"Shir ha-Shirim, Shabbat, and love"

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Each of the five Megillot are prescribed for reading in the synagogue on special occasions: *Shir ha-Shirim* (Song of Songs) on Pesach; *Ruth* on Shavuot; *Eichah* (Lamentations) on the Fast of Tisha B'Av; *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) on Succot; and *Esther* on Purim.

They were prescribed because of their association – some more direct than others – with those special occasions. Esther is the most direct association, given that the very festival of Purim is referred to in the Megillah that bears her name (Est. 9:20-23; 31), as well as on account of its reference to the *pur*, or 'lot,' drawn by Haman to determine the most auspicious day for his campaign to destroy the Jews of Persia (v.26). The book of Ruth is similarly seasonal, given that it is set in the Shavuot period of the harvest. *Eichah* is a natural choice for 'lamenting' the destruction of the Temple; but Kohelet, with its philosophical discourse on life and on the pursuit of true and lasting happiness, has a more tenuous association with Succot. Its link lies possibly in the frailty of the succah, and its status as a temporary abode, serving as a symbol for the superficiality of life, as underscored by Kohelet's pessimistic cry *havel havalim* ('vanity of vanities'), to describe the tenuousness of life and man's vain pursuits as he lives it out.

But the connection between *Shir ha-Shirim* and Pesach seems, at first glance, the most indirect of them all, given that there is not so much as an allusion to the festival anywhere in the text. Rabbinic tradition sought, nevertheless, to provide a connection, namely that, 'the book speaks of the love between the community of Israel and its Father in heaven, which was initiated at the Exodus from Egypt' (*Aruch ha-Shulchan* 490 (5). This is based on the verse, *'I accounted to your favour the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride – how you followed*

Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown' (Jer. 2:2). Israel's Exodus from Egypt is perceived here as a demonstration of unconditional love, wherein she was prepared to put her total trust in her lover (God) to the extent of eloping with Him into the unknown on a journey through an inhospitable land.

Another explanation is offered by R. Moses Isserles (See *Remah* on *Shul. Ar. Or. Ch*. 490:9) who highlights the book's seasonable appropriateness, given that Pesach heralds the arrival of Spring and there are several references in the book to that season as a metaphor for rebirth, regeneration, fauna and flora, joy, and hope. Love is a prerequisite for birth and (re)generation, and poets wax lyrical about Spring prompting birds to sing and bees to buzz, and everything implied in the idiom of 'the birds and the bees!' And *Shir ha-Shirim* is acknowledged as matchless in its descriptions of love.

Some commentators point to the first chapter of that book, wherein the lovers praise one another's beauty, with King Solomon employing the simile of 'a steed in Pharaoh's chariots' (1:9), reminiscent of the object of his love's dark and beautiful complexion (v.5) and perhaps also both her physical and emotional strength. If such a comparison seems strange to the western mind, 'it is nevertheless frequent in Arabic poetry' (S. M. Lehrman, *The Five Megilloth*, Soncino Press, p.3). The fact that Pharaoh's chariots were all drowned on the seventh day of Pesach (See Tal. *Meg*. 31a) is posited as the (unconvincing) reason for reading the book on that day of the festival when there is no intermediate Shabbat.

Although early rabbinic tradition spiritualised *Shir ha-Shirim*, some of the later Talmudic sages remained diffident when it came to according it a place in the biblical canon (See Mish.*Yad.* 3:5); and it was only when Rabbi Akivah – himself a romantic – declared that 'If all the canonical books are holy, *Shir ha-Shirim* is the holy of holies,' that its inclusion was

secured. But this does not solve the problems of its erotic imagery and its apparent absence of spiritual content, to the extent that the name of God may not appear at all in the book.

Ambiguity on the latter point is occasioned by the fact that the precise meaning of the word that is held up by traditionalists to support its occurrence – *shalhevet***yah** (8:6) – is uncertain, as it occurs only once in the entire *TaNaCh*, and, notwithstanding its final syllable, is widely understood by grammarians to connote exclusively the superlative sense of 'a *mighty* flame,' (parallel to *merchavyah* ('*great* relief': Ps. 118:5) and *ma'apilyah* ('*deep* gloom': Jer. 2:31), rather than representing an abbreviated form of God's name.

We cannot ignore, therefore, the niggling question whether those early sages, who 'spiritualised' *Shir ha-Shirim* as symbolic of the reciprocal love of God and Israel, actually believed that King Solomon – the book's putative author (reigned *circa* 968–928 BCE.) – wrote it in the very first instance entirely from that spiritual perspective or whether such an approach was a much later pious re-interpretation of it on the part of Talmudic sages (1st-2nd cent. CE) of a heightened mystical bent.

This is difficult to answer given that King Solomon's piety is also enigmatic. On the one hand, he invested all his energies into creating a glorious Temple to honour the name of God and to generate spirituality throughout the nation, yet, on the other, he is said to have had a harem that numbered seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines 'of the nations of which the Lord had said to the Israelites, "None of you shall join them and none of them shall join you, lest they turn your heart away to follow their gods"' (1 Kgs 11:2-3). So, how do we determine which of those mutually exclusive tendencies was uppermost in his mind when he wrote the erotic lyrics of his book?

Rabbi Akivah – who certainly read it from his mystical perspective as a God-Israel spiritual romance – loved the book so much and hailed it in such superlative terms. We may assume, therefore, that he viewed its genesis as having been spiritual to the core.

But we cannot avoid wondering whether that meant that its literal dimension was totally suppressed or was there a feint blueprint of physical romance at the back of Solomon's mind which only later morphed into a spiritual allegory as the words and holy thoughts poured forth from his pen. If the latter, was he imagining, in that romantic haze, the beauty and majesty of the human form and the delights of love and the pleasures of the man-woman relationship – in which he himself had unashamedly indulged – or was he operating in an exclusively transcendent mode of spiritual contemplation?

Whichever view one takes, it is difficult to ignore the overriding principle of biblical interpretation – *ein mikra yotzei middei p'shuto* – that 'a verse can never lose its plain-sense meaning.' It is also a fact that neither the *TaNaCh* itself nor the Talmudic sages in their interpretations of it were prudish, as evinced, for example, from the stories of Er and Onan (Gen. 38:6-10; See Tal. *Yev* 34b and Rashi on v.7), as well as the call to Hoshea to marry a harlot, and Ezekiel's erotic descriptions (See 16:6-8).

We may nevertheless wonder what motivated Rabbi Akivah's determination to include such a controversial book in the biblical canon, and to employ such hyperbole as 'holy of holies' to describe it! I take the view that we have here an example of polemic, namely a typical Talmudic overreaction to what its sages perceived as a heretical view.

Judaism's concept of married life is that of building a deep relationship and of celebrating the love of a couple in all its manifestations. Hence the truly remarkable biblical law that an Israelite soldier is not to be conscripted into the army for the entirety of the first year of his

marriage, in order – *v'simach et ishto* – 'that he may bring joy to his wife' (Deut. 24:5). The physical pleasure and spiritual nourishment of the couple, as they create their new home and relationship, was perceived as taking priority even over national and security concerns. In this, Judaism was implacably opposed to the Pauline doctrine being preached by the Christians of Akivah's day to the effect that marriage was far from an ideal state, but merely a concession to human passion and weakness. Witness Paul's statement:

> It is good for a man to remain unmarried, but since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband…I wish all men were [unmarried] as I am.
>
> Now to the unmarried and the widows, I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.
>
> (Letter to the Corinthians 7:1-2, 8-9)

Rabbi Akivah's idealisation of *Shir ha-Shirim* takes on a greater resonance when viewed as a protest against this early Christian depiction of marriage as merely a concession to human weakness, as well as against the background of the saga of his and his wife Rachel's love and the vicissitudes of the early years of their marriage. Theirs is assuredly the most romantic story in the entire Talmud.

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Though *Shir ha-Shirim* is read in synagogue on the Intermediate Shabbat of Pesach, some communities, especially in Israel, bring forward its recitation to form part of the Ma'ariv service on the eve of the festival with a view to generating an atmosphere of spiritual love of

God as a prelude to the Seder. Many Sephardic communities have the custom of reciting it every Erev Shabbat before the evening service. When we contemplate the special association between *Shir ha-Shirim* and Shabbat we are brought back once again to the motif of love.

While the author of Proverbs praised love's rather narrow benefit– *al kol pesha'im techaseh ahavah* – 'love covers all transgressions' (10:12), both Shabbat and *Shir ha-Shirim* set out to stimulate and symbolise its infinitely more positive influence. Thus, the gift of Shabbat is emphasised in our liturgy as the symbol of God's love, underscored by the recurring motif – in the Shabbat Amidot, Magen Avot, and Kiddush – of *b'ahava uv'ratzon,* 'love and favour.'

Adam and Eve were created on the sixth day of Creation, Erev Shabbat (See Gen. 1:27). The phrase z*achar un'keivah bara* ***otam*** – 'male and female, He created *them*' (Gen. 1:27) connotes the closest and most intimate relationship between the two. This is tantamount to asserting that on the Sabbath eve *God created intimacy*. And, in Jewish tradition, that is one of the objectives of Shabbat, one that is even codified in the *Shulchan Aruch* (*O.H.* 280:1.), to which the *Ateret Zekeinim* commentary adds, 'for which reason a man should demonstrate extra attention and love toward his wife on Friday evening.'

That motif, of Adam and Eve's Shabbat marriage, is mirrored further in the three liturgical *Amidot* for that day. Unlike the weekday Amidot of 19 blessings, on Shabbat we have seven, corresponding to the *Sheva berachot,* the seven blessings recited at weddings. And the formulae of the central Shabbat blessing within each Amidah reflects the successive stages leading up to the union of bride and groom: The Friday eve blessing commences with the phrase *Attah Kidashta* ('You have sanctified'), evocative of the term for marriage: *kiddushin.* The Shabbat blessing in the morning Amidah commences *Yismach Mosheh* ('Moses rejoiced'), evocative of the recurring motif of 'joy' in the *Sheva Berachot* (*Sos tasis* and

m'same'ach chatan v'chalah). And the Shabbat blessing in the afternoon Amidah commences with the words *Attah echad* ('You are One'), symbolising the ultimate union of bride and groom (See Gen. 2:24).

Shir ha-Shirim – descriptive of the maid's yearning and search for her beloved – and Shabbat – through its unique spirituality as a day of prayer, study, friendly social interaction (a practical expression of 'loving one's neighbour': Lev. 19:18) and as a demonstration of love, both of God and of one's partner and family) – may thus be seen to complement each other thematically, offering thereby a rationale as to why the former was prescribed for recitation specifically on the Shabbat day of the festival of Pesach.

The 16th century mystics of Safed made love of, and union with, God their supreme focus. In the words of R. Eliyahu de Vidas (Hebron; 1518-1587), disciple of Isaac Luria, 'The essence of love is surrendering one's soul and body for the sanctification of God' (*Reishit Chokhmah*, NY: Ktav Publishing, 2002, p.136). Hence, Solomon Alkabetz, author of the *Lecha Dodi* poem, created for recitation on the eve of the Shabbat, borrowed the word *dod* ('Beloved One') – a leitmotif of *Shir ha-Shirim* – as the refrain of his glorious poetic tribute to the Shabbat bride – yet another concept derived from our biblical book.

The word *dod* is a palindrome, meaning it can be read both forward and backward. In our context it connotes the reciprocity of true love, both human and divine, an attribute that lies at the very core of both Shabbat and *Shir ha-Shirim.*

Chag same'ach

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