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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

**Shiur #17: Loving God (VII):**

**I Was Asleep, But My Heart Was Awake (Part 1)**

***Shir Ha-Shirim* as a Parable for Loving God**

In the previous *shiurim*, we addressed the supreme virtue of loving God, which negates the very existence of a person and the entire universe surrounding him in relation to the power of the divine presence, “in Whose presence everything is considered as nothing.” In this *shiur*, we will delve deeper into an additional form of contemplation in light of ideas that arise from the book of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. By examining passages from *Shir Ha-Shirim*, we will address the root of the love of God, as well as the internal process that a person must undergo in order to attain it.

Rambam viewed *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a parable for the power of the love of God, as he emphasized in two places in his writings. At the end of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, which itself is at the end of *Sefer Ha-Mada*, Rambam writes:

What is the proper [degree] of love? That one should love God with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love… **The totality of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a parable describing [this love]**. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:3)

At the end of *Moreh Nevukhim*, Rambam writes:

But when a human being has attained a true comprehension [of God], and rejoices in what he has attained, such that while speaking with others or attending to his bodily needs, his mind is all that time with God (may He be blessed) and he is constantly near Him with his heart, even though his body is with other human beings. **As the poetic parables [*Shir Ha-Shirim*],which deal with these matters, state: “I was asleep, but my heart was wakeful. Hark, my beloved knocks!”** **(*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:2).** I do not claim that this is the level of ordinary prophets, but only that it is the level of our master Moshe, about which it says: “Moshe alone shall come near the Lord” (*Shemot* 24:2); and “And he was there with the Lord” (*Shemot* 34:28); and “But you remain here with Me” (*Devarim* 5:28). (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:51 [note])

Thus, Rambam views *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a model for an individual person’s love of his Creator.

In contrast, R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, in the *Kuzari*, described how *Shir Ha-Shirim* constitutes a parable on the value of closeness and intimacy between God and the community of Israel as a whole:

Perhaps this is what Shlomo meant when he said, “I was asleep, but my heart was wakeful,” in that he compared Diaspora Jewry to one who is asleep. Although one is sleeping, the heart is still awake and beating, and this represents the constancy of prophecy that was still among them [and awaiting their return]…. This is because the Divinity only rests upon a person in accordance with the person’s receptivity to it.[[1]](#footnote-1) (*Sefer Ha-Kuzari* 2:24)[[2]](#footnote-2)

In R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s work on man’s desire to seek out a connection with God, *U-Vikashtem Mi-Sham* (*And From There You Shall Seek*), he uses *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a backdrop for his thesis. Thus, he summarizes the various perspectives on this topic:

The allegorical character of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a firm principle of the Halakha, upon which are founded both the physical sanctity of the scroll of *Shir Ha-Shirim*… However, there is a dual allegorical interpretation, one metaphysical-historical and the other metaphysical-universal. The first interprets the book as a duet sung by the Holy One, blessed be He, and the community of Israel that bursts forth from the history of this nation; the second tends to expound it as material for the duet sung by God and humankind in general, expressing the mutual longings of Creator and created.

The Midrash and the Targum affirm the historical view. This is the interpretation offered by Rashi, R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, Ibn Ezra, and others. Rambam, on the other hand, following Rabbeinu Bachya, took the universalist position…. The Kabbalists followed him in this interpretation.

**In truth, both interpretations refer to the same basic idea: the relationship between God and the world.** This connection, however, is expressed in two ways: between God and the individual and between God and the collective. **Just as God longs to cleave to the individual, He also desires to perpetuate His dwelling within a singular collective, a chosen community and a unique nation.** The tension is two-sided, being at once universalist and supra-historical, but also national and historical. In his *Iggeret Teiman* (*Epistle to Yemen*), Rambam used a quotation from *Shir Ha-Shirim* to describe the Jewish people’s historical fate. **The Kabbalists joined the two motifs – the world and the Jewish people – in their exposition of the book**; in their view, it hints at the mutual longings of the *Malka Kadisha* (Holy King) and the *Shekhina*. On the one hand, the *Shekhina* symbolizes God’s presence within the world; on the other, it symbolizes the community of Israel, in which the majesty of the Holy One, blessed be He, is revealed. ***Shir Ha-Shirim* is both a book belonging to the whole world and the singular book of the community of Israel.** (*And From There You Shall Seek*, n. 1 [Ktav 2008, p. 151])

**The Poetic Progression in *Shir Ha-Shirim***

With this background in mind, let us focus on one central image depicted in *Shir Ha-Shirim* that truly illustrates the deeper meaning of loving God. However, before we begin to address this image, let us briefly describe the progression of events in *Shir Ha-Shirim* leading up to the central song that will be the focus of the main part of our discussion.

**At the beginning of *Shir Ha-Shirim***, the “darling” recklessly seeks closeness to her beloved: “Oh give me of the kisses of your mouth… The king has brought me to his chambers” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:2-4). The darling desires this closeness even before she knows his location: “Tell me: Where do you pasture your sheep? Where do you rest them at noon?” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:7). In contrast to this request, the beloved responds in a manner that is not clear at all: “If you do not know, O fairest of women, go follow the tracks of the sheep” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:8). This response does not provide a direct answer to the question of his location. Thus, it seems that at this stage the beloved believes that the time is not yet right for a meeting, let alone for allowing her entry into his chambers.

The darling also requests that the beloved “lodge between [her] breasts” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:13), and to this he responds: “Like a lily among thorns, so is my darling among the maidens” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:2). As the song continues, even though the darling continues to speak of her lovesickness, the beloved adjures the maidens of Jerusalem: “Do not wake or rouse love until it please” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:7).

It is worth noting that at this stage the imagery of the two lovers is completely external; the descriptions never penetrate inward to the essence of their respective selves. The imagery focuses on jewelry: “Your cheeks are comely with plaited wreaths, your neck with strings of jewels” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:10). There is more general imagery as well: “Like an apple tree among trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the youths. I delight to sit in his shade” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:3).

In the **second song**, the darling describes the appearance of her beloved as “leaping over mountains, bounding over hills” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:8). The beloved then turns to her and says, “Arise my darling, my fair one” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:10). When the beloved is “gazing through the window, peering through the lattice” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:9), he beckons to her, asking her to follow him: “Let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is comely” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:14). However, she refuses to join him, invoking various excuses. Instead, she asks him to wait until “the day blows gently and the shadows flee” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:17). Immediately thereafter, the darling seeks the beloved but cannot find him. In the end, she finds him, but it is all “upon my couch at night” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 3:1).

Following these two encounters, each of which included certain elements of mutual courtship and rejection, the beloved awakens and turns to his darling. The beloved expresses his intent to marry her and to connect with her: “On his wedding day, on his day of bliss” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 3:11). The Talmud explains: “‘On his wedding day’ – this is the Giving of the Torah; ‘On his day of bliss’ – this is the construction of the Temple, which will be built speedily, in our time” (*Ta’anit* 26b). This is an expression of the total connection between the community of Israel and God.

In light of this, when the beloved turns to his darling here, he does so directly, without any intermediary: “Ah, you are fair, my darling, ah, you are fair, with your dove-like eyes!” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:15). The beloved describes the objective beauty of his darling. In addition, even though he understands that it will be possible to delay their meeting, he is not willing to follow his darling’s suggestion and “set out… for the hills of spices (*bater*)” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:17), hills that allude to splitting up (*bitur*) and parting ways. Instead, he intends to go “to the mount of myrrh, to the hill of frankincense” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 4:6).

It may be that this interaction represents the stage of betrothal, and when the beloved continues describing the darling’s beauty after this point, he generally speaks of her physical perfection: “Every part of you is fair, my darling, there is no blemish in you” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 4:7). At this stage, the beloved goes on to describe the extent to which his darling has powerfully influenced him and penetrated his heart and soul: “You have captured my heart, my own, my bride” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 4:9).

At this point, we have already reached the stage of marriage, and the descriptions of beauty advance to the hidden depths of “a garden locked… a sealed-up spring” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 4:12). At first, the beloved hopes and expects to hear his darling’s response, and he indeed manages to elicit one such response from her: “Awake, O north wind, come, O south wind! … Let my beloved come to his garden and enjoy its luscious fruits!” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 4:16). Finally, once the lovers have married, the following response will be realized: “I have come to my garden, my own, my bride; I have plucked my myrrh and spice, eaten my honey and honeycomb, drunk my wine and my milk. Eat, lovers, and drink” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:1).

**“I Was Asleep, But My Heart Was Wakeful” – After Marriage**

Now we arrive at the central image of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, which appears in the final chapter, following the marriage of the lovers:[[3]](#footnote-3)

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.” I had taken off my robe – was I to don it again? I had bathed my feet – was I to soil them again? My beloved thrust his hand through the latch, and my heart was stirred for him. I rose to let in my beloved; my hands dripped myrrh – my fingers, flowing myrrh – upon the handles of the bolt. 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. I met the watchmen who patrol the town; they struck me, they bruised me. The guards of the walls stripped me of my mantle. I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem! If you meet my beloved, tell him this: that I am faint with love. How is your beloved better than another, O fairest of women? How is your beloved better than another that you adjure us so? 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!

“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. You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirtza, comely as Jerusalem, awesome as bannered hosts. (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:2-6:4)

In the beginning of this passage, the connection between the beloved and the darling starts to experience difficulties. The beloved, knocking at the door in the middle of the night, goes unanswered. Even the additional effort that the beloved expends – “My beloved thrust his hand through the latch” – provokes only a lazy response. By the time the darling reaches the door and opens it, the beloved has already gone his own way.

However, once this happens, the darling suddenly comes to her senses. Without giving herself a moment of respite, she sets out in search of her beloved, not stopping until she finds him, though she knows that her life will be full of hardship until she reaches her desired goal. It is worth focusing on the two initial stages in which the beloved expresses his request to approach his darling, and then on the stages of search and hardships that the darling experiences in her efforts to rejuvenate her youthful love for her beloved.

**“But My Beloved Had Turned and Gone”**

When the beloved knocks, all the while uttering precious words of affection – “Let me in, my own, my darling, my faultless dove!” – he is answered with silence, or at most, with simple laziness: “I had taken off my robe… I had bathed my feet.”The darling’s thoughts are wrapped up in herself and she feels no need to answer the call of her beloved. It seems that apathy and disinterest are the dominant factors at this stage.

At the next stage, the beloved does not give up, but rather tries his hand in a different way: “My beloved thrust his hand through the latch.” This time, the darling cannot remain apathetic, but says that “my heart was stirred for him.” The darling makes the decision to get up and open the door for him to enter.

However, she does this demonstrably slowly and lazily. Even though the verses do not mention this explicitly, they point this out through the cadence inherent in the verses. A full verse made up of four segments separates between “I rose to let in my beloved” and “I opened the door for my beloved,” which suggests that the events happened at a slow pace[[4]](#footnote-4) and that the darling hesitated on the way to the door.

It seems that in her heart of hearts, the darling was not fully confident in her decision to reciprocate her beloved’s efforts to reconnect. Accordingly, *Chazal* interpreted this verse in the following manner: “‘I rose to let in my beloved’ – this is *Yotzer* (*Shacharit*); ‘My hands dripped myrrh’ – this is *Musaf*;‘My fingers, flowing myrrh’ – this is *Mincha*;‘Upon the handles of the bolt’ – this is *Ne’ila*” (Midrash, cited in *Kad Ha-kemach* by Rabbeinu Bachya).[[5]](#footnote-5) There is no day during the year on which a person more eagerly seeks out a renewed connection and encounter with God than on Yom Kippur. Nonetheless, the *midrash* warns us not to miss this moment.

Sometimes a person gets the impression that all is under his control. He confidently relies on the assumption that when the moment arrives he will succeed in renewing his encounter with God and manage to draw closer to the “beloved.” However, the verse teaches us that a person can easily miss this moment, only reaching the destination after the heavenly gates have already been sealed. As we recite during *Ne’ila*: “Open us a gate at the time of the locking of the gate, for day is passing. The day will pass; the sun will set and pass; we will come before Your gates.” Sometimes it may happen that by the time a person opens his heart for an encounter with God, “My beloved had turned and gone.” This is precisely what happened to the darling in this chapter; she wanted to adorn herself properly in preparation for her meeting with her beloved,[[6]](#footnote-6) but she missed the moment.

In practice, we find two factors that can lead to missing the moment, as the darling did:

1. **Simple laziness**: “I had taken off my robe… I had bathed my feet” – in other words, this is a bad time, we can meet another time, etc.
2. **Rationalization**: The feeling that one must reach perfection before meeting with God, so that one focuses on secondary issues under the pretext of preparations. By remaining preoccupied with marginal matters, one runs the risk of missing the boat.

**“I Was Faint Because of What He Said”**

From the moment it becomes clear to the darling that she missed her beloved, she makes the decision to find him at any cost. The darling will not rest and will not be silent until she finds him and reconnects with him.

However, the darling is in for a long and wearying trek, one that is not “hedged about with lilies” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 7:3). First of all, no matter how much she calls and cries out for her beloved, she receives no response whatsoever. In addition, when “the watchmen who patrol the town” find her wailing in the streets at night, they strike and bruise her. Their purpose is not merely to cause the darling pain, but more significantly to convince her to give up hope of finding her beloved and to seek out a new lover.

To this end, the guards of the walls strip the darling of her mantle, the symbol of her marriage and her marital status. As Rambam writes:

When a woman performs any of the following acts, she is considered to have violated the Jewish faith: **she goes to the marketplace or a lane with openings at both ends without wearing a mantle like all other women**, even though her hair is covered by a handkerchief. (*Hilkhot Ishut* 24:12)

Stripping the darling of her mantle broadcasts a clear message of disconnection between the darling and her former husband.

What the watchmen attempt to do using force and violence, beating and bruising the darling, the maidens of Jerusalem attempt to do through sweet talking, flattery, and seduction. The darling adjures them to send a message to her beloved regarding the intensity of her great love for him: “I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem! If you meet my beloved, tell him this: that I am faint with love” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:8). To this, the maidens of Jerusalem respond: “How is your beloved better than another, O fairest of women? How is your beloved better than another that you adjure us so?” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:9). In other words, you are the fairest of women; why should you toil in this way in search of this particular man? There are certainly many such men in the world, and you – the fairest of women – should have no problem winning the affection of any of them.

It appears that at this moment the darling was forced to provide **herself** with a cogent response to the challenge posed by the maidens of Jerusalem. It appears that this is the very challenge that formed the basis for the hesitation and the laziness that the darling displayed in response to the beloved’s knocking and thrusting his hand through the latch.

The marriage, it seems, was the initiative of the beloved, who chose his darling from among the maidens because of her great beauty (“Every part of you is fair, my darling, there is no blemish in you”). The darling, on the other hand, did not share her beloved’s perspective, as she did not yet know him well. Even though she responded to his courtship and agreed to marry him, she never completely grasped his nature. So when the maidens of Jerusalem pose their pointed question, “How is your beloved better than another?” the darling must provide an answer – more for her own sake than for the sake of the maidens – regarding the true nature of this man. In other words, what has caused her to choose to undergo so much toil and suffering in order to find her beloved?

At this key moment, the deep, fundamental recognition of the beloved’s uniqueness penetrates into the heart of the darling. For the first time in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, we encounter a full, fundamental, head-to-toe description of the beloved: “His head is finest gold… set in sockets of fine gold” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:11).

In the end, the darling responds to herself and to the maidens of Jerusalem: “His mouth is delicious and all of him is delightful. Such is my beloved, such is my darling, O maidens of Jerusalem!” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:16). When they hear the response of the darling, the maidens of Jerusalem react in a surprising, unexpected fashion: “Whither has your beloved gone, O fairest of women? Whither has your beloved turned? Let us seek him with you” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 6:1). The maidens of Jerusalem finally understand that the beloved in question is unique; indeed, there is truly none other like him. Therefore, it will not do to wait until he is found by chance. With a beloved like this, one must seek him out wherever he may be until he is found.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. Even though R. Yehuda Ha-Levi’s perspective focuses on the community of Israel as a whole, the principle that he innovates (“This is because the Divinity…”) relates by extension to each individual person in his connection to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Compare this to Rashi’s view, expressed in his commentary on *Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:2; also see below for more on this matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Note the textual break between the passage describing the marriage in *Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:1 and the following passage: “I was asleep, but my heart was wakeful.” This indicates that the second passage describes an event that took place after some time had passed since the wedding. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This feature is typical of Biblical stories. When the *Tanakh* wants to describe events that happen at a fast pace, without hesitation or misgivings, it describes a series of actions in sequence. We see this in the Torah’s description of Esav: “**He ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esav spurn** the birthright” (*Bereishit* 25:34). The verse features five consecutive verbs, stressing Esav’s fast pace and determination to sell his birthright. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My teacher and master, R. Yehuda Amital *z”l*, would begin his *sicha* preceding *Ne’ila* on Yom Kippur each year with this *midrash*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The verse mentions myrrh twice: “My hands dripped myrrh – my fingers, flowing myrrh.” This repetition alludes to the darling’s desire to adorn herself in preparation for her beloved. This is similar to the account in *Megillat Esther* of the girls who beautified themselves before meeting with the king (*Esther* 2:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)