# Learning of Love

א-ה-ב

*alef-heh-vet*

If he hadn’t been told of love, he would never have considered loving,” ob­served French philosopher Blaise Pascal. Whether love does come naturally or is an acquired trait, the Torah uses the root א-ה-ב (*alef, heh, vet*),love, to command the love of both God and humankind. On the one hand we are instructed וְאָהַבְתָּ אֵת ה' אֶלוֹקֶיךָ (*ve-ahavta et hashem elokekha*),“Love the Lord, your God,” and on the other וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ (*ve-ahavta le-rei'akha kamokha*),“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

The Bible is generously seasoned with words of love that sometimes lead to dramatic scenes. Abraham is told to take the son אֲשֶׁר אָהַבְתָּ (*asher ahavta*), “whom you love,” Isaac, and sacrifice him. Joseph’s sojourn in Egypt comes about becauseוְיִשְׂרָאֵל אָהַב אֶת יוֹסֵף (*ve-yisra'el ahav et yosef*), “Jacob loved Joseph,” more than his other sons. Proverbs warns its young acolyte melodramatically to beware of the woman who entices him with the phrase נִתְעַלְּסָה בָּאֳהָבִים (*nitalsa ba-ahavim*), “Let us couple in amorous embrace.”

Biblical love is nevertheless often spiritual, especially in the story of Jonathan and David, whose relationship, David insists, surpasses אַהֲבַת נָשִׁים (*ahavat nashim*), the love of women. The Psalmist chants of his love of God, while *Song of Songs* sings another tune, as the beloved speaks of being אַהֲבָה חוֹלַת (*holat ahava*), lovesick.

The rabbis explain the suffering of the righteous with a concept called יִסּוּרִים שֶׁל אַהֲבָה (*yisurim shel ahava*), afflictions of love, i.e., suffering in this world to suffer less in the world to come. They also recognize God’s love for humanity in אַהֲבָה רַבָּה (*ahava rabba*), great love.

The title of A.B. Yehoshua’s first novel is הַמְּאַהֵב (*ha-me'ahev*), *The Lover*, and אַהֲבָה (*ahava*) is a four-letter square sculpture by Robert Indiana at the Israel Museum. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda got into the act when he coined the word אֲהַבְהָבִים (*ahavhavim*), flirting, based on our root. Ruth Almagor Ramon, author of *Rega Shel Ivrit* on Hebrew usage, uses our root to teach a lesson in studied ambiguity. The two-noun construction אַהֲבַת הוֹרִים (*ahavat horim*) can be either parent’s love for children or children’s love for parents. Using our root and the same two-noun construction, Ramon comes up with an adjectival phrase, אַהֲבַת נֶפֶשׁ (*ahavat nefesh*), profound love.

The question remains: Is love a learned condition? To some, אַהֲבַת הַבְּרִיוֹת (*ahavat ha-beriyot*), love of humankind, does come naturally. To others, learning the Hebrew word for love is sufficient.

# Shewayah Shewayah

א-ט-ט

*alef-tet-tet*

Despite the ever-increasing demand these days for “fast, faster and fastest,” there are still a few relaxed folks who like to take their time. If you can’t imagine where these people might be found, take a tour of the Medi­terranean basin, where you will hear: Italian *piano pi­ano;* Greek *siga siga;* Turkish *yavash yavash;* Arabic *shewayeh shewayeh;* and one of many Hebrew idioms for “take it easy,” לְאַט לְאַט (*le'at le'at*),slowly slowly.

Some linguists conjecture that the root from which *le'at* derives, א-ט-ט (*alef, tet, tet*),was used by Isaiah in the word אִטִּים (*ittim*),referring to sorcerers who would mutter soft, slow and moaning sounds. Isaiah also records that the waters of Shiloah הוֹלְכִים לְאַט (*holkhim le'at*),“flow gently.” When Elijah rebukes King Ahab for his crimes, the sinner demonstrates his repentance by becoming אַט (*at*),“subdued.” One of the “comforters” of Job rebukes him with the question ?וְדָבָר לָאַט עִמָּךְ (*ve-davar la'at immakh*),“Are you privy to [cosmic] secrets?” Possibly the most touching use of the root in Scripture is ascribed to King David. Fearful of the fate of his rebellious son Absalom, David pleads, לְאַט לִי לַנַּעַר (*le'at li la-na'ar*),“For my sake deal gently with the lad.” In a decidedly ungentle episode in the Book of Judges, Yael approaches the enemy warrior Sisera בַּלָּאט (*ba-la'at*),“in secret,” the more efficiently to slay him.

The poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik plays musically on the similarity of sound between עֵת (*et*),time, and אֵט (*et*),slow, saying, הַהוֹלֵךְ לְאִטּוֹ יָבוֹא בְּעִתּוֹ (*ha-holekh le-itto yavo be-itto*),“He who goes slowly comes on time.” We can all agree that at times טַחֲנוֹת הַצֶּדֶק טוֹחֲנוֹת לְאַט (*tahanot ha-tsedek tohanot le'at*),“The mills of justice grind slowly.” In Israel today you may hold up your hand, palm out, and say !לְאַט לְךָ (*le'at lekha*),“Take it easy!” Arik Einstein’s popular song סַע לְאַט (*sa le'at*),“Drive Slowly,” was adapted by Israel’s Pizza Hut as an advertising slogan, סַע לַהַאט (*sa la-hat*),Drive to the Hut. Avraham Hefner’s groundbreaking 1967 short film לְאַט יוֹתֵר (*le'at yoter*), *Slow Down!,* was adapted from a story by Simone de Beauvoir.

Driving in Israel, you’ll probably encounter our root on road signs warning, מַחְסוֹם לְפָנֶיךָ !הָאֵט (*ha'et mahsom lefanekha*),Slow Down! Barrier Ahead. A sign in a residential neighborhood may inform you of the פַּסֵּי הֶאָטָה (*passei he'atah*),Speed Bumps. Then there is the dietary ditty: אֱכוֹל מְעַט, אֱכָוֹל לְאַט (*ekhol me'at ekhol le'at*),Eat little, eat slowly. Of course, for those who require a break from their fast-paced lives, a most congenial suggestion might beלְאַט אֲבָל בָּטוּחַ (*le'at aval batu'ah*),slowly but surely.