**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

**Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Shiur #01:**

**Centrality in our Tradition, Canonization, and Connection to Sinai**

For some two thousand years, the religious centrality of *Shir Ha-Shirim* has been a central tenet of our faith. Not only is it canonized as one of the five biblical *Megillot*, but more than perhaps any other, it has become traditional to recite *Shir Ha-Shirim* at key junctures. Its public recitation on Pesach is rooted in *Masekhet Sofrim* (14:18) and is codified by Sephardic (Abudarham) and Ashkenazic (*Machazor Vitri* 106; Maharil, *Tefillot shel Pesach* 10; Rama, OC 490:9) authorities alike. Later customs developed to recite *Shir Ha-Shirim* after the Pesach Seder and, in the wake of the mystical revolution in Tzefat, during the late afternoon on *erev Shabbat*. Many classic parts of our liturgy were composed on the model of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, including parts of *Lekha Dodi*, *Yedid Nefesh*, *Shir Ha-Kavod* (*Anim Zemirot*), and *Berach Dodi* (recited in some communities on the seventh night of Pesach).

Yet initially, the very inclusion of *Shir Ha-Shirim* in *Tanakh*, never mind its importance as a liturgical text, was subject to intense interrogation.[[1]](#footnote-1) The book’s explicit, erotic nature led many to think that it was unsuitable for acceptance into the biblical canon. Nowhere is God’s name clearly mentioned in the book.[[2]](#footnote-2) Furthermore, unlike *Megillat Esther*, which similarly omits explicit reference to God’s name, *Shir Ha-Shirim* does not clearly advance the narrative of biblical history.

Although it is less commonly noted, there is another way in which *Shir Ha-Shirim* departs from other books in *Tanakh*. With the exception of some important parallels to *Mishlei* and the story of Balaam, on the whole, *Shir Ha-Shirim* evinces relatively few clear similarities to other books in *Tanakh*. This may be further suggestive of its distinctiveness.

It is against this backdrop that a classic *mishna* in *Yadayim* (3:5; see also Tosefta *Yadayim* 2:14 and Bavli, *Megilla* 7a) teaches:

All the Holy Scriptures defile the hands. *Shir Ha-Shirim* and *Kohelet* defile the hands.

R. Yehuda says: *Shir Ha-Shirim* defiles the hands, but there is a dispute about *Kohelet*.

R. Yose says: *Kohelet* does not defile the hands, but there is a dispute about *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

R. Shimon says: [The ruling about] *Kohelet* is one of the leniencies of Bet Shammai and one of the stringencies of Bet Hillel.

R. Shimon ben Azzai said: I have received a tradition from the seventy-two elders on the day when they appointed R. Elazar ben Azaria head of the academy that *Shir Ha-Shirm* and *Kohelet* defile the hands.

R. Akiva said: Far be it! No man in Israel disputed regarding *Shir Ha-Shirim*, [arguing] that it does not defile the hands. For the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which *Shir Ha-Shirm* was given to Israel! For all the writings are holy, but *Shir Ha-Shirim* is the holy of holies. If they had a dispute, they had a dispute only about *Kohelet*.

R. Yochanan ben Yehoshua the son of the father-in-law of R. Akiva said in accordance with the words of Ben Azzai: So they disputed and so they reached a decision.

While there is much to say about the *mishna*, it is clear that, according to the majority view and the *mishna*’s conclusion (following Ben Azzai), there was a dispute regarding whether or not to include *Shir Ha-Shirim* in the canon. Of course, the view that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is to be excluded from the canon can be explained in a number of ways: because that opinion viewed *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a literal love song, not an allegory; because the commoner might misunderstand its allegorical, religious significance; or because, despite its allegorical significance, it was not sufficiently divinely inspired to be included in the biblical canon.[[3]](#footnote-3) In any case, the background controversy notwithstanding, the *mishna* leaves its final inclusion in the canon as indisputable.

Nevertheless, an additional halakhic discussion suggests that some continued to treat *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a secular love song:

One who reads a verse from *Shir Ha-Shirim* and renders it a form of song, and one who reads any biblical verse at a banquet house, not at its appropriate time, but merely as a song, introduces evil to the world, as the Torah girds itself with sackcloth and stands before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and says before Him: “Master of the Universe, Your children have rendered me like a harp on which clowns play.”[[4]](#footnote-4)(*Sanhedrin* 101a)

The need to prohibit one from reading *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a pedestrian song suggests that well into the Talmudic period, R. Akiva’s reading was not taken for granted, at least by some of the masses. Indeed, the Tosefta (*Sanhedrin* 12:10) attributes the ruling in *Sanhedrin* to R. Akiva himself and cites the *Tanna* as having gone so far as to suggest that such a person lacks a share in the World to Come. R. Akiva likely felt the need to strenuously underscore the sanctity of *Shir Ha-Shirim* precisely because some remained opposed.[[5]](#footnote-5)

And yet, as noted, the accepted view among the rabbis is that *Shir Ha-Shirim* must be read as allegorical. Ibn Ezra, not one to shy away from the *peshat* when he deems it necessary, makes this point sharply in his introduction to *Shir Ha-Shirim*:

This book is more significant than all those composed by Shlomo, and Heaven forbid that it is about words of lust, but by way of allegory... and had it not been on such a high level, that it was recited with divine inspiration, it would not defile the hands.[[6]](#footnote-6)

For all its importance, however, the precise meaning of R. Akiva’s peroration remains unclear. First, what does it mean that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is “holy of holies”? Does R. Akiva maintain that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is on a higher level of *kedusha* than other biblical works, or is this merely a turn of phrase meant to dispel any doubts regarding the sanctity of *Shir Ha-Shirim*?

Dr. Zvi Yehuda (*Sinai* 100, pp. 471-485) strongly asserts the latter view. Yet others disagree, taking R. Akiva at his (literal) word. R. Yaakov of Lisa (widely known as the *Netivot*), in his commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim* entitled *Tzeror Ha-Mor*, suggests that whereas Moshe’s song at the Reed Sea, *Shirat Ha-Yam*, represents the betrothal between the Jews and God, *Shir Ha-Shirim* is on a higher level, because it represents the Jews’ plea for *nissuin*, consummation of the marriage. Along similar lines, *Targum* (1:1) states that R. Akiva means to suggest that there were ten holy songs composed throughout history and that *Shir Ha-Shirim* supersedes each in its sanctity.

Second, we must inquire, is there any significance to the fact that it is R. Akiva, and not someone else, who makes this assertion regarding *Shir Ha-Shirim*? Numerous commentators have linked R. Akiva’s outspoken view regarding *Shir Ha-Shirim* to his personal biography (although *Da’at Mikra*, p. 4, contends that this linkage is “not compelling”). R. Kook, in a soaring passage, puts it this way:

A soul that is insensitive to feelings of romance cannot relate to the tender sensibilities expressed in songs of love. Such a person will pervert those poetic yearnings, reducing them to the level of his own base desires. Similarly, one who has never ascended the heights of holy contemplation, one who has never experienced the uplifting surge of love for the Rock of all worlds – such a person will fail to grasp how the sublime yearnings of *Shir Ha-Shirim* truly reflect the highest aspirations of the Jewish People. But an insightful person will recognize that the body of literature of this holy nation, whose long history is replete with extraordinary displays of self-sacrifice and martyrdom to sanctify God’s Name, would be incomplete without a suitable expression of their boundless love for God. As he was cruelly put to death at the hands of the Romans, R. Akiva told his students, “All my life I have been troubled by this verse, ‘You will love God... with all your soul’ – even if he takes your soul. When will I have the opportunity to fulfill this?” R. Akiva then recited the *Shema*, and his soul departed when he reached the word *echad*, declaring God’s unity (*Berakhot* 61b).

Only a soul as great as R. Akiva could testify that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is the Holy of Holies, and that “the entire universe is unworthy of the day that *Shir Ha-Shirm* was given to Israel.” In his life, R. Akiva experienced love in all of its levels: the private love for Kalba Savua’s daughter, in its natural purity; the idealistic love for his people, including its fight for independence against Roman occupation; and the lofty love for God, in all of its noble beauty. Thus, R. Akiva was eminently qualified to evaluate the true nature of the love so poetically expressed in *Shir Ha-Shirim*. (*Olat Reiyah*, Commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim*)

For R. Kook, there is no contradiction between R. Akiva’s romantic experience and his championing the view that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is holy of holies. Quite the opposite; the two are inextricably intertwined.

In light of R. Akiva’s high praise for *Shir Ha-Shirim* and R. Kook’s commentary, it is worth also pointing to *Berakhot* 57b, which asserts that “one who sees *Shir Ha-Shirim* in a dream should anticipate piety.” While the printed text of the *gemara* attributes this statement to Ben Azzai, R. Nissim Gaon’s text has R. Akiva as the author of this statement. This suggests that R. Akiva’s statement regarding one who sees *Shir Ha-Shirim* in a dream is consistent with his adoration of *Shir Ha-Shirim* in particular.

There is a final, crucially important piece to the puzzle. R. Akiva specifically uses the language, “the world was not fit the day that *Shir Ha-Shirim* was given.” Fascinatingly, R. Akiva seems to be suggesting that *Shir Ha-Shirim* was *revealed* to the Jewish People. Given the traditional view that *Shir Ha-Shirim* was recited by Shlomo, this is an odd formulation, one that echoes the language of revelation, particularly at Sinai. Indeed, the opening section of *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* reads the phrase, “May he kiss me from the kisses of his mouth” (1:2), as a reference to Sinai.

Following this analysis, Professor Saul Lieberman contends that “we cannot understand these words unless we accept the assumption that this song was sung at Sinai. And it is possible that in his [R. Akiva’s] opinion, God Himself said it” (“*Mishnat Shir Ha-Shirim*,” *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 118).[[7]](#footnote-7) Moreover, after citing a view that the angels recited *Shir Ha-Shirim*, the *midrash* quotes R. Yochanan as having held that “It [*Shir Ha-Shirim*] was said at Sinai, as it says, ‘He shall kiss me from the kisses of his mouth.’”

While it seems unlikely to take literally the view that that *Shir Ha-Shirim* was revealed at Sinai, it seems more likely that R. Akiva means to suggest that in some sense, *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a retelling of the Sinaitic Revelation and that its unique status derives from its special subject matter.

Similarly, the dialogical nature of *Shir Ha-Shirim* makes it unique, and similarly echoes the rabbinical reading of Sinai, in which the Jews played an essential role in responding positively to each of the Ten Commandments. R. Moshe Taragin underscores this point:

If there are two voices to the lyric of history, it is because there are two partners. The great tragedy of *Shir Ha-Shirim* and the great misfortune of history is the lack of synchronicity between these partners; when one is ready, the other is not. Coordinating these two partners is the ongoing challenge of the Jewish historical experience, and its lyric was viewed by *Chazal* as the Holy of Holies – *Kodesh Ha-Kodashim*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This helps to explain an otherwise enigmatic comment of Rashi (*Berakhot* 57b, s.v. *shir*), who writes that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is “entirely fear of heaven and love of God in the hearts of all Israel.” Rashi reiterates the *yirat shamayim* motif in his Introduction to *Shir Ha-Shirim*. While the link between *Shir Ha-Shirim* and love of heaven is evident in light of the allegorical reading, it is difficult to understand the connection to *yirat shamayim*. After all, *Shir Ha-Shirim* overwhelmingly focuses on the love between God and man. In light of the linkage between *Shir Ha-Shirim* and *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, however, this connection is better understood: *Shir Ha-Shirim*, particularly in its ups and downs, as well as the dialectical experience of Revelation at Sinai, manifests the duality of love and awe in the human-divine encounter.

This reading dovetails nicely with the view, set forward by the *midrash* and codified by Rambam (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 6:9), that “Shlomo” refers to the “king to whom peace belongs.” On this view, the opening verse of the book sets forward the notion that *Hashem* Himself is, to a degree, the author of *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

R. Akiva’s implication that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is somehow linked to the Sinaitic Revelation is curious and requires elaboration. We will return to this notion, particularly the poles of *yira* and *ahava*, as we develop our reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim* later on in the course. Still, it deepens our appreciation for R. Akiva’s deeper message and its greater significance.

1. Similar controversies existed regarding the inclusion of a number of other books in the biblical canon. Some of these were ultimately excluded (such as *Ben-Sira*), and others were eventually included (*Yechezkel*, *Iyov*, *Kohelet*, *Esther,* and *Shir Ha-Shirim*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The one possible exception is the term “*Shalhevetkah*” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 8:6), which we will analyze when we discuss those *pesukim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Tiferet Yisrael* (*Yachin* 31), who insists that everyone agrees that the book is to be read as a metaphor for the relationship between God and His people; the only question is whether Shlomo authored the book on his own or under the inspiration of the divine spirit. This interpretation seems to find support in *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* (1:4), which records, “At the beginning they said that *Mishlei*, *Shir Ha-Shirim*, and *Kohelet* should be buried, for they said they were parables, but not from the Writings. They stood and buried them, until the Members of the Assembly came and buried them.”

   At the other extreme, Dr. Shneur Leiman (*The* *Canonization of Hebrew Scripture*, p. 113) suggests that one may maintain that a biblical work has been canonized even without it being divinely inspired. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a discussion of the practical halakhic aspects of the *gemara’*s ruling, see R. Chaim Jachter, https://www.koltorah.org/halachah/torah-passages-in-song-by-rabbi-chaim-jachter.

   As to why the *gemara* singles out *Shir Ha-Shirim*, commentators offer a number of explanations. Rashi (s.v. *hachi*), at least as understood by many, suggests that the *gemara* does not mean to limit its ruling to *Shir Ha-Shirim*; the *gemara* simply means to say that one might have thought one may sing Shir *Ha-Shirim*, as it is a song. *Yad Ramah* (s.v. *tanu rabbanan*), however, rules that this ruling is particular to *Shir Ha-Shirim*. He goes on to suggest that “this is only true when one sings in a manner of joking; but one who intends to bless God with it by way of a tune has done the proper thing.” This final point seems to indicate that the very need for such a Talmudic ruling suggests that people were inclined to sing *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a mere song, not one directed to God. (See also Maharal, *Chiddushei Aggadot*, s.v. *ha-koreh*, who stresses that such an individual implies that Torah lacks intellectual depth.) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dr. Marc Shapiro (<https://seforimblog.com/2011/11/comments-on-this-and-that-part-1/>) contends that even into the Middle Ages, there were those who held that the song was initially composed as a love song, even if the rabbis later came to understand it as allegorical. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The tension of literal versus metaphorical readings evident in the *mishna* in *Ta’anit* 4:8, which cites a verse in *Shir Ha-Shirim* in seeming support of both aspects of Jewish marriage rituals and as a metaphor for the giving of the Torah and construction of the Temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, however, Dr. Zvi Yehuda’s article (*Sinai* 100, p. 474), where he disputes Prof. Liebmerman, whom he cites in footnote 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shir-Ha-shirim-elegy-jewish-history](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shir-ha-shirim-elegy-jewish-history). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)