

ROLE OF LOVE IN SERVICE

“I love you.” Only three words, yet containing so many dimensions. Traditional Jewish sources do not shy away from its power. In one of Judaism’s central prayers traditionally said three times a day, the “*V’ahavta*”, the speaker makes their commitment to love God, “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The Torah doesn’t stop there – in the third book of the Torah, *Vayikra* / Leviticus, it commands us to not only love God, but also the neighbor, the stranger, and even ourselves; “Love your fellow as yourself; I am the LORD.” In response, Rabbi Akiva, honored as one of the greatest sages in Jewish history, writes, “This is a fundamental principle of the Torah.”

What does Judaism’s focus on love mean for us? Using the following texts, let’s explore love in the context of justice and service. Dig in deeper with the help of the people around you and the guiding questions. How can the texts inform how you approach love and its role in volunteering?



"All About Love: New Visions," bell hooks

bell hooks is a Black feminist theorist, poet, essayist, and social commentator who writes about race, class, and gender in modern US society. In "All About Love: New Visions," hooks defines love and explores its practice during different moments in life.¹

To live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic (showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate), we have to be courageous. Learning how to face our fears is one way we embrace love. Our fear may not go away, but it will not stand in the way. Those of us who have already chosen to embrace a love ethic, allowing it to govern and inform how we think and act, know that when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn to other bearers of light. We are not alone.

"Love in Action," Representative John Lewis

On Jan. 27, 2017, Krista Tippett interviewed Congressman John Lewis on her podcast, "On Being" about how love informed Congressman Lewis's actions during the Civil Rights Movement and his work today.²

Well, I think in our culture, I think sometimes people are afraid to say “I love you.” But we’re afraid to say, especially in public life, many elected officials or worldly elected officials, are afraid to talk about love. Maybe people tend to think something is so emotional about it. Maybe it’s a sign of weakness. And we’re not supposed to cry. We’re supposed to be strong. But love is strong. Love is powerful.

The movement created what I like to call a nonviolent revolution. It was love at its best. It’s one of the highest forms of love. That you beat me, you arrest me, you take me to jail, you almost kill me, but in spite of that, I’m going to still love you. I know Dr. King used to joke sometimes and say things like, “Just love the hell outta everybody. Just love ‘em.”

1 | “All About Love: New Visions,” bell hooks, p. 101

2 | [On Being: "Love in Action"](#)

"It's a Pleasure to Serve You," Rabbi Brent Spodek and Adam Gaynor

Published in May 2011 in eJewish Philanthropy, this piece by Rabbi Spodek and Gaynor proposes refocusing the act of service on the person in need, rather than on the person volunteering.

When it comes down to it, most of us find it really hard to be focused on anything other than ourselves, but ultimately, that's what serving is about. Not for nothing does the prophet [Micah] say that all the Divine asks of us is to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. The humility is of the essence, as serving those in need in our cities and in our world is not about being an egomaniac masquerading as a master of mercy, nor is it about being the paternalistic great white hope that can swoop in and save the needy ones. It's about humbly seeking to help those who suffer carry their burdens.



Guiding Questions

- How do these texts address the connection between social justice and love?
- Do you read these texts differently using bell hook's definition of a love ethic?
- What does love for others (and for ourselves) require from us?
- What are the risks to incorporating love into how you approach social justice? What does love require of you in a relationship?
- What steps can you take to create an environment in which service is infused with love and humility, especially between people of various backgrounds and identities?
- What does it mean to be commanded (rather than encouraged) to love by Jewish texts?

