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 קִבֵּי לְרֹאשׁ מִסְנַי); 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.
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.

**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

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.

**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.

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.
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.
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


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Text #1A: Excerpt from Text #1.

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