**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

**Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**Shiur #13: *Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:2-6:3**

As we enter the heart of chapter 5, we encounter the woman’s third semi-sleeping state, but one that is far more tumultuous than either of her previous experiences:

I was asleep, But my heart was wakeful. Hark, my beloved knocks! “Let me in, my own, My darling, my faultless dove! For my head is drenched with dew, My locks with the damp of night.” (5:2)

Her sleep is deeper than in her immediately preceding dream. Previously, she was simply on her bed at night (3:1), but here she is “asleep,” even as her heart is awakened.[[1]](#footnote-1) The blurring of lines between conscious and unconscious has increased in intensity. Even the opening phrase, “*Kol dodi dofek*,” is a double entendre and highly ambiguous. She hears the voice of her beloved knocking at the door. In a waking state, this is impossible. The very suggestion that her beloved’s voice is knocking on the door is absurd and highlights the surrealism of the situation.

For the first time, her beloved knocks instead of calling, and there is an urgency that we have not previously encountered. The insistence of the knocking voice is echoed in the language itself: “*Pitchi li, achoti, rayati, yonati, tamati*.” The five rhyming words and insistent four-fold repetition of his descriptions for his beloved evoke a visceral experience of knocking and bring us into the mind and imagination of the half-conscious woman.

Yet for all the urgency, she is frozen, and she invents excuses for her hesitation:

I had taken off my robe— Was I to don it again? I had bathed my feet— Was I to soil them again? (5:3)

The language of the verse, particularly the closing words “soil them,” evokes precisely the opposite of the pristine images that have adorned the landscape of *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Yet she quickly recognizes her error:

My beloved took his hand off the latch, And my heart was stirred for him. (5:4)

While JPS translates the word “*mei’ay*” as heart, more precisely it refers to one’s innermost instinct or desire. Another instance of this usage appears in *Yirmiyahu*:

Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me, A child that is dandled! Whenever I have turned against him, My thoughts would dwell on him still. That is why My heart [innards - TS] yearns for him; I will receive him back in love —declares the Lord. (31:19)

She attempts to welcome him:

I rose to let in my beloved; My hands dripped myrrh— My fingers, flowing myrrh— Upon the handles of the bolt. (5:5)

Note the references to “*mor*,” a symbol of romance from an earlier verse (4:14). And her actions mirror his: Just as he had placed his hands on the bolt, she does the same.

But she is too late:

I opened the door for my beloved, But my beloved had turned and gone. I was faint because of what he said. I sought, but found him not; I called, but he did not answer. (5:6)

The sense of faintness – literally, her “life exited when he spoke” – reinforces the sense that she finds herself in a liminal state of consciousness, and it returns us to the earlier section in which she had described herself as faint from lovesickness (2:4-6). Yet, in contrast to her previous earlier stupor, when she quickly located her beloved (3:1-4), this time she cannot find him, and panic sets in. She desperately circles the city and is subject to a trauma:

I met the watchmen Who patrol the town; They struck me, they bruised me. The guards of the walls Stripped me of my mantle. (5:7)

The guardsmen, who previously had helped her to locate her beloved, now turn against her and act toward her in a physically, perhaps even sexually abusive fashion (removing at least some of her clothing).

And so this dream-like state differs radically from her previous ones, which were either entirely positive (2:4-7) or without trauma and ending with reunion (3:1-5). We are thus perhaps not surprised to find that this time, when she again adjures the daughters of Jerusalem, there is a twist:

I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem! If you meet my beloved, tell him this: That I am faint with love. (5:8)

Suddenly, the woman pivots. Instead of asking the maidens to allow her to continue dreaming, she urges them to assist in her desperate search. Previously, she had been lovesick, but now she desperately needs practical assistance. It would appear that for the first time, she genuinely fears losing him; her nightmare may become her reality. So instead of urging her friends to allow her to luxuriate in her dreamlike state, she pivots to a this-worldly, activist approach, urging them to join in her search.

**5:9-6:3**

In the previous set of *pesukim*, for the first time, the woman begs the daughters of Jerusalem for their assistance in locating the *dod*. In response, the friends inquire what makes him unique:

How is your beloved better than another, O fairest of women? How is your beloved better than another That you adjure us so? (5:9)

In response to their request, just as in chapter 4 (v. 1-7) the *dod* described her physical attributes starting from the top of her head and moving downward, she now does the same for him:

My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy, Preeminent among ten thousand.

His head is finest gold, His locks are curled And black as a raven.

His eyes are like doves By watercourses, Bathed in milk, Set by a brimming pool.

His cheeks are like beds of spices, Banks of perfume His lips are like lilies; They drip flowing myrrh.

His hands are rods of gold, Studded with beryl; His belly a tablet of ivory, Adorned with sapphires.

His legs are like marble pillars Set in sockets of fine gold. He is majestic as Lebanon, Stately as the cedars.

His mouth is delicious And all of him is delightful. Such is my beloved, Such is my darling, O maidens of Jerusalem! (5:10-16)

The extent to which her response echoes his depiction is striking. Not only does she begin with the head and descend from there, but she also describes many of the same characteristics to which he had drawn attention: the dove’s eyes; reference to milk; spices dripping with myrrh; and the reference to Lebanon, which is evocative of not only his physical stature but hints to the permanence of their relationship (see 1:17). And after describing his physical features, she concludes by summing up that “all of him is delightful,” just as he concluded by declaring, “Every part of you is fair, my darling, There is no blemish in you” (4:7).

How are we to understand this section? According to scholars, including *Da’at Mikra* (p. 51), it is simply a refrain, a literary conceit intended to highlight her praise of her beloved. It is a chorus.

*Da'at Mikra* reads not just these verses, but also the subsequent three, in a similar fashion. Those verses state:

“Whither has your beloved gone, O fairest of women? Whither has your beloved turned? Let us seek him with you.”

My beloved has gone down to his garden, To the beds of spices, To browse in the gardens And to pick lilies.

I am my beloved’s And my beloved is mine; He browses among the lilies. (6:1-3)

According to Amos Chakham, this too is simply a refrain. The first chorus and refrain center around the beauty of her beloved, the second regarding his whereabouts.

Malbim offers a more compelling interpretation, in which the responses of the maidens are not mere refrains, but rather dramatic shifts in the book’s overarching narrative. To this point, the shepherdess had sufficed with luxuriant daydreams about what her life with her beloved might look like. Yet that opportunity begins to slip away as her dreams finally come crashing down. She finally gets the message and has a new message for the daughters of Jerusalem. Instead of asking them to refrain from awakening her from her reverie, she seeks their assistance in locating the *dod*. Moreover, when they finally ask why she cares so much for him, she has a ready, confident answer. And when they inquire as to his whereabouts, she again responds. No longer is she satisfied with her dreams; she now recognizes that there is no guarantee that her beloved will remain with her. So she does an about-face and sets into motion a real-life plan.

On this view, this section partakes of the book’s larger narrative: The shepherdess initially feels inadequate (1:5-6), but comes to recognize the urgency with which she must pursue her beloved, lest she lose him. She is moved from passive, willful daydreaming to dramatic, concrete activity.

This reading seems to fit better with the larger narrative of these two sections, as well as with the one before. For *Da’at Mikra*, this format could have appeared anywhere in the *Megilla*. But Malbim’s reading fits much better in the larger context of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. These calls to the Daughters of Jerusalem follow immediately on the heels of the woman’s nightmarish vision. Immediately upon awakening, she asks her friends to assist in her search, and they therefore can no longer dismiss her as a naive girl. Instead they inquire: “What makes the *dod* different than all other men?” She offers an impassioned response, and they are convinced. In turn they inquire, “Where is the *dod*?” She answers, but without full details, perhaps because she doesn’t know exactly, and perhaps because, having come to realize the vulnerability of her relationship with the *dod*, she wants to guard against any of the other Daughters of Jerusalem winning his hand. Perhaps for this reason, she concludes not with specific directions, but with a declaration of absolute devotion: “I am my beloved’s And my beloved is mine; He browses among the lilies.” (6:1-3)

On this reading, we have before us not just a lyrical chorus, but a fundamental shift in the larger narrative arc of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. No longer content to daydream about her beloved and recognizing the frightening reality that if she does not act upon her urges, she may lose him, the woman springs into action, at first recruiting assistance, then jealously guarding her relationship with her beloved.

1. As an aside, this seems to be the biblical reference from which R. Yehuda Ha-Levi drew his classic line “*Libi ba-mizrach va-ani be-sof ma’arav*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)