Global Day of Jewish Learning
Curriculum—Love: Devotion, Desire and Deception
In memory of Ralph I. Goldman

We dedicate the Global Day of Jewish Learning to the memory of Ralph I Goldman, z’l.

There was only one title that Ralph Goldman claimed for himself: “civil servant of the Jewish people.” During his 100 years of life, Ralph both served and led the Jewish people, most notably at the helm of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. More than almost anyone, he helped steer the course of 20th century Jewry.

Ralph worked under Teddy Kollek, (later the legendary Mayor of united Jerusalem) as a purveyor of ships, arms and goods during the War of Independence. He then served David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, in securing American support for the newly-created Jewish State.

In later years, Ralph raised the funds to establish Israel's high school system and its community centers. He promoted Israeli artists, writers and musicians. His wisdom and foresight—and his many communal connections—were key in establishing the Israel Museum. As the leader of the Joint, he created channels for Soviet Jews to emigrate and helped to lead the exodus of Ethiopian Jewry. Under Ralph’s aegis, the Joint expanded its work in Israel, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Ralph adored the Jewish people—and profoundly loved its heritage. Steeped in the Bible, he would quote its verses in conversation. He opened cultural centers in the former Soviet Union. At a critical moment for the monumental endeavor of the Steinsaltz Hebrew Talmud—when a funding shortage threatened the entire enterprise—Ralph understood the enormous importance of this asset of Jewish culture and persuaded the JDC's leadership to step in and make it accessible to every Jew.

We will always miss—we can never replace—Ralph’s shock of white hair, his dapper bow ties and his huge, huge grin. But as we name the Global Day of Jewish Learning in his memory, we are inspired by his life and lifted by his legacy.
“Grandchildren are the crown of their elders, and the glory of children is their parents.”

– Proverbs 17:6

In honor of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren: their lives burnish the glory of those who perished in the Shoah.

For my parents, Benjamin and Charlotte Gottesfeld z"l, these children are the greatest reward…

- Chana Hanina
- Galia Hanina
- Sarah Rose Warren Siebold and Mike Siebold
- Joseph Nathan Warren

Children of Shira and Steve Stein
- Simcha Meir
- Tamara Yocheved
- Eliyahu Aryeh
- Eitan Yosef
- Rayna
- Talia

Children of Aliza and Zev Ganz
- Shmuel Yoel
- Atara Rina
- Daniel Yomtov
- Yosef

Children of Tamar and Josh Heller
- Yakira Eliyana
- Gavriella Talia
- Yehuda Meir
- Sarah Avigayil

Children of Laura and Adam Hanina
- Samuel Azriel
- Charlotte Eliora
- Lucy Yael

And in tribute to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, whose work has opened the doors of Jewish learning to our generation and those to come.

– Fanya Gottesfeld Heller
Preface

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz has laid down a challenge to Jews everywhere: “To take a step ahead in Jewish learning and commitment.”

The Global Day of Jewish Learning is the collective response—a most successful one—with 500 communities in 42 countries participating in 2014.

Initiated in 2010 to celebrate the completion of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s monumental translation and commentary on the Talmud, the Global Day has quickly become an internationally recognized annual event. As the study of Torah is one of the few things that the entirety of our people can share, the Global Day is a day for all Jews to celebrate and cherish.

The Global Day is the work of many hands, internationally and in communities large and small. We appreciate the work being done on the ground to organize events in synagogues, JCCs, Hillels, Federations, and other community organizations all around the world. The success of the Global Day is due to all of your collective efforts. Thank you.

The Aleph Society, which spearheads the Global Day of Jewish Learning, is an affiliate of the Shefa Institute, which promotes the work of Rabbi Steinsaltz. We are grateful to Rabbi Menachem Even-Israel, Shefa’s Executive Director, for his guidance and creativity.

Several agencies and individuals were instrumental in the planning and outreach for the Global Day. Our deepest thanks go to our key international partner, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and our organizing partners, the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) and Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. We are excited to again have JAFI’s Partnership2Gether join us as a community partner. We are grateful to our 20+ supporting partners, including the rabbinic bodies of all the denominations, for promoting the Global Day to their constituencies. This is truly a collaborative effort.

Thank you to Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, Yaffa Epstein, Devorah Katz, Arthur Kurzweil and Aliza Sperling for contributing pieces to this curriculum. And a special thank you to Devorah Katz for the dedication she brought to her role as Curriculum Editor. Thank you also to Lily Meyer for wearing many hats to support our work and to Howard Hirt and Atara Snowbell for their assistance. We greatly appreciate our special partnership with PJ Library and its work to prepare this year's early childhood family programming unit: Love Stories.

We wish you a wonderful day of learning on Sunday, November 15th and hope that the study of “Love: Devotion, Desire and Deception” will offer us new insights into Jewish texts and our own lives.

Margy-Ruth Davis, Karen Sponder and Zachary Natan Cohen
The Aleph Society
Curriculum 2015—Love: Devotion, Desire and Deception

Overview........................................................................vi–x

FOR ADULT PARTICIPANTS
1. Balancing Love and Obedience: The Curious Case of Nadav and Avihu
In this session, we will explore the death of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, at the dedication of the Tabernacle. The incident raises questions about the tension between spontaneous religious expression and obedience to a religious system.

Facilitator’s Guide ......................................................1
Sourcesheet for Participants .........................................8

2. Fathers, Sons and Brothers: A Story of Love, Hate and Reconciliation
Story after story in Genesis describes how one child is chosen at the expense of the others. When one child is the favorite, is it possible for families to remain united?

Facilitator’s Guide .....................................................12
Sourcesheet for Participants ......................................18

In Judaism, individual human emotions are considered neither “good” nor “bad.” How does this fundamental idea at the core of Jewish belief apply to love? Through a careful look at an excerpt from The Thirteen Petalled Rose, a book of Kabbalah by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, we will explore the Jewish approach to human character traits.

Facilitator’s Guide ....................................................20
Sourcesheet for Participants ......................................26

4. Love and Deception: The Story of Jacob, Rachel and Leah
After Jacob deceives his father to receive the first-born blessing, he is sent to his mother’s birthplace to find a wife. There he encounters Rachel and falls in love. This session explores their love story, the deception involving Laban and Leah, and the definition of true love. The story leads us to think more deeply about different kinds of love.

Facilitator’s Guide ....................................................28
Sourcesheet for Participants ......................................35

5. Loving and Waiting: A Talmudic Perspective on Relationships
The rabbis of the Talmud had strong opinions about romantic love. We will explore some extreme examples of marriages portrayed in the Talmud. What is the connection between loving and waiting? What can these stories teach us about how to balance competing loves?

Facilitator’s Guide ....................................................39
Sourcesheet for Participants ......................................45

6. Loving God and Loving Ourselves
What does it mean to love God? Can a relationship with the Divine lead us to love ourselves? This session asks whether loving God can be a vehicle to loving ourselves and to becoming more whole.

Facilitator’s Guide ....................................................49
Sourcesheet for Participants ......................................57

7. Loving the Ger: Who is the Stranger in our Midst?
The Bible clearly instructs us to love the stranger/convert. Our experience as strangers in Egypt helps us to appreciate the importance of this commandment and the moral imperative that underlies it. What does it mean to be commanded to love a category of people? Who are the strangers?

Facilitator’s Guide ....................................................60
Sourcesheet for Participants ......................................66

FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PARTICIPANTS
The Distance Between Love and Hate: A Story of Brothers (Middle School)
The Bible tells us Rebekah loved their son Jacob, while Isaac loved their other son, Esau. Then Jacob loved his son Joseph more than all of his other children. In both instances, siblings began to hate one another. This session explores the role of favoritism in the Bible.

Facilitator’s Guide ....................................................69
Sourcesheet for Students .........................................74

Playing Favorites: Parents’ Love and Brothers’ Hate (Elementary School)
Imagine being the only one in the family or class to receive a Chanukah present. How would everyone else feel watching you unwrap the only gift? It may be surprising to learn that parents in the Bible play favorites. Explore how stories of brothers teach us about playing favorites and learning to overcome sibling rivalry.

Facilitator’s Guide ....................................................76
Sourcesheet for Students .........................................81

FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD:
PJ LIBRARY PROGRAMMING UNITS
Love Stories: Using PJ Library Books to Explore the Jewish Concept of Loving Parents and Grandparents..................................................83

Supplemental Reading and Discussion Questions—Chapter on Love—from Simple Words .................................114
The Aleph Society’s Mission & Ventures

The Aleph Society was founded in 1990 to further Rabbi Steinsaltz’s mission of “Let My People Know.” The Rabbi’s network of publishing ventures, scholarly work and schools span the globe. After completing a 45-volume Hebrew translation and commentary on the Talmud, he oversees translations of this masterwork into English, French, Russian and Spanish. He has written more than sixty other books that have been translated into a dozen languages. Thousands of students in Israel—from kindergarten to those in post-army advanced studies—have studied in institutions under his aegis. All of the Rabbi’s affiliate organizations are under the umbrella of the Shefa Institute; its website, www.hashefa.com, offers a wealth of digital classes and lectures by the Rabbi and his colleagues.

The American-based Aleph Society sponsors informal education programs that reach a world-wide audience. The Global Day of Jewish Learning, now in its sixth year, is celebrated in over 500 communities, from Singapore to San Francisco and from Dallas to Djerba. Many, many thousands of Jews join together to study the same foundational texts and to be inspired to “take a step ahead,” as Rabbi Steinsaltz has challenged us.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz is internationally regarded as one of the leading scholars and rabbis both of this century, and of the last. As described in Newsweek, “Jewish lore is filled with tales of formidable rabbis. Probably none living today can compare in genius and influence to Adin Steinsaltz, whose extraordinary gifts as scholar, teacher, scientist, writer, mystic and social critic have attracted disciples from all factions of Israeli society.”

Born in 1937 to a secular family, Rabbi Steinsaltz has authored more than 60 books and hundreds of articles on Jewish mysticism, religious thought, sociology, biography, and philosophy. The best known of these is his interpretation of the Talmud, the seminal work of Jewish culture. His The Thirteen Petalled Rose is considered a modern classic of Jewish mysticism.

He is the first person since the medieval sage Rashi to have completed a full translation of and commentary on the Babylonian Talmud. This historic achievement was commemorated in 2010 by the inaugural Global Day of Jewish Learning, which has since become an annual international event in over 40 countries.

Koren Publishers Jerusalem has recently launched the Koren Talmud Bavli, an English edition of the Steinsaltz Hebrew Talmud. The debut volumes garnered a 2012 National Jewish Book Award.

Other honors include Israel’s inaugural Israeli Presidential Award of Distinction, the Israel Prize and the French Order of Arts and Literature. Renowned as an original and open-minded thinker, Rabbi Steinsaltz has lectured and taught in hundreds of communities around the world.
Introduction for Facilitators & Educators

The theme of Love: Devotion, Desire and Deception offers important material for any Jew to explore. At the same time, we do not expect every Global Day participant to feel the same way about these ideas. Therefore, facilitators are challenged to approach the text with nuanced perspectives and to lead a pluralistic conversation, allowing participants to express their ideas. How can a facilitator manage this?

- Opening the text for conversation, rather than offering an authoritative interpretation
- Allowing for different ideas to co-exist in the classroom, including different understandings about love
- Encouraging all involved to keep an open mind and allow themselves to be challenged by the ideas in the room and on the page
- Encouraging participants to learn from each other

The facilitator will also benefit from:

- Asking questions of participants; opening up questions for conversation; after reading a text, asking participants for “reactions” and “questions”
- Stepping back and calling on participants, rather than continually offering ideas
- Allowing silence; letting people sit with ideas and mull over their thoughts
- Ensuring that those in the room know each other’s names and use them; attributing ideas to those who first raise them

Leading Global Day conversations requires a balance between facilitation and teaching. Those leading these conversations “facilitate” when they make room for participants to speak their minds and ensure that the conversation has order. Teaching is also necessary. Through the Global Day, we hope that participants develop a commitment to and interest in Jewish texts, as well as an understanding that such texts are relevant to us today. We hope that they see that Jewish text-based conversations can enrich community work, that any of us can access texts—that they are not so intimidating—and that Jewish study links each of us to the Jewish people as a whole. Facilitators are responsible for conveying these ideas to participants.

Facilitators can convey these ideas in a variety of ways:

- Facilitators can begin conversations by asking: Has anyone studied texts like this before? What is it like? What are our associations with Jewish text study? What would it mean to study more? Facilitators can also close conversations in this way, helping participants to debrief the experience and to validate each other’s positive experiences or concerns.
- Particularly if the group has relatively little experience studying Jewish texts, the facilitator can say directly: Studying Jewish texts is not so scary!
- Facilitators should feel comfortable sharing their own experiences with text study.
- If the group includes community agency leaders, or individuals who are leaders in their own synagogues, the facilitator might lead a conversation about how each person might introduce more text study into their different organizations.

Facilitators should keep in mind these educational goals, asking participants questions and challenging them in ways that will help them think about these ideas. The hope is that these goals will be realized, and that the Talmud and Jewish texts will have gained thousands of students as a result of this great day.
Editor’s Note: Terminology and Translation

Throughout the curriculum we refer to God as “He.” We transliterate certain Hebrew words. Please feel free to adapt these and any other terminology to that which is most fitting for your community.

Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of the Bible are from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*.

The Sessions

To delve into the theme and to help participants see both Jewish texts and narratives as relevant to their lives, the sessions address significant questions related to Love: Devotion, Desire and Deception.

Each class reviews primary ideas in different areas, and the classes complement each other.

We have chosen texts that will challenge participants, raise key questions and help us to develop a richer understanding of love in different forms, in ways that were relevant to the rabbis and will be relevant to us today. Each class contains a variety of texts that shed light on the theme—including texts from the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Medieval and Modern commentators.

Session format:

- Facilitators’ guides contain background information, texts, conversation questions and directions to help you structure and frame each class.
- Sourcesheets for the participants immediately follow the facilitator’s guide in each unit.
- A breakdown of the classes’ timing is provided to facilitators. While we outline 60 minutes for the adult sessions, we expect the facilitator to have the flexibility to abridge or lengthen these classes based on time allotted and/or the participants' interest.

As you put together your outline for the conversation that you will lead, keep in mind:

- Don’t feel compelled to use each text and activity. Rather, use what makes sense and feels natural to you.
- Connect one text to the other. Often, the hardest part of these conversations is making the links between texts. Before leading the conversation, create a mental outline of how one text leads to the next, and of the points you are trying to make in teaching and leading.
- Feel free to share some of your own ideas and personal stories. Bringing yourself into the conversation helps participants see you as a genuine role model.
- Don’t be afraid to share your own questions about the texts. By sharing our questions, we assure students that one can live a rich Jewish life even with—and maybe only with—questions.

These texts have been chosen for their relevance to human experience. In the end, the true purpose of the day is to increase participants’ familiarity with and appreciation for Jewish text study and the types of love these texts describe, as well as the role love plays in Jewish tradition and in our lives. Each text is rich with nuance, and a serious reckoning with the text will certainly yield new perspectives and meaning.
Beyond a text-by-text class discussion, here are some alternative formats you might consider:

- Have the students prepare together in chevruta pairs, discussing the texts with questions you provide. Give them 20 to 30 minutes to prepare the sources and then bring them back together to share their insights. Monitor their progress so you know how many sources they have covered. Often you will find that they say they didn’t have enough time to review all the sources (this is a good thing!).
- Divide the class into small groups and assign a source or two to each group. Give each group 10 to 15 minutes to work together and then reconvene the entire class and ask each group to share their insights.
- Divide the class into small groups and have the entire class learn one or two sources (depending on the length) for five to seven minutes. Then bring them back for a debriefing which will also be five minutes at most. Do that for all the sources, leaving time for a five to seven minute summary at the end.

**Video Class**

In addition to this curriculum, there will be a video class by Rabbi Steinsaltz that will be available for download/online viewing. The class will be approximately 12 minutes long. The video will address the theme and explore questions including:

- What is love?
- Do you believe in soul-mates?
- How can I be commanded to love?

The videos will be available this summer in the Toolbox section of the Global Day website.

**24x24**

24x24 is the Global Day’s live broadcast of Jewish learning from around the world, using Google Hangouts On Air and YouTube. Learn from renowned Jewish educators, rabbis and artists, and ask questions in real time. Bring a speaker from around the world to your Global Day programming.

Visit www.theglobalday.org/24x24 to learn more and check out the latest list of speakers and topics.

**Using the Curriculum Guidebook for All Levels**

**Beginning Adult Learners**

- Study Fathers, Sons and Brothers: A Story of Love, Hate and Reconciliation, as this session is intended to be especially helpful for beginning learners.
- Base a session on Rabbi Steinsaltz’s chapter “Love” from his book Simple Words, which can be found in the Supplemental Reading section. You might want to split the paragraphs up among participants—give a few paragraphs to each participant. After they read and parse the paragraphs, go around the room and create a summary of the chapter from participants’ feedback.

Use the following discussion questions:

1. What are the different types of love that Rabbi Steinsaltz describes? Have you experienced any of these types of love? Do you agree or disagree with Rabbi Steinsaltz’s definitions?
2. What are some examples of “fish love,” or subject-oriented love, that you experience in your own life?
3. What value does learning about love offer us for our Jewish lives and communities? What insights does it offer you personally?
4. Did you find anything in this text challenging? What type of love is the most important in your life?

5. Love means that we see past and “forgive” the flaws of those we care about. How is self-love blind?
   How have you experienced forgiveness as part of self-love? How have you experienced it as part of the love you feel for others?

Close either session by asking participants about their experience of text study, debriefing and helping participants look forward to studying again.

Middle School Students

We are pleased to offer again this year a unit for middle school students (grades 6–8). This unit includes activities to help these students explore sibling relationships, love and favoritism. Middle school students vary by age and educational needs, so this unit will need to be tailored to best fit the group of participating students.

Elementary School Students

We are pleased to offer again this year a unit for elementary school students (grades 1–5). This unit includes activities to help these students explore love and family. Elementary school students vary greatly by age and educational needs, so this unit will need to be tailored to best fit the group of participating students.
Facilitator’s Note: This class can be taught in either a 60-minute or 90-minute session, depending on your time limitations. For a 60-minute session, omit the Introductory Activity. For a 90-minute session, include the Introductory Activity and allow more time for discussion throughout.

Introduction (3 minutes)

The story of the deaths of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, at the dedication of the Tabernacle (Mishkan) raises questions about the tension between spontaneous or intuitive religious expression and obedience to the religious system. We will look at this tragic and baffling episode together, try to understand what happened, and examine its implications for our lives today.

Introductory Activity (15 minutes)

▶ Write the word “Obedience” on one piece of paper and place it on one side of the room. Write “Worship of the Heart” on another piece of paper and place it on the other side of the room.

▶ Pose the following questions for participants to think about as they make their decisions about the ideal form of worship:

1. What do you think is the highest or best form of Jewish worship?
2. Is it obedience to God and Torah, even if it conflicts with your ideas or needs? Or is it subjective worship of the heart, serving God lovingly without the constraints of a fixed system?

▶ Ask participants to stand where they believe the Jewish ideal is (i.e., all the way on one side of the room or the other, somewhere halfway between, etc.).

▶ Briefly discuss where participants placed themselves and why (5 minutes or less—you don’t want this to take up all your time!).

Let’s examine this dichotomy through the story of Aaron and his sons.

Part One: The Dedication of the Tabernacle (10 minutes)

Our story begins in the wilderness. The Children of Israel have been freed from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and received the Torah. They have been commanded to build a Tabernacle, the portable place for Divine worship while the people dwell in the wilderness.

Aaron, the brother of Moses, is the High Priest, and his sons are priests. After seven days of preparation, the Tabernacle is inaugurated with Aaron and his sons bringing sacrifices, and Aaron blessing the people. God’s presence then descends upon the Tabernacle.
Read the story together.


22 Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being.

23 Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people.

24 Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and rejoiced, and fell on their faces.

Ask:

1. Imagine that you are one of the spectators at the Tabernacle’s inauguration. How do you feel at this point?

Continue reading the story; the next events take us by surprise.

Text #2: Leviticus 10:1–2. English translation adapted from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.

1 Now Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord strange fire, which He had not enjoined upon them.

2 And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord.

Ask:

1. Imagine that you are still a spectator at the inauguration. How do you feel now?

2. According to the text, why do Nadav and Avihu die?

Part Two: What did Nadav and Avihu do Wrong? (17 minutes)

The commentators struggle to understand what Nadav and Avihu did to warrant death by fire. We will look at the explanations of Sifra, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, all of whom focus on the
fact that their offering of the incense was an action “that God had not commanded them” (verse 1). Sifra is a late 2nd century commentary on Leviticus. Rabbi Hirsch was a 19th century German rabbi and religious thinker. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best-known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

➢ Read Texts #3, #4 and #5 aloud.

Text #3: Sifra, Shemini 32.

“ויקחו בני אהרן — אח ו蹩 הנפשות. יוהר שרר.vn חורשת לעוזרין אהובא על אהובה. "

“And Aharon’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his censer”—they, in their joy, since they saw a new fire [the heavenly fire], they arose to add love to love.

➢ Ask:

1. According to the Sifra, what was Nadav and Avihu’s motivation for bringing an incense offering?
2. What does the Sifra mean when it says that Nadav and Avihu came to “add love to love”?
3. What is wrong with adding “love to love”?


No place is allowed in the whole service of the offerings of the Sanctuary of the Torah for subjectively doing just what you think right…For the proximity of and getting near to God, which is the purpose of every offering, is only to be found by the way of obedience, by compliance with God’s Will and subordination to it. This is one of the points in which Judaism and Paganism go in diametrically opposite directions. The Pagan brings his offering in an attempt to make the god subservient to his wishes. The Jew, with his offering, wishes to place himself in the service of God; by his offering he wishes to make himself subservient to the wishes of his God. So that all offerings are formulae of the demands of God, which the bringer, by his offering, undertakes to make the normal routine for his future life. So that self-devised offerings would be a killing of just those very truths which our offerings are meant to impress upon the bringers, would be placing a pedestal on which to glorify one’s own ideas, where a throne was meant to be built for obedience, and obedience only. We can understand that the death of the priestly youths, and their death in the first moment of the consecration of the Sanctuary of God, is the most solemn warning for all future priests of this Sanctuary; it excludes from the precincts of the Sanctuary of God—which was to be nothing else but the Sanctuary of His Torah—every expression of caprice, and every subjective idea of what is right and becoming! Not by fresh inventions even of God-serving novices, but by carrying out that which is ordained by God has the Jewish priest to establish the authenticity of his activities.

➢ Ask:

1. According to Rabbi Hirsch, what is the problem with subjective service of God?
2. Do you think obedience is the ideal service of God? Why or why not?
3. According to Rabbi Hirsch, what is the correct balance between subjective acts of love and obedience to the system?
Building the Mishkan [Tabernacle] can be compared to constructing a spaceship. Space travel requires vehicles that can journey to distant, extraterrestrial places, but these voyages—no matter how long they are—are ultimately circumscribed by finite, physical parameters. The Mishkan, on the other hand, faced an even greater challenge: transcending the vast distance, and differences, between an infinite God and a finite humanity.

In order to build a spacecraft, one must develop a design, gather raw materials and fashion each component. Every part must be checked and double-checked, to assure that it meets the exacting specifications. All the pieces are then joined together into a cohesive unit. Finally, each part must be rechecked, each subsystem must be tested, and the whole structure must be reassembled. The Mishkan, too, was assembled, deconstructed and then constructed anew, to verify that each part perfectly complemented the others...

On the last, climactic day of the dedication of the altar (Leviticus 9:1-9:24), the spiritual energy of God was to enter into the physical space of the Mishkan. The actions that would bring about this extraordinary, awe-inspiring event required exacting attention to detail: Moses directs Aaron (the Kohen Gadol, or High Priest) to perform the various sacrifices “as God has commanded” (Leviticus 9:7), and Aaron does so, “according to the law” (Leviticus 9:16), and “as Moshe had commanded” (Leviticus 9:21). It is only after the precise construction of the Mishkan and the flawless performance by Aaron, and only after Aaron and Moshe have blessed the people—creating a bond with them and among them—that God revealed Himself: “...And the glory of God appeared to the entire nation. And a fire went forth from God and consumed [the offerings] on the altar; the whole nation saw and sang with joy and fell on their faces” (Leviticus 9:23-24). The consequence of heedlessness is dramatically demonstrated in the very next verse: Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, bring “a strange fire”—an unauthorized offering...and are immediately consumed by Divine fire (Leviticus 10:1-2).

According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, the criticism of Nadav and Avihu was that they did not pay sufficient attention to detail. Per his metaphor, just as space travel requires very specific guidelines, so too does building the Tabernacle. This leads us to the essential question:

Ask:

1. Is personal and emotional expression inherently irreconcilable with obligation?

Part Three: Moses’ Response (15 minutes)

Imagine that you have witnessed the awful death of Nadav and Avihu. What do you do now? How do you expect that Moses, the uncle, and Aaron, the father, will react?

Let’s continue our reading of Leviticus to find out.
3 Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.” And Aaron was silent. 4 Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, “Come forward and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp.” 5 They came forward and carried them out of the camp by their tunics, as Moses had ordered. 6 And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, “Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes, lest you die and anger strike the whole community. But your kinsmen, all the house of Israel, shall bewail the burning that the LORD has wrought. 7 And so do not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die, for the LORD’s anointing oil is upon you.” And they did as Moses had bidden.

**Ask:**

1. Why do you think Moses tells Aaron and his sons to refrain from outwardly mourning?
2. Do you think this is a proper response by Aaron, given his role as High Priest? Why or why not?

We will look at two commentaries explaining Moses’ puzzling directive to Aaron and his sons. These were written by Rashbam, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, a 12th century French commentator, and Rashi, his grandfather, the 11th century French commentator.

**Text #7: Rashbam. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.**

"This is what the Lord meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people..." 

**And Moses said to Aaron: Do not mourn or cry, and do not desist from your work, for I have told you: This is what the Lord spoke, saying through My close ones I will draw near—through My High Priests who are close to me to serve Me I wish to be sanctified that my Name and Service will not be desecrated...**

**And before all the people I will be glorified: this is the honor of the Heavenly Presence, that [Aaron] sees his sons have died and sets aside his mourning in favor of the service of his creator.**
Ask:

1. According to Rashbam, why should Aaron and his sons refrain from mourning?

2. Imagine seeing Aaron and his sons continue their duties without any sign of mourning. How would you interpret their behavior? Would you experience that as a sanctification of God's name?

3. Do you believe that obedience at great personal cost is the ultimate sanctification of God's name? Why? Can you think of other stories in the Bible or in your life that support this idea?

4. According to this text, that Aaron and his remaining sons did not show outward signs of mourning was a true testimony to their dedication to God and their work in the Tabernacle. How can we contrast this stoicism with Nadav and Avihu dying because they “added love to love”?

In contrast to the commentaries that view Nadav and Avihu’s extreme love and subjective religious expression as deficient, Rashi presents us with a totally different point of view.

Text #8: Rashi. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

This is what the Lord spoke: But when did He speak? [It was when He said], “And I will meet with the children of Israel, and it will be sanctified through My glory (Exod. 29:43). Do not read ‘through My glory,’ (כבוד) but ‘through My honorable ones.’ Moses said to Aaron, “Aaron, my brother! I knew that this House was to be sanctified through the beloved ones of the Omnipresent, but I thought it would be either through me or through you. Now I see that they [Nadav and Avihu] were greater than I or you!”

Ask:

1. How does Rashi’s explanation (taken from the midrash, Leviticus Rabbah) contrast with the commentaries that disapprove of Nadav and Avihu’s spontaneity?

2. What is so great about religious personalities like Nadav and Avihu?

3. According to this explanation, Moses believes that Nadav and Avihu were even greater than himself and Aaron. Moses realizes that they were sanctifying God. Is it possible that Nadav and Avihu did not do something wrong?

Part Four: Aaron and His Sons Push Back (10 minutes)

In the following verses, we will see how Aaron and his remaining sons Elazar and Itamar push back against Moses’ directive to proceed as though all is fine. Aaron, Elazar and Itamar were given specific instructions about sacrifices in the Tabernacle, yet Aaron makes a change to the laws. Whereas Aaron remains silent at the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, here Aaron stands up for what he believes is correct.
Read Text #9 together.


16 Then Moses inquired about the goat of sin offering, and it had already been burned! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and said, 17 “Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and He has given it to you to remove the guilt of the community and to make expiation for them before the Lord. 18 Since its blood was not brought inside the sanctuary, as I commanded.” 19 And Aaron spoke to Moses, “See, this day they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would the Lord have approved?” 20 And when Moses heard this, he approved.

Ask:

1. How does Aaron push back against Moses’ directive to continue his priestly service as usual?
2. What is Aaron’s justification? How does he know whether his actions would have been approved by God?
3. How does Aaron reassert the value of intuitive and subjective worship of God? Why do you think he resists emotionless obedience?

Aaron believed that there was a time and a place for spontaneous worship, along with a sense of responsibility and commitment to obligation. Both exist in Aaron’s world. While Aaron silently mourned the deaths of his sons, he also spoke up when he thought it was important to be able to express himself.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

Let’s consider the stories of Nadav and Avihu’s deaths, the restrictions on Aaron’s mourning and the altercation between Moses and Aaron about the sin offering.

Ask:

1. What do you think the Bible is telling us about the balance between obedience to a religious system and spontaneous, intuitive worship and love of God?
2. What do you think is the right balance?

On the one hand, the story of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu seems to warn us against spontaneous worship of God. On the other hand, the acceptance of Aaron’s response to Moses suggests that there is still room for more than just strict obedience.
Part One: The Dedication of the Tabernacle


רָכַב אֲרֹן נְגֵב-מִזְרָח.
פֻּלָּת בִּשְׂכָלַת, וְיִשְׂנָה-מַעֲשֵׂי-מִזְרָח.
כֹּל וּמְלַשׁ צְבָאֹת, וּמִלָּת מִרְאוֹת.

22 Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being. 23 Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. 24 Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces.

Text #2: Leviticus 10:1–2. English translation adapted from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.

וַיָּכוֹל עַל-רֹאֵשׁ-בָּן אַרֹן מִצְרַיִם, וְיִשְׂפָּר אֶת-מֵתוֹתָו, וַיִּשְׁמֹר אֶת-מִקְדֶּשֶׁת, וַיִּשְׁמֹר חֲסֵדָת, וַיִּשְׁמֹר לֶחֶם עֵין, וַיִּשְׁמֹר לָעָד.

1 Now Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord strange fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. 2 And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord.

Part Two: What did Nadav and Avihu do Wrong?

Text #3: Sifra, Shemini 32.

"וְיִרְאָה בִּלְיָשָׁה — אָכַל בְּשָׁמְתֵּיהּ. כֹּל שָׁרָא אֲשֶׁר הָרַחֵשׁ שְׁמוֹר לֶחֶם אֲכָל בְּעַל אָבֵיתָו.

“And Aharon’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his censer”—they, in their joy, since they saw a new fire [the heavenly fire], they arose to add love to love.
Balancing Love and Obedience: The Curious Case of Nadav and Avihu


No place is allowed in the whole service of the offerings of the Sanctuary of the Torah for subjectively doing just what you think right...For the proximity of and getting near to God, which is the purpose of every offering, is only to be found by the way of obedience, by compliance with God’s Will and subordination to it. This is one of the points in which Judaism and Paganism go in diametrically opposite directions. The Pagan brings his offering in an attempt to make the god subservient to his wishes. The Jew, with his offering, wishes to place himself in the service of God; by his offering he wishes to make himself subservient to the wishes of his God. So that all offerings are formulae of the demands of God, which the bringer, by his offering, undertakes to make the normal routine for his future life. So that self-devised offerings would be a killing of just those very truths which our offerings are meant to impress upon the bringers, would be placing a pedestal on which to glorify one’s own ideas, where a throne was meant to be built for obedience, and obedience only. We can understand that the death of the priestly youths, and their death in the first moment of the consecration of the Sanctuary of God, is the most solemn warning for all future priests of this Sanctuary; it excludes from the precincts of the Sanctuary of God—which was to be nothing else but the Sanctuary of His Torah—every expression of caprice, and every subjective idea of what is right and becoming! Not by fresh inventions even of God-serving novices, but by carrying out that which is ordained by God has the Jewish priest to establish the authenticity of his activities.

Text #5: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “A Bridge to the Infinite—Parshat Vayakhel.”


Building the Mishkan [Tabernacle] can be compared to constructing a spaceship. Space travel requires vehicles that can journey to distant, extraterrestrial places, but these voyages—no matter how long they are—are ultimately circumscribed by finite, physical parameters. The Mishkan, on the other hand, faced an even greater challenge: transcending the vast distance, and differences, between an infinite God and a finite humanity.

In order to build a spacecraft, one must develop a design, gather raw materials and fashion each component. Every part must be checked and double-checked, to assure that it meets the exacting specifications. All the pieces are then joined together into a cohesive unit. Finally, each part must be rechecked, each subsystem must be tested, and the whole structure must be reassembled. The Mishkan, too, was assembled, deconstructed and then constructed anew, to verify that each part perfectly complemented the others...

...On the last, climactic day of the dedication of the altar (Leviticus 9:1-9:24), the spiritual energy of God was to enter into the physical space of the Mishkan. The actions that would bring about this extraordinary, awe-inspiring event required exacting attention to detail: Moses directs Aaron (the Kohen Gadol, or High Priest) to perform the various sacrifices “as God has commanded” (Leviticus 9:7), and Aaron does so, “according to the law” (Leviticus 9:16), and “as Moshe had commanded” (Leviticus 9:21). It is only after the precise construction of the Mishkan and the flawless performance by Aaron, and only after Aaron and Moshe have blessed the people—creating a bond with them and among them—that God revealed Himself: “...And the glory of God appeared to the entire nation. And a fire went forth from God and consumed [the offerings] on the altar; the whole nation saw and sang with joy and fell on their faces” (Leviticus 9:23-24). The consequence of heedlessness is dramatically demonstrated in the very next verse: Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, bring “a strange fire”—an unauthorized offering...and are immediately consumed by Divine fire (Leviticus 10:1-2).
Part Three: Moses’ Response


3 Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.” And Aaron was silent. 4 Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, “Come forward and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp.” 5 They came forward and carried them out of the camp by their tunics, as Moses had ordered. 6 And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, “Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes, lest you die and anger strike the whole community. But your kinsmen, all the house of Israel, shall bewail the burning that the LORD has wrought. 7 And so do not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die, for the LORD’s anointing oil is upon you.” And they did as Moses had bidden.

Text #7: Rashbam. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

And Moses said to Aaron: Do not mourn or cry, and do not desist from your work, for I have told you: This is what the Lord spoke, saying through My close ones I will draw near—through My High Priests who are close to me to serve Me I wish to be sanctified that my Name and Service will not be desecrated…

And before all the people I will be glorified: this is the honor of the Heavenly Presence, that [Aaron] sees his sons have died and sets aside his mourning in favor of the service of his creator.
Text #8: Rashi. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

This is what the Lord spoke: But when did He speak? [It was when He said], “And I will meet with the children of Israel, and it will be sanctified through My glory (Exod. 29:43). Do not read “through My glory,” but “through My honorable ones.” Moses said to Aaron, “Aaron, my brother! I knew that this House was to be sanctified through the beloved ones of the Omnipresent, but I thought it would be either through me or through you. Now I see that they [Nadav and Avihu] were greater than I or you!”

Part Four: Aaron and His Sons Push Back


16 Then Moses inquired about the goat of sin offering, and it had already been burned! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron’s remaining sons, and said, 17 “Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and He has given it to you to remove the guilt of the community and to make expiation for them before the Lord. 18 Since its blood was not brought inside the sanctuary, as I commanded.” 19 And Aaron spoke to Moses, “See, this day they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would the Lord have approved?” 20 And when Moses heard this, he approved.
Parents in the Bible play favorites. We are told that Jacob loved his son Joseph more than all of his other children. Earlier in Genesis we see that Rebekah loved Jacob, while Isaac loved their other son, Esau. In both instances, favoritism led to hate, which caused a rift between brothers.

Today we are going to explore the role of favoritism in the Bible, and the relationship between too much parental love and brotherly hatred. While we may be concerned with the level of hatred between brothers, it is reassuring to see some form of reconciliation as they grow older.

Part One: Jacob and Joseph: When Love Leads to Hate (20 minutes)

We all know the story of Joseph and his brothers: Joseph has dreams that he shares with his brothers, which angers them as they see Joseph as pretending to be better than them. Joseph’s brothers grow so mad at him that they finally throw him in a pit and sell him into slavery. Our first source takes us to the beginning of the tensions between Joseph and his brothers.

Ask participants to read Text #1 and answer the questions in chevruta. Chevruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.


בראשית ל:ב-ד.

2 These then, are the generations of Jacob: At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father. 3 Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a coat of many colors. 4 And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.

Ask:

1. Verse 2 begins by telling us the generations of Jacob. Does it list all of Jacob’s descendants? What message can we take from the verse?
2. Have you ever favored a child, friend or colleague? Why? What were the consequences?
3. What does the text tell us about Joseph’s interactions with his brothers? Is Joseph blameless in this situation?
While the text begins by telling us the generations of Jacob, it fails to actually list any of Jacob’s children... except one. By only mentioning Joseph, it seems clear that Jacob favors him over the rest of his children. The text tells us that Joseph is “the son of his old age” meaning that Joseph was born when Jacob was quite old. We also know that Joseph was born to Rachel, Jacob’s favorite wife. This may help us understand why Jacob favors Joseph. Yet the text also makes sure to tell us that Joseph tattled on his brothers to his father. Certainly, that did not help his relationship with them.

Unfortunately, Jacob’s immense love for Joseph contributes to his other sons’ immense hatred of Joseph. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the [British] Commonwealth, discusses the symbolic gift of Jacob’s love for his son.

> Continue reading the text below in chevruta.

**Text #2: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. “Vayeshev (5771).” Covenant and Conversation.**

Jacob gave this favoritism a visible symbol, the richly ornamented robe or coat of many colors that he had made for him. The sight of this acted as a constant provocation to the brothers. In addition there were the bad reports Joseph brought to his father about his half-brothers, the children of the handmaids.

> Ask:

1. What would have motivated Jacob to give only Joseph a beautiful gift?
2. Rabbi Sacks points out that Jacob’s gift to Joseph is a visible symbol. What is significant about Jacob’s choice of gift?

The type of gift Jacob gave Joseph is significant. When you wear a coat, it is for all to see; it isn’t meant to be tucked away and enjoyed quietly. Additionally, it is a coat of many colors, meant to draw attention. Jacob gave Joseph the coat of many colors as an act of love, but it helped perpetuate the hatred of Joseph’s brothers toward him.

> Discuss:

1. Can there be such a thing as too much love? If yes, what are the possible consequences?
2. Must love lead to favoritism?

In Text #3, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz explores the relationship between love, hate and indifference. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

> Read Text #3 aloud.

**Text #3: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Simple Words.**

The very first element in any kind of love is caring about something. There cannot be love when one does not care. The real opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. The emotions of love and hate do indeed pull in opposite directions; while love means being drawn toward the object of our emotions, hatred is pulling away from it. Yet both love and hate begin with caring. The emotion may not be constant; it may vacillate between love and hate, but the core feeling is, fundamentally, one of caring, of being involved. Only when one is involved can an emotion—positive or negative—develop.
Ask:

1. According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, what is the difference between hatred and indifference?
2. Did Joseph’s brothers hate him or were they indifferent toward him? Why?
3. Think of a time in your life when you felt hatred towards something or someone. Think of a time you felt indifferent. Which is the stronger memory?
4. We are told that Joseph’s brothers hate him. Rabbi Steinsaltz explains that love and hate exist on the same continuum. The brothers have intense feelings for Joseph as opposed to indifference, where they would feel nothing at all. Do you find this reassuring? Is hatred preferable to indifference? How?

Years later, when they are reunited with Joseph, the brothers’ hatred has been replaced with feelings of regret and, we hope, love.

Part Two: Rebekah and Isaac: Following our Parents’ Lead (15 minutes)

If Jacob’s childhood was any indication, we should not be all that surprised that Jacob played favorites because his parents did too. Jacob may have learned about love and favoritism from his parents, Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob grew up in a house where there was clear favoritism.

Note to facilitator: If participants are not familiar with the story of Esau and Jacob, you can take a few minutes to share this quick summary with them:

When Rebekah was pregnant, God told her that she would have twin sons. In the time of the Bible the first born son inherited his father’s estate and had many privileges within the family. God told Rebekah that with her sons, it would be different. The elder twin, God said, would serve the younger. When the twins were born, the older one was named Esau, which in Hebrew, means that he was red and hairy. The younger brother, Jacob, was named after the Hebrew word for heel, because he was born grabbing his twin brother Esau’s heel.

Rebekah and her husband Isaac picked favorites. Rebekah loved her son Jacob most, but Isaac favored Esau.

When Isaac was dying, he planned to give a special blessing that was reserved for his first-born and favorite, Esau. Rebekah decided to help Jacob trick his father, so that he could get the blessing of the first-born instead and all the privileges that went with it. She told him that he should pretend to be his brother Esau and fool his father into giving him his brother’s blessing. When Esau learned that his blessing had been taken and that he had been tricked, he was so furious, he wanted to kill his brother to get revenge. Rebekah, who was afraid for her younger son, told Jacob to run away before his brother could hurt him.

Read Texts #4 and #5 aloud.

27 And the boys grew; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. 28 Now Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison; and Rebekah loved Jacob.

The text tells us clearly that Jacob was loved by his mother while his twin brother, Esau, was loved by his father. In order to get a blessing from Isaac, Jacob deceives him, pretending to be Esau. This deception ultimately leads to the downfall of the entire family unit. Jacob is forced to run away from home to save himself from Esau’s rage. He never sees his parents again.


41 And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, “Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

Ask:

1. What is Esau’s plan for Jacob? Why does Esau intend to wait until after his father dies?

The message is complicated. Jacob listens to his mother (who favors him) and tricks his father (who favors Esau) to steal Esau’s blessing. Given the disastrous result of this dynamic, we would have thought that Jacob would learn the dangers of favoritism. But we see that he does not, because, as a father, he too favors one child: Joseph.

Ultimately, the result of the favoritism is the same. Esau feels betrayed by his brother’s behavior and plots Jacob’s demise. With Isaac already on his deathbed, Esau plans to wait until after his father’s death to exact revenge. Joseph’s brothers, seeing the coat as a symbol of Jacob’s favoritism, grow to hate Joseph and ultimately plan for his demise as well.

Ask:

1. Why do you think Jacob did not learn from his childhood?
2. Doesn’t fratricide seem to be an extreme reaction to favoritism? Why do Esau and Joseph’s brothers desire to go to that extreme?

Part Three: Reconciliation (15 minutes)

Even as they plot Joseph’s death, Jacob’s sons don’t want their father to know what they did to their brother. Even though Jacob deceived his father and brother, Esau doesn’t want his father to witness fratricide. They all want their fathers to love them, not hate them for the loss of the other son. Even when brothers feel betrayed by their fathers, they still still crave their fathers’ love and don’t want to disappoint them.

With time and distance, Esau’s feelings of anger and hatred dissipate, and are replaced with longing to be reunited with his brother, Jacob. After Joseph is sold into slavery, his brothers see the impact of his loss on their father.
Ultimately, Joseph and his brothers, and Jacob and Esau reunite and reconcile.

Rashi, an 11th century French commentator and scholar, points out an interesting choice of words used to tell of Jacob’s sons’ journey to Egypt during the time of famine, to find that their long lost brother has risen to a position of power.

Text #6: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 42:3.

And Joseph’s brothers went down... It is not written as “the sons of Jacob,” in order to teach us that they were contrite about their having sold him [Joseph], and they undertook to conduct themselves towards him as brothers...

The verse refers to Jacob’s sons as “Joseph’s brothers,” emphasizing the relationship that brothers have and the desire Joseph’s brothers have to act as siblings, regardless of past actions.

Ask:

1. We all have different roles we play in our family lives. What is the dominant role you currently play? How does this change over time?

Peter Pitzele, one of the founders of Bibliodrama—an interpretive, role-playing approach to close textual study of the Bible—offers another perspective on the brothers’ longing for reconciliation.

Text #7: Peter Pitzele. Our Fathers’ Wells.

In its latter half Genesis turns to an exploration of the sibling world and invites us to look at the relationship between brothers and sisters as a process of soul-making. Between the sibling polarities, at once intimate and hostile, men and women wrestle with one another and within themselves...Genesis views the sibling bond as a container for the lethal and the loving, as a dynamic made up of extremes held in tension, the centrifugal and the centripetal forces of attraction and differentiation, rejection and longing, the desire to be dominant and to be atoned...Genesis not only gives the divisive and dangerous its due, but honors as well the longing in a brother’s heart for atonement.

Ask:

1. Do you agree with Pitzele’s assertion that a relationship between siblings is a process of soul-making? Why or why not?
2. For those who have siblings, comment on the nature of your childhood with your brothers/sisters. Has there ever been a need for reconciliation? If yes, share your experience if you feel comfortable doing so.
Conclusion (5 minutes)

As a child and then as an adult, Jacob is on both the giving and receiving end of favoritism.

Ask:

1. Why do you think favoritism is a narrative throughout the book of Genesis?
2. What lessons can we learn from these two stories of Jacob?
Part One: Jacob and Joseph: When Love Leads to Hate


These then, are the generations of Jacob: At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.

Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a coat of many colors. And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.


Jacob gave this favoritism a visible symbol, the richly ornamented robe or coat of many colors that he had made for him. The sight of this acted as a constant provocation to the brothers. In addition there were the bad reports Joseph brought to his father about his half-brothers, the children of the handmaids.

Text #3: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Simple Words.

The very first element in any kind of love is caring about something. There cannot be love when one does not care. The real opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. The emotions of love and hate do indeed pull in opposite directions; while love means being drawn toward the object of our emotions, hatred is pulling away from it. Yet both love and hate begin with caring. The emotion may not be constant; it may vacillate between love and hate, but the core feeling is, fundamentally, one of caring, of being involved. Only when one is involved can an emotion—positive or negative—develop.

Part Two: Rebekah and Isaac: Following our Parents’ Lead


And the boys grew; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Now Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison; and Rebekah loved Jacob.

41 And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, “Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

Part Three: Reconciliation

Text #6: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 42:3.

And Joseph’s brothers went down...It is not written as “the sons of Jacob,” in order to teach us that they were contrite about their having sold him [Joseph], and they undertook to conduct themselves towards him as brothers...

Text #7: Peter Pitzele. Our Fathers’ Wells.

In its latter half Genesis turns to an exploration of the sibling world and invites us to look at the relationship between brothers and sisters as a process of soul-making. Between the sibling polarities, at once intimate and hostile, men and women wrestle with one another and within themselves...Genesis views the sibling bond as a container for the lethal and the loving, as a dynamic made up of extremes held in tension, the centrifugal and the centripetal forces of attraction and differentiation, rejection and longing, the desire to be dominant and to be atoned...Genesis not only gives the divisive and dangerous its due, but honors as well the longing in a brother’s heart for atonement.
Today we are going to explore an excerpt from *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz as a Kabbalistic text to study, to try to understand, and to begin to integrate within ourselves. For this session, we will be focusing on the role of love.

*Kabbalah* is a Hebrew word; it shares the same root as a Hebrew word found in the first sentence of “The Ethics of the Fathers,” *Pirke Avot*. There it states, “Moses received the Torah from Sinai” (*מֹשֶׁה קִבְּיָל תּוֹרָה מִסְיָינָא*); the transliteration of this is *Moshe kibayl Torah m’Sinai*. *Kibayl* comes from the same root as *Kabbalah*. You can hear the similarity in the sounds of the words. It means “to receive.”

The word Kabbalah implies our “received tradition” and is most specifically associated with the received tradition regarding the deepest Jewish teachings on the mysteries of Creation. Subsequently, it deals with deep philosophical and theological questions:

1. What is the meaning of our existence?
2. How can a finite human possibly know the Unknowable?
3. Who am I?
4. Where did I come from?
5. Where am I going?

The abstract ideas and questions posed here require prolonged intellectual meditation, not quick reaction or judgment. Kabbalah is a challenging field of Torah study, where paradoxes often reside, and where digging deeper is essential. As Rabbi Steinsaltz teaches in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, “Kabbalah is the theology of the Jewish people.”

**Part One: Introducing our Text** (5 minutes)

If you have ever visited an eclectic spiritual book store you may have noticed that most of the religious traditions represented offer books on abstract topics such as love, faith and harmony, to name a few.

It is rare, however, among the tens of thousands of rabbinic books published over the centuries, to find a Jewish spiritual text on an abstract subject. There is no Jewish spiritual volume on the topic of love.

One reason for this is that Jewish tradition approaches the abstract concept of love—and every human emotion—from an entirely different perspective.

This can be understood by way of an illustration: In Jewish thought, instead of defining “love” and “honesty” as good while defining “hate” and “dishonesty” as bad, the Jewish approach is to view love, hate, honesty and dishonesty as having the potential for either good or bad.

Sometimes “hate” is precisely what the situation calls for.
Sometimes dishonesty is surely appropriate: One does not visit one’s grandmother in the hospital and say, “Grandma, you look worse than you did yesterday.”

As every pharmacist knows, the issue is one of timing and dosage. A medicine can be a poison.

In *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, Rabbi Steinsaltz tries to identify the essential abstract notions at the core of Jewish life and belief. But unlike many other religious traditions, well known for focusing on “love” as a notion at the center of their approach to life, there is no chapter on Love in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*. But in “The Way of Choice: An Answer to Ethics” Rabbi Steinsaltz discusses the Jewish approach to love, hate, anger, laughter—and all the “potentialities of the heart,” as Rabbi Steinsaltz puts it.

Unlike ethical systems, Jewish tradition does not establish a hierarchy of values among the many forms of human expression—where love is “above” hate. Rather, both love and hate have their right time and place as well as their wrong time and place.

**Part Two: Our Text (40 minutes)**

» **Read aloud.**


One cannot determine that a given quality is always and with every person the same.

In certain societies and cultures, love, pity, and compassion may be considered good; and yet there may also be occasions, outside these cultures and even within them, when these qualities could be considered bad, leading one astray into sadness or sin.

Similarly, pride, selfishness, and even hate are not always bad attributes.

As the sages have said, there is no attribute that lacks its injurious aspect, its negation and failure, just as there is no attribute—even if connected with doubt and heresy—that has not, under some circumstances, its holy aspect.

From this point of view, the good and bad qualities are not set opposite one another, with love always on the side of the good and the other qualities always on the side of the bad.

Rather all the attributes, all the emotions, and all the potentialities of the heart and personality are set on the same level and considered good or bad, not according to some judgment of their intrinsic worth, but according to the way they are used.

In Hebrew good attributes are called “good measures,” which suggests that the excellence of a quality is determined by its proportion; not by its being what it is in itself, but by its properly related use in particular circumstances.

Everything that is not in the right measure, that relates out of proportion to a situation, tends to be bad. The good is thus that which is contained within proper limits, and the bad, that which breaks out and goes beyond these limits; and it does not matter whether this exceeding of boundaries is positive or negative, restrictive or excessive, whether refusal of affection or even generosity in love.
And, in fact, this need for balance is true of every living organism; each cell in the organism has a certain form and a fixed rate of growth; and whenever its form is distorted or its growth exceeds what it should be, the result is pathology.

The evil in the world is just such a bursting of bounds, that which allows for the existence of parasitic and injurious factors.

Ask participants to sit in silence for two minutes and then to quietly re-read the piece, contemplating the text individually.

Ask participants to discuss the questions below in chevruta. Chevruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.

Ask:

1. Begin by trying to resist the temptation to argue with the text. Have one member of the chevruta summarize the main points of the text. Ask the other member to weigh in: does s/he agree or disagree with the summary? Work together to fine-tune the summary.
2. What, if anything, bothers you about this text? What does not seem clear? Are there words, sentences or contradictions you would like to have clarified?

Bring the group back together. We will now break down the text and read and discuss the questions and issues that are raised throughout.

Ask a participant to read Text #1A aloud.

Text #1A: Excerpt from Text #1.

There is no attribute that lacks its injurious aspect, its negation and failure, just as there is no attribute—even if connected with doubt and heresy—that has not, under some circumstances, its holy aspect.

Ask:

1. How can the human attributes of doubt and heresy ever be holy?
2. In what ways could the attribute of love have an injurious aspect?

Imagine you are walking down the street and you see a person who is hungry and who is asking for a donation. If you say to yourself, “The Almighty takes care of all of our needs,” you might pass the needy person by. But if you say, “Maybe the Almighty does not take care of everyone,” then your heresy prompts you to give, and the act of charity is holy.

It is easy to imagine an infatuation in which one person takes advantage of another. The young lover, the one with the crush, may allow himself to be misused or misled by the object of his affection. Here love can be hurtful.
Good and bad qualities are not set opposite one another, with love always on the side of the good and the other qualities always on the side of the bad. Rather all the attributes, all the emotions, and all the potentialities of the heart and personality are set on the same level and considered good or bad, not according to some judgment of their intrinsic worth, but according to the way they are used.

**Ask:**

1. Can you give some examples of circumstances when a bad quality is good because of how it is used?
2. With this understanding—that love and hate are not opposites—can you identify other common opposites that are good or bad based on how they are used?

It is bad to habitually hit a child, but if I hit a baby’s hand out of a flame that he or she just touched, it could be seen as a “bad” quality being used for “good.”

Examples: Strict parent/lenient parent; tough employer/gentle employer

In Hebrew good attributes are called “good measures,” which suggests that the excellence of a quality is determined by its proportion; not by its being what it is in itself, but by its properly related use in particular circumstances.

**Ask:**

1. The Hebrew word for measures is *middot*. How are the following character traits distorted by excess or lack: sense of humor, punctuality, honesty etc.…?
2. What are some familiar aspects of life that become “bad” by their proportion, but are not “bad” in and of themselves?

Regarding honesty, the Babylonian Talmud in Tractate Ketubot 17a records the argument between Beit Hillel (the house or school of Hillel) and Beit Shammai (the house or school of Shammai) as to whether one can sing about a bride’s beauty when the bride is not beautiful. Jewish law sides with Beit Hillel: you should indeed sing that she is beautiful. Rabbi Steinsaltz, in his Talmud commentary, emphasizes the importance of treating everyone courteously, noting that “polite words, though they are sometimes not the absolute truth, are part of the structure of social relations.” Some familiar aspects of life that become “bad” by their proportion include chocolate and power. An excess of chocolate can cause cavities. Likewise, power is also something that can be used for good, but could also corrupt someone. Another example is money, which can be used as a weapon or as a tool.

Everything that is not in the right measure, that relates out of proportion to a situation, tends to be bad. The good is thus that which is contained within proper limits, and the bad, that which breaks out and goes beyond these limits; and it does not matter whether this exceeding of boundaries is positive or negative, restrictive or excessive, whether refusal of affection or even generosity in love.
Is Love Always Good? Exploring Love in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*

**Ask:**

1. In what circumstances could love be too excessive? Too restrictive?
2. What does Rabbi Steinsaltz mean by “refusal of affection or even generosity in love?”

There can be certain types of love that would be considered both too excessive and unhealthy—a parent who smothers his or her children with love; someone who stalks an old girlfriend or boyfriend. On the flip side, there is love that is too restrictive, as with parents who withhold affection. Sometimes to refuse affection is good (e.g., from a stranger). Sometimes affection is given far too generously, more than the recipient merits.

**Text #1E: Excerpt from text #1.**

This need for balance is true of every living organism: each cell in the organism has a certain form and a fixed rate of growth; and whenever its form is distorted or its growth exceeds what it should be, the result is pathology.

**Ask:**

1. What areas of life have a particular need for balance?
2. In what ways do we see love manifested in the world as pathology?

Areas of life that have a particular need for balance include eating, prayer and study. We must eat so that we are sufficiently nourished, but should not overeat. With prayer/study we should not get stuck in one to the exclusion of the other. Similarly, we must balance the amount of time we engage in both prayer and study with other life pursuits.

**Conclusion** (10 minutes)

You might ask, “Why is this discussion ‘Kabbalah’? It certainly doesn’t sound like a big secret.”

And to this question, a Kabbalist might say, “Some secrets are hidden right in front of you, but when you reveal them they can change your entire approach to life.”

This one idea that we’ve discussed today is embedded within the Jewish approach to life. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (known by many as “The Rav,”) a 20th century American Talmudist and philosopher widely considered to have been one of the leading Modern Orthodox scholars, expressed this approach as follows:

**Text #2: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. The Rav: Thinking Aloud: Transcripts of Personal Conversations with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik by David Holzer.**

Christianity and other philosophies believe that certain emotions are good while others are bad…Judaism has never thought that way. To us, all emotions are neutral by themselves. Judgments of good or bad are only possible when considering what the emotion is directed towards. An emotion is “good” when appropriate for the situation, and “bad” when inappropriate.
Is Love Always Good? Exploring Love in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*

» Ask participants to join together again with their *chevruta* in discussing the questions below.

» Ask:

1. Has the discussion of the text improved your understanding of the text? How?
2. Which of your concerns have been resolved? Which of your concerns remain unresolved?

**Concluding Activity**

» Ask participants to sit quietly, in silence, for **60 seconds**. Use this time to contemplate the idea expressed by Rabbi Steinsaltz. Consider it. Challenge it. Look for its wisdom. Imagine ways that this Jewish approach might need some fine-tuning in your life.

» After timing the minute, close the session.
Part One: Introducing our Text

Part Two: Our Text


One cannot determine that a given quality is always and with every person the same.

In certain societies and cultures, love, pity, and compassion may be considered good; and yet there may also be occasions, outside these cultures and even within them, when these qualities could be considered bad, leading one astray into sadness or sin.

Similarly, pride, selfishness, and even hate are not always bad attributes.

As the sages have said, there is no attribute that lacks its injurious aspect, its negation and failure, just as there is no attribute—even if connected with doubt and heresy—that has not, under some circumstances, its holy aspect.

From this point of view, the good and bad qualities are not set opposite one another, with love always on the side of the good and the other qualities always on the side of the bad.

Rather all the attributes, all the emotions, and all the potentialities of the heart and personality are set on the same level and considered good or bad, not according to some judgment of their intrinsic worth, but according to the way they are used.

In Hebrew good attributes are called “good measures,” which suggests that the excellence of a quality is determined by its proportion; not by its being what it is in itself, but by its properly related use in particular circumstances.

Everything that is not in the right measure, that relates out of proportion to a situation, tends to be bad. The good is thus that which is contained within proper limits, and the bad, that which breaks out and goes beyond these limits; and it does not matter whether this exceeding of boundaries is positive or negative, restrictive or excessive, whether refusal of affection or even generosity in love.

And, in fact this need for balance is true of every living organism; each cell in the organism has a certain form and a fixed rate of growth; and whenever its form is distorted or its growth exceeds what it should be, the result is pathology.

**Text #1A: Excerpt from Text #1.**

There is no attribute that lacks its injurious aspect, its negation and failure, just as there is no attribute—even if connected with doubt and heresy—that has not, under some circumstances, its holy aspect.
Text #1B: Excerpt from Text #1.

Good and bad qualities are not set opposite one another, with love always on the side of the good and the other qualities always on the side of the bad. Rather all the attributes, all the emotions, and all the potentialities of the heart and personality are set on the same level and considered good or bad, not according to some judgment of their intrinsic worth, but according to the way they are used.

Text #1C: Excerpt from Text #1.

In Hebrew good attributes are called “good measures,” which suggests that the excellence of a quality is determined by its proportion; not by its being what it is in itself, but by its properly related use in particular circumstances.

Text #1D: Excerpt from Text #1.

Everything that is not in the right measure, that relates out of proportion to a situation, tends to be bad. The good is thus that which is contained within proper limits, and the bad, that which breaks out and goes beyond these limits; and it does not matter whether this exceeding of boundaries is positive or negative, restrictive or excessive, whether refusal of affection or even generosity in love.

Text #1E: Excerpt from Text #1.

This need for balance is true of every living organism; each cell in the organism has a certain form and a fixed rate of growth; and whenever its form is distorted or its growth exceeds what it should be, the result is pathology.

Conclusion


Christianity and other philosophies believe that certain emotions are good while others are bad...Judaism has never thought that way. To us, all emotions are neutral by themselves. Judgments of good or bad are only possible when considering what the emotion is directed towards. An emotion is “good” when appropriate for the situation, and “bad” when inappropriate.
Written by: Aliza Sperling

Introduction (10 minutes)

Today we are going to be exploring love in the Bible. True love is truly seeing and responding to another. Love that is all about you is not love.

One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

▶ Ask for a participant to read Text #1 aloud.

Text #1: Rabbi Adin Even Israel Steinsaltz. Simple Words.

In every “I love you,” whoever or whatever the love and the “you” are, there is always an “I.” A self must always be involved in the process; the emotion of love cannot exist without a self. Even when love requires great self-denial, it still requires a self at the center of the emotion. It is impossible for love to be entirely devoid of self, because somebody has to be the carrier, the feeler of the emotion.

Indeed, the quality of the emotion of love, the feeling, depends as much upon the subject, the personality of the lover, as the object. Some personalities are fiery: their emotion has to rise to higher and higher levels. Others do not have any need for storms; they even prefer a quiet life.

▶ Ask:

1. Do Rabbi Steinsaltz’s words resonate with you?
2. How do you view love?

Part One: Love Story (12 minutes)

Keeping in mind the words of Rabbi Steinsaltz, let’s look at the story of Jacob and his love for Rachel:

▶ Give participants some background on the story:

Jacob has been sent to his mother’s birthplace to find a wife after he deceives his father to receive the first-born blessing. Along the way, he has the iconic dream of a ladder extending to the heavens with angels ascending and descending, and God has promised to be with him. Now, far away from his family and not knowing if he can ever return, he arrives in Haran and falls head over heels in love with Rachel. We begin by reading about Jacob and Rachel’s first encounter.

1 Jacob resumed his journey and came to the land of the Easterners. 2 There before his eyes was a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for the flocks were watered from that well. The stone on the mouth of the well was large. 3 When all the flocks were gathered there, the stone would be rolled from the mouth of the well and the sheep watered; then the stone would be put back in its place on the mouth of the well. 4 Jacob said to them, “My friends, where are you from?” And they said, “We are from Haran.” 5 He said to them, “Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?” And they said, “Yes, we do.” 6 He continued, “Is he well?” They answered, “Yes, he is; and there is his daughter Rachel, coming with the flock.” 7 He said, “It is still broad daylight, too early to round up the animals; water the flock and take them to pasture.” 8 But they said, “We cannot, until all the flocks are rounded up; then the stone is rolled off the mouth of the well and we water the sheep.” 9 While he was speaking with them, Rachel came with her father’s flock; for she was a shepherdess. 10 And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother’s brother Laban, and the flock of his mother’s brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well, and watered the flock of his mother’s brother Laban. 11 Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears. 12 Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s kinsman, that he was Rebekah’s son; and she ran and told her father. 13 On hearing the news of his sister’s son Jacob, Laban ran to greet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and took him into his house. He told Laban all that had happened, and Laban said to him, “You are truly my bone and flesh.” 14 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, the name of the younger was Rachel. 15 Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. 16 Jacob loved Rachel; so he answered, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” 17 Laban said, “Better that I give her to you than that I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me.”
Ask:

1. Would you describe the Jacob-Rachel story as a great love story? Why or why not?
2. Look closely at verse 10. What words does the Torah repeat in this verse? How does it help us understand Jacob’s attraction to Rachel?
3. Notice how Jacob is able to move the stone from the well when he sees Rachel. Has love ever empowered you to do something you would not have otherwise been able to do?
4. Whose perspective is missing in these verses? Why do you think the Torah leaves it out?
5. Do you think this is a story of love or of attraction? Is the Torah making a distinction here? What do you think the difference is?

The story of Jacob and Rachel’s first meeting is told in detail and with great drama. When Jacob meets Rachel, he is moved to superhuman strength and great emotion—he kisses her and cries. It appears that Jacob’s desire for Rachel stems from her association with his mother. Verse 10 repeats the phrase “the daughter of his mother’s brother Laban” and the description of Rachel as “fair to look upon” matches the description of his mother in Genesis 24:16. Furthermore, Jacob must have heard about his father’s servant meeting his mother at this very well in Haran, and now he too is meeting his wife at this very spot.

We are left wondering whether the romantic description of Jacob falling in love with Rachel is necessarily a positive story. We do not know whether Rachel reciprocates Jacob’s feelings. In fact we don’t know anything about how she feels. Jacob’s infatuation/love has a distorting effect upon him. He acts outside of convention: he kisses Rachel and weeps loudly upon meeting her, and his sense of time is warped when seven years of servitude feel like “a few days” to a man in love.

Part Two: The Deception (8 minutes)

As Jacob’s seven years of servitude draw to a close, Rachel will finally be his wife as promised. Now, as things get complicated, let us continue reading the story:

And Laban gathered all the people of the place and made a feast. When evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to him; and he cohabited with her.— Laban had given his maidservant Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her maid.— When morning came, there was Leah! So he said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? I was in your service for Rachel! Why did you deceive me?” Laban said, “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older. Wait until the bridal week of this one is over and we will give you that one too, provided you serve me another seven years.” Jacob did so; he waited out the bridal week of this one, and then he gave him his daughter Rachel as wife.— Laban had given his maidservant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid.— And Jacob co-habited with Rachel also; indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he served him another seven years.

Ask:

1. What surprises you about this story? What doesn’t surprise you?

It is interesting to note that deception is a common theme in Jacob’s life. With the help of his mother, Rebekah, Jacob deceives his father by pretending to be his brother Esau. Jacob receives the blessing meant for Esau, but is then forced to flee. In this text, we see Jacob being the victim of deception when Laban gives him Leah, instead of Rachel, on his wedding day.

Ask:

1. In which ways are these two stories of deception similar or different?
2. What is deception’s role in love? How do we deceive ourselves? How do we deceive others?

Part Three: What Defines True Love? (15 minutes)

Laban’s deception of Jacob leaves us all wondering: how was it that Jacob, who lived and breathed for Rachel for seven years, could be so unaware all night that, in fact, he was with Leah?

Many commentators have tried to explain what happened; here we will explore two possibilities. The first is by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th century German rabbi and scholar. The second is by Rashi, an 11th century French commentator and scholar.

Ask participants to read these two texts and answer the questions in chevruta. Chevruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.


So he loved Leah too, and did not make her pay for her father’s behavior and for the way she had become his wife. We can deduce from this that Leah too was taken in by her father by some story of a legal arrangement he had made with Jacob as to agreed customs and that she was not a party to any willful deception.
**Text #5: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 29:25.**

ויהי בָּכָה יִתְנָה וַאֲלֹהָ: אֲנִי בָּלַיָּל אֲלֹהָ לְךָ, לְפֹעֵל שֶׁפֵּרֵק לָרֹאשׁ טִפְטִיפָּה, וְנֶשֶׁרֶת נַחֲלָה שֶׁפֵּרֵק לְךָ.

And it came to pass in the morning, and behold she was Leah: But at night, she was not Leah? Because Jacob had given signs to Rachel, but when she saw that they were bringing Leah, she (Rachel) said, “Now, my sister will be put to shame. So she readily transmitted those signs to her.”

**Ask:**

1. Do you think that Leah was innocent of deceiving Jacob, as Rabbi Hirsch suggests? Or were both Leah and Rachel accomplices to Laban’s deception, as Rashi implies?

2. Whose love is depicted in Rashi’s commentary? How is the love described in this commentary different from Jacob’s “falling in love” story in the beginning of the chapter?

The story of the wedding night is deeply ironic: Jacob, who is so in love with Rachel, does not even realize that he has spent his wedding night with Leah until the morning! What does this turn of events tell us about Jacob’s love for Rachel? Could it be that while Jacob loves Rachel, he does not in fact “see” her—rather his love for Rachel has very little to do with Rachel herself? Does the story of his deception expose the fact that his overwhelming love is an expression of his own longings, rather than a great desire to be with her? And could Rashi’s description of Rachel sharing the signs with Leah show us a different, deeper kind of love—where your love and concern for the other, in this case one’s sister, lead you even to actions against your self-interest?

**Text #6: Genesis 29:31–35. English translation adapted from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.**

31 The LORD saw that Leah was hated and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. 32 Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben; for she declared, “It means: ‘The LORD has seen my affliction’; it also means: ‘Now my husband will love me.’” 33 She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This is because the LORD heard that I was hated and has given me this one also”; so she named him Simeon. 34 Again she conceived and bore a son and declared, “This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons.” Therefore he was named Levi. 35 She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing.
Ask:

1. How did Jacob feel about Leah? In verse 30 it says “Indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah,” whereas here in verse 31 it says “The LORD saw that Leah was hated.” How do you account for the discrepancy?
2. How do Leah’s names for her sons reflect her hopes for a relationship with her husband?

The role of love and hatred in the text is unclear. On the one hand, we are told that Jacob loved Rachel “more” suggesting that he did have at least some love for Leah. Yet the very next verse tells us that God saw that Leah was hated.

Part Four: The Appearance of Love (10 minutes)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the [British] Commonwealth, also discusses what we can learn from love and from Leah’s feeling of rejection.

Read Text #7 in chevruta and then discuss the reflective questions below.

Text #7: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. “Vayetse (5768)—Leah’s Tears.” Covenant and Conversation.

One of the most striking facts about the Jacob narrative is the frequency with which the word “love” appears. It figures once in the story of Abraham (Genesis 22:2), twice in the life of Isaac (24:67, 25:28, though there are also three references to Isaac’s love of a particular kind of food: 27:4, 9, 14), but seven times in the case of Jacob (29:18, 20, 30, 32; 37:3, 4; 44:20). Jacob loves more than any other figure in Genesis.

But through painful experience, Jacob must learn a truth about love. There are times when love not only unites but also divides. It did so in his childhood, when Isaac loved Esau and Rebekah loved Jacob. It did so again when he married two sisters. It did so a third time when he loved Rachel’s child Joseph more than his other sons. What Jacob learned—and what we learn, reading his story—is that love is not enough. We must also heed those who feel unloved. Without that, there will be conflict and tragedy. That requires a specific capacity—the ability to listen, in Jacob’s case, to the unspoken tears of Leah and her feeling of rejection, made explicit in the names she gave her sons.

…In Judaism the highest spiritual gift is the ability to listen—not only to the voice of G-d, but also to the cry of other people, the sigh of the poor, the weak, the lonely, the neglected and, yes, sometimes the un- or less-loved. That is one of the meanings of the great command Shema Yisrael, “Listen, O Israel.” Jacob’s other name, we recall, was Israel.

…Those who, like Jacob, have an unusual capacity to love must fight against the danger of failing to honour the feelings of those they do not love with equal passion. The antidote is the ability to listen. That is what Jacob learns in the course of his life—and why he, above all, is the role model for the Jewish people—the nation commanded to listen.
Discuss these questions in chevruta:

1. What is special about Jacob’s love for Rachel? What is dangerous about it?
2. Rabbi Sacks argues that listening for the cries of other people is an important counterbalance to passionate love. Do you think if Jacob had shown compassion this would have helped Leah? Why or why not?
3. Think about your own love relationships (e.g., parent, sibling, spouse, friend). Do these relationships ever prevent you from listening or relating to others? What practices can you adopt to become more aware of others needs?

There is almost a selfishness to having passionate love. Is it possible that Jacob simply didn’t look beyond Rachel, leaving Leah to feel hated and unwanted?

Conclusion (15 minutes)

In this story, we see how the three main characters are deeply affected by love: Jacob seems revived, infatuated, passionate—he has unusual strength and even moves the stone! But on his wedding night he cannot even recognize that the woman he is with is not the object of his love. Rachel is Jacob’s beloved, but we do not know how she feels toward him. In the midrash, we see the great love she has for her sister Leah, where she understands the shame that Leah will feel if she is caught, and so gives her the signs. Finally, there is Leah, who is unloved and suffers as a result.

Discuss:

1. How does the Torah’s description of Jacob, Rachel and Leah in this chapter invite us to think more deeply about the different kinds of love? Did any of the texts or ideas in this story resonate with you?
2. In our own loving relationships, are we truly seeing and relating to our friends or significant others, or do those relationships fill gaps in our lives?
3. Love and pain are seldom far from each other. What does the Torah and this story tell us about love’s effect on those who are in love and those just outside of it?
**Introduction**

**Text #1: Rabbi Adin Even Israel Steinsaltz. *Simple Words.*

In every “I love you,” whoever or whatever the love and the “you” are, there is always an “I.” A self must always be involved in the process; the emotion of love cannot exist without a self. Even when love requires great self-denial, it still requires a self at the center of the emotion. It is impossible for love to be entirely devoid of self, because somebody has to be the carrier, the feeler of the emotion.

Indeed, the quality of the emotion of love, the feeling, depends as much upon the subject, the personality of the lover, as the object. Some personalities are fiery: their emotion has to rise to higher and higher levels. Others do not have any need for storms; they even prefer a quiet life.

**Part One: Love Story**

**Text #2: Genesis 29:1–21. English translation adapted from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.**

1 Jacob resumed his journey and came to the land of the Easterners. 2 There before his eyes was a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for the flocks were watered from that well. The stone on the mouth of the well was large. 3 When all the flocks were gathered there, the stone would be rolled from the mouth of the well and the sheep watered; then the stone would be put back in its place on the mouth of the well. 4 Jacob said to them, “My friends, where are you from?” And they said, “We are from Haran.” 5 He said to them, “Do you know Laban the
son of Nahor?” And they said, “Yes, we do.” 6 He continued, “Is he well?” They answered, “Yes, he is; and there is his daughter Rachel, coming with the flock.” 7 He said, “It is still broad daylight, too early to round up the animals; water the flock and take them to pasture.” 8 But they said, “We cannot, until all the flocks are rounded up; then the stone is rolled off the mouth of the well and we water the sheep.” 9 While he was speaking with them, Rachel came with her father’s flock; for she was a shepherdess. 10 And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother’s brother Laban, and the flock of his mother’s brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well, and watered the flock of his mother’s brother Laban. 11 Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears. 12 Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s kinsman, that he was Rebekah’s son; and she ran and told her father. 13 On hearing the news of his sister’s son Jacob, Laban ran to greet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and took him into his house. He told Laban all that had happened, 14 and Laban said to him, “You are truly my bone and flesh.” When he had stayed with him a month’s time, 15 Laban said to Jacob, “Just because you are a kinsman, should you serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” 16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, the name of the younger was Rachel. 17 Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. 18 Jacob loved Rachel; so he answered, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” 19 Laban said, “Better that I give her to you than that I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me.” 20 So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. 21 Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife, for my time is fulfilled, that I may cohabit with her.”

Part Two: The Deception


And Laban gathered all the people of the place and made a feast. 23 When evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to him; and he cohabited with her.—24 Laban had given his maidservant Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her maid.—25 When morning came, there was Leah! So he said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? I was in your service for Rachell Why did you deceive me?” 26 Laban said, “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older. 27 Wait until the bridal week of this one is over and we will give you that one too, provided you serve me another seven years.” 28 Jacob did so; he waited out the bridal week of this one, and then he gave him his daughter Rachel as wife.—29 Laban had given his maidservant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid.—30 And Jacob co-habited with Rachel also; indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he served him another seven years.
Part Three: What Defines True Love?


So he loved Leah too, and did not make her pay for her father’s behavior and for the way she had become his wife. We can deduce from this that Leah too was taken in by her father by some story of a legal arrangement he had made with Jacob as to agreed customs and that she was not a party to any willful deception.

Text #5: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 29:25.

And it came to pass in the morning, and behold she was Leah: But at night, she was not Leah? Because Jacob had given signs to Rachel, but when she saw that they were bringing Leah, she (Rachel) said, “Now, my sister will be put to shame. So she readily transmitted those signs to her.”


31 The LORD saw that Leah was hated and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. 32 Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben; for she declared, “It means: ‘The LORD has seen my affliction’; it also means: ‘Now my husband will love me.’” 33 She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This is because the LORD heard that I was hated and has given me this one also”; so she named him Simeon. 34 Again she conceived and bore a son and declared, “This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons.” Therefore he was named Levi. 35 She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing.
Part Four: The Appearance of Love

Text #7: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. “VaYetse (5768)—Leah’s Tears.” Covenant and Conversation.

One of the most striking facts about the Jacob narrative is the frequency with which the word “love” appears. It figures once in the story of Abraham (Genesis 22:2), twice in the life of Isaac (24:67, 25:28, though there are also three references to Isaac’s love of a particular kind of food: 27:4, 9, 14), but seven times in the case of Jacob (29:18, 20, 30, 32; 37:3, 4; 44:20). Jacob loves more than any other figure in Genesis.

But through painful experience, Jacob must learn a truth about love. There are times when love not only unites but also divides. It did so in his childhood, when Isaac loved Esau and Rebekah loved Jacob. It did so again when he married two sisters. It did so a third time when he loved Rachel’s child Joseph more than his other sons. What Jacob learned—and what we learn, reading his story—is that love is not enough. We must also heed those who feel unloved. Without that, there will be conflict and tragedy. That requires a specific capacity—the ability to listen, in Jacob’s case, to the unspoken tears of Leah and her feeling of rejection, made explicit in the names she gave her sons.

…In Judaism the highest spiritual gift is the ability to listen—not only to the voice of G-d, but also to the cry of other people, the sigh of the poor, the weak, the lonely, the neglected and, yes, sometimes the un- or less-loved. That is one of the meanings of the great command Shema Yisrael, “Listen, O Israel.” Jacob’s other name, we recall, was Israel.

…Those who, like Jacob, have an unusual capacity to love must fight against the danger of failing to honour the feelings of those they do not love with equal passion. The antidote is the ability to listen. That is what Jacob learns in the course of his life—and why he, above all, is the role model for the Jewish people—the nation commanded to listen.
Written by: Yaffa Epstein and Karen Sponder

Introduction (10 minutes)

Our session will focus on the issue of romantic love in the eyes of the sages. We will explore what we can learn about relationships from some extreme examples portrayed in the Talmud.

Go around the room and ask everyone to introduce themselves. Read the opening question and ask participants to briefly share their thoughts. If possible, write down the answers so you can later incorporate these answers into conversation.

Ask:

1. What does romantic love mean to you?

How does love feel? Many may describe a warped sense of time where everything moves quickly and yet slowly all at once. Waiting for an answer, waiting for a sign.

Roland Barthes, a 20th century French literary theorist and philosopher, offers us a perspective on love and waiting.


Am I in love?—yes, since I am waiting. The other one never waits. Sometimes I want to play the part of the one who doesn’t wait; I try to busy myself elsewhere, to arrive late; but I always lose at this game. Whatever I do, I find myself there, with nothing to do, punctual, even ahead of time. The lover’s fatal identity is precisely this: I am the one who waits.

Ask:

1. What is the connection between loving and waiting?
2. Do you agree that the one who loves is the one who is waiting?
3. Do you agree that in every relationship there is always one party who loves more?
4. Do you think that this dynamic can change over time within a relationship?

Barthes presents love as something fundamentally unequal. Now let’s look at two stories in the Talmud where one party is continually waiting for the other.

Two significant questions that these stories raise are:

1. How does one balance competing loves, in this case love of Torah study and love of a spouse?
2. Is ideal love one of sacrificing for the other? If yes, how much sacrifice is too much?

The two stories we will look at are from the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Ketubot, which deals with the laws of marriage. According to the Talmud, a husband has three biblical obligations to his wife in marriage: to feed her, to clothe her, and to have sexual relations with her on a regular basis. His sexual obligation depends on factors such as whether he lives at home or away, and his profession.
A discussion is raised regarding Torah scholars and their obligation. The Mishna states that the law is that a Torah scholar is allowed to leave his wife to learn Torah for 30 consecutive days without her permission. The Talmud brings up seven stories where rabbis leave their wives for an extended period of time.

Part One: Rav Rehumi and His Wife (15 minutes)

Ask participants to read Texts #2 and #3 and answer the questions in chaveruta. Chevruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.


This is as it is related about Rav Rehumi, who would commonly study before Rava in Mehoza: He was accustomed to come back to his home every year on the eve of Yom Kippur. One day he was particularly engrossed in the halakha he was studying, and so he remained in the study hall and did not go home. His wife was expecting him that day and continually said to herself: Now he is coming, now he is coming. But in the end, he did not come. She was distressed by this and a tear fell from her eye. At that exact moment, Rav Rehumi was sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed under him and he died. This teaches how much one must be careful, as he was punished severely for causing anguish to his wife, even inadvertently.

Ask:

1. How do you think the text perceives Rav Rehumi and his actions?
2. What were the priorities Rav Rehumi was trying to balance? Do you find that you empathize more with Rav Rehumi or his wife?
3. The text says that Rav Rehumi’s wife felt anguish, caused inadvertently by his absence. What is the Talmud telling us about love?

Dr. Ruth Calderon is a Talmud scholar and former Member of Knesset (Israeli Parliament). Dr. Calderon explores the role of Rav Rehumi’s wife and her sacrifices for the sake of her husband’s Torah study.

Text #3: Dr. Ruth Calderon. A Bride for One Night.

Much ink has been spilled on the battle that raged in Rav Rehumi’s soul. He was torn between the study house and his home, between the texts he learned, which took on a life of their own, and the woman who waited for him to return...

If Rav Rehumi achieved any fame, it is thanks to his wife, and if he acquired a reputation, it is as a tragic hero. His character seems to be a pun on his unique, extraordinary name: Rehumi in Aramaic means “love” and can be interpreted as either “loving” or “beloved.” Rehumi’s wife loved him. As such it is she who renders his name
Loving and Waiting: A Talmudic Perspective on Relationships

appropriate for him—she makes him “beloved.” Though nameless, and though described sparingly, she emerges as a character thanks to the skill of an anonymous master storyteller. Her great love enables her to overlook her husband’s failings, though she is not blind to them...

This is the story of a loving wife and a husband whose Torah renders him incapable of sensing another’s pain. A romantic reading will view Rav Rehumi as a man who has a poor sense of priorities, who preferred to devote himself to Torah instead of to a woman. A moralizing reading will blame him for sacrificing her good for his own. But I view him as a man who simply did not know what love is. The only area in which he was not mediocre was in his loving wife’s estimation. Only through her eyes was he deserving of his name. She allowed him to trample on her soul and, through this tragic story, to achieve immortality.

Ask:

1. What additional insights into this story do you gain from Dr. Calderon’s analysis? Looking at Rav Rehumi’s story from his wife’s perspective, do you feel differently about his behavior?
2. Do you find yourself inclined towards a romantic or moralizing reading? Depending on whether you take a moral approach or a romantic approach, what do you think the Talmud is asking us to value most in our romantic relationships?

In both sources we begin to understand the sacrifices one makes for love. In the case of Rav Rehumi and his wife, she sacrifices everything to help him follow his love of and dedication to Torah study.

Part Two: Rabbi Akiva and Rachel (25 minutes)

We will now look at the story of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel. This story seems to contain both very negative and very positive elements of a husband leaving his wife to learn Torah.

This is the main text of the session—let’s really dig deep into the multi-vocal nature of this text, and what it can, and does, teach us about romantic love.
Ask a participant to read Text #4 aloud.


The Gemara further relates: Rabbi Akiva was the shepherd of ben Kalba Savua, one of the wealthy residents of Jerusalem. The daughter of Ben Kalba Savua saw that he was humble and refined. She said to him: If I betroth myself to you, will you go to the study hall to learn Torah? He said to her: Yes. She became betrothed to him privately and sent him off to study. Her father heard this and became angry. He removed her from his house and took a vow prohibiting her from benefiting from his property. Rabbi Akiva went and sat for twelve years in the study hall. When he came back to his house he brought twelve thousand students with him, and as he approached he heard an old man saying to his wife: For how long will you lead the life of a widow of a living man, living alone while your husband is in another place? She said to him: If he would listen to me, he would sit and study for another twelve years. When Rabbi Akiva heard this he said: I have permission to do this. He went back and sat for another twelve years in the study hall. When he came back he brought twenty-four thousand students with him. His wife heard and went out toward him to greet him. Her neighbors said: Borrow some clothes and wear them, as your current apparel is not appropriate to meet an important person. She said to them: “A righteous man endures the life of his beast” (Proverbs 12:10). When she came to him she fell on her face and kissed his feet. His attendants pushed her away as they did not know who she was, and he said to them: Leave her alone, as my Torah knowledge and yours is actually hers.

In the meantime her father heard that a great man came to the town. He said: I will go to him. Maybe he will nullify my vow and I will be able to support my daughter. He came to him to ask about nullifying his vow, and Rabbi Akiva said to him: Did you vow thinking that this Akiva would become a great man? He said to him: If I had believed he would know even one chapter or even one halakha I would not have been so harsh. He said to him: I am he. Ben Kalba Savua fell on his face and kissed his feet and gave him half of his money. The Gemara relates: Rabbi Akiva's daughter did the same thing for ben Azzai, who was also a simple person, and she caused him to learn Torah in a similar way, by betrothing herself to him and sending him off to study. This explains the folk saying that people say: The ewe follows the ewe; the daughter’s actions are the same as her mother’s.
Discuss:

1. What do you think of this model of love? Is this something we should be striving for? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that Rabbi Akiva correctly understands Rachel's comment to the old man that, “If he would listen to me he would sit [and study] for another twelve years?” Why is it significant that Rabbi Akiva acts on something he overheard his wife say, rather than on a conversation between them?
3. What do the words, “Mine and yours are hers,” mean? What does Rabbi Akiva understand at that moment?
4. What does Rachel's behavior when she went to greet Rabbi Akiva tell you about her feelings towards him?
5. What is the significance of Rabbi Akiva's daughter following in her mother Rachel's footsteps?

According to halakha (Jewish law) a married man is only allowed to leave for 30 days without permission from his wife. Here Rabbi Akiva has left for 12 years, with only tacit agreement from Rachel. We never hear a conversation between them about how long he is allowed to leave for, but Rabbi Akiva understands from his wife’s comment to the neighbor that she is fine with him leaving again. Depending on the tone of that comment, either Rachel is truly happy he is away learning Torah again because he is fulfilling his potential, or she is being defensive, and actually would very much like for him to come home.

Rabbi Akiva says “Mine and yours are hers” in a moment of realization. He understands that everything he has, and everything he has become, is because of Rachel’s sacrifice. This is a moment of love and appreciation, in that he has understood, and is now grateful for, what she has given him.

Rabbi Akiva comes to understand how he owes everything he has to his wife. There is a new level of recognition and gratitude for Rabbi Akiva, and he seems to reach it only when he sees how his students treat his wife. She has given so much for him to succeed. The Talmud here seems to be extolling this model—of waiting, of complete self-sacrifice for another.

At the end of this story—Rabbi Akiva has everything a rabbi in the Talmud could want: Torah, students, wealth and a wife who loves him and supports him. Rachel has the knowledge that she has made him who he is, and has his recognition of her sacrifice.

Ask:

1. Do you think Rabbi Akiva and Rachel had real love? Why or why not?

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz offers up his interpretation of the relationship between Rachel and Rabbi Akiva, in this retelling of their story. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.


She [Rachel] was drawn, as by a magnet, to the sheep pen where Akiva was to be found. She found herself watching him, unable to throw off the superimposed image of the scholar. And he, taller and stronger than the others, and far more youthful and agile than most of those younger than he, seemed to be oblivious of her. In fact, he paid scant attention to anyone, men or women, though many of the latter—shepherdesses and wives of herdsmen—were clearly attracted to him. To be sure, it was not only a physical force that emanated from him, it was a kind of light, something to which everyone joyfully surrendered. She wondered whether anyone else was aware of it as she was.
Was she in the grip of a fascination, or a love, that was out of bounds? Or was her feeling of strong certainty something beyond what could be interpreted as womanly passion? It was not a desire to possess or to be possessed. It was rather a need to do something for him, an irrepressible urge to save him from the oblivion to which he was doomed by the circumstances of his life...

And so the two were banished to years of poverty and destitution in another village far away [after they were married and her father disowned her]. But Rachel made Akiva abide by his promise. He studied. It is said that he learned to read with his sons. It is said that he made such phenomenal progress in all written and unwritten knowledge that few living men could be compared to him. Most wondrous of all, he became a great leader in Israel—the undisputed head of the Sanhedrin, where the law of the Jews and the vast body of postbiblical literature called the Talmud were formulated.

And of all the great teachers of the centuries of the Talmud period, scholars and sages of profound wisdom and purity of life, the greatest of them all was Rabbi Akiva. But that is another, a much longer story.

Much of what happened to Rachel remains in obscurity, as she herself preferred. Her joy was in his triumph, which, in barely twenty years, exceeded all that she could ever have imagined. Moreover, since Rabbi Akiva lived to very ripe old age, he managed to impress on the law and wisdom of Israel the power of a unique and rich personality, more so perhaps than any other single individual since Moses, the lawgiver himself.

Ask:

1. In Rabbi Steinsaltz’s retelling of the story, what attracts Rachel to Rabbi Akiva?
2. What does it mean that Rachel did not “desire to possess or to be possessed” and that “her joy was in his triumph?”
3. Rabbi Steinsaltz says that Rabbi Akiva is considered one of the greatest scholars of all time, and had a large impact. Does that in any way affect your opinion of Rachel and her sacrifice?

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Love is a central theme in these narratives. Whether it is the love of one’s spouse or the love of Torah, it is clear that people are willing to sacrifice greatly in the name of love. The question becomes: when is the sacrifice too great?

Discuss:

1. What are the differences and similarities between the sacrifices made in the two stories?
2. What can these stories teach us about how to balance competing loves (using the love of Torah study and love of a spouse as an example)? Would you go as far as Rav Rehumi or Rabbi Akiva for love of your work?
3. While the Rabbi Akiva story seems to extol the role of sacrificing for the sake of love, the Rav Rehumi story seems to illustrate that there are risks and limits. What insights do these stories offer into how much sacrifice is too much?
Introduction


Am I in love?—yes, since I am waiting. The other one never waits. Sometimes I want to play the part of the one who doesn’t wait; I try to busy myself elsewhere, to arrive late; but I always lose at this game. Whatever I do, I find myself there, with nothing to do, punctual, even ahead of time. The lover’s fatal identity is precisely this: I am the one who waits.

Part One: Rav Rehumi and His Wife


This is as it is related about Rav Rehumi, who would commonly study before Rava in Mehaza: He was accustomed to come back to his home every year on the eve of Yom Kippur. One day he was particularly engrossed in the halakha he was studying, and so he remained in the study hall and did not go home. His wife was expecting him that day and continually said to herself: Now he is coming, now he is coming. But in the end, he did not come. She was distressed by this and a tear fell from her eye. At that exact moment, Rav Rehumi was sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed under him and he died. This teaches how much one must be careful, as he was punished severely for causing anguish to his wife, even inadvertently.
Text #3: Dr. Ruth Calderon. *A Bride for One Night.*

Much ink has been spilled on the battle that raged in Rav Rehumi’s soul. He was torn between the study house and his home, between the texts he learned, which took on a life of their own, and the woman who waited for him to return…

If Rav Rehumi achieved any fame, it is thanks to his wife, and if he acquired a reputation, it is as a tragic hero. His character seems to be a pun on his unique, extraordinary name: *Rehumi* in Aramaic means “love” and can be interpreted as either “loving” or “beloved.” Rehumi’s wife loved him. As such it is she who renders his name appropriate for him—she makes him “beloved.” Though nameless, and though described sparingly, she emerges as a character thanks to the skill of an anonymous master storyteller. Her great love enables her to overlook her husband’s failings, though she is not blind to them…

This is the story of a loving wife and a husband whose Torah renders him incapable of sensing another’s pain. A romantic reading will view Rav Rehumi as a man who has a poor sense of priorities, who preferred to devote himself to Torah instead of to a woman. A moralizing reading will blame him for sacrificing her good for his own. But I view him as a man who simply did not know what love is. The only area in which he was not mediocre was in his loving wife’s estimation. Only through her eyes was he deserving of his name. She allowed him to trample on her soul and, through this tragic story, to achieve immortality.
Loving and Waiting: A Talmudic Perspective on Relationships

Part Two: Rabbi Akiva and Rachel


The Gemara further relates: Rabbi Akiva was the shepherd of Ben Kalba Savua, one of the wealthy residents of Jerusalem. The daughter of Ben Kalba Savua saw that he was humble and refined. She said to him: If I betroth myself to you, will you go to the study hall to learn Torah? He said to her: Yes. She became betrothed to him privately and sent him off to study. Her father heard this and became angry. He removed her from his house and took a vow prohibiting her from benefiting from his property. Rabbi Akiva went and sat for twelve years in the study hall. When he came back to his house he brought twelve thousand students with him, and as he approached he heard an old man saying to his wife: For how long will you lead the life of a widow of a living man, living alone while your husband is in another place? She said to him: If he would listen to me, he would sit and study for another twelve years. When Rabbi Akiva heard this he said: I have permission to do this. He went back and sat for another twelve years in the study hall. When he came back he brought twenty-four thousand students with him. His wife heard and went out toward him to greet him. Her neighbors said: Borrow some clothes and wear them, as your current apparel is not appropriate to meet an important person. She said to them: “A righteous man understands the life of his beast” (Proverbs 12:10). When she came to him she fell on her face and kissed his feet. His attendants pushed her away as they did not know who she was, and he said to them: Leave her alone, as my Torah knowledge and yours is actually hers.

In the meantime her father heard that a great man came to the town. He said: I will go to him. Maybe he will nullify my vow and I will be able to support my daughter. He came to him to ask about nullifying his vow, and Rabbi Akiva said to him: Did you vow thinking that this Akiva would become a great man? He said to him: If I had believed he would know even one chapter or even one halakha I would not have been so harsh. He said to him: I am he. Ben Kalba Savua fell on his face and kissed his feet and gave him half of his money. The Gemara relates: Rabbi Akiva’s daughter did the same thing for Ben Azzai, who was also a simple person, and she caused him to learn Torah in a similar way, by betrothing herself to him and sending him off to study. This explains the folk saying that people say: The ewe follows the ewe; the daughter’s actions are the same as her mother’s.

She [Rachel] was drawn, as by a magnet, to the sheep pen where Akiva was to be found. She found herself watching him, unable to throw off the superimposed image of the scholar. And he, taller and stronger than the others, and far more youthful and agile than most of those younger than he, seemed to be oblivious of her. In fact, he paid scant attention to anyone, men or women, though many of the latter—shepherdesses and wives of herdsmen—were clearly attracted to him. To be sure, it was not only a physical force that emanated from him, it was a kind of light, something to which everyone joyfully surrendered. She wondered whether anyone else was aware of it as she was.

Was she in the grip of a fascination, or a love, that was out of bounds? Or was her feeling of strong certainty something beyond what could be interpreted as womanly passion? It was not a desire to possess or to be possessed. It was rather a need to do something for him, an irrepressible urge to save him from the oblivion to which he was doomed by the circumstances of his life…

And so the two were banished to years of poverty and destitution in another village far away [after they were married and her father disowned her]. But Rachel made Akiva abide by his promise. He studied. It is said that he learned to read with his sons. It is said that he made such phenomenal progress in all written and unwritten knowledge that few living men could be compared to him. Most wondrous of all, he became a great leader in Israel—the undisputed head of the Sanhedrin, where the law of the Jews and the vast body of postbiblical literature called the Talmud were formulated.

And of all the great teachers of the centuries of the Talmud period, scholars and sages of profound wisdom and purity of life, the greatest of them all was Rabbi Akiva. But that is another, a much longer story.

Much of what happened to Rachel remains in obscurity, as she herself preferred. Her joy was in his triumph, which, in barely twenty years, exceeded all that she could ever have imagined. Moreover, since Rabbi Akiva lived to very ripe old age, he managed to impress on the law and wisdom of Israel the power of a unique and rich personality, more so perhaps than any other single individual since Moses, the lawgiver himself.
Written by: Yaffa Epstein

Introduction (5 minutes)

This session will focus on the question: What does it mean to love God? It will also ask: How can a relationship with the Divine also lead me to loving myself and becoming a more whole person?

The issue of loving God is a very complex one and can be very loaded for some people. Loving God is a difficult concept for all; the Rabbis—throughout the generations—struggled with this question and concept, and that is why there are so many interpretations and understandings of what it means to love God. Let’s acknowledge that not everyone in the room has the same conceptions and perceptions of God.

Go around the room, and ask everyone to introduce themselves and answer the opening question in one sentence. If possible, write down the answers so you can incorporate these answers into conversation later.

Ask:

1. What does love mean to you?

Part One: Finding Love (10 minutes)

This song is from the musical, Oliver! based on the book Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens. The music and lyrics were written by Lionel Bart, a British Jewish composer. Oliver is a young orphan who is lonely and alone. This song is his prayer/plea for love.

If you wish you can find the music on the Global Day of Jewish Learning website (www.theglobalday.org/oliver) and play it for your participants.

Ask a participant to read Text #1 aloud.

Text #1: Lionel Bart. “Where is Love?” from the musical, Oliver!

Where is love?
Does it fall from skies above?
Is it underneath the willow tree
That I’ve been dreaming of?
Where is she?
Who I close my eyes to see?
Will I ever know the sweet “hello”
That’s meant for only me?
Who can say where she may hide?
Must I travel far and wide?
‘Til I am beside the someone who
I can mean something to...
Where...?
Where is love?
Ask:

1. How is love understood in this piece?
2. What kind of love is Oliver looking for?

According to Oliver, love is something that demands searching or a quest. He describes love as a person—“Where is she?” This shows us that love is somehow inherently about connecting and nurturing a relationship. Oliver is looking for love outside of himself, as something other than himself.

Oscar Wilde, the 19th century Irish poet and author who wrote many parodies on the theme of love, has a different outlook on love. Despite its humor, there is a serious message in this quote:

**Text #2: Oscar Wilde. An Ideal Husband.**

To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.

Ask:

1. How is love understood in this piece?
2. What does “a lifelong romance” mean?
3. What is the purpose of self-love? How is it different than loving someone else?
4. How does this differ from the Oliver! quote (Text #1)?

Self-love is something eternal and in a way primary to our existence. If we don’t love ourselves, we are denying something basic in our own humanity and vitality. If you compare the two quotes, you’ll see that they have very different ideas about love. For Oliver, love is something that is outside of himself, something miraculous and about a connection being made with another. To Oscar Wilde, love is internal and long-lasting. It is important to understand both of these approaches and visions of love in dealing with the question of loving God.

**Part Two: Loving God (30 minutes)**

Ask participants to read Text #3 and answer the questions in chevruta. *Chevruta* is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.

The book of Deuteronomy in the Bible instructs us how we should love God:

**Text #3: Deuteronomy 6:5.**

Daveveeyim yeh.

Ha’avodah, ha’ta’alov, be’al-le’aven be’al-mafshar, be’al-mavo’ach.

5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your might.

This text is the second line of the *Shema*, the *Ve’Ahavta* paragraph, which is said twice a day, and is one of the most fundamental and ancient prayers in Jewish liturgy.
Loving God and Loving Ourselves

Ask:

1. What do you think it means to love God?
2. What are we told to love God with? Why do you think this is and why is that important?
3. Is there a problem in commanding an emotion?
4. What does it mean to love an infinite, omniscient, intangible being?

We are commanded to love God with all of our heart, our soul and our might. This is a very tall order. How can we understand what this means? Focus on the concept of all of your might. How does this set up the concept of loving God with our whole self?

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz discusses the differences between loving others and loving God. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Text #4: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Pebbles of Wisdom.

There is no essential difference between the love of God and the love of man. But since the love of God is not described in numberless publications sold at corner kiosks, with illustrations and cartoons, the matter seems to be much more difficult.

True, there is an intrinsic difficulty. Love of God depends on one’s ability to be aware of Him, not in the sense of one’s knowledge of what is written in this book or another, but in terms of personal consciousness. One can love God to the degree that one is able to be conscious of Him or to feel Him.

All that is necessary is to understand and to sincerely inquire into one’s knowledge of that which is worthy of love, and the natural impulse, the love of God, is awakened.

Ask:

1. Do you agree with Rabbi Steinsaltz’s assertion that there is no essential difference between loving God and loving man? Why or why not?
2. According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, why is it difficult to love God?
3. What does Rabbi Steinsaltz think is necessary in order to love God? Do you agree or disagree?

According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, there is no difference between loving God and loving man. Rabbi Steinsaltz understands that there is an intrinsic difficulty in loving God, in that God is intangible. The way that we love God is that we become aware of God. It is a personal choice to feel and become aware of God in our lives. Loving God is something inherent and accessible to every person. All that is necessary is the desire and an attempt to raise our awareness. Love of God is a natural impulse in mankind that is awakened by sincere introspection: that when we know we are worthy of love, our love of God naturally occurs. Feeling worthy of love, like the orphan Oliver, implies a certain amount of self-love.
Ask:

1. Is love a matter of personal choice? Do we choose to love?
2. Can we love God with our whole selves without fully loving ourselves?

There is an underlying idea here that one must be in touch with oneself in order to be in touch with God. This connects with what we said about the Ve’Ahavta prayer: There is a wholeness that is capable of being accessed when we talk about loving God. Connection to self is inherent to connecting with God and with others.

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 54a. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Mishna articulates a general principle: One is obligated to recite a blessing for the bad just as for the good, as it is said: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might” (Devarim 6:5). The Mishna explains this verse as follows: With all your heart means with your two inclinations, with your good inclination and your evil inclination, both of which must be subjugated to the love of God.

Ask:

1. According to this source, what does it mean to love God with all of your heart?
2. What do you think it means to, “Love God with your evil inclination?” How is that possible and why is it important?

This passage centers around the Hebrew word l’vaveḥ (לבבות) — your heart. In Rabbinic tradition, every letter of the Biblical text is sacred and intentional. The text could have said l’vaveḥ (לבבות) — your heart, and it would have had the same meaning. As a result, the word l’vaveḥ (לבבות) has an extra letter (vet/ב) that is unnecessary. Therefore, the Rabbis here understand that the extra letter ב is trying to teach us something: that a person really has two hearts. A person should bless God for everything, both the good and the bad. There is a requirement here for acceptance of both of these aspects in our lives, and that both of these things come from God. A person has two different sides of him/herself, and both can and should be used to serve God, and to have a relationship with God. The evil inclination is not necessarily all evil — it too can be used to serve God.

Once again, we have the idea that loving God is supposed to allow us to access ourselves. This text explains that a person has many different sides of one’s self, and loving God provides an opportunity to bring all (כל) of the different parts of one’s self into conversation, and into wholeness.

Maimonides, a 12th century Spanish commentator and philosopher, expands on this idea of loving God with both your good and your evil inclination.

With the good inclination and with your evil inclination—it means to say, that you shall place in your heart love of God and faith in Him, even in a time of bitterness, and anger—because all of this is the evil inclination, as it says, “And in all your ways you should know Him” (Proverbs 3:6) even when you are involved in sin.

Ask:

1. How does Maimonides understand what it means to love God?
2. What is significant about the ability to love God “with your evil inclination,” even at times that you are sinning? What does this teach about love?

Maimonides offers an explanation of what it means to love God with the evil inclination. He writes that even in our worst moments—especially in our worst moments—we are still commanded to love God, and we are still able to love God. Many times people feel despair and distant from God when they are in a negative emotional place. This text allows even the person who feels the farthest from God to have a relationship with God. Perhaps it is specifically when one feels far away from God that one is most able to attempt to relate to God.

This text is teaching us that we are truly able to bring every part of ourselves into relationship with God. Not only are we able, we are commanded to love God even with the worst parts of ourselves.

Notice the verse Maimonides quoted from Proverbs 3:6, “Know Him in all your ways, and He will direct your paths.” Once again we have the concept of all (כל). In all of our lives, and in our different emotional states, we have the opportunity to know God.

Let’s return to Rabbi Steinsaltz’s idea that loving God is about becoming more conscious. If I allow myself to really be present, and be in the actual state that I am in, I am able to connect to my consciousness, and thus to God. Like Maimonides, Rabbi Steinsaltz is asking us to be aware of ourselves, and to use that awareness to bring God into our lives as a result.

The next source looks back on the love that was expressed in Deuteronomy (Text #3) and offers up another interpretation.

Read Text #7 aloud.

Text #7: Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86a. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Abaye said: As it was taught in a baraita that it is stated: “And you shall love the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6:5), which means that you shall make the name of Heaven beloved.
Ask:

1. According to this source—what does it mean to love God with all of your heart?

This passage from the Talmud is part of a discussion on what is considered the desecration of God’s name. In this context Abaye (a prominent rabbi in Babylonia during the time of the Talmud) explains what it means to love God as allowing God to become loved through your behavior in the world.

This is a completely new concept of what it means to love God. It is no longer simply focusing on my own relationship with God. Now it is demanding that I look outside of myself, to others, and allow my relationship with God to affect them. This source is suggesting that my behavior in the world should be an example to others, and should somehow demonstrate my relationship with God.

This text is not demanding an emotional response to God, but rather a behavioral response to God. It suggests that what is really necessary is that we behave in a way that reflects God, and that is good and moral. It does not demand that we feel anything. Rather, we must behave in a way that we feel is Godly, and that brings God’s presence into the world.

Ask:

1. Must love be felt? Can we act as if we love? Is love a behavior or an emotion?

Part Three: How Does God Love Us? (10 minutes)

Ask a participant to read Text #8 aloud.

Text #8: Ahava Rabbah. Final Blessing recited before the Recitation of Shema in the morning prayers. English translation from The Koren Siddur. Bolding added for emphasis by curriculum author.

אוהבה רבה. ברכה לفهم קוריית שמך מבשלח השחרור.
אלהים עמדי, אלהים עלברד. תרתי תרתי תהי שמא שליח.
אינני מבקש מהבשראות תהי תהי תהי תהי תהי תהי.
אתנה אתה (ו”א) צבי (ו”א) צבי (ו”א) צבי (ו”א) צבי.
אתה לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך לך_limits六个字的，然後因為不敢亂寫，只好查翻譯本。
You have loved us with great love, Lord our God, and with surpassing compassion have You had compassion on us. Our Father, our King, for the sake of our ancestors who trusted in You, and to whom You taught the laws of life, be gracious also to us and teach us. Our Father, compassionate Father, ever compassionate, have compassion on us. Instill in our hearts the desire to understand and discern, to listen, learn and teach, to observe, perform and fulfill all the teachings of Your Torah in love. Enlighten our eyes in Your Torah and let our hearts cling to Your commandments. Unite our hearts to love and revere Your name, so that we may never be ashamed. And because we have trusted in Your holy, great and revered name, may we be glad and rejoice in Your salvation. Bring us back in peace from the four quarters of the earth and lead us upright to our land. For You are a God who performs acts of salvation, bring us close to Your great name forever in truth, that we may thank You and proclaim Your Oneness in love.

_Blessed are You, Lord, who chooses His people Israel in love._

This blessing describes how God feels about the Jewish people. Here, we are told that God loves and chooses “His people Israel.”

This blessing comes immediately before we recite the Ve’Ahavta. In other words, the Rabbis, when constructing the daily prayers, did a very beautiful thing. They created a blessing which states that God loves the Jewish people, before the paragraph that commands us to love God.

In other words, when we recite the line, “And you shall love the Lord your God,” we are already guaranteed that God loves us. What this can mean is that a relationship with God is guaranteed. All we need to do is to walk into that relationship.

This relates to everything we have discussed so far because this blessing means that our relationship with God is unconditional. God has chosen us to be in relationship with, and God loves us. And all we need to do is decide to be in that relationship. This also means that we can be our full and real selves, our whole selves, when we are in relationship with God.

► Ask:

1. How does this prayer’s perspective, that God loves the Jewish people, affect our understanding of the Ve’Ahavta prayer and our discussion today?
2. What does it mean to you to know that God loves you unconditionally?
3. What other relationships do you have where love is unconditional? Are you the one loved unconditionally, or do you love unconditionally?
4. What connection might you see between God’s love of us and self-love?
Loving God and Loving Ourselves

Conclusion (5 minutes)

Loving God can be understood in many different ways. Loving God can be understood as a connection to something outside of ourselves or as something inherent to who we are.

Becoming more whole and more aware of myself can bring me closer to loving God. Loving God can be a vehicle to loving myself, and to helping me become more whole.

► Ask:

1. How do you choose to relate to God? Do you love Him? If so, how do those feelings manifest themselves?
2. Do you feel that God’s love for you is unconditional? Does that empower you to love yourself?
Part One: Finding Love

Text #1: Lionel Bart. “Where is Love?” from the musical, Oliver!

Where is love?
Does it fall from skies above?
Is it underneath the willow tree
That I’ve been dreaming of?
Where is she?
Who I close my eyes to see?
Will I ever know the sweet “hello”
That's meant for only me?
Who can say where she may hide?
Must I travel far and wide?
’Til I am beside the someone who
I can mean something to ...
Where...?
Where is love?

Text #2: Oscar Wilde. An Ideal Husband.

To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.

Part Two: Loving God

Text #3: Deuteronomy 6:5.

5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your might.

Text #4: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Pebbles of Wisdom.

There is no essential difference between the love of God and the love of man. But since the love of God is not described in numberless publications sold at corner kiosks, with illustrations and cartoons, the matter seems to be much more difficult.

True, there is an intrinsic difficulty. Love of God depends on one’s ability to be aware of Him, not in the sense of one’s knowledge of what is written in this book or another, but in terms of personal consciousness. One can love God to the degree that one is able to be conscious of Him or to feel Him.

All that is necessary is to understand and to sincerely inquire into one’s knowledge of that which is worthy of love, and the natural impulse, the love of God, is awakened.
Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 54a. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Mishna articulates a general principle: One is obligated to recite a blessing for the bad just as for the good, as it is said: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might” (Devarim 6:5). The Mishna explains this verse as follows: “With all your heart” means with your two inclinations, with your good inclination and your evil inclination, both of which must be subjugated to the love of God.


With the good inclination and with your evil inclination—it means to say, that you shall place in your heart love of God and faith in Him, even in a time of bitterness, and anger—because all of this is the evil inclination, as it says “and in all your ways you should know Him” (Proverbs 3:6) even when you are involved in sin.

Text #7: Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86a. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Abaye said: As it was taught in a baraita that it is stated: “And you shall love the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6:5), which means that you shall make the name of Heaven beloved.
Part Three: How Does God Love Us?

Text #8: Ahava Rabbah. Final Blessing recited before the Recitation of Shema in the morning prayers. English translation from The Koren Siddur. Bolding added for emphasis by curriculum author.

You have loved us with great love, Lord our God, and with surpassing compassion have You had compassion on us. Our Father, our King, for the sake of our ancestors who trusted in You, and to whom You taught the laws of life, be gracious also to us and teach us. Our Father, compassionate Father, ever compassionate, have compassion on us. Instill in our hearts the desire to understand and discern, to listen, learn and teach, to observe, perform and fulfill all the teachings of Your Torah in love. Enlighten our eyes in Your Torah and let our hearts cling to Your commandments. Unite our hearts to love and revere Your name, so that we may never be ashamed. And because we have trusted in Your holy, great and revered name, may we be glad and rejoice in Your salvation. Bring us back in peace from the four quarters of the earth and lead us upright to our land. For You are a God who performs acts of salvation, bring us close to Your great name forever in truth, that we may thank You and proclaim Your Oneness in love.

Blessed are You, Lord, who chooses His people Israel in love.
To command someone to love is unusual.

The Bible does not command us to love our parents or our children. The Bible commands us to love our neighbors, God and the ger. According to one Talmudic tradition (Bava Metzia 59b), there are thirty-six places in the Bible that teach us how to treat the ger with fairness and empathy, including the injunction to love those who have come to live among the Jewish people. Clearly this is an important commandment. But the object of the instruction is less than clear.

Ger translates to “stranger.” The Rabbis of the Talmud interpret the term to mean a convert—someone who has chosen to become part of the Jewish People. In this session, we will explore the Biblical commandment to love the ger, and try to better understand: Who are the strangers in our midst and why should we love them?

Part One: The Ger in Biblical Sources (20 minutes)

There are many definitions of the stranger. Who is the stranger? The word ger (גֵּר) in the Bible can refer either to a non-Jew living amongst the Jewish people, a ger toshav (גֵּר תֹּשָׁב) or to a full convert, a ger zedek (גֵּר צֶדֶק). The ger is the stranger who lives within the Jewish community, is subject to the power of the majority, and is vulnerable. They are people who are somehow at the mercy of the larger community. A convert is a more specific example of the ger—one who has joined the Jewish people and is now a full part of our society.

Because ger can be translated as either “stranger” or “convert,” we will use the Biblical translation of “stranger” in the upcoming sources to maintain the ambiguity of the original biblical Hebrew.

We will begin by looking at three locations in which the Bible instructs us regarding the ger. As we read the texts, note the other individuals who appear alongside the ger and consider the insight these passages offer on how to treat others.

» Ask participants to read Texts #1 and #2 and answer the questions in chevruta. Chevruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.


כִּי לֹא-יֻפְגַּם נַפְשֵׁךָ. לֹא יַעֲלֶהָךָ חַיָּה חַיָּה. לֹא תַעַזְּבֶּהָ עַל שֶׁהָיָה מִאֶדְמוֹ. לֹא תְעַבְּרֶהָ עַל הָעֵצֶם. לֹא תְּעַבְּרֶהָ עַל הָעֵצֶם. לֹא תְּעַבְּרֶהָ עַל הָעֵצֶם.

20 You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. 21 You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan.
**Ask:**

1. How would you explain the logic connecting our history as strangers in Egypt with the commanded behavior towards strangers?
2. Why is the stranger included in a category along with the widow and the orphan? What similarities and differences would you expect among these groups?

**Text #2: Leviticus 19:32–34.**

32 You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. 33 When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. 34 The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.

**Ask:**

1. Why would the Bible connect the ger with the elderly?
2. What do you make of the different verbs that are commanded regarding these two groups, that we are to rise and show deference towards the elderly and love the stranger?

This text adds three components to the connection between our treatment of strangers and our having been strangers in Egypt: that we are to love the stranger, to love the stranger as ourselves and “I the Lord am your God.”

**Ask:**

1. What do you think is the meaning of these additions? What might be the implications for our behavior?

**Read Text #3 aloud.**

**Text #3: Deuteronomy 10:17–19.** English translation adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.*

This text adds three components to the connection between our treatment of strangers and our having been strangers in Egypt: that we are to love the stranger, to love the stranger as ourselves and “I the Lord am your God.”
Loving the Ger: Who is the Stranger in our Midst?

17 For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, 18 but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. 19 You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Ask:

1. In this text, which other people are mentioned alongside the ger? Why are they significant?
2. God is described as upholding justice for the widows and orphans and loving the stranger. How are justice and love similar and different?
3. This text also describes that God demonstrates his love for the stranger by feeding and clothing him. What types of behaviors is God demonstrating to us?
4. What makes a ger deserving of our love?

In these three texts, the ger is mentioned alongside the widows, orphans and elderly—the marginalized, vulnerable members of society. These groups often lack physical, economic and social power, and can be easily wronged or oppressed. These verses seem to suggest that the ger is likewise part of a marginalized segment of society; someone who comes to a new society without connections may be treated with mistrust, which could lead to being oppressed and wronged.

Ask:

1. Would your understanding of these three texts change if we translated ger as “convert” instead of “stranger?” If yes, how?

Part Two: Commentators on Loving a Stranger (15 minutes)

The call to love the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt lends itself to varying interpretations.

The Bible is clear in its directive: the ger is someone we must love. We are reminded firmly that we, too, were strangers in a strange land. As Jews, we know the pain of being oppressed or marginalized and, therefore, should not cause others a hurt we ourselves have suffered.

Rashi, an 11th century French commentator, says that it would not be prudent to remind a stranger of his origins since he could turn around and remind you of the Jewish people’s humble beginnings.

Ask a participant to read Text #4 aloud.

For you were strangers in the land of Egypt: If you taunt him, he can also taunt you and say to you, “You too emanate from strangers.” Do not reproach your neighbor with a fault that is also yours (Mechilta, B.M. 59b). Every expression of a stranger (גר) means a person who was not born in that country but has come from another country to sojourn there.

Ask:

1. What is the value to the Jewish people of having been strangers in the land of Egypt?
2. The Jewish people’s history includes many instances of oppression. How should this history inform our value system?

Nahmanides, a 13th century Spanish philosopher and scholar known as Ramban, explains that the Jewish people should be well aware of how God hates oppression and has compassion for the oppressed.


The correct interpretation is that when it says: “Do not wrong a stranger, and do not oppress him,” you should assume that there is no one who can save him from you; for you know that you were strangers in the land of Egypt, “and I have seen the oppression which the Egyptians have oppressed...” (Ex. 3:9), and I took vengeance on them, because I see the tears of the oppressed, who have no comforter, while the power is on the side of their oppressors (Eccl. 4:1) and I deliver any man from one who is too strong for him (Ps. 35:10). Likewise, you shall not oppress the widow and the fatherless for I will hear their cry, for all these people cannot rely upon themselves, but trust in Me. And in another verse He added this reason: For you know the soul of a stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Ex. 23:9). That is to say, you know that every stranger feels demeaned, and is sighing and crying, and his eyes are always directed towards God; therefore, God will take pity upon him just as He had upon you, as it is written: “And the children of Israel sighed from their servitude, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God from their servitude” (Ex. 2:23).

In other words, God took pity on them not for their own merit, but only on account of the servitude. According to Ramban, we might think we can oppress strangers because no one will save them. We should remember, however, that this is not true, since God saved us when we were strangers.

Ramban also mentions the widow and orphan as individuals whose cries God hears. He writes of the stranger who feels depressed and is sighing. God will have mercy on him, as He had mercy on us when we were slaves.
Ask:

1. How do God’s actions towards those who are suffering demonstrate what our own behavior should be? Are they behaviors we usually associate with “love?”

Those who have experienced a particular distress should empathize with others in a similar situation. Someone who has never had a migraine might not appreciate the pain of someone else who suffers from them. The Jewish people know what it is like to be a persecuted outsider; therefore, we should exhibit sensitivity to others in a similar situation.

Ask:

1. Can you think of a situation in which your own suffering led you to greater empathy for the difficulties of another person?
2. Is that the same as love?

Part Three: The Stranger as Convert (12 minutes)

So far we have looked at the ger as a stranger. In this text Maimonides, a famous 12th century Spanish physician and philosopher known as Rambam, writes about the way we should approach converts to Judaism.

Rambam wrote a letter to Ovadiah, a convert who was called a fool by his teacher. The letter from Rambam shows the love and admiration he had for converts.

Text #6: Maimonides’ Letter to Ovadiah the Convert

Know that the obligation regarding converts is quite great. The Torah commands us to honor parents and to listen to the prophet but a person can honor and listen to those he does not love. Regarding the convert, we are commanded to love him... That he called you a fool is a great wonder. A person who left his family and birthplace and the kingdom of his people who are in power and he understood with his discerning heart, and he came to cling to this nation that is currently downtrodden because he recognizes that their religion is just and true, can you call such a person a fool? God forbid! You are not a fool but a wise individual.

Ask:

1. Why is the commandment “to love” a convert as opposed to respect or honor?
2. How does this view of the convert compare to our other texts about the treatment of strangers?
Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz also writes of his respect for the convert. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

**Text #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Biblical Images.**

In the Midrash, it is expressed in a parable. A shepherd has a large flock of sheep. A deer enters the fold. The shepherd tells his herdsmen to treat the deer with special care. The herdsmen ask why, with such a large flock, the shepherd should concern himself with this one deer. The shepherd tells them, “My sheep have only this fold, while this deer has the whole world to choose from. Yet he chose my flock, and it is therefore fitting that I should give him special care.”

This attitude sums up many mitzvot [commandments] that require us to welcome the proselyte [convert] in our midst, someone who has the choice of belonging elsewhere and who, nevertheless, chooses to enter the Jewish framework. The convert deserves special consideration and a special relationship.

**Ask:**

1. Do you know of anyone who has left all that is familiar behind to go on a personal journey?
2. Why would converts have merited or needed this extra level of “love”?

**Conclusion (8 minutes)**

While being commanded to love is unusual, the Bible clearly commands us to love the stranger. Our experience as strangers in Egypt provides us with the historical framework to appreciate the importance of this commandment and the moral imperative to strive to fulfill it.

**Ask:**

1. What does “love” mean in the context of loving the stranger?
2. Is love expressed by an inner emotion or through actions only? Are actions enough?
3. Does the commandment to love change the way that you view marginalized members of society? If so, how?
Part One: The Ger in Biblical Sources


20 You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. 21 You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan.

Text #2: Leviticus 19:32–34.

32 You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. 33 When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. 34 The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.


17 For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, 18 but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. 19 You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
Part Two: Commentators on Loving a Stranger


For you were strangers in the land of Egypt: If you taunt him, he can also taunt you and say to you, “You too emanate from strangers.” Do not reproach your neighbor with a fault that is also yours (Mechilta, B.M. 59b). Every expression of a stranger (יבד) means a person who was not born in that country but has come from another country to sojourn there.


The correct interpretation is that when it says: “Do not wrong a stranger, and do not oppress him,” you should assume that there is no one who can save him from you; for you know that you were strangers in the land of Egypt, “and I have seen the oppression which the Egyptians have oppressed…” (Ex. 3:9), and I took vengeance on them, because I see the tears of the oppressed, who have no comforter, while the power is on the side of their oppressors (Eccl. 4:1) and I deliver any man from one who is too strong for him (Ps. 35:10). Likewise, you shall not oppress the widow and the fatherless for I will hear their cry, for all these people cannot rely upon themselves, but trust in Me. And in another verse He added this reason: For you know the soul of a stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Ex. 23:9). That is to say, you know that every stranger feels demeaned, and is sighing and crying, and his eyes are always directed towards God; therefore, God will take pity upon him just as He had upon you, as it is written: “And the children of Israel sighed from their servitude, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God from their servitude” (Ex. 2:23).
Part Three: The Stranger as Convert

Text #6: Maimonides’ Letter to Ovadia the Convert

Know that the obligation regarding converts is quite great. The Torah commands us to honor parents and to listen to the prophet but a person can honor and listen to those he does not love. Regarding the convert, we are commanded to love him…That he called you a fool is a great wonder. A person who left his family and birthplace and the kingdom of his people who are in power and he understood with his discerning heart, and he came to cling to this nation that is currently downtrodden because he recognizes that their religion is just and true, can you call such a person a fool? God forbid! You are not a fool but a wise individual.


In the Midrash, it is expressed in a parable. A shepherd has a large flock of sheep. A deer enters the fold. The shepherd tells his herdsmen to treat the deer with special care. The herdsmen ask why, with such a large flock, the shepherd should concern himself with this one deer. The shepherd tells them, “My sheep have only this fold, while this deer has the whole world to choose from. Yet he chose my flock, and it is therefore fitting that I should give him special care.”

This attitude sums up many mitzvot [commandments] that require us to welcome the proselyte [convert] in our midst, someone who has the choice of belonging elsewhere and who, nevertheless, chooses to enter the Jewish framework. The convert deserves special consideration and a special relationship.
Introduction (5 minutes)

Imagine being the only one in the family to receive a Chanukah present. How would you feel and how would everyone else feel watching you unwrap the only gift?

Would it surprise you to learn that parents in the Bible played favorites? We see that Jacob loved his son Joseph more than all of his other children. The Bible also shares with us earlier in Genesis that Rebekah loved Jacob, while Isaac loved their other son, Esau. In both instances, this favoritism led to hate, which came between brothers.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines favoritism as:

The practice of giving unfair preferential treatment to one person or group at the expense of another.

Today we are going to explore the role of favoritism in the Bible, and the relationship between too much parental love and brotherly hatred.

Part One: Jacob and Joseph—When Love Leads to Hate (25 minutes)

We all know the story of Joseph and his brothers: Joseph has dreams that he shares with his brothers, angering them because they see Joseph as pretending to be better than them. Joseph’s brothers are so mad at him that they finally throw him in a pit and sell him into slavery. Our first source takes us to the beginning of the tensions between Joseph and his brothers.

» Ask students to read the first source and answer the questions in chevruta. Chevruta is partnered learning.

Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.


2 These then, are the generations of Jacob: At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father. 3 Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a coat of many colors. 4 And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.
Ask:

1. Verse 2 begins by telling us the generations of Jacob. Does it list all of Jacob’s descendants? What does that tell us about the importance of the one descendant who is named?
2. What does Jacob give Joseph?
3. Parents are not supposed to have favorites. Why do you think Jacob does?
4. Is Joseph blameless in this situation? What does the text tell us about his behavior?

While the text begins by telling us the generations of Jacob, it fails to actually list any of Jacob’s children—except one. By only mentioning Joseph, it seems clear that Jacob favors him over the rest of his children. The text tells us that Joseph is “the son of his old age” meaning that Joseph was born when Jacob was quite old. We also know that Joseph was born to Rachel, Jacob’s favorite wife. This may help us understand why Jacob favors Joseph. Yet the text also makes sure to tell us that Joseph tattled on his brothers to his father. Certainly that did not help his relationship with them.

Unfortunately, Jacob’s immense love for Joseph contributes to his other sons’ immense hatred of Joseph.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the [British] Commonwealth, discusses the symbol of Jacob’s love for his son.

Either read the source out loud to the class or continue with *chevruta* learning.

**Text #2: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. “Vayeshev (5771).” Covenant and Conversation.**

Jacob gave this favoritism a visible symbol, the richly ornamented robe or coat of many colors that he had made for him. The sight of this acted as a constant provocation to the brothers. In addition there were the bad reports Joseph brought to his father about his half-brothers, the children of the handmaids.

Ask:

1. What would motivate Jacob to give only Joseph a beautiful gift?
2. How do you think Joseph’s brothers felt?
3. How do you think Joseph felt?
4. Think back to a time when you received a treasured gift. What did you get? How did it make you feel?

The type of gift Jacob gave Joseph is also significant. When you wear a coat, it is for all to see. It isn’t something that you can tuck away quietly and enjoy. Additionally, we are told it is a coat of many colors. It is certainly meant to draw attention. Jacob gave Joseph the coat of many colors as an act of love, but it also perpetuated the brothers’ hatred of Joseph.

In Text #3, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz explores the relationship between love and hate. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.
The very first element in any kind of love is caring about something. There cannot be love when one does not care. The real opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. The emotions of love and hate do indeed pull in opposite directions; while love means being drawn toward the object of our emotions, hatred is pulling away from it. Yet both love and hate begin with caring. The emotion may not be constant; it may vacillate between love and hate, but the core feeling is, fundamentally, one of caring, of being involved. Only when one is involved can an emotion—positive or negative—develop.

Ask:

1. Love and hate are very strong emotions. What are two things that you love (e.g., basketball and reading) and two things that you hate (e.g., spelling tests and broccoli)?
2. According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, what is the difference between hatred and indifference?
3. Did Joseph’s brothers hate him or were they indifferent toward him?
4. Think of a time in your life that you felt hatred towards something or someone. What about a time you felt indifference? How were they different?

We are told that Joseph’s brothers hate him. Rabbi Steinsaltz reassures us that love and hate exist on the same continuum. The brothers have intense feelings for Joseph as opposed to indifference, where they would feel nothing at all. Years later, when they are reunited with Joseph, the feelings of hatred have been replaced with feelings of regret and, we hope, love.

Part Two: Rebekah and Isaac: Following Our Parents’ Lead (15 minutes)

Ask:

1. Why do you think Jacob played favorites with his sons?
2. Have you ever felt like you were someone’s favorite? What about feeling like you weren’t favored? Did that affect your relationships with those around you?

If Jacob’s childhood was any indication, we should not be all that surprised that Jacob played favorites because his parents did too. Jacob may have learned about love and favoritism from his parents, Isaac and Rebekah, in a house where there was clear favoritism.

Read Texts #4 and #5 aloud.

Note to facilitator: If your students are not familiar with the story of Esau and Jacob, you can take a few minutes to share this quick summary with them:

When Rebekah was pregnant, God told her that she would have twin boys. Back then, being the first-born came with a lot of privileges. The first-born son would normally be the son who was in charge of his other siblings. God told Rebekah that with her sons, it would be different. The older twin, God said, would serve the younger. When the twins were born, the older one was named Esau, which in Hebrew, means that he was red and hairy. The younger brother, Jacob, was named after the Hebrew word for heel, because he was born grabbing his twin brother Esau’s heel.
Rebekah and her husband Isaac picked favorites. Rebekah loved her son Jacob most, but Isaac favored Esau.

When Isaac was dying, he planned to give a special blessing to his first-born and favorite son, Esau. Rebekah decided to help Jacob trick his father so that he could get the special blessing instead. She told him that he should pretend to be his brother Esau and fool his father into giving him the blessing that was supposed to go to his older brother. When Esau learned that his blessing had been taken, and that he had been tricked, he was so furious that he wanted to kill his brother to get revenge. Rebekah, who was afraid for her younger son, told Jacob to run away before his brother could hurt him.

**Text #4: Genesis 25:27–28.**

> 27 And the boys grew; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. 28 Now Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison; and Rebekah loved Jacob.

The text tells us clearly that Jacob was loved by his mother, while his twin brother, Esau, was loved by his father. In order to get a blessing from Isaac, Jacob deceives him, pretending to be his brother, Esau. This deception ultimately leads to the downfall of the entire family unit. Jacob is forced to run away from home to save himself from Esau. He never sees his parents again.

**Text #5: Genesis 27:41.** English translation adapted from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.

> 41 And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, “Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

**Ask:**

1. What is Esau’s plan for Jacob?
2. Why does Esau plan to wait until after his father dies?

The message is complicated. Jacob listens to his mother (who favors him) and tricks his father (who favors Esau) to steal Esau’s blessing. We would have thought that Jacob would learn from this the dangers of favoritism, but we see that he does not because as a father he, too, favors one child: Joseph.

In both cases, the result of the favoritism is the same. Esau feels betrayed by his brother’s behavior and plots Jacob’s demise. With Isaac already on his deathbed, Esau plans to wait until after his father’s death to get revenge. Joseph’s brothers, seeing the coat as a symbol of Jacob’s favoritism, grow to hate Joseph and ultimately plan to get revenge as well.
The complexity revolves around the following two questions.

Discuss:

1. Can there be such a thing as too much love?
2. Must all love lead to favoritism?

With time and distance, Esau’s feelings of anger and hatred lessen and are replaced with longing to be reunited with his brother, Jacob. Ultimately, Joseph and his brothers, and Jacob and Esau, reunite and reconcile.

Conclusion: Letter from a Friend (15 minutes)

Discuss:

1. What lessons can we take away from the story of Jacob and Esau and the story of Joseph and his brothers?

Provide students with the following instructions:

Let’s explore: What can we do when we feel hate or jealousy? What would you tell a friend who is feeling this way? Would you listen to that advice if you were feeling jealous?

Imagine that you are a good childhood friend of Jacob’s. Write him a letter either right before he deceives his father, Isaac, or right before he gives Joseph the coat of many colors. Offer him advice, as a friend, to help him through a complicated moment in his life.

Ask your students to share their letters with the group.
Part One: Jacob and Joseph: When Love Leads to Hate


בראשית לֹא בָּדָא לְיָהוָה, יֵשָׁה בַּבָּקֹר אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַר שֵּׁה יָהֳעַר אֶתָּא וַאֲסָי מַעַר, וַהֲוָא יָהֳעַר אֶתָּא בֶּלַח חָלֵא חָלֵא לֹא בָּדָא לְיָהוָה.

2 These then, are the generations of Jacob: At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.

3 Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a coat of many colors.

4 And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.


Jacob gave this favoritism a visible symbol, the richly ornamented robe or coat of many colors that he had made for him. The sight of this acted as a constant provocation to the brothers. In addition there were the bad reports Joseph brought to his father about his half-brothers, the children of the handmaids.

Text #3: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Simple Words.

The very first element in any kind of love is caring about something. There cannot be love when one does not care. The real opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. The emotions of love and hate do indeed pull in opposite directions; while love means being drawn toward the object of our emotions, hatred is pulling away from it. Yet both love and hate begin with caring. The emotion may not be constant; it may vacillate between love and hate, but the core feeling is, fundamentally, one of caring, of being involved. Only when one is involved can an emotion—positive or negative—develop.

Part Two: Rebekah and Isaac: Following Our Parents’ Lead


בראשית כִּסֵּפֶר וַאֲסָי מַעַר, אֲשֶׁר כְּפָר גַּם אָוָה חֵד צָא, אָוָה חֵד צָא מַעַר, בַּבָּקֹר אִשָּׁה מַעַר, חָלֵא חָלֵא חָלֵא חָלֵא.

27 And the boys grew; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. 28 Now Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison; and Rebekah loved Jacob.

41 And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, "Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob."
FACILITATOR’S GUIDE

Playing Favorites: Parents’ Love and Brothers’ Hate (Elementary School)

Written by: Devorah Katz

Facilitator’s Note: This class can be taught in either a 60-minute or 75-minute session, depending on your time limitations. For a 60-minute session, omit the Optional Concluding Activity. For a 75-minute session, include the Optional Concluding Activity.

Introductory Activity: Your Favorite Gifts (15 minutes)

Materials needed: crayons, markers or colored pencils and paper for drawing.

► Ask:

1. Do you have a favorite person? Do they know? How do you let someone know that they’re special to you?
2. Do you like getting presents? What’s your favorite gift that you’ve ever received? Who gave it to you?

► Have the students draw their favorite gift and a picture of who gave it to them.

► When they’ve finished drawing, ask them to share with the group their drawings and the story of their gift, in a sentence or two.

► Ask:

1. Is the gift special because of who gave it to you, or is it special because of what it is?
2. Imagine being the only one in the family to receive a Chanukah present. How would you feel? How would everyone else feel watching you unwrap the only gift?

It may be surprising to learn that parents in the Bible play favorites. In the Bible there are two stories about Jacob that show us about playing favorites. We see that Jacob loved his son Joseph more than all of his other children. Jacob was the son of Rebekah and Isaac. His mother loved him best, while his father loved Jacob’s brother, Esau. In both instances, favoritism led to hate, which caused a divide between brothers.

Today we are going to explore the role of playing favorites in the Bible, and the relationship between too much parental love and hatred between siblings.

Part One: Jacob and Joseph: When Love Leads to Hate (25 minutes)

The story of Joseph and his brothers is well known. Joseph has dreams that he shares with his brothers, angering them as they see Joseph as pretending to be better than them. Ultimately, Joseph’s brothers throw him in a pit and then sell him into slavery. Our first source takes us to the beginning of the tensions between Joseph and his brothers.

► Read Texts #1 and #2 aloud.
These then, are the generations of Jacob: At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.

Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a coat of many colors.

And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.

Ask:

1. What does Jacob give Joseph? Why would Jacob give only Joseph a beautiful gift?
2. How do you think Joseph’s brothers felt? How do you think Joseph felt?
3. Think back to a time when you received a treasured gift. What did you get? How did it make you feel? What happens when you get a gift but your sibling doesn’t?
4. Was it only the coat that made Joseph’s brothers hate him?

The type of gift Jacob gave Joseph is significant. When you wear a coat, it is for all to see. It isn’t something that you can tuck away quietly and enjoy. Also, we are told it is a coat of many colors. It is certainly meant to draw attention. Jacob gave Joseph the coat of many colors as an act of love, but it helped make Jacob’s other sons hate their brother Joseph even more.

Yet the text also makes sure to tell us that Joseph tattled on his brothers to their father. Certainly, that did not help his relationship with them. Unfortunately, Jacob’s immense love for Joseph leads, in part, to his other sons’ immense hatred of Joseph.

Ask:

1. Love and hate are very strong emotions. What are two things that you love (e.g., basketball and reading) and two things that you hate (e.g., spelling tests and broccoli)?
2. Parents are not supposed to have favorites. Why do you think Jacob does?

The text tells us that Joseph is “the son of his old age” meaning that Joseph was born when Jacob was quite old. We also know that Joseph was born to Rachel, Jacob’s favorite wife. This may help us understand why Jacob favors Joseph.

Rashi, an 11th century French commentator and scholar, suggests another reason that Jacob loved Joseph the most. He uses Genesis Rabbah, a part of Midrash Aggadah, which often contains stories or legends, to help teach us about the text.
Text #2: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 37:2. English translation adapted by author to accommodate younger students.

The Bible bases the “generations of Jacob” on Joseph for many reasons: one is that, with his whole being, Jacob served Laban for Rachel (Joseph’s mother). In addition, Joseph looked like his father Jacob, and whatever happened to Jacob happened to Joseph. Jacob was hated, and Joseph was hated. Jacob’s brother Esau sought to kill him, and Joseph’s brothers sought to kill him...

Rashi suggests that there are a number of reasons why Jacob favored Joseph. Joseph was the first son of Jacob’s true love, Rachel. Jacob may also have loved Joseph because they have so much in common: They looked the same and they were both disliked by their brothers.

Ask:

1. Do you choose your friends based on what you have in common?
2. How could being friends with someone different than you be good?

Part Two: Rebekah and Isaac: Following our Parents’ Lead (10 minutes)

Would it surprise you to learn that the story of Joseph is not the only story of playing favorites in the Bible? In fact, Jacob himself was a favorite.

Ask:

1. Have you ever felt like you were someone’s favorite? What about feeling like you weren’t someone’s favorite? Did that affect your relationships with those around you?
2. How would you feel about someone else who was your teacher’s favorite, or your parents’ favorite person?

If Jacob’s childhood was any indication, we should not be all that surprised that Jacob played favorites because his parents did, too. Jacob may have learned about love and playing favorites from his parents, Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob grew up in a house where each parent loved a different child best. Then Jacob grew up to have a favorite child, as well.

Read the Texts #3 and #4 aloud.

Note to facilitator: If your students are not familiar with the story of Esau and Jacob, you can take a few minutes to share this quick summary with them:
When Rebekah was pregnant, God told her that she would have twin boys. Back then being the first-born came with a lot of privileges. The first-born son would normally be the son who was in charge of his other siblings. God told Rebekah that with her sons, it would be different. The older twin, God said, would serve the younger. When the twins were born, the older one was named Esau, which in Hebrew, means that he was red and hairy. The younger brother, Jacob, was named after the Hebrew word for heel, because he was born grabbing his twin brother Esau’s heel.

Rebekah and her husband Isaac picked favorites. Rebekah loved her son Jacob most, but Isaac favored Esau (Text #3). When Isaac was an old man and knew he was going to die soon, he planned to give a special blessing to his first-born and favorite son, Esau. Rebekah decided to help Jacob trick his father so that he could get the special blessing instead. She told him that he should pretend to be his brother Esau and fool his father into giving him the blessing that was supposed to go to his older brother. When Esau learned that his blessing had been taken and that he had been tricked, he was so angry that he wanted to kill his brother to get revenge (Text #4). Rebekah, who was afraid for her younger son, told Jacob to run away before his brother could hurt him.

**Text #3: Genesis 25:27–28.**

> וַיִּבְנֶ֣ה הָאָנָ֑ו וְנָֽעַרְתָּ֑י נֹ֖זֶר הָעָ֣שֶׂה לִי־דָּוָ֑ד שַׁחֲרֵי־ם. כִּ֣י גּוֹדֵ֤ה גַּם־חֲמָרָ֔י נְחַשָּׁ֣ה נְחַשָּׁ֔ה שֶׁ פֶּן־יִתְּנֵ֥ה שָׁהְ֔מֶן. כִּיּוֹרֵבֵ֖ה יַעֲשֶׂה־ם יַעֲשֶׂה־ם אֲדֹֽלֶֽם. כִּֽיּוֹרֵבֵ֖ה יַעֲשֶׂה־ם יַעֲשֶׂה־ם אֲדֹֽלֶֽם.

27 And the boys grew; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. 28 Now Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison; and Rebekah loved Jacob.

The text tells us clearly that Jacob was loved by his mother while his twin brother, Esau, was loved by his father. In order to get a blessing from Isaac, Jacob pretends to be his brother, Esau.

**Text #4: Genesis 27:41.** English translation adapted from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.

> וַיִּהְבִּיתָ הַגַּֽפִּֽו מָלַ֤ה גָּלֶֽפֶת. וַיִּיָּשֵׁ֤ה יִשְׁפֵּֽו בְּעֵדָ֣ו דְּבָרֵי֙ אַרְבָּאִי֙וּ וַֽיַּעֲשֶׂה֙ יִשְׁפֵּ֣ו בְּעֵדָֽו. וַיִּהְבִּיתָ הַגַּֽפִּֽו מָלַ֤ה גָּלֶֽפֶת. וַיִּיָּשֵׁ֤ה יִשְׁפֵּֽו בְּעֵדָ֣ו דְּבָרֵי֙וּ וַֽיַּעֲשֶׂה֙ יִשְׁפֵּ֣ו בְּעֵדָֽו.

41 And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, “Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

**Ask:**

1. What is Esau’s plan for Jacob?
2. Why do you think Esau plans to wait until after his father, Issac, dies?
The message is complicated. Jacob listens to his mother (who favors him) and tricks his father (who favors Esau) to steal Esau’s blessing. This causes trouble for the whole family. Jacob is forced to run away from home to save himself from Esau. He never sees his parents again. We would have thought that Jacob would learn from this the dangers of playing favorites, but we see that he does not because, as a father, he too favors one child: Joseph.

**Conclusion** (10 minutes)

Ultimately, the result of the favoritism is the same. Esau feels betrayed by his brother’s behavior and plots Jacob’s death. With Isaac already on his deathbed, Esau plans to wait until after his father’s death to get revenge. Joseph’s brothers, seeing the coat as a symbol of Jacob’s love for Joseph alone, grow to hate Joseph and ultimately plan for his death as well.

▶ Discuss:

1. Is there such a thing as too much love?
2. Look at the pictures you drew of your favorite gift. Do you think someone is jealous of you because you got such a great present?

With time and distance, Esau’s feelings of anger and hatred gradually disappear and are replaced with longing to be reunited with his brother, Jacob. Ultimately, Joseph and his brothers, and Jacob and Esau, reunite and forgive one another.

**Optional Concluding Activity: Sharing Your Love** (15 minutes)

**MATERIALS NEEDED**

▶ Empty toilet paper rolls (one for every two participants)
▶ Assorted paint colors: red, yellow, orange (pour small amounts of paints onto paper plates)
▶ Thin markers
▶ Paper

**DIRECTIONS**

1. Bend the toilet paper roll into a heart shape (it is easy to do).
2. The toilet paper roll is now a heart stamp! Dip it into paint and cover your page with hearts.
3. Inside each heart, write something that you love: It can be family members, friends, activities or items.
Part One: Jacob and Joseph: When Love Leads to Hate


These then, are the generations of Jacob: At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father. Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a coat of many colors. And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.

Text #2: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 37:2. English translation adapted by author to accommodate younger students.

The Bible bases the “generations of Jacob” on Joseph for many reasons: one is that, with his whole being, Jacob served Laban for Rachel (Joseph’s mother). In addition, Joseph looked like his father Jacob, and whatever happened to Jacob happened to Joseph. Jacob was hated, and Joseph was hated. Jacob’s brother Esau sought to kill him and Joseph’s brothers sought to kill him...

Part Two: Rebekah and Isaac: Following our Parents’ Lead


And the boys grew; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Now Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison; and Rebekah loved Jacob.
Text #4: Genesis 27:41. English translation adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*.

41 And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, “Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”
The word “love” is used in a multitude of contexts, with a myriad of connotations, embracing a wide range of emotions, from the most trivial whim to the most sublime philosophical idea. We all think we know what love means, but precisely because the word is used so often, and in so many ways, it has become fuzzy, obscure, even meaningless. Love of God, love of one’s country, love of a spouse, love of children, and love of herring may all be called “love,” but they are clearly not the same feeling. Even the expression “making love” refers to an act that does not necessarily have anything to do with love, or, for that matter, any other emotion.

The word “love” is used and misused in so many ways. It refers to emotions that range from the very low to the very high, and may differ considerably in intensity: from a rather weak inclination to an overwhelming passion. Therefore, it is necessary to begin our discussion with the simplest and broadest definition.

The very first element in any kind of love is caring about something. There cannot be love when one does not care. The real opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. The emotions of love and hate do indeed pull in opposite directions; while love means being drawn toward the object of our emotions, hatred is pulling away from it. Yet both love and hate begin with caring. The emotion may not be constant; it may vacillate between love and hate, but the core feeling is, fundamentally, one of caring, of being involved. Only when one is involved can an emotion—positive or negative—develop. It therefore happens that people have ambivalent feelings of love and hate mingled together.

In many cases, the emotional involvement may reverse: passionate love may sometimes turn into passionate hate, as happens in cases of disappointment in love. Jealousy is another common case of deep love that has turned into fierce hatred. As the verse in the Song of Songs (8:6) puts it, “Love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave.” It may happen in the opposite direction as well, with hatred turning into love. In any case, the emotion depends on caring about something. On the other hand, when one no longer cares, the object becomes insignificant, and is neither loved nor hated. Indifference is the death of any emotional bond.

Caring is the foundation of love, but it is not the emotion itself. Caring about anything may develop in directions other than love. It may turn into respect or admiration, as happens sometimes when one deals with important people or significant subjects. Thus, one may respect the science of biophysics, or admire a great philosopher. This results in a certain emotional response, but that response will not be love. On the other hand, one may care about something that is dangerous or harmful: an abyss alongside a road, or a tiger on the way. There will be an emotional response—fear, and an attempt to avoid the danger—but it will not be hatred.

Love begins when this caring is not only an objective appraisal, but becomes a personal attachment, when the object is not just “a thing” or “a person” that is judged by itself, but when one becomes involved in the relationship. Certain physical attributes, as well as some mental and emotional responses, are found among people everywhere. A certain amount of caring seems to be inherent in our existence. Love, however, seems to be on a different plane; it seems that love is something that people have to learn. As children develop, first they know and care only about themselves, because they do not really have a clear notion of “outside.” As they grow, they begin to find the other, first as a reflection of their own image, then as a separate entity. When they see a creature that is different from themselves, yet somewhat similar, they begin to have a relationship; they begin to care for the other.

The capacity for love may be inborn, but it does not always develop. It may take time and experience until it happens. Caring may develop into compassion—which literally means to feel passion together with another. When compassion grows, the emotional involvement deepens, and then becomes the emotion of love.

Love, then, is the emotion of attraction toward an object—the beloved. But this feeling of attraction is not a single, well-defined emotion. Because of the great variety in personalities, the differences in the object of love, and the vagueness of the term, there may be many different relationships that people will call “love.”
There is a Jewish folk tale that illustrates how vague the meaning of the word “love” can be, and also it demonstrates some of the basic problems in statements such as “I love you.” Once upon a time, a fisherman caught a large pike, and when he pulled the fish out of the water and saw its size, he said, “This is wonderful! Take it to the Baron; he loves pike.” The poor fish says to himself, “There's some hope for me yet.” The fisherman brings the fish to the manor house, and the guard says, “What do you have?” “A pike.” “Great,” says the guard, “The Baron loves pike.” The fish feels that there is some corroboration of the facts. The fisherman enters the palace, and though the fish can hardly breathe, he still has hope: the Baron loves pike. He is brought into the kitchen, and all the cooks exclaim how much the Baron loves pike. The fish is placed on a table, and the Baron himself enters, and gives instructions, “Cut off the tail, cut off the head, and slit it this way.” With his last breath, the fish cries out in great despair, “Why did you lie? You don’t love pike, you love yourself!”

The poor fish clearly had a linguistic-philological problem. It confused two different meanings of the same verb. This raises the question: are these two meanings really so different from each other? Don’t people make the same mistake when they think and talk about love? There is “fish love,” and there is Love. Clearly, they are not the same. They do not have the same emotional impact, and what is more important, the emotions themselves are not the same.

The various kinds of love differ both in quantity—namely, in how strong and compelling the emotion is—and, more significantly, in quality. Different loves are distinguished from one another by the object of love, and by the feeling itself. Usually, people instinctively differentiate between the different kinds of love, but when they do mix them up, it may become ridiculous, bizarre, and even perverse. A person who is in love will frequently form an attachment to objects that belong to the beloved as well. However, when the emotion toward the beloved’s shoe becomes identical to the emotion toward the person, there is a clear case of perversion (fetishism, to use the clinical term). If one loves children in the same way one loves a spouse (or vice versa), this, too, is obviously a mental illness.

With all the emotional differences among the various “loves,” they have many things in common. In every love there is strong positive feeling and deep attraction to the beloved, whether it is a person, an idea, or an inanimate object. What “fish love” and Love have in common—in fact, what every form of love has, from the most exalted to the most prosaic—are three components: the subject (the lover), an emotion (love), and an object (the beloved). The nature of the love depends on each of them alone, and on the interrelationships among them.

The most exalted kind of love is something that most people can speak about only theoretically. Poets and philosophers write about it, people in love speak about it, and many others yearn for it, but most of us have never experienced it. It is a love that is entirely object-oriented; the lover does not care what benefit or enjoyment he gains from the beloved. The emotional drive, as well as the joy of that love, is in the feeling of love itself. I love something, and I love it as it is, just because it is. I do not need to possess it, or even to have a response from my beloved. Sometimes, the only wish of the lover is just to be as close as possible to the beloved. In higher forms, even this desire does not occur, because the love is just the joy that the beloved exists, and that is enough.

One example of this love may be admiring a beautiful mountain. I do not care whether the mountain responds, whether the mountain loves me back. I also do not want to take it with me. I leave it as it is. I can admire it, I can even experience an intense feeling of love, but I have no desire to possess it, nor do I expect it to give me anything in return.

In most cases, however, love is not so “detached.” If I love flowers, and I find a beautiful flower, how should I best express that feeling: by picking it, or by letting it be? If I really love the flower in itself and for itself, the beauty of it, the smell of it, then I should leave it as it is. That would be object-oriented love. However, most people would pick the flower, which means that they not only want to love it, but also to possess it. They are willing to destroy the flower in order to enjoy it. That is also love, but of another kind; it is clearly a subject-oriented love.
The difference between object-oriented and subject-oriented love can be very subtle. Complicating the issue is the fact that anything is liable to become “misused” as the subject of subject-oriented love. In the fish story, it is clear that the Baron’s love of pike is completely selfish, and that he cares nothing for the fish, its welfare or its life. He just likes (or even passionately loves) the taste of the fish, because he loves himself, and one of his ways of satisfying that love is by eating the fish. When it comes to human relationships that are more complex, it is not always that clear. Whatever the object of love may be, the question is always: what do I love? Do I really love the object, or do I love myself, and just want to gratify my desires by means of the object?

This problem is very well recognized in the realm of erotic or sensual love. Does one really love the beloved as a person, or is the love only a pretext to have sex with another, enjoying oneself by means of the other, a true “fish love”? There are far more subtle cases. For instance, some people say they love their children, but in truth, they use the youngsters for their own enjoyment. This enjoyment may not necessarily be physical; perhaps they like meddling with another person’s life, or having somebody to pet. Either way, it is themselves they care for, not the children. If I need an object, and I keep it in order to meet my needs, I am not really interested in the object, I am just interested in its usefulness to me. Whether the enjoyment is spiritual or material, whether it is simply possessiveness, or gross physical abuse for the sake of enjoyment—if it is about what the object provides for the subject, it is not ideal, selfless love.

This way of probing into the nature of love may become very disturbing. Self-interest may persist from the grossest material benefit to very refined and spiritual forms. One should ask, “How much of my love is simply self-gratification?” It is possible for love of God to be the same as love of pike, e.g., when religiosity is based on one’s needs for security, as a crutch for a failing individual, or mostly when it is centered on “what will I get from it.”

In every “I love you,” whoever or whatever the love and the “you” are, there is always an “I.” A self must always be involved in the process; the emotion of love cannot exist without a self. Even when love requires great self-denial, it still requires a self at the center of the emotion. It is impossible for love to be entirely devoid of self, because somebody has to be the carrier, the feeler of the emotion.

Indeed, the quality of the emotion of love, the feeling, depends as much upon the subject, the personality of the lover, as upon the object. Some personalities are fiery: their emotion has to rise to higher and higher levels. Others do not have any need for storms; they even prefer a quiet life. Indeed, Jewish sources describe these two kinds of loves as “love like fire” and “love like water.” “Love like fire” consumes, it burns a person, while “love like water” is satisfying, soothing.

At first glance, it may seem that the “love like fire” is desire, and “love like water” is fulfillment, but that is not necessarily so; there is a difference in the nature of the emotion itself. A lover consumed with “love like fire” may burn with a compelling need to do something about that love; it makes the lover less and less happy—consumed, but not happy, not joyful. To express their love, some have to shower the beloved with gifts—not in order to bribe or possess the beloved, but as an expression of their burning desire. Yet the more they express it, the more the desire grows. In a sense, those gifts have less to do with the recipient than with the giver: the giver has the satisfaction of giving, of expressing love. Martyrdom is the ultimate expression of love that cannot be satisfied until it is sacrificial, because it is an all-consuming feeling. In contrast, in “love like water,” the very existence of the beloved is enough to make the lover happy.

Just as the personality of the lover affects the nature of the love, the object of the love is also essential to the relationship. Not all beloveds lend themselves to the same kind of love; some objects, almost by their very nature, can only be loved in one form and not in another. Loving a beautiful thing and loving food are not the same kind of love; the beautiful object and the food are utilized in different ways.

---

1Indeed, one of the differences between giving charity and giving out of love is that charity is object-oriented; it is connected, or should be connected, with the needs of the recipient.
Some people are so in love with money that they have an almost physical craving for it. The miser who will not use his money derives immense satisfaction just from knowing that he has it. In that case, the money becomes an abstract ideal. One might say that the miser’s love is a very delicate kind of love; he does not need anything from his beloved, he does not use his beloved; he is just happy that it is there for him. Everybody told him that it was not he she loved, but his money. To this the miser retorted, “I spent my whole life making money, thinking about money; that was the only thing that really interested me. What am I? I am my money. If she loves the money, she loves me dearly.” He identified so with his money that it was no longer just something that he possessed; it was his very self.

The sages of the Talmud differentiate between conditional and unconditional love. In conditional love, fulfillment often results in the end of love. Amnon, the son of King David, fell madly in love with his half-sister Tamar. He tricked her into coming to his bedroom, and despite her pleas, he raped her. “Afterward, Amnon hated her with an intense hatred; he hated her with a hatred even greater than his former love,” and he threw her out of his house. This example—a particular historical instance of something that happens frequently—shows how people may deceive even themselves by confusing emotions. Amnon thought that he loved the girl, while in truth he just had a very intense sexual desire. He really wanted something very concrete, and once he got it, Tamar became like a used rag for him: ugly, dirty, and not worth keeping.

Amnon’s “love” was clearly conditional. In other cases, however, differentiating between love for a quality or attribute of the beloved, and a higher, more refined love for the person or object, may be a far more delicate matter. If I love someone because he or she is beautiful, clever, powerful, or has some other quality, is it the person that I care about, or is it the quality? Does love connect to an essential self in the beloved, or just to a list of attributes? The question goes even further than that: does love require attributes in the beloved in order to exist? Is love rational, at least in the sense that it increases as the attributes get better, more beautiful, more bountiful, more anything? Or is love blind?

It seems that there does not have to be any real connection between the emotion of love and the object of love. Consider the most common kind of love: self-love. Of course, this love is usually quite different from falling in love with another person. Except for pathological cases (extreme narcissism), it does not include any fiery emotion. Still, it has all the elements of love: the attachment, the involvement, the desire to grant the beloved (oneself, that is) every whim, and so on. Because we are born with it, there is no strong emotional display, very much like love within the family; yet it is a very stable and enduring love.

Self-love provides powerful evidence of two important, broadly applicable aspects of love. First, love is blind—or, better yet, hallucinatory. Most people love themselves even though they know more derogatory things about themselves than anybody else could ever find out. In most cases, self-love is a full-fledged, everlasting love affair, and, although it sometimes grows and sometimes diminishes, it exists independently of any special attributes.

Similarly, when I adore a person, a thing, a picture, or an abstract notion, I may be mistaken; I may be blinded by emotion, prejudice, or a chemical reaction. Nevertheless, as long as the imaginary quality exists for me, as long as I see it, the feeling lasts. The imaginary beauty is beautiful, as long as I imagine it to be so. People who fall in love become blind; they do not see the crooked nose or the terrible mental qualities of the beloved. In this case, beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder. To the male warthog, the female warthog possesses every kind of beauty. It is only when the illusion stops that one realizes there was no substance there, that one loved an illusion, without valid grounds to base it on.

The second aspect of love epitomized by self-love is forgiveness. Even people who are not forgiving—by religion or by temperament—are ready to forgive themselves, and forget almost everything. Forgiveness does not mean that people ignore all their own flaws, but they are able to go on loving themselves, even with all the faults and all the guilt. How does this happen? At a certain point, when people begin to develop a sense of self, they fall in love with this self, and they cease to demand anything of it; its mere existence is enough for them. Love rarely distorts facts; it covers up
faults by changing our estimation of them. Facts somehow do not sound the same, or matter quite as much, when they are about me.

When I love someone, whether it is my child, my spouse, or any other person, I may see the whole person, including the faults, but I just do not care about these faults. In a sense, it is like looking at an airplane propeller. As long as it is moving very fast, one cannot see the blades; once one begins to see them, it means that the propeller is no longer functioning. As long as one looks at the object of love and sees no flaws—just, perhaps, a little blur—then everything is all right. When one begins to focus on details, the appreciation of the whole person is lost, and the love can no longer override the flaws.

A loftier instance of love, however, is described in the Book of Genesis (29:20): “Jacob worked to get Rachel for seven years, and they were like several days in his eyes, because of his love for her.” At first glance, that seems paradoxical—not just because seven years is a long time, but because when one in love is separated from the beloved, a day seems like a year. Yet here, it says just the opposite: seven years was like several days.

If the love of the other is for one’s own satisfaction, then being separated from the object of love causes suffering; the more intense the feeling, the longer, subjectively time seems. When I truly love the other just because the beloved exists, not because I want anything, then seven years and three days are exactly the same. What I really get from the love is the love itself. What matters is the relationship, not the benefits derived from it. My beloved exists, and therefore all is well; I need nothing more, not a smile or a look in return for my love. I do not even need my beloved to notice me. Theoretically, the greater the love, the more it is centered on the object and the less it has to do with the subject. Ideal love is concentrated on the beloved and nowhere else; the lover feels love, and does not require anything in return.

The loftiest kind of love, the love of God, is described in the Book of Job (13:15). It says there: “Even when He kills me, I still yearn for Him.” When I am aware that You, God, are there, everything is all right—not because the world is perfect, or all is well with my life, or because this makes me richer or happier. Life is all right because You exist, and that in itself provides all the satisfaction I need. Job’s extreme statement defines the most unconditional kind of love.

Some people are born with a great gift for love, while others have to learn love from the very basics—possibly by expanding self-love into love for others. For others yet, love is a very difficult exercise, and in order to achieve it, even to the smallest degree, they have to make deep structural personality changes. Some people experience love only for a fleeting moment. Only a few—possibly, those who have this gift from birth—are willing, and able, to attain totally unconditional love.


Discussion Questions

1. What are the different types of love that Rabbi Steinsaltz describes? Have you experienced any of these types of love? Do you agree or disagree with Rabbi Steinsaltz’s definitions?
2. What are some examples of “fish love,” or subject-oriented love, that you experience in your own life?
3. What value does learning about love offer us for our Jewish lives and communities? What insights does it offer you personally?
4. Did you find anything in this text challenging? What type of love is the most important in your life?
5. Love means that we see past and “forgive” the flaws of those we care about. How is self-love blind? How have you experienced forgiveness as part of self-love? How have you experienced it as part of the love you feel for others?