

What Does Judaism Say About Love?

Independent

Love is defined in Hebrew as *ahavah*, which is rooted in the Aramaic word *hav* and literally translates as “give.” Rather than translate *B’reisheet*, the first words of the Torah, as “in the beginning,” one can say “in the first gift.” Creation originated in the Creator’s will to give. We refer to the nature of this gifting as love because it involves not only giving of oneself, but also stepping back to enable the existence and flourishing of the other. God thus models what love entails: selfless gifting accompanied by withdrawal to enable the other to emerge. Therefore, the ancient rabbis defined authentic love as not contingent on any factor because if it is, and then that factor is gone, so is love. But romantic love does have contingencies. It requires compatibility and trust because it involves intimacy. The Talmud admonishes, “A man should never marry off his daughter but to the one whom she finds favorable.” Is romantic love then a step down from altruistic love? Not at all. It is rather a step into the inner sanctum of love, a sampling of the World to Come, where love is not merely a state of grace but a state of bliss.

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Humanist

What is love? An emotion? Is it defined by what it is not? The opposite of hate? Like the theological challenge of defining God, does love defy being pinned down? Perhaps the most familiar references to love in our tradition come from two verses: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” (Leviticus 19:18) and “You shall love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might,” (Deuteronomy 6:5). I have always been intrigued by the idea that love could be mandated. I thought true love was voluntary, from the heart. Rashi, the 12th-century commentator, seems to have understood my problem. He distinguished between acting out of fear and acting out of love. Fear may induce basic obedience, but it won’t build loyalty. Love, on the other hand, will be met with love and a readiness to give back even more in return.

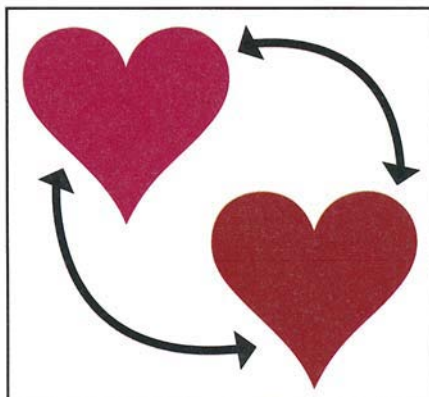
For Rashi, “love your God” meant “performing commandments out of love.”

What matters is how we carry ourselves, how we treat others, how we act with loving intentions. The mandate isn’t necessarily a mandate to love God. In fact, God doesn’t even need to be part of the equation and is conspicuously absent in the instruction to love our neighbor as ourself.

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Renewal

The Torah commands: Love God “with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might,” “love the stranger” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” You are



God created the world because love needs another to love.

asked to receive God’s love in the form of Torah, community, history and the wonders of nature. These commandments constitute the most simple and the most complicated challenge of living a holy life. Love is the “measure” for my Jewish practice. Every mitzvah I keep, every prayer I say, is done and said with the intention of adding more love to this world, opening my heart, connecting myself to the divine essence that is hidden in all things. Psalm 34 asks, “Who is the one with a passion for life, loving every day and seeing the good?” Jewish wisdom ignites my passion

for life, reminds me to pay attention to the quality of my loving every day and points me toward the essential goodness of being. Learning to love and be loved is the most rigorous spiritual path there is. Every day, we must ask, “How do we love God and receive God’s love through this world?”

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Reconstructionist

For romantic love, see *Song of Songs*. But the word love in Torah is primarily an activist commandment: Love your neighbor and the stranger; love God. Even to love God (says *Talmud Yoma* 26a) means we should behave divinely toward others, “making God beloved, through us.” And Maimonides brought an almost ecological consciousness to loving the One in the Mishneh Torah: “When we study God’s many wondrous works and creations, and thus comprehend God’s infinite wisdom, immediately we love, and praise.” The prophets warn us to pair every prayer with acts of love. As 20th-century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber taught: “Love of the Creator and love of that which God has created, are finally one and the same.”

Still, can feelings of love really be commanded? In the rabbinic mind, these mitzvot demand actions. Here we should emulate our Unitarian-Universalist cousins, whose “Stand on the Side of Love” campaign takes the logic of love to its fullest by organizing for universal health coverage, same-sex marriage equality, caring for creation and more. In short: Love the stranger, whether documented or undocumented. Love your neighbor, regardless of whom they love in turn. And through these loving actions, you love God.

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Reform

The Jewish expression of love is a triangle: love of self, love of another and love of God. Leviticus 19:18 teaches us, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” To love another, one has to first feel and express love for

oneself. We all know that this is not always easy to achieve, but it is vital. Finally, a loving relationship is seen as Jewish when the partners acknowledge, value and name that relationship as holy. Two people in love see the divine. Think of Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* singing, “To love another person is to see the face of God.” Ultimately, our understanding of God informs how we love ourselves and another. We must uphold the Jewish value of *b’tzelem elohim*, that we are created in the image of God. In so doing, we continuously strive to see that holy essence in ourselves and in others. With holiness as that measure for how we treat, care for and love each other, we can build truly loving relationships.

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Conservative

The Bible suggests that loving relationships can be either sexual or platonic. The *Song of Songs* vividly describes sexual love. It is unique in the Bible because its purpose is to describe the power of love between men and women. Talmudic rabbis understood the *Song of Songs* to be an allegory: It used a man and a woman to explain the love between God and the Jewish people and suggests the high regard Judaism has for male-female love and sexuality. The Bible also offers two images of platonic love: one between Ruth and Naomi and one between Jonathan and David. The circumstances around both are complicated, but nevertheless demonstrate a strong, sincere bond. Naomi was Ruth’s mother-in-law, a relationship that is not always associated with love. To make matters worse, Ruth was from Moab, an enemy of ancient Israel. Still, the women’s relationship flourished after Ruth’s husband died. David and Jonathan’s friendship survived even greater tension. Jonathan, King Saul’s son, was assumed to be the heir to the throne, while David, the leading soldier in Saul’s army, was the popular choice to become king. Our texts teach us that love has multiple meanings and comes in multiple forms.

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Modern Orthodox

“Love makes the world go round”—that is Jewish wisdom. According to Kabbalah,

God created the world because love needs another to love. Three times a day, traditional Jews say in the Ashrei prayer: “God is good to all [in the world because] God’s mother love extends to all God’s creatures” (Psalms 145:9). So consuming is God’s love that Hashem brings a flood to wash out evil and start again. But Hashem also promises never to do that again and instead enters into a covenant to accept humans as they are. With all of their flaws, God partners with humans to build a perfect world (*tikkun olam*). We are called to return God’s love. Says the Torah: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.” All commandments and rituals are meant to express our love for Hashem. In the Jewish ideal, every person finds the unique one destined for him/her to love totally (body, emotion, mind) to become



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fully human and together create and nurture more life. Such a love can mature through life—and beyond. “Love is stronger than death” (*Song of Songs* 8:6).

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Sephardi

Judaism acknowledges that love—both of God and our fellow human beings—is a beautiful part of life that plays an important role in our emotional, spiritual and intellectual development. The Bible famously describes love as an extraordinarily power-

ful force that is “stronger than death.” That being said, love, especially of the romantic variety, is not without its limitations and pitfalls. Western culture, in particular, has a tendency to exaggerate the significance of romantic love, portraying it as the be all and end all of happiness. I believe that the skyrocketing divorce rates are a sign not of more failing marriages but of the prevalence of unrealistic expectations about love that can only lead to disillusionment and frustration. This is why my favorite Biblical verse about marriage is in Ecclesiastes: “Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your futile life....” In other words, enjoy love for what it is worth, but do not expect it to provide you with more satisfaction or fulfillment than it can. Otherwise, you will inevitably find yourself disappointed.

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Chabad

Love is the gravity that pulls the universe together. Hatred is the anti-matter that rips it apart. Love between a man and woman is life’s loftiest goal. But it must be accompanied by lust. The tenth commandment orders a man not to covet his neighbor’s wife, which, by clear implication, means he should be coveting his own. Erotic love is most fully expressed in the *Song of Songs*. Interestingly, the man and woman are never named. We do not know if they are even married. This teaches us that love best flourishes when it is both mysterious and sinful. How can marriage, a legal institution based on familiarity, attain these twin attributes? Having a monthly period of sexual separation in which husband and wife are forbidden to each other heightens, in the illicit physical period, the role of conversation in which the inner and ever-deeper layers of human personality are slowly manifest. Love between a man and woman is even more exalted than the unbreakable bond between parent and child, which is why G-d’s relationships with the Jewish people, which encompasses both aspects, is ultimately described as a marriage. Romantic love embodies choice, whereas genetic love, however strong, is compelled by a blood relationship. The Jewish people are, therefore, G-d’s chosen.

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