

What is love really all about? Are there different kinds of love? How much does giving have to do with love? How much of love is about yourself, how much is about others, and, what do fish have to do with it?!

Beginning with the earliest stories in the Torah, Judaism emphasizes the importance of finding someone to love and holding on to that relationship. In later biblical writings, a romantic notion of love and relationship is highlighted, even used allegorically to symbolize the relationship between the Jewish people and God. In this episode, Hanan and his parents discuss the meaning of real love and how to find it. Together they begin a conversation which ultimately leads Hanan to the realization that real love has to do with the act of giving rather than a calculation of what one can get out of the relationship.

① It’s Not About You

One of the first concepts Hanan’s mother and father introduce is the idea that what we think of as love for another person may in actuality be a preoccupation with ourselves. While focusing on yourself is not necessarily bad, Hanan’s parents challenge him to decide whether the relationship Hanan is describing is really love. Using the midrash about fish love as their model, they push him to start thinking about the lesson of the Kotzker rabbi, Menachem Mendel Morgenstern (1787-1859, Poland). While this teaching about love is one of his best known, ironically he chose to live in near seclusion for the last twenty years of his life.

You don’t love fish, ... You love yourself!

1. Why is the surface feeling of joy around the fulfillment of wants and desires what some people understand as love?
2. Hanan’s parents point out that focusing on one’s own needs is not what love is about. Are they correct? If so, why?
3. In your opinion, what does love include? When you begin thinking about what love should include, do you find yourself starting to think more about what you are getting out of the relationship? If so, what does that mean?

Hanan defends himself by saying the following:

HANAN: Look...it’s complicated...I’m looking for something else...my life is going in a different direction. It’s nobody’s fault...I just always had a certain picture in my mind, of what I want out of my life and what I want in a relationship...and honestly, what I think I really need, is to find myself, you know, I need to spend a little time...focusing on me right now.

4. Are there points in your life when you have said or felt similar things?
5. While Hanan’s parents tell him the focus on himself is why he is having a hard time achieving love, is there any legitimacy to what Hanan says? Are there times in life when focusing on oneself might be helpful? When does it get in the way?
6. When have you found that letting go of your ego, and focusing on the other person, has enhanced a relationship?

② To Love is to Give

Hanan’s mother emphasizes a second message. She explains a concept to Hanan which is rooted in Jewish text when she says:

MOMMY: If you’re giving to the other person, expecting something in return, that’s not love. That’s a business deal. I give you this, you give me that...

Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach Duran, also known as The Rashbatz (14th - 15th century, Spain), taught a similar message:

Anyone who establishes a friendship for access to power, money, or sexual relations; when these ends are not attainable, the friendship ceases...love that is not dependent on selfish ends is true love of the other person since there is no intended end.

*Magen Avot – abridged and adapted translation –
prepared by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein for
the United Synagogue Conservative Yeshiva*

1. How hard is it to give, in the way Hanan’s mother and The Rashbatz describe, without expectations or worries — just genuine giving?

When you worry about what you will receive from giving, your ego is still involved in the relationship. Once you can move away from that, it is easier to relate to Hanan’s mother’s point:

MOMMY: Love is not a means to an end Hanan... It’s the end itself.

as well as Hanan’s father’s comment:

DADDY: If you truly GIVE...not in order to receive, not in exchange, or with expectations, or because you’re worried you’re going to be punished...if you SIMPLY GIVE in order to GIVE... because you truly WANT to give...something inside of YOU WANTS to GIVE...then...**the giving itself IS your reward...**

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2. How much of giving is rooted in self interest, expecting something in return? When are the times you felt you were able to give without it feeling conditional? What do you think giving has to do with love?

One of the most famous relational Jewish philosophers, Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995, France), said it this way:

Love exists without worrying about being loved.
Is it Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Lévinas, pg. 143

3. What are the similarities between what Hanan's parents are saying and what Lévinas says?

③ God Love

And, now for the hard question. If, as Hanan's parents teach him, love is about letting go of one's ego, being able to give without worrying about what will come in return, how does that affect one's understanding of love for God? Jewish philosophers, commentators, and mystics through the ages have always maintained that love of God – no matter what your theology – is a challenging, but important aspect of Jewish life.

Deuteronomy commands that:

You shall Love Adonai your God with all your heart, all your soul,
all your being.
Deuteronomy 6:5

1. If you have a belief in God, do you feel that love for God, like love between people, is equally dependent on giving?
2. Is it harder to feel love toward God — without expectation — than toward others?

The sages interpret "You shall love Adonai your God" to mean:

You cause the name of Adonai to be beloved
Sifre, Deuteronomy 32

Contemporary commentators explain that this means loving God through your actions. Love for God can be shown and even intensified by what you give and what you do.

3. When thinking about love for God, what kind of giving feels most sincere?
4. How would you describe the difference between fish love and real love?

