

*The JTS Hendel Center for Ethics and Justice Presents:*



# LOVE IN DARK TIMES: FRIENDSHIP AND EROS IN JEWISH THEOLOGY, LITERATURE, AND ETHICS

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INSTITUTE FOR ISRAEL AND JEWISH STUDIES  
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# LOVE IN DARK TIMES: FRIENDSHIP AND EROS IN JEWISH THEOLOGY, LITERATURE, AND ETHICS

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# *Framing the Conversation on Love in Dark Times*

Dr. Shira Billet

## 1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

“The metaphysical event of transcendence - the welcome of the Other... - is not accomplished as love.”

“Love does not simply lead, by a more detoured or more direct way, toward the Thou. It is bent in another direction than that wherein one encounters the Thou.”

“The relationship established between lovers in voluptuousness, fundamentally refractory to universalization, is the very contrary of the social relation. It excludes the third party, it remains intimacy, dual solitude, closed society, the supremely non-public.”

## 2. Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium*

“[Why do we study Plato in particular? When we look at the present situation in the world, this side of the Iron Curtain, we see that there are two powers dominating present-day thought, positivism and historicism. The defect of these powers today compels us to look out for an alternative.” (1)

“Philosophy, Aristophanes suggests, in contradistinction to poetry, is unable to persuade... the multitude. Philosophy transcends the ephemeral, the mundane, the political. However, it cannot find its way back to it. The philosopher... is blind to the context in which philosophy exists, namely political life... [P]hilosophy is un-erotic and... unpoetic. Philosophy is blind to the human things experienced in... the acts of living. These acts of living are precisely the theme of poetry... Poetry is the capstone of wisdom...” (6-7)

“Plato defends Socrates against this charge... Socrates is so far from being blind to the political that he is truly the discoverer of the political in its own kind... And Socrates, far from being an unerotic man, is the erotician. It is not true that poetry is the capstone of philosophy. On the contrary, philosophy is the capstone of poetry... [I]n the Symposium..., philosophy defeats poetry in the contest for supremacy regarding wisdom. [This also means] that the right kind of philosophy is more truly poetic than poetry... For Plato... if you have understood the human soul in its essence, you can make these highest principles transparent in all human beings and all types of human beings.” (8).

## 3. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

(א) לְכֹל זְמַן וְעֵת לְכָל-חֵפֶץ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם : (ב) עֵת לְלֵדָת וְעֵת לָמוּת עֵת לְטֹעַת וְעֵת לְעִקּוֹר נְטוּעַ : ... (ד) עֵת לְבָבוֹת וְעֵת לְשִׁחוּק עֵת סִפּוּד וְעֵת רִקּוּד : ... (ז) עֵת לְקָרוֹעַ וְעֵת לְתַפּוּר עֵת לְחֻשׁוֹת וְעֵת לְדַבֵּר : (ח) עֵת לְאַהֲבָה עֵת לְשִׂנְאָה  
עֵת מִלְחָמָה וְעֵת שְׁלוֹם :

(1) A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven: (2) A time for birthing and a time for dying; A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted... (4) A time for weeping and a time for laughing; A time for wailing and a time for dancing;... (7)... A time for silence and a time for speaking; (8) A time for loving and a time for hating; A time for war and a time for peace.



# *Uncertainty and Vulnerability in Love and Politics*

Dr. Fannie Bialek

## 1. Lysias in Plato's *Phaedrus*:

“You know what my condition is, and you have heard how I think it is to our advantage to arrange these matters. [231a] And I claim that I ought not to be refused what I ask because I am not your lover. For lovers repent of the kindnesses they have done when their passion ceases; but there is no time when non-lovers naturally repent. For they do kindnesses to the best of their ability, not under compulsion, but of their free will, according to their view of their own best interest. And besides, lovers consider the injury they have done to their own concerns on account of their love, and the benefits they have conferred, and they add the trouble they have had, [231b] and so they think they have long ago made sufficient return to the beloved; but non-lovers cannot ever neglect of their own affairs because of their condition, nor can they take account of the pains they have been at in the past, nor lay any blame for quarrels with their relatives; and so, since all these evils are removed, there is nothing left for them but to do eagerly what they think will please the beloved.” (Phaedrus's 230e-231b)

*Plato, “Phaedrus,” in Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9 translated by Harold N. Fowler. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925*

## 2. Mark Strand, “In Memory of Joseph Brodsky”

It could be said, even here, that what remains of the self  
Unwinds into a vanishing light, and thins like dust, and heads  
To a place where knowing and nothing pass into each other, and through;  
That it moves, unwinding still, beyond the vault of brightness ended,  
And continues to a place which may never be found, where the unsayable,  
Finally, once more is uttered, but lightly, quickly, like random rain  
That passes in sleep, that one imagines passes in sleep.  
What remains of the self unwinds and unwinds, for none  
Of the boundaries holds — neither the shapeless one between us,  
Nor the one that falls between your body and your voice. Joseph,  
Dear Joseph, those sudden reminders of your having been — the places  
And times whose greatest life was the one you gave them — now appear  
Like ghosts in your wake. What remains of the self unwinds  
Beyond us, for whom time is only a measure of meanwhile  
And the future no more than et cetera et cetera ...but fast and forever.

*First published as “Et Cetera, Et Cetera” in The New Yorker, November 4, 1996. Later published in this form in Mark Strand, Blizzard of One (New York: Knopf, 1998)*

# Turning Suffering into Love

Rabbi Dr. Shai Held

## 1. שמות כג:ט

<sup>9</sup>וְגַר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם :

### 1. Exodus 23:9

<sup>9</sup>You shall not oppress a stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.

## 2. ויקרא יט:לג-לד

<sup>33</sup>וְכִי יִגּוּר אִתְּךָ גֵר בְּאֶרְצְכֶם לֹא תוֹנוּ אֹתוֹ

<sup>34</sup>כִּי אֶזְרַח מִמֶּךָ יְהִי לְכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם וְאַהֲבַתְּ לּוֹ כְּמוֹדֶךָ כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֲנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם :

### 2. Leviticus 19:33-34

<sup>33</sup>When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. <sup>34</sup>The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your native-born; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.

## 3. דברים י:טז-יז

<sup>17</sup>כִּי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֲדֹנֵי הָאֲדֹנִים הָאֵל הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד :

<sup>18</sup>עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוֹם וְאַלְמָנָה וְאַהֲבֵה גֵר לְתַת לּוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה :

<sup>19</sup>וְאַהֲבַתְּם אֶת הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם :

### 3. Deuteronomy 10:17-19

<sup>17</sup>For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, <sup>18</sup>but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. <sup>19</sup>You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

## 4. שמות כב:כא-כג

<sup>21</sup>כֹּל-אַלְמָנָה וְיְתוֹם לֹא תַעֲנוּן .

<sup>22</sup>אִם-עֲנֶה תַעֲנֶה אֹתוֹ—כִּי אִם-צָעַק יִצְעַק אֵלַי שָׁמַע אֲשָׁמַע צַעֲקוֹתָיו .

<sup>23</sup>וְחָרָה אַפִּי וְהִרְגֹתִי אֶתְכֶם בְּחָרָב ; וְהָיוּ נְשִׁיכֶם אַלְמָנוֹת וּבְנֵיכֶם יְתוֹמִים .

### 4. Exodus 22:21-23

<sup>21</sup>You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. <sup>22</sup>If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, <sup>23</sup>and My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

## 5. דברים כג:טז-יז

<sup>15</sup>לֹא-תִסְגִּיר עֶבֶד אֶל-אֲדֹנָיו אֲשֶׁר-יִנְצַל אֵלָיִךְ מֵעַם אֲדֹנָיו .

<sup>16</sup>עִמָּדָה יֵשֵׁב בְּקִרְבְּךָ בְּמִקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר בְּאַחַד שְׁעָרֶיךָ—בְּטוֹב לוֹ לֹא תוֹנֶנּוּ .

### 5. Deuteronomy 23:16-17

<sup>16</sup>You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master. <sup>17</sup>He shall live with you in any place he may choose among the settlements in your midst, wherever he pleases; you must not ill-treat him.

# *Must Love Be Disinterested?*

Dr. Nadav S. Berman

See Nadav S. Berman, "Peculiarly Interesting Disinterestedness: A Pragmatist Reading of Mishnah Avot 5:16." *Journal of Jewish Ethics* 8(1): 42-56 (2022)

## 1. Mishnah Avot 5:16

(טז) כָּל אֲהָבָה שֶׁהִיא תְלוּיָהּ בְּדָבָר, בְּטֵל דָּבָר, בְּטֵלָה אֲהָבָה. וְשֵׂאִינָהּ תְלוּיָהּ בְּדָבָר, אֵינָהּ בְּטֵלָה לְעוֹלָם. אֵיזוֹ הִיא אֲהָבָה הַתְלוּיָהּ בְּדָבָר, זוֹ אֲהָבַת אֲמִנוֹן וְתָמָר. וְשֵׂאִינָהּ תְלוּיָהּ בְּדָבָר, זוֹ אֲהָבַת דָּוִד וַיהוֹנָתָן:

Any love that depends upon a thing—when the thing is lost, the love is lost. But one that doesn't depend upon a thing—it will never be lost. What is an example of love that depends upon a thing? The love of Amnon and Tamar. And one that doesn't depend upon a thing? The love of David and Jonathan.  
(Translation by Martin S. Jaffee)

## 2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

"Now that it has become so common to praise "disinterested people," we must [...] be made aware of what the common people are actually interested in [...] What we will discover is that most of what interests and attracts people of more refined and discriminating taste, anyone of a higher nature, seems completely "uninteresting" to the average person [...] "disinterested" action is a very interesting and interested action."

*Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. and ed. M. Faber, UK: Oxford University Press 1998, p. 112.

## 3. 1 Samuel 18:1; 2 Samuel 1:26

...וְנָפֶשׁ יְהוֹנָתָן נִקְשְׂרָה בְּנֶפֶשׁ דָּוִד (וַיֵּאָהֲבוּ) [וַיֵּאָהֲבֵהוּ] יְהוֹנָתָן כְּנֶפֶשׁוֹ:

... Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself.

צָר־לִי עָלֶיךָ אַחִי יְהוֹנָתָן וְנִעַמְתָּ לִי מְאֹד נִפְלְאַתָּה אֲהַבְתָּךְ לִי מֵאֲהַבַת נָשִׁים

I grieve for you/ My brother Jonathan/ You were most dear to me.  
Your love was wonderful to me/ More than the love of women.

## 4. 2 Samuel 13:1-2, 14-15

...אֲחֵרִיכֶן וּלְאַבְשָׁלוֹם בְּרִדְנָה אֲחוֹת יָגָה וּשְׂמֵהָ תָמָר וַיֵּאָהֲבָה אֲמִנוֹן בְּרִדְנָה: וַיִּצָּר לְאֲמִנוֹן לְהִתְחַלּוֹת בְּעֵבֹר תָּמָר אָחִיתוֹ

... Absalom son of David had a beautiful sister named Tamar, and Amnon son of David became infatuated with her. Amnon was so distraught because of his [half-]sister Tamar that he became sick...

...וַיַּחֲזֶק מִמֶּנָּה וַיַּעֲנֶהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ: וַיִּשְׁנֶאֱתָה אֲמִנוֹן שִׂנְאָה גְדוֹלָה מְאֹד

...[H]e overpowered her and lay with her by force. Then Amnon felt a very great loathing for her...

# *Eros and Desire in Modern Hebrew Literature*

Dr. Tafat Hacoheh-Bick

## 1. Nathan Bistritzky-Agmon, *Visions* (Hebrew)

“Nathan of Gaza: (In a rage) The people have reached a degree of heat that can't be imagined... Knesset of Israel, the time of love has come... the entire world spreads a wedding canopy above it... and where is the beloved? Where is the Redeemer of Israel? We have no time, no time!... Each soul cries for Redemption, like a suckling infant cries for its mother's milk, just so... Jews are leaving their land, abandoning their home and possessions, throwing it all away behind their backs, for here, the End of Wonders has arrived... the End of Wonders has arrived...”

*Nathan Bistritzky-Agmon, Visions, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: HaDfus HaHadash, 1960), 503*

## 2. Numbers 25:14-15

(יד) וְשֵׁם אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמָּכָה אֲשֶׁר הִכָּה אֶת־הַמְדִּינִית זִמְרִי בֶן־סָלוּא נְשִׂיא בֵּית־אָב לְשִׁמְעוֹנִי: (טו) וְשֵׁם הָאִשָּׁה הַמָּכָה הַמְדִּינִית קֹזְבִי בַת־צֹר רֵאשׁ אֲמוֹת בֵּית־אָב בְּמִדְיָן הוּא:

(14) The name of the Israelite man who was killed, the one who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, chieftain of a Simeonite ancestral house. (15) The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi daughter of Zur; he was the tribal head of an ancestral house in Midian.

## 3. Micha Josef Berdichevsky, "From a Place of Thunder"

“הרבה נשים יפיפיות היו בעולם, אבל כמו זו הניצבת פה לא ראו עוד יושבי לוטון מימיהם. בבני-שחץ לא אדבר. אבל גם יראי-העדה הסכמו בלבם, כי כמראָה היה גם מראה כזבי בת-צור, אשר זנה אחריה נשיא בית-אב לשמעוני.”

“There are many beautiful women in the world, but the inhabitants of Loton had never in their lives seen anyone like the woman standing before them. I shall not talk about the irreligious ones, but even the God-fearing people in the congregation inwardly agreed that the beauty of this woman must be similar to that of Cozbi, the daughter of Tzur, who caused a prince of the chief clan of the Simeonites to go a-whoring after her.”

“לפתע חרד העולם. שני הרים ניתקו ממקומם ונפגשו ונתאחו יחד. צועק החי בבטן האדמה קול ענות וקול רעם ותהום אל תהום קורא. נהפכו סדרי בראשית, ברקי הלילה אצים ודולגים, כימה וכסיל החליפו את מקומם.”

“Suddenly the world trembled, two mountains were torn up from their roots, met and fused together. Life cried out in the womb of the earth, a sound of passion and thunder. Deep called to deep, the order of creation was overturned. Night flashes of lightning danced and zigzagged; Pleiades and Orion whirled in mad confusion of orbits.”

*Micha Josef Berdichevsky, "From a Place of Thunder," in Miriam and Other Stories (London: Toby Press, 2004), 115-202.) p. 142 and p. 161.*



4. Lea Goldberg/ "Will there yet come days?"

האמנם \ לאה גולדברג

Will there yet come days in forgiveness and grace,  
When you walk in the field as the innocent wayfarer walks,  
And the soles of your feet the clover leaves caress,  
Though stubble will sting you, sweet will be their stalks.

האמנם עוד יבואו ימים בסליחה  
ובחוסד,  
ותלכי בשדה, ותלכי בו פהלך התם,  
ומחשוף כף רגלך ילטף בעלי האספסת,  
או שלפי שבלים ידקרוך ותמתק  
דקירתם.

Or rain will overtake you its thronging drops tapping  
On your shoulder, your chest, your throat, your gentle head  
bowed.  
And you walk in the wet field, the quiet in you expanding  
Like light in the hem of a cloud.

או מטר ישיגך בעדת טפותיו הדופקות  
על כתפך חוז צוארך וראשך רענן.  
ותלכי בשדה הרטב וירחב בך השקט  
כאור בשולי הענן.

And you will breathe the odor of furrow, breathing and quiet,  
And you will see mirrored in the gold puddle the sun above,  
And things will be simple and alive; and it is permitted to  
touch them,  
It is permitted, it is permitted to love.

ונשמת את ריחו של התלם נשום ורגוע,  
וראית את השמש בראי השלולית הזהב,  
ופשוטים הדברים וחיים ומתן בם  
לנגע,  
ומתן ומתן לאהב.

Slowly you will walk in the field. Alone. Unscorched by flame  
Of conflagrations on roads that bristled with horror and  
blood.  
True to your heart, you will again be humble and bending  
Like one of the grasses, like one of man.

את תלכי בשדה. לבדך. לא נצרכת בלהט  
השרפות בדרכים שסמרו מאימה ומדם.  
ובישר-לבב שוב תהיי ענוה ונכנעת  
כאחד הדשאים כאחד האדם.

*Mintz, Ruth Finer, Modern Hebrew Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.  
(translation modified)*

## Panelist Bios:



**Dr. Fannie Bialek** is an Assistant Professor of Religion and Politics at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis. Her work focuses on contemporary religious and philosophical approaches to interpersonal relationships marked by love, justice, and care, or their absence. Dr. Bialek's forthcoming book, *Love in Time*, argues for a consideration of love as a relationship of uncertainty instructive for vulnerabilities in interpersonal relationships and political life. Her next book project focuses on Abraham Joshua Heschel and radical democratic politics.



**Rabbi Dr. Shai Held** is President and Dean of the Hadar Institute, which he co-founded in 2006. A philosopher and a theologian, Rabbi Held is the author of *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (2013) and *The Heart of Torah* (2017). His forthcoming book, *Judaism is About Love*, will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 2024. Rabbi Held is a recipient of the prestigious Covenant Award for Excellence in Jewish Education, and has been named by Newsweek as one of the fifty most influential rabbis in America and by the Jewish Daily Forward as one of the fifty most prominent Jews in the world.



**Dr. Nadav Shifman Berman** recently completed a Kreitman postdoctoral fellowship at the Goldstein-Goren Department of Jewish Thought, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Prior to that, Dr. Berman was a postdoctoral associate at Yale University's Jewish Studies Program, and a lecturer at JTS. Dr. Berman is currently a research fellow at the Faculty of Law, University of Haifa, where he co-leads (with Prof. Tal Zarsky) a research project on the concept of code between Jewish Thought, Law, and Technology. His scholarship focuses on pragmatism and agapic love in Jewish Thought.



**Dr. Tafat Hacoheh-Bick** is a scholar of modern Hebrew literature, specializing in the fields of secularism, theology and poetics. She completed her PhD at the department of Hebrew literature at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev with a dissertation on the poetry of Pinchas Sadeh, Yona Wallach, and Zelda Schneerson (2020). In 2022-2023, Dr. Hacoheh-Bick was a fellow at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She is currently a Visiting scholar at New York University and CUNY Graduate Center.

**Dr. Shira Billet (moderator)** is Assistant Professor of Jewish Thought and Ethics at JTS. Prior to joining the faculty at JTS, she was a postdoctoral associate in Judaic Studies and Philosophy at Yale University. Her 2019 dissertation from Princeton University focused on the German Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen. She's currently completing a book manuscript on the virtues of courage, truthfulness, humility, and loyalty as public virtues in Cohen's philosophical and Jewish thought.