

Love in Judaism

Stanton St. Beit Midrash, February 2011

When Jewish sources discuss "אהבה" or "love" it's usually in reference to God such as the beginning of the Shema when we are told "to love God with all of our heart and soul" (Devarim 6:5). But what does Torah have to say about loving other people, and what would that say about romantic relationships?

The first time the root "אהב" is found in the Torah appears in a less than romantic passage:

<p>Bereishit 22:1-2 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, <u>whom you love</u>—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."</p>	<p>בראשית פרק כב (א) וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי : (ב) וַיֹּאמֶר קַח נָא אֶת בְּנֶךְ אֶת יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֶּתָ אֶת יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ לְךָ אֶל אֶרֶץ מֹרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ :</p>
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Aside from the obvious context of being commanded to sacrifice one's son what is unusual about this usage of love, especially being the first time it's ever mentioned?

The first time we find the root "אהב" referring to what we might call "romantic" love, though perhaps it is unusual in its own right:

<p>Bereishit 24:67 Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. <u>So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.</u></p>	<p>בראשית פרק כד סז וַיָּבֵאָהּ יִצְחָק הָאֵלֶּלֶה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת רֵבֶקָה וַתְּהִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּאָהֲבָהּ וַיִּנְחַם יִצְחָק אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ :</p>
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The first instance of more romantic love seems a little more appropriate:

<p>Bereishit 29:18 <u>Jacob was in love with Rachel</u> and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel.</p>	<p>בראשית פרק כט (יח) וַיֵּאָהֵב יַעֲקֹב אֶת רָחֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֶעֱבֹדְךָ שִׁבְעַ שָׁנִים בְּרָחֵל בְּתוּךָ הַקְּטָנָה :</p>
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Now consider the physicality of their relationship:

<p>Bereishit 29:11 Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud.</p> <p>Bereishit 29:25 When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?"</p>	<p>בראשית פרק כט (יא) וַיִּשָׁק יַעֲקֹב לְרַחֵל וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת קִלּוֹ וַיִּבְכֶּה : (כה) וַיְהִי בַבֹּקֶר וַהֲנִיחָהּ הוּא לְאֵהָ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל לְבָן מַה זֹאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי הֲלֹא בְרַחֵל עֲבַדְתִּי עֶמְלָךְ וְלָמָּה רָמִיתָנִי :</p>
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Not long after, we find a use of "אהב" antithetical to what we ought to expect:

<p>Bereishit 34:1-4 Now Dinah, the daughter Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, the ruler of that area, saw her, he took her and raped her. His heart was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; <u>he loved the young woman</u> and spoke tenderly to her. And Shechem said to his father Hamor, "Get me this girl as my wife."</p>	<p>בראשית פרק לד (א) וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה בַת לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרֵאוֹת בְּבָנוֹת הָאָרֶץ : (ב) וַיִּרְא אֶתֶּה שֹׁכֵם בֶּן חַמּוֹר הַחִוִּי נָשִׂיא הָאָרֶץ וַיִּקַּח אֶתֶּה וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּה וַיַּעֲנֶה : (ג) וַתִּדְבַק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בַת יַעֲקֹב וַיֶּאֱהַב אֶת הַנַּעֲרָ וַיְדַבֵּר עַל לֵב הַנַּעֲרָ : (ד) וַיֹּאמֶר שֹׁכֵם אֶל חַמּוֹר אָבִיו לֵאמֹר קַח לִי אֶת הַיְלָדָה הַזֹּאת לְאִשָּׁה :</p>
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Back to Yaakov, it's clear that "love" can be quantifiable:

<p>Bereishit 29:30 Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.</p>	<p>בראשית פרק כט (ל) וַיִּבְּאֵ אִם אֶל רַחֵל וַיֶּאֱהַב גַּם אֶת רַחֵל מֵלֵאָה וַיַּעֲבֹד עִמּוֹ עוֹד שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים אַחֲרוֹת :</p>
<p>Bereishit 37:3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate[a] robe for him.</p>	<p>בראשית פרק לו (ג) וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהַב אֶת יוֹסֵף מִכָּל בְּנָיו כִּי בּוֹ זָקְנִים הוּא לוֹ וַעֲשָׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים :</p>

So Yaakov was the first person to actively feel romantic love, but he also loves one more than the other. How does this affect our view of "Love" in his eyes?

As we can see in the Rabbinic era, not all uses "אהב" are pure:

<p>M. Avot 2:3 Be careful in your relations with the government; for they draw no man close to themselves except for their own interests. They appear as <u>friends</u> when it is to their advantage, but they do not stand by a man in his time of stress.</p>	<p>משנה מסכת אבות פרק ב משנה ג הוּ זְהִירִין בְּרִשׁוֹת שְׂאִין מִקְרִבִין לוֹ לְאָדָם אֲלֵא לְצוּרֵךְ עֲצֻמֵן נִרְאִין כְּאַוְהֵבִין בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּאֻתָן וְאִין עוֹמְדִין לוֹ לְאָדָם בְּשַׁעַת דְּחֻקוֹ :</p>
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But the sages also provide the idyllic relationship:

<p>M. Avot 5:16 Whenever love depends upon something and it passes, then the love passes away too. But if love does not depend upon some ulterior interest then the love will never pass away. What is an example of the love which depended upon some material advantage? That of Amnon for Tamar. And what is an example of the love which did not depend upon some ulterior interest? That of David and Jonathan.</p>	<p>משנה מסכת אבות פרק ה שנה טז כֹּל אֲהָבָה שֶׁהִיא תְלוּיָה בְּדָבָר בְּטֵל דְּבָר בְּטֵלָה אֲהָבָה וְשֵׂאִינָה תְלוּיָה בְּדָבָר אֵינָה בְּטֵלָה לְעוֹלָם אִיזוֹ הִיא אֲהָבָה הַתְלוּיָה בְּדָבָר זֶה אֲהָבַת אֲמֹנֹן וְתָמָר וְשֵׂאִינָה תְלוּיָה בְּדָבָר זֶה אֲהָבַת דָּוִד וַיהוֹנָתָן :</p>
<p>I Sam 16:21 David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armor-bearers.</p>	<p>שמואל א פרק טז (כא) וַיָּבֵא דָּוִד אֶל שָׁאוּל וַיַּעֲמֵד לְפָנָיו וַיִּאָּהֲבֵהוּ מְאֹד וַיְהִי לוֹ נָשָׂא כְּלָיִם :</p>
<p>I Sam 18:1-3 After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself.</p> <p>I Sam 20:16-17 So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, "May the LORD call David's enemies to account." And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself.</p>	<p>שמואל א פרק יח (א) וַיְהִי כְּכֹלְתּוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֶל שָׁאוּל וְנִפְּשׁ יְהוֹנָתָן נִקְשְׁרָה בְּנֶפֶשׁ דָּוִד וַיֵּאָהֲבוּ וַיִּאָּהֲבֵהוּ יְהוֹנָתָן כְּנַפְשׁוֹ : (ב) וַיִּקְחֵהוּ שָׁאוּל בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וְלֹא נָתַנוּ לְשׁוּב בַּיִת אָבִיו : (ג) וַיִּכְרֹת יְהוֹנָתָן וְדָוִד בְּרִית בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֹתוֹ כְּנַפְשׁוֹ</p> <p>שמואל א פרק כ (טז) וַיִּכְרֹת יְהוֹנָתָן עִם דָּוִד וַיִּבְקֶשׁ יְקֹנֵךְ מִיַּד אֲבִי דָּוִד : (יז) וַיִּוְסַף יְהוֹנָתָן לְהַשְׁבִּיעַ אֶת דָּוִד בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֹתוֹ כִּי אֲהָבַת נַפְשׁוֹ אֲהָבָה :</p>

Now compare David's love for Yonatan with his other relationships:

<p>I Sam 18:18-21 But David said to Saul, “Who am I, and what is my family or my clan in Israel, that I should become the king’s son-in-law?” So[b] when the time came for Merab, Saul’s daughter, to be given to David, she was given in marriage to Adriel of Meholah. Now Saul’s daughter Michal was in love with David, and when they told Saul about it, he was pleased. “I will give her to him,” he thought, “so that she may be a snare to him and so that the hand of the Philistines may be against him.” So Saul said to David, “Now you have a second opportunity to become my son-in-law.”</p>	<p>שמואל א פרק יח (יח) וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל שָׂאוּל מִי אֲנֹכִי וּמִי חַיֵּי מְשֻׁפְּחֹת אָבִי בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי אֶהְיֶה חֲתָן לְמֶלֶךְ : (יט) וַיְהִי בַעֲת תֵּת אֶת מֶרֶב בַּת שָׂאוּל לְדָוִד וְהִיא נִתְּנָה לְעַדְרִיאֵל הַמְּחֹלַתִּי לְאִשָּׁה : (כ) וַתֵּאָהֵב מִיכָל בַּת שָׂאוּל אֶת דָּוִד וַיִּגְדּוּ לְשָׂאוּל וַיִּשֶׁר הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינָיו : (כא) וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂאוּל אֶתְּנֶנָּה לוֹ וַתְּהִי לוֹ לְמוֹקֵשׁ וַתְּהִי בּוֹ זֶד פְּלִשְׁתִּים וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂאוּל אֶל דָּוִד בְּשִׂתִּים תִּתְּחַתֶּן בִּי הַיּוֹם :</p>
<p>II Sam 11:2-4 One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, “She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness.) Then she went back home.</p>	<p>שמואל ב פרק יא (ב) וַיְהִי לַעֲת הָעֶרֶב וַיִּקָּם דָּוִד מֵעַל מִשְׁכְּבוֹ וַיִּתְהַלֵּךְ עַל גַּג בַּיִת הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּרְא אִשָּׁה רֹחֶצֶת מֵעַל הַגָּג וְהָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת מְרָאָה מְאֹד : (ג) וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד וַיִּדְרֹשׁ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלוֹא זֹאת בַּת שֻׁבַע בַּת אֱלִיעָם אִשְׁתׁ אֹרִיָּה הַחִתִּי : (ד) וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד מַלְאָכִים וַיִּקְחֶהָ וַתְּבוֹא אֵלָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּהּ וְהִיא מְתַקְדָּשֶׁת מִטְּמֵאָתָהּ וַתֵּשֶׁב אֶל בֵּיתָהּ :</p>

Two more sources to consider:

<p>B. Sanhedrin 7a Another used to say: When love was strong, we could have made our bed on a sword-blade; now that our love has grown weak, a bed of sixty [cubits] is not large enough for us</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף ז עמוד א ההוא דהוה קאמר ואזיל: כי רחימתין הוה עזיזא - אפותיא דספסירא שכיבון, השתא דלא עזיזא רחימתין - פוריא בר שיתין גרמידי לא סגי לן.</p>
<p>Mishlei 10:12 Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs.</p>	<p>משלי פרק י (יב) שִׁנְאָה תַעֲרֹרר מְדִינִים וְעַל כָּל פְּשָׁעִים תִּכְסֶּה אַהֲבָה :</p>