

Activity Name: Did David Love Jonathan?: A Text Study

Purpose: To explore a possible gay relationship in the Bible

Time: 1 hour

Materials: print-outs of the texts

Notes: It would probably be useful to have bibles available for participants to look at if they would like to see the context of the passages on the sheets.

Activity: The leader begins by introducing the characters of David and Jonathan in the Bible. S/he then asks the participants to form pairs or groups of three and hands out the text study sheet (see below). The participants discuss the texts in pairs using the questions on the sheet. When it seems like the discussion is dying down, the leader brings everyone back together to debrief as a group.

Changes/expansions: This text study can be used as part of an all-night Shavuot study session.

Did David Love Jonathan? Texts

1 Samuel 18:1-4

ויהי ככלתו לדבר אל שאול ונפש יהונתן נקשרה בנפש דוד ויאהבו יהונתן כנפשו:
ויקחהו שאול ביום ההוא ולא נתנו לשוב בית אביו:
ויכרת יהונתן ודוד ברית באהבתו אתו כנפשו:
ויתפשט יהונתן את המעיל אשר עליו ויתנהו לדוד ומדיו ועד חרבו ועד קשתו ועד חגרו:

When [David] finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself. Saul took him [into his service] that day and would not let him return to his father's house.—Jonathan and David made a pact, because [Jonathan] loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the cloak and tunic he was wearing and gave them to David, together with his sword, bow, and belt. *JPS*

Commentary:

Jonathan's love for David is expressed practically in the pact between them, and symbolically in the bestowal of the garments and arms—which, however, were also of considerable real value.

*Jewish Study Bible*¹

וּנְפֶשׁ יְהוֹנָתָן – *Jonathan's soul*. The verse reveals the source of the friendship. David and Jonathan were “soul brothers”: their attraction was not based on love of pleasure or any ulterior motives (*Abarbanel*).

*Rubin Edition of the Prophets: Samuel I and II*²

בְּרִית – *A covenant*, i.e., an irrevocable commitment to one another. Just as the covenant between G-d and Israel remains in force even if the people sin grievously, so, too, David and Jonathan committed themselves to one another no matter what.... Jonathan made a covenant purely out of love, not to protect himself (*Malbim*), and signified it by taking his robe and battle gear, which were most important to him as a warrior, and giving them to David.

Rubin Edition of the Prophets: Samuel I and II

Questions:

1. What happens in this passage?
2. What does the commentary say that “Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David” means? What do you think it means?
3. What does the commentary say that the exchange of clothing between David and Jonathan means? What do you think it means?

¹ Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2004.

² Scherman, Rabbi Nossan, *The Rubin Edition of the Prophets: Samuel I and II* (New York: Mesorah Publications), 2002.

ויחר אף שאול ביהונתן ויאמר לו בן נעות המרדות הלוא ידעתי כי בחר אתה לבן ישי לבשתך ולבשת ערות
אמך:

כי כל הימים אשר בן ישי חי על האדמה לא תכון אתה ומלכותך ועתה שלח וקח אתו אלי כי בן מות הוא:

Saul flew into a rage against Jonathan. “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman!” he shouted. “I know that you side with the son of Jesse—to your shame and the shame of your mother’s nakedness! For as long as he son of Jesse lives on earth, neither you nor your kingship will be secure. *JPS*”

Commentary:

It is clear from Jonathan’s answer [that David is not at the meal because Jonathan let him go home to see his family] that he sides with David. This infuriates Saul and causes him to use obscene language. Both *shame* (besides its usual meaning) and *nakedness* denote the genitals. The insult is directed at the son, not the mother.

Jewish Study Bible

אמך – ולבשת ערות אמך – *And the shame of your mother’s nakedness*. People seeing you support my enemy will assume that you are born of an adulterous relationship, and are not really my son. (*Radak*).

The Rubin Edition of the Prophets: Samuel I and II

The phrase “mother’s nakedness” in this context is not easily understood. The Hebrew word for nakedness here, *erva*, is the word used in Leviticus and elsewhere to express sexual violation. To uncover nakedness is to have illicit sexual relations. Add to this that the first of Saul’s insults to Jonathan that he is perverse. Jonathan has chosen David in a perverse and shaming way that offends his mother’s nakedness. Saul is not offended by a platonic relationship, but by his son’s perverse, shameful, and naked love of David.

*Rabbi Steven Greenberg, Wrestling with G-d and Men*³

Questions:

1. What happens in this passage?
2. Why does the commentary say that Saul is angry at Jonathan? Why do you think he is angry?
3. What does the commentary say that the phrase “the shame of your mother’s nakedness” means? What do you think it means?

³ Greenberg, Rabbi Steven, *Wrestling with G-d and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison University of Wisconsin Press), 2005.

ויתן יהונתן את כליו אל הנער אשר לו ויאמר לו לך הביא העיר:
הנער בא ודוד קם מאצל הנגב ויפל לאפיו ארצה וישתחו שלש פעמים וישקו איש את רעהו ויבכו איש את
רעהו עד דוד הגדיל:

Jonathan handed the gear to his boy and told him, “Take these back to the town.” When the boy got there, David emerged from his concealment at the Negev. He flung himself face down on the ground and bowed low three times. They kissed each other and wept together; David wept the longer. *JPS*

Commentary:

Some scholars have suggested that 1 Sam. 2:41, “They kissed each other and wept together, until David exceeded,” if translated “until David was enlarged” implies that David achieved an erection in their embrace. This is a very unlikely translation. The phrase probably means that David wept longer. However, the context of Jonathan’s arrow-shooting practice during which the hidden David understands the secret message certainly marks the encounter as strongly homoerotic, if not sexual.

Rabbi Steven Greenberg, Wrestling with G-d and Men

[The] “revised standard” translation based on the King James Bible informs us that David “exceeded,” an obscure reference to say the least. The Hebrew is clearer. It reads, “until David *became large*” (*ad David higdil*). The reference, I think, is to physical arousal. Such a reading, however, has never been suggested by biblical scholars: the pioneering *Lexicon of Biblical Hebrew* by Brown, Driver, and Briggs, the standard reference work used by generations of English-speaking Old Testament students, tell us that *higdil* means to magnify, become great, or become large—except once in all the Hebrew literature, *higdil* means “to weep greatly”! While I have found no other place that *higdil* refers to male sexual arousal, such an interpretation seems far less a distortion than “to weep greatly.”

Jody Hirsch, “In Search of Role Models”⁴

Questions:

1. What happens in this passage?
2. What does the commentary say that the phrase “*ad David higdil*” means? What do you think it means?
3. Both *The Jewish Study Bible* and *The Rubin Edition of the Prophets* are silent on the issue of “*ad David higdil*.” What significance does this have in your eyes?

⁴ Hirsh, Jody, “In Search of Role Models,” in *Twice Blessed* ed. Christie Balka and Andy Rose (Boston, Beacon Press), 1989.

I grieve for you, / My brother Jonathan, / You were most dear to me / More than the love of women. *JPS*

Commentary:

This v., wholly dedicated to Jonathan, and formulated in the first and second person, is the most direct and personal one in the dirge. David's statement that Jonathan's *love was wonderful* to him *more than the love of women* (for him) does not hint at homosexual relations, but is an expression of deep friendship.

Jewish Study Bible

נפלאתה אהבתך לי מאהבת נשים – *Your love was more wondrous to me than the love of women!* There are various explanations.

- (a) Based on the plural *women*, it refers to David's two wives (*Targum Yonasan*), Abigail and Ahinoam. Thus David was saying that Jonathan's love for him was greater even than that of his wives (*Radak*). [Although Michal, too, was David's wife, he omitted her because they had been separated from the time that Saul had "annulled" their marriage, and David did not know that she was still loyal to him.]
- (b) *R' Menachem Azariah of Fano* writes that *Targum* refers to Jacob's two primary wives, Rachel and Leah. David meant to compare Jonathan's unselfish affection for him to that of the two sisters who were married to Jacob. Just as it was unnatural for a prince, Jonathan, to give up his throne to someone else, so it was unnatural for a woman, Rachel, to give up her fiancé to her sister. Nevertheless, just as Rachel's love for Leah led her not to protest when Leah was substituted for her under the marriage canopy, so too, Jonathan stepped aside gracefully in favor of David.
- (c) A woman's love for her husband and children is stronger than a man's, but Jonathan's love for David was even stronger than that (*Radak; Ralbag*).
- (d) My love for you was more pro-found than a man's love for a woman, for the latter is influenced at least partially by physical attraction, but the love of the two friends was completely pure and unselfish (*Metzudos*).

Rubin Edition of the Prophets: Samuel I and II

It is unlikely that David is expressing an erotic love for Jonathan at this moment. He admits that Jonathan was very dear to him, but no more. He remembers Jonathan's love of him as more selfless and giving than the love he received from the women in his life.... He is adored, fawned over, worshiped in song and lore, but David never seemed to be passionately in love with anyone, except perhaps G-d.

- *Rabbi Steven Greenberg, Wrestling with G-d and Men*

Questions:

1. What happens in this passage?
2. What does the commentary say that this verse means? What do you think it means?

Summary Questions:

“While the story drips with obvious homoeroticism, there is no evidence of any physical intimacy between them. There is, however, also no evidence in the language that would absolutely preclude such a relationship either.”

- *Rabbi Steven Greenberg, Wrestling with G-d and Men*

1. What is Rabbi Greenberg saying in this quote? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
2. Queer Jews will often look to David and Jonathan as gay role models in the Bible. Based on the texts, what do you think was the nature of David and Jonathan’s relationship?
3. Why is it important for people to find role models in the Bible?