1. WELCOME

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

- **Accountability:** I’ll show up for eight meetings over the next eight months. Or I’ll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone’s time. Which means that meetings will start and end on time, no matter how good the schmoozing.
- **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.
- **Double Confidentiality:** I’ll maintain complete confidentiality. What I hear and say stays here. That means that even when I see group member in another context, like at Central or in the neighborhood, I won’t bring up what has been shared in our group unless you open the conversation.
- **Vulnerability:** I’ll stretch myself to be as open and honest as I can with my perspectives and experiences to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks, too.
- **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 each person 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 and some of us are quieter, so I’ll be aware to not dominate discussions or always leave the weight of it to others.
• **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of 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 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.

2. **ASK AND 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.
3. LEARN

Love is a powerful topic for a lot of us. It’s both deeply personal, cutting to the heart of our most intimate relationships, and extremely public, as we’ve seen most recently in the fight for marriage equality. It touches a fundamental part of our humanity; “Love is as fierce as death,” cries the Song of Songs (8:6). But, at the same time, as Psalms (89:3) notes, “the world is built on love.” It often serves as the fuel that builds and sustains families and communities of many kinds.

Of course, there are a lot of different kinds of love, and a lot of different ways that loving others can impact us. Sometimes love can make us vulnerable in ways that can be terrifying. Sometimes even the most secure of relationships can demand difficult, even painful work. Sometimes it can be confusing to know if a relationship is one that is truly loving, or if it is based on false illusions about the other person (or mutually false illusions), unhealthy codependence, obsession, superficial infatuation, or something else.

So it makes sense to ask: How do we love? How do we think about love, and what does it look like on the ground? What assumptions do we make about the acts of giving and receiving love, and how do those assumptions impact our lives?

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 passage, 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?

In what ways do you give love to those in your life?

When do you find it hard to love?

### 4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions look through a Jewish lens? Here are some texts—several from the Bible, and a more contemporary reading on a Torah verse—to consider. You need not discuss all of the texts; feel free to choose those that speak to you. These texts are merely tools for reflecting on your own stories and experiences. Please use them in a way that organically continues or deepens the conversation you have been having so far.

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

- 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”?

The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I Adonai am your God.
--Leviticus 19:34

- What does the commandment to love the stranger as yourself entail? How is this act of loving the same as, or different from, the commandment to love one’s neighbor?
- Why do you think this was given as a separate commandment?
- How does this act of loving connect to the fact that we were strangers in Egypt?
- Is this kind of loving easier or harder than the one commanded in the first text? Is it reasonable for God to command humans to love one another?
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

- 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 who dwells among you?

These two texts appear at different points in the story chronicled in the Books of Samuel; in the first, David meets Jonathan, Saul’s son, for the first time; in the second, David learns of Jonathan’s death in battle.

When [David] finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan’s soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved [David] as himself/his own soul. Saul took him into his service that day and would not let him return to his father’s house. Jonathan and David made a covenant, because [Jonathan] loved him as himself/his own soul. Jonathan took off his cloak and gave them to David, together with his sword, bow, and belt.

--1 Samuel 18:1-4

How have the great ones fallen in battle; Jonathan, slain on your heights! I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan. You were very dear to me. Your love was wonderful to me, more than the love of women.

--2 Samuel 1:25-26

- In what ways does the love between David and Jonathan manifest?
• How does this relationship measure against hooks’ definition?
• Have you ever experienced a connection of the sort described in these texts? If so, how was it similar to or different from other forms of love in your life?

The biblical word for sex is ya-da, knowing someone in the fullest sense of the word – respecting and caring for someone in a physical and spiritual way.
-- Rabbi Roland B. Gittelson, Little Lower than the Angels

• How does Rabbi Gittelson’s reading of what yada means relate to the conversation we’ve been having so far?
• Does the type of knowing obtained through sexuality transfer into other realms of knowing or loving another person? Or vice-versa?
• In what ways do we have to know someone in order to love them? In what ways do we have to love someone in order to know them?

5. DO

The act of loving—loving in genuine ways that foster the wholeness of all involved, and making our selves vulnerable to do so—can push us to grow in ways that aren’t always easy. But when we enter it fully, it can help to help us to manifest powerful things in this world. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel suggested that “true love of man is clandestine love of God,” and the philosopher Martin Buber argued that the one “who loves brings God and the world together.” Perhaps the work of loving one another here on Earth are, in their own way, a path to serving and even perhaps encountering the divine.

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 thing you want to change in your life based on this conversation?
• What’s one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
• What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions.
Thank you for being part of this conversation. Please join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.

Central Synagogue works tirelessly toward a world in which Judaism is central to the lives of Jews everywhere and is a profound and positive force for humanity. We are relentless in our pursuit of that goal — constantly evolving and always seeking new ways to be "more excellent." We reach far beyond the walls of our synagogue to learn, worship, serve, and continually redefine what it means to be Jewish today.

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APPENDIX: IMAGES IN LARGER SIZES