

Spiritual Expressions of Love

SHABBOS CHOL HAMOED PESACH (5757)

EXPLORING THE ESSENCE OF A SPECIAL SONG

It is customary to read *Shir Hashirim* [Song of Songs] on *Shabbos Chol Hamoed Pesach* [Sabbath in the middle of Passover]. If *Shabbos* comes out on the last days of *Yom Tov* [the main holiday], we recite it on that *Shabbos*. The reason to read *Shir Hashirim* during *Pesach* is that *Yetzias Mitzraim* [the Exodus from Egypt] is clearly described in this *Megilla* [book or scroll]. (*Rama and Mishna Brura, Orach Chaim* 490:9)

This being the case, it is appropriate to explore the essence of *Shir Hashirim*.

It is stated in *Yodaim Perek Gimmel* [chapter 3], *Mishna Hey* [5]: Rabbi Akiva says that all the **writings** (“*ksuvim*”) are holy, but *Shir Hashirim* is holy of holies. It seems from here that the other sacred books of *Tanach* [Scripture] don't have the sanctity of *Shir Hashirim*.

However, if we look in the *Yalkut Shimoni*, the remark is a bit different. All the **songs** - poems - (“*shirim*”) are holy, but *Shir Hashirim* is holy of holies. No comparison is being made between the *Megillas Shir Hashirim* and the other actual books of *Tanach*. In fact, the other actual *sefarim* [books] of *Tanach*, such as *Beraishis* [Genesis], *Shmos* [Exodus], *Yehoshua* [Joshua], *Shmuel* [Samuel], etc. might have greater holiness than *Megillas Shir Hashirim*. Rather, there is a distinction between this song and other songs found in *Tanach*. Is there something worthy of notice here?

Rav Boruch Haleivi Epstein, in the *Torah Temima*, comments as follows. It is easier to comprehend the terminology of the *Yalkut Shimoni*, because the very term *Shir Hashirim* - *Song of Songs* - is a contrast between this poem (song) and other poems (songs) found in *Tanach*, rather than a contrast to other whole *sefarim*. But still, what is it about this metaphoric book of spiritual love which sets it apart from all other songs found in *Tanach*, such as Moshe's songs by the Sea and in *Ha'azinu*?

The solution to this becomes clear when we carefully study the text of the entire *Shir Hashirim*. A startling discovery comes our way: in every other song in *Tanach*, one of two things is happening. Either Hashem is praising *Bnai Yisroel* [Children of Israel], or vice-versa. By the splitting of the *Yam Suf* [Reed Sea], for example, the Jews praise G-d for the open miracles. In *Ha'azinu*, G-d expresses the praise of His beloved nation. But in *Shir Hashirim*, BOTH expressions of glorification are found. We praise Hashem, and He also praises us. This explains the terms used by *Chazal* [our Sages] in the *Yalkut Shimoni* mentioned above. The contrast is between this SONG and other SONGS. The other ones are sacred - they possess one level of holiness - one side is praising the other. In contrast, *Shir Hashirim* is *kodesh kadashim* [holy of holies]- it contains compliments going both ways, constituting double *kedusha* [holiness]. This interpretation is found in the *Midrash Rabba* on *Shir Hashirim*, 1:11.

We have thus far gained an appreciation of the unique *kedusha* of this *sefer* [book]. Let us sample its poetry and depiction of the passionate love Hashem has for His devoted nation. The following excerpt is perfect for the latter days of *Pesach*, where we find ourselves now.

The scenario is well known. *Bnai Yisroel* are cornered - Paroh and his army pursue us from behind, the *Yam Suf* is in front, and there is no possibility of turning to the sides, because vicious, wild animals roam the wilderness. *Shir Hashirim Bais, Pasuk Yud Dalid* [2:14] states: “My dove in the crevices of the rock, in the concealment of the terrace... show Me your appearance, let Me hear your voice, because your voice is pleasant, and your appearance is comely.”

What does this all mean? *Rashi* explains each part of the *pasuk*. Paroh pursued us and caught up to us as we camped by the sea. As mentioned before, there was absolutely nowhere to turn. To what were *Bnai Yisroel* comparable at that time? We were like a dove fleeing from a hawk, a bird of prey bearing down on her. The dove entered a crevice, a narrow cave, to take refuge. But alas! A snake occupied this cave. The snake was hissing from inside, and the hawk was threatening from the outside. If she moves further in, the snake is there. But she can't exit the cave either, since the hawk waits menacingly for her. Obviously, the hawk is the Egyptian army, and the snake is the *Yam Suf* and dangerous animals of the *midbar* [wilderness]. Hashem said to *Bnai Yisroel*, “Show Me

your appearance! Let Me see your behavior under stress. To whom do you turn when the going gets rough? Let Me hear your *tefilla* [prayers]. *Daven* [pray] for salvation!”

This incredible metaphor helps us capture the flavor of *Shir Hashirim*. *Pesach* is a time of redemption and salvation. We are desperate for *geulah* [the Redemption]- the advent of the Messianic age - the days of *Moshiach* [Messiah]. At times, we find ourselves caught between the hawk and the snake. Anti-Semitism torments us from without, and the *yaitzer hora* [evil inclination] threatens from within. “It is obvious to You that it is our desire to do Your will. But who prevents us? The yeast in the dough - the *yaitzer hora* that inflates our ego and causes it to rise like *chametz* [leavening] - AND the persecuting nations. May it be Your will that You save us from their hand, and we will return to do the statutes of Your will with a full heart” (*Gemara Brachos 17A*). When we find life challenging and at times frustrating, Hashem is knocking on our door, awaiting our heartfelt prayers for assistance. “Let Me hear your voice, since your voice is pleasant.” Instead of becoming disheartened by life’s trials and difficulties, may we allow these words of *Shir Hashirim*, the holiest of holy songs, to move us to *tefilla* and optimism.

Thus, we have gained a meaningful awareness of the relevance of this sacred *sefer* to the season of redemption. The profound, poetic lessons of *Shir Hashirim* will undoubtedly impress and inspire us to reach lofty heights of spirituality, as we celebrate this *Yom Tov* [holiday] of *Pesach* [Passover] together.

By Rabbi Moshe Heigh

Text © 1997 Rabbi Moshe Heigh. Main title, formatting and definitions © 2011 Jewlight Inc. This Essay may only be printed unaltered in its entirety with copyrights displayed and given out free-of-charge. Linking allowed if your topic is relevant. Posting online is strictly prohibited.