A romance based on a rather implausible coincidence, the novel is the story of a jilted woman, Shlomtzion Dror, who sees her subsequent existence as forever on the rebound. When her beloved daughter, Maya announces that she is engaged to marry Ariel Berman, son of the narrator’s long lost love, a fact of which Maya is unaware, Shlomtzion knows that she will have to confront her past and reveal it to her daughter. Reminiscences addressed in free association style to her daughter and Ariel’s father, Yair Berman, now the well-known rabbi of Tirza a town (“settlement”) in the West Bank, make her ruminations about her life, past and present, an intense personal drama.

As Shlomtzion, now a successful interior designer in Tel Aviv, stunned by her daughter’s news since it exposes her to her own painful memories, reviews the events of her life, we learn about her family’s unhappy history of loveless marriages, her own relationships with family members and the many friends and teachers who played significant roles in her childhood and adolescence. We get a large dose of Israeli politics along with details of intense spiritual quests that often seem like high-minded teen-age angst.

Shlomtzion is the daughter of Avrum Dror, once a religious yeshiva student, now a secular Bible scholar whose womanizing is tolerated by her submissive mother. Determined that this would not be her fate, Shlomtzion at age nine and a half latches onto Yair, two years older than she, and they grow together as friends, soul-mates (in her mind) before ever thinking of marriage. The break-up foretold, the narrative unfolds in premonitory scenes, with Shlomtzion recalling her high-school years in New York City, her later fascination with Rabbanit Hava Schor’s classes on the Maharal of Prague’s Eternal of Israel, and her times with Yair. During the halcyon days after the Six-Day War, she imagines her future life with Yair when they would devote themselves to their goals of improving the world. Her candid revelations tell of her determination to change her family’s pattern by making Yair the hero with whom she will share a happy fulfilled life.

There are a few clues that Yair doesn’t always accede to Shlomtzion’s enthusiasms, once even attributing her longings to her family’s “dysfunctionality.” Yair tries to raise her spirits by reading to her from “Thirst for the Living God” a chapter in Lights by Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook: “When the soul yearns for the clearer light, the world becomes reviled in its eyes.” Shlomtzion takes exception to Yair’s impassioned defense of the influence a Rosh Yeshiva on his community since everyone seeks his advice before making important decisions: “I had a hard time accepting this kind of mass self-effacement, as well as the idea that people needed the rabbi’s approval for everything and were not allowed to exercise their own judgment. Yair, of course, said that I needed to
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work on myself, and that anyone who lacks faith in the rabbis must also lack faith in God.” Her feminism is further expanded later in a discussion with Lealeh, her unquestioning Orthodox friend who defends the traditional position that “the entire edifice stands on the foundation of the rabbis” and Shlomtzion responds, “It’s just wrong to oppress half of humanity … to think that women were meant to choke off their abilities…” (p.77)

The inevitable break-up occurs when Yair completes his army service and proposes to Shlomtzion, he wants to receive his Rosh Yeshiva’s blessing before announcing the engagement. The couple is devastated by the refusal to bless the union, and Shlomtzion is further destroyed when it becomes clear that Yair will not marry her because of it. In her confusion she seeks out Rabbanit Schor, who, in the midst of her Shabbat preparations, is less than compassionate when she “recite[s] in even and relaxed tones, the dictum that ‘A man should always seek to marry the daughter of a Torah scholar.”

The novel is divided into “before and after” rejection, and the tale then takes on the rapid change in Shlomtzion who flees Jerusalem into the arms of Rosy, one of Yair’s army buddies, marries him after becoming pregnant, leaves him because she doesn’t love him and will not live in a loveless marriage (he adores her) and ends up becoming a secular independent professional - in Tel Aviv, of course. As the reader already knows, her own daughter rejects the secular life style, and as a Ba’alat Tshuva, is thrust into the world that her mother has discarded.

References to halachic issues relating to women are sprinkled throughout the story: the grandmother who lost her true love when her husband was forced to divorce her after ten years because she failed to get pregnant; (Obviously, she was not infertile because she conceived with her second husband.) Shlomtzion and Yair are not supposed to spend time alone with each other because of the laws of modesty. When Yair has leave during his army service they spend all their time together, but “it never crossed my rarefied mind to violate any of the prohibitions written in the codes of Jewish law, so I never tried to get Yair to touch me, God forbid, even a little – even though every bone in my body ached for his (p. 41). Later, when Shlomtzion reports – disapprovingly – that when her friend Edna has an adulterous affair, the Rabbis award custody of her children to her husband. Another childhood friend, Estherke, living a rather impoverished haredi life with five children, is deserted by her husband who renounces the Orthodox way of life and refuses, for an extended period, to give her a writ of divorce, the get. The implication is that he intentionally wanted to make her an Agunah. In a newspaper article the husband Yehoshuah Grazenstein, now Shuki Granit, is quoted as saying he wanted to start an organization to help young people who are “breaking the bonds of religion.” Like Shlomtzion’s long-suffering mother, Estherke does not blame her husband for his conduct, but rather seems to admire his courage for having freed himself from their restrictive environment.

Somewhat reminiscent of A.B. Yehoshua’s A Late Divorce, this story parallels Israel’s social and political history with its beginnings in Zionist ideology, continuing through the highs and lows of the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War and concluding with the
ongoing debates and disputes between the Israeli secular political Left and religious political Right regarding the West Bank “settlements,” the Oslo Peace agreements and the deep rifts in Israeli society because of them. The novel concludes during the emotionally charged Rabin period with symbolic rapprochement hoped for in the union between the newly engaged Maya, daughter of the secular Leftist and the family of Ariel Berman, living in Tirza, in the Shomron, the West Bank.

Because there are so many references to religious and sacred texts, (the title is a quotation from *Shir HaShirim*) and so many untranslated words, the translator provides a Glossary at the end. This may be distracting to readers who must refer to the glossary and, even then, may not recognize the relevance of the *Sefat Emet* or the Maharal of Prague to the story. Emuna Elon, is a well-known public figure in Israel, not only as a writer on politics, religion and feminist issues, but as the wife of Benny Elon, presently a member of parliament from the Halchud HaLeumi, The National Union Party. (He is a former Rosh Yeshiva.) *If you Awaken Love* was criticized by the Orthodox politically right as being too sympathetic to secularists and by the secularists as propaganda for the Settler/Orthodox position. This book may be read as a not-so-hidden plea for understanding between the two extreme positions as well as a story of love interrupted.

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