**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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In memory of Tzvi Alexander ben Reuven Bell z”l

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**Shiur #03: The Parable of *Shir* *Ha-Shirim*: God and the Jewish People**

*Chazal* take it for granted that *Shir Ha-Shirim* cannot be read as a literal love story between a man and a woman. As we have previously cited from Ibn Ezra:

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.

What exactly is that metaphor, and what, if any, is the overarching plot of the book? While we will be best in position to analyze these questions during and following our analysis of the text of the *Megilla*, to provide proper background for study of the *Megilla*, it is important to outline the various positions before beginning our textual analysis. For that reason, we will spend the coming *shiurim* reviewing a number of approaches to the allegorical significance of the *sefer*, and only then analyze the entire *sefer* inside.

The classic midrashic perspective maintains that the woman refers to the Jewish People and the man to God. (Interestingly, at least one contemporary scholar holds the reverse – namely that the woman refers to God and the man to the Jewish People.[[1]](#footnote-1)) While this perspective identifies the characters, it leaves open the questions as to whether there is a plot line and what the larger meaning of the *Megilla* is for the relationship between God and the Jewish People. At the end of the series, we will present our own analysis of this question. For the meantime, we will summarize the views presented by the classical commentators.

As a general rule, the *midrashim*, while linking specific verses with particular formative historical events in Jewish history, do not generally provide a clear timeline or overarching narrative for the storyline.

Many of the medieval commentaries, however, offer specific approaches as to the story *Shir Ha-Shirim* seeks to tell. For instance, one group of commentators – including Rashi, Rashbam,[[2]](#footnote-2) Metzudat David, Lekach Tov and Akeidat Yitzchak[[3]](#footnote-3) – see the book as the Jewish People’s retrospective, in which they look back in exile and aspire once again to be reunited with their beloved God. This is consistent with the insight we offered in a previous *shiur*, namely that the story is predominantly offered from the woman’s perspective. Rashi puts it this way in the second part of his classic Introduction (the first part of which we will return to in a future *shiur*):

And I say: For Shlomo saw with divine inspiration that the Jews would eventually be exiled, exile after exile, destruction after destruction, and to mourn during this exile over their previous honor, and to recall the original love in which they were more beloved to Him than all nations. He would then say, “I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better then than now” (*Hoshea* 2:9), and they would remember His kindnesses and the treachery they performed, and the good He planned to offer them in the End of Days. And he established this book with divine inspiration, in the voice of a woman bound up in living widowhood, craving her husband, leaping for her beloved, reminding [him] of her youthful love for him, and confessing her sin. So too, her beloved experiences her pain and recalls the kindnesses of her youth, the pleasantness of her beauty, and the capacity of her actions, through which he is tied to her with intense love, to convey to her: “For it was not of his heart’s [desire] to afflict her” (*Eikha* 3:33), and her sending away was not a permanent sending away. For she remains his wife and he her husband. And he is bound to return to her.

Rashi’s narrative is gripping and moving. *Shir Ha-Shirim* is not a classic romantic love story between God and His people, but a prophetically-inspired plea for reunion, to which the husband answers in the affirmative.

Rashbam, Rashi’s grandson, offers a very similar perspective, but with an important twist. He writes in his Introduction:

For the one who gathered the wisdom from all the people of the east [Shlomo] wrote his book and set his song before his word and wisdom, which were praiseworthy and outstanding among the custom of the world, as a young lady who moans and mourns for her beloved, who separated from her and went far distances away. And she remembers him with his eternal love for her. And she sings and says: “This type of intense love my beloved showed to me when he was with me.” And she speaks and tells her friends and maidens: “Such and such said to me my beloved, and such I answered him.”

Rashbam seems to suggest that the story does not record a late-in-life reunion between the man and woman, but the aspirations of the young woman, who retains her hope of being reunited with her lover and recounts his words to her friends and maidens as a form of expressing that hope.

The Aramaic Targum and Ibn Ezra (Introduction), by contrast, see the storyline as more generally narrating the key moments in Jewish history leading up to the final redemption. Ibn Ezra, for example, explains that he will explain *Shir Ha-Shirim* on three levels: individual words, the larger *peshat* of the story, and the *midrash*, the latter of which represents the essential meaning of the book. He introduces that third section of his commentary a follows:

The third time will explain [*Shir Ha-Shirim*] following the paths of the *midrash*. Some say that the Daughters of Jerusalem are the nations of the world… some say the Daughters of Jerusalem are groups of angels… and it appears most likely to me that the Daughters of Jerusalem are literally daughters, and the mother is the nation of Israel, like a person who speaks to herself… Shlomo begins with Avraham, who is the [nation’s] head…

When we combine this introductory comment with Ibn Ezra’s commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim* 8:12, where he explains that the *sefer* concludes with a description of the messianic era, it becomes clear that for Ibn Ezra, *Shir Ha-Shirim* recounts a linear version of the history of God and Israel’s love relationship, beginning with Avraham Avinu until the time of *Mashiach*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Any overview of this school of thought is incomplete without reference to the Netziv’s traditional-yet-innovative reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. On the one hand, the Netziv is insistent that the story must be read as a parable for the relationship between God and the Jewish People. He cites Ibn Ezra in support of this contention. On the other hand, the Netziv presents a radically different explanation of the *nimshal* than any of the commentators we have seen until this point.

Picking up on his theory (mentioned in the previous *shiur*) that *Shir Ha-Shirim* was originally recited by Shlomo Ha-Melekh on Pesach in celebration of the completion of the First Temple, the Netziv seeks to understand Shlomo’s precise intention in composing and reciting this song in public. He explains by pointing to an anomaly with regard to Pesach: Since the major event of the holiday is the Exodus, which is celebrated on the 15th of Nissan, why does the holiday continue for another six days? (Apparently, the Netziv does not believe that the Splitting of the Sea merited a holiday in its own right, perhaps because it was merely the completion of the events whose crux has already transpired on the 15th.)

The Netziv answers that the final six days of Pesach are intended to inspire the Jews in their loving connection and devotion to God. Moreover, the final day is termed “*Atzeret*” by the Torah to indicate that the day’s goal is to retain the lessons and inspiration of the previous days and take them forward into the year to come. *Shir Ha-Shirim* was delivered on *Atzeret* by Shlomo to inspire the Jews toward increased loving devotion to God.

Furthermore, Shlomo recognized that with the completion of the Temple, many pious individuals would now be subject to the new stricture against offering sacrifices on *bamot*, private altars. This significantly increased the risk that such inspired individuals might struggle with their diminished opportunities to serve God and be tempted to offer private sacrifices. Accordingly, Shlomo taught *Shir Ha-Shirim* to exhort the nation to continue their dedication to worship God lovingly, particularly through the Temple sacrifices and Torah study.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Notably, for the Netziv, not only are these the particular allegorical themes encapsulated by *Shir Ha-Shirim*, but there is no historical dimension to the text. This is a departure from not only Rashi, Rashbam, Targum, and Ibn Ezra, but even from *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba*, which depicts *Shir Ha-Shirim* as referencing a loosely-connected series of historical events. While the Netziv agrees that the book is ultimately concerned with God and the Jewish People, he sees it as a pure allegory, locating it at a particular moment in history, rooting it in his unique understanding of the holiday of Pesach, and seeing no need for there to be a coherent plot running through the entire story. (We will return to this interpretation at a later point.)

While each of these interpretations differs from one another, a common thread runs throughout: They all interpret the parable on a national level. The story is about the love relationship between God and the Jewish People. This is in contrast to the view that the allegory in fact explores the individual’s relationship with God, which we will consider in two weeks’ time.

**Rashi on *Shir Ha-Shirim* and Jewish-Christian Polemic**

Upon more closely examining Rashi’s reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, we may suggest that it is intimately connected not only to Rashi’s role as a *pashtan*, but also as a community leader. As discussed, Rashi reads *Shir Ha-Shirim* as telling the story of a beleaguered woman who retains her faith in the possibility of redemption. What motivates Rashi to adopt this interpretation?

The last few decades have seen a methodological debate of sorts regarding Rashi’s biblical commentary, at least in regard to Chumash. Professor Nechama Leibowitz *z”l* was deeply devoted to the view that Rashi was overwhelmingly motivated by his understanding of the plain reading of the text. Throughout her career, she repeatedly taught her students to become attuned to the textual nuances that motivated Rashi’s (and other commentators’) interpretations. Other scholars, particularly in recent years, have taken issue with this approach. They tend to see Rashi’s writing as inspired by a range of considerations, which include, but are not limited to, textual factors. In particular, scholars such as Yisrael Ta-Shma and Avraham Grossman have pointed to Rashi’s role as a community leader and educator as playing a key role in his exegetical choices.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is particularly true in his commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim*, which clearly responds to Christian polemical claims of Supersessionism. Indeed, many scholars believe that Rashi’s biography is particularly relevant to his commentary on *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Rashi lived in Christian France for the majority of his life, but spent time studying in the *yeshiva* in Worms, Germany from approximately 1057-1065. Though he was exposed to a degree of Christian antisemitism throughout his life, 1096 – nine years before Rashi’s death in 1105 – saw the First Crusade, which devastated the Rhineland German Jewish communities, including Worms. Rashi was in his hometown of Troyes, France at that time, but the events left a traumatic imprint on Ashkenazic Jewry as a whole.

In light of these elements, numerous scholars have convincingly argued that Rashi’s commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim* (in addition to *Tehillim* and *Yeshaya*) was written partly as a polemic against Christianity and with an eye toward strengthening Jewish faith during a period of acute persecution and national depression. This explains both the language and overall narrative of Rashi’s Introduction, which, as we have seen, sees that book as an exilic work recounting the joint commitment of God and the Jewish People to be united despite her having survived “exile after exile,” and even though she presently found herself in a state of “living widowhood.”

In addition to his Introduction, a series of comments in Rashi’s commentary, when placed side-by-side, strongly suggests this reading.[[7]](#footnote-7) We will cite a few classic examples:

1:4

**The king has brought me into his chambers.** And even today, I still have joy and happiness that I cleaved to you.

**We recall your love.** Even today, in living widowhood, I always recall your first love [for me] more than any banquet of pleasure and joy.

The former phrase is open to interpretation. Many commentaries read it as a poetic aspiration: The woman aspires that the king bring her to his chambers. Rashi, however, does not interpret this verse in this way. Instead, he explains that at the very outset of the song, the elderly woman recalls the love the couple felt when they were first married. Further, she declares that “even today, in living widowhood,” despite the distance in place and time, she still vividly recalls the relationship they enjoyed. Clearly, for Rashi’s larger reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim* as well as this particular verse, Rashi sees the book as directly addressing a community “in living widowhood,” an apt description of the Ashkenazic Jewish community.

4:1

**Your eyes are like doves.** Your hues, appearance and characteristics are like those of a dove, which cleaves to its mate, and when they slaughter it, it does not struggle but stretches forth its neck; so have you given your shoulder to bear My yoke and My fear.

If not for the historical context, this comment of Rashi would seem inexplicable. The *Dod* is commenting on the *Raya*’s comely eyes; nowhere in the biblical text is there any indication of any negativity or violence! Yet Rashi comments that just as the dove extends its neck to be slaughtered without complaint, so too do the Jews bear the yoke of God. While he does not explicitly conclude the analogy by mentioning the death of Jews, he says all but that. The decision to hint to willing martyrdom and bearing the heavy burden of *mitzvot* suggests a radically different meaning than the face meaning of the text and closely alludes to the Jews’ experience during the Crusades and under Christian rule.

4:8

**With me [will you come] from Lebanon O bride.** When you are exiled from this Lebanon [*Beit Ha-Mikdash*], with Me you will be exiled, for I will go into exile with you.

**With me from Lebanon will you come.** And when you return from the exile, I will return with you, and also throughout the exile, I will be distressed in your distress. Therefore, [Scripture] wrote, “with me from Lebanon will you come.” When you are exiled from this Lebanon, you will come with Me, and [Scripture] does not write, “With me to Lebanon will you come,” to denote that from the time of your departure from here until the time of your return, I am with you wherever you go and come.

Here too, the theme of hope during exile becomes central to *Shir Ha-Shirim* on Rashi’s interpretation. No matter where our exile might take us, God will be present, much as God promises the Jews at the burning bush with regard to their enslavement in Egypt.

5:9

**With what does your beloved excel another beloved.** This is what the nations were asking Yisrael: “What is it about your God more than all the other gods, that you allow yourselves to be burned and hanged [*ve-nitzlavim*] because of Him?”

Rashi here offers an unusual reading of *peshuto shel mikra*. Simply understood, the Daughters of Jerusalem are inquiring unsuspiciously of the *Raya*: What distinguishes your beloved such that you are so obsessed with him? Yet Rashi understands the Daughters to be asking jealously: Why is your God unique such that you martyr yourselves for His sake? Further, Rashi specifically uses the term “*tzelav*,” likely an allusion to the Crucifixion. It is almost as if the gentiles are saying, “We always held the Crucifixion to be our great sign of sacrifice, yet in the wake of the First Crusade, we now see that in fact it is the Jews who excel in this respect.”

7:9

**And now let your breasts.** And now, make true My words, that you will not be enticed to follow the nations, and may the good and wise among you be steadfast in their faith, to retort to those who entice them, so that the lesser ones among you will learn from them.

Here, Rashi explicitly relates to the religious danger confronting the minority Jewish community in a majority Christian context. We know that Rashi’s community was riven by bitter disputes regarding the status of those who had initially left the Jewish community and later desired to rejoin the Jewish community. Accordingly, Rashi has God urge the Jews to remain “steadfast in their faith” and develop the ability to respond to the claims of the gentiles living in their midst. On an intellectual plane, Rashi was asking the people to excel at Jewish-Christian polemic, precisely the sort of activity in which Rashi implicitly engaged in this very commentary.

Ultimately, this historically contextualized reading of Rashi is essentially indisputable. What is more, it dovetails with a proper understanding of the larger purpose of a biblical work, namely to send a message that is at once timeless and simultaneously relevant to all generations. As the *gemara* puts it, “Prophecy that was needed for all generations is written down, while a prophecy that was not needed for all generations was not written down” (*Megilla* 14a).

1. <http://www.hatanakh.com/en/lessons/whos-who-shir-hashirim>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sarah Kamin in her authoritative work *Rashbam Le-Shir Ha-Shirim*, pp. 49-50, definitively concludes that earlier scholarship notwithstanding, it is indeed Rashbam’s commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All appear in their respective introductions to the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fascinatingly, an [anonymous Prague manuscript](https://thetorah.com/song-of-songs-the-emergence-of-peshat-interpretation/) sees *Shir Ha-Shirim* as the personal testimony of one of King Shlomo’s sixty wives, who desires to be singled out by her beloved husband. On a *peshat* level, this might dovetail nicely with Ibn Ezra’s rendering of the *nimshal*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The latter is consistent with the generally high value the Netziv assigns Torah study and the incorporation of that motif into his biblical commentary. For example, in his Introduction and throughout his commentary to *Sefer Devarim*, the Netziv expounds *Devarim* as a commentary about the importance of studying the Oral Torah in great depth. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Y. Baer, “*Rashi Ve-HaMetziut Ha-Historit shel Zemano*,” *Tarbitz* 20 (5709), pp. 320-332. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an excellent overview, see the essay by Dr. Avigayil Rock *z”l* available at <http://www.hatanakh.com/en/articles/rashi-4>. See also Sarah Kamin, “*Peirush Rashi al Shir Ha-Shirim Ve-HaVikuach Ha-Notzri*,” in *Bein Yehudim Le-Notzrim Be-Farshanut Ha-Mikra* (2008, Jerusalem); and Mordechai Z. Cohen’s “Maimonides’ Attitude Toward Christian Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of Earlier Jewish Sources,” in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Carlebach and Shacter (Brill, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)