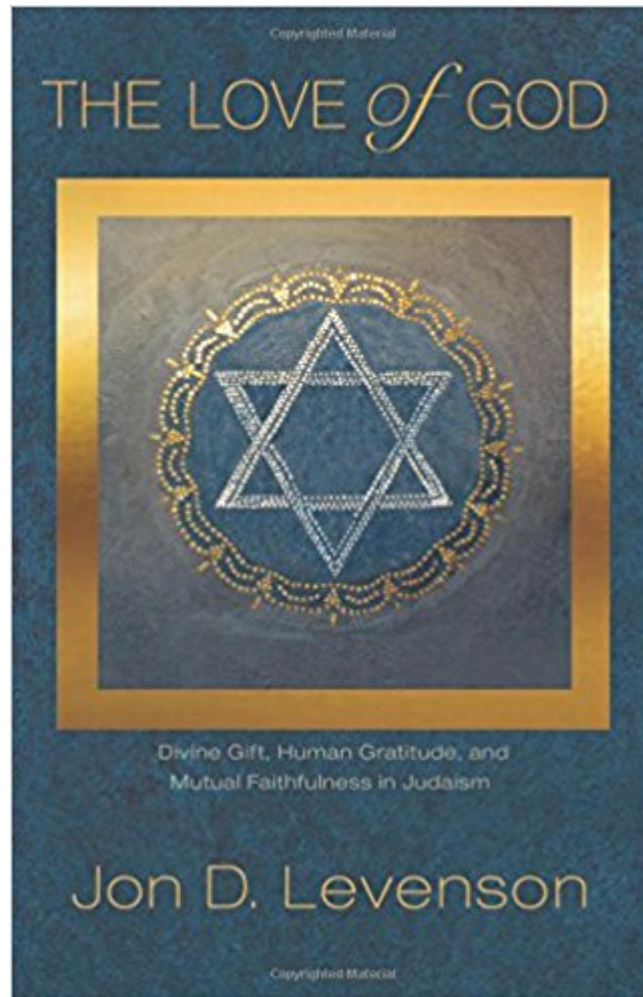


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The Love Of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, And Mutual Faithfulness In Judaism (Library Of Jewish Ideas)



Synopsis

The love of God is perhaps the most essential element in Judaism--but also one of the most confounding. In biblical and rabbinic literature, the obligation to love God appears as a formal commandment. Yet most people today think of love as a feeling. How can an emotion be commanded? How could one ever fulfill such a requirement? The Love of God places these scholarly and existential questions in a new light. Jon Levenson traces the origins of the concept to the ancient institution of covenant, showing how covenantal love is a matter neither of sentiment nor of dry legalism. The love of God is instead a deeply personal two-way relationship that finds expression in God's mysterious love for the people of Israel, who in turn observe God's laws out of profound gratitude for his acts of deliverance. Levenson explores how this bond has survived episodes in which God's love appears to be painfully absent--as in the brutal persecutions of Talmudic times--and describes the intensely erotic portrayals of the relationship by biblical prophets and rabbinic interpreters of the Song of Songs. He examines the love of God as a spiritual discipline in the Middle Ages as well as efforts by two influential modern Jewish thinkers--Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig--to recover this vital but endangered aspect of their tradition. A breathtaking work of scholarship and spirituality alike that is certain to provoke debate, The Love of God develops fascinating insights into the foundations of religious life in the classical Jewish tradition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

How can love be commanded or prescribed? Jon Levenson's beautiful exploration of this and

related questions is an eloquent search into one of the central issues of a religious life. The clarity of Levenson's prose illuminates subtle pathways in guiding the reader to an understanding of how love of God was understood in the Bible, the rabbinic tradition, medieval philosophers such as Bahya and Maimonides, and modern Jewish thinking in Buber and Rosenzweig. Despite the inevitable flaw of oversimplifying Levenson's thought, perhaps a few examples of provocative ideas will serve to entice you to buy this deeply affecting work: We think of love as emotion and affect. In the Bible love for God is more service and obedience, as a relationship between suzerain and subject or parent and child. The Biblical self is familial and intergenerational, not individual. Male conception of love is more action and service, while female idea is more affect and emotion. Love of God contains both, but the Bible is closer to the former. Behavior and ritual generate emotion, directing and refining feelings. Thus "empty ritual" is not empty. Suffering leads away from illusions of self-sufficiency and invulnerability. The covenant with Abraham is a grant, a divine gift. The covenant at Sinai is a treaty with mutual obligations. The covenant at Sinai made divine love practical, reliable, reciprocal. It is not an abstract universal moral code or natural law. What higher reality does human sexual love disclose? Self-mastery prepares for love of God. Fear of God is not just fear of punishment, not a cost-benefit calculation, but awe of incomparable majesty. This "fear" is part of love.

What is the nature of the love of God in Judaism? Does the love flow in both directions or does it flow only from humans to God? Jon Levenson, the Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University, explores a multitude of related understandings of the love of God in his new book "The Love of God: Divine, Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism". (2015) The book is relatively short, but it is learned and densely written. It is a book that must be pondered and studied. The book is scholarly, but Levenson writes to convince. He wants to show the reader that there is deep value to the Jewish understanding of the love of God and to encourage a sense of religious awareness. Levenson argues that the love of God is perhaps the most essential part of Judaism but that it remains little studied and understood. The commandment to love God is at the heart of the Shema, the most important prayer in Judaism, with a text that derives from the Torah. Levenson explores love of God in Judaism in five distinct periods: 1. the Torah; 2. the Talmudic commentators; 3. the Prophets; 4. the medieval Jewish philosophers; 5. the modern day, with an emphasis on Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, two twentieth century Jewish philosophers who knew one another and who engaged in discussion about Jewish life. It is worth noting that chronologically nos. 2 and 3 in Levenson's presentation are reversed. Levenson finds a great deal

of difference in the understanding of the love of God as developed over the centuries. He also finds a strong degree of continuity.

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