



Kallah 2023: Merging into One

Va'ad #1¹

Introduction

This *va'ad* (small group meeting) will explore essential expressions of the *middah* (soul-trait) of love – *ahavah* through a Mussar lens and then bring our focus to the love of self. What is the essence and the spiritual root of all Love? Why is love a central feature of a spiritually oriented life? Why is loving the self so integral to our personal spiritual journey and our Mussar path? What follows is a suggested format and content for your meeting but your *va'ad* facilitator will guide the discussion and practices according to what he or she feels is best. There is no expectation that the group cover all the content included here and you are encouraged to revisit these materials in your own time.

Outline of this *va'ad* session:

- A. Welcome and Centering
- B. Check in
- C. Text Discussion and Integration Part I
- D. Text Discussion and Integration Part II
- E. Take Away
- F. Closing

A. Welcome and Centering

Your group facilitator will welcome you to the meeting and invite you to introduce yourselves to the *va'ad* members.

The actual meeting will begin with a brief centering exercise to bring you into the sacred space of the *va'ad* and away from whatever might have been occupying your attention until now.

B. Check In:

Your group facilitator will invite you now to consider *your* definition of love. How do you perceive love, as an emotion, a feeling? Is love an action? Or? How do you experience love in *your* life?

¹ Materials prepared by Avi Fertig.



C. Text Discussion and Integration Part I: *Achdut / Oneness*

1. Love – Merging Into One²

A person loves another person through the soul, because the soul desires love, and even though individual bodies are separate one from the other, the souls of each person are spiritual, and spirituality is not divisible, rather it is characterized by complete oneness. And when the soul of one person awakens the desire to love the other, the other's soul awakens the desire to love the [first] person, and the two souls become one. As the verses says regarding [the love between] David and Jonathan, "Jonathan's soul became bound together with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved [David] as his own soul,"³ David's love of Jonathon engendered love back to him, as the verse says, "And they kissed one another and wept..."⁴

אהבת האדם לחברו הוא על ידי הנפש, כי רצון הנפש היא האהבה, ואף על פי שהגופים נחלקים ונפרדים זה מזה, הנפש של זה וזה היא רוחנית, והרוחניות אינו נפרד אלא מיוחד תכלית האחדות, ובהיות הנפש של חבר אחד מעורר רצונה לאהוב את חברו, גם חברו יתעורר נפשו ויאהב אותו ויהיו שני הנפשות אחת, כמו שאמר הפסוק בענין דוד ויהונתן (שמ"א יח, א) ונפש יהונתן נקשרה בנפש דוד ויאהבהו יהונתן כנפשו, ואהבת דוד ליהונתן הורה אהבתו לו כאמרו (שם כ, מא) וישקו איש את רעהו ויבכו וגו

2. The *Kavannah*- Intention of Creation

The Talmud (Ketubot 8a) teaches that according to one opinion, God created the first man and woman as one being, in one act of creation, and that they were subsequently separated into two independent beings. The Talmud then further clarifies this opinion:

Rav Yehudah raises a contradiction. In one verse **it is written: "And God created man in God's own image"** (Genesis 1:27), indicating one act of creation, **and** in another verse **it is written: "Male and female God created them"** (Genesis 5:2), indicating two [separate] acts. **How can this apparent contradiction be resolved? Initially, the thought entered God's mind to create two, but ultimately only one was actually created.**

רב יהודה רמי, כתיב: "וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ", וְכֵתִיב: "זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בְּרָאם", הָא

² The text that follows is from *Reishit Chochma sha'ar Ha'Ahavah* ch. 1. *Reishit Chochma – The Beginning/Foundation of Wisdom* is an important Kabbalistic Mussar Text written by Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas in the 16th century. This seminal work has become a pillar in both the Mystical and Mussar traditions of Jewish thought and practice.

³ Samuel I 18:1.

⁴ Samuel I 20:41.



כִּיצַד? בְּתַחֲלָה עָלָה בְּמַחְשָׁבָה לְבְּרָאוֹת שְׁנַיִם, וּלְבַסּוֹף נִבְרָא אֶחָד

The Vilna Gaon explains⁵ the meaning behind this enigmatic passage:

Is it possible that God changed His mind, Heaven forbid? Rather it means that God's ultimate goal was for male and female to be separate, but God created male and female as one [and subsequently separated the two] so that there would be love and friendship between them- one body literally! God's 'original thought' was actually the goal, but to reach the goal of having two separate entities that loved each other as one, God created them as one and subsequently separated them into two separate entities.

3. Integration – Taking it to Heart

- a) How do you understand the concept that at its root, there is an *achdut* – oneness permeating all of creation? How do you experience this *achdut* – oneness?
- b) In what way have you or might you experience the “binding together of souls” in the verse describing the love between David and Jonathan?
- c) What may be the challenges to this spiritually binding love? What might overcoming these challenges look like?
- d) How do you understand the concept of 'one body' created by God, yet 'two separate beings' sharing love for one another? What does this bring up for you in your experience of love?

D. Text Study and Integration Part II: Self-Love

1. The Good and the Bad – Positive Love of Self

... There is a great mistake found among the masses who think that this concept of [self-love] is a deplorable trait. This error is rooted in the hearts of the nation [i.e., the masses of the nation], because they are drawn after a non-Jewish understanding [of self-love]. [In this foreign view], the “self” refers only to one’s most coarse physical desires. This [form of loving one’s self] is indeed an extremely evil trait that [has the potential to] remove a person from the world.⁶ But Israel, a nation of holy ones, who sanctify themselves, their spirits and their souls, with the holiness of the Torah and the commandments and who sanctify the name of the Blessed One in the world, is it not certain that they are to love themselves in true and constant love with no evasion whatsoever. And from the force of this love, one [must] always be bestowing kindness

⁵ In his commentary to Proverbs 9:10. This is a free translation of the Vilna Gaon’s text, prepared by Avi Fertig.

⁶ A reference to *Pirkei Avot* (4:28), “Rabbi Elazar HaKappar said, ‘Envy, lust and [pursuit of] honor remove a person from the world.’”



to the soul and distancing from it the baser desires that are destructive to [everything from] the soul to the flesh. [Indeed,] one must protect the body – the ‘clothing’ of the soul, as it is said, “And you shall guard yourselves very well” (Deuteronomy 4:15) ...

When a person becomes aware of and engages in developing this force of true self-love, they will surely ascend to loving their fellows and relatives, and fulfil the divine directive of “and you shall love your neighbor **as yourself**” (Leviticus 19:18). This means to say, that just as a person loves themselves with a **positive love, emanating from an awareness of the greatness of the soul, and by understanding the depths of the responsibility one has towards their soul and to their body that serves as a tool and a helper [for the soul]**, so in this very measure must one love one’s fellow and be attentive to support (lit., fix) their body and their soul, without any evasion whatsoever.⁷

2. Self-Worth and Self-Love for one’s Spiritual Path

Every pathway for leading one’s life, whether the mundane or the ethical/spiritual,⁸ whether communal or individual, is guided by and predicated upon the measure of one’s assessment of one’s self-worth. A person who is small-minded, in their smallness and lack of self-worth, will degrade themselves and all of life to the point where one might recklessly abandon oneself to physical danger, without taking any caution, even in the most trivial of circumstances. The opposite is true of one who possesses a developed mind, who recognizes his/her self-worth; such an individual will cherish and love life. Such an individual will try with all their strength to elevate themselves, and elevate all of life with them.

This is the overriding principle: Awareness of one’s [true] value is the essential aspect of life itself and the essential measure of growth for every person who walks the face of the earth. Thus, the great principle [in the governing] of our lives is to be aware and to know a person’s worth as evaluated by the Torah, because, in reality, this is the true value of a person. Indeed, awareness of this truth is the basis for our spiritual service and growth, and through it we possess the true yardstick for measuring every action and movement – all our behavior, both generally and specifically.

“He [Rabbi Akiva] used to say: ‘Beloved is humanity, for he/she was created in God’s image; an even greater love is expressed [by the fact that] it was made known [to

⁷ *Leket Sichot Mussar*, vol. 1, pp. 60-61, Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Sher, “Self-Love – The Positive and the Negative.” Translated by Alan Morinis and Avi Fertig. Emphasis in **bold** added by Avi for this *va’ad*.

⁸ The original text used the word “*musari*,” literally ethical. However, when the term *musari* is used opposite *chomari* / mundane, as in this case, it has the connotation of one’s spiritual life.



humanity] that he/she was created in God's image, as it is said (*Bereishit / Genesis 9:6*) "For in the image of God [*b'tzelem Elokim*] He made humanity" (*Pirkei Avot ch. 3*).⁹

3. Integration – Taking it to Heart

- a) How would you describe a positive form of self-love?
 - b) How do you perceive loving oneself an essential aspect of one's spiritual path and growth?
 - c) Discuss how the following Mussar practices might be employed in your life as you seek to cultivate greater self-love:
- **Hitlamdut:**¹⁰ To love the self, one must know the self. **Hitlamdut** is the reflexive form (*hitpa'el*) of the verb *lomeid- to learn*, which signifies teaching myself or learning myself. The best translation would be "self-instruction" or "teaching yourself" and the clear implication is "from your own experience." The practice is to cultivate a heightened sense of presence, of self-awareness and self-discovery throughout all of life's experiences, and specifically in one's Mussar practice of *middot/ soul-traits*. **Hitlamdut** encourages us to not only have an experience, but to seek in that experience an awareness of self and, and based on this awareness, a relevant lesson that applies to one's life. To love the self, one must know the self.
 - **Eiyen Tova – A Good/Positive Eye:**¹¹ The practice of **Eiyen Tova** is to look upon others and upon oneself with a positive, non-critical eye. When observing others, we look at their positive traits and are non-judgmental of the traits or behaviors that we might perceive as negative. This same positive eye is directed towards oneself. Being overly critical of ourselves will deter us from going further and will hamper our growth. We must be honest with ourselves, but we must also maintain a generosity of spirit. In our spiritual path, we first concentrate on observing our natural strengths, before concentrating on observing our deficiencies and the *middot* that need improvement. When we discover a shortcoming, our response should be non-judgmental. As we grow, we are prepared to acknowledge our faults and strengths with all the deflation of ego and responsibility that this automatically engenders. Yet, this honesty should always be accompanied by a generosity of spirit, with an *eiyen tova*.

⁹ *Ohr HaTzafun / The Hidden Light*, Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka. The essay was originally published in a journal called, "*Shiurei Mussar / Lessons in Mussar*. This English translation was prepared by Avi Fertig and Alan Morinis and published in the second edition of the book, "The Hidden Light," in 2018.

¹⁰ The primary source of this practice is Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe's *Alei Shur*. Most specifically, in volume 2, pp. 192-197, but the practice actually underlies Rav Wolbe's entire Mussar approach.

¹¹ The primary sources for this practice are: *Pirkei Avot ch. 2*, *Ohr Yisrael*, letter 20, *Alei Shur* vol. 2 pp. 158-160.



E. Take Away

Your group leader will invite you to share one take away from this *va'ad* session.

F. Closing

And Yitro rejoiced (Va'yichad) over all the kindness that God had shown Israel when delivering them from the Egyptians.¹²

וַיִּחַד יִתְרוֹ עַל כָּל־הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה יְהוָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הִצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרָיִם:

It is said that Eskimos have over fifty different words for snow. To an Eskimo, an all-inclusive word would be almost unthinkable. Similarly, in *Lashon HaKodesh*, the holy tongue (or biblical Hebrew), we find many words to express various nuances of joy. In one of the blessings recited at a traditional Jewish wedding, we thank God for creating “*sason, simcha, gila, rina, ditza, and chedva*,” which are all various expressions of joy. A Midrash (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah*¹³) lists ten expressions of joy.

In the verse above, the Torah uses the word *va'yichad* to express Yitro's joy. The root of the word is *chad* or *echad*, meaning one.¹⁴ And so, we have here a specific expression of joy, and that is the joy of oneness.

Is it the joy of connecting - becoming one- with others? The joy of connecting with oneself? Is it being one with creation or with God? How might you experience this joy of oneness?

To close our *va'ad* session, you are invited to spend a few moments considering and trying to experience this special joy of oneness.

This completes the first of the three va'ad meetings that are on the schedule for the Kallah.

¹² *Shemot/Exodus 18:9.*

¹³ *Shir haShirim Rabba, parasha 1:*

בעשרה לשונות של שמחה נקראו ישראל:
גילה, שישה, שמחה, רנה, פצחה, צהלה, עלצה, עלזה, חדוה, תרועה

¹⁴ The Hebrew word *chedva* shares this root and is the more common expression of this word.