

Born to Love:

Why, How, & With Whom?

Jewish Teachings and Prompts for Conversation



Small Groups 5778

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Congregation B'nai Israel

Born to Love: Why, How, & With Whom?

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RABBI ELIE KAPLAN SPITZ

הרב אליעזר בן משה יוסף ושרה שפיץ

Dear Friend,

Small groups entail one or more friends or couples meeting for a weekly one-hour conversation in a home (or a Starbucks or even CBI, where we have made space available). The goal of the hour-long small group is to share. So it is wise to choose a small enough group to allow each person enough time to speak. The host may consider putting out light refreshments or asking others to bring items to share.

The following are some suggestions as to how to use this booklet and your small group meeting time. We recommend 30-45 minutes of reflections, enabling remaining time for socializing. Some of the study is in "havrutah" (2-3 people) while other pieces are for the entire small group; similar to the traditional format for the study of Talmud. Members should bring this booklet to the meetings.

Much success on your shared communal journey.

Blessings,

Elie Spitz

Session One: Defining Terms and Refining Self

Why this topic? We are born to love, both the easiest act and the most difficult. Personal fears, needs, and insecurities may impede trust and an open heart. And yet, the more fully we give ourselves to others lovingly, the more satisfying and enriched are our lives.

The goal of these five sessions is to share conversations that will clarify expectations and activities to express love. While acknowledging multiple, soul-satisfying passions in life- such as music, work, study, dance, travel, and hobbies- this book focuses on personal relationships as the fullest expression of ourselves and the use of the word “love.”

Who is this for? This booklet is for a diversity of participants: whether male or female; married, divorced, or never married; straight or LGBTQ; a parent, grandparent, or never having had children; Jewish or non-Jewish; a CBI member or not. This booklet is for anyone wishing to grow in love.

What is love?

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk of 19th century, Ukraine, saw a young man savoring a fillet of fish.



“Why are you eating the fish?” the rabbi asked.

The young man, taken aback by the question responded, “Because I love fish!”

“And is it because you love the fish so much that you killed and cooked it? If you really loved the fish, you would have let it live in the water. You love yourself, young man, and because the fish gratifies your appetite, you killed and ate it.”¹

I am drawn to this story as a reminder of the differing ways that we use the word “love.” I do so while acknowledging that I love dark chocolate, which fortunately entails no killing. The word love can simply mean “to feel a strong attraction.” And yet, “love” on a higher plane is

to treat another as more than a self-satisfying object. Love at its best entails taking actions that honor another as an end rather than as a means. Our sages have taught that “When love depends on achieving a certain goal, love vanishes when that goal is achieved; but a love which is not dependent on any goal, never vanishes” (Mishnah Avot 5:18).²

Romance may begin with great passion. As the Beatles sang, “Would you believe in a love at first sight? Yes, I am certain that it happens all the time.”³ I have blessed friends whose relationships began with great attraction and certainty that has remained for them a touchstone. Yet, all too often such strong initial feelings are a projection of wishful thinking. First blush responses are often magnified by the natural chemicals released by intimate touching. The deepening of true love is more often the reward of sustained commitment, along with enduring life’s challenges and creating satisfactions together. How quickly a romance begins is not an indicator of how trustworthy and deep that love is twenty years later.

The early sages will state that the world was created by the divine principle of love (*Genesis Rabbah* 12:15). To love is to give and to receive genuine, open-hearted concern, which exists on a continuum. On one end, love is a fleeting, sentimental feeling. On the other, we are fully present and in receiving and giving reveal our best selves. On a day to day basis, love is evident through small acts of care. To live with such love is essential for a life of meaning. “A heart without affection is like a purse without money.”⁴

The Torah commands love: “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18); “And you shall love the stranger (Leviticus 19:34);” and “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, and might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). The first two times that the Torah uses the word it is in regard to family: a child (Isaac) and a wife (Rebecca).

In this booklet, we will look more closely at how the Torah uses the word “love” in order to discern:

- What do these Biblical verses mean for our lives?
- Can love be commanded? How can I love more fully?

During these five sessions, you are invited to explore the nature of love in order to enrich the quality of your relationships.

Small Groups: What's in it for me?

A small group is composed of at least one other person. Most of our study groups are six to ten people. A group member does not need to be a member of CBI or even Jewish, just someone that you will welcome getting to know better.

Meeting with a group enables a safe space to reflect, strengthen, and more effectively prioritize what matters to you. As a participant, you may choose to speak or just to listen. Participants in the group are like mirrors, allowing you to see yourself more clearly, including bringing to the surface what might otherwise go unnoticed.



Your group also serves to motivate action, taking chances to become your best. In addition to the five meetings, consider choosing a *havrutah*, a friend- whether a group member or from outside the group- to further reflect on “love” and how the exercises are working for you. For the sake of focus and continuity, please consider meeting once a week for five weeks and yet, I leave it to you and your group members to do the scheduling that is manageable for you.

The material of this booklet provides content and context for discussion and activity. **What you share with each other is the primary goal of these five sessions.**



To begin: Conversations for the first group meeting-

1. Introduce yourself and in a sentence, express what you hope to gain from being in the group by exploring this topic of “love.”

2. Share a favorite love song and explain why you like this song and what it says to you about the nature of love.



"Okay, Ralph. Lovely song, but I could use your help in the kitchen."

3. Who have you known that has modeled a loving life? Describe what that life looks like to you.

Follow-up: Steadiness of practice

Commit to meeting with your group these next four sessions. Set dates.

Gratitude Journal: Gratitude is a wellspring of love. Begin a daily journal and add a sentence a day, "I am grateful for...." At the end of this booklet is place for such entries.

Havrutah reflection: What practical advice would you give a young person about leading a life of love?

Outreach: Pick a person you have not shown love to for a while and surprise him or her: Send a note; give a call; invite him or her to join your group.



For further consideration:

Video: Ted talk on vulnerability as the gateway to love:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o&sns=em>

Session Two: Love of Family



Group reflection from last week's outreach: "Pick a person you have not shown love to for a while and surprise him or her: Send a note; give a call; invite him or her to join your group." How did it go? What surprised you?

And now for the new topic:

In the Ten Commandments, we are told: "Honor your father and mother so that you shall lengthen your days on the land that I am giving to you" (Exodus 20: 12; Deuteronomy 5:16). "To honor" is the verb. The rabbis explain that feelings, such as love, are hard to command. The sages understand this fifth of the Ten Sayings as a duty to provide for the wellbeing of parents. Just as parents provided food and shelter for their children, so the children must reciprocate. And the reward, the only one contained among the Ten Sayings, is societal stability.

Love amongst family is quite complicated. Those closest to us evoke the strongest emotions. We may brush off a stranger who acts rudely. But, when a parent, a spouse, a sibling ignores or speaks ill of us—ouch! Pain inflicted by immediate family can endure and even expand, for it goes to the heart of how we see ourselves.

In the popular 1970's film, *Love Story*, based on the novel by Erich Segal, a central line was, "Love is never having to say you are sorry." Can you imagine living with a person who never said "sorry?" Such self-satisfaction or callousness would badly damage any relationship. Mistakes, misunderstandings, and moments of selfishness occur. Admission of wrong doing and forgiveness are essential for love to endure, especially among those closest to us. In this unit, we will look at love of family and the necessary art of forgiveness.

Love between parents and children.

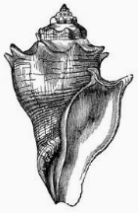
We are hard-wired to adore our children. My brother tells that when he first started walking down the streets of Manhattan with his newborn son, he discovered his instinct of protection by leaning over his

newborn and carefully monitoring scaffolding for the dangers of falling objects. Mothers naturally cherish their offspring as an extension of their own body. And yet, parenting is complicated. Parents' needs and those of the growing child lead to natural conflicts.

Remarkably, the first use of the word *ahavah*, love, used in the Bible is in the context of parental abuse.⁵ God commands Abraham, "Take your son, the only one you love, Isaac, and surely go to the land Moriah and place him there as an offering on one of the mountains that I will show you" (Genesis 22: 2). In our tradition this event is called the "binding of Isaac" (*akeidat Yitzhak*) for Abraham stops short of killing his son. But, tying his offspring to an altar is surely trauma enough.

This extreme story has prompted the question, "For what are you prepared to sacrifice your children?" "What is your supreme value?" Rabbis have used the text to preach on when sending children to war is unjustified. U.S. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "Great cases like hard cases make bad law."⁶ This extreme case of child abuse is limited in what it comes to teach us in normal parenting. And yet, this primal tale evokes the question: How do we translate the love of our children into deed?

I remember the first time that I went to see a psychotherapist. He asked, "Tell me what you feel about your father?" I was so emotionally stymied at that point in my late-20's, I responded, "Do you have anything to read that might help me with the question?" I knew that my father and mother had loved me greatly, as well as my siblings. I was fortunate to have such wonderful parents. And yet, there was still room for therapy, specifically in exploring my self-imposed pressures of not disappointing them. Now, as a parent I rest assured that my children will have what to discuss- either way- about how they were raised.



A. Questions for group discussion (pick one):

1. What is one life lesson that each of your parents taught you and how have you applied those lessons in your own life?

2. “Mother love has been much maligned. An over mothered boy may go through life expecting each new woman to love him the way his mother did. Her love may make any other love seem inadequate. But an unloved boy would be even more likely to idealize love. I don’t think it is possible for a mother or father to love a child too much” (Frank Pittman, psychiatrist and family therapist).

What are your thoughts on the stereotypes of overly loving Jewish parents and when is loving too much and when is it healthy?



“Your mom is a little overprotective, isn’t she?”

3. “The last step in parental love involves the release of the beloved; the willing cutting of the cord that would otherwise keep the child in a state of emotional dependence” (*Lewis Mumford, social critic and writer*)
When is letting go of a child an expression of love and how have you managed it?

4. How did parenting shift the understanding of your own parents?

5. How has grand-parenting given you a distinctive taste of love? - Keep in mind the saying of humorist Sam Levenson, “The reason grandparents and grandchildren get along so well is that they have a common enemy.”

Romantic Love

The second use of the word “love” in the Torah is in reference to Rebekah and Isaac. Sarah has died and Abraham wants his son Isaac to marry. Insisting that his son, Issac, remain in the Promised Land, the Patriarch sends his servant on a mission to Mesopotamia, where he and



Sarah were raised. The nameless servant returns with Rebekah, who has passed a test of kindness by providing water at her initiative for the stranger and his ten camels. She will decisively say to her family, “I will go,” in response to the proposal of marriage to the wealthy master’s son. When Rebekah sees Isaac walking in a field, she comes down from her camel and modestly covers her face with a veil. After a report from the servant, the text accounts: “Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort

after his mother’s death” (Genesis 24:67). Rabbi Harold Kushner, who edited a commentary in the Bible that we use in our synagogue, the *Etz Hayim*, notes: “Isaac comes to love Rebekah *after* he marries her. Their love is the result, not the prerequisite, of their relationship.”⁷

The Bible’s most romantic language only comes much later, specifically in the Song of Songs. Jewish folk tradition will say that King

Solomon composed the love-poem when he was young; Proverbs, a collection of aphorisms, in his middle years; and Ecclesiastes, the more life-weary text that states “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity,” in his old age. Song of Songs displays a longing of unfulfilled love, which the sages will justify as a sacred text as an allegory for the love between the people of Israel and God. And yet, on its immediate level the sensuous words are exchanged between human lovers, with such lines as: “Your love is better than wine” (1:2); “My beloved is for me; and I am for my beloved” (6:3) and “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it” (8:16).

The sages will emphasize that it is communication that keeps a marriage healthy. In that light, Rabbi Abaye in the Talmud will advise: “If your wife is short, bend over to hear her” (Bava Metzia 59b). “And then there is the wisdom of our Yiddish folk tradition, “Love tastes sweet, but only with bread.” Or as my mother would say, “Love is through the stomach.” What is clear is that love between spouses or best friends rarely exists with no challenges. We may have moments of sublime trust and joy, but most of the time we love along a continuum with daily demands creating fatigue and touches of tension. Love realistically is a package deal, where we accept the perceived flaws of another and value his or her genuine strengths and goodness.⁸

In a Ted-talk with over ten million views, Esther Perel explores sexual attraction in a long-term relationship and asks, “Can we want what we already have?” She points out that people have two conflicting yearnings:

1. Security, predictability, permanence, home and
2. Adventure, novelty, risk, and surprise.

The bridge between them, she emphasizes is imagination. When she asks people, “When are you most drawn to your partner?” The answers are linked to imagination: When my partner and I reunite after separation; Seeing my partner from a distance engaged in activity of radiant confidence; my partner surprising me, whether figuratively wearing cowboy boots or tuxedo. Long term attraction, she concludes,

requires awareness of what turns us on to erotic receptivity, coupled with committed focus, imagination, and presence.⁹



B. Questions for group discussion (pick one):

1. “To keep the fire burning brightly there’s one easy rule: Keep the two logs together near enough to keep each other warm and far enough apart- about a finger’s breadth- for breathing room. Good fire, good marriage, same rule.”¹⁰ How do you create and honor space in your togetherness? Say more about, “fire needs air.”

2. The Talmud states, “When love was strong, we could have made our bed on a sword’s blade; now, when it has become weak, a bed of sixty cubits in not large enough for us” (Sanhedrin 7a). What advice would you give a younger couple as to how to sustain and grow their love?

3. “The only people I know who are very happy are people that I do not know very well” (Helen Telushkin, mother of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin). Who for you is a happy couple? Describe their relationship, acknowledging strengths and how they overcome weaknesses.

Forgiveness

We will fall short of doing as much as we could for those we love and we may even inflict pain by losing our temper and using ill-conceived words. We may also harbor anger for selfish and even abusive behavior that was inflicted upon us. Many of us hold on to our justified rage. Forgiveness is not an entitlement of a wrongdoer. And yet, holding on to painful memories inflicts ongoing harm on ourselves. To forgive is not to say that the wrongdoing was excusable, rather it is to acknowledge that now there is a need to move forward. We have succeeded in forgiveness when we respond with a smile, rather than a grimace upon hearing the name of someone who has hurt us.

Elie Wiesel wonders why the rabbis thought so highly of Joseph, referring to him as *HaTzaddik*, the righteous one. Wiesel identifies Joseph’s greatness with the gracious forgiveness of his brothers.¹¹ Soon after his father’s death, Joseph reassures his guilt-ridden, cowering

brethren, “Do not be afraid. Am I a substitute for God? Although you may have meant to do me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result: the survival of many people” (Genesis 50:20). Joseph’s words exemplify a desire to hold his family together. To forgive is not to condone hurtful behavior, but to gain release from the past so as to enlarge the future.



C. Forgiveness: Questions to discuss (Pick one)

1. What is a story of well-timed forgiveness that has moved you?
2. What is the relationship between justice and forgiveness? When is forgiveness, if ever, worthy of holding back?
3. What are the steps to releasing yourself from the pain of wrongdoing done to you? When is actual conversation required to let go of the pain and when can you move on without it?

In the week ahead:

With your havrutah: Please consider picking a second question from each category to discuss.

Call a loved one that you have not spoken to for a while and catch up and if needed, make up. If the call’s initiative is touched by tension, consider sharing that you are calling because your rabbi insisted that it was Jewishly right to seek amends.¹²

Continue to journal a daily gratitude as a source of seeing the good in your life.

For further consideration:

1. Francine Klagsbrun’s *Married People: Staying Together in the Age of Divorce* (1985), the author’s research led her to conclude that commitment was the distinguishing ingredient for intact marriages.
2. Stephen M. Covey’s *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything* (2006) emphasizes that whether in personal life or work, success hinges on trust.
3. Gary Chapman’s *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1992, 2015) identifies differing ways

that people express and need to receive love: words of affirmation; quality time; receiving gifts; acts of service; physical touch. Knowing your and your partner's primary "language of love" sustains trust and passion.

4. Esther Perel's Ted-talk (viewed by over ten million): "The Secret to Desire in a Long-Term Relationship,"

https://www.ted.com/talks/esther_perel_the_secret_to_desire_in_a_long_term_relationship/transcript?language=en

Session Three: Love your neighbor, the stranger, & yourself



Follow-up from last week's, call a loved one that you have not spoken to for a while and catch up. How did it go?

A. Love of Neighbor

The Torah commands, "Love your neighbor as yourself." What if our neighbor is annoying? What if we doubt our own lovability? What does it mean "to love"?

Let's begin with the Biblical verse and some of its commentaries:

ה' אֵלֵינוּ: וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹד, בְּגִי עֶמֶד-תִּטֹּר אֶת-תִּקְוָם וְלֹא-לֹא.

"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the children of your people; You must love your neighbor as yourself. I am YHWH" (Leviticus 19:18).

Hillel in the first century emphasized this verse's preeminence and framed it practically. When a prospective convert asked him to summarize the Torah while standing on one foot, he responded, "What is distasteful to you, do not do to another. The rest is commentary. Now, go and learn." [BT Shabbat 31a]. By framing the golden rule in the

negative, Hillel makes the rule more practical and accessible.¹³ His aphorism provides the place to start, while encouraging continued learning for a fuller understanding of Torah.

Rabbi Akiva of second century, Israel, also stated that “love your neighbor as yourself” is “the greatest principle of the Torah.” Ben Azzai countered stating that the premier Biblical statement was ‘God created Adam in the likeness of God’” (Genesis 5:1), explaining, “You shall not say, since I am hated, let my neighbor be similarly hated or since I am in trouble, let my neighbor be similarly troubled. Instead, you shall remember that both you and your neighbor were created in the image of God (Genesis Rabbah 24:7).¹⁴

Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai emphasize differing vantage points of the Torah’s message. Two-thousand years ago when they lived- or for that matter a hundred years ago- people travelled little, resided mostly where they were born, worked in the family business, usually agriculture, and their neighbors’ origins were very much like their own. Neighbor was “kinsman,” as conveyed in the first half of the verse. The command to love the stranger as yourself will come later in the same chapter (19:33). It was only in 19th century, Germany that Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explicitly expanded the Hebrew term “neighbor” to include all peoples.¹⁵ And yet, Ben Azzai emphasized a universal concept by stating that the greatest teaching of the Torah is that we are all descendants from Adam, and hence all related. As Rabbi Tanhuma would add to the Akiva-Ben Azzai exchange: “If you do so, know whom you put to shame, for ‘In the image of God did God make him’” (Genesis 1:27).¹⁶

Across generations, Jewish commentators would vary in their explanation of whether a commanded love was an attitude or action. Maimonides (12th century, Spain-Egypt), exemplified the practical emphasis, writing: “Loving you neighbor as you love yourself means visiting the sick, comforting mourners, joining a funeral procession, celebrating the marriage ceremony with bride and groom, offering hospitality, caring for the dead, or delivering a eulogy. All at the things

that you would want from others to do for you- do for your brothers and sisters.”¹⁷

Abraham Ibn Ezra (Spain, 11th-12th century) would focus on the precise Hebrew noting that love was an attitude: the wording as “love to your neighbor as yourself,” signifies “love the good for your neighbor as you love it for yourself.”

Nahmanides (13th century, Spain-Israel), likewise commented that love was rooted in a “wish for another the quality of successes that you would wish for yourself,” elaborating as follows:

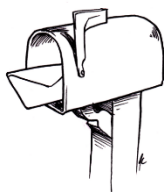
Rabbi Akiva has already taught us that if only one life can be saved, you should save your own life at the expense of another person's. What the Torah is commanding is that, in practical terms, one should treat the other person in every respect just as one would wish to be treated. But it is significant that the Hebrew text adds a proposition, “love *for* your neighbor.” This would have to mean that one's love for others should be equivalent to one's love for oneself.... If he loved him completely, he would want him to have wealth and property, honor, knowledge, and wisdom- but it is human nature that a person will always want more for oneself than others. The text commands that one should not nurture those petty jealousies, but love one's fellow with the same unlimited love that one has for oneself.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of Hasidism, taught, just as you recognize that you have flaws and have made mistakes, so you should consider that “like yourself” others are also worthy of forgiveness and acceptance despite shortcomings.¹⁸

In the 20th century, Martin Buber (Germany-Israel) focused on *kimocha*, “like yourself” as a forgiving attitude: “Be loving to your fellow, as to one who is just like you” for you and your neighbor are

interconnected as kinsman, as parts of a body, and that to punish your hand for an action would only hurt the entire person.¹⁹

In sum, love of the neighbor has many facets, and yet whether love is primarily an action or affect is a misleading distinction. For deeds and feelings of love are intertwined. In the words of Bible scholar, Jon Levinson: “behaviors can generate and define emotions and behaviors- the good ones and the bad ones- are to a significant degree learned...The movement, in other words, is not unidirectional, only from inner states of mind to outward actions; it takes place in the opposite direction as well, from action performed and texts recited to feelings and motivations.”²⁰



Questions for discussion on “love your neighbor” (pick one):

1. Before praying, the influential 16th century kabbalist Rabbi Yitzchak Luria would meditate upon the following *kavannah* (act of intentionality): “I hereby accept upon myself the *mitzvah* of “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Many later prayerbooks would add those words.²¹ What does “love your neighbor as yourself” convey as a mindset for prayer? How would you use it in your own prayers?
2. The biblical verse immediately before “love your neighbor” reads: “You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart. Reprove your neighbor and incur no guilt on his or her behalf” (Leviticus 19:17). Describe a time when someone was honest and loving enough to tell you what you needed to hear, rather than what you might have wanted to hear. How did the words help you? How was the admonishment delivered so that you heard it? What is the link between the words of correction and love?
3. *Ahavat Yisrael*, the love of your fellow Israelite, is a premier Jewish value. Hillel taught, “*al tifrosh min ha’tzibbur*”, “Do not separate yourself from the community” (*Mishnah Avot* 2:5). In what ways do you

show your love of belonging to the Jewish people? Why is having an extended family of Jewish people so important to you?

B. Love of the Stranger

In the Bible the stranger (*ger*) is a primary concern: “You too must love the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19).²² The Bible will repeatedly emphasize the need for justice by providing for the stranger’s basic physical needs and equal law. In the words of Rabbi Harold Kushner, “We are to treat aliens, widows, orphans, and other marginal members of society as we would want to be treated in similar circumstances. The decency of a society is measured by how it cares for its least powerful members.”²³

The Biblical mandate to treat the stranger lovingly is linked to collective memory. As we recount in the Haggadah of Passover, “In every generation, a person is to see him or herself emerging from Egypt.” It is a mental stretch to identify with events that did not occur to us directly. And yet, Biblical stories are woven and read to internalize collective memory, including the bitter taste of alienation that comes from being a stranger. Within Judaism, God is the parent of all people. The religious calling is to help God care for another person, even a stranger, as extended family.

The Code of Jewish Law, compiled by Rabbi Joseph Karo in the 16th century, describes *tzedakah* (charitable acts) as a duty in concentric circles.²⁴ We are first and foremost responsible for meeting the needs of our family. Although *tzedakah* begins at home, it does not end there. We are obligated to give charity to those in our local worship community, then to our town, and finally to a communal fund that tends to the needy regardless of origin. A person is to put some money into each of these categories, actively expanding the categories of “me” toward “we.”

Rabbi David Wolpe of Los Angeles has taught that the key message of Judaism is “knowing that each person is created in the image of God.” To illustrate, he will ask visiting nonJewish clergy to look around his synagogue and identify the Jewish representation of God.

Many point to the Torah. He responds, "That is the word of God." Others point to the eternal light burning above the ark conveying that God enables enlightenment. "That is only light and not God," he will rebut. "If you want to see the vessel for God, then look into the eyes of the person next to you. For each person holds a spark of the Divine." Wolpe has commented that the answer often gets a giggle of discomfort for it touches on a personal aspect of who we are. He will ask those in the sanctuary to look steadily into the eyes of the person next to him or her so as to recognize that spark. Wolpe sums up, "To value each person as a vessel for the Divine spark leads to mutual respect and never giving up on others. Relationships, both with people and God, are at the core of Judaism."²⁵



Discussion (pick one)

1. "Do not withhold good from another who deserves it, when you have the power to do it. Do not say to your fellow, 'Come back again; I will give it to you tomorrow,' when you have it with you"

(Proverbs 3:27-28). Why do we hesitate to act kindly? What would it mean to you to act now, rather than wait?

2. Have you ever received help from a stranger when you needed it? What was the situation? How did it feel? What did you learn about your own power to help others?

3. Gaze into the eyes of another person and pay attention to the spark that you see. What is evoked in noticing the spark? Why do you think we so often avoid such eye contact? What does it mean to you to be a vessel for God's presence?



C. Love of Self

Implicit in “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is that you need to love yourself. As Hillel of 1st century Israel, taught: “If I am not from myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when? [*Mishnah Avot* 1:14] Dr. Abraham Twerski dedicated his psychiatric career to working with addicts. He is the author of over sixty books, describing his constancy of writing as his personal addiction. He says that all those book may be summarized in a sentence: “You are worthy of love.”

In the Shema prayer taken from the Torah we are commanded to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might.” The traditional prayer immediately before is the *Ahavah Rabbah*, which recounts God’s love of the Israelites marked by giving them the Torah.²⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Omerman has explained the juxtaposition by saying, “Before we can love others, we have to allow ourselves to receive love.”²⁷ Indeed, the wellspring of our love is the grace of love that has come our way. Cultivating our love of self and an openness to receive love enables us to more effectively love our families and the stranger.

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, the great-grandson of the the Ba’al Shem Dov (the 18th century founder of Hasidism) acknowledged that we can often be overly self-critical, obscuring our own distinctive goodness. Regarding the process of forgiveness, he taught that our task is to find just one good point in another person, such as one good deed. We are then bidden to find another and then another. After identifying those aspects of goodness, to respond with an open heart of concern. He then says that the same process must occur within our selves. We must find that one good point (*nekudah tovah*). If we begin to dismiss a worthy past deed as less than pure in motivation, he advises, look within the point itself to find the good within. And so continue lining up the good points as if so many notes (*nekodot*), explaining that a musical note is a sound extracted from what is otherwise noise. We are then to line up the points- the notes, our shining good deeds- revealing our unique, beautiful melody and inner self.²⁸



Discuss (Pick one).

1. **Self-care:** How do you care for yourself? What time do you set aside and how do you use it? What gets in the way? How to more reliably secure the self-care?

2. **Self Identity:** Rabbi Nahman of Braslav, said: “If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you!”²⁹ Explain this quote. What does it mean to you to be an “I” and what is the role of “you?” What are your defining strengths?



Follow-up:

1. **Pick one person** who you would like to help this coming week and share with the group your specific intention or pick a strategy of five acts of helping strangers this week, such as paying a toll for the car behind you; picking up the tab of poor person. What is your plan?

2. **With your havrutah:** Please consider picking a second question from each category to discuss and if you have **continued to journal a daily gratitude, share what you have gained?**

3. **For next week:** **Pick a love song** that also could be used as a love poem/prayer for God.

An additional commentary

“You shall love your fellow,” says the Torah, “for I am your Lord.” Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin (Ukraine, 1796-1850) comments, “I do not understand the connection. You shall love your fellow man for I am thy Lord? Where is the connection between the two?” And he said, “I will tell you a story. There were two Jews who were friends. One of them was accused by the Russian police of distributing anti-czarist literature and was sentenced to death. His friend did all he could to save his jailed friend, but made no progress. Finally, he had an idea. He came to the police and said, ‘You cannot punish my friend because I did it.’ At that point they were all up in arms. They said, ‘You did it?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ So he too was arrested. The case was so strange that it went from court to court until it reached the Czar. When the Czar heard about the case, he

said, 'I want to see the two Jews.' They were brought before him, trembling –two Jews meeting the Czar. And the Czar said, 'Do not be afraid. I am not going to do anything to either one of you. I am going to free both of you. I know you are not guilty. I wanted to see you because I wanted to see two people who can be such friends, so devoted. Now that I see you, I have one request. Take me in as your third partner.'”³⁰



Discuss:

What are the limits of empathy? In what ways could you listen better to understand what another is feeling?

Session Four: Love of God



Discuss from last week's to-do:

Who did you help? How did it go?

A. God is Love

In clarifying the meaning of “God is love,” a place to start is with the question, “When have you felt close to God?” For intellectually defining the term “God” evokes uncertainty. On the absolute level, God is an abstraction, defying definition. The mystics will say that God’s essence is no-thing: *Ein Sof*, without end. On a practical level, we have much to overcome in using the word “God” due to its misuse, either by those who speak with such certainty as to what God wants or the awareness that the word has shifted in meaning historically as people have acquired more and more God-like powers, such as conceiving, healing, and monitoring private acts. And yet, most of us have experiences that point to a caring Presence, an Other, who transcends our limited years and enables for a unity in the whole of creation. At a loss for a direct description of God, we use human-like metaphors. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a contemporary mystic, explained:

The heart...needs relationship. Our minds might insist that we go directly to the Infinite when we think of God, but the heart doesn't want the Infinite; it wants a You it can confide in and take comfort in. The poetry of Shir Ha-shirim, the Song of Songs, speaks this language.³¹

In teaching personal prayer, I invite participants to write a letter to God spontaneously "as if" God is present, putting aside analysis of the nature of God for another time. The foundation for this exercise is the folk practice of placing a note between the massive stones of the Western Wall (the *Kotel*) in Jerusalem. Such notes have a quality of honesty, because we assume that God knows us and will not tell our secrets. Such unfiltered expression is self-revealing and often leads to words of gratitude.

As an extension of this experience, I ask people to respond to their letter "as if" God was writing back, an act of Divine empathy. "Letters back" reveal core values and our broadest perspective. Such responses are consistently compassionate and process-oriented rather than yes-no answers. I recall a father in such a family class saying, "After what I wrote to God, I expected a slap. Instead, the answer back conveyed love."

Reaching out to God is a pathway of discovery, as beautifully described by Rabbi Samuel Dresner:

What begins with a person's quest ends with God's presence; what starts in the narrowness of the ego, emerges into the wide expanse of humanity; what originates in the concern for the self becomes a concern for others and concern for God's concern; what commences in petition concludes as prayer.³²

Exercises:

1. Share with each other when you have felt close to God and then discern what the stories share in common.



GOD FINDS ALL THE PRAYERS OF
MANKIND IN HIS SPAM FOLDER.

2. Take five minutes to write a letter to God; and five more to respond "from God." Share what the process (rather than the content per se) revealed to you about how "prayer" is similar and yet different than an exchange with a close friend.

B. Passion for God

Our prayerbooks, prophets, poets, and philosophers used love language to describe a yearning for God. The prophets Hosea,³³ Isaiah,³⁴ and Jeremiah,³⁵ spoke of God as lover, but the most romantic language is presented in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, the Song of Songs. Although spoken between a man and woman, the exchanges are read allegorically by the Talmud's sages. In the debate as to whether the sensuous Song of Songs is worthy of inclusion into Sacred Scripture, "Rabbi Akiva says: 'God forbid that anyone should say that the Song of Songs renders one's hands impure! The greatest day was the one on which Israel received the Song of Songs. All of the writings in the Bible are holy and the Song of Songs is the holiest of holies. If there was any dispute about a certain book, it was about Ecclesiastes'" (*Mishnah, Yadayim* 3:5). Among Sephardim (Mediterranean Jews), many read the Song of Songs before the start of each Shabbat. Consider the longing conveyed in these selected verses (*italics indicating the female voice*):

Oh, give me of the kisses of your mouth, for your love is more delightful than wine.

Tell me, you whom I love so well: Where do you pasture? Where does your flock rest at noon?

O, loveliest of women! If you have no idea, follow the tracks of the herds, and graze your goats close by the sheds of the shepherds....

You are beautiful, my beloved; you are beautiful, with eyes like doves.

*You are handsome, my beloved, oh so graceful!
Like an apple tree in a vast forest, so is my beloved
among the young men: in its shadow, desire grew in me
and I lingered, its fruit sweet on my tongue...*

O my dove in the crevice of the rock in the covert of the cliff- let me see you, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and you are beautiful.

*My beloved is mine and I am his, the one who browses
amidst the lilies.*

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a band on your arm. For love is as strong as death, its jealousies as fierce as hellfire, its pangs are fiery burning flames.

Even vast seas cannot extinguish love, nor can quick-flowing rivers drown it. But were someone to spend all their wealth to buy love, surely that person would be laughed at and scorned. ³⁶

On Friday night, the mystics of 16th century, Safad composed what has become known as *Kabbalat Shabbat* to prepare for the formal

evening prayers. Six psalms, representing the six work days, are chanted as passageway to the repose of the seventh day. The singing of *Lecha Dodi* is the formal welcome of Shabbat, imagined as a bride. In anticipation of the people of Israel's reuniting with God, love songs are sung. Listen to the yearning conveyed in *Yadid Nefesh*, a poem composed in Safad contemporaneously with the *Lecha Dodi*.

Beloved of my soul, source of compassion, draw me,
Your servant, to Your desire. Would that I could run like
a gazelle, and before before Your beauty, for I find Your
love sweeter than honey or any delight.

Beautiful, splendrous light of the world, my soul is sick
with love. God, please heal her [my soul] by bathing her
in Your serene light- then she shall surely be
strengthened and healed and be Your servant forever.

Ancient One, let Your compassion flow. Have pity on the
child who You love- for I have yearned for so long to see
Your luminescent power. My God, my beloved, hurry;
please, do not hide!

Please, my beloved, reveal Yourself. Spread the *sukkah*
of Your love over me. May the whole world be
illuminated with Your glory; then shall we be glad and
rejoice with You. My lover- come quickly, for the time
has come- have compassion for me as in days of old.³⁷

Likewise, the Zohar, the mystical commentary on the Torah, is romantic. God is described as possessing a male and a female dimension. The opening line encapsulates and foreshadows the longing for inner union.



Rabbi Hizkiyah opened, "Like a rose among thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens" (Song of Songs 2:2). Who is a rose? Assembly of Israel. For there is a rose, and then there is a rose! Just as a rose among thorns is colored red and white, so Assembly of Israel includes judgment and compassion (1:1a).

The Divine quest is the bringing together of the male *Tiferet* [the "splendorous" blending of compassion (white) and judgment (red)] with the female *Shekhinah* ["presence" linked to Assembly of Israel]. When these inner dimensions merge, all ten of God's *sefirot* (aspects of inner being) are aligned and creation is harmoniously complete.

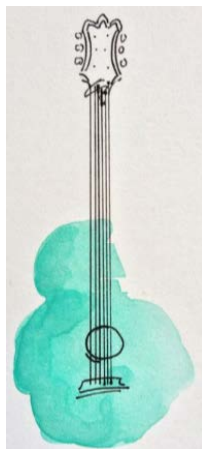
Yearning for God is not only mystical, the pursuit of Divine understanding and intimacy. Judaism's most accomplished rationalist, Maimonides, describes the ideal longing for God as lovesickness. His encyclopedia of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, and philosophical *Guide for the Perplexed* endure in their influence. Maimonides emphasizes that love for God is equal to the knowledge of God's creation, requiring study of math and science.³⁸ Consider the passion of his ideal believer.

What is a fitting love of God? It is that you should love God so greatly that your soul is bound up with the love of God and is constantly captured by it, as one were sick with lovesickness, as when your consciousness is not freed from the love of your beloved but you think of your beloved all the time: when you lie down and when you rise up, at the times that you are eating and drinking. The love of God should be even more than this in the hearts of Godlovers; it should be present continually, as we are commanded: "You shall love Adonai, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul." This is what Solomon expressed metaphorically, saying, "For I am sick with love." The entire Song of Songs is an allegorical description of this love.³⁹

God's ever presence is conveyed by the 19th-century, Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, who used to sing a song part of which is as follows, "The Song of 'You:'"

Where I wander-You!
Where I ponder-You!
Only You, You again,
 always You!
You!You!You!
When I am gladdened
 -You!
When I am saddened
 -You!
Only You, You again,
 always You!
You! You! You!
Sky is You! Earth is You!
You above! You below!
In every trend,
 at every end,
Only You, You again,
 always You!
You! You! You!

(Translated by Olga Marx)⁴⁰



Discussion:

What popular song did you pick that most reminds you of the yearning used to describe God in these excerpts? How would that song feel to you if sung about God?

(Pick one)

1. Choose a line from the sampling from Song of Songs and explain why it moves you.
2. What activities for you express a yearning for God? In what sense do they add to that longing?

C. “And you shall love God”

The Shema is the touchstone of Jewish faith: “Hear O’Israel YHVH is our God, YHVH is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). That Biblical line is immediately followed by “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

What does it mean to love God?

Just as the rabbis defined the commandments of love of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) and love of the stranger (Leviticus 19:34) as actions, so too is love of God widely understood. The Biblical order is highlighted in a *midrash*: as love of God is chronologically last, preceded by loving the neighbor and stranger for we are bidden to love other people in such ways as to make God beloved by them as our influence of compassion (*Midrash ha-Gadol*).⁴¹ Maimonides, as quoted earlier, defines love as imitating God’s ways of care as described in the Torah (visiting the sick, redeeming from Egypt, willing to forgive) and learning about the details of creation as a source of wonder and heartfelt gratitude. For the mystic writer, Samuel David Luzzatto (19th century, Italy) “loving God” is not a command, but an underlying principle in observing each of God’s commands.

Love of God is loyalty to God's covenant. The commands of the same Biblical paragraph focus on keeping God at the forefront of awareness: teaching our children; attaching Torah parchments to our bodies (*tefillin*) for prayer and on our homes (*mezuzot*). The reminders of God presence and expectations are prompts to follow God's ways. Loyalty to God is manifest by fulfilling *mitzvot* (Divine decrees). Loyalty, a constancy of commitment, sustains love.⁴²

Love (*ahavah*) and fear (*yirah*) are often combined in the Torah. For instance, "And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you? Only this to fear (*leyir'ah*) the Lord your God, to walk only in God's paths, to love God, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul" (Deuteronomy 10:12). In the Torah *yirah*, while often translated as "fear" more contextually conveys reverence or humility. We are to know that we are not God. God is awesome beyond compare. For God is the Creator. Our relationship with God is not between equals. And yet, as God is mighty and loving, we live with gratitude, willingly follow God's decrees. Our relationship is reciprocal. Only in rabbinic writings, would *yirah* take on a meaning as an opposite of love, as when the sages would emphasize that it is superior to serve God from love, rather than fear of punishment: "Perform God's commandments out of love. One cannot compare a person who acts out of love to one who acts from fear, who serves a master out of fear. When the latter feels overburdened, he leaves and goes away."⁴³

Love of God, some sages taught, is a natural inclination that gets covered over by the demands of life. The 19th century Gerer Rebbe⁴⁴ encouraged performing *mitzvot* (Divine expectations) to remove the distractions and obstacles that hinder expression of love for its Creator. Service from love, rather than from fear, perpetuates the desire to do another positive deed. As stated in a much earlier rabbinic comment, "A person who serves a master out of fear will always seek ways of escaping those obligations. But for the person who serves out of love, obedience is a source of joy" (Sifrei). In an anthropomorphic vein, to see God as commanding love is to identify with an emotive God who seeks love.⁴⁵

The three-fold, biblical description of that love of God is explained in the Mishnah as follows: "Love the Lord... with all your heart" - with both your good and evil inclinations; "With all your soul" - even when God takes your life; "With all your might" - with all your possessions (*Berachot* 9:5). We are thus asked to bring our whole person to our love of God: heart (mind and emotions), soul (spirit as life-force) and might (physicality). The paragraph continues with the demand that we are to teach these instructions to our children "When you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up." Pinchas Peli of 20th century Jerusalem commented, "The teaching with which we are concerned here is not done by passing on information or by preaching or issuing orders but by personal example, which by its sheer sincerity and passion should be qualified to impress our children and students."⁴⁶ Love is as love does, as in marriage: changing textures of many strands, tied together by commitment.

Finally, a Zen-like story of the Maggid of Dubnow (Lithuania, 18th Century) that emphasizes that love of God is conditioned on separation from base attachments.

Once upon a time a peasant came to a store that sold fine clothing and asked for a suit. The experienced shopkeeper handed him a suit that matched his estimated size. The peasant immediately put the suit on over what he was already wearing. "This suit constrains me!" the customer complained.

"You must first take off the coarse garments you are wearing and then the suit will fit you well," said the salesman.

The Maggid then explained, similarly is our love of God: We need to divest ourselves of immediate earthly pleasures, before we can feel ourselves attuned to God's loving presence.⁴⁷



Follow-up:

1. **Create a group project** for the coming week: Prepare a gift package for a newcomer; visit a group home, such as Bubbie and Zayde's or Heritage Pointe as a group outing.
2. **Continue to journal a daily gratitude.**
3. **With your havrutah** pick a topic above that you would like to further discuss.

For further consideration:

Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2016) provides a scholarly yet accessible examination of love in the Bible and rabbinic writings.

Session Five: Born to Love



Discuss:

What surprised you about your group activity? In what ways was the activity gratifying?

This concluding chapter is both a summation and points us forward from reflection toward ongoing action.

Why Love?

We are born to love, because we are social beings. We are self-defined by whom we love. We harvest a return of joy and wholeness through our investment in relationships. More than following our passions, we gain from following our contributions: what we share of ourselves with others. As a wise person stated in summing up her life, "I have loved and been loved; all the rest was background music."⁴⁸

What is the nature of love?

Standing in Love

Erich Fromm, psychoanalyst and social philosopher, wrote *The Art of Loving* in 1956. I remember going to the store to purchase the book for a high school reading assignment. It was located on the shelf entitled, "Sexuality." I was titillated anticipating the content. I was admittedly disappointed when the book did not deal with sex, but rather analyzed the psychology of love. Fromm's ideas have endured for me. His key message was that love is "an activity, not a passive affect; it is a 'standing in,' not a 'falling for.'" He explained that "the active character of love can be described by stating that love is primarily *giving*, not receiving... Giving is the highest expression of potency. In the very act of giving, I experience my strength, my wealth, my power. This experience of heightened vitality and potency fills me with joy. I experience myself as overflowing, spending, alive.... Giving is more joyous than receiving, not because it is a deprivation, but because in the act of giving lies the expression of my aliveness."⁴⁹

The expression "it is better to give than to receive" rightly conveys the deep satisfaction of seeing the smile of another person when opening a gift. Our dignity is tied to giving; our joy is linked to loving. And yet, in the course of any day, we may naturally feel a questioning of our own lovability. Another person's care feels good, a balm to our commonly-held, secret insecurities. We tend to reciprocate warm attention by desiring to show affection, which leads to a caution.

Beware of the Bear Hug

Some people display love to make up for their own feelings of insecurity. Actually, we all do to a point, but the caution is for those whose caregiving is just about their own needs, lacking genuine empathy. I have seen people kiss and hug everyone around them, literally; while in private speaking abusively to those closest to them. Some hugs are figuratively bear hugs, an attempt to control. I have seen people respond favorably to even insincere affection; who were then hurt when the apparent fondness promptly reversed over an

exaggerated, misperceived slight. Beware of individuals whose motivations for love are extremely self-serving.

Political leaders often fall prey to their own self-importance. Some religious leaders also grab the mantle of leadership for their own gain, whether of power, profit, or pleasure. Jay Michaelson, a contemporary teacher of Judaism and spirituality, described a genuine teacher as follows:

I would submit that there is only one kind of beneficial, transformative energy. That energy is love, and one can't have too much of it. It refuses to use other people, refuses to put them in what Buber called an "I-It" relationship. Love regards the other, seeks to really see, to really cherish, and to really celebrate the other as other, both in what they are and what they can become. I have met spiritual teachers with that energy. Most often they were not famous, not rich, and not particularly charismatic. Yet they saw me, and when I spoke with them I felt like they and I were the only two in the world. They saw things in me with a precision and speed that astonished me, yet they didn't use these things to their own advantage. They used their sight to give me good, loving counsel and to mirror me back to myself in my potential. They did not seek to make me dependent, but rather independent. They didn't try to make me like them, but more like myself. They did not in any way have their eye on my wallet and they didn't try to have sex with me (excuse me, help me 'tantrically')." ⁵⁰

A Package Deal

Mature love entails accepting another person's flaws, as well as elevating perceived strengths. And yet for some in the words of Moshe Ibn Ezra, "Love blinds to faults; hatred to virtues."⁵¹ I am pained to observe when counseling a couple in the midst of divorce proceedings that they tend to distrust and see only the worst in each other, the flip

side of the feelings that brought them together. My thirty years of marriage have taught me that love is accepting differences and incompleteness while celebrating the gifts of affection and trustworthiness.

Sincere love is sustained by communication, affection, and empathy, with our own initiative as the starting point. In the words of Song of Songs, “I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me” (6:2). As Moses Mendelssohn, the 18th century, Jewish-German philosopher, stated, “Love that you may be loved.”⁵² For many, a broad, generous perspective is all too often only present after the fact or as in the quip of Sholom Aleichim, the Yiddish writer identified with *Fiddler on the Roof*, “As a rule, people love one another from a distance.”⁵³

Willing to Forgive and Accept Responsibility

We make mistakes. For me, fatigue is a primary intoxicant, leading to overreaction and misuse of words. I am particularly vulnerable to testiness in moments of transition, such as getting to an airport. One verbal slip and it takes a while to get steadied again. I depend on the forgiveness of my wife. It sometimes takes time and accepting responsibility for my actions. But, so far forgiveness has enabled moving forward and growing as a couple.

What is true for me is normative. We are fallible. And our willingness to forgive others and judge them in the spirit of presumed goodness is an underpinning of love. In the 2200-year-old words of Joshua ben Perachya, “When you assess people, tip the balance in their favor” (*Mishnah Avot*, 1:6). At the same time, judgment does have a place. When we are being mistreated, we are in need of protecting ourselves.

And when we see another hurt, we have a duty to act justly. The verse immediately before the challenge of “love your fellow as yourself,” states: “You shall surely reprove your kinsman” (Leviticus 19:17). The rabbis will emphasize that such reproach is only an obligation when the person is capable of listening so as to alter behavior and said in a way that conveys genuine respect and compassion.⁵⁴

With Whom?

We love in concentric circles. For some, there is a misguided assertion of loving humanity, just not any one individual. Actually, love wisely starts from an individual and works out from there. The starting point is actually self-love. Let us look again at the statement of first-century Hillel, “If I am not for me, who will be?; If I am only for myself, what am I; And, if not now, when?” (*Mishnah Avot* 1:14). We are all too familiar with our own shortcomings and naturally feel vulnerable to discovery as less than presented. Appreciating our own goodness and loveability underlie our ability to love. And yet, as stated in the second clause of Hillel, we are only fully an “I” when in relationship with others. In some cases, that relationship is abstract as when we see ourselves in the presence of God. Abstract in the sense that we cannot visibly see God. And yet, we may feel that our own lovability is grounded in creation itself, a loving God who created us and accepts us despite our incompleteness.

The rabbis emphasized that love of God is demonstrated by love of other people and the other parts of creation.⁵⁵ Judaism teaches that God is our collective parent. Nothing gives a parent greater joy than seeing children support, care, and enjoy each other. So, we have a duty to love all people, potentially. “Potentially” in that there is often a gap between an ideal and reality. And yet, we are to put time and resources into each of the concentric circles: starting with ourselves, those of our immediate family; extended family; community in which we live; the world community.

In that regard, a pause to emphasize the value of belonging to a religious community. We are more effective in doing good in the world when we work together with others. Judaism does seek to cultivate goodness, but also belonging. For we are more elevated in our aspirations when informed by a collective memory of “We were slaves in Egypt” and “We stood together at Mount Sinai.” The curiosity of Jews that has led to creativity and thoughtful contributions in all areas of society is a product of a culture that has debated how to best fulfill a covenant with God, a debate contained in our sacred texts, which are

worthy of careful study. The willingness of Jews to contribute charity generously is a product too of a culture that sees a duty to help repair the world. I worry about many who step away from Jewish identity as an active search of meaning. It is a loss for them of content garnered by the most sensitive and thoughtful among our people who sought to answer “Why are we here?” and “How best can I serve.” Rituals as well are vessels for values and enable the satisfaction of continuity across generations.

Hillel emphasized, “If not now, when?” Developing a keen awareness of the present moment as the time to act and doing so, enables love to flow immediately and to continue. In the words of Anne Frank, ““How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”



Becoming A Vessel for Love.

In the time of the Temple, the priests in Jerusalem would bless the pilgrims on the Temple Mount each day. The Torah provided the fifteen words in Hebrew that they chanted: “May God bless you and guard you; May God shine God’s light upon you graciously; May you feel God’s light turning toward you granting you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26). Those blessings are still recited in certain worship settings by the descendants of the priests of old. Before echoing the three-fold benediction, they recite that the priests are commanded to bless “with love.” The addition of the phrase “with love” is a unique expectation among traditional blessings. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of England explains that priests in their benediction are only conduits. The love that they convey is God’s love for Israel. He continues, “Love means that we are focused not on ourselves, but on another. Love is selflessness. And only selflessness allows us to be a channel through which flows a force greater than ourselves, the love that as Dante said, ‘moves the sun and the other stars,’ the loves that brings new life into the world.”⁵⁶

In the Jewish tradition, the three-fold blessing is also delivered by parents for their children just before the Friday-night Shabbat meal. With the destruction of the Temple, rituals of the past democratized. Already God in the Torah charged, "You shall be a nation of priests, a holy people" (Exodus 19:6). Each of us is tasked to be that conduit of love. And by each, I mean both a common Jew and even a nonJew. In our day, we have the privilege of living in a more open world than our ancestors, more able to expand the "we" so as to see ourselves as part of the expanse of humanity.

In our synagogue, as so many other contemporary houses of worship, we have made an addition to our liturgy in recent years. When we chant at the end of services "*Oseh shalom bimromav...*" - "May You who make peace in the constellations also make peace among all of Israel," we have added *vikol yoshvei tevel*- "and among all [the world's] inhabitants." Our collective challenge as individuals is to feel loved and to reduce our ego-needs so as to become a vessel for love to flow through us. Love is seeing the other as both unique and similar, enabling an open heart to receive and to give affection and concern.

As expressions of love, a closing story and a prayer:

A rabbi once asked his students: "How do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?" The students thought they grasped the importance of this question. There are, after all, prayers and rites and rituals that can only be done at nighttime. And there are prayers and rites and rituals that belong only to the day. So, it is important to know how we can tell when night has ended and day has begun.

So the first and brightest of the students offered an answer: "Rabbi, when I look out at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." A second student offered his answer: "Rabbi, when I look from the fields and I see a house, and I can tell it's my house and not the house of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." A third student offered another answer: "Rabbi,

when I see an animal in the distance and I can tell what kind of animal it is, whether a cow or a horse or a sheep, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." Then a fourth student offered yet another answer: "Rabbi, when I see a flower and I can make out the colors of the flower, whether they are red or yellow or blue, that's when night has ended and day has begun.

Each answer brought a sadder, more severe frown to the rabbi's face. Until finally, he shouted, "No! None of you understands! You only divide! You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from your neighbor's field, you distinguish one kind of animal from another, you separate one color from the others. Is that all we can do- dividing, separating, splitting the world into pieces? Isn't the world broken enough? Isn't the world split into enough fragments? Is that what Torah is for? No, my dear students, it's not that way, not that way at all!"

The shocked students looked into the sad face of their rabbi. "Then, Rabbi, tell us: How do we know that night has ended and day has begun?"

The rabbi stared back into the faces of his students, and with a voice suddenly gentle and imploring, he responded: "When you look into the face of the person who is beside you, and you can see that that person is your brother or your sister, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun."⁵⁷

Seeing the other and extending ourselves begins with self-love, strong families, and healthy communities. Pursuing love is morally right and essential for a life of wholeness and joy. We have the capacity to fulfill the Biblical mandates to love our selves, our neighbors, strangers, and God. An interpretive translation of Psalm 67 by Stephen Mitchell offers a closing prayer for our success:

Bless us, Lord, with your peace; make your light shine within us, so that your presence may be known and your love appear to all people.

Let all earth's nations honor you and all people shout out your praise; Christian, Muslim, and Jew, idol-worshiper, agnostic, Buddhist, Taoist, scientist, brown-skinned, yellow and white.

Let wisdom speak in their hearts and justice light us their eyes.

Let all of them feel Your presence and sing out in the fullness of joy.

58



Discussion questions:

What have you gained from your conversations with your small group?

Describe how keeping a gratitude journal has impacted you.

Take a moment to express your gratitude to each other for what you have shared.

Try This: *Hesed* (Compassion) Meditation

<http://youtu.be/Mw4R6VRyRk4>

This guided meditation and prayer awakens the desire to give and to do so for an ever-increasing circle of recipients.⁵⁹



"Can he call you back? He's meditating."

Sit comfortably and awake. *Breathe out tension and breathe in calm. Breathe out.*

Bring to mind a person who delights you. See this person in front of you. Now convey the following blessings to him or her with an open heart:

May you feel at ease;

May you live with strength; May you live feeling deeply loved and grateful.

Bring to mind an acquaintance, a familiar stranger, such as the checker at the local grocery store or your mail deliverer. Bless this person, after bringing a clear image of him or her before you:

May you feel at ease;

May you live with strength; May you live feeling deeply loved and grateful.

Bring to mind unfamiliar strangers, people near and far who like you want to live with safety, strength, and satisfaction; who share with you the desire to safely share a home with their family and celebrate the

goodness of their lives. And now reach out compassionately toward each of them and bless:

May you feel at ease;

May you live with strength; May you live feeling deeply loved and grateful.

Bring to mind someone you love and hear that person bless you:

May you feel at ease;

May you live with strength; May you live feeling deeply loved and grateful.

Before you open your eyes, pause. See yourself radiating love into the world, sending well wishes to all peoples and the whole of creation. Imagine if each person in the world took a moment to radiate such love. Feel the peace. Feel the promise of what could be. Feel the wholeness. Breathe out. Open your eyes.

Post-script: Looking forward



What aspect of love will you prioritize for further development?

What is one act that you would like to do for someone else today?

Gratitude Journaling

Consider completing this sentence once a day:

I am grateful for...

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"It is good to give thanks to the Ever-Present-One."

Psalm 92:1



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***“It is gratefulness
which makes the soul
great.”***

Rabbi Abraham
Joshua Heschel



¹ Abraham Twerski, *Visions of the Fathers* (New York: Art Scroll, 1999), p. 309; or see Rabbi Twerski describing love and telling this story:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMcHtSjtNBY>

² “When love depends of achieving a certain goal, love vanishes when that goal is achieved: but a love which is not dependent on any goal, never vanishes” (Mishnah Avot 5:18). What is an examples of a love that is conditional? The love of Amnon and Tamar. What is an example of an unconditional love? David and Jonathan.” Mishnah Avot 5:18.

³ “With a Little Help from My Friends,” written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney (1967), sung by the Beatles.

⁴ Mandelstamm, *Mishle Binyamin*, 1884, cited in Joseph L. Baron, *Treasury of Jewish Quotations*, “Love,” (A.S. Barnes, 1965).

⁵ I am fascinated by first-occurrences after learning psychologist Alfred Adler’s insight that a person’s earliest memory reveals core identity. By extension, I have found that firsts in text often condense and foreshadow the use of a term or concept. The subsequent uses of “love” in the book of Genesis are also linked with discord: 25:28- Isaac and Rebecca each picking a favorite son; 37:3-Isaac/Jacob preferring his son Joseph; 44:20- brothers relating that their father, Jacob, has a unique attachment to youngest Benjamin.

⁶ Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’ dissent opinion in Northern Securities Co. v. United States (1904).

⁷ *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly-United Synagogue of America, 2001), p. 138.

⁸ A Ted-Talk to consider is by photographers Stacey Baker and Alec Soth, “The is what enduring love looks like,” who discuss and show photos of speed dating in Las Vegas on Valentine’s Day and couples in a nearby retirement community-
https://www.ted.com/talks/alec_sothe_stacey_baker_this_is_what_enduring_love_looks_like/up-next.

⁹ Esther Perel:

https://www.ted.com/talks/esther_perel_the_secret_to_desire_in_a_long_term_relationship/up-next

¹⁰ Marnie Reed Crowell, writer; found in *Love: Quotes and Passages from the Heart*, edited B.C. Aronson, NY: Random House Reference, 2007. p.53.

¹¹ Elie Wiesel, “Joseph or the Education of a *Tzaddik*,” *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (NY: Random House, 1976), pp. 139-169.

¹² I asked Rabbi Harold Schulweis, a rabbi’s rabbi, just months before he passed in 2014 which of his High Holiday sermons had made the biggest impact. Among those that he cited was one on asking congregants to call a family member to seek reconciliation. He added, “I was moved by the accounts and what made it work was that they could say, ‘My rabbi said that I needed to call.’”

¹³ The influential 19th century, German philosopher, Emmanuel Kant, would present “the categorical imperative” in a similar vein: “Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

¹⁴ Variations of this exchange are also found in the midrashic collection of *Sifra* 89b and in the Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:4. At the end of the exchange there is an addition:

R. Tanhuma said: "If you do so, know whom you put to shame, for 'In the image of God did God make him'" (Genesis 1:27).

¹⁵ Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808-1888) stated that the love of humanity was a precondition for being a true Israelite; Hermann Cohen (Germany, 1842-1918), likewise emphasized such universal love was a necessary and unique component of Jewish monotheism.

¹⁶ The need for universal kindness appears early in rabbinic writings. In the land of Israel, first-century Hillel and Rabbi Meir of the second century both emphasize the need to love all of God's creatures (*Mishnah Avot* 1:12 and 6:1, respectively). Repeatedly in the Mishnah and Talmud attending to the needs of a non-Jewish neighbor is mandated as *mipneh darchey shalom*, "in the interests of peace." Maimonides, the 12th century codifier of Jewish Law will state, "We bury the dead of non-Jews, comfort their mourners and visit their sick, as this is the way of peace" (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Evel* 14:12).

¹⁷ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Evel* 14:1.

¹⁸ Joseph Telushkin, "Love Your Neighbor," in *Jewish Literacy* (New York: Morrow Press, 1991, 2001), p.26.

¹⁹ *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, edited by Gunther Plaut, commentary on Leviticus by Bernard Bamberger (New York: UAHC, 1962, 1967), p.893.

²⁰ Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2016), p.32. In a related vein, Rabbi Dessler, emphasized that people make a mistake when they believe that you give to whom you love. Rather we love those to whom we give, for we feel invested by our gift as if part of ourselves is now in the recipient. Quoted by Rabbi Abraham Twerski, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMcHtSjtNB>

²¹ In composing a *siddur* (traditional prayerbook), 18th century, Polish Kabbalist, Jacob Koppel inserted the following meditation before prayer, "Behold I am taking upon myself the positive commandment 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' and I love everyone of Israel with all my soul, with all my heart and with all my might." Jacob Koppel ben Moshe of Mezritch (died c.1740), *Siddur Kol Ya'akov* (Slavita, 1804), v.1, page 37b.

²² Also see, "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 22:20- also see Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:34).

²³ Harold Kushner, *Etz Hayim*, commenting on Exodus 22:20, p. 468.

²⁴ *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 251:3. The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 31b) will explain the need to give to those of other towns: *Open, you shall open your hand to him* (Deuteronomy 15:7-8). Now, I would have known only about the poor of your own town. From where is it derived for the poor of another town? The verse states, open, you shall open - in all cases. *Give, you shall give* (Dt 15:10).

²⁵ Shared at Temple Bat Yahm of Newport Beach, CA on August 20, 2017. As to look in another's eyes, please consider the Ted-Talk by Mandy Len Catron, "Falling in love is the easy part," in which she describes the impact of a psychology experiment of thirty-six increasingly personal questions, followed by four minutes of staring into another person's eyes as a formula for falling in love:

https://www.ted.com/talks/mandy_len_catron_falling_in_love_is_the_easy_part/up-next. The thirty-six questions were composed by Arthur Aron:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/open-gently/201310/36-questions-bring-you-closer-together>

²⁶ *Ahavah rabbah* is chanted in the morning; the evening prayer before the *Shema* is *Ahavat Olam*.

²⁷ Small group teaching at Congregation B'nai Israel, Tustin, in 1990.

²⁸ Rabbi Nahman, "Finding the Good," *Letukei Maharani* 282.

²⁹ *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters* (1948) by Martin Buber as translated by Olga Marx.

³⁰ Elie Wiesel, Lecture, Temple Beth Am, Los Angeles, California, December 1977.

³¹ "The Lovers", Zalman Schachter-Shalomi with Joel Segel, *Davening: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Prayer* (Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012), p.64.

³² Samuel Dresner, *Prayer, Humility and Compassion* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1957)

³³ Hosea in chapters one and two describes his unfaithful wife as analogous to Israel who has betrayed God with idolatry and is yet welcomed back into covenant.

³⁴ Isaiah 54:6-7- "The Lord has called you back as a wife forlorn and forsaken. Can one cast off the wife of his youth? - said the Lord. For a little while I forsook you, but with vast love I will bring you back."

³⁵ Jeremiah 2:2- "Go proclaim to Jerusalem: Thus said the Lord, 'I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride; how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a long not sown.'"

³⁶ Song of Songs 1:1,7,15-16; 2:2,14, 16; 8:6-7; italics indicates female voice.

³⁷ *Yadid Nefesh* was composed by Eleazar Azikri (1533-1600); translation from *Siddur Lev Shalem* (NY: Rabbinical Assembly, 2016) p. 10.

³⁸ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Essentials of Torah" 2:2: *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:51, 54.

³⁹ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Repentance" 10:3; also see "Laws of Repentance" 10:6, "Laws of Essentials of Torah" 2:2: *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:51.

⁴⁰ *Lev Shalem*, p.106.

⁴¹ Cited in *Etz Hayim*, p. 1025.

⁴² Elana Stein Hain of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem teaches widely on the link between love and loyalty, weaving texts of the Bible and the sectarian writings of Qumran with contemporary business writings.

⁴³ *Sifrei* on Deuteronomy 6:5, which will get repeated there by Rashi. The distinction between Biblical and Talmudic sources is made by Jon Levinson, *The Love of God*, pp. 29-31.

⁴⁴ Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, Russia (1847-1905), also known by his writing as The Sfat Emet; cited in *Etz Hayim*, p. 1025.

⁴⁵ Heard from radio-personality and Torah teacher, Dennis Prager.

⁴⁶ Pinchas Peli, "Torah Today," *Jerusalem Post*, August 10, 1985, p.10.

⁴⁷ A retelling of the story contained in Abraham Twerski, *Twerski on Chumash* (New York: Shaar Press, 2003), pp. 377-378.

⁴⁸ Phil Lader quoting a beloved, deceased participant of Renaissance Weekends.

⁴⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974), 18-19.

⁵⁰ Jay Michaelson, "Some Thoughts...", <http://hashkata.com/?page=3>

⁵¹ Moshe Ibn Ezra, *Shirat Yisrael* 1924, cited in Noble, *Treasury of Jewish Quotes*, "Love."

⁵² Moses Mendelssohn, preface to *Vindiciae Judaearum*, 1782, cited by Baron, "Love."

⁵³ Sholom Aleichem, *Di erste Commune* 1904, cited Baron, "Love."

⁵⁴ See *Sifra* on the verse and commentary of *Etz Hayim*, p. 696.

⁵⁵ Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev taught, "Whether a person really loves God is determined by the love borne for other people."

⁵⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Commentary on *Naso*, 5776:

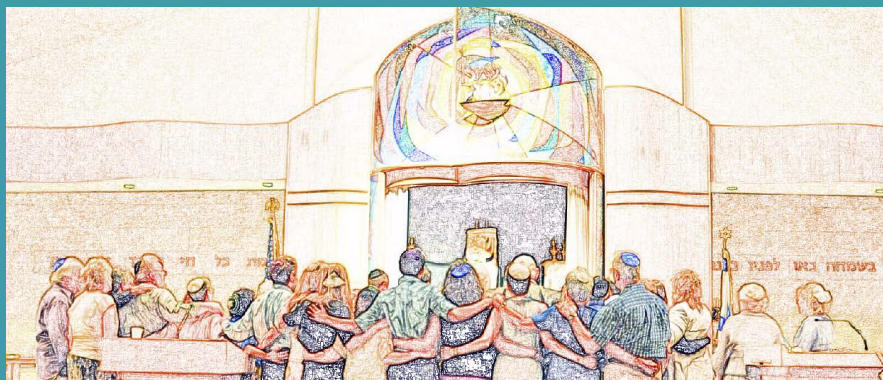
<http://rabbisacks.org/parsha/naso/>.

⁵⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016) quoting Rabbi Jonathan Maltzman, pp. 356-357.

⁵⁸ *Lev Shalem*, p. 118.

⁵⁹ Sylvia Boorstein, self-described as a student of the mind and a master practitioner of *metta* (compassion) meditation, inspired the meditation. In Buddhist practice, metta-meditation seeks to awaken loving-kindness. Sylvia Boorstein, a master practitioner, is a founder of the Buddhist Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, California and an active teacher in the Jewish community.

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