Global Day of Jewish Learning
Curriculum—Love: Devotion, Desire and Deception

Grandma Rose's Magic

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A Project of the Aleph Society
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.

   **Text #1: Roland Barthes. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments.*

   *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 mintues)**

» Ask participants to read Texts #2 and #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.

**Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 62b.** English translation and commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

This is as it is related about Rav Reḥumi, 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 Reḥumi 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: Reḥumi in Aramaic means “love” and can be interpreted as either “loving” or “beloved.” Reḥumi’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.

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 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.
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.

Text #5: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. The Strife of The Spirit.

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


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Part One: Rav Rehumi and His Wife

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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.
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