

HOW DO WE LOVE?

A GUIDED CONVERSATION



WELCOME

Before we begin, let's review the brit—the covenant—that animates our time together:

1. **Accountability:** I'll show up to our agreed-upon meetings. I'll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone's time.
2. **Presence:** When we're together, I'll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
3. **Double Confidentiality:** What I hear and say stays here. If I see another group member in a different context, I will not bring up anything they said here unless they do first.
4. **Vulnerability:** I'll stretch myself to be as open and honest as possible with my perspectives and experiences in order to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks as well.
5. **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
6. **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight:** I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to "solve their problem." No advice unless it's asked.
7. **Stepping Up & Stepping Back:** I understand that some of us are natural talkers while others are quieter. I'll pay attention to how much I am contributing, and will seek to balance how much I am talking with how much I'm listening.
8. **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of big questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
9. **Ownership:** This is our community to create. While we have guidelines and suggestions, it is ours to shape and form. We will get out of it what we put into it.

ASK & SHARE

Welcome to our conversation. Let's begin by looking at some images. Below are a few photos; each one can prompt you to think about love in some way. There are larger versions of each photo in the Appendix. Take a moment to look at the pictures, and to consider:

- What does each picture tell you about love?
- Which images speak to you?
- Which images challenge you?

Take a few moments to look at the pictures, and then we'll share our responses in no more than a sentence or two. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.



LEARN

bell hooks—who spells her name in lowercase in order to focus attention on her message, rather than herself—is a feminist scholar who has written prolifically on race, gender, education, and the media. In 2000, she published a book called *All About Love: New Visions*. Please read this excerpt, below, out loud in pairs or as a group.

The vast majority of books about love work hard to avoid giving clear definitions. In the introduction to Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of Love*, she declares, "Love is the great intangible." A few sentences down from this she suggests: "Everyone admits that love is wonderful and necessary, yet no one can agree on what it is." Coyly, she adds, "We use the word love in such a sloppy way that it can mean almost nothing or absolutely everything."

I spent years searching for a meaningful definition of the word "love," and was deeply relieved when I found one in the psychiatrist M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*. Echoing the work of Erich Fromm, he defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." Explaining further, he continues: "... Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action..."

When we understand love as the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth, it becomes clear that we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive.... It took me a long time to recognize that while I wanted to know love, I was afraid to be truly intimate. Many of us choose relationships of affection and care that will never become loving because they feel safer.

To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility. We are often taught we have no control over our "feelings." Yet most of us accept that we choose our actions, that intention and will inform what we do. We also accept that our actions have consequences. To think of actions shaping feelings is one way we rid ourselves of conventionally accepted assumptions such as that parents love their children, or that one simply "falls" in love without exercising will or choice, that there are such things as "crimes of passion," i.e. he killed her because he loved her so much. If we were constantly remembering that love is as love does, we would not use the word in a way that devalues and degrades its meaning. When we are loving we openly and honestly express care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- How would you paraphrase hooks' preferred definition of love?
- What does hooks suggest changes in our thinking about love when it's defined as an action, not a feeling?
- How does hooks distinguish between "relationships of affection and care" and loving relationships? What might that difference look like in real life?
- Does hooks' definition only apply to romantic relationships? Why or why not?

Reflective Questions

- When was a time that you gave or received love in the way that hooks describes?
- Does Peck's use of the phrase "spiritual growth" speak to you? Why or why not? If not, are there ways that you might reformulate his definition that would speak to you?
- Would accepting this definition of love change the way you think about your own relationships? Why or why not?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Consider the following biblical texts, which touch on the importance of love:

Love your neighbor as yourself: I am Adonai.
--Leviticus 19:18

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean to love another as oneself? What does this look like according to hooks' definition of love?
- Have you ever succeeded in doing this? What did that look like?
- Why do you think the second half of the verse is, "I am Adonai"?

You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These instructions with which I command you this day will be upon your heart. Teach them to your children. Speak of them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

--Deuteronomy 6:5-9

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways might we think about the commandment to love God through hooks' definition of love?
- How does this text tell us that we should enact the act of loving God?
- Does this, then, teach us something about loving in general?
- Do you find that loving God (whatever that might mean to you) is easier or harder than loving the people in your life? Than loving your neighbor? Than loving the stranger?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

DO

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider.

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one action you might take, or practice you might try, before we meet next time, based on what you're taking from this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to taking that action? How can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to do so?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.

Appendix: Images in Larger Sizes









The Union for Reform Judaism leads the largest and most diverse Jewish movement in North America. We strengthen communities that connect people to Jewish life. Visit <https://urj.org/> for more information.



Ask Big Questions was developed, launched, and scaled by Hillel International: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. Ask Big Questions is a national initiative to help people deepen understanding, strengthen community, and build trust through reflective conversation. Visit AskBigQuestions.org to learn more.

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