**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

**Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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In memory of Tzvi Alexander ben Reuven Bell z”l

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**Shiur #05:**

***Shir Ha-Shirim* as an Allegory for the Individual’s Relationship with God**

In the past two *shiurim*, we reviewed the better-known view that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a parable for the relationship between God and the Jewish nation. A prominent group of commentators offer an alternative, however: *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a metaphor for the all-consuming relationship between the individual seeker and God.

This view, while not generally represented in the *midrashim*, does find some expression in midrashic texts. For instance, *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* (1:6) suggests that the phrase “He shall kiss me from the kisses of his mouth” refers to the death of righteous individuals by the “kiss” of God.

But this view did not truly gain in popularity until the Middle Ages. Thus, Ibn Ezra saw the need to forcefully reject not only those who viewed the song as mere love poetry, but also those who saw it as an allegory for the soul:

These are the words of the author, Avraham son of R. Meir the Sephardi: The men of investigation sought to explain this book on the basis of the secret of the world, and the way in which the upper soul becomes bound up with the body, which is on the lower level… yet they all carry wind for they are empty, and the truth is only that which our predecessors recorded, namely that this is a book about the nation of Israel.

Ibn Ezra’s protest was not heeded by all medieval rabbis, however, particularly those of a philosophical or mystical bent. R. Shalom Carmy summarized the point well, offering some insight into why this second view is not as widely known:

The great medieval Jewish commentaries bequeathed to us two models for interpreting Song of Songs. The first is more familiar, partly because it is found in the easily accessible commentaries of Rashi and Ibn Ezra. This model reads the poem as a rendering of Jewish sacred history, from Exodus through Exile. The male Lover is thus God, and the female beloved is Israel.

The second model, championed by medieval and early modern philosophical and mystical writers, perceives in Song of Songs an allegory not for the people so much as for the individual on a spiritual journey. This approach is less popular, and its most influential exponent, Maimonides, presented his approach only in passing. His time-bound mix of Aristotelian philosophy and medieval mysticism, moreover, tends to obscure the existential dimensions of the interpretation and distance it from the common reader.[[1]](#footnote-1)

One of the earliest medieval thinkers to have made this suggestion was the 10th century pietist R. Bachya ibn Pakuda. While he did not compose a commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim*, twice in his classic *Chovot Ha-Levavot*, R. Bachya seems to read the book as an allegory for the soul. At the beginning of *Sha’ar Ha-Yichud*, the first section *Chovot Ha-Levavot*, R. Bachaye explains the Torah’s presentation of *mitzvot* of the limbs that are intended to inspire internal emotional states:

He proceeded to the duties of the limbs, which consist of action only, and gave three examples, as He said: "And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand; and they shall be as *totafot* between your eyes; and you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house, and on your gates," which refers to the *tefillin* of the hand and of the head, and the *mezuza*, all of whom cause one to remember the Creator, and to wholeheartedly love Him, and yearn to Him, and as scripture says regarding how lovers keep their love in mind: "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm" ([*Shir Ha-Shirim* 8:6](https://www.sefaria.org/Song_of_Songs.8.6))...

In this passage, R. Bachya asserts that the purpose of these *mitzvot* is to inspire one to love God. He then cites the verse, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm” as a prooftext that at least the *tefillin shel yad* and *tefillin shel rosh* are intended to inspire the individual to love God. This only makes sense if we are to understand *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a description of the individual’s loving relationship with God.

Toward the end of the book, R. Bachya’s comments again carry the same implication. After describing the lengths to which one ought to go in absolute devotion to God and in ascribing individual suffering to the divine will, R. Bachya again offers a prooftext from *Shir Ha-Shirim*:

On this matter the wise man alluded to in saying: "A bundle of myrrh is my beloved unto me, between my breasts he shall rest" ([*Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:13](https://www.sefaria.org/Song_of_Songs.1.13)), which our sages expounded: "Even though my beloved is causing me pain and bitterness like myrrh, 'He rests between my breasts'" ([*Shabbat* 88b](https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.88b)). Similarly the prophet [Moshe] said: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might" (*[Devarim](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.6.5)* [6:5](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.6.5)).

Based on his understanding of the *gemara* in *Shabbat* 88b, R. Bachya seems to have understood that this verse refers to individual suffering: One must maintain his love for God despite whatever individual vicissitudes one may confront.

R. Bachya’s reading of the passage in *Shabbat* is particularly notable, as other commentaries took the *gemara* in rather different directions. Maharsha (s.v. *af al pi*), for instance, suggests that the *gemara* understands the verse to mean that even when the Jews suffer in exile, God remains with them. Rashi (s.v. *af*, *bein*) understands the *gemara* to be saying that despite the sin of the Golden Calf, God nevertheless permitted the Jews to construct the Tabernacle. Not only is this consistent with Rashi’s interpretation of this verse in his commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim* (1:12, s.v. *nirdi*; 1:13, s.v. *tzeror*), but it fits with Rashi’s larger, national-historical interpretation of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Their different readings of the *gemara* in *Shabbat* underscore the wide difference between Rashi and R. Bachya’s respective readings of the allegory behind *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

As R. Carmy notes, most prominent among the medieval thinkers to read *Shir Ha-Shirim* as an individual allegory was Maimonides, who writes in his *Laws of Repentance* (10:3):

And what is the proper love? He shall love the Lord with an exceeding great and very strong love, so that his soul be tied to the love of the Lord, finding himself in a constant tremor, as if he were suffering of lovesickness, when his mind is free because of love for that woman, being continuously agitated about her, whether he sitting down, or whether he is standing up, even when he is eating and drinking. More than this should the love for the Lord be in the heart of those who love him, meditating therein constantly, even as He commanded us: "With all your heart and with all your soul." **This is what Solomon allegorically said: "For I am love-sick" (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2.5). And the whole book, *Shir Ha-Shirim*, is an allegory on this subject.”**

Rambam could not be more clear: The whole of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is an allegory for the individual’s love relationship with God.

Rambam offers an analogous presentation in *Guide* 3:51, where he cites a different verse in depicting the highest level of love for God:

When we have acquired a true knowledge of God and rejoice in that knowledge in such a manner, that whilst speaking with others or attending to our bodily wants, our mind is all that time with God; when we are with our heart constantly near God, even while our body is in the society of men; when we are in that state that the Song on the relation between God and man poetically describes in the following words: "I sleep, but my heart is awake: it is the voice of my beloved that knocks" ([*Shir*](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Song_of_Songs.5.2) *Ha-Shirim* 5:2) – then we have attained not only the height of ordinary prophets, but of Moshe, our Teacher...

A strong devotee of Rambam’s rationalist-intellectual approach, R. Yosef ibn Kaspi, writes in his Introduction to *Shir Ha-Shirim* that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a parable for the various degrees to which the soul can attach itself to the active intellect, the source of God’s emanation on Earth. Unsurprisingly, Ibn Kaspi cites the aforementioned passage in the Guide.

R. Levi ben Gershom presents yet another variation on this medieval philosophical reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. In an echo of the passage in the *Guide*, Ralbag stresses that the entirety of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is aimed at the religious elite, who seek to achieve a higher level in their divine worship.

Alongside the medieval rationalist tradition championed by Rambam, the medieval Jewish mystics adopted their own approach to *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a metaphor for the individual relationship with God. As Arthur Green puts it in his explication of the Zoharic view:

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was a great shift in the reading of the Song of Songs from a collectivist to an individualist allegory. The Canticle now came to be seen as a song between God and the soul, a reflection of the new emphasis on individual quest and personal pilgrimage in the religious life of the era...

If the male Jewish reader could not wax passionate about the erotic relationship between himself and the essentially male figure of God, what was needed was a female presence, inserted between these two males, with whom both could have that passionate relationship. This is exactly what the Kabbalah did in placing the female *shekhina* at the end of the sefirotic chart or as the gatekeeper between the upper and lower worlds…. Israel, too, as the devoted children, servants, and bridal attendants of the *shekhina*, served as “awakeners of her desire to unite with the Holy King.” They did this by cultivating their own love for the divine bride in their devoted lives of Torah study and in performance of the commandments, including that of holy union with their own wives, an earthly representation of the union above.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This idea later came to be exemplified in the practice of reciting *Shir Ha-Shirim* on *erev Shabbat*, which originated in Tzefat. The *yehi ratzon* that is sometimes recited following *Shir Ha-Shirim* typifies the sort of individual longing with which this recitation is associated:

Master of the universe, may it be Your will, that in the merit of *Shir Ha-Shirim* that we read, which is holy of holies… we will merit to reach a place from which the souls are hewn, and may it be as if we have accomplished all that we sought to seek...[[3]](#footnote-3)

These two readings – *Shir Ha-Shirim* as an allegory for the nation and for the soul – are not mutually exclusive (especially in an allegorical work), and may in fact coalesce into a single perspective. This, at least, is R. Soloveitchik’s position in *U-Vikashtem Mi-Sham*, where the Rav insists that on a deeper level, these two readings are ultimately one and the same. Both are essentially about the breathless human quest for the divine, and thus are not mutually exclusive. Ultimately, Judaism understands life itself as a human-divine drama that acts itself out on the stage of the world and the stage of the soul.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. “Perfect Harmony,” *First Things*, December 2010, available at: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/12/perfect-harmony>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Arthur Green, “Intradivine Romance: The Song of Songs in the Zohar,” in Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (eds.), *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 214-227. Other thinkers who embraced this individualist reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim* include R. Yosef ibn Aknin; an anonymous Yemenite medieval Jewish thinker (see Y.Z Langermann, “Saving the Soul by Knowing the Soul: A Medieval Yemeni Interpretation of Song of Songs,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 12:2, pp. 147-166,); the mystics of Tzefat, including the Arizal; [R. Kook](https://www.sefaria.org/Olat_Reiyah%2C_Song_of_Songs?lang=bi); and R. Soloveitchik in *U-Vikashtem Mi-Sham*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://web.nli.org.il/sites/nlis/he/Song/Pages/Song.aspx?SongID=5344#1,13,9127,11>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *U-Vikashtem Mi-Sham*, pp. 119-120, footnote 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)