

My friends, this week on the Dennis Prager Show, Dennis spoke very movingly about his late father, Max. One of the main things he talked about was how much Max loved God. He also admitted that while he, Dennis, loved the Bible and obeyed respected God, he found it much harder to love God than his father did. Max Prager, Dennis said, had led a life in which he “walked between the raindrops” until his wife Hilda passed away. Dennis believes this was an important factor in his father’s love for God, although as Dennis acknowledged, most people would say that Dennis himself leads a charmed life and still he finds it challenging to love God. That is why he believes there is a commandment to love God, because it does not come naturally. Stealing comes naturally so we are commanded not to steal. Loving God does not come naturally and so we need the commandment to tell us to love God.

Let’s pause for a quick question, one you might be able to answer in the wink of an eye, or perhaps that you have not spent time thinking about and will require time to be able to answer. Either way, I think it is important for one’s religious life to include the answer to this question, no matter what that answer turns out to be. Here is the question: do you love God? I will give my answer and the reason for it later in my talk.

You might be surprised to learn that there is very little said about loving God in the Torah. By far, the Book of Psalms has more to say about loving God than any other Biblical book, but though the Psalms may have been Divinely inspired, no one considers them to be the word of God. We first hear about loving God in the Decalogue, more popularly known as the Ten Commandments: *You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth*

*generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

Perhaps there is an important lesson here, one that might help Dennis, who feels vulnerable when he shares his struggle with loving God. Do you remember that I said Dennis respects and obeys God? Perhaps the Ten Commandments is telling us that simply by following God's commandments, we are showing love. I think the two are inextricably linked. Can you imagine someone saying, "I ignore everything that God has said about how to live (the commandments), but I really love Him a lot."? I think it is a rhetorical question. The commandments tell us what God wants from us, and for Dennis, what God wants from us is much more important than what we want from God. I agree with him completely.

Despite the Ten Commandments mentioning loving God, they do not command us to love God. If there is a commandment to love God, we find it in the first paragraph of the Shema. Because our prayer books print a line after the first verse of the Shema, a line that does not come from Torah like the Shema does, we don't always realize that the first paragraph includes the first six words we all learned early in our Jewish educations. Here is the entire first paragraph: *Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

It is rare that Dennis and I differ on questions of Judaism. However, tonight I want to share with you that I do not believe we are commanded to love God. Didn't I just read the commandment to love God? No, and I wish I could give you

a lofty, spiritual explanation as to why not, but it is as simple as this: the Hebrew there is not in the grammatical imperative form that commandments take. It is in a form of the future tense, so I read it as the Torah assuring us that we will indeed love God. How? By knowing His ways, which the Torah tells us means doing what is just and right.

As for me, do I love God? I do. Why? Because like Dennis, I am concerned with what God wants from me, and God has given me, given all of us, the moral absolutes on which a good society and a good world must be based. For that alone, God is worthy of being loved. I hope the questions of whether you love God and whether the Torah commands it (Prager) or predicts it (Sendrow) are ones to which you will devote some thought. I hope that simply considering these questions will be religiously enriching. And I pray for the day that whether they love God or not, all people will live by the moral absolutes with which God blessed His Creation.