



Judaism is About Love

Study Guide

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Chapter 1: We Are Loved

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

In this first chapter, we explore two radical and potentially transformative ideas: 1) that God loves us; and 2) that we are infinitely valuable. I argue that God loves us not because of anything we do, but simply because we are created in God's image. We are always already loved by God. So a religious life is not about earning God's love but about striving to live up to it. Similarly, we are infinitely valuable not because of what we do or accomplish, but simply because we are created in the image of God. We are always already infinitely valuable. A religious life is not about earning our worth but about striving to live up to it. There is no need to compare ourselves to others: we are loved, and so too is every other human being on the face of the earth; and we matter, and so too does every other human being on the face of the earth. As you work through this chapter and study the sources provided here, consider how our lives might be different if we truly took these teachings to heart.

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. What's your gut response to the statement, "God loves you"?
2. What is your relationship to the word "grace"?



3. What, if anything, have you been taught about why God created the world? What, if anything, is your personal theology about creation?
4. Does gratitude to God make sense within your theology? Is the God you do—or don't—believe in a Being to Whom you can feel gratitude?

III. Sources and excerpts

1. Genesis 9:6

Whoever sheds the blood of the human being, by the human being will their blood be shed; for in God's image did God make the human being.

2. Genesis 1:27

And God created the human being in God's image; male and female [God] created them.

3. Genesis 5:1

This is the book of the generations of Adam, on the day God created Adam, with the semblance of God God made him.

4. Mishnah Avot 3:14

[Rabbi Akiva] used to say: Beloved is the human being, for he was created in the image of God. Even more beloved is [the human being], for it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God, as Scripture says, "For in God's image did God make the human being" (Genesis 9:6).

- *Rabbi Akiva references Genesis 9:6 to demonstrate that God loves humanity. Compare that verse to Genesis 1:27 and 5:1. How does Genesis 9:6 differ from the other two?*



- *Why do you think Rabbi Akiva chooses Genesis 9:6, which specifically mentions the prohibition against shedding blood, over the other verses? What might this choice tell us about how Rabbi Akiva wants us to understand God's love for humanity?*
- *What do you think Rabbi Akiva means when he says it's "even more beloved" that God tells the human being that God loves them?*

5. Judaism is About Love, p. 23

We are loved. We are loved, Judaism teaches, because God loves us. Not because of anything we have done or accomplished, but simply because we are created in God's image.... God's love is not something we earn, but rather something we (ought to) strive to live up to. This is a good definition of Judaism's vision of the spiritual life: the attempt to live up to God's love.

- *Do these statements about God differ from ones you have heard in Jewish settings, and if so, how?*
- *How do these statements about God's love for us resonate with you?*

6. Judaism is About Love, p. 34

Just as no human being can confer God's love upon us, so also can no human being take it away. And just as no human being can bestow our worth upon us, no human being can ultimately take it away. We can be attacked or assaulted, humiliated or betrayed—and those crimes can leave intense scars, both physical and psychological—but no abusive parent or teacher, no political power, no torturer or interrogator, can ever strip us of our worth. No matter what happens to us, regardless of what we accomplish or are forced to endure, we matter, and we are loved.



IV. Group discussion questions

1. How is this theology resonant or dissonant with your own conception of God at this juncture in your life?
2. Has the way you thought about God's love changed in the course of reading this chapter? How so?
3. How might your outlook and behavior be different if you believed this to be true—that, no matter what, you are loved by God?

V. Enrichment texts

7. Rambam's Commentary to Mishnah Avot 3:14 (Maimonides, 12th c.)

Sometimes one does good for someone out of pity for them and, because one disrespects them, one doesn't [bother to] inform them of what one did.

8. Maharal (Rabbi Yehudah Loeb, 1522–1609), *Derekh Hayyim* to Mishnah Avot 3:14

One who makes known the love to their lover, through this they inform them of the love, for they say, "I love you," in order that the other also will become closer to them and love them. Therefore, [Rabbi Akiva] said, "An extra love that it was made known to them," meaning: the love is not extra until it is made known to the beloved and is not a hidden love. Because God also wants Israel to love God, therefore God made the love known to them.

- *While the Rambam maintains that making God's love known to us was a sign of God's respect for us, the Maharal suggests it was a sign that God wants us to respond to God's love with our own. What do you think of each of these perspectives? Which one resonates with you more and why?*
- *Are the two commentators' answers complementary or contradictory? Why?*



Chapter 2: The Gifts of God Flow Through You

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

In this chapter, we explore the idea that the gifts we receive from God are meant to flow through us, and not just to us. In other words, we are meant to be not only beneficiaries but also intermediaries of God's blessings—we keep them moving. In a world so often marred by selfishness and acquisitiveness, we are meant to live lives of generosity and kindness.

The chapter develops three interrelated ideas: 1. that life and consciousness are gifts from God that we did not earn—and could not possibly have earned—they are, in other words, gifts of grace (*he'in* in biblical Hebrew); 2. that the most appropriate response to grace is gratitude; and 3. that part of what it means to be grateful is to want others to have what we do. In other words, gratitude is constituted in part by generosity. To live a religious life is not to hoard the gifts that God gives us but to keep them flowing.

As you work through this chapter, ask yourself: In what ways do we (do you) serve as a channel for God's gifts and in what ways do we serve as obstacles, or even dams, that stop their flow? And how could we help restore the flow of God's *hesed* (love) in the world?

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. What might it be like to feel loved by God?
2. Is it possible to increase your capacity to feel God's love? How so?
3. How might the experience and awareness of God's love impact the ways you act and carry yourself in the world?



III. Sources and excerpts

1. Bereishit Rabbah 14:9

Rabbi Levi said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: For every single breath that a person breathes, she must praise the Creator. What is the verse? “Every soul (*neshamah*) will praise God” (Psalm 150:6)—every breath (*neshimah*) will praise God.

- *What orientation is Rabbi Hanina demanding? Does it seem like a realistic demand?*
- *Instead of using the words for “thank” or “express gratitude” (lehodot), Rabbi Hanina uses words for “praise” (lekales and lehallel). How do you imagine one would praise God with every breath?*

2. *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 41–42

I readily admit that when I first encountered these words [of Rabbi Hanina], I was put off by them: I am not capable of praising God with every breath, I thought; so these words offer nothing more than a prescription for guilt. But over time I have come to hear Rabbi Hanina’s dictum very differently. On one level, Rabbi Hanina lays down a daunting challenge: Can we maintain a sense of gratitude at all times? Can we remember that each moment we are alive is another unearned gift? Yet on another level, he provides wise and gentle counsel. If we have trouble with gratitude—perhaps we’ve suffered so deeply that the depth of our hurt threatens to crowd out the possibility of gratitude; perhaps the pace of our lives is so overwhelming that we can’t seem to slow down enough to touch into gratitude—there is a resource perpetually available to us: we can take a breath and ask, Who made that? A simple inhalation is a portable and perpetually available reminder of the gift we are given at each moment. Every breath, Rabbi Hanina reminds us, is both a summons and an opportunity to be grateful.



- *Does this framing make you think differently about what “praising God” involves? How might it help a person to access gratitude?*
- *A similar teaching is found in the Talmud from Rabbi Meir: “A person is obligated to recite one hundred blessings every day” (Menahot 43b). What might Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Meir have been hoping to convey by requiring such a magnitude of praise every day of one’s life?*
- *Traditionally, Jews begin each day with three simple words: “Modeh/modah ani lefanecha - grateful am I before You.” What would it mean to take this practice seriously? How can it set an orientation for our lives?*

3. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 43

The kind of gratitude I am speaking of here is not primarily a feeling, but an “existential posture,” a way of holding oneself in the world.

Why not focus exclusively on gratitude as a feeling? To begin with, it isn’t possible to have an overflowing feeling of gratitude at every moment. After all, we can’t maintain **any** feeling at each and every moment. Feelings are, by their nature, ephemeral; they often disappear as quickly as they come, frequently for reasons that completely elude our conscious awareness. We all know what this is like. Feelings have their own mysterious rhythms. But while it may not be possible to feel grateful at every second, it is still possible to be oriented toward gratitude. An orientation does not depend on what we happen to be feeling at this moment or that, or with what intensity we happen to be feeling it.



- *What might it look like to “orient” yourself toward gratitude on a daily basis? What would you need to do this?*
- *What might make this “existential posture” a challenge? How might it be a blessing?*

4. Rabbeinu Beḥaye ibn Pekudah (12th c., Spain), Hovot ha-Levavot Sha’ar 3, Introduction

For anyone who bestows benefits on others has first their own interest in mind—either to secure an honorable distinction in this world or hereafter, or relieve themselves of pain, or improve their material possessions. Yet all these considerations do not absolve the beneficiaries of their duty of praising, thanking, respecting, and loving their benefactors and making them some return. And this, despite that the benefit was only loaned to the benefactors; that they were compelled to dispense it, as we have pointed out; and that their beneficence is not permanent, their generosity not prolonged, and their benevolence is mixed with the intent either to further their own interest or to ward off harm.

If so, how much more then does a human being owe service, praise, and gratitude to God Who created the benefit and the benefactor, Whose beneficence is unlimited, permanent, perpetual, without any motive of self-interest, or purpose of warding off injury, but only an expression of grace and love emanating from God towards all human beings.

- *Do you agree that anyone who gives a gift or helps someone “has first their own interest in mind”? Why or why not?*
- *Whether you agree or not, what could Rabbeinu Beḥaye be trying to teach?*



- *Have you ever experienced a natural outpouring of gratitude and a desire to give back to someone who helped or gave something to you? Can you describe the chain of events, internal and external?*

5. Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner (1906–1980), *Pahad Yitzhak*, Rosh Hashanah #3

For it is the spiritual nature of love (*hesed*) that all of its actions behave in the way of planting and cultivating. An act of bestowing love is planting a seed that will necessarily grow fruit similar to it: a fruit tree makes fruit of its kind....

And because of this, a person who receives goodness from their fellow is like one who has planted a seed of love in the world of the one who received it, and according to the created nature of love, this seed necessarily will sprout growths of love.

- *What does Rabbi Hutner's imagery add to your understanding of the concept of *hesed*?*
- *Are there other metaphors you can think of when you consider the experience of overflowing gratitude?*
- *When and why does the flowering of *hesed* within us get blocked? What can we do to heal and overcome those blockages?*

6. Leviticus 7:15

And the flesh of the thanksgiving sacrifice of well-being shall be eaten on the day that it is offered; none of it shall be set aside until morning.



7. *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 46–47

The Torah implicitly requires a person who brings a thanksgiving offering to invite others to dine with him. Why? The laws around the consumption of the thanksgiving offering are intended to inculcate and express a core religious value: when we have been the beneficiaries of God's kindness, we are expected to bestow kindness ourselves. The gifts of God are meant to be shared, not hoarded. Authentic gratitude is antithetical to possessiveness and acquisitiveness; the impulse of a grateful person is to give rather than grasp. Leftovers unshared are thus a sign of ingratitude.

- *When have you seen or experienced generosity that stems from gratitude?*

IV. Group discussion questions

1. What makes the orientation to gratitude so essential to Judaism? How do love and gratitude relate to each other?
2. What obstacles might prevent you from fully embracing and living with an awareness of God's eternal, unconditional love for you?
3. What questions are you left wondering about when it comes to God's love for humanity and for the Jewish people?

V. Enrichment texts

8. Rambam (Maimonides, 12th c.), *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Yom Tov 6:18*

When a person eats and drinks [in celebration of a holiday], they are obligated to feed foreigners, orphans, widows, and others who are destitute and poor. In contrast, a person who locks the gates of his courtyard and eats and drinks with their family, without feeding the poor and the embittered, is [not indulging in] rejoicing associated with a *mitzvah*, but rather the rejoicing of their gut.



And with regard to such a person is applied: “Their sacrifices will be like the bread of mourners, all that partake thereof shall become impure, for they [kept] their bread for themselves alone” (Hosea 9:4). This happiness is a disgrace for them: “I will spread dung on your faces, the dung of your festival celebrations” (Malakhi 2:3).

9. Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1839–1933), Mishnah Berurah 529:17

And also in the Zohar it speaks very strongly about the punishment of one who does not give to the poor from his meal on holidays, Heaven forbid; and all the later authorities have cited this matter, and the great obligation has become publicized to all Israel. Therefore, it is not common for a person who is poor to remain on a holiday without a meal. But what shall we do for the miserable and downtrodden in the city who are ashamed to stretch out a hand and ask? Therefore, in some places it has been the custom that before holidays, understanding people go to the houses of the wealthy to collect for these destitute individuals; and fortunate are the people who pay attention to this, for they bring merit to themselves and bring merit to all the people of the city.

- *In what ways are holidays times of gratitude? How does gratitude on holidays connect to generosity on holidays?*
- *In these texts, can you see both duty to share and desire to share?*

10. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1892–1953), Mikhtav mei-Eliyahu vol 1, p. 32

When the Almighty created human beings, God made them capable of both giving and taking. The faculty of giving is a sublime power; it is one of the attributes of the blessed Creator of all things. God is the Giver par excellence; God’s mercy, bounty, and goodness extend to all God’s creatures. God’s giving is pure giving for God takes nothing in return. God can take nothing for



God lacks nothing, as the verse says, “If you are righteous what do you give to God?” (Job 35:7). Our service to God is not for God’s need but for our own, since we need a means of expressing our gratitude to God. Humans have been granted this sublime power of giving, enabling them to be merciful, to bestow happiness, to give of themselves, as it is written, “God created humanity in God’s own image” (Genesis 1:26).

- *What’s powerful about thinking of human generosity as being part of what it means to have been created in the image of God? How does that connection change our orientation to generosity?*
- *Based on these texts, why might Jewish law require even the poor who are dependent on charity to give charity?*



Chapter 3: On Protest

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

People commonly think that to be religious means to be obedient, and even docile. And indeed, rabbis and educators sometimes present Judaism in precisely that way. But in this chapter we encounter another, very different religious posture: protest in the face of injustice. According to a highly influential *midrash*, Abraham's first encounter with God takes place when (and perhaps because) he sees a world in crisis and refuses to remain silent and passive. The stunning implication of the *midrash* (made explicit in a talmudic passage we'll encounter below) is that God's partners aren't permitted to go along to get along; when we see cruelty, abuse, or oppression, we are bidden to speak up.

In refusing to accept the world as it is, and in speaking up for how the world is intended to be, we reveal a deep faith in a transcendent standard against which empirical reality is measured. Perhaps, then, we are also revealing a deep faith in a transcendent God who is the source of that very standard.

As you read this chapter and study the sources presented here, ask yourself: What role does protest play in my life? Is it connected to my understanding of God and Torah, and if so, how? What implications does the image of Abraham as protestor carry for our own lives?

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. What role does protest play in your life?
2. Does protesting on your own behalf play an important role in your life?
3. How do you think about the relationship between protesting on your own behalf and protesting on behalf of others?
4. Do you think there is value in crying out about your own suffering?



III. Sources and excerpts

1. Bereishit Rabbah 39:1

Rabbi Yitzhak said: This may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a building *doleket* (“on fire” or “illuminated”). “Is it possible that the building lacks a person to look after it?” he wondered. The owner of the building looked out and said, “I am the owner of the building.” Similarly, because Abraham our father said, “Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?” The Holy Blessed One looked out and said to him, “I am the guide, the Sovereign of the Universe.”

- *Doleket has been taken to mean either “illuminated” or “on fire” (the latter is more correct as the plain sense of the text). How does the midrash read differently with each of these translations?*
- *Why does God wait to emerge until Abraham asks his question?*

2. Rashi (11th c., France), comments to Bereishit Rabbah 39:1

Abraham our father said, “Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?” He saw heaven and earth and he saw the sun by day and the moon by night, and stars shining. He thought, “Is it possible that such a great thing could be without its having a guide?” The Blessed Holy One looked at him and said, “I am the Master of the world.”

3. Yedei Moshe (Rabbi Jacob Moses Helin Ashkenazi, 18th c.), comments to Bereishit Rabbah 39:1

Just as the person in the parable saw a palace *doleket*—that is, on fire—and reasons that since no one was putting out the fire, the palace must not have had a guide, and the master of the palace looked at him and said, “I am the master of the palace and it is my will that it burn up,”



similarly when Abraham our father saw that the world was going to be ruined... he thought, “Could it be, God forbid, that the world has no guide?” and the Blessed Holy One looked at him and said, “I am the Master of the world and it is my will to lay waste to the wicked. As for you, go forth from your land, from these wicked people.”

- *Compare Rashi and the Yedei Moshe on the midrash. What translation of “doleket” does each one use?*
- *How does the Yedei Moshe connect Abraham’s question to God’s command? What does the connection imply about what Abraham is meant to accomplish in his going forth to Canaan?*

3. *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 54–55

If Abraham’s question is, at heart, really a protest—he is not simply confused by the state of the world, he is aghast, and he gives voice to his horror—then that very protest itself can be said to reveal a deep and abiding sense that **things are meant to be otherwise**. Abraham does not cry out simply because he doesn’t like the way the world presently looks; he objects, rather, because the empirical reality he sees fails to measure up to a transcendent standard he intuitively feels. The insistence that the world as he encounters it is not yet the world as it must be, as it is in some ultimate way **intended** to be, is itself a manifestation of faith. When God peers at Abraham and announces that “I am the owner of the world,” then, God is only making explicit what is already implicit in Abraham’s anguished cry.

4. *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 403–404 (n. 46)

[Bible scholar Walter] Brueggemann goes so far as to insist that the mere act of noticing one’s pain can be a powerful source of hope. “Those who are incapable of noticing their hurt,” he



writes, “the ones numbed to despair and resigned to conforming docility, do not hope. When human pain is noticed, however, it is noticed as unnatural and abnormal, and finally as unacceptable.”¹

5. *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 72, 73–74

When we respect other people, when we take them seriously, we believe they ought to be accountable for their actions.... Sometimes we get angry at people precisely because we respect them; our anger is in fact a manifestation of our respect.

But it’s not just respect for the culprit that requires us to get angry; it’s first and foremost respect for the victim. “When we value someone as a person, we see him or her as **commanding** respect.” This means not only that we are obligated to treat the person with respect, but that we expect others to do so as well. Truly valuing people in this way “entails resentment or indignation when they are abused.” In other words, respect for the victim requires us to become angry at the victimizer.² ...

A life animated by faith and love requires us to respond to the sufferings of the oppressed but also to work to bring an end to their oppression. (Compassion is sometimes unavoidably political.) This means that while love can and must express itself as kindness, and compassion, and generosity, there are also times when it can and must manifest itself in indignation and protest.

- *Does the idea that protest reveals a “deep and abiding sense that things are meant to be otherwise” resonate with you? Do you agree that that is—or can be—a*

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction* (Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 51.

² Antti Kauppinen, “Valuing Anger,” in Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan (eds.), *The Moral Psychology of Anger* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2018), p. 37.



fundamentally religious posture?

- *How do we know what “otherwise” should look like?*
- *How are respect and protest intertwined in these excerpts? Hope and pain?*

6. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 54b

Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of his own family and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of his family. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the people of his community and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of his community. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of the entire world.

- *Do you agree that lack of protest necessarily contributes to transgression, such that one should be held accountable for that evil?*
- *Are there ever circumstances under which not protesting transgression can be justified? What are those circumstances?*
- *What stops us from protesting against transgression?*

IV. Group discussion questions

1. Do you experience protest as a religious act?
2. Are there types of protest that feel dangerous? What is the line between productive protest and those types?



3. How can sacred indignation and protest be expressions of love for others, the world, and even God?

V. Enrichment texts

7. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), pp. 112–112, “A Palace Full of Light”

Lift your eyes on high. Religion is the result of what man does with his ultimate wonder, with the moments of awe, with the sense of mystery. How did Abraham arrive at his certainty that there is a God who is concerned with the world? According to the Rabbis, Abraham may be “compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace full of light. Is it possible that there is no one who cares for the place? He wondered. Until the owner of the palace looked at him and said, I am the owner of the palace. Similarly, Abraham our father wondered, Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide? The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said, “I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the world.” It was in wonder that Abraham’s quest for God began.

8. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 367, “A Palace in Flames”

There are those who sense the ultimate question in moments of wonder, in moments of joy; there are those who sense the ultimate question in moments of horror, in moments of despair. It is both the grandeur and the misery of living that makes man sensitive to the ultimate question. Indeed, his misery is as great as his grandeur. How did Abraham arrive at his certainty that there is a God who is concerned with the world? Said Rabbi Isaac: Abraham may be “compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames. Is it possible that there is no one who cares for the place? He wondered. Until the owner of the palace looked at him and said, I am the owner of the palace. Similarly, Abraham our father wondered, Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide? The Holy One,



blessed be He, looked out and said, I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the world.” The world is in flames, consumed by evil. Is it possible that there is no one who cares?

- *Rabbi Heschel presents two different readings of the same midrash—one emphasizing wonder at beauty, the other horror at destruction. Which reading resonates more with your own spiritual journey? Can both be true simultaneously?*
- *How does starting from “ultimate wonder” versus starting from “horror and despair” shape one’s relationship with God and approach to faith? Do these lead to different kinds of religious practice?*
- *Rabbi Heschel suggests that both “grandeur and misery” make us sensitive to ultimate questions. How do you experience this tension in your own life? Does one tend to dominate the other?*

9. Miroslav Volf, *Against the Tide: Love in a Time of Petty Dreams and Persistent Enmities* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), p. 36

Why are we disturbed about the brute and blind force of tsunamis that snuff out people’s lives? ... If the world is all there is, and the world with moving tectonic plates is a world in which we happen to live, what’s there to complain about? We can mourn—we’ve lost something terribly dear. But we can’t really complain, and we certainly can’t legitimately protest. The expectation that the world should be a hospitable place... is tied to the belief that the world ought to be constituted in a certain way. And that belief—as distinct from the belief that the world just is what it is—is itself tied to the notion of a creator.

- *Volf argues that our ability to protest natural disasters is “tied to the notion of a*



creator.” Do you agree that protest requires belief in how things “ought to be”? Can secular worldviews also ground legitimate protest?

- *What is the difference between mourning and protesting according to Volf? Why might this distinction matter for how we respond to suffering?*
- *How does Volf’s argument relate to the earlier texts about Abraham seeing the burning palace? Does believing in a creator make the problem of suffering easier or harder to bear?*



Chapter 4: Learning to Love and Be Loved: The Family

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

This chapter explores a Jewish vision of family life. Families are, ideally, schools for love, in which we learn to love and be loved, to care and be cared for. Crucially, the love we experience at home is meant to extend outward. Selfishness is a vice, whether it's exhibited by an individual or by an entire household. This is exemplified by the *huppah*, or marital canopy, being without walls—a physical reminder of a love that goes outward, towards the wider world.

Thinking about love in the context of families raises some rich and complex questions about conditional and unconditional love, about the possibilities of love and also about the desired outcomes of familial love. And this context invites us to reflect on how our human experience of love relates to divine love: how we reflect God's love, how we can serve as vehicles of it, and how to move forward when we fall short of meeting the expectations that come with God's love.

As you read this chapter and study the sources provided here, ask yourself how your family life and your religious life intersect and interact, both in broad, philosophical terms and in the daily joys and struggles of living with others.

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. What role does your family play in your religious life?
2. Can we learn about God's love through experiencing human love? What might the limits of human love be in that learning?



III. Sources and excerpts

1. Bereishit Rabbah 48:9

Rabbi Abahu said: The main tent of our patriarch Abraham was open on both sides, like a large plaza.

2. Mishnah Avot 1:5

Yose ben Yoḥanan of Jerusalem used to say: Let your house be wide open, and let the poor be members of your household.

- *What does it mean that Abraham's tent was "open on both sides"? How does this physical description reflect a spiritual or ethical principle?*
- *How does Yose ben Yoḥanan's instruction to "let your house be wide open" and "let the poor be members of your household" connect to Abraham's example?*

3. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 88

It is easy for couples to forget that their marriage is intended to have broader redemptive impact upon the world. We have all met couples whose love seems totally insular. Having found each other, they live as if there were no reality, no one else who really existed, outside their own little bubble. The narcissism of two is no better than the narcissism of one; the love between married couples is meant to radiate outward.

It is in part for this reason that Jews traditionally marry under a canopy (*huppah*) with no walls: the structure is intimate in that it brings the couple together in their symbolic first home, while its lack of walls serves as a dramatic declaration of openness to the world. There is an obvious tension here. On the one hand, the *huppah* establishes a home, which is at least



to some extent an intimate and private space.... Yet on the other hand, that intimate and private space refuses to close in on itself. The *huppah* reminds us of Abraham's and Sarah's tent, which the talmudic sages describe as having been open at both sides so that they could hurry out to greet passersby and welcome them into their home. In the spirit of Abraham, the talmudic sage Yose ben Yohanan instructs, "Let your house be wide open," and, pushing us harder, "let the poor be members of your household."

- *What are some of the considerations in balancing intimacy and commitment to the larger world within a marriage? Are these different from balancing those values in a larger family unit?*
- *What values or commitments to the larger world do you center in your family unit?*

4. Mishnah Avot 5:16

Any love that is dependent on something—when the thing ceases, the love also ceases. But a love that is not dependent on anything never ceases.

5. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 92

I'm not sure that human beings are actually capable of unconditional love—and in any case, we can't ever be sure that our love is truly unconditional. Our children could change in ways that undermine the steadfastness of our love, whether or not we want it to. To take an example from the philosopher Christopher Cordner, they "could become... drug addict[s] dedicated to feeding their addiction[s] at any cost, including deceiving [their] parents, stealing from them, attacking them physically, expressing apparently relentless anger and hostility towards them and others." It's hard to be confident that our love would not waver under such circumstances. And we too could change: corrosive forces like "serious illness or hardship,



betrayal of friends, loss of reputation, [and] being taken over by envy and resentment,” to take just a few examples, could severely compromise our ability to love.³ ...

Yet even if we cannot fully achieve it, unconditional love can still serve as an aspirational ideal against which we measure ourselves and toward which we seek to grow. Asymptotic though the ideal may be, we can regard our actual loving as “answerable” to the requirements of unconditional love.

- *What does it mean for our actual loving to be “answerable” to the requirements of unconditional love?*
- *In what ways does striving to love our children unconditionally help us understand or emulate God’s love?*

6. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 90

But there’s the rub. The only way for young children to internalize the sense that they matter, and that God loves them, is if parents and teachers mediate that love for them. Try telling an adolescent who has been assailed time and again by an abusive parent that he matters because God loves him and you will not get very far (at least not at first, and without deep work dedicated to healing what the parent has broken). Low self-worth in children is of course not necessarily an indication of parental failure. The world is a complicated and often brutal place and the human heart and mind are profoundly fragile. But as parents, in doing our best to love our children unconditionally we strive to emulate and reflect God’s love.

³ Christopher Cordner, “Unconditional Love?,” *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 3.1 (December, 2016), p. 3.



- *In what ways might parents model God's love for their children?*
- *Would you want a child—or your child—to see their parent's love as a model of God's love? Why or why not?*
- *In what ways might parental love be a useful model for God's love? In what ways might that model fall short?*

IV. Group discussion questions

1. Do you think human beings are capable of unconditional love?
2. Do you think that your experience of family has shaped the way you think about God's love?
3. Are there portrayals of love in the chapter that challenge your notions of love and family? What are they? What do you find challenging about them?

V. Enrichment texts

The following sources each discuss the mandate to allow others (particularly our children) to grow into who they are, as opposed to who we might imagine—or want—them to be.

- *What claim does each source make about the religious or ethical importance of that mandate?*
- *What are the emotional difficulties that arise in allowing others, particularly children, to develop into their own people? What can we do to manage those emotional difficulties?*



7. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Epstein (1751–1823), Ma'or va-Shemesh, Lekh Lekha

People who associate themselves with the righteous should not simply follow their behaviors and actions, such that simply because the *tzaddik* (righteous person) does something they too will do it... they must instead learn to act according to their own mind in its own truth, and to serve God with their own heart... And this is what Abraham meant when he said “and my steward will be my heir” (Genesis 15:3), meaning, his steward in that he drew from the Torah of his master and gave it to others to drink from; i.e., that he taught them to do exactly as his master did, which is undesirable. And when God answered: “none but your very own issue shall be your heir” (15:4), Abraham was still afraid that his own son might simply do whatever he was taught without any insight of his own heart. Therefore, God took him outside and told him: “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them” (15:5). This is a metaphor... the stars do not receive their light from each other, rather, each is illuminated on its own, and as a result, the lights of the stars are different from each other. So too, God promised Abraham that his descendants would worship God each according to their own insight and not simply do as they were instructed by others.

8. Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush, 1809–1879) on Proverbs 22:6

It is a *mitzvah* that the education should be according to his own way because each person is naturally capable of different things... there are those whose minds are sharp, and there are those whose intellects are honest and unsharpened, and it is necessary to teach them according to their characteristics. And so too in actions: there are those who are ready for a specialized art, and specialized study, and will receive it easily and this can be recognized in a child according to their desire, and according to what they strive for themselves in some specific area. Such a child should be educated according to their way and according to what they are ready for, then they will not depart from it even if they grow old. This, however, is not so if they educate them to what is outside of their nature.



9. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), comments to Genesis 25:27

Every child must be educated in different ways, depending on the future life expected from their disposition. To want to teach and educate a Jacob and Esau at the same school desk, under the same habits of life, in the same way would certainly mean ruining one of them. A Jacob will learn to draw from the source of wisdom and truth with ever-increasing desire, but an Esau can hardly wait for the time when he will throw away the old books—and at the same time, an entire destiny, which he has only been exposed to through one perspective, and which he only came to know in ways that don't speak to his own inclinations at all.

If Isaac and Rebekah had looked into Esau and asked themselves early on, “How can the strength and courage and skill that lie dormant in Esau be used in the service of God?” then instead of becoming a warrior of the hunt, Esau might have been a “warrior of God.” Jacob and Esau, with their very different talents, could have remained twin brothers in spirit and in life. Esau's sword could have married with Jacob's spirit early on, and who knows what a different shape they would have taken the course of time.

But this is how it happened: “and the boys grew up”—only when the boys became men were people surprised to see such complete opposites emerge from one mother's womb, from the same care, upbringing, and school.



Chapter 5: Loving Our Neighbor

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

There is something wonderfully, almost quintessentially Jewish about the mandate to love our neighbor: Jewish thinkers agree that is utterly central to Jewish spirituality and ethics, but they often disagree about what precisely it means. In this chapter, we explore some of the very different ways interpreters have understood the *mitzvah*: 1. that it focuses on our actions, and tells us what not to do; 2. that it focuses on our actions, but—perhaps more ambitiously—tells us what we ought to do; and/or 3. that it focuses on our emotional life and instructs us in how we should feel and think about other people. I pay special attention to the interpretation offered by the Ramban (Nahmanides), who seems to offer an understanding of the *mitzvah* that offers an alternative to the ethos of comparison and competition that so often bedevils our lives together.

As you read this chapter, ask yourself how each of the approaches to loving our neighbor would make for better individual lives, better families and communities, and a kinder, healthier world. And when you get to the Ramban, ask yourself how you would need to grow in order to live in the way that he advises—or more accurately, in the way that he thinks God commands.

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. When the Torah commands “love your neighbor as yourself,” what do you think “love” means in that context? Is it a feeling? A way of acting?
2. Who do you think qualifies as a “neighbor”? Who is and is not included in that word?
3. Do you think love can be commanded? What would it mean to be held responsible for whether or not you love?



4. Is there someone in your life whose example has shown you what it means to truly love a neighbor? What did their love look like in practice?

III. Sources and excerpts

1. Targum Pseudo-Yonatan (early Aramaic translation) to Leviticus 19:18

Love your fellow, for what is hateful to you yourself, do not do to them. I am God.

2. Rambam (Maimonides, 12th c.), Mishneh Torah, Laws of Mourning 14:1

“Love your neighbor as yourself”—all things that you want others to do for you, you should do for them, for your kin in Torah and *mitzvot*.

For each of these two interpretations consider:

- *Is this understanding commanding “love” in the form of more abstract feelings or more concrete actions?*
- *What would it look like to fulfil the mitzvah of “loving your neighbor” based on this understanding?*
- *What about this understanding of love seems compelling to you, and what about it seems difficult?*

3. Ramban (Nahmanides, 13th c.) on Leviticus 19:18

The Torah’s *mitzvah* means that one should love their fellow in every manner, just as one loves themselves with everything good.



It is possible that since [the verse] does not say “and you shall love your neighbor (with the direct object marker **תא**) as yourself,” but instead it equated the love of them both in the word “to/for your neighbor” (with the prefix **ל**)... For sometimes a person will love their neighbor in certain matters, such as doing good to them in material wealth but not with wisdom, and so on.

But if one loves them completely, they will want their beloved friend to gain riches, properties, honor, knowledge, and wisdom. However they will still not want them to be their equal, for there will always be a desire in their heart that they should have more of these good things than their neighbor. Therefore the Torah commanded that this degrading jealousy should not exist in one’s heart, but instead a person should love to do abundance of good for his fellow-being as they would for themselves, and they should place no limitations upon their love for them.

4. Sefer ha-Mitzvot of the Rambam, Positive Mitzvah #206

That one’s love and compassion for their fellow is like the love and compassion for themselves—with their property, with their bodies, and anything that is within one’s capacity: if they want it, I want it for them; and anything that I want for myself I want them to have the same.

- *Do you agree with the Ramban that human nature inclines us not to want the best for our neighbor, and that “love your neighbor as yourself” comes to account for this inclination?*
- *What ideal does the Ramban think this mitzvah is trying to achieve?*



- *Is the Rambam (Maimonides) putting forth the same idea as the Ramban (Nahmanides) about how we should love our neighbor?*

5. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 116

Notice that we've now seen two passages from Maimonides (sources #2 and #4). Whereas the first holds that "love your neighbor" refers to concrete kindnesses we perform for others, the second maintains that its concern is with what we wish for others. In one place, then, Maimonides seems to belong to the (positive) action school, but in the other he appears to belong to the emotion school.

Which one is it? Does he think "love your neighbor" refers to emotions or to actions? My sense is that he thinks it refers to both. For Maimonides, love is a disposition, a quality of character, and as such it has both emotional and actional dimensions. I want only good for my neighbor and I act accordingly.

IV. Group discussion questions

1. Taking both of the Rambam's teachings together, and Rabbi Held's commentary, do you think that love can be commanded? How so?
2. In this chapter of his book, Rabbi Held explores several concrete ways we might show love for our neighbor—by resisting envy, judging others favorably, choosing to forgive, giving respectful rebuke, and orienting our hearts to care for and about others. Are there other concrete ways we can engage with this *mitzvah*?



V. Enrichment texts

6. Proverbs 14:30

A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.

7. Mishnah Avot 4:21

Rabbi Elazar ha-Kappar said: Envy, lust, and the pursuit of honor drive a person out of the world.

8. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 119

Envy arguably reflects distrust in God, since it suggests that we do not really believe that God loves us or that we are genuinely and intrinsically valuable. We pursue a sense of our worth, often with no small degree of desperation. But as we saw at length in chapter 1, according to Judaism we don't need to do that; worth is something we always already have. Our frenzy to achieve "comparative success" suggests that our awareness of God's love and our own value has become attenuated at best.

Most crucially for our exploration of loving the neighbor, envy is hostile to others because it interprets their success as our failure, their accomplishment as our defeat. If our sense of self-worth depends on competition with others, then we become invested in their failure (at least in comparison to us). Our insecurity means that we either dwell on our purported superiority or stew in our ostensible inferiority—or, as is often the case, we shuttle back and forth between the two. To put this very simply, lack of a stable sense of self-worth means that we are perpetually envious, which in turn means that we can't truly wish others well—and that, recalling Nahmanides, means that we cannot fulfill the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves.



- *How do these texts understand the relationship between envy and a person's inner life? What does envy do to us, and what does it reveal about us?*
- *Taken together, do these sources treat envy primarily as a personal problem, a moral failing, or a theological issue? What's at stake in how we define it?*
- *How do these texts deepen or complicate the idea that loving one's neighbor means wanting the good for them?*
- *Is it possible to acknowledge feelings of envy without letting them define how we relate to others? What would that require?*



Chapter 6: Loving Our Own, and Everyone Else Too

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

Does ethics require that we treat every person on the face of the earth in exactly the same way, or does it make space for us to prioritize those closest to us? If the latter, what does that “closeness” consist of? Is it family relationships? friendship? geographical proximity? ideological affinity of some kind? Or something else entirely? These are some of the thorniest problems in ethics.

In this chapter, we explore three things: 1. just how complicated these questions are, even when we read sources that at first glance seems pretty clear; 2. a robust case for “partiality” (being partial to some people over others) in ethics, even as there are dangers inherent in such a position; and 3. that Judaism ultimately rejects both particularism and universalism and instead advocates for what I refer to as “particularist universalism.”

As you work through this chapter, think about your own passions and your own concrete giving: How do you prioritize people and issues that feel (or literally are) close to home, and how do you spread your concerns over a wider horizon? How do you feel about not having an absolute formula for “solving” a problem like this one, but instead needing to think and feel your way through it?

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. When you think about your moral obligations, do you try to treat everyone’s needs equally, or do you prioritize those closest to you? Beyond your family, do you see yourself as having special responsibilities to particular groups (religious, ethnic, national, or otherwise)? What shapes these commitments?



2. In thinking about your responsibilities to others, what would feel “too parochial,” and what would feel “too abstract”?
3. When have you felt a strong pull to prioritize “your own” over others? When does that pull begin to feel morally uncomfortable or problematic?
4. Is it possible to love your own community deeply without excluding others? What makes this difficult?

III. Sources and excerpts

1. Exodus 22:24

If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; exact no interest from them.

2. Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 71a

Rav Yosef taught: The verse states: “If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you.” The term “My people” teaches that if one of My people (i.e., a Jew) and a non-Jew both come to borrow money from you, My people take precedence. The term “the poor” teaches that if a poor person and a rich person come to borrow money, the poor person takes precedence. And from the term: “among you,” it is derived: If your poor person, meaning one of your relatives, and one of the poor of your city come to borrow money, your poor person takes precedence. If it is between one of the poor of your town and one of the poor of another town, the one of the poor of your city takes precedence.

3. Rabbi Menahem ha-Meiri (13th c., Provence), Beit ha-Be^hirah to Bava Metzia 71a

In what they expounded from this verse—namely, from “If you lend money”—there is included an element of *mitzvah* in making a loan, at least for interest-bearing profit, and not abandoning [the non-Jew] entirely. ...



From this (= source #2) you learn that the non-Jew, too, is alluded to in the verse. However, a Jew who is to be lent money without interest takes precedence even over a non-Jew to whom one could lend at interest. The language of “precedence” was not stated regarding the non-Jew; rather, the point is that they too are included within the category of a *mitzvah* and an ethical obligation.

4. Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu (10th c.), chapter 27

If a person has abundant provisions in their house and wishes to set some aside for the sustenance of the needy, what order are they to follow in providing for them? First they should take care of their parents. If they have some provisions left, they should take care of their siblings. If they still have some provisions left, they should take care of the members of their household (including household staff). If they again have some provisions left, they should take care of the people of their wider family. Then, if they have some left, they should take care of the people in their immediate neighborhood. Next, if they have some left, they should take care of the people on their street. And finally, [with what remains], they should provide charity freely for all Jews.

- *What values are expressed in these texts? How do they structure our responsibilities to different people?*
- *What, if anything, feels challenging or counterintuitive about this hierarchy of obligations?*

5. *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 141–142

I’m inclined to defend partiality as integral to morality itself. Partiality, after all, is not just integral to being a self; it’s also fundamental to the good life. If love is essential to the good



life—and it hardly needs arguing that it is—and part of what it means to love someone is to be partial to them, then some degree of special concern for those we love seems permissible and even required. Cottingham eloquently spells out the implications of this: “If I give no extra weight to the fact that this is **my** lover, **my** friend, **my** spouse, **my** child, if I assess these people’s needs purely on their merits (in such a way as an impartial observer might do), then that special concern which constitutes the essence of love and friendship will be eliminated. Partiality to loved ones is justified because it is an essential ingredient in one of the highest of human goods. To ask people not to show partiality towards those they love is thus to deprive them of one of life’s most essential goods. Even more fundamentally, a world without partiality would be one “where much of what gives human life preciousness and significance had disappeared.” It seems implausible that morality mandates our living in what would be an arid, loveless world.

To get at this from a more theological angle: strict impartiality would undermine my individuality—and the individuality of those dear to me. Having family and friends to whom we are partial is part of what makes us individuals rather than abstract, generic members of a species. Recall the Mishnah’s insistence that the irreducible uniqueness of each human being redounds to the glory of God (Sanhedrin 4:5).

- *What’s comforting about Rabbi Held’s defense of partiality? What feels morally challenging about it?*
- *Rabbi Held invokes the mishnah that sets up the notion that all human beings descend from Adam, and yet God created every single human being unique: “Therefore, each and every person is obligated to say: The world was created for me” (Sanhedrin 4:5). How does this mishnah strengthen or deepen Rabbi Held’s argument?*



Does Rabbi Held's argument help you understand this mishnah in a new way?

- *Does Rabbi Held go too far in defending partiality, or not far enough? Why?*

IV. Group discussion questions

- The chapter makes a strong claim: not only is it impossible to love everyone equally, it would be undesirable even if we could. What is the argument that equal love would be undesirable? Do you find it convincing?
- How do we recognize when legitimate care for our own community has crossed into harmful exclusion of others?
- Rabbi Held raises some genuinely difficult questions about how much partiality is too much. For example, he wonders how much it is legitimate to provide for our own children—e.g., private school, vacations, a room of their own—before we are shirking our responsibility to children who have much less. Have you ever grappled seriously with this question? What considerations would guide your decisions?
- How is the *mitzvah* to love all Jews (*ahavat Yisrael*) similar to showing patriotic preference to your fellow citizens? How are these different?
- Do you think universal love can be built through particular loves, rather than in spite of them? Can you think of examples where this has—or has not—been true in your life?

V. Enrichment texts

6. Exodus 23:3

Nor shall you show deference to a poor man in his dispute.



7. Exodus 23:6

You shall not subvert the rights of your needy in their disputes.

8. Leviticus 19:15

You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly.

4. Deuteronomy 1:17

You shall not be partial in judgment: hear out low and high alike. Fear no man, for judgment is God's. And any matter that is too difficult for you, you shall bring to me and I will hear it.

- *These texts insist on strict impartiality, especially in judgment. How does that challenge—or limit—Rabbi Held's defense of partiality?*
- *Is it ever acceptable to allow your child—or members of your community—to bend rules you would enforce for others? Why or why not?*
- *Where do you see the line between appropriate partiality and unfair bias? What helps you recognize when you've crossed it?*



Chapter 7: Human Dignity and Solidarity: Judaism's Other "Great Principle"

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

According to Rabbi Akiva, loving our neighbor is “the greatest principle in the Torah,” but according to Ben Azzai, God’s creation of humanity in God’s image is the great principle. To better understand Ben Azzai’s perspective, this chapter offers an extended reflection on Genesis 1 and the idea that we are all, every last one of us, created in God’s very own image. (Or perhaps it would be better and more accurate to translate Genesis 1:26 as saying that we are created “**as** God’s very own image”). We will turn to modern biblical scholarship to shed light on what was so revolutionary in the Bible’s understanding of who and what we are as human beings, and I explore why its ideas are no less radical now than they were three thousand years ago.

This chapter invites you to think about human dignity and human solidarity, and to ask yourself how your life would change, and how the lives of your community, your people, your country (or countries), and the whole world would change—if we actually took these ideas to heart.

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. Do you think human dignity must be earned, or is it inherent to every person simply by virtue of being human? What shapes your view?
2. What does it mean to you that all human beings are created “in the image of God”? Is this primarily a theological claim, an ethical one, or both?
3. Have you ever felt especially seen, affirmed, or diminished by the way another person treated you? What made the interaction matter so much?
4. What, if anything, do we owe other people simply because they are human beings?



III. Sources and excerpts

1. Jerusalem Talmud Nedarim 9:4 (41c)

“Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

Rabbi Akiva says: This is the greatest principle in the Torah.

Ben Azzai says, “This is the book of the generations of Adam” (Genesis 5:1) is an even greater principle.

2. Rabbi David Frankel (1707–1762), *Korban ha-Edah*, comments to source #1

“This is the book of the generations of Adam”—[the reason it is a greater principle is] that all human beings come from one ancestor. This is a greater principle than “love your neighbor as yourself,” which applies only to your neighbor [i.e., fellow Jew]. And some interpret [it based on] the end of the verse, which states “in the image of God God made him”—and therefore one should be careful with the dignity of one’s fellow.

- *What changes when we ground moral obligation primarily in covenantal belonging (like Rabbi Akiva) rather than in shared humanity (like Ben Azzai)?*
- *Rabbi Frankel offers two explanations for Ben Azzai’s position: all human beings come from one family, and all human beings are created in the image of God. Are these fundamentally different claims? Would one lead to a different kind of ethics than the other?*
- *Why might Ben Azzai consider shared humanity a “greater principle” than “love your neighbor as yourself”? Do you agree? Why or why not?*



3. Genesis 1:26–27

And God said, Let us make the human being in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth. And God created the human being in God's image; male and female [God] created them.

- *If every human being is created in the image of God, what kinds of social hierarchies or ways of treating people become harder to justify?*
- *What responsibilities might follow from the claim that all human beings are created in the image of God?*

4. Mishnah Avot 4:15

Rabbi Matyah ben Harash said: When meeting people, be the first to greet all others.

5. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 17a

They said about Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that no one ever preceded him in issuing a greeting, not even a non-Jew in the marketplace.

6. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 6b

Rabbi Helbo said that Rav Huna said: One who is aware that another person is accustomed to greet them must greet that person first, as it is stated: "Seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:15). If the other person extended their greeting to them and they did not respond, they are called a robber.



7. Mishnah Avot 3:12

Rabbi Yishmael said: ... receive every person with joy.

8. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 165

We again come face-to-face with Judaism's concern for integrating the internal with the external, emotion with action. Greeting another person with genuine joy reflects a higher spiritual plane than greeting them merely with a friendly countenance. Crucial as it is to greet each person warmly, it is not sufficient; ideally, we must also feel genuine joy in seeing them—and this, in turn, requires caring about them. How do we get to the point of a warm countenance reflecting a warm heart? We train our hearts by setting the intention to have them follow our deeds. In other words, we smile at others with the intention of genuine human warmth emerging from us.

- *Greeting someone warmly can seem like a very small thing. Why do our Rabbis in the Mishnah and Talmud—and Rabbi Held—treat it as spiritually and ethically significant?*
- *Rabbi Held suggests that outward actions—like smiling, greeting others warmly, or showing joy in their presence—can help train the heart toward genuine care. Do you find this idea persuasive?*
- *What happens to people when they are ignored, unseen, or treated as socially insignificant? Have you ever experienced a small gesture of acknowledgment—or its absence—as more powerful than expected?*

9. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 166

There is nothing generic or one-size-fits-all about such commitment to human dignity. As



we've seen repeatedly, Jewish theology insists on the uniqueness and irreplaceability of each person. To live in accord with Jewish ethics therefore requires us not to respect human beings in general but to respect them in all their particularity. This has concrete ramifications in the interpersonal sphere. What one person takes as playful banter another experiences as painfully humiliating. What one person takes as an expression of concern another perceives as an invasion of privacy. What is permissible or even desirable to say to one person may be problematic or even forbidden to say to another. Among other things, this means that central to Jewish ethics as it is, law alone can never fully capture what taking dignity seriously requires.

- *Rabbi Held argues that respecting human dignity requires sensitivity to particular people and situations, not just adherence to rules. Why might rules alone be insufficient for preserving dignity?*
- *What helps people become more attentive to the experiences and vulnerabilities of others?*

IV. Group discussion questions

1. What does a deep sense of shared humanity require of us? What becomes possible when we genuinely see other people as fully human?
2. What makes it difficult to experience another person's humiliation or suffering as something that implicates us personally? What helps cultivate that kind of solidarity?
3. Rabbi Held suggests that small acts of everyday recognition and large struggles for justice exist on the same moral spectrum. Do you find this persuasive? Why might seemingly minor gestures matter so much?



V. Enrichment texts

10. Proverbs 14:31

One who oppresses the poor insults their Maker. One who shows pity for the needy honors [their Maker].

11. Proverbs 22:2

The rich and the poor have this in common: God is the maker of them all.

- *Why is the treatment of vulnerable people connected so closely to the honor of God?*
- *What changes when disrespect toward another human being is understood as a desecration of something sacred?*

12. Exodus 22:24–26

If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; exact no interest from them. If you seize your neighbor's garment as collateral, you must return it to them before the sun sets. It is their only clothing, the sole covering for their skin. In what else shall they sleep?! If they cry out to Me, I will pay heed, for I am merciful.

13. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 169

Collateral that must be returned every evening is, in fact, not really collateral at all. It may well be that in this situation, the garment is “collateral more for the benefit of the feelings of the borrower than for the security of the lender.” Why does the Torah require the creditor to keep returning the garment? The text itself answers with great pathos: “It is his only clothing, the sole covering for his skin. In what else shall he sleep?!” (Exodus 22:24–26). The rights of the creditor are subordinated to the dignity and welfare of the debtor. No one deserves to spend



the night naked and cold. In this remarkable law, the dignity of the borrower is paradoxically protected both in the handing over of the garment as collateral **and** in its nightly return. Compassion for the poor person and her predicament trumps the ordinary ways economic affairs are conducted.

- *What does it say about the Torah's priorities that it effectively sacrifices economic practicality in order to protect human dignity?*
- *How do we hold together the Torah's genuine concern for the poor with the reality that its protections are often insufficient?*

14. Rambam (Maimonides, 12th c.), Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:4

Whoever gives charity to someone who is poor with an unpleasant countenance and with their face cast downward loses and destroys their merit—even if they give 1,000 gold pieces. Instead, they should give with a pleasant countenance and with happiness, commiserating with him about his troubles, as [Job 30:25] states: “Did I not weep for those who face difficult times; did not my soul feel sorrow for the destitute?” And they should speak words of sympathy and comfort, as [29:13] states: “I would bring joy to a widow’s heart.”

- *Why does the Rambam think the manner in which we give matters so much?*
- *Have you ever received help that preserved your dignity—or help that undermined it? What made the difference?*



Chapter 8: Loving the Stranger

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

In this chapter, we encounter one of the Bible's greatest moral revolutions. Whereas other Ancient Near Eastern societies emphasized the need to protect widows and orphans, members of one's community who were vulnerable to exploitation, the Torah expands the category of widows and orphans to include *gerim* (strangers/sojourners/immigrants) too. Rather than just protecting **our** vulnerable, we are also expected to take care of **the** vulnerable, whether or not they are full members of our community.

In inspiring and challenging us to live up to this mandate, the Torah appeals to memory. Having been *gerim* ourselves, we should be especially sensitive to the plight of *gerim*. Memory is complex—remembering past sufferings can help elicit passionate concern for the downtrodden, but it can also lead to unbridled rage and a sense of moral license. With the *mitzvah* to love the *ger* (singular of *gerim*), the Torah is pushing us to nurture a particular type of memory, one that will lead to more compassionate and empathic treatment of the defenseless.

As you read this chapter, consider how memories of vulnerability and suffering—both collective experiences of the Jewish people and more individual experiences—affect your life, and ask yourself whether and how you could play a more active role in helping memory teach you to live with greater compassion and sensitivity.

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. The Torah appeals to memory and feeling (“you were a *ger*”) as the foundation for the obligation to love the *ger*. Does this seem like a reliable basis for ethics?



2. What kind of love is it possible to have for people who are not in your inner circle?
What's radical about the commandment to love the *ger*?
3. Have you ever felt like a stranger or an outsider—perhaps in a new place or a new community? What did that experience feel like, and what did you most need from the people around you?

III. Sources and excerpts

1. Deuteronomy 6:5

You shall love God your Lord with all your heart and with all your life and with all your might.

2. Leviticus 19:18

Do not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your people; but love your neighbor as yourself; I am God.

- *Looking at these commands side by side, why do you think the command to love God does not read, “love God as yourself?” And why do you think the command to love your neighbor does not read, “love your neighbor with all your heart and with all your life and with all your might”?*
- *How does the first part of Leviticus 19:18 (“Do not take vengeance”) further illuminate the meaning of the mitzvah to love your neighbor?*

3. Exodus 23:9

Do not oppress a *ger*, but know the life of the *ger* because you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt.



4. Leviticus 19:34

The *ger* who lives with you will be like one of your citizens; and you will love them as yourself, for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt; I am God your Lord.

5. Deuteronomy 10:17–19

For God your Lord is the Lord of lords and Master of masters, the great, mighty, and awesome God, Who does not show favor or take bribes, Who does justice for orphan and widow, Who loves a *ger* to give them food and clothing—You will love the *ger*, for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt.

6. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 182

Exodus teaches us the baseline requirement: not to oppress the stranger. Leviticus magnifies the demand: not only must we not oppress the stranger, we must actively love him. And Deuteronomy raises the stakes even higher: loving the stranger is a crucial form of “walking in God’s ways.”

- Above, we translated the verse from Exodus: “Do not oppress a *ger*, but know the life of the *ger*...”. But it could also be translated, “Do not oppress a *ger*, for you know the life of the *ger*...”. What are the implications of each translation?
- Why do you think the Torah repeats the command to care for the *ger* so many times?
- How is a *ger* like an orphan or widow (meaning: one of the most vulnerable members of society), and how is a *ger* different from an orphan and widow?



7. Leviticus 25:23

But the land [of Israel] will not be sold in perpetuity, because the land is Mine; because you are *gerim* and residents with Me.

- *How does this image of Jews as gerim in God's land—in the present tense—resonate with you?*
- *What does this image add to your understanding of our obligations vis-à-vis the ger?*

8. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 189

The lesson—having been strangers in Egypt, the Jewish people are forbidden to oppress the stranger—is so familiar and so often cited that it's easy to miss just how radical it is. The Torah could have responded to the memory of affliction quite differently, saying, Since you were tyrannized and exploited and no one did anything to help you, you don't owe anything to anyone; how dare anyone ask anything of you? Might that not have been a natural response? But the Torah chooses the opposite path: Since you were exploited and oppressed, you must never be among those who exploit and oppress. You must remember **what it feels like** to be a stranger, and the empathy you muster must intensify your commitment to siding with the weak and vulnerable against those who would harm them.

9. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 191

There are crucial lessons that I think we can learn from the texts we've seen. Some key examples:

(1) The demonization and dehumanization of immigrants and foreigners is an abomination, and an assault on biblical ethics. You cannot call yourself a religious person and hate those



whom God loves. (Again: you can disagree in good faith about how best to help the defenseless but you cannot simply dismiss the mandate to assist them.)

(2) Be careful about assuming that the immigrant comes with belligerent intentions. The word *ger* is connected to the Hebrew root meaning “to be hostile.” Yet the Torah wants us to love the *ger*, not hate him. In other words, we are taught to love the one we too easily tar as an enemy. To be absolutely clear, sometimes a perceived enemy really is an enemy and needs to be treated as such. The Torah does not preach naivete but it does challenge us to overcome prejudice and expand our circle of concern.

(3) Immigrants should be cared for but also protected by law; we can’t rely on empathy alone. Societies need to ensure that the vulnerable are protected even when, for whatever reason, those who are more powerful than they harbor them ill will.

IV. Group discussion questions

1. How do you understand the Torah’s call to extend our love beyond our immediate community? Can you think of specific ways this principle might shape your interactions with someone you would consider a *ger* in your own community?
2. The Torah emphasizes that we know and should remember the experience of being a *ger*. In the same way, the Haggadah on Passover urges us to remember and feel the experience of having been slaves in Egypt. What are the Torah and the Haggadah trying to teach us, and what pedagogical tools do they use to convey their message?
3. In this chapter, Rabbi Held quotes Leon Wieseltier: “The Holocaust enlarged our Jewish hearts, and it shrunk them.” How do we account for the fact that the same experience of suffering can generate both compassion and hostility? What determines which response wins out?



V. Enrichment texts

10. Deuteronomy 23:16–17

You shall not hand over to their master a slave who seeks refuge with you from their master. They shall live with you in any place they may choose among the settlements in your midst, wherever they please; you must not oppress them.

11. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 187

Why is the Torah so sensitive to the plight of slaves fleeing their master? The people of Israel are themselves a nation of runaway slaves worshipping a God who liberates slaves. Here again, our ethical sensibilities are to be guided both by what we've been through and by who God is. We were fugitive slaves pursued by an almost unimaginably hostile master—and God refused to return us.

- *Ancient Near Eastern law codes did everything they could to hinder runaway slaves in their pursuit of freedom: escaped slaves faced extreme punishment or death, harboring them was penalized, and returning them was rewarded. How does the Torah's command here compare to that legal and moral backdrop? What makes it morally and theologically radical?*
- *These texts suggest that loving the ger may require not just empathy, but active resistance to unjust systems. What might that look like in practice today?*
- *What kind of image of God emerges from this commandment and Rabbi Held's interpretation? How might that image shape how we think about our own ethical obligations?*



Chapter 9: Must We Love Our Enemies Too?

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

This chapter, about loving enemies, was the most difficult for me to write. First, there are so many varied and often disparate voices in Jewish tradition that it can be difficult to know how to sort through them. Second, the issues and questions about how we relate to enemies are complex, and often excruciatingly painful—not to mention morally challenging. Third, discussions of this topic are hindered by a massive (but widely accepted!) oversimplification according to which Christianity teaches us to love our enemies whereas Judaism does not. Finally, we often fail to clarify what kind of “enemy” we are talking about.

As you read through the chapter and work through the sources provided here, I invite you to consider especially Rabbi Yehezkel Levenstein’s assertion that hatred is always and everywhere a vice. Does this seem right to you, and if so, what are the implications of believing this? If you disagree, what are examples of righteous or justified hatred?

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. Do you think it should be a religious value to forgive your enemies? Why or why not?
2. Are there crimes that are—or should be—beyond forgiveness?
3. Think of someone you consider an “enemy” or someone who has deeply wronged you. What would it take—emotionally, spiritually, practically—for you to offer them help if they needed it?



III. Sources and excerpts

1. *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 211–212

When I was growing up, I was taught that there is a stark dividing line between Jewish and Christian ethics: Christianity instructs its adherents to turn the other cheek, and Judaism counsels its followers to defend themselves and fight back. In the schools I attended, this was accepted almost as a truism. And yet in point of fact the talmudic sages celebrate “those who are insulted but do not insult, hear themselves reviled but do not answer” (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88b) and to this day, traditional Jews pray three times a day: “To those who curse me, let my soul be silent.” Although it is surely not the only strain in Jewish tradition, an ethos of nonretaliation is deeply grounded in Jewish sources.

- *What, if anything, were you taught about how Judaism teaches us to relate to those who harm us?*

2. Exodus 23:4–5

When you encounter your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering, you must take it back to them. When you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with them.

- *Verse 4 uses the word “enemy” (oyev), where verse 5 uses the word “someone who hates you” (sona’akha). Would you say there is a difference between an enemy and someone who hates you?*
- *If these two verses were your only guidelines for how to act toward someone who hates you, would they inspire you to change the way you treat people? If everyone in society followed these guidelines, how do you imagine society would look?*



3. Targum Onkelos (ancient Aramaic translation) of Exodus 23:5

When you see your enemy's donkey fallen beneath its load and would withhold from taking it up, you should let go of what is in your heart about him and unload with him.

- *Targum Onkelos understands the “freeing” from the verse not as helping remove the burden but removing the internal obstacles of hatred and enmity. In some sense, Onkelos says that in order to truly help your enemy, you must make them no longer your enemy. What do you think about this reading?*

4. Rabbi Meir ha-Kohen (13th c.), Hagahot Maimoniyot to Hilkhhot De'ot 6:3

This only applies if they are your neighbor in Torah and *mitzvot*. But a wicked person who does not receive rebuke, it is a *mitzvah* to hate them, as it is said, “Fear of God is hatred of evil” (Proverbs 8:13), and it says, “Will I not hate those who hate You?”

- *Rabbi Meir ha-Kohen limits the identity of “neighbor” to someone who is not evil and has a genuine intention of changing if they do something wrong (they “receive rebuke”). What do you think would motivate him to limit the command to love one's neighbor in this way?*
- *Rabbi Meir ha-Kohen argues that hating your enemies serves a positive value. What value is that? Do you agree?*

5. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 221

If human beings—even awful, murderous ones—are created in God's image, then perhaps we are forbidden—for religious reasons—from hating them. If we love God, we cannot hate what God has made.



Is this right? Again, I am not at all certain.

Religion helps us ask hard questions but it does not often offer us easy answers.

IV. Group discussion questions

1. Do you consider it an ideal to love one's enemies, or would you agree more with Rabbi Meir ha-Kohen that it is incumbent upon us to hate true enemies?
2. What does the word "enemy" mean to you? Are there different categories of enemies?
3. How can you remove your internal obstacles to forgive an enemy?

V. Enrichment texts

6. Rabbi Yehezkel Levenstein (1885–1974), Or Yehezkel vol. 4, p. 145

"Righteous people walk on them but sinners trip on them" (Hosea 14:10). The sinner truly trips in this way, since because she is obliged to be occupied with hatred, she makes herself used to the character trait of hatred. And one who speaks *lashon hara* (gossip) about the wicked and who influences himself to be used to *lashon hara*, and similarly when one is angry at them, the character trait of anger strengthens inside her, and so too with other character traits.... So the required way of worship is to hate the deeds of the wicked, but it is forbidden to hate the wicked themselves—because a person is beloved that she was created in the image and it is impossible to hate her. Rather, it is required to ingrain in herself love of God in such large measure that through its strength she comes to hate the deeds of the wicked, and when she hates only their deeds she will be raised and grow, because love of God increases inside her. But when she hates the wicked, she adds in herself the trait of hatred, which is the way of "sinners trip on them."



- *Rabbi Levenstein warns that hatred becomes a habit that shapes our character. Have you experienced how negative emotions toward others can change who you become? How does this insight challenge or affirm your approach to enemies?*
- *What is the distinction between hating someone's deeds versus hating the person themselves? Is this a practical distinction you can maintain, or does it feel artificial?*

7. Proverbs 25:21–22

If your enemy is hungry, give them bread to eat; if they are thirsty, give them water to drink. You will be heaping live coals on their head, and God will reward you.

- *The text presents this approach as superior to withholding aid. In what situations might this teaching be most challenging to follow? When might it be dangerous?*
- *How might providing for an enemy's basic needs (food and water) differ from other forms of kindness or forgiveness? Why do you think the text focuses on these fundamental acts?*

8. Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush, 1809–1879) to Proverbs 25:21–22

“If your enemy is hungry, you should feed them bread”—this advises one who wants to take great revenge on her enemy: she should not take revenge in this way, by withholding bread or water from him, but on the contrary, she should give him everything good—if he is hungry, she should feed him; if he is thirsty, she should give him water, for in so doing she will benefit in two ways:



(1) “You will be heaping live coals on his head”—for with the good you are doing for him, it would appear to him that you are heaping live coals on his head! When he remembers how he sinned against you and did something bad to you, he will be embarrassed and ashamed that now he is forced to receive bread and water from you in payment for his wickedness.

(2) “And the Lord will reward you”—that you will receive reward from God because of the *tzedakah* (charity) that you did; but if you take revenge by not giving him anything, you will not receive a reward.

9. Ralbag (Gersonides, 1288–1344) to Proverbs 25:21–22

“If your enemy is hungry”—do not refrain from showing her grace and feeding her bread. “And if she is thirsty, give her water”—for this is an extremely praiseworthy character trait to be good to all people, to a friend and to an enemy. But if you are bothered by the thought, how can you be good to her when she did bad to you? Know that in truth, in bestowing one of the greatest of virtues upon your own soul, you are taking revenge on her.

“Live coals...”—for this is as unpleasant for her as if you were “piling live coals on her head” to make her burn with shame over the good that she received from you in payment for the bad that she bestowed on you. “And God will pay you” in goodness on account of the good that you bestowed on her.

- *Both Malbim and Ralbag suggest that kindness to enemies causes them shame and embarrassment. Is this a form of “revenge” you’re comfortable with?*
- *Malbim presents two benefits: the enemy’s shame and God’s reward. Which motivation feels more compelling to you? Does it matter which one drives our actions?*



- *These interpretations transform an act of kindness into a form of “taking revenge.” Does this reframing make it easier or harder to show kindness to enemies? What does it say about human psychology?*



Chapter 10: The Beginning and End of Judaism is Love

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

This chapter explores the idea that compassionate presence with those who are suffering is the greatest height a human being can achieve in this lifetime—or, in more traditional language, that it is a form of “walking in God’s ways.” We will consider both why walking in God’s ways is so central to Jewish ethics and spirituality, and also why it can be so hard for many of us. In particular, we explore the ways that fear can get in the way of compassion, and underscore the idea that to grow as a religious person involves learning not to be controlled or governed by our fears. (This is not the same as not having them!)

As you read this chapter, ask yourself about models of compassion you’ve witnessed, and consider how, when faced with suffering and loss, you could learn to respond with greater compassion and presence.

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. What is Judaism ultimately about, and what is it really for? If you were asked to explain the purpose of the Torah to someone unfamiliar with it, what would you say?
2. When someone is suffering, what do they most need from other people? Practical help, emotional support, wise advice, simple presence, or something else?
3. Who has taught you the most about compassion? What made that person's way of responding to others so powerful?



III. Sources and excerpts

1. Sifrei Devarim 49 (3rd c. CE)

These are the ways of God: “God, merciful, compassionate” (Exodus 34:6). And it says, “Anyone who is called by the name of God will be saved” (Joel 3:5). But how is it possible for a person to be called by the name of God?

Rather, God is called “merciful,” so too you should be merciful. The Holy Blessed One is called “compassionate,” so too you should be compassionate, as it is said, “Compassionate and merciful is God... God gives free gifts” (Psalm 145:8). God is called “righteous”—as it is said, “For God is righteous, and loves righteousness” (Psalm 11:7)—so too you should be righteous. God is called kind (*hasid*)—as it is said, “For I am kind, declares God” (Jeremiah 3:12)—so too you should be kind.

That’s why it is said, “Anyone who is called by the name of God will be saved,” and it says, “all who are called by My name” (Isaiah 43:7), and it says, “All of God’s actions are for God’s sake” (Proverbs 16:4).

2. Babylonian Talmud Sotah 14a

Said Rabbi Hama bar Rabbi Hanina: What is written, “After God your Lord you should walk” (Deuteronomy 13:5)? Is it possible for a person to walk after the divine presence?! Is it not already said, “For God your Lord is a devouring fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24)?!

Rather, to walk after the Holy Blessed One’s character traits: Just as God clothes the naked—as it is written, “God made for Adam and his wife clothes of skin and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21)—so too must you clothe the naked.

The Holy Blessed One visited the sick—as it is written, “God appeared to [Abraham] at Elonei



Mamre” (Genesis 18:1)—so too must you visit the sick.

The Holy Blessed One comforted mourners—as it is written, “After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac” (Genesis 25:11)—so too must you comfort mourners.

The Holy Blessed One buried the dead—as it is written, “God buried [Moses] in the valley” (Deuteronomy 34:6)—so too must you bury the dead.

- *The Sifrei Devarim emphasizes God’s character traits, while the Talmud emphasizes concrete acts of care. What does each text suggest about what it means to imitate God? Which vision speaks to you more, and why?*
- *Many of the actions highlighted here—visiting the sick, comforting mourners, burying the dead—are acts of compassionate presence. Why might the tradition treat these as especially powerful ways of walking in God’s ways?*
- *Do these texts ask more of us than basic morality or justice? What, if anything, distinguishes walking in God’s ways from simply being a good person?*

3. Midrash ha-Gadol (13th c.) to Genesis 37:1

This is what Scripture says: “Go, see the actions of God, terrible deed against people” (Psalm 66:5). This verse is said about the terrible deeds that the Holy Blessed One visits upon God’s world. And this is one of the four character traits that it is not appropriate for mortals to use, but only the Holy Blessed One: jealousy, vengeance, price, and terrible deed.



4. Mekhilta (3rd c. CE) Massekhta de-va-Hodesh 6

“For I, God your Lord, am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5). But am I a God of jealousy?! I rule over jealousy, and jealousy does not rule over Me.

I rule over sleep, and sleep does not rule over Me, as it is written, “Behold, God does not sleep or slumber, guardian of Israel” (Psalm 121:4).

- *The Midrash ha-Gadol and the Mekhilta offer different explanations for why some divine traits should not be imitated. What is the difference between them, and what are the implications of each approach?*
- *If God is sometimes described in Tanakh as jealous, wrathful, or vengeful, why do our Rabbis insist that these traits should not serve as models for human behavior?*
- *What kind of God do these texts ultimately encourage us to imitate?*

5. *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 229–230

Textual support notwithstanding, I’d like to suggest that part of what allows the sages to conclude that God’s mercy is somehow more essential to who God is than is God’s wrath, is that they trust their own religious intuitions. (Of course, reading Scripture can shape our intuitions and our intuitions can shape our readings in ways that can never be teased apart.) The sages are quite comfortable with the idea that some things are just more appropriate to attribute to God than others; we shouldn’t need scriptural support to show that love is more fundamental than anger to who God is. That is the kind of intuition that religion should honor rather than override. To demand textual evidence that love is a higher form of perfection than hate, for example, is to betray a kind of spiritual sickness.



What so disturbs many people ought perhaps to inspire us instead: The sages' "selective reading" reflects their deep trust in their sense of what the highest good is. The Bible itself honors this too: God wants Abraham to protest against the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah not because Scripture instructs him to—Abraham predates Sinai and thus has no Scripture to turn to—but because God honors Abraham's internal moral sense. Most often, religion is not about overturning our moral intuitions so much as bolstering them and moving us to act on them.

6. *Judaism Is About Love*, p. 239–240

Implicit in all this is a simple but revolutionary claim: acts of loving kindness are not diversions or distractions from what really matters; they are the very heart and culmination of the spiritual life.

There is a spiritual litmus test implied in the remarkable statement: if we study Torah and it does not render us kinder and more willing to be present with people facing crisis, sorrow, or loss, then it is not Torah that we have studied. Perhaps it is Jewish culture, or academic Jewish studies; but it is not Torah. Torah leads to love, the midrash implies, or it is not Torah at all.

I am making a normative claim, not a descriptive one. In other words, I am advocating for how I believe religion **should** function, not portraying how it always **does** function.

- *Rabbi Held argues that the rabbis' "selective reading" of God's character reflects confidence in their moral and religious intuitions. When should religious tradition challenge our moral instincts, and when should it affirm them?*



- *Rabbi Held suggests that Torah study should be judged, at least in part, by its moral fruits. Is it fair to ask whether learning Torah makes us more compassionate? Why or why not?*
- *What do you think of Held's claim that acts of loving kindness are not a distraction from spiritual life but its culmination? How does this idea reshape what it means to "walk in God's ways"?*

IV. Group discussion questions

1. What do you think is the ultimate purpose of Torah, *mitzvot*, and religious practice?
2. Imagine two people: one is deeply knowledgeable and observant but not especially compassionate; the other is consistently kind and present for people in need but less engaged in traditional religious practice. Which person better embodies the ideals of this chapter? What makes this comparison difficult?
3. The chapter emphasizes visiting the sick, comforting mourners, and accompanying people in moments of vulnerability. Why are these forms of presence often so difficult? What fears or obstacles most commonly get in the way?
4. If "walking in God's ways" means imitating the qualities the tradition considers most essential to God, which qualities most need cultivation in your own life? What practices, relationships, or experiences help develop them?

V. Enrichment texts

7. Sifrei Devarim 49 (3rd c. CE)

Expounders of *aggadah* [that is, of the stories and nonlegal dimensions of the Jewish tradition] say: Is it your desire to know [or perhaps, be intimate with] the One Who spoke and



the world came into being? Study *aggadah*, for through doing so, you will come to know the One Who spoke and the world came into being, and will cleave to God's ways.

8. Rabbi Yehezkel Levenstein (1885–1974), Or Yehezkel vol. 4, p. 155

The whole purpose of the human being is only to delight in the divine presence. In fact, basking in the divine presence is not limited to the next world; the righteous merit basking in the divine presence even in this world. For when the righteous merit the attribute of *hesed*—an attribute that is one of God's attributes—in its wholeness, then they are basking in the divine presence in this world, in that they merit God's own attributes.

- *How does the midrash (source #7) understand the relationship between Torah study, knowing God, and walking in God's ways?*
- *Rabbi Levenstein (#8) suggests that acts of *hesed* are not only ways of imitating God but also ways of experiencing God's presence. How does this deepen the idea of "walking in God's ways"?*
- *What is gained by describing compassion and love in theological terms rather than merely moral ones?*



Chapter 11: Love in the Ruins

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

This chapter builds on a simple but radical idea prescribed by our sages: in the face of destruction and devastation, seek out and provide more love. This can seem difficult and daunting, but it's also intuitive for many of us much of the time. In the face of unspeakable horrors, many of us know that we are invited and summoned to care for one another. We can often recognize, in the wake of those moments, that how we treat one another is in some profound sense how we treat God. As you read through the chapter and study the sources gathered here, ask yourself how love has functioned in moments of deep suffering—your own suffering and that of those around you. How might we concretely embody the lessons that Jewish tradition seeks to teach?

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. When you think about communal or personal tragedies in your life, do you tend to focus more on mourning what was lost or on rebuilding what might come next? How do you balance these impulses?
2. What role does love play in your life during times of devastation?
3. How much control do we have over how we respond to moments of crisis? What role might religious guidance play in those moments?

III. Sources and excerpts

1. Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6

There were five events that happened to our ancestors... on Tisha B'Av (9th Av)... It was decreed about our ancestors that they should not enter the Land of Israel; the Temple was



destroyed—the first and the second time; Betar was captured; and the city [of Jerusalem] was plowed.

- *What do you think it says about the Mishnah's approach that commemoration of tragedies are concentrated on particular days and not, e.g., spread throughout the Jewish calendar? What kind of an approach to tragedy does this situation encourage those who practice it?*
- *Why is actively remembering and mourning these events so important?*

2. Mishnah Ta'anit 4:8

Said Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel: There were no days of joy for Israel like Tu B'Av (15th Av) and Yom Kippur. For on those days, the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white garments—borrowed, in order not to shame any one who had none.

And the daughters of Jerusalem would come out and dance in the vineyards.

And what would they say? “Young man, lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself. Do not set your eyes on beauty but set your eyes on the family. ‘Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman that fears the Lord, she shall be praised’ (Proverbs 31:30).”

3. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 251

Now, let's think about this for a moment. The Temple has been destroyed, and we are in mourning; the traditional seven days of mourning (*shiva*) have not yet been completed—and suddenly we are thrust into one of the most joyous days of the year. What is going on here?



The tradition implicitly makes a stunning claim. In the wake of destruction and devastation, we should respond with... more love. Grief and lament have their place, but they cannot, must not, be given the final word. When everything seems lost, the Mishnah subtly reminds us, set about reaffirming life and rediscovering love.

- *This mishnah highlights Tu B'Av as a day of great joy—a day of coupling off! Does this directive—to seek out love, even and especially in the midst of great loss—make sense to you as a paradigm to follow?*
- *Notice that the young women would wear borrowed clothing. This was so that those who couldn't afford a nice white garment would not be embarrassed. What's significant about this detail?*

4. Yalkut Shimoni (13th c.) on Nakh #522

“For I desire kindness, and not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6). The Holy Blessed One said, “The acts of kindness you do to each other are more beloved to Me than all the sacrifices that King Solomon sacrificed before Me.”

A thousand burnt offerings offered Solomon, but it is written, “This is the Torah *la*-burnt offering *la*-grain offering” (Leviticus 7:37)—this is the Torah, not (*lo*) a burnt offering and not a grain offering.

Once, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was walking in Jerusalem and Rabbi Yehoshua was walking after him. He saw the Temple destroyed. He said, “Woe to us that this house is destroyed, the place where they atone for the sins of Israel!”



[Rabban Youanan] said to him, “My son, do not let this trouble you. We have an atonement that is like it—and which is it? Acts of kindness. That’s why it is said, ‘For I desire kindness, and not sacrifice’ and it says, ‘I said: the world will be built on kindness’ (Psalm 89:3).”

5. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 250

In some sense, sacrifice and acts of lovingkindness are structurally parallel: both are about giving something to God. Since, in the absence of the Temple, we can’t give something to God directly, we give something to God indirectly, by giving it to God’s creations.

- *How can kindness be understood as an act of atonement? An act of sacrifice?*

IV. Group discussion questions

1. How do you think the Rabbinic responses to loss and devastation—mourning, sacred indignation, kindness, and love—might shape the ways we confront tragedy in our own lives and communities?
2. The sources suggest that acts of kindness can serve as a form of “atonement” or healing after destruction. Have you experienced giving or receiving kindness as a path toward healing? What did that look like?
3. The chapter suggests that responding to devastation with “more love” is a form of resistance or resilience. Can you think of historical or contemporary examples where communities have embodied this principle? What made their responses effective or transformative?
4. How do we distinguish between healthy movement toward joy and love after tragedy versus bypassing or suppressing necessary grief?



V. Enrichment texts

6. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1903–1993), *Kol Dodi Dofek* (1956)

We do not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty, but, rather about the path wherein man shall walk when suffering strikes. We ask neither about the cause of evil nor about its purpose, but, rather about how it might be mended and elevated. How shall a person act in a time of trouble? What ought a man to do so that he not perish in his afflictions?

- *Rabbi Soloveitchik distinguishes between asking “why” suffering happens versus asking “what now”—how to respond when it does. Why might this shift in focus be spiritually or psychologically important? What does each question assume about human agency and divine will?*
- *The passage suggests suffering can be “elevated”—transformed into something meaningful. What might this elevation look like in practice? How do we distinguish between finding meaning in suffering and justifying or minimizing it?*



Chapter 12: Waiting for God

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

This chapter explores a wonderfully provocative image from a *midrash*: that serving God involves “waiting for God.” What might it mean (and what probably does it not mean) to wait for God? We will explore the idea that waiting for God actually involves imitating God—that is, that it involves creating moments of redemption even here and now, in our profoundly broken and unredeemed world. The idea is that we can catch glimpses—that we can create glimpses—of what a redeemed, perfected world could look like. As you read the chapter, consider how you would go about doing that—in your own life, in the life of your community, or even on a broader scale.

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. How can we talk about a God who loves in a world so full of suffering—and what does that tension do to a person?
2. Does it push you toward faith, toward cynicism, or toward some uneasy space in between? How do you make sense of that pull?

III. Sources and excerpts

1. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

Said Rava: When they bring in a person for judgment, they say to them, “Did you do business faithfully? Did you fix time for Torah? Did you have children? **Did you wait for redemption?** Did you debate in wisdom? Did you understand one thing inside another?”



- *Upon one's death, says Rava, the heavenly powers have a series of questions for us about how we lived our lives. Why do you think "waiting for redemption" appears alongside concrete responsibilities like honest business dealings and Torah study? What does that placement suggest about what redemption requires?*
- *What might it mean for "waiting" to be something a person is held accountable for? What would count as doing it well or poorly?*
- *Is waiting for redemption primarily a matter of belief, hope, action, or something else?*

2. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 260

I think that what it means is this: when we die, each of us is asked, Did you create moments of redemption even in the midst of this impossibly broken, thoroughly unredeemed world? Did you create pockets of holiness even in the midst of this so often totally profane and degraded world? Did you create a home, or a school, or a classroom, or a work environment, or a city block, in which human dignity was real and the presence of God was manifest? With the way you carried yourself, did you strive to build those things? ... Did you catch glimmers of the Promised Land even as you had no choice but to live in the wilderness? Did you **create** glimmers of the Promised Land even as you had no choice but to live in the wilderness?

Human beings are not capable of redeeming the world. The world is stubborn, recalcitrant, and indescribably complex. So often we try to resolve one problem and end up, despite ourselves, creating another. The brokenness is so deep, the problems so intractable, that for a fully redeemed world we have no choice but to wait for God.



3. Sifra Kedoshim Parashah 1 (3rd c. CE)

“Speak to the whole congregation of Israelites and say to them, ‘Be holy’” (Leviticus 19:1). ...

Abba Shaul says: The retinue for the king—what are they supposed to be? Imitating (or: waiting for) the king.

In a linguistic coincidence, there is a word in Hebrew for “wait for” (מַחֲכָה) that is almost identical to a word for “imitate” (מַחֲקָה). Because of this linguistic confusion, some Medieval manuscripts of this midrash read “wait for” and others, “imitate.”

- *What kind of religious life emerges if we understand holiness as waiting for God?*
- *What kind of religious life emerges if we understand holiness as imitating God?*
- *How do “waiting” and “imitating” relate to each other? Do they feel complementary, in tension, or mutually exclusive? Why?*

4. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 261

We wait by imitating. We wait for God by manifesting love and kindness and compassion in the world. We wait for God by conducting our lives as if human dignity were a fact rather than an ever-deferred dream. We wait for God, I’d venture to say, by making it seem less crazy and less implausible to believe in God.

IV. Group discussion questions

1. What might it look like, concretely, to create moments of redemption in an unredeemed world? What makes this difficult?



2. How, if at all, have these texts changed your understanding of what it means to “wait for redemption”?
3. Rava imagines that we are asked at the end of life, “Did you wait for redemption?” What would a good answer look like?
4. How does the idea that we “wait by imitating” God challenge the choice between blind faith and cynical disengagement?

V. Enrichment texts

5. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 257

The Torah is, in large part, about a journey to the Promised Land, and about the massive difficulties in getting there. The book of Deuteronomy goes to great lengths to prepare the Israelites for arrival in the land—it offers them inspiration to remember and love God, warns them of the consequences of forgetting God and being hard-hearted with one another, and grants them righteous laws (Deuteronomy 4:8) to help them build a good, decent, and just society, and to guide them in thanking and serving God. And then, with the people on the border of the land, the book simply ends. Imagine reading a long and gripping drama and then discovering that the author simply decided to forgo a conclusion. Studying the Torah is in a way like that. The story seems to end in mid-sentence, giving it “the character of an unfinished symphony.”

6. Exodus 6:5–8

“I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant.

“Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: ‘I am God. I will free (וְהוֹצֵאתִי) you from the labors of the Egyptians and I will deliver (וְהוֹצֵלְתִּי) you from their bondage. I will redeem (וְגִאֲלֹתִי) you



with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take (וְלִקְחָתִי) you to be My people, and I will be your Lord. And you shall know that I, God, am your Lord Who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring (וְהִבֵּאתִי) you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession—I, God.”

- *Rabbi Held describes the Torah as an “unfinished symphony.” What does it mean for a sacred text to end without reaching its apparent destination?*
- *The Exodus passage contains five promises of redemption (we gave you the Hebrew verbs), yet Jewish tradition famously centers on four cups of wine, corresponding to the first four of these verbs. What might it mean for our Passover tradition to preserve a sense of unfinished redemption?*
- *How does the idea that redemption remains unfinished reshape what it means to “wait for redemption”?*



Chapter 13: The God of Judaism Is a God of Love

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

It is a cultural commonplace that the God of Tanakh (which Christians refer to as the “Old Testament”) is a God of violence and vengeance, while the God of the New Testament is a God of sweetness and love. Sadly, this caricature has been internalized and accepted as accurate by countless Jews, including many who are passionate about Judaism. Through careful study of a series of biblical passages, this chapter aims to show that the caricature is as misleading as it is widespread. While I do not pretend to “solve” every difficult or disturbing text (and I’m not sure we should try to “solve” them; part of what it means to live with a religious tradition is to live with jagged edges), I underscore what I take to be one of Tanakh’s most fundamental messages: God loves the Jewish people, and a major part of what makes God God is the unfathomable depth of God’s love and mercy.

As you read this chapter, I hope you’ll consider how we could embrace this idea of a God who loves us more deeply, and less ambivalently. How could we teach this to our children, and how could we correct the ways we ourselves have internalized problematic and even damaging images of God? And ask too: how would our communities change if we truly believed that we live in covenant with a God of love?

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. Which portrayals of God in the Tanakh have stayed with you most strongly—and why?
2. Have you ever struggled with the way God is portrayed in the Tanakh? What felt difficult or unsettling?



3. When you think about the God of the Tanakh, where—if at all—do you see expressions of love?
4. How would you describe God today—and how does that shape your relationship with God, if at all?
5. If you pray, who, or what, do you imagine you are praying to?

III. Sources and excerpts

1. Isaiah 55:6–9

Seek God when God is to be found; call to God when God is close. The wicked abandons their way and a person of sin their thoughts; they will return to God and God will have mercy on them, to our Lord Who is great to forgive. Because My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways—declares God. For higher as the heavens are than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.

- *What does it mean for God to be “found” and “close” (or not)?*
- *The text simultaneously emphasizes God’s closeness and God’s distance. How can both be true? How can this tension be resolved?*
- *What is the text implying about God’s thoughts and ways? How are they different from ours?*

2. Radak (Rabbi David Kimhi, 13th c., Provence) on Isaiah 55:8

Because when a person sins against her fellow, she takes revenge on him and does not forgive him, or even if she forgives him in appearance she keeps it in her heart...



“Behold,” [God says,] “I am great to forgive—not like you. When I forgive, I forgive truly, and nothing of the sin remains with me.”

- *How does the Radak interpret the claim that God’s ways are not like human ways?*
- *According to the Radak, what makes God’s forgiveness fundamentally different from human forgiveness?*
- *Do you agree with the Radak’s portrayal of human forgiveness as often partial? Why or why not?*

3. Hosea 11:1–9

I fell in love with Israel
when he was still a child;
and I have called [him] My son
ever since Egypt.
Thus were they called,
but they went their own way;
they sacrifice to Baals
and offer to carved images.
I have pampered Ephraim,
taking them in My arms;
but they have ignored
My healing care.
I drew them with human ties,
with cords of love;



but I seemed to them as One
Who imposed a yoke on their jaws,
though I was offering them food.
No!
They return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria is their king.
Because they refuse to repent,
a sword shall descend upon their towns
and consume their limbs
and devour [them] because of their designs.
For My people persists
in its defection from Me;
when it is summoned upward,
it does not rise at all.
How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How surrender you, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah,
render you like Zeboiim?
I have had a change of heart,
all My tenderness is stirred.
I will not act on My wrath,
will not turn to destroy Ephraim.
For I am God—not human—
the Holy One in your midst:
I will not come in fury.



4. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 269

Think about how radical this is. Imagine hearing someone say that God loves us like a mother loves her children. Now imagine that they said, “But keep in mind: God is **like** a person but God is not **actually** a person.” You might be tempted to think: “Okay, since God is God and not a person, then God doesn’t really love us. After all, that’s anthropomorphism, attributing human characteristics to God. People love, but God doesn’t, and to say that God loves is just a figure of speech.” But Hosea argues precisely the opposite: The fact that God is God and not a person means that God can love in a much deeper and more enduring way than we can even begin to fathom, let alone embody ourselves. We are reminded that God is God not so that we remember that God doesn’t really love us, but on the contrary, so that we understand that God’s love for us far outstrips anything we could possibly imagine.

- *How would you describe the emotional character of God in the passage in Hosea?*
- *How does Rabbi Held reinterpret the idea that God is “not human”? What does divine difference mean in this reading?*
- *In Rabbi Held’s reading, how does Hosea both use and challenge the metaphor of God as a loving parent?*

5. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 307

To return to where we started, all this talk about divine love may strike some readers as... well, unJewish. And that’s precisely why I’ve written this book: to help us overcome impoverished and distorted understandings of the Jewish tradition. Judaism tells us of a God of love Who summons us to lead lives of love; we are called both to feel love and to act



lovingly. Jewish law, ritual, and practice are intended to give concrete expression to our love, both for one another and for God.

The loving God will not force us to love; God is too invested in our freedom for that. God does not determine what we feel or how we act—but God waits on our love. We saw [in Chapter 12] that part of what it means to live a religious life is to wait for God. If I may be so bold, I'd add that a significant part of what it means to be God is to wait for us.

IV. Group discussion questions

1. When you revisit one challenging Torah story (e.g., the Flood, the binding of Isaac, the plagues, or the conquest), how—if at all—does Rabbi Held's theology change the way you read it?
2. Does this understanding of God as loving help you make sense of that story—or does it create new problems?
3. What do we gain—and what might we risk losing—if we understand God primarily in terms of love rather than power?
4. Do you find Held's claim persuasive—that the God of the Tanakh is fundamentally a God of love? Why or why not?
5. If you took seriously the idea that God's love is primary, how might it change the way you relate to God—or to other people?

V. Enrichment texts

6. Exodus 33:18–23, 34:5–8

[Moses] said, "Please, show me Your glory!"



[God] said, “I will pass all My goodness before your face and I will announce in the name of God before you; I will have grace on those I will have grace and will have mercy on those I will have mercy.”

[God] said, “You cannot see My face, for no person can see Me and live.” God said, “Here is a place with Me; stand on the rock and, when I pass My glory, I will place you in the crag of the rock and I will cover you with My palm until I pass. I will remove My palm and you will see My back; but My face cannot be seen.” ...

God descended in the cloud and stood with [Moses] there and announced in the name of God. God passed before his face and announced, “God! God! Merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, full of kindness and truth, Who guards kindness for thousands, forgives sin and iniquity and transgression, Who will not requite punishment, Who visits the sin of fathers on children and on grandchildren, on third and fourth generations.”

Moses hastened and bowed to the ground.

- *This interaction between Moses and God occurs after God forgives the people for the sin of the golden calf. How do you understand the coexistence of compassion and punishment in this passage?*
- *If love is essential to who God is, how should we understand the persistence of punishment in these verses?*
- *Can a God who “visits the sins of the fathers on children” still be understood as fundamentally loving? Why or why not?*



7. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 271

The first verse of God's self-description describes God's character, or **Who God is**; the second describes God's actions, or **what God does**. Only one word is repeated in both verses, thus underscoring its immense significance: *hesed*, steadfast love. Whatever else God may be, these verses teach, God is a God of love. More precisely, it's essential that we notice that in Exodus 34:6, which describes **Who God is**, no mention whatsoever is made of anger; God's anger is introduced only in verse 7, which portrays **what God does**. The implication of this is crucial for a proper understanding of Jewish theology: anger is not essential to Who God is in the way that love is. God **gets** angry, but God **is** loving.

- *What is at stake in distinguishing between who God is and what God does?*
- *Does the distinction between God's essence (love) and actions (including anger) help resolve moral difficulty in texts?*
- *How does this passage from Exodus deepen or challenge the idea (from Isaiah and Hosea) that God's ways are not like human ways?*
- *When you think about your own identity, would you likewise separate the way you occasionally act from who you are? How is this framework for understanding God helpful? How is it challenging?*



Chapter 14: Engaging Chosenness

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

Modern people are often highly suspicious of the biblical idea of chosenness. And indeed, in crude, triumphalist forms, chosenness can be a dangerous notion. But this chapter proposes an alternative understanding of chosenness that is at once rooted in and committed to the sources, and consciously committed to affirming the dignity, value, and preciousness of all human beings, Jewish and non-Jewish alike.

As you read the chapter and study the sources provided here, consider these two interrelated issues: 1. How does tradition wrestle with the issue of grace as opposed to merit in the context of chosenness? 2. How does tradition work to prevent Jews from developing what the Bible scholar Moshe Weinfield referred to as a “superiority complex”? Finally, as you read this chapter, I hope you’ll challenge yourself to consider what a plausible and compelling theology of divine chosenness would look like to you?

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. What is your emotional reaction to the word “chosenness”?
2. Do you believe that God chose the Jews? Why or why not? If so, why and for what?
3. Do you **feel** chosen? Have you ever?

III. Sources and excerpts

1. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 310

Every theology that takes divine election seriously is confronted with an unavoidable trade-off. Explain what it is about the elect that led to their election and you risk eliciting a



superiority complex (“God loves us because we’re better than everyone else”); insist that their election was pure grace—that is, that the elect did nothing at all to earn it—and you risk making God’s choice seem capricious, and even arbitrary (“God loves us because, well, God loves us”). No matter which path you take, you pay a real price.

2. Mishnah Avot 3:14

[Rabbi Akiva] used to say: Beloved is the human being, for he was created in the image of God. Even more beloved is [the human being], for it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God, as Scripture says, “For in God’s image did God make the human being” (Genesis 9:6).

Beloved are Israel for they were called children of God. Even more beloved [is Israel], for it was made known to them that they are called children of God, as it is said, “You are children of God your Lord” (Deuteronomy 14:1).

Beloved are Israel that God gave them a precious tool. Even more beloved [is Israel], for it was made known to them that God gave them a precious tool with which the world was created, as it is written, “For a good purchase I have given you, My Torah you should not abandon” (Proverbs 4:2).

- *Rabbi Akiva’s language is about “love,” not “chosenness,” but the former has a clear implication for the latter. What do you think about the relationship between love and chosenness? How do you imagine God showing love to humanity and to the Jewish people, given Rabbi Avika’s framework?*
- *Rabbi Akiva demonstrates God’s love for Israel, saying that God calls the Jewish*



people God's children and gives them the Torah. How do these actions show that we are chosen? Do they reflect the same kind of chosenness, or are they different? Why? What do you think it might mean to be God's "children"?

3. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 309

Unsettling as it may be for some, it's important to understand the structure of Rabbi Akiva's teaching. Only human beings—and not other creatures—are created in God's image, he maintains, and only Israel—and not other nations—are called God's children and given the gift of Torah.

4. *Amos 2:3, 9:7*

"You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth. Therefore I will call you to account for all your sins." ...

"To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Cushites"—declares God. "True, I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Aramaeans from Kir."

- *What's your initial reaction upon reading these verses? What do you feel?*
- *Amos seems to be countering exactly these misconceptions, that God chose Israel alone, which makes us special. In fact, God chose other nations too and we are more culpable, not more special. How do you think an audience listening to Amos' words might have reacted to the way he presented these corrections?*



5. *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 343–344

Recall what Rabbi Akiva proclaims: “Beloved is the human being,” he says, “for s/he was created in the image of God.” The talmudic sage speaks in the singular: each and every human being on the face of the earth is loved by God. Continuing, Rabbi Akiva declares: “Beloved are Israel, for they were called children of God.” In speaking of God’s extra love for Israel, the sage speaks in the plural. The contrast between the reference to human beings in the singular and Israel in the plural is extremely suggestive, even if it is almost never remarked upon. Perhaps Rabbi Akiva’s point is that God loves all humanity but God has especial love for one particular collective, the Jewish people. It is not that God loves this Jew or that more than everyone else; it is, rather, that God has entered into a unique relationship with the people of Israel *qua* the people of Israel.

- *What do you make of these two kinds of divine love (love for all human beings and a particular love for the Jewish people)? How do you envision God expressing—or manifesting—each kind of love?*
- *While there are many metaphors used to describe the relationship between God and the Jewish people, including the parent-child relationship described above, one common metaphor is that of a marriage (see pp. 312–313). How might it be helpful to imagine God’s special love for Israel in the framework of a “covenant-marriage”? What might be difficult about this framework?*

IV. Group discussion questions

1. What is appealing about the concept of chosenness? What is dangerous about it?



2. Can other religions or nations be chosen alongside or in different ways from the Jews?
If so, how does that change your understanding of chosenness?
3. Do you feel differently about the idea of chosenness than you did before you read this chapter? If so, how?

V. Enrichment texts

6. Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Harper Collins, 1985), p. 77

Covenant-love is mutual; it distinguishes a relationship of reciprocity. On God's side lies an obligation to fulfill the oath he swore to the Patriarchs, to grant their descendants the promised land, to be their God. Israel, for her part, is to realize her love in the form of observance of her master's stipulations, the *mitzvot*, for they are the words of the language of love... It is not a question of law or love, but law conceived in love, love expressed in law. The two are a unity.

7. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, pp. 76–77

The special status of Israel rests not upon her merits, her strength or numbers or intelligence or honesty, but upon something irrational, a passion, an affair of the heart, not the mind, in short a love. All the efforts to explain the special destiny of Israel in rational terms only dissolve its power.

8. Rambam (Maimonides, 12th c.), *Guide of the Perplexed* II:25 (ed. Pines), p. 329.

Why did God give this Law to this particular nation, and why did God not legislate to the others? ... God wanted it this way... we do not know God's will or the exigency of God's wisdom.



Chapter 15: Loving a Loving God

I. Introduction from Rabbi Shai Held

It is a foundational *mitzvah*, but also, for many, a difficult one to understand: how do we love God? This chapter explores an array of possible responses to this fundamental religious question. Some of the approaches are well-known, like expressing love for God through observance of the *mitzvot* or studying Torah; but others are less obvious, like striving to love as God does and “becoming God’s hands.”

As you read this chapter, ask yourself about the role each of these ways of loving God plays in your life, and about the role some of the others could come to play. As you proceed, you might want to consider another crucial question: is the *mitzvah* of loving God primarily about loving God directly (for example, through encountering God in prayer), or about loving God indirectly (for example, by loving what God loves)?

II. Introductory reflection questions

1. Do you think of religious practices—prayer, study, ritual observance, acts of kindness—as obligations, expressions of love, or some combination of both? What shapes the way you experience them?
2. Have you ever experienced a sense of closeness to God—through prayer, study, nature, relationships, or ordinary daily life? What made that experience possible?
3. What do you think it means to “love God”? Is love of God primarily a feeling, a practice, a form of loyalty, an ethical commitment, or something else?
4. Do you experience spirituality as something found mainly in explicitly religious moments, or as something that can permeate ordinary life as well?



III. Sources and excerpts

1. Siddur Ashkenaz, Shaharit

You have loved us with abounding love, God our Lord, and with great and extraordinary tenderness you have been tender to us. Our Father, Our King, for the sake of our ancestors who trusted in You, and to whom You taught the laws of life, be gracious also to us and teach us. Our Father, compassionate Father, ever compassionate, have compassion on us. Instill in our heart the desire to understand and discern, to listen, learn, and teach, to observe, perform, and fulfill the teachings of Your Torah in love. Enlighten our eyes in Your Torah and let our hearts cling to Your commandments. Unite our hearts to love and revere Your name, so that we may never be ashamed. And because we have trusted in Your holy, great, and revered name, may we be glad and rejoice in Your salvation.

Bring us back in peace from the four corners of the earth and lead us upright to our land. For You are a Lord who performs acts of salvation, and You chose us from all peoples and tongues, bringing us close to Your great name for ever in truth, that we may thank You and proclaim Your Oneness in love.

Blessed are You, God, who chooses God's people Israel in love.

2. Siddur Ashkenaz, Ma'ariv

With everlasting love have You loved Your people, the house of Israel. You have taught us Torah and commandments, decrees, and laws of justice. Therefore, God our Lord, when we lie down and when we rise up we will speak of Your decrees, rejoicing in the words of Your Torah and Your commandments forever. For they are our life and the length of our days, and them we contemplate day and night. And Your love, do not remove from us forever.

Blessed are You, God, Who loves God's people Israel.



3. *Judaism is About Love*, p. 349

Our prayer for God's grace in understanding God's teaching culminates in our yearning not just to fulfill God's commandments, but to fulfill them "out of love" (*be-ahavah*). The significance of this should not be overlooked: the aspiration underlying this whole liturgical unit is for our worship to be animated and driven by love. As important as keeping the commandments is in Jewish life, it is not enough; the ideal is for us to keep the commandments *out of love*. God gives the commandments in love and we, in turn, strive to observe them in love. As we've seen time and again in this book, motives matter: emotions are crucial; and inwardness is key to Judaism's vision of the good life. Just as we are commanded to perform acts out of kindness (*gemilut hasadim*) for others from a place of love for them, so are we commanded to perform God's commandments from a place of love for God.

- *What kinds of love and closeness do these prayers imagine between God and Israel?*
- *In these prayers, how are Torah and commandments portrayed as expressions of love rather than merely obligation?*
- *Many people think of Judaism primarily as a religion of obligation or law rather than love. How does Rabbi Held challenge that assumption? Do you find his reading persuasive or surprising?*
- *What do you think it looks like to perform mitzvot out of love?*

4. Mishnah Avot 3:6

Rabbi Halafta of Kfar Hananyah said: When ten people sit together and occupy themselves



with Torah, the divine presence abides among them, as it is said: “God stands in the congregation of God” (Psalm 82:1). How do we know that the same is true even of five? As it is said: “This band God has established on earth” (Amos 9:6). How do we know that the same is true even of three? As it is said: “In the midst of the judges God judges” (Psalm 82:1). How do we know that the same is true even of two? As it is said: “Then they that fear God spoke one with another, and God hearkened, and heard” (Malachi 3:16). How do we know that the same is true even of one? As it is said: “In every place where I cause my name to be mentioned I will come unto you and bless you” (Exodus 20:21).

5. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *And From There You Shall Seek*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2008), p. 145.

When I sit down to learn Torah, I find myself immediately in the company of the sages of the [tradition]. The relations between us are personal. The Rambam is at my right, Rabbenu Tam at my left, Rashi sits up front and interprets, Rabbenu Tam disputes him; the Rambam issues ruling, and the Rabad objects. They are all in my little room, sitting around my table. Torah study... is a powerful experience of becoming friends with many generations of Torah scholars, the joining of one spirit with another, the union of souls. Those who transmitted the Torah and those who received it come together in one historical way-station.

- *What might it mean for the divine presence to be present during Torah study? How does Rabbi Soloveitchik's description of learning illuminate the mishnah?*
- *Rabbi Held describes Torah study not primarily as receiving information from God, but as being in God's presence. What do you think this means? Have you ever experienced learning in this way?*



- *Why might study itself become a spiritual or religious practice rather than merely an intellectual one?*
- *What does it mean to experience Torah study as an act of love—for the tradition, for its sages, and ultimately for God?*
- *If Torah study is one way of cleaving to God, what other forms might deveikut (attachment to God) take?*

6. Rabbi Aharon Kotler (1892–1962), Mishnat Rabbi Aharon vol. 1, pp. 150–151.

When a person stands before God in prayer, in submission, and in contemplation of God's greatness, the person is nullified and thinks of God's exaltedness; but when one engages in mercy and kindness toward others, one becomes connected to God's attribute of kindness, as it were. ...

The entire world was built through kindness; the beginning of creation was through kindness, and all the actions of the Blessed Creator are acts of kindness. Therefore, the ideal that exists in the world is also the attribute of kindness, and it is truly good. As has been said, "And God saw the light, that it was good" (Genesis 1:4)—because there is a good and a beneficent God in the world. Accordingly, this is the form of the human being, who was created in the divine image. The essence of cleaving to God is through kindness and mercy. Through this, a person brings the image of God within them into expression, into completeness, and into its proper realization.



7. *Judaism is About Love*, pp. 363–364

There is something off about arguing that God loves us and that our only possible response is... to love God's children. If I declare my love for my wife and she responds by promising to take care of our children, something is amiss in her words. Loving our children may be part of how my wife loves me, but it cannot be the whole story. Presumably, my wife would want to spend time with me, not only with our children; she would want to have moments of intimacy with me and her life would include gestures of love aimed directly at me. The same logic applies to our relationship with God. Loving human beings is part—an **integral** part, arguably even the **most important** part—of how we love God, but the former is not the entirety of the latter. Loving God involves moments of intimacy between us and God, without other people as necessary third parties to the relationship.

- *According to Rabbi Kotler, why can acts of hesed bring a person close to God? What does this suggest about the relationship between spirituality and ordinary worldly life?*
- *Rabbi Held argues that loving other people cannot fully replace direct relationship with God. Why not? What kinds of experiences or practices might constitute “direct” love of God?*
- *How do these two texts complement one another? Do they describe different dimensions of religious life, or do they pull in different directions?*

8. *Sifrei Devarim 32 (3rd c. CE)*

“And you shall love God your Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:5): Cause God to be beloved by everyone, as our father Abraham did, as it is said, “and the souls that they (Abraham and Sarah) had



made in Haran” (Genesis 12:5). Now if all humanity were gathered together to make a mosquito, they could not do so. How, then, is the above to be understood? Abraham converted them and brought them under the wings of the divine presence.

9. Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86a

Abaye said: As it was taught, “And you shall love God your Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:5), means that you shall make the name of Heaven beloved. When someone studies Torah and spends time with sages and conducts their affairs with integrity and speaks to others pleasantly, what do people say? “Happy are the parents who taught them Torah, happy is their teacher who taught them Torah, woe to the people who have not studied Torah! So-and-so, who learned Torah, see how pleasant are their ways, how correct are their deeds!”

- *How does each text understand the commandment to love God? What does it mean, in each case, to make God “beloved” to others?*
- *What are the differences between Abraham’s model in the Sifrei Devarim (#8) and the model presented in the Talmud? Which approach do you find more compelling, and why?*
- *In the Talmud’s vision, ordinary ethical behavior becomes a form of religious witness. What is gained—and perhaps lost—when Judaism is represented primarily through the character and conduct of Jews?*
- *Why might Rabbi Held be especially drawn to the Talmud’s model of sanctifying God through integrity, kindness, and humility?*



IV. Group discussion questions

1. Rabbi Held argues that *mitzvot* are meant to be practiced not only out of obligation, but out of love. What changes when love becomes a religious ideal? What becomes more powerful—and what becomes more difficult?
2. Rabbi Held argues that religion cannot be reduced to ethics alone. What might be lost in a religious life made up only of morality and social justice? Conversely, what dangers emerge when religion loses its ethical core?
3. Several texts in this chapter suggest that God is encountered not by escaping the world, but through ordinary life—study, prayer, relationships, and acts of care. What does it mean to bring holiness into the world rather than withdraw from it?
4. The chapter acknowledges periods of spiritual “dryness,” when God’s presence feels distant. What sustains religious life during such periods? Can love persist without feeling?
5. Which pathways to loving God resonate with you most deeply—study, prayer, ritual, ethical action, community, or something else? What does your answer suggest about how you understand religious life?

V. Enrichment texts

10. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), *Musar Avikha* (1946), p. 30

“In all your ways know God” (Proverbs 3:6) means that one must seek the Holy Blessed One within the very paths in which one is engaged.

When a person is occupied with prayer, they should seek the Holy Blessed One through understanding the content of their prayers and through proper intention, with the faithful devotion of their heart directed toward the matters expressed in those prayers. At that moment, he should not seek knowledge in other areas. For when he is engaged in this



particular service, the Holy Blessed One, so to speak, dwells for him specifically within that service; there he will find God, and not elsewhere.

Likewise, when she is occupied with Torah study, she should know that she will find the Holy Blessed One through deep investigation and careful analysis in order to understand a matter correctly, to remember it, and to establish it firmly in her mind. In this way she comes to know God through God's Torah, and not through some other avenue, for at that moment God is revealed through that particular service.

So too, when he is engaged in acts of kindness and beneficence toward another person, he should seek the Holy Blessed One only through thoughtful reflection on how best to benefit that person with a good deed that is great, fitting, and enduring.

The same applies to everything one does. In truth, there is nothing in the world that is not for God's glory. Therefore, whatever a person does should be understood as an expression of God's command and will, and within it she should seek God's blessed Name. This is accomplished by investing all of her intellect and all of her powers in carrying out what she is doing with the utmost perfection, in every respect in which perfection can be attained. Thus she comes to know the blessed Name in all her ways.

- *Rabbi Kook suggests that we should seek God within the activity we are already engaged in, rather than somewhere else. Why might this be spiritually difficult?*
- *What kinds of ordinary experiences or activities can become spiritually meaningful when approached with greater presence and attention?*



- *How does Rabbi Kook challenge the idea that holiness is found only in obviously “religious” moments or spaces?*
- *What happens to religious life when our attention is constantly fragmented or distracted?*

