

Lesson Guide: Class Thirteen

Love: The Greatest Blessing



Miller Introduction to
Judaism Program

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



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Lesson Guide for Class #13: “The Greatest Blessing”

Class Summary:

Study of Jewish rituals for sanctifying relationships, with an in-depth focus on the marriage ceremony. Exploration of mikvah—both for conversion and for sanctification of sexuality. Exploration of Jewish ethics around intimate relationships and sexuality. Inclusion of LGBTQ folks in contemporary Jewish life.

When possible, arrange for either an in-person or virtual tour of a mikveh for this session.

Objectives:

Students will:

- Consider the ways that Jewish ethical teachings can enrich a contemporary understanding of relationships and intimacy.
- Learn the essential Jewish marriage rituals and be able to name the steps of a Jewish wedding ceremony.
- Become familiar with the Mikveh and its uses.

Key Vocabulary:

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| ▪ Mikveh | ▪ Bedeken |
| ▪ Taharat ha-Mishpacha/Niddah | ▪ Kiddushin |
| ▪ Aufruf | ▪ Sheva Brakhot |
| ▪ Ketubah | ▪ Yichud |
| ▪ Chuppah | ▪ Get |

In-Person Teaching Materials:

- Room and door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Chalkboard, white-board, or large flip chart
- Colored markers or chalk
- On One Foot course books or printed PDFs
- Projector, computer & screen if using Class Slide Decks, On One Foot videos
- Optional: Items related to a Jewish wedding (sample ketubot, etc)
- Arrange for a mikveh tour, if possible.

Online Teaching Materials:

- Zoom Pro Account
- PDF of On One Foot chapter
- PowerPoint Class Slide Deck
- Appropriate background, lighting, and sound setup.
- Optional: Items related to a Jewish wedding (sample ketubot, etc)
- Arrange for a virtual mikveh tour, if possible.

Tour & Discussion: Mikveh

Whenever possible, it is a valuable learning experience for students to visit the mikveh and learn about its history and function. This is especially important in classes where a significant percentage of students have the goal of conversion, as seeing the mikveh before the actual conversion ceremony helps lower anxiety.

If an in-person or virtual tour is not possible, there are images of mikveh on the class slide deck.

Key Mikveh Facts:

What is a mikvah?

- Any naturally flowing body of water — a river, lake, or ocean -- counts as a mikvah, provided it is deep enough for a person to immerse in fully.
- A human-made mikvah must be connected to a naturally flowing source of water (*mayim hayyim*), rather than water delivered through a pipe. Common methods for supplying mayim hayyim is by gathering rainwater in a cistern, connecting the mikveh to an underground spring, or linking it to a pool of melting ice.

- A mikvah requires enough water for an average sized person to immerse completely. The Talmudic estimated forty *seah*, which is approximately equal to 200 gallons.

What are some of the uses of mikvah?

- Conversion to Judaism always involves immersion in a mikvah.
- Brides and grooms often immerse in the mikvah prior to their wedding.
- Traditionally, Jewish women immerse in the mikvah each month following the cessation of their menstrual period prior to resuming sexual relations with their partners (*niddah*)
- Mikvah can be used to mark other life transitions, ranging from a significant birthday to recovery from an illness to before/after pregnancy to following a trauma.
- People of any gender can use the mikvah for all these purposes.

What is the procedure for immersion in the mikvah?

- Prior to mikvah immersion, in a private dressing room, one removes all clothes, makeup, contact lens, or any other barrier (*hatzitzah*) between themselves and the water. Then one takes a shower and carefully washes themselves to enter the mikvah completely clean.
- One enters the mikvah undressed and then takes a series of immersions completely under the water, ensuring the water can flow around every part of one's body, and reciting a blessing before or after each dip.
- Typically, there will be a mikvah attendant who will observe the immersion, to ensure that the entire body goes under the water.
- If one is using mikveh for conversion, the Beit Din will typically be present, but may be behind a curtain or in an adjoining room.

Lecture/Discussion: "Judaism and Sexuality"

Begin by reading and discussing the "this too is Torah" text from BT Brakhot 62a in the coursebook/slide deck.

Discussion questions:

- What might this text suggest about the dangers of not having a safe space to discuss sexuality?
- What does Kahana mean when he says that learning about sexuality is a form of learning about the Torah? Do you agree?

- Do you think that Judaism ought to have a place in the discussion of what happens in the bedroom? What do you think that place ought to be?

If we conclude from this text that it is important to speak openly about sexuality in a Jewish context (rather than learning surreptitiously by sneaking around under peoples' beds!), then one place to begin that conversation is with the foremost Jewish philosopher of relationships, Martin Buber.

Break students into hevruta pairs/breakout rooms and ask them to study the summary of Martin Buber's concept of "I-Thou" found in the coursebook. Ask the hevruta pairs/breakout groups to settle on a general definition of what constitutes an "I-It" interaction and an "I-Thou" interaction, and then have a group discussion to come up with a consensus definition:

I-It interactions are relationships of use – where parties use one another to fulfill a secondary purpose (“means to an end.”) This need not be nefarious – most of our interactions with others, including loved ones, are based on the need to “get stuff done.”

I-Thou interactions, however, are based on encounter. Here there is no external motivation or secondary purpose (“end in itself.”) The only goal of the I-Thou exchange is the strengthening of the relationship. No wonder Buber taught that God could most easily be located between an I and a Thou.

Ask the group: What does the I-It/I-Thou look like in intimate relationships? What elements are necessary to ensure that both partners are treated as a Thou, rather than an It (trust, honesty, safety, emotional commitment, etc.).

One suggestion for teaching this concept comes from Rabbi Ed Feinstein. He proposes drawing a spectrum, labeling one end I-It, and the other I-Thou, and inviting students to name different types of sexual relationships that might span the range (i.e., prostitution or hook-ups are generally understood to be I-It relationships, while committed partnerships and marriages are more likely (though not guaranteed!) to achieve I-Thou). This activity usually leads to a great conversation, but the instructor should only do this if they are comfortable having a more frank discussion about sexuality.

An alternative way to have this conversation is through Q&A, either by having students ask their questions aloud or by writing them anonymously on index cards that are re-collected and addressed by the teacher. Use the excerpt from Rabbi Elliot Dorff's "Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex and Were Afraid to Ask a Rabbi" included in the coursebook as a guide for answering questions.

This discussion of sexual ethics is an excellent opportunity to discuss the evolving attitudes toward LGBTQ inclusion in most areas of contemporary Jewish life. It is a core value of the Miller Introduction to Judaism Program that LGBTQ folks be fully welcomed into the Jewish community. So, all our language in the course ought to include people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

Break

Lecture: "Jewish Weddings"

This is always an area of great interest, particularly for students planning or hoping to plan a wedding. Depending on the number of such students in the class, it may be valuable to bring in some practical suggestions about Jewish wedding planning (i.e., local resources for purchasing a ketubah, kosher caterers, etc.) It's also important not to marginalize single people in this session, as engaged couples can quickly take over this discussion.

The instructor can approach this material in two ways, either as a lecture or, in the best of American Hebrew school tradition, with a "mock wedding" ceremony. Even if you present the material as a lecture, it is always valuable to bring in as many "props" as possible — including a ketubah, a huppah, etc. Also, please make room in the language used to describe the wedding ceremony to reflect that not all Jewish weddings are between people of different genders.

If the teacher is going to run a mock wedding, you can follow the order laid out in the section of the coursebook entitled "So You're Going to a Jewish Wedding."

Key Terms:

Ketubah: The Jewish wedding document outlines the terms of the commitment between the partners in the couple. The ketubah is signed by two witnesses before the wedding ceremony and serves as a reminder of marriage's joys and duties.

Aufruf: The celebration of an engaged couple on the Shabbat before their wedding day. The couple will generally be called up for an aliyah at the Torah and receive a special blessing from the rabbi.

Bedeken: The ceremony that immediately precedes in which the bride is veiled after her groom has checked to ensure that she is indeed who he intends to marry.

This ritual comes from the story of Jacob in Genesis 29, who is fooled into marrying Leah, rather than his beloved Rachel. Jewish men have been checking ever since.

Huppah: The wedding canopy, symbolic of a couple's first shared home as a married couple, under which the wedding takes place. The huppah should be open on all sides and is generally held up by four poles, which special guests may be honored by being asked to hold. The huppah is so identified with the wedding itself that sometimes the whole ceremony is just referred to as "the huppah."

Kiddushin: The exchange of rings and declarations in the first half of the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, which sanctifies the couple to one another and formally binds them in matrimony.

Sheva Brakhot: The Seven Blessings from the Talmud, which are recited to a couple during their wedding. The themes of the blessings draw from two idyllic images: The primordial love between the first two human beings in the Garden of Eden, and the world redeemed after the coming of the Messiah. The text of the Sheva Brakhot is included in the coursebook— which makes for a valuable and engaging text study if you have sufficient time.

Breaking a Glass: The tradition at the end of a Jewish wedding ceremony has many explanations, including recalling that even in the time of a person's greatest joy, they should also recognize the existence of brokenness in the world and the duty to participate in the work of tikkun olam.

Yichud: It is traditional for the couple to take some private time after the wedding ceremony before joining in the celebration. While, in antiquity, this was the space in which the wedding may have been immediately consummated, today, it generally allows the couple to focus on one another (and eat!) after the ceremony, rather than immediately turning their attention to their guests.

Get: Thankfully, this is not the last stage in the wedding ceremony for ALL couples, but it is essential to mention the concept of Jewish divorce, accomplished by presenting a get document in the presence of a Beit Din.

Wrap Up and Reflection

Journal Prompt: "Something that we discussed in class that I appreciated.", "Something that we discussed in class that challenged me.", and "Something we discussed in class that I would like to know more about."

Instructors should be checking for understanding throughout the lesson and regularly pausing for questions. However, it is essential to do so at the close of each class. In addition to using the journal prompts included in coursebook, the instructor may wish to do a group check for understanding using one of the following methods:

- As a whole class, have students go around and briefly state/write in chat one thing they learned/that surprised them/that interested them in class.
- Have students divide into pairs and share with their partner something they learned/that surprised them/that particularly interested them.

If you want to check that the students understand primary content, at the end of this class, students should be able to define the key marriage vocabulary listed above, articulate the meaning and uses of the mikvah, and be able to share their thoughts about how Judaism influences interpersonal & sexual ethics.

At Home Work

Students should be told to watch the "The Greatest Blessing" video and answer the review questions and journal prompt.