

A Seal Upon Your Heart: Love and Romance in the Jewish Tradition
Study Guide
KOACH Shabbat 2008

Welcome to this year's **KOACH** Shabbat Study Guide! We are delighted that you are participating in this very exciting program, shared by dozens of campuses and hundreds of students across North America.

This year's packet features a four page (two double sided sheets to preserve trees!) text component, designed to enable you to conduct one or more sessions on the topic. Feel free to pick and choose as you see fit. Recommendations below will provide guidelines on how to best use the materials relative to the time available.

Make sure to serve the special sweet treat we have provided as a part of the event. **We ask that you promote our annual gathering of college students, the 2009 KOACH Kallah.** This year's Kallah will take place at the Brandeis-Bardin campus of the American Jewish University in Simi Valley, CA, February 26-March 1. Scholar in residence Rabbi Bradley Artson, Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, will speak on *Jew Meets World: Guarding the Earth, Protecting the Heavens*.

Thank you again for your involvement with this project. If you have any questions, please be in touch with Rabbi Elyse Winick, **KOACH** Associate Director at winick@uscj.org or 617 244 5221; you'll receive an evaluation shortly after **KOACH** Shabbat. Please help us out and fill it out in a timely manner!

Shabbat Shalom!

If you are doing two sessions (read on for single session guidance).....

Allow an hour to hour and a half per session.

Session I

1. Open with an icebreaker and/or introductions. (need icebreaker ideas? <http://wilderdom.com/games/icebreakers.html>) Invite people to introduce themselves and identify the relationship they most admire and why. 10-15 minutes
2. Ask participants to identify love stories in the Torah. This may be a challenge, since the Torah does not contextualize relationships in this way. (if they need some urging, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, as well as examples of nonromantic love, like filial devotion or God and Israel) Allow them to branch out into *Tanakh* and do spend a little time considering *Shir HaShirim* – why do they think it is part of the canon? 10 minutes

3. Turn to the text sheets. Note that the study of traditional texts has a particular social and historical context. Keeping this in mind as you proceed through the texts can help enrich and frame discussion, opening us up to the ways in which tradition can be in conversation with contemporary life.
Have participants read through the *Bereshit* text, in *hevruta*, if possible. What does this text teach us about relationships? Is there anything hierarchical here? How does being created in God's image come into play? Is there love here?
10 minutes
4. Move on to the mystical, midrashic text from *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, which portrays our first ancestors somewhat differently. This medieval text was not part of the texts of our tradition. How does it differ from the *Bereshit* text? Lilith appears only in the book of Isaiah and then again in the Talmud. How is the concept of relationship contextualized here? 5 minutes
5. Ultimately, draw the conversation back to the story of Isaac and Rebekah, focusing on Genesis 24: 63-67. Why does Rivkah fall off the camel? What does Isaac's love for her represent? 10 minutes
6. Now consider the text from *Shir HaShirim*. This is a powerful statement about love in a tome which tells very few love stories. Why do they think there are so few love stories in the text? From the vantage point of these texts, how would they define love in a Jewish context? Relationships? What, if anything, is missing? Why? 15 minutes
7. Conclusion: try ending with something relevant, but not text based. You might teach a song based on *Shir HaShirim* (e.g., *Dodi Li*). You might invite them to raise the questions they'd like to discuss in session two, knowing that a: you aren't able to take notes and b: you can't guarantee for them that you know the answers. A last idea might be to read a poem, such as this from Yehuda Amichai. The point is not to discuss the poem, but to use the sound of it as a way to close.

Layla, night, the most feminine of all things, is masculine in Hebrew, but it is also the name of a woman.
Sun is masculine and sunset feminine,
the memory of the masculine in the feminine, and the yearning of a woman in a man. That is to say: the two of us, that is to say: we.
And why is *Elohim*, God, in the plural? Because All of Him are sitting in the shade under a canopy of vines in Akko, playing cards. And we sat at a table nearby and I held your hand and you held mine instead of cards, and we too were masculine and feminine, plural and singular, and we drank Arab tea with roasted almonds, two tastes that didn't know each other and became one in our mouth.
And over the café door, next to the sky, it said:
"Not Responsible for Items Forgotten or Lost."

Session Two (you need to keep reading if you're only able to do one session!)

Allow an hour to an hour and a half....

1. Introductions all around once more. Invite people to share thoughts from the previous session. Did they learn anything surprising? Disappointing? Comforting? If this doesn't get the conversation started, try having people offer one word they think of when they think of love. 5 minutes
2. These texts focus on the sexual aspect of a loving relationship. Some safe space language would be helpful to set the tone, reminding people that we are all here to learn and how important it is to be respectful of one another and to remember that this is an opportunity to learn from the tradition. Expect some discomfort or embarrassment, giggling, etc. Take it in stride and encourage people, with a smile, to see this as an educational moment. It's also worth revisiting the context ideas from point three above.
3. Open with the text from *Masekhet Sotah*. Help the group through the textual analysis and then ask them how this contextualizes the notion of relationship (responses may range from sanctity, to the heterosexual focus, to mutuality, among other things – it's good to raise these if no one else does) 5 minutes
4. Invite participants to study the *Pirkei Avot* text in *hevvruta* (paired study). When they've finished, ask how they respond to the text. Do they understand the distinction in the text? (Amnon and Tamar were based on rape and conquest; David and Jonathan represent a friendship of eternal love and willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of the friendship.) Though the rabbis see the relationship of David and Jonathan as one of friendship rather than sexual love, with that point made, it's not unreasonable to allow the discussion to go in that direction. Have participants contrast the *Pirkei Avot* text with the text from *Masekhet Sotah*. 10 minutes
5. Move on to the text from the *Tur*, a 13th century Spanish halakhic code by Yaacov ben Asher. With this we shift from the nature to the content of the relationship. What does the *Tur* tell us about the purpose of marriage? Does the Exodus text which follows support or contradict it? What are a wife's conjugal rights? (note that in the context of the day, the rabbis understood the obligation to procreate as the man's, rather than the woman's) 5 minutes
6. Now read the laws from Maimonides regarding the definition of conjugal rights. What is their reaction? Are they surprised by the breakdown by profession? How do they understand it? Explain that this is the source for the notion of the 'double mitzvah' of sex on Friday night. What does this tell us about mutuality and responsibility? About sex as a procreative act? 10 minutes
7. Have participants read the texts from *Masekhet Brakhot* and *Masekhet Nedarim* in succession. How do they reflect on one another? How do they feel about Rav Kahane's independent study? His justification for his actions? What questions do Imma Shalom's words raise about the *Nedarim* text? It's important for participants to grasp the multivocal nature of the tradition reflected here. Texts which celebrate pleasure and texts which condemn it – or limit it – do coexist in our tradition. The time-honored tradition plurality of voices in Judaism is both

- the practical and spiritual ancestor of the diversity of opinion in Conservative Jewish thought and practice. 10 minutes
8. The last traditional text in this packet comes from *Iggeret HaKodesh*, which is attributed to Nahmanides (Spain, 13th century), but is now generally agreed not to be his. The *Holy Letter*, as it is called, is a celebration and sanctification of sexuality and sensuality. What do participants make of this? Does this shift their understanding of how Judaism views relationships? Sexuality? What do they think it means when the text says the woman should give forth seed first? (n.b., it means she should achieve orgasm first) Can this be taken out of the context of procreation? 10 minutes
 9. Read the final contemporary passages. How do our traditional texts refract the questions of nonmarital sexual relations? What do we do with this in the context of contemporary life? What questions do our texts fail to ask or answer 15 minutes
 10. Wrap up. Return to the text from *Shir HaShirim*. Ask them if their understanding of this text has changed. What are they taking away from the conversation? About what would they like to learn more? If you didn't use a poem or a song to conclude the first session, you may want to use one here.

If you're only doing one session...

Allow an hour and a half and use the following elements from the two session model:

From Session One: 1, 2, 5, 6

From Session Two: 4, 5, 7, 9

Conclude with 7 from Session One

Best of luck!! Should you have any questions about this material, please contact Rabbi Elyse Winick, **KOACH** Associate Director at winick@uscj.org.

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