**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

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Dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky z"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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**Shiur #08: *Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:1-8**

Having concluded our introductory *shiurim*, including a study of the opening verse, we will now examine the text. Each *shiur* will examine a number of verses, until we complete the *sefer*. In accordance with our earlier advocacy for the importance of beginning with the study of *peshuto shel mikra* as an entry point to the book’s deeper levels of meaning, we will analyze the *peshat* of each verse, seek to identify which verses comprise literary units, and explore how the verses relate to the larger interpretations of the storyline and metaphorical meaning of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Along the way, following the motif of *Shir Ha-Shirim* – a song comprised of multiple songs – we will seek to develop a novel thesis, which shares some of the observations of Malbim and R. Cherlow but forges a new path.

As noted in the previous *shiur*, commentators grapple with the apparent existence of two different male lovers – a royal king and lowly shepherd. This raises the fundamental question: How does this fit with the classic understanding of a love story between two individuals? Some, following the classic midrashic view, conflate these two characters. For instance, many hold that the man is a king, and the references to his status as a shepherd are merely symbolic in nature. Rashi and Ibn Ezra exemplify this view. This is known as the two-character thesis. Alternatively, as we noted in the previous *shiur*, Malbim (and many 19th century biblical scholars) hold of a three-character thesis: The story is not a simple one of reciprocal love, but the drama of a love triangle that includes three parties. Assuming that there is coherence to the characters in the first place (many biblical scholars, such as Robert Gordis[[1]](#footnote-1) and Harold Fisch,[[2]](#footnote-2) maintain that *Shir* *Ha-Shirim* is simply a series of songs about different individuals, or not about actual individuals at all), these are the dominant explanations among classical commentators and biblical scholars.

Yet there is an alternative. A close reading of the entire *sefer* suggests that *Shir Ha-Shirim* in fact conveys two parallel stories – one about a young woman and a king, and another about a young woman (perhaps the same one, perhaps another) and a shepherd. To be sure, on the level of the *nimshal*, the shepherd and king might be one and the same; the singular God is manifest to us in many facets, and our relationship with Him is refracted through countless prisms and retold in countless metaphors. Still, closely following the two male guides is crucial to a complete understanding of the story. We will bear in mind this possibility as we examine the *pesukim*on the level of *peshuto shel mikra*. At the conclusion of this series, we will consider the allegorical significance of this novel reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Having previously studied the first part of 1:1 – “*Shir Ha-Shirim*” – as part of our introductory study of the book, we now turn to the second half of the verse, “*asher le-Shlomo*.” Although the simple understanding attributes the authorship or compilation of the book to Shlomo, it is noteworthy that a minority position (cited by *Da’at Mikra*, p. 1, note 2) sees the second clause as indicating that the book is *dedicated to* Shlomo. We have previously discussed (*shiur* 2) the possible significance of this dedication, particularly according to the midrashic view that “Shlomo” refers to God.

Verses 2-4 read:

(2) Oh, give me of the kisses of your mouth, For your love is more delightful than wine.

(3) Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance; Your name is like finest oil— Therefore do maidens love you.

(4) Draw me after you, let us run! The king has brought me to his chambers. Let us delight and rejoice in your love, Savoring it more than wine—Like new wine they love you!

We may make a few observations regarding these verses. Only the woman (she is not given a name here) speaks in these opening *pesukim*. Her unbridled passion bursts forth suddenly, as if the *sefer* begins *in medias res*: The book opens with her dreaming of her beloved’s kisses. Indeed, the repetition of the term “*neshika*” in these opening verses lays great emphasis on the importance of kissing, which presumably underscores the passion with which she opens her first recorded speech. Rashi (s.v. *yishakeni*) and Ibn Ezra (ibid.) further emphasize that the reference is specifically to kissing on the lips, a particularly intimate form of emotional expression. Relatedly, Ibn Ezra notes that the term “*neshikot*” is used in the plural. This further reinforces the centrality of this phrase to her initial plea. One gets the clear sense that she has experienced these kisses previously, further underscoring the passionate manner in which she explodes on the scene.

Notwithstanding some modern interpretations that see the language of “he shall kiss me” as a poetic (JPS) or indirect way of requesting that he kiss her (*Da’at Mikra*), it is intriguing that the face reading is that the woman begins by speaking of her beloved in the third-person, as if he is not present. Yet at the end of the very same verse, as Rashbam (s.v. *pihu*) notes, she concludes by speaking directly to him (“For your love is more delightful than wine”). It is unclear what to make of this. For Malbim, who maintains that the *dod* is hiding just outside the *raya*’s prison cell, she truly intends to talk directly to him, but begins by speaking *of* him in order to throw the female guards off her trail. Alternatively, the move from third-person to second-person is a poetic technique intended to heighten the increasing emotional pitch of the passage.

The second half of the verse is somewhat ambiguous. In particular, the word “*dodekha*” is not entirely clear and is subject to a variety of interpretations among the commentators. The “Gaon” (presumably Saadia), cited by Ibn Ezra (s.v. *dodekha*), claims that “*dod*” here refers to a certain liquid underneath the tongue. On this interpretation, the word “*dod*” refers back to the opening phrase of the verse, echoing the kissing motif. The majority of interpreters (Rashbam, s.v. *ki*; Ibn Ezra, s.v. *dodekha*; Metzudat Tziyon, ibid.), however, understand “*dod*” here as a reference to affection. The *raya* is telling the *dod* that she values his affection even more than fine wine.

On either interpretation, especially the latter, there is a clear pun on the term “*dod*,” her beloved’s name as identified soon after. And, yet again, the latter part of the verse lays an emphasis on the theme of multiplicity, as “*dodekha*” is stated in the plural. In general, then, 1:2 lays great emphasis not just on the intensity of the woman’s passion for her beloved, but also on the invigorating abundance of their relationship. To this we may add that the motifs of singularity and plurality may return us to the opening verse of the *sefer*, as the phrase “Song of Songs” also plays on the themes of singular and plural.

The opening phrase of verse 3, “Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance,” is straightforward. The meaning of the term “*turak*” in the second clause, however, is unclear. Many commentators (Rashi, s.v. *shemen*; Rashbam, s.v. *le-reiach*; R. Yosef Kara, s.v. *shemen*; Metzudat David, ibid.) suggest that “*turak*” is derived from the word “*reik*,” empty. In this context, she is saying that his scent is like that of oils emptied from vessel to vessel and carried throughout the land. Ibn Ezra (ibid.) cites a view that it refers to a particular location. On this view, the verse means that the man’s scent is like that of the location named Turak. Ibn Ezra’s own opinion, however, is that “*turak*” refers to a particularly exotic type of oil. *Da’at Mikra* (p. 3) suggests that every time she hears his name, she is reminded of his rapturous scent.

In any case, the larger themes of the first two verses parallel one another, as the woman repeatedly stresses her infatuation with her beloved. Furthermore, the literary structure of the two verses is parallel to one another; each begins with a description of her desire and concludes with a reason (“*ki tovim dodekha mi-yayin*”) or elaboration (“*al ken alamot aheivukha*”).

The fourth verse begins by describing the king as having “brought her into his chambers.” As the various commentators make clear, the phrase “the king has brought me to his chambers” is particularly important for understanding the larger narrative of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Rashbam (s.v. *mashkheni*, *aheivukha*), for example, understands the young woman to be reminiscing about the times when the king brought her into his chambers. This fits nicely with (Rashbam’s grandfather) Rashi’s and Rashbam’s larger reading of the book, in which the woman (older for Rashi, younger for Rashbam) reminisces about her prior relationship with the man. *Da’at Mikra*, by contrast, understands this phrase not to refer literally to a king. Instead, the woman imagines as if the man is a king who had summoned her into the inner chambers of his palace, which serves as a metaphor for the depth of the inner world which they share. This is consistent with *Da’at Mikra*’s wider perspective that there is no need to see this passage as confirming a larger narrative of *Shir Ha-Shirim* in which the king plays a key role; for *Da’at Mikra*, there is no overarching narrative to the storyline. In the view of R. Cherlow, this serves as evidence that the man is in fact a king who finds himself in a relationship with a shepherdess.

The next phrase, “may we rejoice and be happy in you,” is curious for its plural formulation. After all, who aside from the *raya* is rejoicing in her beloved? Is this not intended as love poetry between two individuals? As *Da’at Mikra* suggests, this may indicate that this opening song was originally intended to be sung as part of a wedding celebration. Thus, instead of her continuing to sing individually about her beloved, she is joined by others in her celebratory song. This also fits nicely with the double emphasis on wine in this verse, which further buttresses the hypothesis that these verses were originally meant to be sung at a celebratory occasion.

It is clear that these opening three verses form a single literary unit. They are all recited by the woman. The phrase “delightful like wine,” specifically utilizing the term “*dod*” to refer to an affection rather than a person in 1:2 and 1:4, closely links the opening and closing verses of this mini-unit with one another. All three verses clearly involve a heavy emphasis on the plural, and the reversion between second-and third-person pulls together the three verses. More broadly, these verses (seem to) refer to the man as a king, and no reservations whatsoever are expressed in the loving relationship between the man and woman. We will see this pattern recur in future sections.

**1:5-6**

(5) I am dark, but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem— Like the tents of Kedar, Like the pavilions of Solomon.

(6) Don’t stare at me because I am swarthy, Because the sun has gazed upon me. My mother’s sons quarreled with me, They made me guard the vineyards; My own vineyard I did not guard.

At first glance, beyond the general motif of a love song, verses 5-6 are not obviously connected to verses 2-4. Indeed, consistent with his general viewpoint, *Da’at Mikra* suggests that as a series of individual songs, these verses need not carry any specific linkage to the previous set of *pesukim*. For Malbim, however, these verses are part of the larger continuation of the opening act in the five-part story – the first section of which involves the woman clandestinely speaking to her beloved from prison and ultimately escaping from beneath the guards’ watchful eye in order to spend time with her beloved. (See the earlier *shiur* in which we outline Malbim’s view.)

Alternatively, focusing more narrowly on the specific connection between these sets of verses, Ibn Ezra (s.v. *ba’avur*) contends that the *benot Yerushalayim* and *alamot* are one and the same. Thus, in verses 5-6, the woman turns to her competitors for the love of the *dod*, insisting that she is deserving of his love despite her untoward appearance.

What is the woman’s larger argument in these verses? She is contending that despite her darkness or the splotches on her body, she is beautiful on the inside. She has been sullied only because her half-brothers have compelled her to spend time outside guarding their vineyards, leaving her unable to tend to her own. Her dark hue is comparable to the tents of Kedar, which have been distorted because they are in the heat of the sun (Ibn Ezra, s.v. *ve-chazrah*) or because they have been dragged from place to place (R. Yosef Kara, s.v. *me-ohalei*).

Overall, these two verses offer a sense that she has been somehow traumatized, perhaps by the absence of her lover, and certainly by the hands of her half-brothers. Indeed, for R. Cherlow’s interpretation (see the previous *shiur* where we discussed his view), these verses establish a number of key biographical facts about the girl: She seems to be orphaned and has been subject to mistreatment at the hands of her older brothers. She has little to no property, perhaps only a vineyard. Yet, despite her suffering and lowly status, she continues to believe that she is worthy of being reunited with her beloved.

**Verses 7-8**

The final set of verses in this section read:

(7) Tell me, you whom I love so well; Where do you pasture your sheep? Where do you rest them at noon? Let me not be as one who strays Beside the flocks of your fellows.

(8) If you do not know, O fairest of women, Go follow the tracks of the sheep, And graze your kids By the tents of the shepherds.

Here, for the first time, we encounter not a monologue, but a dialogue between the woman and the man.

In the first verse, the woman inquires where her beloved shepherds his sheep during the daytime. (This is the first time he is explicitly referred to not as a king but as a shepherd.) The verse is ambiguous on two levels. Technically, some of the terminology is noteworthy and/or not entirely clear. The term “*shalamah*,” which is confusing at first glance, is understood by all commentators to mean “that why.” (It might also be a play on the name Shlomo, which comprises the same letters.)

More difficult to decipher, the meaning of “*ke-otya*” is especially unclear. What appearance does the woman wish to avoid? Ibn Ezra (s.v. *ke-otya*) lays out three plausible interpretations for this word: a) skipping; b) embarrassed; and c) mourner (the latter is his preferred interpretation). According to the first interpretation, the maiden wonders why she must continue jumping around seeking her beloved, instead of knowing his precise location in advance. Alternatively, on the latter two interpretations, she is bemoaning her degraded state, mourning over the absence of her beloved. The repetition of the word “*eikha*,” which carries tragic overtones elsewhere in *Tanakh*, might reinforce this sense of loss. Moreover, from a literary standpoint, the repetition of the word “*eikha*” contributes to the sense of insistence in the verse: The *raya* is intensely focused on locating her beloved.

Beyond these textual questions, the verse is ambiguous in two deeper (and likely connected) senses. First, why does she ask to be united with her lover during the day? On the one hand, it is possible that she recognizes that this is simply the only time he has available, as shepherds in hot climates often take a break during the heat of the day (*Da’at Mikra*). Alternatively, R. Mosheh Lichtenstein suggests that her desire to be united with her lover during the daytime is immodest or even impetuous. After all, day is for work, night for social activity.[[3]](#footnote-3) Whether or not her request is appropriate is a key, unresolved question.

Similarly, the shepherd's response in 1:8 is unclear. On the one hand, he might be understood as trying to direct her how to locate him effectively. To that end, some see the *dod* as urging her to abandon city life and become a shepherd herself, so they may be reunited (*Da’at Mikra*). But this reading is far from compelling. As R. Mosheh Lichtenstein notes, the *dod* does not provide clear-cut instructions as to how to find him. Moreover, his suggestion that, while searching for her beloved, she might mingle with other shepherds, might hint that she would be better off pursuing another relationship.

Whatever the *dod*’s intention, looking at verses 5-8 as a unit – particularly in contrast to verses 2-4 – it seems that the relationship is anything but blissful. The woman is separated from her lover for at least some, if not all, of the time, and we hear precious little from him. Even when they finally engage in dialogue, it is not even clear whether her request is appropriate and whether he truly desires to be reunited with her, or if he means to send her on a “wild goose chase.” If, in verses 2-4, we find a male king and blissful relationship, verses 5-8 portray him as a shepherd and their union as all but ensured.

As the curtain closes on these poignant opening scenes, next week we will turn from the woman’s impassioned praises for the man to those of the man toward his beloved.

1. Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fisch, *Poetry With a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation*, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shabbat-chol-ha-moed-pesach-shir-Ha-shirim](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shabbat-chol-ha-moed-pesach-shir-ha-shirim). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)