

אהבה

Ahava / Love

Love Is Complicated

## The Many Acts of Love

Joanna Samuels

*"What was new and remarkable in the Bible was the idea that love, not just fairness, is the driving principle of the moral life."*

— Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The Torah includes three commandments to love: to love God, to love our fellow humans as ourselves, and to love the stranger. If love is the driving principle of the moral life of the Torah, then the actualization of that love is the foundational enterprise of rabbinic Judaism. The Torah gave us the aspirational; mitzvot endow us with the behaviors that will bring those aspirations closer to earth.

The first two of these commandments — love for God and love for our fellow humans — are actualized through mitzvot, a system that shapes ideals into behavior and is deepened through communal norms. One individual whispering about love while binding her arm with leather straps that hold sacred text is a curiosity; millions of others engaging in this activity across time and geography make real the idea that one way to show devotion and love for God is through the mitzvah of *tefillin*.

So, too, with *mitzvot bein adam l'chavero*, the commandments that govern how we show our love for one another. We all need many things: gifts of money and kindness, hospitality, ethical business practices, and the scrupulous avoidance of gossip and untruth. Together, these behaviors are a call and response of giving and receiving that affirms our love for humanity — if not always in the particular, then powerfully in the general.

But what of the command to love the stranger? What behaviors demonstrate this love and how are they actualized and reinforced by communal norms? Of our three love commands, this one possesses the clearest emotional rationale: a radical empathy for those thrust into the vulnerable circumstance we have known. Loving the stranger on the basis of our shared understanding of estrangement returns us to a

remembered version of our own vulnerability and displacement. But what have we done for the stranger with this love? What are the needs of the stranger, such that our love is a salve?

And what of this love? Do we accept this command upon ourselves, or is it subject to our political proclivities? Do we love the stranger only when it is politically expedient? Have we forgotten who we are? Have we forgotten who we were?

Judging whose estrangement is worthy of love does not fulfill the commandment to "love the stranger." In this painful time in our nation's history, we must love and we must actualize love. If there is indeed a breach between love for the stranger and ritualized, communal action on his behalf, then we must work toward filling it, with bold, purposeful action.

*Mitzvot bein adam l'ger*, the commandments to love the stranger, lack any clear-cut associative behaviors. Thus, we need to learn together, and in real time, how to actualize this mitzvah. These communal actions could include ad hoc legal clinics at airports as immigrants are detained and in need of legal services; they could include new coalitions between Muslim and Jewish communities to face threats to our communal spaces together. They could include synagogues becoming sanctuaries for undocumented Americans and members of suburban communities preparing safe rooms in their homes to protect those threatened with deportation.

As we perform these acts of love, they form in us a new memory — not of our vulnerability or nostalgia, but of our capacity to act. These mitzvot of love will become, we hope, as familiar as our established mitzvot already are. They hold open the invitation, always, for depth, intention, and truth.

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Rabbi **Joanna Samuels** is the executive director of Educational Alliance's Manny Cantor Center, an innovative multicultural community center and settlement house on New York's Lower East Side.

Art by Irina Sheynfeld  
"Kisses"  
pastel, mixed media

Inspired by Leonard Cohen's song  
"A thousand kisses deep"

# NiSh'ma

On this page, we offer three takes on a deeply evocative line from Shir HaShirim: “Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it.” (Song of Songs 8:7) Our commentators reflect on the changing nature of love — what endures and what dies over time. Our online version is interactive, and we welcome your comments. —S.B.



**Melila Hellner-Eshed:** The choice of the sages to read the Song of Songs as an allegory of the relationship between the congregation of Israel and God opened the floodgates for commentary, poetry, midrash, mystical insights, and contemporary writing on each and

every verse. The language of *Shir HaShirim* is the language of lovers, with its emotional landscapes of desire, longing, fantasy, ecstasy, jealousy, missed opportunities, bitter surprises, and moments of bliss. Reading the relationship of God and the people Israel through *Shir HaShirim* means favoring the relationship of lovers over that of parent and child or master and servant.

The rabbis of the Zohar read *Shir HaShirim* as the choicest of all songs, the love language that tells the story of past, present, and future. They even dare to read the word, “love,” “*ahava*,” (אהבה) as the inner mystery of the divine name YHVH (יהוה).

While our love relationships change over time and we are alive for but a fleeting moment, this verse in the concluding chapter of the Song of Songs speaks about the endurance of love: “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.” (8:7) Love is an inner constant flame, a *ner tamid*, at the heart of existence and of religious experience. And although the waters of time will come and go in a stormy or peaceful manner, the presence of love will prevail.

I’m grateful that my tradition has given me this passionate lexicon with which to explore my relationship with God, and to know and feel fully that love will endure.

**Melila Hellner-Eshed** teaches Zohar and Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University and is a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. She is also on faculty of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.



**Andrew Ramer:** In my 20s, *Shir HaShirim* was my favorite book in the *Tanach* — that short anthology of erotic verses that Rabbi Akiva called the Holy of Holies. He and his fellow sages read the Song of Songs as an allegory of the relationship between the people Israel and God. In their reading, Israel is the woman and God is the man. The woman is chasing a man, a societal inversion, that made the book work for me as a newly out gay man. And, years later, Rabbi Julia Watts Belser invited readers to experience this questing woman as God and the pursued man as God’s beloved, which would have been restorative had I come to it sooner.

Just before we read the verse, “Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it,” we read this about love: “Its darts are darts of fire, a blazing flame...”

Those words and images — hot and fiery — were of my youth. But I am in my 60s now, and the love language of my relationship with God isn’t a dart of fire, a *ner tamid*, or even the flickering flame of a single candle on my meditation altar. Age has brought a constancy to me of presence, of godness, that I could not have imagined earlier. My love in and with God is liquid: a bubbling spring, a brook flowing softly over mossy rocks in a forest of old-growth trees — not a Ground of Being, but an Ocean of Being, a Oneness that shifts, changes, and enlivens the me who is, while still alive, mostly water myself. And I find myself drawn to these words instead: “Eat, lovers, and drink: Drink deep of love.” (Song of Songs 5:1)

**Andrew Ramer** is the author of *Torah Told Different: Stories for a Pan/Poly/Post-Denominational World* and of *Queering the Text: Biblical, Medieval, and Modern Jewish Stories*. His back yard is a large urban lake. He can be reached at [andrewramer.com](http://andrewramer.com).



**Matthew Zapruder:** I was immediately struck by the word “quench” in this verse. The quote seems to be saying, don’t worry, no matter how many “waters” and “floods” come, they will never drown out love.

The flame of love will survive. As Melila Hellner-Eshed writes in her wise commentary, love is a *ner tamid* (constant flame). So, love is to be preserved and quenching it is not what we want.

What’s a little strange, though, is that, normally, to quench means both to drink until one is no longer thirsty or to extinguish with water. Each of those meanings implies the elimination of a problem (thirst, something burning). So,

when I try to follow the metaphor literally, it seems peculiar and counter to the meaning of the quote. To “quench” love makes it seem as though love is a problem, like a terrible thirst, or a burning house.

But maybe the word “quench” is exactly right because it gets at a far less sentimental, wiser idea of love. June Carter, in the song “Ring of Fire,” about her devastating and undeniable passion for Johnny Cash, wrote that love is a burning thing and makes a fiery ring. The song is one of the great portrayals of love because it communicates the ambiguity of desire — our simultaneous wish and need to quench and also to stoke our love. This may be as true for religious passion, which, as we know from history and the present, can be both immensely sustaining and profoundly dangerous. As usual, the sages continue to offer wise instruction.

**Matthew Zapruder** is the author of four books of poetry and *Why Poetry*, a book of prose about poetry, forthcoming from Ecco/Harper Collins. An associate professor in the MFA program at Saint Mary’s College of California, he is the 2016-2017 editor of the poetry column for the *New York Times Magazine*. He lives in Oakland, Calif.

מִיָּם רַבִּים לֹא יוּכְלוּ לְכַבּוֹת אֶת-הָאֵהָבָה  
וְנִהְרֹת לֹא יִשְׁטְפוּהָ.

“Many waters cannot  
quench love; neither can the  
floods drown it.”

Song of Songs 8:7

**Jewish sensibilities** are approaches to living and learning that permeate Jewish culture. The ideas, values, emotions, and behaviors they express — emanating from Jewish history, stories, and sources — provide inspiration and guidance that help us to respond creatively and thoughtfully to life's challenges and opportunities. Sensibilities are culturally informed senses or memes. This month, *Sh'ma Now* reflects on “*ahava*,” the various ways we love in Judaism — loving God, loving others, loving the stranger, loving the Jewish people (*ahavat ha'am*), and loving Israel (*ahavat Yisrael*). We will resume publication in September with an issue on fear, “*Pachad Yitzchak*,” for the High Holidays.

## Messy Over Messianic

Sharon Cohen Anisfeld

“Do You Love Me? Do I What?”  
— “Fiddler on the Roof”

This poignant, comical exchange between Tevye and Golda in the musical “Fiddler on the Roof” was a canonical text in my childhood home. It spoke to the impossibility of speaking about love — and conveyed the mysterious mix of tenacity and tenderness required to sustain a relationship over many years. Its decidedly unromantic view of love was echoed by another quote on the bulletin board in my mother's kitchen: “Love is what you've been through with somebody.”

I was raised on the classic Zionist narrative, when that was simpler than it is now. But the truth is that my sense of *ahavat Yisrael* has never been about a neatly packaged Zionist ideology. It has been about the abiding sense that my personal story is deeply bound up with the story of Israel.

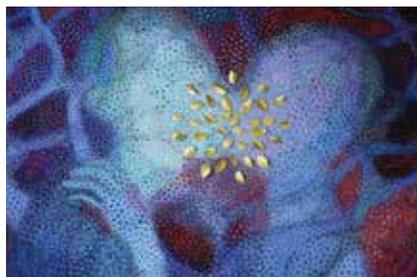
My mother was born in Haifa and, although she came to America when she was a young child, I always felt a quiet pride that my family was part of the story of pre-state Palestine. My grandmother was a nurse (the private nurse of Hebrew poet Haim Nachman Bialik, for a brief time), and my grandfather studied in the first graduating class of Haifa's Technion Institute of Technology.

Shortly after I turned 13, the Yom Kippur War broke out. I pledged my entire bank account (\$33.11) to support the Israeli war effort. It was the first time I remember the feeling of being needed by something much bigger than myself.

Three years later, I returned from summer camp humming an old Israeli folksong, “Shir Ha'emek.” My mother recognized it as a long forgotten lullaby her mother used to sing to her when she was a little girl. Learning this, I felt a powerful connection to something beyond myself — to the grandmother I never knew, and to the threads of Hebrew poetry and song that tied us together over vast distances of time and space.

At age 17, I spent eight months studying in Israel. I met Rabbi David Forman, z”l, who became an important mentor for many years. He modeled a deep and spacious sense of *ahavat Yisrael* — one that had room for both idealism and outrage, for devotion and disappointment. Early in the program, he took us on a tour of Jerusalem and showed us how inequities and injustices were built into the landscape of the city. I intuitively understood that he did this out of love for this place he had chosen to make his home — the same love he exuded when he sang his favorite Hebrew songs. I vividly remember a magical car ride with him from Haifa to Jerusalem. We sang for hours. It was then that I learned the melody to “*V'Yehuda l'olam teshev*”; “*Yehuda* will endure forever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation.”

What captured my imagination about Israel



“Kisses,” by Irina Sheynfeld

in my youth — and has claimed my heart ever since — was not the promise of redemption, but the drama of human connection and aspiration. I have always been drawn not to the perfection of heavenly Jerusalem, but to the vitality of earthly Jerusalem — to the messy over the messianic.

Recently, I traveled with a group of Jewish leaders (through Encounter, encounterprograms.org) to spend four days meeting with Palestinians in the West Bank. Much of what we witnessed was ugly and painful: the entrenchment of occupation after almost 50 years, the daily indignities, the elusiveness of any solution in sight.

I was afraid that the experience might shake my sense of *ahavat Yisrael*. It didn't. I felt that the people I was with — both Jews and Palestinians — understood what it means to love and to long for a place, what it means to feel that one's personal story is bound up with the story of one's people. While the stories we heard were difficult and sometimes heartbreaking, I did not feel that they were intended to erase my own story.

*Ahavat Yisrael* is not about a loyalty oath to the State of Israel. History has taught us the danger of such oaths. Our love cannot be built on a brittle ideological branch that will break the minute it encounters the reality of a complex country that is both beautiful and burdened by trauma and pain. Our relationship must be more supple and subtle than that.

The word *ahavah* is related to the Hebrew root meaning “to give.” Another form of the same root means “a burden.” For me, this speaks to the essence of *ahavat Yisrael*. It is about the burdens and blessings of belonging, about the love that grows within us when we give, about linking our lives to something beyond ourselves. It is, after all, about what we've been through together.

Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld has been dean of the Hebrew College Rabbinical School ([www.hebrewcollege.edu](http://www.hebrewcollege.edu)) for eleven years. She worked previously as a Hillel rabbi at Tufts, Yale, and Harvard universities, and she has been a faculty member for the Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel since 1993.

## Loving My People Is Worth the Effort

Adam Weisberg

In the abstract, love is about as good as it gets. Yet Jewish wisdom seems to know just how hard it is to love, how inclined we are to move in the opposite direction.

In the book of Leviticus, we learn: “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart.” (19:17) The Torah seems to understand that each of us will find some people so challenging that we will be inclined to harbor the deepest of ill will toward them. The verse continues: “Reprove your kinsman, but/and incur no guilt because of him.” The Torah, again, recognizes that we are often so agitated by our fellows that we feel compelled to point out their bad behavior, irritating attitudes, and outright objectionableness. The second half of the verse offers instruction on how to vent one’s spleen: Call it as you see it, but do so in a way that doesn’t make you as loathsome as that boor you are chastising.

And then, the Torah continues: “You shall love your fellow as yourself.” If ever there were words to live by today, these are the words. And yet, today I find that loving the people Israel — particularly some individuals — is a truly challenging proposition.

By way of example, the recently confirmed U.S. ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, in a *New York Magazine* opinion piece written in June of 2016, referred to members of J Street: The Political Home for Pro-Israel Pro-Peace Americans as “far worse than kapos.” In Friedman’s camp, Jews who criticize Israel publicly or try to influence Israeli politics toward the center or left, are an existential threat to Israel and, by extension, to the Jewish people. (While Friedman apologized for his remark, the fact that the apology came during his Senate confirmation hearing and the fact of his failure to apologize directly to the people he’d impugned, makes it all less believable.) In the other camp are Jews who see Israel’s right-of-center political leadership hurtling the country toward a seemingly inevitable demise as a democratic Jewish state. While referring to another Jew as “far worse than kapos” may be crossing a line,



the current use of sloppy, incendiary language makes me less concerned with the specifics of a comment like Friedman’s and more concerned with what it reveals about our enmity for one another. We are living through a period of intense communal acrimony, one that gives license to forgetting that the Torah pronounces all human beings as having been created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in God’s image.

While “the good old days” may never have existed, the ubiquity of electronic communication, social media, and our networked reality tend to amplify and spread enmity. To partially reference the old story about the advice the rabbi gives to the slandered, there are more feathers of hate in the pillow, and they are spread much farther, much faster. All of this leads to this question: How do I hate your ideas or actions without growing to hate you — perhaps even while continuing to love you?

The Hasidic teacher Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pzhysha taught that we should carry two truths in our pockets at all times. The first, “I am but dust and ashes,” reminds us of our humility. The second, “For my sake was the universe created,” reminds us of our inherent preciousness. Rav Bunim taught us that when we feel prideful, we should read the first quote to bring us down to size. And when we feel insignificant, even worthless, we should read the second quote to remind us of our inherent value.

Another way to read Rav Bunim’s teaching is that we can hold two seemingly conflicting ideas simultaneously; thus, we transcend a false dichotomy. Holding two truths together, I can find it loathsome that Friedman could refer to liberal Jews as “far

worse than kapos” without needing to find him loathsome. I can condemn Friedman’s language and attitude while still acknowledging that he is created *b’tzelem Elohim*.

This is not easy. And I don’t always get it right. It is far more instinctual for me — for most of us — to respond to an attack with a counterattack, to meet revulsion with revulsion. But revenge seldom, if ever, cures our ills.

Loving anyone is a task. Even love that comes naturally — for our children and parents — is fraught. And the love we feel for our partners is even more complicated. So, is it possible to love a people? The notion of loving the whole Jewish people, *ahavat ha’am*, seems more aspirational than practical. Most of us have loved the idea of our people much more than its actuality. The idea of a people, of a collective striving toward the core values our tradition teaches — loving kindness, righteousness, mercy, peace — is profoundly compelling.

Perhaps it is too much for most of us to love the actual people. People are difficult, flawed, and complicated. They say and do things to us that should never be said or done. But the fact that individual Jews can be remarkably irritating (or downright evil) does not detract from the beauty of Judaism, of Jewishness. The idea of a Jewish people remains essential; it serves our need to be part of and to serve a collective. This seems particularly essential in today’s anonymizing, globalized world. And that impels us toward the idea of *ahavat ha’am*. If we work hard enough to love the idea of the Jewish people, we may just end up loving a few more actual people than we otherwise would have.

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**Adam Weisberg** has worked in the Jewish community for 25 years as an educator and agency director. He has extensive experience as an adviser, coach, and mentor to young and mid-career professionals. He serves on the boards of Urban Adamah, Wilderness Torah, and the Jewish Community High School of the Bay.

## Visualizing Love

Lee Moore

"Fear and love are the two wings of a bird, and a bird cannot fly with just one wing."

– Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady, based on the Zohar

We love love. We hate fear. Yet every attempt to love inevitably involves some fear. In the *Tanya* (an 18th-century collection of Hasidic writings), Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady notes that with every move toward love, fear arises: "Before awakening the love of God, you must awaken fear and raise it to consciousness in your heart or mind." Without addressing our fears, he says, we can't actually love. And so, he offers meditative exercises for practicing both loving and fearing.

Schneur Zalman's object of love and fear is God. Loving God is our soul longing to merge with divinity; it is like a drop of water longing to slip into the ocean from where it came and where, in truth, it has always belonged. Love, by its nature, accepts unconditionally. Love breaks through and transcends boundaries. As the psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm argued in his 1956 classic, *The Art of Loving*, in love, we long for a union that takes us toward a real or imagined merger — as a state of being, or of grace, or of being connected and even entwined with another. Without connection, we suffer intense anxiety.

The irony — and often tragedy — of love is that when pulled toward merger, we inevitably sense an intense fear of separation, or a fear of the loss of the self. If we don't address those fears and anxieties, they thwart our attempts to love, to get closer. In one meditative exercise, Schneur Zalman asks us to practice feeling and imagining that our fear is grounded in the ultimate fear of disconnection and alienation. He goes on to teach that it helps to name the fear and, in fact, we must do so if we are to merge and love.

In another meditative exercise, Schneur Zalman

advocates a particular way of practicing self-sacrifice, or *mesirat nefesh*, as a way to approach love. He frames self-sacrifice not as a devaluing of ourselves, but rather as a form of visualization: imagining that we are returning our soul to God, intending that our drop has returned to that ocean. In Jewish ritual practice, each morning we are invited to recite, "My God, the soul you have given me is pure... You breathed it into me and you will ultimately take it from me." This is not only a gratitude practice for the return of the soul each day upon waking. It also imagines that each night we surrender our soul to God — the One who put our soul into our body when we were born and who will one day take it again at the end of our life. Schneur Zalman interprets this prayer as this visualization practice and assertion — that each and every moment throughout the day, whenever we remember to, we might try to merge our soul with that unity.

The paradox of love and fear persists even in this rather abstract and esoteric practice. While love is the yearning for, or actualization of merger, only by approaching God as an "other" can we then merge. Schneur Zalman points this out in the voice of the psalmist: "To You, God, I raise my *nefesh*/soul." If God is an "other," a "you," we inevitably begin from a position of separateness — along with the inherent anxieties that can accompany separation. Ironically, only from a separate place can I "raise my soul" and consider merger. Perhaps that is the very point of the practice. Like a Mobius strip, we may always twist and turn between separating and merging, separating and merging, exercising our ability to be content with both. That is a strengthening that ultimately can help us to get closer — to God, or to any beloved.

Rabbi **Lee Moore** is director of Jewish and Organizational Learning for Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah. She studies the *Tanya* regularly with rabbis Ebn Leader, Seth Wax, and Elisha Herb. She is also the campus rabbi for Hillel at Kent State University.

### Editor-in-Chief

Susan Berrin

### Founding Editor

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, z"l

### Design

Emily Rich

### Contact

info@shma.com

### For editorial inquiries, contact

sberrin@shma.com

### Advisory Board

Rachel Brodie  
Richard Hirsh  
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# Consider & Converse

A Guide to 'Ahava' — 'Love'

## Introduction

*Sh'ma Now* curates conversations on a single theme rooted in Jewish tradition and the contemporary moment. At the heart of this issue of *Sh'ma Now* is the theme of “*ahava*” — “love.” The issue explores the various ways we love in Judaism — loving God, loving others, loving the stranger, loving the Jewish people (*ahavat ha'am*), and loving Israel (*ahavat Yisrael*). The perspectives shared in these pages are meant to be expansive — to inspire reflections on Judaism and possibility in ways you may not have considered before. They aim to hold discord. We hope that the richness and diversity of these essays will show you new perspectives that are personally meaningful and edifying.

*Sh'ma Now* has never viewed learning or “meaning-making” as solely an individual activity. That's why we have included this guide, which is specifically designed to help you to consider the idea of going forth independently or with others, formally and informally.

## How to Begin

This guide offers a variety of suggestions, including activities and prompts for individual contemplation and informal or more structured conversations. We suggest that you use this guide to share reflections and thoughts over a Shabbat meal, or, for those who are more adventurous, to lead a planned, structured conversation, inviting a small group of friends and family to your home or to a coffee shop. If you would like more information about ways in which this journal might be used, please contact Susan Berrin, *Sh'ma Now* editor-in-chief, at SBerrin@shma.com. You can also print out a PDF file of the entire issue at <http://forward.com/shma-now/>.

## Guidelines for Discussion

If you wish to hold a structured conversation, the following guidelines may help you to create a space that allows for honest personal exploration through sharing:

- Create a sense of shared purpose that can foster the kind of internal reflection that happens through group conversation.
- Remind participants of simple ground rules for conversations. For example: Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other's comments. Make room for everyone to speak. Step into or away from the conversation appropriately. No one participant should dominate the conversation. Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts.
- For each of the questions below, we recommend that you print out the article in question, or provide the link to it, and we ask that you take a moment to read it in print or on screen, before the conversation begins.
- Allow people a few minutes to absorb the article, perhaps even to read it a second time, before moving into the discussion.

# Consider & Converse

A Guide to 'Ahava' — 'Love'

## Interpretive Questions

can focus the reader on the ideas in the articles.

- Rabbi **Joanna Samuels** [page 1] introduces readers to some of the ritual source material on "*ahava*" — "love." Joanna explains the Torah's three commands to love — to love God, to love our fellow humans as ourselves, and to love the stranger — and then she focuses on the third command: to love the stranger. She asks: "What behaviors demonstrate this love and how are they actualized and reinforced by communal norms?" Loving the stranger demands a radical empathy for those "thrust into the vulnerable circumstance we have known." She complicates this by stating, "Loving the stranger on the basis of our shared understanding of estrangement returns us to a remembered version of our own vulnerability and displacement. But what have we done for the stranger with this love?" And she asks: "What are the needs of the stranger, such that our love is a salve?" What is the difference between loving the stranger because of our own Jewish experiences of being strangers, and loving the stranger because of their position of need? How does this way of responding to the stranger in need activate us?
- Rabbi **Sharon Cohen Anisfeld** [page 3] reflects on her own personal history of *ahavat Yisrael*, love for Israel. She grew up with a classic Zionist narrative. Over decades of study and travel in Israel, she "has been drawn not to the perfection of heavenly Jerusalem, but to the vitality of earthly Jerusalem — to the messy over the messianic." What captured her imagination "was not the promise of redemption, but the drama of human connection and aspiration." Later, she writes, "Our love cannot be built on a brittle branch that will break the minute it encounters the reality of a complex country that is both beautiful and burdened by trauma and pain. Our relationship must be more supple and subtle than that." How does one love across a divide, amid messiness? How does the love of Israel resemble the love of one's partner, drawing on imagery in the Song of Songs? How does one act out love or keep the idea of love going when day to day life is so fraught? What re-stokes the fire of love when it is on a low simmer? In what ways is the idea of "covenant" crucial to our love for Israel?
- **Adam Weisberg** [page 4] jumps into the challenges of loving the Jewish people, *ahavat ha'am*. He writes: "Loving anyone is a task. Even the love that comes naturally — for our children and parents — is fraught. And the love we feel for our partners is even more complicated. So, is it possible to love a people? The notion of loving the whole Jewish people, *ahavat ha'am*, seems more aspirational than practical. Most of us have loved the idea of our people much more than its actuality." Is it possible to love a "people"? How do you understand Jewish peoplehood, and does the idea of the Jewish people change as the world becomes more globalized? How so? Is loving the Jewish people an abstraction — or a real possibility?

# Consider & Converse

A Guide to 'Ahava' — 'Love'

## Reflective Questions

can help to integrate the ideas in these articles with one's own sense of self.

- Rabbi **Lee Moore** [page 5] writes about the connection between love and fear. She draws on the teaching of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady, who writes in the *Tanya* (an 18th-century collection of Hasidic writings), about love as a method of merger with the divine. Our fear about love is grounded in a fear of our being disconnected and alienated. He suggests a practice that “every moment throughout the day, whenever we remember to, we might try to merge our soul with that unity.” Moore writes that “the irony — and often tragedy — of love is that when pulled toward merger, we inevitably sense an intense fear of separation, or a fear of the loss of the self. If we don’t address those fears and anxieties, they thwart our attempts to love, to get closer” to others and to God. Has this been your experience of love? How do you understand the difference between merging with another and remaining one’s own self in the practice of love? How do you understand love as a way to seek closeness with God?
- In *NiSh'ma*, [page 2] our simulated Talmud page, three writers explore one of the most evocative lines from *Shir HaShirim*: “Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it.” (Song of Songs 8:7) Our commentators reflect on the changing nature of love — what endures and what dies over time. **Melila Hellner-Eshed** writes that she is grateful that Judaism provides a passionate lexicon with which to explore her relationship with God, and to know and feel fully that love will endure. “Love is an inner constant flame, a *ner tamid*, at the heart of existence and of religious experience,” she writes. “And although the waters of time will come and go in a stormy or peaceful manner, the presence of love will prevail.” **Andrew Ramer**, writing in his 60s, reflects that the language he uses for loving God “isn’t a dart of fire, a *ner tamid*, or even the flickering flame of a single candle on my meditation altar. Age has brought a constancy to me of presence, of godness... My love in and with God is liquid: a bubbling spring, a brook flowing softly over mossy rocks in a forest of old growth trees. Not a Ground of Being, but an Ocean of Being, a oneness that shifts, changes, and enlivens the me who is, while still alive, mostly water myself.” How does love change over time — both in relationships with others and in your spiritual seeking of God? What are your favorite metaphors for love, and how do they serve your understanding of this timeless passion?