House of Sages

LOVE AND JUDAISM 3RD MARCH, 2024

COME & LEARN

"ואהבת לרעך כמוך" – רבי עקיבא אומר זה כלל גדול בתורה.

"Love your fellow/neighbor as yourself" - Rabbi Akiba said: "This is the greatest principle of the Torah"

Commentary on Leviticus 19:18

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SOURCES THAT DEFINE LOVE

SOURCE 1 – PIRKEI AVOT 5:16

כָּל אַהֲבָה שֶׁהִיא תְלוּיָה בְדָבָר, בָּטֵל דָּבָר, בְּטֵלָה אַהֲבָה. וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ תְּלוּיָה בְדָבָר, אֵינָהּ בְּטֵלָה לְעוֹלָם

Any love that is dependent on something, when that thing perishes, the love perishes. But [a love] that is not dependent on something, does not ever perish.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What do you think it means for a love to be "dependent" or "not dependent" on something?
- What are some examples of things that love might become dependent on? How might these things potentially threaten a relationship?
- Does this text reflect your own beliefs about what makes love last? Why or why not?

SOURCE 2 A – 1 SAMUEL 18:1, 3-4;

וַיְהִי כְּכַלֹּתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֶל־שָׁאוּל וְנֶפֶשׁ יְהוֹנָתָן נִקְשְׁרָה בְּנֶפֶשׁ דָּוִד ויאהבו וַיֶּאֱהָבֵהוּ יְהוֹנָתָן כְּנַפְשׁוֹ וַיִּכְרֹת יְהוֹנָתָן וְדָוִד בְּרִית בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֹתוֹ כְּנַפְשׁוֹ וַיִּתְפַּשֵּׁט יְהוֹנָתָן אֶת־הַמְּעִיל אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ לְדָוִד וּמַדָּיו וְעַד־חַרְבּוֹ וְעַד־קַשְׁתּוֹ וְעַד־חֲגֹרוֹ:

And it came to pass, when he was finished speaking to Saul, that the soul (nefesh) of Jonathan was knit with the soul (nefesh) of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul (k'nafsho). Then Jonathan and David made a covenant because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him and gave it to David, and his apparel, even to his own sword, and to his bow and to his belt.

SOURCE 2 B – 2 SAMUEL 1:26

[David, after learning of Jonathan's death in battle:]

צַר־לִי עָלֶיךָ אָחִי יְהוֹנָתָן נָעַמְתָּ לִּי מְאֹד נִפְלְאַתָּה אַהֲבָתְךָ לִי מֵאַהֲבַת נָשִׁים:

I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan. You were most dear to me - your love was wonderful to me, more than the love of women.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you imagine it means for two souls to be "knit" together? What might this feel or look like?
- There have been a wide array of interpretations to this story of David and Jonathan, ranging from platonic love, queer love to a model of deep, loving friendship . Based on the text, what do you imagine is the nature of their love for one another?

SOURCE 3 – GENESIS 24:63-67

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לָשׂוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לִפְנוֹת עָרֶב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה גְמַלִּים בָּאִים: וַתִּשָּׂא רִבְקָה אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרֶא אֶת־יִצְחָק וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמָל: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָעֶבֶד מִי־הָאִישׁ הַלָּזֶה הַהֹלֵךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה לִקְרָאתֵנוּ וַיֹּאמֶר הָעֶבֶד הוּא אֲדֹנִי וַתִּקַּח הַצָּעִיף וַתִּתְכֶּס: וַיְסַפֵּר הָעֶבֶד לְיִצְחָק אֵת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה: וַיְבִאֶהָ יִצְחָק הָאֹהֱלָה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֶּאֱהָבֶהָ וַיִּנָּחֵם יִצְחָק אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ:

(63) And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. (64) Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She descended from the camel (65) and said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" And the servant [Eliezer] said, "That is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. (66) The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. (67) 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.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON NEXT PAGE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In your own words, what happens in this narrative?
- This is the first mention of love in the Torah. Given that context, what do you think this text is trying to say about the meaning and significance of love?
- What do you imagine is happening for Isaac and Rebekah at this moment? Is this love at first sight, Isaac responding to the grief of losing his mother, something else?
- The text tells us that Isaac's love for Rebekah comforts him after his mother's death. What do you think is the difference between parent-child love and romantic love?

SOURCE 4 — "LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT," THE FIVE BOOKS OF MIRIAM: A WOMAN'S COMMENTARY ON THE TORAH, ELLEN FRANKEL

Ellen Frankel (born 1951) is a feminist Jewish pioneer in business and cultural arts. She served as the first woman CEO and Editor-in-Chief of the Jewish Publication Society (JPS).

Rebecca Recounts: What an awful journey it was! After an endless camel trek to reach a home and husband I had never seen, I finally caught a glimpse of my husband-to-be "walking in the field toward evening" (24:63). What immediately struck me was how much older he was than I'd imagined and how bent over, as if he'd been carrying a heavy load all his life. Out of respect for him, I hurried to dismount from my camel, but I was sick at heart.

The Rabbis Offer Their Version: Rebecca is so overcome by fatigue, frayed nerves, and erotic excitement that she falls off her camel. As it is written: "she alighted from her camel" (23:64). Indeed, the Hebrew word - vatipod - literally means "to fall down."

Rebecca Fires Back: Why don't you try spending a few days riding a camel! Anyway, once I'd made sure that this stranger was Isaac, I veiled myself.

SOURCE CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE

Our Mothers Comment: Rebecca acts spontaneously, responding to her own heart. For although she is otherwise spirited and bold, here she restrains herself and behaves with modesty, covering herself before her future husband.

But Rebbeca Demures: Just as I asserted my own will in agreeing to this marriage, so here I asserted myself in meeting Isaac eye-to-eye. That's why Eliezer identified Isaac as his master, not mine. Because in me, Isaac had more than met his match.

Sarah the Ancient One (Isaac's mother) Breaks In: Love did not come easy to Isaac. When he was a child, his half-brother, Ishmael, hated him for dispossessing him. Later, his father undermined their relationship when he almost sacrificed him on Mount Moriah. And I, who had waited ninety barren years for him, did not - could not - love him enough to stop Avraham from leading him off to the slaughter. So what could he know of normal love? How could he trust that his God-intoxicated father would choose a proper wife for him? It was only after marrying Rebecca and bringing her into my tent that Isaac discovered that love can heal as well as wound. As it is written: "Isaac loved her and thus found comfort after his mother's death" (23:67).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What gaps in the story does this midrash fill in? What do we learn about Isaac and Rebekah?
- Why do you think it's important for Sarah to share the family history in explaining Isaac's love?
- The love between Isaac and Rebekah is described as "spontaneous." Do you tend to think that love comes on suddenly or, alternatively, that it develops slowly over time?
- Does this change when thinking about different types of love? (self-love, familial love, romantic love, etc.)

SOURCES THAT DEFINE LOVE

SOURCE 5 — SIFRA KEDOSHIM 4:12 ON VAYIKRA (LEVITICUS) 19:18

THE SIFRA (THE "BOOK") WAS WRITTEN C. 250-350 CE IN TALMUDIC ISRAEL/BABYLON. IT IS A HALAKHIC MIDRASH (LEGAL INTERPRETIVE COMMENTARY) ON THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS; THE IDENTITY OF ITS COMPILER IS A MATTER OF HISTORICAL DEBATE.

"Love your fellow/neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Rabbi Akiba said: "This is the greatest principle of the Torah"

"ואהבת לרעך כמוך" – רבי עקיבא אומר זה כלל גדול בתורה.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does loving yourself connect to loving others?
- Must you love yourself before loving others? Why or why not?
- What might loving ourselves teach us about loving others?

SOURCE 6 — RAMBAM COMMENTARY ON PIRKEI AVOT 1:6

Acquire for yourself a friend (Pirkei Avot 1:6).

וקנה לך חבר.

This uses the language of acquisition rather than saying, "Make for yourself a friend," or "Befriend others." The intention is that a person must acquire a love for themself, so that all of their deeds and actions can be refined through this friend…**as the Mussar masters say, "When you love, do not love according to your traits; but rather love according to the traits of the one you love."....**

זכר אותו בלשון קנייה ולא אמר עשה לך חבר או התחבר לאחרים הכונה בזה שצריך לאדם שיקנה אוהב לעצמו שיתקנו בו מעשיו וכל עניניו ... **כמו שיאמרו בעלי המוסר כשתאהב לא תאהב על מדותיך ואמנם תאהב על מדת אהוביך ...**

SOURCE CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE

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There are three types of love: a love for benefit, a love for enjoyment and a love for virtue. A love for benefit is like the love of two [business] partners …

ג' מינים אוהב תועלת אוהב מנוחה ואוהב מעלה אמנם
אוהב תועלת כאהבת שני השותפים …

A love for enjoyment is of two types - for pleasure and for confidence. Indeed, the love for pleasure is like the love of males and females and similar to it (ie, sexual relations); whereas the love for confidence is when one has someone to whom they can confide their soul. **Nothing is kept from this love - not in action and not in speech. All affairs - the good ones and the disgraceful ones - are shared without fearing that any loss will come with all of this, neither with him nor with anyone else…**

אוהב מנוחה הוא ב' מינים אוהב הנאה ואוהב בטחון אמנם אוהב הנאה כאהבת הזכרים לנקבות וכיוצא בהם. ואמנם אוהב בטחון הוא שיהיה לאדם אוהב תבטח נפשו בו לא ישמר ממנו לא במעשה ולא בדבור ויודיעהו כל עניניו הטוב מהם והמגונה מבלתי שירא ממנו שישיגהו בכל זה חסרון לא אצלו ולא זולתו…

And a love for virtue is when the desire of both of them and their intention is for one thing, and that is the good. And each one wants to be helped by the other in reaching this good for both of them together.

ואוהב מעלה הוא שיהיה תאות שניהם וכונתם לדבר אחד והוא הטוב וירצה כל אחד להעזר בחבירו בהגיע הטוב ההוא לשניהם יחד

SPACE FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

If you'd like use this space to reflect on what you've gathered from the sources above.
You may ask yourself how you expected Jewish sources to define love, did these surprise you or meet your expectations? Has your own understanding of what love is been impacted by these sources? how?

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SOURCES ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

SOURCE 1 — KOHELET (ECCLESIASTES) 4:9-11

טוֹבִים הַשְּׁנַיִם מִן־הָאֶחָד אֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ־לָהֶם שָׂכָר טוֹב בַּעֲמָלָם: כִּי אִם־יִפֹּלוּ הָאֶחָד יָקִים אֶת־חֲבֵרוֹ וְאִילוֹ הָאֶחָד שֶׁיִּפּוֹל וְאֵין שֵׁנִי לַהֲקִימוֹ: גַּם אִם־יִשְׁכְּבוּ שְׁנַיִם וְחַם לָהֶם וּלְאֶחָד אֵיךְ יֵחָם:

Two are better off than one, in that they have greater reward from their efforts. For should they fall, one can raise the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls with no companion to raise them! Further, when two lie together they are warm; but how can one who is alone get warm?

SOURCE 2 — AVOT D'RABBI NATAN 8:3

AVOT D'RABBI NATAN ("FATHERS OF RABBI NATHAN") WAS WRITTEN C.650-950 CE, AND IT PRESENTS A COLLECTION OF MAXIMS OF WISDOM ALONGSIDE EXPLANATIONS AND STORIES.

שיקנה האדם חבר לעצמו שיאכל עמו וישתה עמו ויקרא עמו וישנה עמו ויישן עמו ויגלה לו כל סתריו סתר תורה וסתר דרך ארץ שכשיושבין ועוסקין בתורה וטעה א' מהם הלכה או ראש הפרק או שיאמר על טמא טהור או על טהור טמא ועל אסור מותר ועל מותר אסור **חבירו מחזירו.** ומניין שכשחבירו מחזירו וקורא עמו שיש להם שכר טוב בעמלן שנא' (קהלת י) טובים השנים מן הא' אשר יש להם שכר טוב בעמלם:

A person should acquire a friend to eat together, drink together, study together, go to sleep together, and tell one another all their secrets, both secrets of the Torah and secrets of the ways of the world. For when they sit and engage in Torah together, and one of them makes a mistake in the law, or the division of chapters, or declares an impure thing pure, or a pure thing impure, or a forbidden thing permitted or a permitted thing forbidden, **then they can correct one another**. And how do we know that when they study and correct one another that they will have great reward? For it says (Ecclesiastes 4:9), "Two are better off than one, in that they have greater reward from their efforts."

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What type of relationship is this text describing?
- What does it mean to "correct one another"? How might this apply to different types of contemporary relationships?
- Who in your life holds you accountable for your actions and/or beliefs?
- In what ways do you hold the people in your life accountable for their actions and beliefs?

SOURCE 3 — "WHY IS MODERN LOVE SO DAMN HARD?," ESTHER PEREL (2023)

ESTHER PEREL (BORN 1958) IS A JEWISH BELGIAN-AMERICAN PSYCHOTHERAPIST, KNOWN FOR HER WORK ON HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY.

I want to speak to those of you who view commitment as a loss of self.

The idea that we lose ourselves in the presence of our partner is deeply ingrained in the modern perception of love, particularly in the United States. As almost all of our communal institutions give way to a heightened sense of individualism, we look more frequently to our partner to provide the emotional and physical resources that a village or community used to provide.

Is it any wonder that, tied up in relying on a partner for compassion, reassurance, sexual excitement, financial partnership, etc. that we end up looking to them for identity or, even worse, for self-worth? Combine that with the commodification of love, the increasingly omnipresent "is there somebody better?", and we have a recipe for decreasing the perceived "cost" of love. All the while increasing our expectations on our partnerships, and even adding more to the list, without really understanding what we're asking.

So, what is the solution? How can we commit to another without losing ourselves in trying to meet these vast expectations? How can we be in a fulfilling partnership that also helps us grow as individuals?

Here's a place to start. We can think more clearly about our expectations from a partner. Research shows that people who have more social resources, and more people to talk to about various issues in their lives, do better in marriage. So in what areas do we want to invest with our partners, and in which areas do we need to invest in ourselves and our personal networks?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Perel identifies the pressure that modern love places on a partner, do you agree? What are the potential downsides of placing this type of expectation/responsibility on a romantic partner?
- Do you agree that the role currently fulfilled by partners used to be provided by a broader community? Are there any examples of this that resonate for you?
- How might the meaning and value from other types of relationships be similar to or different from romantic partnership?

SPACE FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

If you'd like use this space to reflect on what you've gathered from the sources above.

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SOURCES ABOUT PARTNERSHIP

SOURCE 1 — BERESHIT (GENESIS) 2:18-22

The Eternal God said, “It is not good for the human to be alone. I will make a fitting helper [ezer k’negdo] for him.” And the Eternal God formed from the earth every living thing of the field, and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the human to see what he would call it —and whatever he called every living thing, that would be its name. And the human gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky and all the wild beasts; but for the human no fitting helper was found. So the Eternal God cast a deep sleep upon the human; and, while he slept, [God] took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And the Eternal God fashioned the rib that [God] had taken from the human into a woman; and [God] brought her to the human. Then the human said, “This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman, for from man was she taken.”

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקוָק אֱלֹקִ-ים לֹא־טוֹב הֱיוֹת
הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ:
וַיִּצֶר יְקוָק אֱלֹקִ-ים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־
חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֵת כָּל־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וַיָּבֵא אֶל־הָאָדָם לִרְאוֹת מַה־יִּקְרָא־
לוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא־לוֹ הָאָדָם נֶפֶשׁ
חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמוֹ: וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שֵׁמוֹת
לְכָל־הַבְּהֵמָה וּלְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְכֹל
חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וּלְאָדָם לֹא־מָצָא עֵזֶר
כְּנֶגְדּוֹ: וַיַּפֵּל יְקוָק אֱלֹקִ-ים תַּרְדֵּמָה
עַל־הָאָדָם וַיִּישָׁן וַיִּקַּח אַחַת
מִצַּלְעֹתָיו וַיִּסְגֹּר בָּשָׂר תַּחְתֶּנָּה: וַיִּבֶן
יְקוָק אֱלֹקִ-ים אֶת־הַצֵּלָע אֲשֶׁר־לָקַח
מִן־הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה וַיְבִאֶהָ אֶל־הָאָדָם:
וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הַפַּעַם עֶצֶם
מֵעֲצָמַי וּבָשָׂר מִבְּשָׂרִי לְזֹאת יִקָּרֵא
אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לֻקֳחָה־זֹּאת:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON NEXT PAGE

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How would you summarize what is happening in this source?
- Based on this text, how do you understand what it means for a person to be a "fitting helper" (ezer k'negdo)?
- What seems to be the role of the man? The role of a woman? What message(s) does this source send about the relationship between men and women?
- What, if anything, resonates with or troubles you about this depiction of partnership?

SOURCE 2 — RASHI ON BERESHIT 2:18

"A fitting helper": If he merits it, then [she is] a helpmate, if he does not merit, then [she is] opposite him, to fight him.

עזר כנגדו - זכה עזר, לא זכה כנגדו להלחם

SOURCE 3 — "THE MISSING PIECE," SHEL SILVERSTEIN (1976)

SHEL SILVERSTEIN (SHELDON ALLAN SILVERSTEIN) WAS A JEWISH AMERICAN WRITER, POET, CARTOONIST, SINGER-SONGWRITER, MUSICIAN, AND PLAYWRIGHT FROM CHICAGO, ILLINOIS (1930-1999).

"Are you anybody else's missing piece?"
"Not that I know of."
"Well, maybe you want to be your own piece?"
"I can be someone's and still my own."

— Shel Silverstein, The Missing Piece

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON NEXT PAGE

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In a sentence, how does Rashi's commentary depict partnership? How does Silverstein's illustration depict partnership?
- What do you think it means to either "merit" a partner or to be "opposite him, to fight him"? Concretely, what might each of these partnerships look like?
- Is it possible to be both "your own" and "someone else's"? Why or why not?
- How do you balance the value and importance of both relationships and independence? To what extent do you feel independent vs. reliant on relationships?

SOURCE 4 — BABYLONIAN TALMUD KETUBOT 62B

כי הא דרב רחומי הוה שכיח קמיה דרבא במחוזא הוה רגיל דהוה אתי לביתיה כל מעלי יומא דכיפורי יומא חד משכתיה שמעתא הוה מסכיא דביתהו השתא אתי השתא אתי לא אתא חלש דעתה אחית דמעתא מעינה הוה יתיב באיגרא אפחית איגרא מתותיה ונח נפשיה

Rav Rehumi used to learn in Rava's yeshiva [place of study] in the town of Mahoza. He was accustomed to coming home every Yom Kippur eve. One day he lost himself in his learning. His wife was awaiting him: "Now he's coming, now he's coming," she thought.
He did not come. She grew weak.
She let a tear fall from her eye.
At that moment Rav Rehumi was sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed underneath him and he fell to his death.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do you think Rehumi didn't come home?
- How do you interpret his character in the story? (ex: unaware, singularly dedicated to learning, careless, etc?)
- Why do you think the punishment was so great?
- What lessons about responsibility and agreements within partnerships might we learn from this story?

SOURCE 5 — "BELOVED RABBI," A BRIDE FOR ONE NIGHT (COMMENTARY IN RESPONSE TO KETUBOT 62B), DR. RUTH CALDERON

DR. RUTH CALDERON IS A FORMER MEMBER OF THE ISRAELI KNESSET (PARLIAMENT), AND IS AN ADVOCATE, EDUCATOR, AND WRITER WHO HAS PROMOTED THE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL JEWISH TEXTS BY JEWS OUTSIDE OF THE ORTHODOX COMMUNITY.

If Rav Rehumi achieved any fame, it is thanks to his wife, and if he acquired a reputation, it is as a tragic hero. His character seems to be a pun on his unique, extraordinary name: Rehumi in Aramaic means "love" and can be interpreted as either "loving" or "beloved." Rehumi's wife loved him. As such, it is she who renders his name appropriate for him—she makes him "beloved." Though nameless, and though described sparingly, she emerges as a character thanks to the skill of an anonymous master storyteller. Her great love enables her to overlook her husband's failings, though she is not blind to them…I view him as a man who simply did not know what love is. The only area in which he was not mediocre was in his loving wife's estimation. Only through her eyes was he deserving of his name. She allowed him to trample on her soul and, through this tragic story, to achieve immortality.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think about Calderon's estimation of Rav Rehumi's wife that she allowed him to "trample on her soul"? How would you describe the wife's agency in this story?
- How would you describe the wife's agency in this story?
- Have you ever felt emotionally responsible for another person? What was that experience like for you?

SPACE FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

If you'd like use this space to reflect on what you've gathered from the sources above.
You may ask yourself how you expected Jewish sources to define partnership, did these surprise you or meet your expectations? Have these sources impacted how you think about partnership? How?