# Preface

## From the Dust of the Earth to the Repair of the World

In a short story that appeared first in *The New Yorker*, Cynthia Ozick, herself an American master of English prose, reveals a predilection for the Hebrew language. Her fondness for Hebrew stems from a profound understanding of the mechanisms by which Hebrew operates. Introducing the heroine of the novel that derived from that story, *The Puttermesser Papers* (Knopf, 1997), Ozick dilates on Ruth Puttermesser’s fascination with Hebrew grammar and the allure of the three-letter root on which its vocabulary is based. Ozick writes: “The permutations of the triple-lettered root elated her; how was it possible that a whole language, hence a whole literature, a civilization even, should rest on the pure presence of three letters of the alphabet? … It seemed to her not so much a language for expression as a code for the world’s design… The idea of the grammar of Hebrew turned Puttermesser’s brain into a sort of palace, a sort of Vatican; inside its corridors she walked from one resplendent triptych to another.”

For more than thirty years I have been walking along the corridors of these same Vaticans and palaces. Moreover, as the Hebrew Language columnist at Hadassah Magazine during this time, I have had the pleasure of elucidating for thousands of readers not only the mechanisms of the triliteral (three-letter) root of Hebrew, but also the beauty of Hebrew vocabulary as it develops in Biblical, Talmudic, Medieval, and Modern Hebrew, right up through the colorful slang of the streets and fields of the modern State of Israel. This has been accomplished not only in the Magazine but in two previous books—*Hebrew Speak* and *Hebrew Talk*—based on these columns. Since their publication, these two books have attracted thousands of readers. For this new book, *Hebrew Matters,* I have compiled one hundred and ten columns written for Hadassah Magazine in recent years.

Over the years, I have considered each column I write an ode to the Hebrew language. Often, the poetry metaphor takes my mind a little too far. While I am editing a draft of a column for Hadassah Magazine, I will start thinking that the 450-word limit the magazine imposes is like the 14-line restriction on the sonnets of Shakespeare and Petrarch I had studied as a young man. I then proceed from there to the comparison of my three volumes of musings on more than 300 Hebrew roots to Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* of 300 and more sonnets. Eventually, returning to earth, I mumble to myself, “Get off your high horse, Dr. Joe!”; and then I go back, a bit more modestly, to the root in question.

Each root is presented with a light touch and spiced with a good measure of humor. As one reader wrote, on the Amazon web site, “This [book] makes Hebrew vocabulary easy to learn and remember. . . .But it’s also fun, because there is plenty of cleverness, wit, and cultural flavor to the twists and meanings flowing through the connections. And this book is about the fun, funny, sarcastic, and joyful bits of the language. Far from being a dry, analytical work, it’s full of stories, quips, jokes, and overall love and reverence for Hebrew.”

In this book I try to capture how the Hebrew language “matters” to us today. What I am interested in learning is how Hebrew makes its way through the roads and byways it takes and how the stories it tells through its three-letter roots travel to the various worlds that make up Jewish civilization through the ages. Almost every word spoken in the places where Hebrew has flourished resonates with the echoes of Jewish history, Jewish civilization, and the Jewish textual tradition. Readers of this book are invited to listen in to the stories of Hebrew told here in the hope that these echoes will resonate with them as well.

Riverdale, New York

December 21, 2021

# A Note on Translation and Transliteration

The three-letter roots that form the basis of this book are presented in Hebrew characters in the title of each chapter, in Hebrew alphabetical order, *alef* to *tav*—from the dust of the earth in chapter 1, to the repair of the world in chapter 110. Words derived from each root are then presented in the body of each chapter, in Hebrew, together with the vowel points—dots and dashes—that make it easier for readers to read. The Hebrew of these words and phrases is followed by a transliteration into English letters, to help readers familiarize themselves with the sounds of Hebrew. Finally, all the Hebrew words are translated into English. This is all done in what I hope is companionable prose designed to capture the reader’s interest. Because this book is intended for pleasurable reading, as though it were a conversation with our readers and not a vocabulary list, not all our translations are literal or exact. For example, in many cases we have tried to find equivalents of Israeli slang in American idioms. In a great many other cases, for the sake of accessibility, we have aimed to “converse” rather than translate the Hebrew into English, in what one might call a *converslation*, so that even the translation tells a story that engages the reader.

As to the transliterations, *Hebrew Matters* generally follows the transliteration rules of the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), Vol. 1, p. 90. In addition, because even transliteration is not immune to trends, fashions, and elaborations, I have from time to time deviated from the rules when it has appeared prudent to do so for the sake of our readers’ comfort. Many Hebrew words have entered the English language and have found a home there, in dictionaries, the street, and advertisements. In the body of this text, that’s how they may appear as well. When they are transliterations of the Hebrew, however, the spelling will follow our rules of transliteration. Take the example of unleavened bread. In English, it may be “Matzoh”; in the transliteration, (*matsah*).

# Acknowledgements

After many other occasions to do so during our long life together, cut short by the Coronavirus pandemic, I am once again pleased to thank my late wife, Judith, the first reader of everything I had written for publication. Her sharp eye went beyond hunting for typographical errors. She was also expert at detecting and repairing all types of pedantry, sophistry, and overly technical language. For coming to my technological rescue at the many times it was needed—and especially when it was getting close to the wire—I am indebted to our children, Shari, David and Benji.

In addition, I would like to thank Alan Tigay, the executive editor at Hadassah Magazine at the time, for inviting me in the first place to write the columns that make up the content of what are now three volumes about Hebrew roots and their derivations, and Lisa Hostein, the magazine’s current executive editor, who took the initiative to return my column to its place in the Hadassah firmament after a brief hiatus. This is also the place to praise the Hadassah organization itself for its steadfast commitment over the years to The Jerusalem Program, in which a central plank is Hebrew education and the teaching of Hebrew as the national language of the Jewish people.

My most faithful companions over the years have been the Hebrew lexicographers and scholars whose weighty dictionaries landed with a pleasant thud on my dining room table each month, as I was beginning a new chapter in my way of telling the Hebrew story. It is a pleasure to list their names here: Reuven Alkalai; Avraham Even-Shoshan; Yaacov Choueka; Eitan Avneyon; Abraham Solomonick; Ruth Almagor-Ramon; Ruvik Rosenthal; Dan Ben-Amotz, Netiva Ben-Yehuda; and Avshalom Kor. Truly, any such list begins and ends with Eliezer Ben Yehuda, whose dictionary I paged through not in my dining room but in the stacks of Columbia University’s Butler Library in New York. Lost in the heady odors emanating from those old volumes, as I moved from a new linguistic discovery to a new Judaica insight, I often dreamt of Ben Yehuda as the best Jew of my lifetime, even though he had died 20 years before my birth.

I owe a great debt as well to Roselyn Bell, Zelda Shluker, and most recently Leah Finkelshteyn, my editors at Hadassah Magazine over the years, for their tender loving care of the columns that arrived on their desks at regular intervals, for enhancing my prose, making it readable for the general audiences for which it was intended and, when it was called for, for making sure that any inaccuracies that had crept in would be duly corrected.

Furthermore, I am grateful to Walter Herzberg, a good friend with whom I had been reunited after many years during which we had lost touch with each other, for sharing his vast knowledge and love of Hebrew grammar, philology and usage. Rabbi Joseph Brodie has been an invaluable Judaica resource who, like Chaucer’s cleric, would “gladly learn and gladly teach,” and would do so with exemplary patience. I am grateful to Erica Goldman-Brodie, a master of the WorldWideWeb who, together with her own worldwide web of contacts, would uncannily find what I needed when I needed it. I am greatly beholden to my learned daughter-in-law Avital Malina for reading the proofs of this book before it went to press and for making sure that it is as close as humanly possible to being error-free. It goes without saying that I am nevertheless solely answerable for any errors that remain.

I would like to thank Darren Slade, President of the Global Center for Religious Research, and Publisher as well of its GCRR Press, for his instant and enduring enthusiasm for this project. I am especially thankful to Jennifer Walker and Kimberly Dell, of the editorial staff at GCRR Press, for their keen discernment and judicious comments, suggestions and corrections.

Finally, it is difficult to assess the many ways in which Richard White, a good friend of many years, shared his skills in the use of proper English, his deep knowledge of Semitic languages and his expertise in information technology. I have over the course of these many years considered him my teacher in a broad range of subjects relating to the humanities. More than any other, after uncountable telephone conversations and shared text messages and e-mails, he has been instrumental in helping me turn my manuscript into a book.

# Wrestling with Dust

א-ב-ק

*alef-vet-kof*

The art educators at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles teach that to gain insight into a work of art, you have to train yourself to “look longer.” Similarly, look hard and long enough at a Hebrew root and you will find an abundance of insight into the art of Jewish liv­ing. For example, look at the root א-ב-ק (*alef, vet, kof*)and you will uncover: dust and wrestling, perfume and pollen, a certain male organ and slander, buttonholes, a lung ailment—and grandma’s vac­uum cleaner.

According to Hebrew etymologist Ernest Klein, the word אָבָק (*avak*), dust, is related to an Arabic word meaning that which flies or flees. Throw soot toward the sky, as Moses does in Exodus, and noxious *avak* will fly out all over the land of Egypt. The marketplace enters into the lyricism of the *Song of Songs* with our root, as the beloved arrives, enveloped in clouds of perfume made from אַבְקַת רוֹכֵל (*avkat rokhel*), literally, merchant’s powder.

Rashi disagrees with medieval philologist Menahem ben Saruk about the narrative of Jacob’s wrestling match with an angel. For ben Saruk, the phrase וַיֵּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ (*va-ye'avek ish immo*)signifies that Jacob and the “man” raised dust while wrestling. For Rashi, however, *avak* is related to חָבַק (*havak*),Aramaic for he fastened himself on, or intertwined himself. Think of the way a twined אֶבֶק (*evek*),loop, is made. *Pirke Avot* uses both embracing and dust metaphorically, telling us, הֱוֵי מִתְאַבֵּק בַּעֲפַר רַגְלֵיהֶם (*hevei mitabbek ba-afar ragleihem*),“Cling to the dust of their feet,” i.e., study at the feet of the sages. The rabbis take this dust even more abstractly, taking the word *avak* to mean a hint of, or smidgen. Thus, Maimonides forbids not only slander, but even “a hint of slander,” אֲבַק לְשׁוֹן הָרָע (*avak leshon ha-ra*).Thus, Maimonides forbids one to even speak *well* of a person in front of his enemy, lest the latter take this as an opening to speak *ill* of him.

Today, too much dust in the air can lead to אַבֶּקֶת (*abbeket*),coniosis, a dis­ease of the lungs. While הַאֲבָקָה (*ha'avakah*),crop dusting, is used by farmers to kill harmful insects, the אַבְקָן (*avkan*),male sexual organ of the flower—sta­men—is used by nature to perform אֲבָקָה (*avakah*),pollination. Israeli novel­ist Meir Shalev, in a memoir of his childhood in Nahalal, tells a charming story of his Russian grandmother and her American שׁוֹאֵב אָבָק (*sho'ev avak*),vac­uum cleaner.

This has not been too much of a מַאֲבָק (*ma'avak*),struggle. To gain insight from a Hebrew root, you need only look longer and deeper.

# 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.

# How’m I doing?

א-י-כ

*alef-yod-khof*

It is widely held that הָאֵיכוּת חֲשׁוּבָה מֵהַכַּמּוּת (*ha-eikhut hashuva me-ha-kam­mut*),quality is more important than quan­tity. The words אֵיכוּת (*eikhut*),quality, and כַּמּוּת (*kammut*),quantity—found in neither biblical nor talmudic literature but present throughout medi­eval Hebrew texts—are coined from אֵיךְ (*eikh*), how, and כַּמָּה (*kamma*),how much. Strikingly, each word encompasses both quality and quantity and is therefore important enough to merit individual treatment.

The root א-י-כ (*alef, yod, khof*)has a verb form, לְאַיֵּךְ (*le-ayyekh*), to qualify, that is rarely used. In Scripture, the root mainly appears in rhetorical questions and exclamations of grief or astonishment. In Genesis, King Abimelekh scolds Isaac for lying to him, asking, אֵיךְ אָמַרְתָּ (*eikh amarta*),“How could you say” Rebekah was your sister? Later, Judah begs to be substituted for Benjamin as hostage, arguing אֵיךְ אֶעֱלֶה (*eikh e'eleh*),“How can I go back up” to my father without the boy? In David’s elegy commemorating the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, we find the quintessential expression of despair, אֵיךְ נָפְלוּ גִּבּוֹרִים (*eikh naflu gibborim*),“How the mighty have fallen!”

Grief is deepened as the *eikh* is drawn out. On Tisha B’Av, we memorialize the destruction of the Temple by chanting the Book of Lamentations: אֵיכָה יָשְׁבָה בָדָד (*eikha yashva vadad*),“How does [the city that was full of people] sit so desolate?” Esther adds another syllable and further poetic poignancy, justifying her request to King Ahasuerus that he rescind Haman’s evil decree, pleading אֵיכָכָה אוּכַל וְרָאִיתִי(*eikhakha ukhal ve-ra'iti*),“How can I bear to see” evil done to my people?

Today, we are interested in אֵיכוּתִי (*eikhuti*),qualitative issues like אֵיכוּת הַסְּבִיבָה (*eikhut ha-seviva*),quality of the environment, and אֵיכוּת הַחַיִּים (*eikhut ha-hayyim*),quality of life. Modern Hebrew also uses the root in many popular expressions, from אֵיךְ קוֹרְאִים לְךָ (*eikh kor'im lekha*),what do they call you?, to אֵיךְ הָעִנְיָנִים (*eikh ha-inyanim*),how’re things? One might argue, אֵיכְשֶׁהוּ (*eikhshehu*),somehow, and אֵיךְ שֶׁלֹּא יִהְיֶה (*eikh she-lo yiheyeh*),no matter what, that its widest use is in the exclamation וְעוֹד אֵיךְ (*ve-od eikh*),you better believe it!

Crooning in Hebrew slang a chanson by Georges Brassens, Israeli folksinger Yossi Banai asks a recently deceased friend, presumably in heaven, to inquire of Mother Eve, אֵיךְ הַמַרְגָשׁ (*eikh ha-margash*),“How’re you feeling?” So, does quantity generate quality? We’ll explore that issue in Chapter 42, with כַּמָּה מִלִּים (*kamma milim*),a few well-chosen words.

# A Man and a Woman?

א-י-ש

*alef-yod-shin*

The question of the origins of men and women has received much attention, with advocates adducing biblical, scientific, and sociopolitical explanations for the gen­esis of humankind. No less interesting than this hot topic is the debate around the origins of the He­brew words אִישׁ (*ish*),man, and אִשָּׁה (*isha*),woman.

The 19th-century German rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, suggests that the verbal root א-י-שׁ (*alef, yod, shin*)is related to יֵשׁ (*yesh*),there is, meaning “to exist.” The *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford Uni­versity Press) speaks of “the impossibility of deriving אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה from the same root, “since the *dagesh* in the *shin* in אִשָּׁה hints at a missing letter. The *BDB* entertains the notion of a root א-נ-שׁ (*alef, nun, shin*),which would give us not only אִשָּׁה, but also אֱנוֹשׁ (*enosh*),humankind; הַאֲנָשָׁה(*ha'anasha*),personification; and the plurals אֲנָשִׁים (*anashim*),men, and נָשִׁים (*nashim*),women. However, the *BDB* concludes, “probability seems to favor the root א-י-שׁ.”

The Bible has no difficulty seeing *ish* and *isha* as masculine and feminine forms of the same word. Adam, who names all living things, declares לְזֹאת יִקָּרֵא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לֻקֳחָה (*le-zot yikkare isha ki me-ish lukaha*), “She shall be called woman because she was taken from man.” The pairs of animals led into Noah’s Ark are called אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ (*ish ve-ishto*),male and female.

Jacob is אִישׁ תָּם (*ish tam*),a simple man, and Esau אִישׁ יוֹדֵעַ צַיִד (*ish yode'a tsayid*),a cunning hunter. Since the prophetess Deborah is אֵשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת (*eshet lappidot*),the wife of Lapidot, the term today is applied to a strong, energetic woman. King David may not build the Temple because he is מִלְחָמוֹת אִישׁ(*ish milhamot*),a man of wars, while God Himself is praised as אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה (*ish milhama*),Man of War. The Talmud’s taboo against using the name of Jesus gives us אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ (*oto ha-ish*),That Man. *Pirkei Avot* traces history from Moses—whom the Torah dubs הָאִישׁ (*ha-ish*),the man—to אַנְשֵׁי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוֹלָה (*anshei kenesset ha-gedola*),the Men of the Great Assembly.

Today, we speak of the common man as הָאִישׁ בָּרְחוֹב (*ha-ish ba-rehov*),the man in the street, or אַנְשֵׁי הַשּׁוּרָה (*anshei ha-shura*),the rank and file. One might refer אִישִׁית (*ishit*),personally, to a public אִישִׁיּוּת (*ishi'ut*),personality, as an אִישׁ אֱשְׁכּוֹלוֹת (*ish eshkolot*),Renaissance man, one whose name is found in סֵפֶר הָאִישִׁים (*sefer ha-ishim*), *Who’s Who.* In דִינֵי אִישׁוּת (*dinei ishut*),the laws of matrimony, אִשְׁתּוֹ כְּגוּפוֹ (*ishto ke-gufo*),a man’s wife is considered to be like the man himself. Original, isn’t it?

# You Don’t Say

א-מ-ר

*alef-mem-resh*

It isn’t what it’s talking about that makes a book Jewish—it’s that the book won't shut up.” So said Philip Roth, author of several books in which Jews can’t stop talking. But is he aware that the simple Hebrew root א-מ-ר (*alef, mem, resh*), to say, reveals as much about Jewish mores as his droll אִמְרָה (*imra*), aphorism? Variations on the formula “God spoke to Moses, לֵאמֹר (*leimor*), saying,” appear more than 900 times in Scripture. The root is also found in some potentially violent biblical narratives. For example, Rebekah sends her son Jacob into exile when she learns—how, we do not know—that his twin brother, Esau, אָמַר בְּלִבּוֹ (*amar be-libbo*), “was plotting in his heart,” to kill him. The root also introduces the exile of Moses to Midian, where he flees after hearing the veiled threat הַלְהָרְגֵנִי אַתָּה אֹמֵר (*ha-le-horgeini ata omer*), “Do you mean to kill me” as you killed the Egyptian overseer? More sentimentally, in Egypt, Joseph asks his brothers if their father אַשֶׁר אֲמַרְתֶּם (*asher amartem*), “whom you mentioned,” is well.

When one combines the “titles” of three consecutive weekly readings in *Leviticus—aharei mot,* after death; *kedoshim,* holy; and אֱמֹר (*emor*),say—one may come up with the advice, “Say only positive things of the dead.” Possibly the cleverest use of our root is found in an article by modern Hebrew-language maven Ben-Zion Fischler: אִמְרֵי חַזַ"ל שֶׁחַזַ"ל לֹא אָמַרוּם (*imrei hazal she-hazal lo amarum*),“Sayings of the Rabbis That the Rabbis Never Said.”

The rabbis did say many things, of course, calling a whole class of its sages אָמוֹרָאִים (*amoraim*),speakers. When some rabbis would come upon a difficult biblical verse, they might declare, זֶה אוֹמֵר דוֹרְשֵׁנִי (*zeh omer dorsheni*),this verse calls for a midrashic interpretation. In a dispute, one might find the expression יֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים (*yesh omerim*),there are those of a different opinion.

One way to bring redemption to the world in the Jewish value system is to cite a quotation בְּשֵׁם אוֹמְרוֹ (*be-shem omero*),in the name of its originator, זֹאת אוֹמֶרֶת (*zot omeret*),that means, give credit for an idea that is not yours. The root is widespread in colloquial Hebrew, where the literal meaning might take on slangy overtones. Thus, you might hear expressions such as מָה אַתָּה אוֹמֵר (*mah atta omer*),You must be kidding! Or זֶה לֹא אוֹמֵר לִי כְּלוּם (*zeh lo omer li kelum*),I don’t care for this at all.

Or you might just read a מַאֲמָר (*ma'amar*),article, that reminds you not of Philip Roth but of a מֵימְרָה (*meimra*),saying, from *Pirke Avot: אֶמֹר מְעַט* (*emor me'at*),Say little, but do a lot.

# Plenty of Nothin’

א-פ-ס

*alef-feh-samekh*

Who would want to take credit for inventing nothing? That is perhaps why it is difficult to trace the history of the num­ber zero. Was it the Babylonians? The Mayans? The Indians? The Arabs? The latter are indeed credited with having introduced zero to the West, via a word related to the Hebrew *sefira,* number. Never­theless, another root, א-פ-ס (*alef, feh, samekh*), originally meaning extremity, is the Hebrew equivalent for zero.

Genesis tells us that during the famine in Egypt, the people came to Joseph, Pharaoh’s vizier, to beg for bread, כִּי אָפֵס כָּסֶף (*ki afes kassef*),“because [our] money has run out.” Isaiah berates the Babylonians for falsely thinking to themselves אֲנִי וְאַפְסִי עוֹד (*ani ve-afsi od*), “I am, and none else is besides me.” He reminds Persia’s King Cyrus, on behalf of God, אֶפֶס בִּלְעָדָי (*efes bil'adai*),“There is none but Me.” Isaiah also quotes the nations of the world, who will one day declare אֵין עוֹד אֶפֶס (*ein od efes*),“there is no other,” but God. In Numbers, the 12 scouts add a caveat to their praise of Canaan: אֶפֶס כִּי עַז הָעָם (*efes ki az ha-am*),“however, the nation [dwelling there] is strong.”

The expression אַפְסֵי אָרֶץ (*afsei arets*),the ends of the earth, is found a dozen times in Scripture in its original sense, extremity. Using our root metaphorically to make an ethical point, Proverbs remarks בְּאֶפֶס עֵצִים (*be-efes etsim*),“absent trees” (i.e., talebearers), the fires of strife go out. Ezekiel’s expression מֵי אָפְסָיִם (*mei ofsayim*),water that reaches the ankles, is used today to mean shallow water. Medieval grammarian Jonah Ibn Janakh suggests that shallow water does not come from *efes,* but rather from פַּס (*pas*),sole of the foot, making *mei ofsayim* both shallower and more logical.

Today, the verb אִפֵס (*ifes*),to annihilate, is also used in the Army to “zero” an instrument. A physicist may lecture to a hall filled עַד אֶפֶס מָקוֹם (*ad efes makom*),to capacity, about אֶפֶס מוּחְלָט (*efes muhlat*),absolute zero. Some people are lucky enough to get things done בְּאֶפֶס יָד (*be-efes yad*),without trying too hard, or even בְּאֶפֶס מַעֲשֶׂה (*be-efes ma'aseh*),without doing anything at all. While some people are philosophical אַפְסָנִים (*afsanim*),nihilists, there are several ways using slang to characterize a person who is an אֶפֶס גָמוּר (*efes gamur*),real big nothing. Compare an אֶפֶס בַּר אֶפֶס (*efes bar efes*),zero, son of zero; אֶפֶס אַפָסִים (*efes afasim*),a zero to end all zeroes; אֶפֶס בְּרִיבּוּעַ (*efes be-ribu'a*),a zero squared; and אֶפֶס מְאוּפָס (*efes me-ufas*),a zeroed zero. Who would have thought that in a land flowing with milk and honey there could be such a plethora of zeroes?

# On the Other Road

א-ר-ח

*alef-resh-het*

When an Israeli travels abroad today, he carries a דַרְכּוֹן (*darkon*),passport, from the word דֶרֶךְ (*derekh*),road. A century ago, one's passport might have been called an אָרְחִית (*orhit*)*—*aword that has fallen entirely into disuse—from a parallel ancient Hebrew root that has survived and sometimes flourished, א-ר-ח (*alef, resh, het*),to travel.

In Scripture, this root is found in connection with two important narratives. In the Joseph story, when the youngster, doted upon by his father, is thrown into a pit by his envious brothers, his life is saved thanks to a passing אֹרְחַת יִשְׁמְעֵאלִים (*orhat yishme'elim*), “caravan of Ishmaelites.” When foremother Sarah, in old age, is told that she is to bear a child, she is incredulous. After all, she has ceased to exhibit אֹרַח כַּנָּשִׁים (*orah ka-nashim*), “the ‘way’ of women,” a euphemism for the menses that indicate fertility. The psalmist finds this figurative sense of the root particularly useful, especially when he entreats, אֹרְחֹתֶיךָ לַמְדֵנִי (*orhoteha lamdeini*), “Teach me Thy ways.”

The rabbis of the Talmud used an Aramaic term containing our root to speak of something incidental to a main argument, אַגַב אוֹרְחָא (*agav orha*), “by the way.” In deciding Jewish law, the Talmud, foregoing strict legalism, stakes out a claim for local custom, אוֹרַח אַרְעָא (*orah ar'ah*), the “way of the land.”

Modern Hebrew writers often demonstrate a classical flair by using Aramaic idioms. Bringing into play our root, Hayyim Nahman Bialik chastises אָרְחֵי פָּרְחֵי (*orhei porhei*), vagrants; S.Y. Agnon relates that one politely asks a wayfarer where he is from, כְּאוֹרַח גוּבְרִין יהוּדָאִין (*ke-orah guvrin yehuda'in*), “after the manner of Jewish gentlemen.”

The root has taken on usages that have mainly to do with hospitality, especially in the words אוֹרֵחַ (*ore'ah*), guest, and אֲרוּחָה (*aruhah*), meal. A luxury hotel in Tel Aviv advertises that it practices אֵרוּחַ כְּיַד הַמֶּלֶךְ (*eru'ah ke-yad ha­melekh*), hospitality fit for a king. Visitors, having tasted Israeli hotels’ sumptuous אֲרוּחַת בּוֹקֶר (*aruhat boker*), breakfast, might be willing to forego the locals’ אֲרוּחַת עֶשֶׂר (*aruhat esser*), 10 A.M. snack; אֲרוּחַת צָהֳרַים (*aruhat tsohorayim*), lunch; and אֲרוּחַת אַרְבַּע (*aruhat arba*), 4 P.M. snack. By the time of אֲרוּחַת עֶרֶב (*aruhat erev*), dinner, however, they may appreciate being אוֹרְחִים (*orhim*), guests, at an אֲרוּחַת שְׁחִיתוּת (*aruhat shehitut*), copious meal of many courses.

Dieters may prefer an אֲרוּחַת יָרָק (*aruhat yarak*), light meal of greens. But next time you go לְהִתְאָרֵחַ (*le-hitare'ah*), to be a guest, at the home of an Israeli family, bring to your מְאָרְחִים (*me-arhim*), hosts, both a hearty appetite and a nice box of Israeli chocolates.

# Coming, Going—And Then Some

ב-ו-א

*bet-vav-alef*

Have you ever felt you didn’t know whether you were coming or going? Well, Hebrew has a root that might feel that way. Depending on context, ב-ו-א (*bet, vav, alef*)means to come, to go—and many more sur­prising things as well. It makes sense that a root found some 3,000 times in Scripture would have a wide variety of meanings. In Genesis, Abraham is בָּא בַּיָמִים (*ba ba-yamim*),old. A barren Rachel offers Jacob her servant Bilha and says, בֹּא אֵלֶיהָ (*bo eile­ha*),“Lie with her.” Reuben, learning of his brother Joseph’s disappearance, laments אָנָא אֲנִי בָּא (*ana ani ba*),“Where shall I turn ?” In Exodus, God in­structs Moses בֹּא אֶל פַּרְעֹה (*bo el par*'*oh*),“Go to Pharaoh.” Leviticus decrees וּבָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְטָהֵר (*u-va ha-shemesh ve-taher*),“When the sun sets [the Priest] is cleansed.” In Numbers, Moses confronts the tribes who want to settle in Transjordan with, “Your brothers יָבֹאוּ לַמִלְחָמָה (*yavo'u la-milhama*),will go to war, and you’ll stay here?”

To intensify a Hebrew verb one doubles it. In *Tanakh, בֹּא יָבֹא* (*bo yavo*)means both “He will certainly come” and “It always comes true.” The Bible also uses the root to point out a route, e.g., בֹּאַךָ גְרָרָה (*bo'akha gerara*),“as you come toward Gerar.” Look closely and you’ll recognize our root in תְּבוּאָה (*tevu'a*),crop, the produce coming to us from the land.

The Sages of the Talmud used our root לְהָבִיא רְעַיָה (*le-havi re-aya*),to bring a proof, and to declare that בִּיאָה (*bi'a*),cohabitation, is one way of consecrating a marriage. In the Shabbat liturgy, we greet the Sabbath angels with בּוֹאַכֶם לְשָׁלוֹם (*bo'akhem le-shalom*),come in peace. Then there is the mystical עוֹלָם הַבָּא (*olam ha-ba*),world to come.

In modern Israel, you’re likely to hear opening gambits like לְהַבָּא (*le-ha-ba*),from now on; בֹּא נַגִּיד (*bo* *naggid*),let us say; and בָּרוּךְ הַבָּא (*barukh ha-ba*),welcome. A proposal may be rejected out of hand with a gruff לֹא בָּא בְּחֶשְׁבּוֹן (*lo* *ba be-heshbon*),out of the question! A מָבוֹא(*mavo*)is a preface, leading the reader into a book.

Songwriter Ehud Manor, using our root twice, celebrates those who come on *aliya* in the refrain בָּא לִי לְהַגִּיד כַּמָּה טוֹב שֶׁבָּאְתֶם (*ba li le-haggid kamma tov she-batem*),“I really want to say ‘I’m very glad you came.’” Less sentimentally, that welcoming plaque inscribed בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה בְּבוֹאֶךָ (*barukh ata be­-vo'ekha*),“Bless you as you come in,” has been seen bearing a scribbled addendum reading, “All the more so as you go out.”

Maybe it’s time for us to go as well.

# Nine-tenths of the Law

ב-ע-ל

*bet-ayin-lamed*

How does one take possession? He­brew offers an understanding of the issue of בַּעֲלוּת (*ba'alut*),ownership, through the root בּ-ע-ל (*bet, ayin, lamed*),to own, rule over, marry, have sexual relations.Early on, the noun, בַּעַל (*ba'al*),owner, was the name of the powerful Canaanite god, Ba’al, worshiped as owner of the land who provided rainfall to make the soil fertile. The verb בָּעַל (*ba'al*)meant to take possession of a territory by entering and fructifying it. It is not difficult to see how the root came to be used in connection with marriage and בְּעִילָה (*be'ila*),sexual congress.

In the Book of Esther, the Persian king’s advisers argue that rebellious Queen Vashti should be deposed so that wives in his realm יִתְּנוּ יְקָר לְבַעֲלֵיהֶן (*yitnu yekar le-va'aleihen*),“show respect to their husbands.” The prophet Isaiah reminds Israel that even an ass knows how to find אֵבוּס בְּעָלָיו (*evus be'alav*),“the feeding trough of its owner.” The same Isaiah renames the land of Israel בְּעוּלָה (*be'ula*),espoused, presumably to God. (The woman’s name Beulah surely comes from this source.) Joseph is called derisively by his brothers בַּעַל הַחֲלוֹמוֹת (*ba'al ha-halomot*),“the dream man,” where *ba'al* refers not to ownership but to his possession of a singular trait.

In both classical and modern Hebrew, *ba'al* is used in dozens of compound expressions. The founder of the Hasidic movement was known as the בַּעַל שֵׁם טוֹב (*ba'al shem tov*),Master of the Good Name. In the synagogue, we have a בַּעַל תְּפִילָּה (*ba'al tefilla*),prayer leader, to say nothing of the בַּעַל תְּשׁוּבָה (*ba'al teshuva*),penitent. One way of referring to the Jewish God is בַּעַל הָרַחֲמִים (*ba'al ha-rahamim*),the Merciful One.

A בַּעַל חַיִים (*ba'al hayyim*)suggests anything endowed with life. Today, however, the term is applied almost exclusively to animals, as in Israel’s חֶבְרַת צַעַר בַּעֲלֵי חַיִים (*hevrat tsa'ar ba'alei hayyim*),Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. During World War II, the Allies were known in Hebrew as בַּעֲלוֹת הַבְּרִית (*ba'alot ha-berit*).The father of a circumcised child is also called בַּעַל בְּרִית (*ba'al berit*),probably because he and his wife are the בַּעֲלֵי שִׂמְחָה (*ba'alei simha*),hosts of the celebration. A father might boast that his daughter is not only בַּעֲלַת גִּזְרָה דְּקִיקָה (*ba'alat gizra dekika*),slim-waisted, but also בַּעֲלַת תּוֹאַר דּוֹקְטוֹר (*ba'alat to'ar doktor*),a Ph.D.

. .

And then there is the eternal verity of Jewish communal life, בַּעַל הַמֵּאָה הוּא בַּעַל הַדֵּעָה (*ba'al ha-me'ah hu ba'al ha-de'ah*),he who gives the money calls the tune. For better or worse, philanthropy is nine-tenths of ownership.

# Gesundheit

ב-ר-א  
*bet-resh-alef*

Leave it to Hebrew, whose speakers are thought to be indifferent to etiquette, to have two ways of saying *Gesundheit* when someone sneezes. There is לִבְרִיאוּת (*livri'ut*),to health (without a definite article)—the grammat­ically correct way to say it—and לַבְּרִיאוּת (*la-beri'ut*),(with the definite article), to your (literally, the) health—the way most people say it. Interestingly, Hebrew etymologists waver between two closely related roots, א‑ר‑ב (*bet, resh, alef*),to be fat (and, therefore, healthy), and ב-ר-ה (*bet, resh, heh*),to nourish oneself.

These roots are found in several biblical stories. There is the tale of Joseph, who interprets as seven “good” years Pharaoh’s dream of seven fat cows, בְּרִיוֹת בָּשָׂר (*beri'ot bassar*)“fleshily healthy.” David’s lovesick son Amnon criminally seduces his half sister Tamar by convincing her that he can recover from his listlessness only if she serves him בִּרְיָה (*biryah*),food. And then there is, from the Book of Judges, Ehud Ben-Gera, who gets away with killing the Moabite King Eglon, who was בָּרִיא מְאֹד (*bari me'od*),very fat, by burying his sword in the folds of the king’s ample belly.

An example of the root’s use in rabbinic literature can be found in the Aramaic prayer *Yekum Purkan,* with its straightforward petition for בַּרְיוּת גוּפָא (*baryut gufa*),“bodily health.” The term בִּריוֹנִים (*biryonim*),whose ori­gin is unclear, refers to beefy Jewish Zealots fighting against the Roman occupation of Judea in the first century and is used today to designate burly bullies who abuse weaker classmates. One who does so online also has a name, בִּריוֹנֶט (*biryonet*),Internet bully.

Medieval philosopher-physician Maimonides advised his patients to control their lives with דְבָרִים הַמַּבְרִין (*devarim ha-mavrin*),“nutritive things.” Perhaps in a Zionist response to Rambam, Nobel Prize writer S.Y. Agnon proclaims that the air itself of the Land of Israel is מַבְרִיא (*mavri*),“curative.”

A mourner returning from the cemetery is served aסְעוּדַת הַבְרָאָה (*se'udat havra'ah*),convalescent meal. To recuperate from an illness one may repair to a בֵּית הַבְרָאָה (*beit havra'ah*) or, to use a word coined by Eliezer Ben-Yehu­da, a מִבְרָאָה (*mivra'ah*),sanatorium. In the old days, one might begin a letter with a polite הִנְנִי בְּקַו הַבְּרִיאוּת (*hineni be-kav ha-beri'ut*),I am well. Today, one takes leave of a friend with a well-mannered תִּהְיֶה בָּרִיא (*tihyeh bari*), “Be well.”

Etiquette? Just remember, הָעִקָּר הַבְּרִיאוּת (*ha-ikkar ha-beri'ut*),it’s all good, as long as you have your health.

# In the Big Inning

בּ-ר-א

*bet-resh-alef*

In April, everything is full of promise. It’s springtime and we celebrate newly burgeoning nature. It’s Passover and we re­joice at becoming a newly free nation. It’s spring training and every baseball team is undefeated. And it’s *Hebrew Matters* and we examine anew the story of Creation and the root בּ-ר-א (*bet, resh, alef*),to create. Is Genesis 1:1 recounting that “In the beginning,” God בָּרָא (*bar'a*),created the world, ex nihilo, out of nothing? Or does the text assume this and, as Rashi imagines—manipulating the vowels of the three-letter root—the Torah is reporting that Genesis begins with “Let there be light” as God בְּרֹא (*ber'o*),“goes about creating”?

Originally, the root denoted creating by cutting or carving, e.g., whittling a branch to create an arrow. More monumentally, during the conquest of Canaan, when one of the tribes complains that it is cramped for space, Joshua uses our root to reply, “Go to the forest and בְּרֵא לְךָ (*ber'e lekha*),cut down trees, to carve for yourselves an area, on which to fashion cities.”

The root is found in many liturgical settings taken from Scripture. King David, having been caught dallying with Bathsheba, repents contritely, using our root to ask God, לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרָא לִי (*lev tahor ber'a li*),“Fashion a pure heart for me.” In the *Yah Ribbon* Sabbath hymn, we draw on the Aramaic of the book of Daniel to chant חֵיוַת בְּרָא (*heivat ber'a*),“He creat­ed the beasts of the field.” One would think that when God is called simply הַבּוֹרֵא (*ha-bor'e*),the Creator, that would cover everything. Nevertheless, among several specific Pleasure Blessings, God is also the בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הַגָּפֶן (*bor'e peri ha-gafen*),creator of the fruit of the vine.

Hebrew writer Haim Hazaz used our root, as it is sometimes used in Yiddish, to label a Jewish homemaker a בִּרְיָה (*biryah*),an industrious manager. In “On the Slaughter,” Hayyim Nahman Bialik’s poem commemorating the Kishinev Pogrom, the poet, while demanding revenge, realizes that such vengeance עוֹד לֹא בָּרָא הַשָּׂטָן (*od lo bar'a ha-satan*),“the Devil himself has not yet created.” Hillel the Elder, suggesting a role model for humanity, points to Aaron the High Priest as one who אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיאוֹת (*ohev et ha-beri’ot*),loves all God’s creatures.

Today, when one categorically denies that something happened, one refer­ences Job who, according to the Talmud, לֹא הָיָה וְלֹא נִבְרָא (*lo* *hayah ve-lo nivra*),“neither existed nor was created.”

O.K. The weather is beautiful. Go outside. It’s a new inning. Play ball!

# The Way of All *Fleish*

ב-שׂ-ר

*bet-sin-resh*

Is meat good for the Jews? The Tal­mud insists that every celebratory meal should consist of בָּשָׂר וְדָגִים (*basar ve-dagim*), meat and fish. But the sages of *Pirke Avot* con­tend that מַרְבֶּה בָּשָׂר מַרְבֶּה רִמָּה (*marbeh basar mar­beh rimma*),“the more meat you eat, the more worms you have.” Hebrew poses a similar quandary about meat: there are two derivatives of the root ב-שׂ-ר (*bet, sin, resh*),בָּשָׂר (*basar*),meat, and בְּשׂוֹרָה (*besora*), good tidings. Vague hints permit the conjecture that the two words are related: since the word *basar* once referred to something pleasant to the senses, one can connect eating a steak and hearing good news.

In Genesis, the word בָּשָׂר (*basar*),flesh, is initially used without carnivorous shadings. At Eve’s creation from his rib, Adam exults that his companion is בָּשָׂר מִבְּשָׂרִי (*basar mi-besari*),“flesh of my flesh.” Later, having acquired glut­tonous cravings in theסִיר הַבָּשָׂר (*sir ha-basar*),“fleshpots,” of Egypt, Israelites in the desert cry out, מִי יַאֲכִילֵנוּ בָּשָׂר (*mi ya'akhilenu basar*),“If only we had meat to eat!”

Soldiers today talk tough about death, using, for new recruits, terms like בָּשָׂר טָרִי (*basar tari*),fresh meat, and בְּשַׂר תּוֹתָחִים (*besar totahim*),cannon fodder. Often unthinkingly, writes poet Yehuda Amichai, we accept the reduc­tion of human beings to בָּשָׂר וָדָם (*basar va-dam*),flesh and blood. To say בְּשָׂרִי אֲנִי (*ani besari*),however, means I am *fleishig,* not necessarily fleshy.

In another register, King David, not knowing what to hope for as he awaits news of his son Absalom’s rebellion, sees a runner coming and cries out, מְבַשֵׂר גַם זֶה (*gam zeh mevaser*),“He, too, brings good tidings.” In a lively psalm of praise to God, David sings out, less ambiguously, בַּשְׂרוּ...יְשׁוּעָתוֹ (*basru...yeshu'ato*),“Proclaim... His victory.” The prophet Isaiah provides the name for a suburb of today’s Jerusalem, מְבַשֶׂרֶת צִיוֹן (*mevaseret tsiyyon*),“herald of Zion’s joy.” A resident of that town, David Grossman, in his recent novel, *To the End of the Land* (Knopf)—in Hebrew, אִשָּׁה בּוֹרַחַת מִבְּשׂוֹרָה (*isha borahat mi-besora*),“A Woman Tries to Evade Bad News,”—uses the word *besora* with a negative connotation, for notifying a mother of a son’s death.

The Talmud reports that during a wedding procession a בְּשׂוֹרָה כּוֹס (*kos besora*),wine cup proclaiming the bride’s virginity, was carried aloft. Today, a gift shop in Tel Aviv sells a silver letter opener with בְּשׂוֹרוֹת טוֹבוֹת (*besorot tovot*),good news, engraved on the blade. Depending on the contents of the envelopes opened by the bride and groom, the letter opener is as welcome as a prime rib.

# If Not Higher

ג-ב-ה

*gimel-vet-heh*

One of the lessons learned from the 2011 Israeli film *Footnote* is that when He­brew philologists quarrel, the stakes are often more psychological than substantial. In medieval Spain, however, quarrels among gram­marians could lead to charges of heresy. One hotly de­bated issue then was whether Hebrew roots were bi­literal (two letters) or triliteral (three). Today, everybody agrees that Hebrew roots are of three letters. And yet, there are cases when one may wonder.

Take the example of ג-ב (*gimel, vet*),originally something curved, giving us the noun גַּב (*gav*),back. Add the letter נ (*nun*),and you get a rounded גִּבֵּן (*gibben*),hunchback. Curdle milk and this root will make גְּבִינָה (*gevinah*),cheese. Some say we eat cheesecake on Shavuot because rabbinic sources identified Mount Sinai with Psalms’s הַר גַּבְנֻנִּים (*har gavnunnim*),a cheese-like mountain of jagged peaks.

Have you ever raked a pile of leaves? Add the letter ב (*vet*)to the two-letter root and you form גִּבֵּב (*gibbev*),to rake or pile up. The Talmud uses this root in the story of another rabbinic quarrel: the sage Eleazar Ha-Moda’i insists that the manna in the desert was piled 60 *amot* (90 feet) high. Rabbi Tarfon asks, derisively: How long will you מְגַבֵּב דְּבָרִים (*megabbev devarim*),rake up such tall stories? This story, about גוֹבַהּ (*govah*),height, leads straight ה‑ב‑ג to (*gimel, vet, heh*),to be tall. The prophet Samuel sees future King Saul’s stature as a sign, because וַיִּגְבַהּ מִכָּל הָעָם (*va-yigbah mikol ha-am*),he was taller than the whole nation. God, הַמַגְבִּיהִי לָשָׁבֶת (*ha-magbihi lashavet*),sitting on high, מַגְבִּיהַּ שְׁפָלִים (*magbiah shefalim*),raises the downtrodden.

This root has been used in Jewish communal settings to “raise”—and distribute—funds. That’s where we get גַּבַּאי (*gabbai*),originally, a treasurer; today, he is the fellow who distributes synagogue honors—like הַגְבָּהָה (*hagbahah*),lifting high the Torah Scroll. Interestingly, the 19th-century *pinkas* (chronicle) of Brisk, Lithuania, mentions a female גַּבָּאִית (*gabba'it*),charged with distributing to poor women “two linen dresses.” California-based Magbit Foundation uses our root to provide interest-free loans for students at Israeli universities.

Error-prone computer types will want to make a גִּיבּוּי (*gibbui*),backup. A מַגְבֵּהַ (*magbe'ah*),tire jack, certainly comes in handy. At the barber, one might ask for a trim of one’s rounded גַּבּוֹת (*gabbot*),eyebrows. Then there are הַחַלוֹנוֹת הַגְּבוֹהִים (*ha-halonot ha-gevohim*),the high windows, an idio­matic expression applied to a community’s higher-ups. Believe it or not, at one time this could have referred to grammarians.

# Phoneticians Without Borders

ג-ב-ל

*gimel-vet-lamed*

Mountains often serve as linguistic borders; they separate languages even as they foster limited commerce between peo­ple. Curiously, but not surprisingly, if you listen carefully you’ll hear how the Hebrew word גְּבוּל (*gevul*),border, and the Arabic word *jebel,* mountain, are phonetically related. To get to the Hebrew root ג-ב-ל (*gimel, vet, lamed*),to set bounds, confine, abut, one passes through its ancient meaning, to twist, and then to the braided cord, מִגְבָּלָה (*migbala*),sometimes used to delimit a territory.

At the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, Moses recalls God’s order, הַגְבֵּל אֶת הָהָר וְקִדַּשְׁתּוֹ (*hagbel et ha-har ve-kidashto*), “Encircle the mountain and sanctify it.” In Deuteronomy, the Torah’s property law insists לֹא תַּסִּיג גְּבוּל רֵעֲךָ (*lo tassig gevul re-akha*), “You shall not move your neighbor’s boundary marker [to annex his land].” Interestingly, eight of the ten times Scripture uses the expression גְבוּל יִשְׁרָאֵל (*gevul yisrael*), it doesn’t mean the border of the land of Israel, but territory inside the border.

Modern times makes ample use of our root. First, there is the מִשְׁמָר הַגְּבוּל (*mishmar ha-gevul*), Border Patrol, a unit of the Israel Defense Forces often stationed in the territories. To protect one’s personal assets one establishes a corporation with limited liability, בְּעֵרָבוֹן מוּגְבָּל (*be-eravon mugbal*), abbreviated בע"מ (*ba'am*), Ltd. Everybody has מִגְבָּלוֹת (*migbalot*), limitations, of one sort or another. Israeli society, sensitive to children who have disabilities, uses the euphemism יְלָדִים מוּגְבָּלִים (*yeladim mugbalim*), children with limitations.

When military action to the north heats up, the media will remind us that Israel… גּוֹבֶלֶת בּ (*govelet be-...*), borders on, Syria and Lebanon. A profligate person will send money לְלֹא הַגְבָּלָה (*le-lo hagbala*), without limits. One way to express anger in an argument is to shout, ! זֶה עוֹבֵר כָּל גְּבוּל(*zeh over kol gevul*), that exceeds all bounds! No one will argue with the necessity to place a הַגְבָּלַת גִּיל (*hagbalat gil*), age restriction, on an R-rated movie.

Do you accept the argument that in wartime it is often necessary לְהַגְבִּיל אֶת הַזְּכוּיוֹת (*le-hagbil et ha-zekhuyot*), to limit civil rights? You might wish to protest ! יֵשׁ גְּבוּל(*yesh gevul*), there are limits, you know! A stockbroker proposing a slightly risky investment warns his client that it is קְצַת גְּבוּלִי (*ketsat gevuli*), not 100 percent sure.

And then there is the 2-year-old who seems always לִבְחוֹן אֶת הַגְּבוּלוֹת (*livhon et ha-gevulot*), to test the limits his parents set on his behavior. It’s important to stand firm, but don’t make a mountain out of a boundary.

# Mending Fences

ג-ד-ר

*gimel-dalet-resh*

When the neighbor in Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” baldly asserts, in one of American poetry’s most famous verses, “Good fences make good neighbors,” the poet replies subtly that neigh­borly goodwill might just bemore fundamental than a good fence. Such is also one of the lessons learned from the Hebrew root ג-ד-ר (*gimel, dalet, resh*),fence, wall, hedge. Visitors to the northern Israeli town of Metulla learn all about הַגָּדֵר הַטּוֹבָה (*ha-gader ha-tovah*),the Good Fence, which for a time fostered cordial relations between well-intentioned residents on both sides of the border between Israel and Lebanon.

The root appears sparsely in Scripture. In one anecdote in the book of Numbers, the prophet Balaam (sent to curse Israel) is seen riding through a narrow pass, גָּדֵר מִזֶּה וְגָדֵר מִזֶּה (*gader mi-zeh ve-gader mi-zeh*), “with a fence on either side of him.” Suddenly, Balaam’s donkey becomes so frightened by the appearance of an angel blocking his way that he veers off the narrow path and crushes the prophet’s foot against the fence. One can guess who bears the brunt of Baalam’s curses at this point. Again in Numbers, when the cattle-rich tribes of Reuben and Gad ask Mosesfor permission to settle outside the Land of Israel proper, they argue that they need to build גִּדְרֹת צֹאן (*gidrot tson*),fenced-in sheep folds, for their livestock.

Elsewhere in Scripture, the Psalmist uses our root to introduce the term פּוֹרֵץ גָּדֵר (*porets gader*),one who metaphorically breaks through a fence, a lawbreaker. Fancifully, the Hebrew language reverses the word order of the metaphor to create the term גּוֹדֵר פֶּרֶץ (*goder perets*),one who mends a breach in a fence. Among the dozens of Canaanite towns listed in the book of Joshua as appropriate for settlement, the one called גְּדֵרֹתַּיִם (*gederotayim*),literally “double fences,” invites conjecture about both its linguistic and archi­tectural structures.

Today, the reflexive verb לְהִתְגַּדֵּר (*le-hitgader*),to distinguish oneself, has both positive and negative הֵגְדָּרוֹת (*hagdarot*),definitions: one may set oneself off from others by excelling at something and one may do so by obnoxiously boasting about it.

If the reader will promise not לָצֵּאת מִגְּדֵרוֹ (*la-tset mi-gedero*), to lose his patience, with a far-fetched etymology, we’ll conclude with the charming story of how the Hebrew word גִּדְרוֹן (*gidron*),wren—a little, sweet-singing bird often seen perched on a garden hedge—is derived from our root. According to Hungarian-born Canadian lexicographer Ernest Klein, the Hebrew word was coined by Yiddish writer Mendele Mocher Seforim, who translated it from a German expression for wren that means “king of the hedges.” It turns out that good fences make good stories, too.

# How Jews Stick Together

ד-ב-ק

*dalet-vet-kof*

In Israel, at election time, bumper stickers—from the ridiculous to the truly sublime—appear in profusion. *Stickerim* is the popular “Hebrew” word for this Israeli way of airing one’s opinion. Israel’s Academy of the Hebrew Language reminds us that there are perfectly suitable Hebrew alternatives derived from the root ד-ב-ק (*dalet, vet, kof*),to glue. Take, for example, מַדְּבֵּקָה (*madbekah*)and תַּדְבִּיק (*tadbik*)—*both* mean gummed label—which lead to דִּבְקִית (*divkit*), sticker. The spectrum of phrases derived from our root includes דְּבֵקוּת (*devekut*),devotedness, the soul-grabbing enthusiasm one displays in prayer, as well as the “sticky-fingered” phrase דָּבֵק בְּיָדוֹ (*davek be-yado*),literally, “it sticks to his hands,” referring to robbery. As we can see, the root has the advantage of adding to the discussion some wide-ranging cultural commentary.

In Scripture, the root rises to poetic heights. At the conclusion of the story of the creation of woman, the text issues an injunc­tion that may well confer on wives a controlling hand in marriage, saying: “Therefore shall the man leave his mother and father,” וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ (*ve-davak be-ishto*),“and cleave unto his wife.” In the biblical oath of allegiance to Jerusalem from Psalm 137, one swears: תִּדְבַּק לְשוֹנִי לְחִכִּי (*tidbak leshoni le-hikki*),“May my tongue cleave to my palate, [if I do not remember you].”

The root is found multiple times in the story of Ruth, who is called by the rabbis הַדְּבוּקָה (*ha-devukah*),the one who became attached to the Jewish people. After the death of Naomi’s sons, one daughter-in-law separates herself from Naomi, while Ruth דָּבְקָה בָּהּ (*davka ba*),clung to her. Back in Bethlehem, kindhearted Boaz invites a destitute Ruth to glean from his fields, suggesting, תִּדְבָּקִין עִם נַעֲרֹתָי (*tidbakin im na'arotai*),“stick with my girls.” In a less glorious incident described in the Bible, namely the death of King Saul, the prophet Samuel recounts the story of the Philistines who—giving the root two meanings— וַיִּדְבְּקוּ...אֶת שָׁאוּל (*va-yidbeku...et sha'ul*),both pursued and caught Saul.

The noun דֶּבֶק (*devek*)means glue, except when it doesn’t. Sometimes it refers to a nudnik (who gets on another’s nerves and won’t let go) or, alluding to *davak* in the story of the creation of woman, to a prospective groom. The term דִּבּוּק (*dibbuk*),incubus, calls to mind the play by Yiddish playwright S. Ansky that tells of a demon that clings to the soul of a suffering bride.

Bumper *stickerim*—likelife—teach us that not all stickiness is helpful. But when love of Hebrew becomes מְדַבֵּק (*medabbek*),infectious, it’s all to the good.

# That’s What the Last Minute Is For

ד-ק-ק

*dalet-kof-kof*

There are two types of people in this world: דַּיְּקָנִים (*daykanim*),those obsessed with accuracy and punctuality; and those who arrive casually at the דַּקָּה הַתִּשְׁעִים (*dakka ha-tish'im*),90th minute (the last minute of a soc­cer match). Both expressions derive from ד-ק-ק (*dalet, kof, kof*),originally to pulverize or grind to a thin powder. In the biblical story of the Golden Calf, Moses, enraged, burns the statue, then וַיִּטְחַן עַד אַשֶׁר דָּק (*va-yithan ad asher dak*),“grinds it thoroughly.” Mixing the thin powder with water, he makes the Israelites drink it. In Pharaoh’s dreams, cows and sheaves of wheat are דַּקּוֹת (*dakkot*),emaciated or withered. The book of Kings uses the adjective metaphorically when it describes the קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַּקָּה (*kol demama dakka*),“thin small voice,” heard by the prophet Elijah as he flees the wrath of Jezebel. One of the most lyrical of Isaiah’s prophecies uses our root to praise God the creator, הֵנֹּטֶה כַדֹּק שָׁמַיִם (*ha-noteh kha-dok shamayim*),“who spreads out the skies like gauze.”

In rabbinic literature, a דְּקָקָה (*dekaka*),is a tender child, while בְּהֵמָה דַּקָּה (*behema daka*),denotes small cattle. During the preparation of incense for the Temple ritual, the priest grinding it, or his supervisor, would chant repeatedly הָדֵק הֵיטֵב (*hadek hetev*),“Grind it very thoroughly!”—implying that the sound of a voice is somehow beneficial to the incense itself. The root also serves clinical purposes, using the same word, דַּקִּים (*dakkim*),for small intestines and, euphemistically perhaps, urination. Medically, דֹּק (*dok*)denotes a cataract. Concerned with digestive health, the rabbis urged the populace דּוֹק בַּשִּׁנַּיִם (*dok ba-shinnayim*)*,* chew your food thoroughly.

The Talmud states that God, harsher with the very pious, מְדַקְדֵּק עִם סְבִיבָיו (*medakdek im sevivav*),demands stricter observance from those closest to Him. In language matters, medieval grammarian Menahem ben Saruk is among the first to use the word דִּקְדּוּק (*dikduk*),fine point, to mean, simply, grammar.

In a subtle play on words, the letter ע (*ayin*)in the expression דִּקְדּוּקֵי עֲנִיּוּת (*dikdukei aniyyut*),crushing poverty, is changed to an א (*alef*),as in אֲנִי (*ani*),ego, giving us דִּקְדּוּקֵי אֲנִיּוּת (*dikdukei aniyyut*),petty self-centeredness. Where this expression comes from בְּדִּיוּק (*be-diyyuk*),precisely, is unclear but, דַּוְקָא (*davka*),just so, it provides us with a fine pun.

Precision is fine but, as linguist Reuven Sivan warns, beware of דַּיְּקָנוּת נוּקְשָׁה (*daykanut nuksha*),too rigid exactitude. We all know that “I’ll be ready in חֲצִי דַּקָּה (*hatsi dakka*),”half a minute, often translates into 15 minutes. This gives us plenty of time to read about the fine points of the Hebrew language.

# Jews for Exegesis

ד-ר-שׁ

*dalet-resh-shin*

Often, words will leave the comfortable world of their plain, concrete meaning and soar into the realm of metaphor. Take, for example, the Hebrew root ד-ר-שׁ (*dalet, resh, shin*),to explicate. Originally, it was based on an agricultural term for separating the wheat from the chaff, ד-ר-ס (*dalet, resh, samekh*),to trample, thresh. Soon enough, the new root was used figuratively to describe the way the rabbis of the Talmud would search for the deeper meaning of a biblical text.

In Scripture, the root is found in a wide variety of contexts. Proverbs praises the woman of valor for her industriousness, stating, דָּרְשָׁה צֶמֶר וּפִשְׁתִּים (*darsha tzemer u-phishtim*),“she sought out wool and flax.” In II Kings, the Israelite King Ahazia instructs his servants to דִּרְשׁוּ בְּבַעַל זְבוּב (*dirshu be-va'al zevuv*),“inquire of Beelzebub,” a local god, whether Ahazia will recover from life-threatening wounds suffered from his fall off a balcony. The Prophet Elijah, learning of this blasphemy, intercepts the servants on the way to their task and harshly informs them that the king will not recover. The Prophet Micah asks the ultimate question, דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמְּךָ 'מָה ה (*mah ha-shem doresh mi-mekha*),“What does God demand of you?” before answering sublimely: “Do justice, love goodness and walk modestly with your God.”

A familiar derivative of our root is the word מִדְרָשׁ (*midrash*),explication, which has meanings all over the lexical map. The midrash is the part of the oral Torah that explains problematic or unclear passages of the written Torah by telling didactic parables. Our elders teach that לֹא הַמִּדְרָשׁ הָעִקָּר (*lo ha-midrash ha-ikkar*),“study is less central than acts.” Other usages of the root include דַּרְשָׁן (*darshan*),exegete, and דְּרָשׁ (*derash*),homiletical exegesis. Many synagogues have an adjoining בֵּית מִדְרָשׁ (*beit midrash*),study hall. The term מִדְרָשָׁה (*midrasha*),coined by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, connotes a post-secondary school for Jewish studies. The cognate Arabic *madrassa* is a school that teaches Islamic texts.

Come fall in Israel, you’ll see flyers announcing דְּרוּשָׁה מְטַפֶּלֶת (*derushah metapelet*),“Nanny Wanted.” During Israeli summers, there is very little דְּרִישָׁה (*derishah*),demand, for umbrellas. Capital cases call for דְּרִישָׁה וְחֲקִירָה (*derisha ve-hakira*),painstaking legal investigation. Casual conversations will often end with the plain-sounding abbreviation דַ"ש (*dash*),“Regards,” shorthand for the poetic expression דְּרִישַׁת שָׁלוֹם (*derishat shalom*), literally, plea for peace—a good way to end a column as well.

# Have You Heard the Buzz?

ה-ג-ה

*heh-gimel-heh*

Your elbow on your knee, your chin in your hand, you sit staring at the blank computer screen. Gradually, an image of Rodin’s *The Thinker* emerges, slowly lifting its head and mumbling. Our הוֹגֵה דֵעוֹת (*hogeh de'ot*),philosopher, murmurs words that use the Hebrew root ה-ג-ה (*heh, gimel, heh*),to meditate, to murmur. He goes on to philosophize about lions growling, pigeons cooing and humans reasoning, all from the same root.

In Scripture, the psalmist laments כִּלִּינוּ שָׁנֵינוּ כְמוֹ הֶגֶה (*killinu shaneinu khemo hegeh*),“our lives end like a fleeting murmur.” He also uses our root in הִגָּיוֹן בְּכִינוֹר (*higgayon be-khinor*),lyre music, and הֶגְּיוֹן לִבִּי (*hegyon libi*),the heart’s meditation.

Medieval grammarian David Kimchi, the Radak, associates our root with a Jewish value. He declares that the expression in Psalms, וּבְתוֹרָתוֹ יֶהְגֶּה יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה (*u-ve-torato yehgeh yomam va-laila*),does not mean merely “one should study His Torah day and night.” Radak insists that *yehgeh* means mur­mur, that one should be so immersed in Torah study that even when one nods off one should mumble its words involuntarily. The Deuteronomy Rabba com­mentary makes a distinction between הוֹגֶיהָ (*hogeha*)and עוֹשֶׂיהָ (*oseha*),those who study the law and those who do it. In tractate Berakhotthe Talmud warns מִנְעוּ בְּנֵיכֶם מִן הַהִגָּיוֹן (*min'u beneikhem min ha-higgayon*),“restrain your chil­dren from superficial parroting of the Bible.” In tractate Sanhedrinone is admonished not to be a הוֹגֶה אֶת הַשֵׁם בְּאוֹתִיוֹתָיו (*hogeh et ha-shem be-otio­tav*),“one who pronounces the Divine Name as It is written.” Rather, as in the Days of Awe liturgy, God should be הֶהָגוּי בְּאֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (*he-hagui be-ehyeh asher ehyeh*),“One whose name is pronounced, ‘I am that I am.’”

Today, the root is applied to one of the neglected Hebrew arts, תּוֹרַת הַהִגוּי (*torat ha-higui*),phonetics. There one learns of הֶגֶה אָטוּם, קוֹלִי אוֹ אַפִּי (*hegeh atum, koli o* *api*),a consonant that is unvoiced,voiced or nasal.

A popular admonition is אַל תּוֹצִיא הֶגֶה מִפִּיךָ (*al totsi hegeh mi-pikha*),don’t utter a sound. Speaking of don’t, don’t confuse *hegeh,* utterance, with *hegeh,* steering wheel, from a different root. And speaking of different roots, don’t confuse הָגִיָּה (*hagiyya*),pronunciation, with הָגָּהָה (*haggaha*),proof­reading, from נ-ג-ה (*nun, gimel, heh*),to throw light upon. This distinction נִשְׁמַע הֶגְיוֹנִי (*nishma hegyoni*),sounds logical. Even the person who הָרָה וְהָגָה (*hara ve-haga*),thought up this discussion, agrees: anything is more *hegyoni* than a statue coming to life on a computer screen.

# To Be—That Is the Answer

ה-י-ה

*heh-yod-heh*

Ask the Prince of Denmark whether “to be” or not and he will hem and haw. Ask the King of Kings a similar question and He will reply, אֶהְיֶה אַשֶר אֶהְיֶה (*eheyeh asher eheyeh*), I am and always will be. The root ה-י-ה (*heh, yod, heh*), to be, become, remain and its alternate spelling, ה-ו-ה (*heh, vav, heh*), are found more than 3,500 times in Scripture. The first word out of God’s mouth in Genesis is יְהִי (*yehi*), “Let there be.” As Rebekah takes leave of her family to marry Isaac, they bless her with הֲיִי לְאַלְפֵי רְבָבָה (*hayi le-alfei revava*), “May you become [the mother of] myriads.” In Deuteronomy, God’s promise is fulfilled with the assertion הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה נִהְיֵיתָ לְעָם (*ha-yom ha-zeh niheyeta le-am*), “Today you became a nation.”

The composers of the liturgy used the biblical expression וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר (*va-yehi erev va-yehi voker*), “There was evening, there was morning,” to introduce the Friday evening Kiddush. In *Pirke Avot* we frequently find the expression הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר (*hu haya omer*), “He used to say.” And God’s Ineffable Name—which we don’t pronounce—is carefully identified as הַהֲוָיָה שֵׁם (*shem ha-havayah*), literally, the Name of Existence.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik used our root to coin the word הֲוַי (*havai*) to describe a people’s way of life—its customs, culture, and manners. An idiomatic quirk of the root occurs when one considers the two meanings of the word אִישׁ (*ish*), man or husband. Thus, הָיָה לְאִישׁ (*haya le-ish*) is he became manly, and הָיְתָה לְאִישׁ (*hayeta le-ish*), she got married.

While Ecclesiastes preached מַה שֶּׁהָיָה הוּא שֶׁיִהְיֶה (*mah she-haya hu she­yiheyeh*), “What has been is that which shall be,” a modern Israeli will more likely say, מַה שֶּׁהָיָה—הָיָה (*mah she-haya—haya*), what was—was, i.e., don’t cry over spilt milk. The root is often doubled to introduce a story, as in הָיֹה הָיוּ שְׁנֵי חֲבֵרִים (*hayo hayu shenei haverim*), once there were two friends.

Did your friend apply for a job? הֱיוֹת וְאַתָּה שׁוֹאֵל (*heyot ve-ata sho'el*), since you are asking, I will tell you that הָיָה לוֹ לִשְׁלוֹחַ קוֹרוֹת חַיִּים (*haya lo lishlo'ah korot hayyim*), he should have sent in his résumé, rather than just call the company on the telephone. Anyway, הָיוּ אִתּוֹ עִנְיָנִים (*hayu itto inyan­im*), there were “issues” with him, and לֹא יָכוֹל לִהְיוֹת (*lo yakhol liheyot*), it’s not possible, that he was hired.

If you are the nostalgic type, the words הָיוּ זְמַנִים (*hayu zemanim*), those were the days, will often be found on your lips. If you are like me, you will end every conversation with תִּהְיֶה בָּרִיא (*tiheyeh bari*), stay healthy.

# From a Hum to a Howl

ה-מ-ה

*heh-mem-heh*

W

hen forefather Abram is awarded the name Abraham, the Torah’s etymologi­cal explanation is that he will one day become אָב הֲמוֹן גּוֹיִם (*av hamon goyim*),“father of many nations.” Today’s etymologists remind us that הֲמוֹן (*hamon*)derives from the root ה-מ-ה (*heh, mem, heh*)*.* If you sound out the verb הוֹמֶה (*homeh*), you will hear a modest onomatopoetic “hum,” like the הֶמְיָה (*hemya*),cooing, of a dove. Inten­sify this hum, using the related root מ- ה-מ (*heh, mem, mem*),and you will go from a near-silent murmur to a noisy howl, as in מְהוּמָה (*mehumah*),commotion. Scripture has many gradations between these two extremes.

In Song of Songs*,* the beloved’s heart is so stirred מֵעַי הָמוּ עָלָיו (*me'ai hamu alav*),“my intestines moan over him.” In Psalm 39, it is futile that peo­ple יֶהֱמָיוּן (*yehemayun*),should “bustle” about. And then there is blood­-thirsty Jezebel and a drought. Elijah appears to Jezebel’s husband, Ahab, and conjures up for him the sound of הֲמוֹן הַגָּשֶׁם (*hamon ha-gashem*),the rum­bling sound of approaching rain.

While this column does not always endeavor to speak to the הֲמּוֹנִים (*ha­-monim*),masses, it does try to contribute to the הִמוּן (*himmun*),popularization, of Hebrew language and literature. Hayyim Nahman Bialik, in a popular Zionist poem, sings of בַּת יוֹנִים הוֹמִיָּה (*bat yonim homiyyah*),a cooing dove, that leads a young boy in a rowboat to the promised land but does not gain him entry. Israeli writer Meir Shalev, in his novel *A Pigeon and a Boy,* uses Bialik’s poem as the springboard for a story about the War of Independence. The boy, plucked from Bialik’s rowboat, is now helping the war effort by the use of a well-trained יוֹנָה הוֹמִיָּה (*yonah homiyyah*), which—playing on *homeh* and home—some commentators have taken the liberty to translate as “homing pigeon.”

There are two Israeli הִימְנוֹנִים (*himnonim*,from Greek *hymnos*,not our root despite appearances), anthems, associated with a form of our root. “*Hatikvah*”sings of נֶפֶש יְהוּדִי הוֹמִיָּה (*nefesh yehudi homiyyah*),“the yearning Jewish heart,” always looking to Zion, while “*Shir Ha-Palmach*”sings of its coura­geous soldiers, whose head is not bowed while מִסָּבִיב יֵהוֹם הַסַּעַר (*mi-saviv yehom ha-sa'ar*),“all around the storm does rage.”

Even Shakespeare gets into the act. The Hebrew expression הַרבֵּה מְהוּמָה עַל לֹא מְאוּמָה (*harbeh mehumah al lo me'umah*)is a translation ofhis *Much Ado About Nothing.* Yet even Shakespeare would have to agree that to get from a hum to a howl to Abraham’s multitudes is worthy of much ado.

# Careful! Words at Play

ז-ה-ר

*zayin-heh-resh*

For medieval Hebrew etymologists as well as for the folks at Merriam-Webster, some words, like children, just want to get out and play. Take the example of the Hebrew root ז-ה-ר (*zayin, heh, resh*),which presents a fascinating enigma. The authoritative *Brown-Driver-Briggs* lexicon of biblical Hebrew leaves it to us to conjecture how we get from “shining,” the root’s original sense, to the notion of “warning,” its subsequent usage.

In Scripture, the root appears twice in one verse of the book of Daniel; in 12:3, the angel Michael prophesies that when the dead are resurrected, the “enlightened” יַזּהִירוּ כְּזֹהַר הָרָקִיעַ (*yazhiru ke-zohar ha-rakia*),“will be radiant like the bright expanse of the sky.” It is not insignificant that our root appears 18 times in the book of Ezekiel, the prophet of the heavenly chariot. In his vision, Ezekiel is confronted with a מַראֵה זֹהַר (*mar'eh zohar*),a radiant figure having the appearance of fire. Today, the word זוֹהַר (*zohar*)is used to describe the splendor of nature’s Aurora Borealis. These connections are espe­cially striking when we recall that the foundational text of the Kabbalah is סֵפֶר הַזֹּהַר (*sefer ha-zohar*),the Book of Splendor, a mystical text often attributed to Shimon bar Yohai—the rabbi we celebrate with Lag B’Omer bonfires. The Talmud’s זַהֲרוּרֵי הַחַמָּה (*zaharurei ha-hammah*),the glowing red streak of the setting sun, bridges bright day to ominous night.

In other rabbinic texts, different senses of the root appear, for example in the talmudic admonition הִזָּהֲרוּ בִּבנֵי עֲנִיּיִם (*hizaharu bivnei aniim*),“Take care of the children of the poor” because they are where Torah will come from. In Jewish law, a sinner may be punished only if הִזהִירוּ אוֹתוֹ (*hizhiru oto*),he was forewarned of the prohibition. *Pirke Avot* warns our Sages themselves to הִזָּהַרוּ בְּדִבְרֵיכֶם (*hizaharu be-divreikhem*),“Be careful with your words.”

In Israel, if you are in the proximity of high voltage, you may come upon a red triangle enclosing an exclamation point. The accompanying word, אַזְהָרָה (*azharah*),warning, tells you to be זָהִיר (*zahir*),cautious, of the danger. Simi­larly, roadblock signs read זְהִירוּת (*zehirut*),“Careful!” In other expansions of the root, there is the brilliant child with an עָתִיד מַזְהִיר (*atid mazhir*),promising future, and the gleaming נַעֲרַת זֹהַר (*na'arat zohar*),glamour girl. Even further from its root, זְהוֹרִית (*zehorit*),rayon, refers to the fabric’s shiny sheen .

O.K. A quick warning to all those still seeking enlightenment about our root—playtime is over.

# The Merit System

ז-כ-ה

*zayin-khof-heh*

Some people like to say that Israel is a country that runs on Vitamin P. They are referring to the embrace of *protektzia* by the early settlers, where זְכוּיוֹת (*zekhuyyot*),benefits, were said to be doled out by nepotism. For others, Israel is a true meritocracy, whereכָּל הַקּוֹדֵם זָכָה (*kol ha-kodem zakha*),first come, first served. In both cases, the student of Hebrew will encounter ז-כ-ה (*zayin, khof, heh*),to merit, a many-nuanced root having to do with clarity, purity and innocence.

Sometimes, to get at the root of a Hebrew root, it pays to look at its two-letter version. Here it means purity, as in the biblical requirement that the Tabernacle’s Eternal Lamp use only שֶׁמֶן זַיִת זָךְ (*shemen zayit zakh*),pure olive oil. The word *zakh* is used with a moral undertone by Job who, protesting his innocence, proclaims אֲנִי בְּלִי פָשַׁע זַךְ (*zakh ani beli fasha*),“I am pure, with­out sin.” For Job, to be pure is to be innocent.

Rabbi Hananiah ben Akashia, a talmudic sage, wanted to know why there are so many mitzvot*.* He concluded that God wanted לְזַכּוֹת אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל (*le-zakkot et yisrael*),to provide the Israelites with as many opportunities as pos­sible to earn merit. Indeed, when the charity collector leaves, he doesn’t say thank you; rather, he blesses you with תִּזְכֶּה לְמִצְוֹת (*tizkeh le-mitzvot*),may you merit to perform even more righteous deeds. In Aramaic, *zakha* is related to צֶדֶק (*tzedek*),justice. ln Islam, *zakka* is another word for *tzedaka,* charity.

Uses of our root in Jewish history and practice include the name of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, the man credited with preserving Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the name of the prayer recited before Yom Kippur, תְּפִלָּה זַכָּה (*tefilla zakka*),that exonerates one’s acquaintances for any damages they may have caused one during the previous year.

If you look conscientiously through a transparent pane of זְכוּכִית (*zekhukhit*),glass, you might, like medieval grammarian David Kimchi, see a crystal-clear relationship to our root.

In the literary world, writer Meir Shalev זָכָה בִּפְרָס (*zakha bi-feras*),won a prize, for his novel, *A Pigeon and a Boy* (Schocken). In business circles, one can gain an exclusive right to develop a piece of public property, such as a radio station, by acquiring a זִכָּיוֹן (*zikkayon*),concession.

Some will say that such a זְכוּת (*zekhut*),legal right, is often acquired only by those who have *protektzia.* Others will insist that each of us is בְּחֶזְקַת זַכַּאי (*be-hezkat zakkai*),presumed innocent, and that first come, first served is a vir­tuous principle indeed.

# I Threw a Word in the Air…

ז-ר-ק

*zayin-resh-kof*

What do Moses, urban planners, health professionals, strict teachers, and Torah chanters have in common? Well, if you throw these words into the air—along with a dozen more—they will fall to earth in the vicinity of the Hebrew root ק‑ר‑ז (*zayin, resh, kof*),to throw, sprinkle.

In Scripture, the root has several distinct meanings. In Leviticus, priests are ordered to זָרְקוּ אֶת הַדָּם (*zarku et ha-dam*),sprinkle sacrificial blood (against the altar walls), using a special מִזְרָק (*mizrak*),bowl. In Egypt, Moses is charged to take a handful of soot וּזְרָקוֹ...הַשָּׁמַימַה (*u-zerako...hashamaimah*) and throw it toward the sky; when it falls to earth, it brings on the sixth plague—boils. In a strange linguistic twist, the prophet Hosea, using a bakery metaphor, compares sinful Israel to a rotting cake, on whichשֵׂיבָה זָרְקָה (*seivah zarkah*),mold (some say, “gray hair”) is scattered. Legendary 20th-century Bible educator Nechama Leibovitz was reputed to have a disciplinary quirk: if you came to her class without a bible text in hand, נְחָמָה זוֹרֶקֶת (*nehama zoreket*), the beloved teacher would throw you out.

The Talmud uses our root allegorically, to teach discernment. One should eat the nutritious part of the fruit, to be sure, but קְלִפָּתוֹ זוֹרֵק (*kelipato zorek*), throw away the unpalatable peel. Tractate Hullin, for its part, warns of unintended consequences. Do not be like one who, thinking he’s doing a righteous act, זוֹרֵק אֶבֶן לְמֶרְקוֹלִיס (*zorek even le-merkolis*), throws a stone at a pagan statue of Mercury, because, unknowingly, he is committing idol worship. When medieval Masoretic scribes created a system of musical cantillation for the public chanting of the Torah, they used the Aramaic word זַרְקָא (*zarka*) to indicate a “scattering” of five different notes. In an orchestra, string instruments have a pair of זַרְקָתַיִּם (*zarkatayyim*), sound holes, through which the violin’s music resonates.

Today, a health care worker at the clinic will fill a מַזְרֵק (*mazrek*), syringe, with תַּזְרִיק (*tazrik*), serum, to administer a זְרִיקָה (*zerikah*), injection. In scornful slang, a זָרוּק (*zaruk*) is a drug addict. To project light distantly, use the portmanteau word זַרְקוֹר (*zarkor*), light thrower, i.e., searchlight. In 2015, urban planners in Eilat installed a flashy מִזְרָקָה (*mizrakah*), ornamental fountain, called the Musical Fountain, which sprinkles water, light and music on tourists. Then there is the tiresome זוֹרֵק שֵׁמוֹת (*zorek sheimot*), name dropper, as well as the colleague who asks you לִזְרוֹק מִלָּה (*lizrok millah*), to throw in a good word with the boss. As for this column, לֹא לִזְרוֹק (*lo lizrok*), don’t throw it in the trash. It contains much Hebrew nourishment.

# When Israel Celebrates

ח-ג-ג

*het-gimel-gimel*

The debate had been raging now for months: Should the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel be celebrated with solemn reserve or wild revelry? Not coincidentally, the root ח-ג-ג (*het, gimel, gimel*),to celebrate, contains both nuances. Thus, then Israeli President Shimon Peres might have announced חֲגִיגִית (*hagigit*)*,* solemnly, a celebratory חֲגִיגָה (*hagiga*),festival, on 3 Iyyar (moved back from the 5th because of Shabbat).

Early on, the root meant to leap or dance and, therefore, to turn in circles. In Scripture, when David confronts the Amalekites who had burned the town of Ziklag to the ground, he is distressed to find them in a celebratory mood—eating, drinking, וְחוֹגְגִים (*ve-hogegim*), “and making merry.” More soberly, Moses informs Pharaoh that God insists that the Israelites leave Egypt so that לִי יָחֹגּוּ (*yahoggu li*), “they will sacrifice to Me.” Hagiga is also the name of a tractate of Talmud, dealing with festival sacrifice—represented on the Seder plate, for example, by a “circular” egg.

The word חַג (*hag*), festival, is attached to all the pilgrimage festivals in the Torah, circular, perhaps, because they take place periodically. Sukkot, a particularly joyous holiday, is called הֶחָג (*he-hag*), the holiday, par excellence. Interestingly, according to scholars, the Arabic word *haj*, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, is a direct borrowing from the Hebrew word *hag*.

While the prophet Amos states מָאַסְתִּי חַגֵּיכֶם (*ma'asti haggeikhem*), “I despise your feast offerings,” the psalmist declares no less emphatically that holidays be celebrated by הַמוֹן חוֹגֵג (*hamon hogeg*), “vast numbers of celebrants.” That Jewish festivals are to be celebrated joyfully is found in Deuteronomy’s וְשָׂמַחְתָּ בְּחַגֶּיךָ (*ve-samahta be-haggekha*), “Rejoice on your festivals,” and in the festival Kiddush, חַגִּים וּזְמַנִּים לְשָׂשׂוֹן (*haggim u-zemannim le­sasson*), “the holidays and times for joy.”

The related root, ח-ו-ג (*het, vav, gimel*), to encircle, is found in a Hebrew version of “Ring Around the Rosy.” The song tells children בַּמַעֲגַל נָחוּגָה (*ba­ma'agal nahugga*), let us dance around in a circle. This root has also morphed into an appropriate meeting place for Hebrew lovers, the חוּג עִבְרִית (*hug ivrit*), Hebrew circle.

If only to celebrate with Hebrew in May, put on a תִּלְבּוֹשֶׁת חֲגִיגִית (*til­boshet hagigit*), party frock, and make the day חֲגִיגָה לָעֵינַיִם (*hagiga la-eina­yim*), a feast for the eyes. After all, לֹא בְּכָל יוֹם חַג (*lo bekhol yom hag*), not every day is a holiday.

# Holey, Holey, Holey

ח-ל-ל

*het-lamed-lamed*

No one is quite sure where the challa on your Shabbat table comes from: the word, that is, not the loaf. It may be derived from the root ח-ל-ה (*het, lamed, heh*),sweetness, as in the Middle Eastern treat חַלְוָה (*halva*),or as in חַלַּת דְּבַשׁ (*hallat devash*),honeycomb. Halla—what Rashi’s commentary on Numbers 15:20 calls, in Old French, a “little torte”—is sweeter than rye bread, *n’est-ce pas?*

But what about the notice on the side of a box of *matzot* in the pantry assuring us that *חַלָּה* (*halla*)has been taken out? Quite possibly, that word is rooted in *ח-ל-ל* (*het, lamed, lamed*),to hollow out, because when one “takes halla”—i.e., a portion of a batch of dough taken originally as a priestly offering—one creates a hollow.

Initially, our root meant to turn round and round, to bore a hole. That’s how we get the word *חָלָל* (*halal*),one who dies in battle, because formerly soldiers died when they were “holey,” pierced by a sword.

On a happier note, the root gives us *מָחוֹל* (*mahol*),circle dance. And then there is the expression *וְחוֹזֵר חֲלִילָה* (*ve-hozer halilah*),and so on, that also implies circularity. Let us also not forget that *כָּל הַתְחָלוֹת קָשׁוֹת* (*kol hat'halot kashot*),all beginnings are difficult (a beginning is also a cutting out). Shabbat may have been created last but according to the “*Lekha Dodi*”hymn chanted on Friday evening, Shabbat was *בְּמַחֲשָׁבָה תְּחִלָּה* (*be-mahashavah tehillah*),in God’s mind from the very beginning.

A *יוֹם חוֹל* (*yom hol*),weekday, describes an absence of holiness. And *הַמּוֹעֵד חוֹל* (*hol ha-mo'ed*)is the intermediate days of a holiday. Today, a significant portion of Israeli society are *חִלּוֹנִים* (*hillonim*),secularists.

Scripture tells us that Noah looked out of a *חַלּוֹן* (*hallon*),an opening in the ark, i.e., window, to verify whether the Flood was abating. Nowadays, the word *hallon* is used to signify the wedge of watermelon the merchant cuts out to let the customer verify its quality (and sweetness?). It’s also a bank teller’s window or a computer screen. When one of the firm’s *חַלּוֹנוֹת הַגְּבוֹהִים* (*hallonot ha-gevohim*),literally, high windows, and figuratively, big shots at the top, has a *hallon* in his day between appointments, he’ll be glad to see you.

Nobody wants to commit a *חִלּוּל הַשֵּׁם* (*hillul ha-shem*),desecration of God’s name. We could stop on that note but *חַס וְחָלִילָה* (*has ve-halilah*),Heaven forbid, we should omit the *חָלִיל* (*halil*),recorder, that quintessentially Israeli hollowed-out musical instrument.

Its sound is as sweet as a Shabbat loaf.

# Keep the Change

ח-ל-פ

*het-lamed-feh*

Former President George W. Bush warned that extremist Muslims were preparing to reestablish the caliphate and institute totalitarian regimes worldwide. In so doing, beyond radical politics, they would also be getting into Hebrew etymology. In traditional Islam, the caliph—in Arabic, *khalifa*; in Hebrew, חָלִיף (*halif*)—is the successor of the Prophet Muhammad, his stand-in. The Hebrew word derives from the root, ח-ל-פּ (*het, lamed, feh*), to change, exchange or pass through.

The root appears at critical moments in Scripture. In Genesis, Jacob complains that his father-in-law repeatedly הֶחֱלִיף אֶת מַשְׂכֻּרְתִּי (*hehelif et maskurti*), “changed my wages.” When Joseph learns that he is to be released from prison, וַיְחַלֵּף שִׂמְלֹתָיו (*va-yehallef simlotav*),“he changes his clothes.” In Numbers, the Levites are promised a tithe חֶלֶף עֲבוֹדָתָם (*helef avodatam*),“in exchange for their work” in the sanctuary. The lovers in the Song of Songs report joyfully הַגֶּשֶׁם חָלַף (*ha-geshem halaf*),“the [winter] rain has passed.” The most problematic use of our root in Scripture comes from the story of Samson, as he explains to Delilah that his מַחְלָפוֹת (*mahlafot*), “plaits of hair,” are his weak point. One scholar conjectures that braiding involves one plait passing through another.

Another difficulty is the rabbinic use of the noun חַלָּף (*hallaf*) for a ritual slaughterer's knife, which—might we speculate?—passes rapidly through the flesh of the animal. The rabbis use our root metaphorically to warn against making a bad deal, לְהֲחַלִיף פָּרָה בַּחֲמוֹר (*le-hahalif para ba-hamor*),to exchange a cow for a donkey. In the *Kapparot* ceremony used to ward off the evil decree before Yom Kippur, one recites the formula זֶה חֲלִיפָתִי (*zeh halifati*),“This [chicken or money] shall be my substitute.”

Today, one buys a new חֲלִיפָה (*halifa*),suit, for the holidays. By email, or לַחֲלוּפִין (*la-halufin*),alternatively, by post, some people carry on a חֲלִיפַת מִכְתָּבִים (*halifat mikhtavim*),correspondence. A basketball team has five starters and five מַחְלִיפִים (*mahlifim*), substitutes. At the grocery you may buy margarine as a תַּחֲלִיף (*tahlif*),substitute, for butter. To exit the highway, you look for the appropriate מֶחְלָף (*mehlaf*),interchange. At the lab, you examine the חִלּוּפִית (*hillufit*),amoeba, to note its changes of shape. In trading cards, a lucky youngster has plenty of הַחְלָפוֹת (*hahlafot*), doubles, to exchange. And you go to the חַלְפָן (*halfan*),moneychanger, to buy shekels at the goingשַׁעַר חַלִיפִין (*sha'ar halifin*),exchange rate. Finally, in times of anxiety the most calming words are חָלְפָה הַסַּכָּנָה (*halfa ha-sakkana*),the danger is past. *Inshalla.*

# At the Campfire

ח-נ-ה

*het-nun-heh*

W

hat does the study of Jewish and Zionist culture have to do with ball playing? For one thing, both activities can be found at Young Judaea's several מַחֲנוֹת קַיִץ (*mahanot kayitz*),summer camps, across the United States. Not incidentally, the Hebrew root from which מַחֲנֶה (*mahaneh*)derives, ח-נ-ה (*het, nun, heh*),to encamp, is also tied to both recreational activities and Jewish history.

The original meaning of the root, to bend or incline, can be deduced from an expression in the book of Judges, הִנֵה חֲנוֹת הַיוֹם (*hineh hanot ha-yom*),“Behold the day [i.e., the sun] bends” toward its resting place. The modern word חָנוּת (*hanut*),shop, comes from our root. It is recorded that the prophet Jeremiah was imprisoned in חֲנוּיוֹת (*hanuyot*),vaulted chambers. Subsequently, a חָנוּת (*hanut*),little cell with an arched roof, was used by חֶנְוָנִים (*henvanim*),shopkeepers, to do business.

In Scripture, the noun *mahaneh* means not only encampment where people rest but also army—בַּמַחֲנֶה (*ba-mahaneh*)is the title of the Israel Defense Forces' periodical—or, as in Jacob's funeral, מַחֲנֶה כָּבֵד מְאֹד (*mahaneh kaved me'od*),“large horde of people.” By adding the preposition עַל (*al*),against, to the verb, the Bible changes the meaning from “resting” to something more warlike. In II Samuel, David is exhorted, חַנֵה עַל הָעִיר (*haneh al ha-ir*),“besiege the city.” And the psalmist proclaims אִם תַּחֲנֶה עָלַי מַחֲנֶה (*im tahaneh alai mahaneh*),“should an army besiege me,” I would have no fear.

According to medieval etymologists, חֲנִית (*hanit*),spear, also derives somehow from our root. Did not Isaiah prophesy that חֲנִיתוֹתֵיהֶם (*hanitoteihem*),their spears, would be ground into pruning hooks, ushering in eternal rest from war?

Moses sends scouts to Canaan to check whether the locals live בְּמַחֲנִים (*be-mahanim*),in unguarded camps. Today, מַחֲנַיִם (*mahanayim*),literally meaning two camps, is a version of dodge ball, a game often played by מַחֲנָאִים (*mahana'im*),campers.

A base in Israeli softball, תַּחֲנָה (*tahana*),is also a station. Until the train comes, there is always the problem of parking one's car. When you are tempted not to feed the מַדְחָן (*madhan*),parking meter, or to ignore the אֵין חֲנָיָה (*ein hanaya*),no parking, sign, don't risk it; the fines are outrageous.

All these issues—from biblical warfare to modern Israeli laws—are fuel for discussion at the campfires of Young Judaea's summer camps.

# A Tree Grove in Oz

ח-ר-שׁ

*het-resh-shin*

Family harmony often depends on a tacit agreement to forgo finicky fault finding. Amos Oz, in *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Harvest Books), describes a pleasant Tu Bishvat outing with his often-discordant parents to a חוּרְשָׁה (*hursha*),a grove of trees, in suburban Jerusalem. When his usually pedantic father begins to expound fancifully on words associated with the root שׁ‑ר‑ח (*het, resh, shin*), his usually depressed mother whimsically adds her own list of derivations. Neither feels the need to tweak the other as they normally do, sensing, Oz implies, that creating associations among Hebrew words is a way of forging human links. Interestingly, no scholar has definitively pinpointed the source of the word *hursha* in relation to its root's other meanings. Today, we recognize the word mainly from Naomi Shemer's lilting song חֹרְשַׁת הָאֵיקָלִיפּטוּס (*horshat ha-ekaliptus*),“The Eucalyptus Grove.”

Another meaning of the root *het-resh-shin* is to plow. This sense is found in the biblical prohibition in Deuteronomy לֹא תַּחֲרֹשׁ (*lo taharosh*),“You shall not plow [using an ox and an ass together].” Samson uses the root metaphorically when he tells the Philistines they would never have gotten the answer to his riddle לוּלֵא חֲרַשְׁתֶּם בְּעֶגְלָתִי (*lulei harashtem be-eglati*),“had you not plowed with my heifer,” i.e., plotted with Delilah to cajole the answer out of me.

In modern Hebrew, one finds מַחְרֵשָׁה (*maharesha*),plow, and בֵּית חֲרוֹשֶׁת (*beit haroshet*),factory. Colloquially, the verb is used to describe long, arduous tasks, as when a student cramming for an exam חוֹרֵשׁ אֶת הַחוֹמֶר (*horesh et ha-homer*),studies the material intensively, or an apartment seeker חוֹרֵשׁ אֶת הָעִיר (*horesh et ha-ir*),combs the entire city.

A different use of the root is found in the verbs חָרַשׁ (*harash*)and הֶחֱרִישׁ (*heherish*),to be silent, and, in the latter case, also to deafen by being loud. Related are the adverb חֶרֶשׁ (*heresh*),secretly; the adjective חֵרֵשׁ (*heresh*),deaf; and the doublet חֵרֵשׁ חֵרֵשׁ (*heresh heresh*),very quietly. Queen Esther explains to the Persian king that if Haman had not been bent on the utter destruction of the Jewish people, הֶחֱרַשְׁתִּי (*heherashti*),“I would have remained silent.” The biblical injunction לֹא תְּקַלֵל חֵרֵשׁ (*lote-kallel heresh*),“Do not curse the deaf,” is starkly ethical.

Some scholars want to find a connection between plowed land and a defective auditory canal. Amos Oz's parents found, with their selective deafness, in the woods and in words, a moment of family peace.

# Labor and the Law

ט-ע-נ

*tet-ayin-nun*

You can never tell how many uses a two-trick pony will end up having. Take the example of ט–ע–נ (*tet, ayin, nun*), to load, to pierce. While the root appears only twice in Scripture, it has dozens of applications today.

In the story of Joseph and his brothers, Pharaoh, delighted to learn of the existence of his vizier Joseph’s father, uses the root to instruct Joseph’s brothers to טַעֲנוּ אֶת בְּעִירְכֶם (*ta’anu et be’irkhem*), load up your beasts of burden, return to Canaan and convince your father to come live in Egypt. We have to wait until the “Song of Scorn” (in Isaiah 14) to find the root again, albeit in a different register. There, Isaiah invokes, Dante-like, a dead Babylonian king condemned to walk around the underworld among מְטֺעֲנֵי חָרֶב (*meto’anei harev*), “those pierced by a sword,” or, more to our point, laden with a sword in the belly.

In the Talmud, legal-minded rabbis expanded the meaning of the biblical root by bringing it into Jewish law courts—especially in commercial cases when a טוֹעֵן (*to’en*), claimant, brings a suit against a נִטְעָן (*nit’an*), defendant, who admits only partial responsibility.

The Talmud adds an interpersonal ethical component when it asserts that מִצְוָה לִטְעֹן (*mitsva lit’on*), one is obliged to help a neighbor load his goods. Yet, when a מַטְעִין דְבָרָיו (*mat’in devarav*), traveling salesman, adds a load of slanderous gossip to the wares he peddles, he incurs the opprobrium of the rabbis. In a definite ethical advance, Israel, since the 1990s, has certified a

Today, the port of Tel Aviv is a leisure time hot spot. In the 1930s, poet Leah Goldberg used our root in what has become a rousing Zionist anthem to celebrate the newly built commercial port there—taking special pride in the constant flow of סִירוֹת מִטְעָן (*sirot mit’an*), cargo boats. In an army tank, a טָעָן (*ta’an*), loader of ammunition, is both the soldier and machine. Be careful handling a מִטְעַן חַבָּלָה (*mit’an habbalah*), explosive charge, a task for which great care is טָעוּן (*ta’un*), required. Tech users might want לִטְעוֹן (*lit’on*), to upload software or, using a מַטְעֵן (*mat’en*), charger, recharge one’s cellphone battery.

If any readers have טְעָנוֹת וּמַעֲנוֹת (*teanot u-ma’anot*), an argumentative “bone to pick,” with this column, remember, sword-piercing is a trick the pony has by now forgotten.

# Creative Add-Ons

ט-פ-ל

*tet-feh-lamed*

At first glance, tapeworms, your children’s nanny, root canals and chicken giblets would seem to have little in common. In Hebrew, surprisingly, they are all tied to the three-letter root ט-פ-ל (*tet, feh, lamed*), to attach, plaster over. While it is relatively easy to see how the adjective טָפֵל (*tafel*), secondary, incidental, comes from our root—an add-on is by its nature subordinate—it takes some imagination to picture how the other meanings evolved.

In the Bible, both Job and the Psalmist use the root vituperatively. Job, for his part, accuses his consolers of calumny, not condolences, saying, אַתֶּם טֹפְלֵי שֶׁקֶר (*atem toflei sheker*), “you plaster falsehood,” or invent lies. According to one commentator, by covering him over with falsehood, Job’s accusers make his true character unrecognizable. The Psalmist says his detractors טָפְלוּ עָלַי שֶׁקֶר (*taflu alai sheker*), “have accused me falsely.” Recognizing the usefulness of a colorful idiom when he sees one, the author of the Yom Kippur *viddui* liturgy inserts the expression טָפַלְנוּ שֶׁקֶר (*tafalnu sheker*), we have falsely accused others, in his litany of breast-beating confessions.

The rabbis of the Talmud use the root in Aramaic to take it in a different direction. They recognized that children are טְפוּלִין (*tefulin*), attached to, i.e., financially dependent on, their parents. The rabbis colorfully used טֶפֶל (*tefel*), putty, as a generic term for children. Would it be going too far to speculate that, in the eyes of the rabbis, אֶמוּנוֹת טְפֵלוֹת (*emunot tefeilot*), superstitions, are childish by their very nature? Or are *emunot tefeilot* merely add-ons to our core beliefs?

Children and caregiving go together in many ways. From the infinitive לְטַפֵּל (*le-tappel*), to take care of, we have a מְטַפֶּלֶת (*metappelet*), nanny or babysitter. An Israeli might say of a person unusually sensitive to another, הוּא טִפֵּל בּוֹ בִּקְצוֹת הָאֶצְבָּעוֹת (*hu tippel bo bi-ketsot ha-etsba'ot*), he handled him with kid gloves, literally, with his fingertips. Speaking of highly sensitive things, our root also takes us to another kind of root, this one at the dentist’s office, where טִפּוּל שֹׁרֶשׁ (*tippul shoresh*) is a root canal procedure. ln biology, an organism that attaches itself to another and feeds off it is called a טַפִּיל (*tappil*), parasite—a tapeworm, or perhaps a twenty-something who won’t move out of his parents’ house.

Though our grandmother recognized that a chicken’s breasts and thighs were primary, she also knew how to make good use of the טִפְלַיִם (*tiflayim*), giblets. Who says the secondary can’t be made primary?