she knew that I still was friends with her son. I told her about the incident. I said, "I know your husband was principally responsible, but why did you laugh?" She looked at me and said, "You didn't want me to lose my husband's love, did you?" I did not say anything but that incident taught me conclusively that love is not the highest value if I would not have already known it from our tradition.

In the *Torah* portion *Shofteem* we learn about the importance of justice and righteousness. Justice, we know, is a combination of law and kind-

ness. Strict justice must always be tempered with mercy, but it is the highest value, not love. We learn, “*Tzedakah Tzedakah Tirdot* - justice, justice you should pursue.” The highest value is righteousness, justice, not love.

It is interesting to note that in this *Torah* portion whenever it mentions that we should love the Lord your G-d, it mentions first that we should observe His commandments. Almost always in the *Torah* the fear of G-d is mentioned before the love of G-d to teach us that even the love of G-d cannot take precedence over morality. Susan Smith was willing to sacrifice her children for love. In the ancient world people also sacrificed their children for love, for the love of pagan gods. This is an abomination. Child sacrifice can never be allowed.

In this *Torah* portion we also learn that we must be *Tameen*, whole-hearted, with G-d, which means that we must be just. G-d does not want us to act in an unjust manner even for the sake of our love for Him.

We also learn in the *Torah* portion *Shofteem* how Moshe reminds the Jewish people how when they heard the *Ten Commandments* they begged Moshe Rabbeinu to receive the rest of the *Torah* himself since the words of G-d were too strong for them. As the Jewish people said, “Let me not continue to hear the voice of G-d out of this great fire.” The passion and love for ideas and ideals can also lead to great injustices. Look what happened because of those Communist idealists in Russia. Twenty million people were killed on the altar of their ideals. Love is wonderful, but it must always be subordinated to morality.

When we say the *Shma* every day, we first say, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is one” and then we say, “You should love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul.” The rabbis say that when we say the *Shma* what we are doing is receiving upon ourselves the yoke of heaven, which means that when we say the *Shma*, we are agreeing to be moral. Only after we agree to be moral can we then love the Lord our G-d. Even the love of G-d has limits.

During the High Holiday prayers, we reiterate this same message. We talk about the reverence of G-d before we talk about the love of G-d. In fact, at the end of the *Malchuyos* section where we declare G-d’s sovereignty, we say the *Shma* first before we speak about the love of G-d. We must remember that morality comes before love.

Judaism postulates that the way we complete ourselves is through assuming responsibility, being moral individuals. We have a moral responsibility to ourselves, to others, and to our community. Making love the highest value can many times cause us to do immoral things. Love can cause us to betray our own children can cause us to betray our responsibilities to our families, to our people, and to our traditions. In America today there are so many young people who are leaving the Jewish fold because they feel that they must be true to their love, that love takes precedence over their family and over their responsibilities to the Jewish people. What is even more tragic is that sometimes some women think that love even takes precedence over their own responsibilities to themselves. How many women stay in abusive relationships because they do not feel they can live without the love of this man who is harming and abusing them? How many times have I heard women say, "How can I give him up? I love him." This has cost many women even their lives in America because they have put love above everything else.

America needs a rebirth of family values, but it will only have a rebirth of family values if we learn to subject love to responsibility. Family values will only be restored in America if we will all realize that the highest value is not love; it is being responsible for ourselves, for others, and for our community. We have to do away with this culture of love and remember that our responsibilities to our children and to our community and even to ourselves are higher values than love.