

Dear Rabbi,

I have begun some Jewish study, and ran into a question. In the shema prayer it says you should love god. From all I've grown up with and observed in my life about love, the kind of behavior called love doesn't jive with god. I don't see how my love for my girlfriend is what I should feel for god. I hope you understand my question.

Thanks,
Ian G.

Dear Ian,

Your question is actually quite profound. You are pointing out a contradiction between the definition of love in popular culture to the concept of love that Judaism attaches to the Al-mighty. This contradiction is very real, there's a wide, vast schism between the two definitions.

In popular culture, love is something that "happens". Two people meet, and "fall" in love. They didn't necessarily, or perhaps necessarily didn't, do anything to create and build that love. Like a pit, which one "falls" into without any preparation, aforethought or hard work, love also is "fallen" into, by today's definition. Love is also defined in today's jargon as a physical act, which one "makes". It is called love even if those experiencing that act have never met before and may never meet again. These two modern uses of the word love, which you've grown up with, would certainly make it difficult to grasp love's relationship to G-d.

In Judaism, however, love doesn't just happen. If it does, we say the emotions being felt are those of infatuation, not of love.

The true concept of love in Judaism is spelled out in the very word itself. The Hebrew for love is "*Ahava*". The root of *Ahava* is "*Hav*", which means "to give". One *attains* love by giving. The more you give, the more your attached, because you begin to see more and more of yourself in the recipient of your giving. We love ourselves, and the way to love someone else is to see yourself in the other. The numerical value of *Ahava* is 13, the same value as the word *Echad*, meaning one. Through giving and love the two become as one.

The physical attraction two people have for one another is an important step to enable them to love each other. But it's only a window opened to have the desire to begin to truly give to each other of themselves. Only at that point does *Ahava* – the Jewish concept of love, begin to kick in.

A great Jewish philosopher, Rabbi E. E. Desler, elucidated this concept with a true story. A couple was separated in the holocaust, the father had the children and the mother was alone. She wept over them for years, hoping and praying for the day she would be reunited with her precious family. After the war they were reunited, the mother doing all she could to reconnect to her children. She was very disturbed, however, to see that, despite all her tears and wishes, did not feel the same intensity of love for the children as her husband did. When she approached Rabbi Desler, he explained to her that love comes out of giving. Tragically, she was missing those crucial years of giving to her children during her separation, that her husband had. He assured her not to worry, and before long she would, with all the opportunities a mother has to give to her children, her feelings would completely return.

The Shema tells us to love G-d. This means we need to foster a Jewish love relationship with G-d. The more we give of ourselves to Him, we will feel connected and become as one. This love is a two-way relationship, one that gives us constant and eternal peace of mind and joy as Jews.

I hope you continue your studies and that you'll experience the beauty, depth and joy of Torah and Judaism.