Hebrew Matters:
110 Hebrew Roots
The Roads They Take
The Stories They Tell

Joseph Lowin

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Remembering Judy

חֲפֹשׂ בִּי— אוֹצָר נִמְצָא בַּפְּנִים
Search me—a treasure is hidden inside.

What Professionals Have to Say About the Trilogy

Joseph Lowin's *HebrewSpeak* is essential for anyone wishing to learn the depth and beauty of this ancient tongue that has remained alive and amazingly modern….This brilliant and captivating study of Hebrew roots, reads like a series of tales that will enrich the knowledge of students and teachers alike.

–Elie Wiesel
Nobel Laureate

Dr. Joseph Lowin's *HebrewSpeak* charges us with the magnetism of the Hebrew tongue, turning it like a teacherly kaleidoscope to show us its manifold facets: now wise, humorous, charming; now absorbing, enticing, joyful; and always succinct and surprising. The magical three-letter root, in Dr, Lowin's hands, transforms learning into delight (and vice versa) and pleasure into revelation.

–Cynthia Ozick
Author of *The Puttermesser Papers*

In a very friendly, unconventional, humorous way, *HebrewTalk* conveys to the English-speaking student the beauty of the Hebrew language, demonstrating its etymological sources, its poetic and proverbial facets, its biblical and post-biblical connotations, and its colloquial usages in contemporary spoken Hebrew in Israel. It unites "the pleasant with the useful" for the benefit of all those who wish to learn this old-new language.

–Aharon Megged
Israel Prize Winner,
Member, Israel Hebrew Language Academy

I enjoy … not only the information, but the wit, humor and good sense….From your columns emerges, subtly but powerfully, and without any preachment, the notion that Hebrew is quite the indispensable vehicle for knowing the amalgam of history, religion, culture, experience and wisdom that comprise Judaism.

–Howard Marblestone
Professor of Classical Languages, Lafayette College

Nobody knows the Hebrew language the way Joseph Lowin does. Whether tracing the ethical root of an everyday phrase like "after you," or uncovering the deep-seated connections between Hebrew, Aramaic, and even English, Lowin is a master of Hebrew words, phrases and ideas. To read this book is to journey into history, literature, philosophy and politics. And besides all that, it is wonderful fun, whether you are fluent in Hebrew or just a beginner. So read, learn and talk the talk that Lowin makes so accessible.

–Francine Klagsburn
Author of *Lioness: Golda Meir and the Nation of Israel*

Hebrew language is holy, its very letters sacred. In Joseph Lowin's hands, we see that it is also exuberant, full of rich treasures, fresh as well as ancient, funny as well as profound This is a book for scholars of *leshon ha-kodesh,* for amateur linguists and for ordinary folk who simply like a good read.

–Blu Greenberg
Author of *On Women and Judaism*

What General Readers Have to Say About the Trilogy

This modest-sized book is a treasure trove of insights into the Hebrew language and its unique characteristic of deeper meanings to be found within words. Each page starts with a word and definition; the author then takes you through a fascinating journey of the word's derivation, what it has come to mean, and what Jewish values and teachings it has prompted. I love this book!

It's not a "study book" that is meant to teach Hebrew, but one that meanders through a select list of roots and gives the reader perspective on where the root originated from, how it was used through the ages and how it is used in Modern Hebrew. The author's vast knowledge and research is evident, and the book as a whole is a tribute to the deep history of Hebrew and its amazing evolution to Modern Hebrew. Each root gets about 2 pages of commentary, so it's an easy read and one that doesn't need to be done sequentially. Recommended for anyone who can read Hebrew and has a fundamental comprehension of how words are formed and sentences constructed. It's a fun book for Grammar Geeks and History Buffs alike.

This is a wonderful book to expand your Hebrew knowledge. The stories that go along with each root tell so much about the Jewish value system. Thank you for sharing this wonderful information.

If you are new to learning Hebrew, this book will surely wind up in your book collection. This book brings Hebrew words to life through etymology.

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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' אֱלוֹקֶיךָ (*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 because וְיִשְׂרָאֵל 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 נִתְעַלְסָה 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 חוֹלַת אַהֲבָה (*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 הַבְּרִיּוֹת (*ahavat ha-beriyot*), love of humankind, does come naturally. To others, learning the Hebrew word for love is sufficient.