

Guide for Your Group

WELCOME

Ask each person to introduce themselves and to share with the group a part of their day or week they would like to bring with them as they begin this conversation, and/or a part of their day or week they would like to leave behind.

As we gather in our Sh'ma group, may we honor the values of our Jewish tradition. May we bring compassion, insight, and wisdom to our learning and conversation. May we recognize the Divine Image in one another, and let that awareness be reflected in our words and actions.

ברוך אתה יי, חונן הדעת

Baruch atah Adonai chonein ha'daat.

Blessed are You, Adonai,
who grants us wisdom and awareness.

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

- **Accountability:** I'll show up to our agreed upon times. I'll let the guide(s) know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone's time.
- **Presence:** When we're together, I'll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offers many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
- **Double Confidentiality:** I'll maintain complete confidentiality. What I hear and say stays here. It means that even when I see group members in another context, such as at Temple or in the neighborhood, I will not initiate a conversation on what has been shared.
- **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.
- **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
- **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight:** I will give everybody the gift of true attention without trying to "solve their problem." No advice unless it's asked.
- **Listening:** I understand that some of us are talkers, while some of us are quieter. I'll be aware not to dominate discussions and to balance how much I'm talking with how much I'm listening.
- **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.
- **Ownership:** This is our Sh'ma Group. 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.

ABOUT OUR LEARNING MATERIALS: NISH'MA

On the following page you will find three takes on a passage of *Mishnah* that teaches we are all descended from the same person, the original Adam. This page is constructed like the Talmud—the central text in the center and various commentary surrounding it. We have chosen this learning material (NiSh'ma) because it explores relevant topics, and because we hope it will generate meaningful dialogue where the different perspectives within your Sh'ma group can be heard and appreciated. NiSh'ma is a project of The Forward magazine. If you have any feedback or questions about NiSh'ma, please let us know at AHorn@tedallas.org.

In February we can feel bombarded by images of hearts, visual representations of "love". The materials this month explore how in Jewish life love is to be affirmed and celebrated not just once a year but in manifold ways, all the time. (Rabbi Robbins and Cantor Glikin are students of Dr. Melila Hellner-Eshed and hope you will love her teaching as much as they do!) Here's a link if you'd like to learn more about this topic <https://forward.com/shma-now/ahava/?attribution=articles-article-listing-13-headline>

NiSh'ma



Melila Hellner-Eshed: The choice of the sages to read the Song of Songs as an allegory of the relationship between the congregation of Israel and God opened the floodgates for commentary, poetry, midrash, mystical insights, and contemporary writing on each and every verse. The language of *Shir HaShirim* is the language

of lovers, with its emotional landscapes of desire, longing, fantasy, ecstasy, jealousy, missed opportunities, bitter surprises, and moments of bliss. Reading the relationship of God and the people Israel through *Shir HaShirim* means favoring the relationship of lovers over that of parent and child or master and servant.

The rabbis of the Zohar read *Shir HaShirim* as the choicest of all songs, the love language that tells the story of past, present, and future. They even dare to read the word, “love,” “*ahava*,” (אהבה) as the inner mystery of the divine name YHVH (יהוה).

While our love relationships change over time and we are alive for but a fleeting moment, this verse in the concluding chapter of the Song of Songs speaks about the endurance of love: “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.” (8:7) Love is an inner constant flame, a *ner tamid*, at the heart of existence and of religious experience. And although the waters of time will come and go in a stormy or peaceful manner, the presence of love will prevail.

I’m grateful that my tradition has given me this passionate lexicon with which to explore my relationship with God, and to know and feel fully that love will endure.

Melila Hellner-Eshed teaches Zohar and Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University and is a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. She is also on faculty of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.



Andrew Ramer: In my 20s, *Shir HaShirim* was my favorite book in the *Tanach* — that short anthology of erotic verses that Rabbi Akiva called the Holy of Holies. He and his fellow sages read the Song of Songs as an allegory of the relationship between the people Israel and God. In their reading, Israel is the woman and God is the man. The woman is chasing a man, a societal inversion, that made the book work for me as a newly out gay man. And, years later, Rabbi Julia Watts Belser invited readers to experience this questing woman as God and the pursued man as God’s beloved, which would have been restorative had I come to it sooner.

Just before we read the verse, “Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it,” we read this about love: “Its darts are darts of fire, a blazing flame...”

Those words and images — hot and fiery — were of my youth. But I am in my 60s now, and the love language of my relationship with God isn’t a dart of fire, a *ner tamid*, or even the flickering flame of a single candle on my meditation altar. Age has brought a constancy to me of presence, of godness, that I could not have imagined earlier. My love in and with God is liquid: a bubbling spring, a brook flowing softly over mossy rocks in a forest of old-growth trees — not a Ground of Being, but an Ocean of Being, a Oneness that shifts, changes, and enlivens the me who is, while still alive, mostly water myself. And I find myself drawn to these words instead: “Eat, lovers, and drink: Drink deep of love.” (Song of Songs 5:1)

Andrew Ramer is the author of *Torah Told Different: Stories for a Pan/Poly/Post-Denominational World* and of *Queering the Text: Biblical, Medieval, and Modern Jewish Stories*. His back yard is a large urban lake. He can be reached at andrewramer.com.



Matthew Zapruder: I was immediately struck by the word “quench” in this verse. The quote seems to be saying, don’t worry, no matter how many “waters” and “floods” come, they will never drown out love. The flame of love will survive. As Melila Hellner-Eshed writes in her wise commentary, love is a *ner tamid* (constant flame). So, love is to be preserved and quenched; it is not what we want.

What’s a little strange, though, is that, normally, to quench means both to drink until one is no longer thirsty or to extinguish with water. Each of those meanings implies the elimination of a problem (thirst, something burning). So, when I try to follow the metaphor literally, it seems peculiar. To counter to the meaning of the quote. To “quench” love makes it seem as though love is a problem, like a terrible thirst, or a burning house.

But maybe the word “quench” is exactly right because it gets at a far less sentimental, wiser idea of love. June Carter, in the song “Ring of Fire,” about her devastating and undeniable passion for Johnny Cash, wrote that love is a burning thing and makes a fiery ring. The song is one of the great portrayals of love because it communicates the ambiguity of desire — our simultaneous wish and need to quench and also to stoke our love. This may be a true for religious passion, which, as we know from history and the present, can be both immensely sustaining and profoundly dangerous. As usual, the sages continue to offer wise instruction.

Matthew Zapruder is the author of four books of poetry and *Why Poetry*, a book of prose about poetry, forthcoming from Ecco/Harper Collins. An associate professor in the MFA program at Saint Mary’s College of California, he is the 2016-2017 editor of the poetry column for the *New York Times Magazine*. He lives in Oakland, Calif.

“Love is as fierce
as death.”

(Song of Songs 8:6)

Reflective Questions

1. What was your initial understanding of the central text? What did you understand differently after reading/discussing the commentaries?
2. Which passage in the commentaries resonated with you—and why? Which passage was most challenging to you, and why?
3. What experiences have you encountered that illustrate OR amplify OR contradict something taught on the page?