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 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.”
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 cohabited 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.

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?


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


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 When he had stayed with him a month's time, Laban said to Jacob, “Just because you are a kinsman, should you serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?”

15 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, the name of the younger was Rachel.

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.”

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


22 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?

**Text #4: Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. The Hirsch Chumash. Commentary on Genesis 29:30.**

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.”

**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.
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.

…but 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.

…but 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.