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

Grandma Rose's Magic

www.theglobalday.org

A Project of the Aleph Society
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.**

וְהָיָה הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵי אֲבָרְכֵּנוּ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁאֲדוֹתֵנוּ אֶלֶךָ וְאֶתְוַהֲדוּתֵנוּ אֶלֶךָ וְמֵעָלֶהָתֵנוּ אֶלֶךָ וְבֶעָלֶהָתֵנוּ אֲשֶׁר הָעָבְדָתָם אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

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.
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’vaveḥa (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’vaveḥa (לבבות) has an extra letter (vet/ו) that is unnecessary. Therefore, the Rabbis here understand that the extra letter ו 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 ילל 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 (כָל). 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. Bold 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.**

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 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

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Is it underneath the willow tree
That I’ve been dreaming of?
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Text #2: Oscar Wilde. An Ideal Husband.

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Part Two: Loving God

Text #3: Deuteronomy 6:5.

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