

JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES



THE DYNAMICS OF LOVE SOURCE SHEET AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PROJECT
INSPIRE.
A PROGRAM OF aish HaTorah

Up to this point we have been focusing upon shaping an attitude of recognizing virtue to enhance our relationships. We've seen that feeling of warmth and love arise when we see the good in others and associate them with that good, even if they do have a few negative qualities. However, is cultivating more love in our lives only about what we commit ourselves to focus upon? Or are there any actions that we can take to enhance the love in our lives?

What about actions?

Let's take a look at a contemporary perspective on the role of action from a great Jewish philosopher and ethicist from the 20th century:

SOURCE 1: *Strive for Truth – Essay on Kindness Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler*

If one were only to reflect upon the idea that a person comes to love the one to whom he gives, he would realize that the only reason the other person seems a stranger to him is because he has not yet given to him; he has not taken the trouble to show him friendly concern. If I give to someone, I feel close to him; I have a share in his being. It follows that if I were to start bestowing good upon everyone I come into contact with, I would soon feel that they are all my relatives, all my loved ones. I now have a share in all of them.... (Strive for Truth – Essay on Kindness.)

Rabbi Dessler offers a penetrating insight into the dynamics of relationships: **Giving generates love.**

Q: But is Rabbi Dessler right? I would have thought the one who receives, not the one who gives is the one who loves more?

Though counterintuitive, we see proof from the parent child relationship:

Though the child receives much more from the parent than the parent can ever get back, the parent clearly loves the child more than the child loves the parent. The more giving, the more love!

Did you know that the Hebrew language itself testifies to Rabbi Dessler's conclusion?

SOURCE 2: *Etymology of Ahava – love in Hebrew.*

The Hebrew word for **Love** is "**Ahava**" – the root of this word is **hav** which means "**to give**".

We can give in so many ways to people, with our time, money, energy and commitment. Even just listening and offering support to people is an enormous act of giving.

A New Approach to Love

Rabbi Dessler is suggesting a strategy for promoting love that is based upon the sound premise of giving to others; **the more you give to people, the more you will love them.**

Q: How does this fit in with our definition that “love is the pleasure derived from seeing the good in others”, and is accomplished by focusing upon their virtue? They seem like two disparate approaches?

Rabbi Noach Weinberg suggests a novel approach in bringing the two definitions together. You see, we would indeed love if we were able to focus on people’s virtues. However we are often blinded by a natural tendency to see the negative in others. Consider the following source:

SOURCE 3: *The River, the Kettle and the Bird* pg. 123

“Man’s egotism makes recognizing noble qualities in others hard to come by. We spend too much of our lives fantasizing about how beautiful, intelligent and important we are while convincing ourselves how ugly, unintelligent and unimportant others are. Our jealousy makes it difficult for us to acknowledge that another person possesses a superior quality that we lack. (Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, *The River, the Kettle and the Bird*, p. 143)

Q: What stands in the way of seeing the virtue in others? How can giving to others help us bypass our natural proclivity to go negative?

Rabbi Weinberg suggests that Giving to others allows us to look beyond the negative view we are predisposed to adopt, because **we are now vested** in their future. It is the same reason why giving to a charity makes a person more likely to advocate for the charity, or why buying a Rolex causes a person to champion that product. Now it’s an extension of **himself**, which we are more likely to see as good.

This understanding is actually alluded to by the beautiful words of R. Dessler himself:

SOURCE 4: *Strive for Truth -- Essay on Kindness Continued.*

“If I give to him; I have a share in his being. (self-interest in seeing his virtue) You shall love your neighbor as yourself...By giving to him of yourself, you will find in your soul that you and he are indeed one; you will feel in the clearest possible way that he really is you, “as yourself”. (Strive for Truth - Essay on Kindness)

UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF LOVE ON A DEEPER MYSTICAL LEVEL

Consider the following source which forces us to take a closer look at love:

SOURCE 5: *Conversation between Rabbi Leib Chasman and Student.*

Rabbi Leib Chasman, famous ethicist and spiritual supervisor of Chevron Yeshiva, once saw a student eating fish with great relish. “Tell me, young man, do you love fish?”

The student answered “absolutely.”

If you love fish, replied Rabbi Chasman, you shouldn’t eat it! You should, take care of it, feed it and try to make it happy. Actually, you don’t really love fish, you love yourself!

Q: We use the term love often, and though we appreciate not all love is the same, does this story cause us to re-examine the things that we say we love?

Let's face it. When we were dating, and went out with a "great catch", we did it because we loved ourselves, not them. We just saw qualities in them that would make us happy. Or to put it another way, we were pursuing our own self-interest.

Then one night it all changed: Yet as we got to know them better and actually grew to love them, we started giving to them, not so we could get something from them, but actually without wanting anything in return at all.

If you look into this magical transformation a little more deeply, it's not as if we morphed into good Samaritans all of a sudden, and lost our sense of self-interest.

Q: Can you explain this behavior not as a suppression of our self-interest but rather as a pursuit?

Actually, we just came into contact with **a deeper self-interest that is actualized through selflessly giving rather than taking**. We actually derive more pleasure from this type of giving.

Q: Why do you think that is so?

Really, it's because in so doing, we are acting like G-d; As we give, we connect to the Source of all giving in the deepest possible way.

One of the reasons that people - especially men - run away from marriage is that **they think that they will get less pleasure being tied down in a relationship than being single**; they will have to compromise on the expression of self because of the perceived commitment to other. However, what many discover is that they can actually experience their "true selves" on a deeper level only through marriage. This is because it is the quintessential vehicle capable of transforming them from takers into givers. In actuality, it allows them to truly bring out the G-dliness latent within them.

Question: Doesn't this reverse the psychological dynamic around giving and taking responsibility? How so?

Though we take while we are young, as we grow older, we all realize that the happiest people are those who give of themselves the most. This really is the expression of a deep human psychic need going back to the very beginning of human history.

The creation of this world by G-d was really the first love story in human history. G-d created a beautiful world to give his children ultimate pleasure and connection. When we act like G-d by giving and taking care of His world, we participate in the unfolding story of creation, bringing it to a final magnificent conclusion!

EXERCISES:

1. Do an inventory of the various aspects of your life. In which areas are you a giver and which a taker?
2. Take an honest look at how "happy" and "satisfied" you are with each of these areas.
3. If your evaluation indicates a need to put more giving responsibility and giving in your life, start small and take a lot of satisfaction in each step!