

The Hebrew Corner

Love is a topic that is discussed in numerous books of the Tanach. There are two Hebrew words that are identified with love that are similar in meaning but not synonymous. One of these is used in the following passage (Ecclesiastes 9:5-6):

“For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun.”

Translated as love in the passage is the Hebrew word ahava (אהבה, ah-hah-VAH), which is a word that may be used to indicate various forms of love. This is often contrasted with hatred in many passages such as this one, in which the Hebrew word for hatred is used, which is sina (שנאה, sih-NAH).

One use of this word is in a psalm of David (Psalm 109:4-5):

“For my love they are my adversaries: but I give myself unto prayer. And they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love.”

The love that David mentions here likely is the love of God, possibly also the love he has for his people. The Hebrew word ahava used is in both cases translated as love. Clearly he is not referring specifically to love for a woman, as it is in the next passage (2

Samuel 13:10-15):

“And Amnon said unto Tamar, Bring the meat into the chamber, that I may eat of thine hand. And Tamar took the cakes which she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. And when she had brought them unto him to eat, he took hold of her, and said unto her, Come lie with me, my sister. And she answered him, Nay, my brother, do not force me; for no such thing ought to be done in Israel: do not thou this folly. And I, whither shall I cause my shame to go? and as for thee, thou shalt be as one of the fools in Israel. Now therefore, I pray thee, speak unto the king; for he will not withhold me from thee. Howbeit he would not hearken unto her voice: but, being stronger than she, forced her, and lay with her. Then Amnon hated her exceedingly; so that the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her. And Amnon said unto her, Arise, be gone.”

Here ahava translated as love represents a superficial kind of sexual desire, which resulted in Amnon forcing himself on Tamar, then casting her out after the act was finished.

Ahava is also be used to represent the love of God for man (Hosea 11:1-4):

“When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt. As they called them, so they went from them: they sacrificed unto Baalim, and burned incense to graven images. I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them. I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love:

and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid meat unto them.”

God's love for Israel here is described as the love of a father for his son. In fact, in the B'rit Hadasha, this passage is referenced as a fulfilled prophecy about Yeshua the Messiah (Matthew 2:13-15):

“When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt. As they called them, so they went from them: they sacrificed unto Baalim, and burned incense to graven images. I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them. I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love: and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid meat unto them.”

A second Hebrew word is also used to connote love, used in the following passage (Psalm 69:12-16):

“They that sit in the gate speak against me; and I was the song of the drunkards. But as for me, my prayer is unto thee, O LORD, in an acceptable time: O God, in the multitude of thy mercy hear me, in the truth of thy salvation. Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sink: let me be delivered from them that hate me, and out of the deep waters. Let not the waterflood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up, and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me. Hear me, O LORD; for thy lovingkindness is good: turn unto me according to the multitude of thy tender mercies.”

The word lovingkindness is a translation of the Hebrew word *chesed* (חֶסֶד, CHEH-sehd), which at least one version translates as steadfast

love. This is a strong bond of God to a man that is portrayed in this passage. Along similar lines is the following passage (Psalm 63:1-3):

“O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary. Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee.”

The psalmist indicates that the chesed love of God is greater than his life, a very deep love. Moreover, chesed can also mean mercy, as shown in the following passage (Genesis 39:20-21):

“And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were bound: and he was there in the prison. But the LORD was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison.”

Chesed in the same vein is also used in the song of Moses and the Israelites after they crossed the Red Sea (Exodus 15:11-13):

“Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders? Thou stretchedst out thy right hand, the earth swallowed them. Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed: thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation.”

Chesed here is used to describe the mercy that God had shown to the Israelites, even though they had demonstrated a lapse of faith on the other side of the Red Sea.

So we see that ahava is used for a general depiction of love that may include the love of God for man, or man for God, or even a desire of a man for a woman. Chesed in contrast represents a deeper love of God toward individuals, a steadfast love that includes mercy.

May you have a great month full of God's love and mercy.