

What Is Love?

by Rabbi Shais Taub / from Chabad.org

Why Do We Ask, “What Is Love?”

Whenever we ask, “What is love?” it’s usually because a) we’re unsure if a certain special someone really loves us, or b) because a certain special someone just accused us of not really loving them.

When we are truly engaged in giving and receiving love, we don’t ponder such philosophical questions. It’s only when something is lacking that we begin to analyze and contemplate what that thing actually is. For example, nobody sits down to a full meal and asks, “What is a pastrami sandwich?”

It’s only when something is lacking that we begin to analyze and contemplate what that thing actually is. So, if we’re even asking the question, “What is love?” it probably means that we don’t feel completely loved, or that someone doesn’t feel completely loved by us.

But since we’re asking, let’s try to answer the question.

“Am I Loved?” Vs. “Do I Love?”

The two scenarios that usually cause us to contemplate “What is love?” give meaning to the question. Either we wonder, “Am I loved?” or we ask, “Do I love?”

It is easier to first address the “What is love?” question in terms of the love we feel coming toward us. If we understand how to recognize when we are being loved, we can also learn to recognize our love for another.

When we are loved, we tend to feel it intuitively in our guts. But how does it work? Is there an extrasensory perception in the heart that is able to read the feelings in another person’s heart?

In fact, it’s really not that ethereal or supernatural. On the contrary, it’s pretty practical and down-to-earth. Our hearts take cues from our senses. Everything we see, hear, taste, touch or smell teaches us about our universe. We don’t need to contemplate or ask questions. Our sensory organs report to our brains, and our brains interpret the data and send the report to our hearts. So, if we see a loving smile, hear loving words, or feel a loving touch, the brain processes this information and concludes, “Hey, we are being loved right now!”

In short, when we are loved, there is tangible proof. It’s not an abstract thought or feeling, it’s concrete and evidenced. As King Solomon wrote in his book of Proverbs (27:19), “As water reflects a man’s face back to him, so is the heart of one man to another.” This means, when you are treated with love, your heart feels that love.

Love is an Action

Now we can address the second part of the “What is love” quandary—how to know if we love someone else?

The answer is straightforward. When we behave lovingly towards someone, it means we love that person.

When we ask a question like "What is love?" we assume that we're trying to define an abstract concept similar to "What is freedom?" or "What is good fortune?" But truthfully, love is not a concept. It's an action.

To ask, "What is love?" is like asking, "What is running?" or "What is swimming?" If you've ever seen someone run or swim, you know exactly what running and swimming entail.

In order for love to be real love, it has to be expressed as an action. The Hebrew word for love, *ahavah*, reveals this true definition of love, for the word *ahavah* is built upon the root consonants *h-v*, which means "to give." In order for love to be real love, it has to be expressed as an action. If you love your beloved, then you must show it. By the same token, if you are loved, that will show, too. You will recognize it by the way you are treated.

G-d Teaches Us How to Love

G-d commands us (Deut. 6:5), "And you shall love the L-rd your G-d." This precept leads us to voice the age-old question, "How can we be commanded to feel a feeling?" Either you feel it or you don't, right?

An answer offered by our tradition explains that we are not being ordered to feel a feeling in the abstract sense. Rather, the command is for us to behave lovingly. In this light, "And you shall love," actually means, "You shall perform acts of love."

This is the true test: action, deeds, performance.

Feelings can be deceptive. Sometimes, what we perceive as love may in fact be another emotion. But actions cannot be mistaken. So, rather than ask, "What is love?" we must ask, "Do I perform acts of love for my beloved?" and "Does my beloved perform acts of love for me?"

Rabbi Shais Taub is a noted speaker, author, and columnist, who serves as scholar-in-residence of Chabad of the Five Towns. His talks and classes may be seen on SoulWords.org.