



# ישיבת הר עציון

## Yeshivat Har Etzion – Israel Koschitzky VBM Parsha Digest, Year VI, #35 Shabbat Chol HaMo'ed & Shevi'i shel Pesach 5784

Selected and Adapted by Rabbi Dov Karoll

### Quote from the Rosh Yeshiva

Each year, as we read the magnificent love story of Shir Ha-shirim, we encounter the sacred flames of passion between the Jewish people and the Almighty expressed in the work. Whose heart wouldn't be stirred by the depiction of the Dod (male lover), symbolizing God, knocking at his beloved's door, begging her to let him in, or by the riveting drama of the Re'aya (female lover) – the Jewish people – returning to her beloved as the mutual bonds of affection are restored?...

Just as God did not forsake His love of Am Yisrael in the wake of the sin of the Golden Calf, so does the Dod retain his affection for the Re'aya even after she does not open the door for him. Great is repentance motivated by love (teshuva me-ahava), for it brings man closer to God, and great is the love and compassion of the Almighty for His people! -Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein

Taken from: <https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/pesach/your-time-love-has-arrived>

### Shabbat Chol HaMo'ed: Shir HaShirim Holy of Holies

Based on an article by Harav Yaakov Medan

Based on: <https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/pesach/holy-holies>



For the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which Shir Ha-Shirim was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy, but Shir Ha-Shirim is the holy of holies. (Yadayim 3:5)

This declaration of R. Akiva is the clear ruling of the Sanhedrin. This verdict is based on the identification of the male beloved (dod) and the female companion (raya), the lovers mentioned in this book, with God and the Nation of Israel. However, can this be proven from the text itself? On the simplest level, these verses appear to be erotic poetry, love songs between a man and a woman of flesh and blood. What is the textual basis for declaring them sacrosanct?

“Your Waist is a Mound of Wheat”?!

If we read Shir Ha-Shirim in its simplest sense, we are left somewhat dumbfounded by the description of the female form of the companion, as spelled out in 7:2-5:

Your graceful legs are like jewels, / the work of an artist's hands. // Your navel is a rounded goblet / that never lacks blended wine.

Your waist is a mound of wheat / encircled by lilies. // Your breasts are like 2 fawns, / like twins of a gazelle.

Your neck is like an ivory tower. / Your eyes are the pools of Cheshbon by the gate of Bat Rabim.

Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon / looking toward Damascus.

Your head crowns you like the Carmel. / Your flowing hair is like crimson; the king is held captive by its tresses.

Some of these descriptions are bizarre, and they do not seem complimentary at all. The companion's waist being like a mound of wheat does not appear flattering in the least. “Your eyes are the pools of Cheshbon” does not appear appropriate, and “Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon” seems profoundly strange. Nor does it seem logical to declare “Your breasts are like 2 fawns.”

There is a single solution to all of our questions: These appellations describe the body of a female gazelle (tzeviya), not of a human woman. This is not very surprising, as the beloved is also compared to the tzevi in appearance (2:9) and behavior (2:8, 2:17). The nose of the gazelle is large and prominent, and its eyes are large and clear like “the pools of Cheshbon.” Its white belly is particularly noticeable when contrasted with its yellow-gray hide, much like a white mound of wheat amidst a field of stalks. The tzeviya is also known for its warm maternal nature, so that when its twins nestle close to suckle, they obscure her breasts.

Still, other descriptions in Shir Ha-Shirim do seem appropriate for a human woman: “Your hair is like a flock of goats” (4:1); “Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon” (4:3), etc. But these descriptions relate only to the upper, exposed parts of the body, not those that are usually concealed.

Clearly, some aspects of the relationship described in Shir Ha-Shirim must be understood as metaphorical. Indubitably, King Shelomo had no intention to write a love song between a tzevi and a tzeviya! Since we have no choice but to say that this book employs parables, there is nothing to stop us from seeing Shir Ha-Shirim as an analogy for the relationship between God and the Jewish People, rather than between flesh-and-blood human beings.

#### The Companion and the Land of Israel

Let us consider another description of the raya (4:1-5):

Your hair is like a flock of goats / descending from the hills of Gilead. // Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn... / your mouth is beautiful... // Your brow behind your veil / is like a pomegranate slice.

The descriptions of the beauty of the raya are based on the geographical & topographical beauty of the Land of Israel. Her black hair is like a herd of black goats descending from the mountains of Gilead to quench their thirst in the Jordan. This refers to a Damascus goat common to the area. The white teeth of the raya are like the white sheep coming out of the Jordan to climb back to Gilead.

The exceptional term used for mouth here is midbar (which might also refer to her speech), inescapably recalling the midbar, the wilderness of the pastureland, characteristic of the eastern lands of the Tribe of Binyamin (see Shoftim 20:42). The pomegranate slice (pelach ha-rimon) to which the raya’s brow is likened recalls the place name Sela Ha-Rimon, adjacent to the midbar of Binyamin (see *ibid.* v. 47; I Shmuel 14:2). The conclusion invokes “two fawns (ofarim), twins of a tzeviya,” recalling more sites in the same area of eastern Binyamin: Ofra, Taybeh (Tzeviya).

Elsewhere, the raya is compared to capital cities – to Jerusalem and to Tirtza in the tribal lands of Menasheh (6:4). Pelach ha-rimon is mentioned there as well (6:7), perhaps a reference to Gat Rimon, a priestly city in Menasheh (Yehoshua 21:25).

The beginning of the seventh chapter is also notable:

Come back, come back, Shulamit; / come back, come back, that we may look upon you!

Why would you look upon the Shulamit / as on the dancing of twin camps?

Regarding the appellation Shulamit, once cannot help but think of Shunamit, the term for women from the town of Shunem (I Melakhim 1-2; II Melakhim 4), next to Givat Ha-Moreh in the Yizre’el Valley. The final phrase as well, “mecholat ha-machanayim,” recalls 2 places on the east bank of the Jordan, Avel Mechola and Machanayim. The verses then explicitly invoke Cheshbon, the tower of Lebanon and the Carmel, as noted above.

The idea is clear: the beauty of the raya is like the beauty of the Land of Israel. Now, if the raya is compared to the Land of Israel, it is reasonable to assume that this is a metaphor for the People of Israel; the Torah is its soul, while the Land of Israel is its body.

“Like the Tents of Kedar”

Let us return to the first chapter, where the following metaphor is used to describe the raya (recall that Kedar is a son of Yishmael):

Dark am I, yet beautiful, / daughters of Jerusalem, // like the tents of Kedar, / like the curtains of Shlomo.

Do not stare at me because I am darkened, / because the sun has gazed upon me.

My mother’s sons were angry with me / and made me take care of the vineyards; / my own vineyard I had to neglect.

The simple meaning of the verse can be grasped, as we follow the thread of each idea: Dark am I [like the tents of Kedar], yet beautiful [like the curtains of Shlomo]. The raya’s tan is considered uncomplimentary, so she feels compelled to justify her sun-blasted appearance due to hard labor outside. Nevertheless, she also claims the beauty of Shlomo’s curtains, the finest materials worked by the finest artisans. Though her sunburnt appearance is far from impressive, her inner beauty remains, the raya maintains. Thus, the metaphor is a pavilion that looks like the tents of Kedar from the outside but the curtains of Shlomo from the inside.

In fact, just such a paradox of a structure is what Moshe constructs in the desert. The Mishkan has 2 sets of curtains: The inner ones were made of the finest materials by the finest artisans, connected by golden clasps, but its outer appearance is blackened, like the tents of Kedar, and its outer curtains are connected by bronze clasps (Shemot 26:1-11):

Make the tabernacle (Mishkan) with 10 curtains of finely twisted linen and sky-blue, crimson and scarlet yarn, with cherubim woven into them by a skilled worker... Then make 50 gold clasps and use them to fasten the curtains together so that the tabernacle is a unit.

Make curtains of goat hair for the tent over the tabernacle — 11 altogether... Then make 50 bronze clasps and put them in the loops

to fasten the tent together as a unit.

These goatskin curtains are black, and they can be seen to this day in Bedouin tents. These curtains are durable and able to withstand inclement weather, and they protect very well the inner curtains, which depict, through their cherubim, the Divine Presence.

The raya in Shir Ha-Shirim is thus similar to the structure of the Mishkan. This description is not appropriate for a flesh-and-blood woman; it makes much more sense as a metaphor for the Nation of Israel.

#### Shepherd and King

Let us devote some time to the dod, the beloved of the raya. The poem describes him sometimes as a shepherd and sometimes as king. As a shepherd, the tents of Kedar are quite appropriate, as shepherds in the wilderness would indeed make their tents out of goatskin curtains. As a king, they are Shlomo's curtains, which have regal glory.

But what flesh-and-blood person fits this bill, being both a shepherd and a king? The king and the shepherd do not exist in the same social class; how can the poem synthesize them into 1 character? It makes sense that this character is not flesh-and-blood at all, but rather a metaphor for God Himself, as He was the shepherd while the Israelites made their way through the wilderness. The shepherd leading a flock through the wilderness must be armed with staff, sword, or crook to drive off malefactors, be they animal (predators) or human (thieves). David notes this (I Shmuel 17:34-35):

But David said to Shaul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it."

Just as the shepherd must protect the flock of sheep or herd of goats, human leaders must protect those who put their trust in those leaders:

Therefore, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done, declares the Lord. I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing, declares the Lord. (Yirmeyahu 23:2-4)

The shepherds who have scattered God's flock will be replaced with faithful ones (Mikha 5:4-5):

And he will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land and march through our fortresses. We will raise against them 7 shepherds, even 8 princes of men, Who will rule the land of Assyria with the sword... He will deliver us from the Assyrians when they invade our land and march across our borders.

Just as the shepherd guards the sheep, God protects His people, and He saves them from every malefactor and misfortune throughout their sojourn in the wilderness. At that time, God could be described as a shepherd in the tents of Kedar.

However, in the days of Shlomo, once the Israelites have entered the Land taken possession of it and they have reached a period of peace and tranquility, God no longer appears as a shepherd, but rather as a king. He is the victorious monarch leading his armies to His sanctuary, to His temple, to the curtains of Shlomo (Tehillim 24:7-10):

Lift up your heads, you gates; / be lifted up, you ancient doors, / that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory? / The Lord strong and mighty, / the Lord mighty in battle...

The description of the dod as a ro'eh and as a king complements the descriptions of the raya with terminology taken from the Mishkan. These 2 phenomena point to the fact that the members of this couple are God and the Nation of Israel.

#### "A Song of My Beloved as to His Vineyard"

The partner of the raya has 2 appellations: sometimes "dod" and sometimes "Shlomo." Obviously, this is not meant to be a case of polyandry, with 1 woman having 2 lovers. Since the dod is God, the poet must mean to allude to 2 different ways of divine manifestation. Sometimes He reveals Himself as a dod and sometimes as Shlomo.

There is another place in Tanakh in which we find a double metaphor for God, and there as well He is referred to as a dod. This is the famous parable of the vineyard from the Book of Yeshayahu (5:1-2):

Let me sing, I pray you, for my loved one, / A song of my beloved as to his vineyard.

My loved one had a vineyard / on a fertile hillside. // He dug it up and cleared it of stones / and planted it with the choicest vines.

He built a watchtower in it / & cut out a winepress as well. // Then he sought a crop of good grapes, / but it yielded only bad fruit.

The vineyard in this metaphor represents the inhabitants of Judea, or perhaps the inhabitants of Jerusalem. God is both "my loved one (yedidi)," who is singing the song, as well as "my beloved (dodi)," who owns the vineyard. Since this is about the construction of

Jerusalem, it makes sense that these 2 appellations alluded to the great kings of Israel – King David, who is referred to as “dod,” and King Shlomo, whose other name is Yedidya (II Shemuel 12:24-25). God is sometimes a dod, and this is how he relates to David. At other times, He appears as He revealed himself to Shlomo, as the Talmud (Shevuot 35b) declares: “Every ‘Shlomo’ mentioned in Shir Ha-Shirim is sacred [as a reference to God]: the Song to Him whose is the peace (asher ha-shalom shelo).”

The name Shlomo in Shir Ha-Shirim compares the partner to a king in his palace, with servants obeying his word. The relationship of Shlomo and his raya is marriage in the fullest sense of the word. We find mentions of a bridal canopy, a bed, a private chamber, wine, and kisses:

The song of songs, which is of Shlomo. // Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth— / for your love is more delightful than wine. // Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; / your name is like perfume poured out.

No wonder the young women love you! / Take me away with you — let us hurry! // Let the king bring me into his chambers.

We rejoice and delight in you; / we will praise your love more than wine. // How right they are to adore you! (1:1-4)

Look! It is Shlomo’s bed, / encircled by 60 warriors, / the noblest of Israel, All of them wearing the sword, / all experienced in battle, // Each with his sword at his side, / prepared for the terrors of the night. // King Shlomo made for himself the palanquin; / he made it of wood from Lebanon. // Its posts he made of silver, / its base of gold. // Its seat was upholstered with purple, / its interior inlaid with love. // Daughters of Jerusalem, come out, / and look, you daughters of Zion. // Look on King Shlomo wearing a crown, / the crown with which his mother crowned him / on the day of his wedding, / the day his heart rejoiced. (3:7-11)

Shlomo had a vineyard... / he let out his vineyard to tenants. / Each was to bring for its fruit / 1000 shekels of silver. (8:11)

These descriptions fit the era of King Shlomo, a period of peace and tranquility throughout the land:

So King Shlomo ruled over all Israel. (I Melakhim 4:1)

The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank, and they were happy. And Shlomo ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Shlomo’s subjects all his life. (Ibid. vv. 20-21)

For he ruled over all the kingdoms west of the Euphrates River... and had peace on all sides. During Shlomo’s lifetime, Judah and Israel, from Dan to Be’er Sheva, lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree. (Ibid. vv. 24-25)

On the other hand, in places in which Shir Ha-Shirim mentions the dod, we find searching, temporary separation, momentary encounters, & concealment. The relationship of the raya with the dod reflects the period of betrothal, during which the love between the partners is passionate and not bound by institutions, shattering all rules and frameworks, in which there are absences & crises:

All night long on my bunk I sought the one my heart loves; / I sought him but did not find him. / I will get up now and go about the city, / through its streets and squares; / I will search for the one my heart loves. / So I sought him but did not find him.

The watchmen found me / as they made their rounds in the city. / “Have you seen the one my heart loves?” // Scarcely had I passed them / when I found the one my heart loves. / I held him & would not let him go / till I had brought him to my mother’s house, / to the room of the one who conceived me. (3:1-4)

I slept but my heart was awake. / Listen! My beloved is knocking: / “Open to me, my sister, my companion, / my dove, my flawless one. / My head is drenched with dew, / my hair with the dampness of the night.” / I have taken off my robe — / must I put it on again? // I have washed my feet — / must I soil them again?

My beloved thrust his hand through the latch-opening; / my heart began to pound for him.

I arose to open for my beloved, / and my hands dripped with myrrh, // my fingers with flowing myrrh, / on the handles of the bolt. I opened for my beloved, / but my beloved had left; he was gone. // My heart sank at his departure. / I sought him but did not find him. / I called him but he did not answer. / The watchmen found me / as they made their rounds in the city.

They beat me, they bruised me; / they took away my cloak, / those watchmen of the walls!

Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you — / if you find my beloved, / what will you tell him? / Tell him I am faint with love. (5:2-8)

These descriptions recall verses from Tehillim in which King David delves into the difficult periods of distance in his relationship with God. His passionate love, his powerful yearning for an encounter, his ecstasy when the longed-for rendezvous is finally realized.

Of David: // The Lord is my light and my salvation — / whom shall I fear? // The Lord is the stronghold of my life — / of whom shall I be afraid? // When the wicked advance against me / to devour me, // it is my enemies and my foes / who will stumble and fall. // Though an army besiege me, / my heart will not fear; // Though war break out against me, / even then I will be confident.

One thing I ask from the Lord, / this only do I seek: // That I may dwell in the house of the Lord / all the days of my life, // To look upon the pleasantness of the Lord / & to seek him in His temple. // For in the day of trouble / He will keep me safe in his dwelling; // He will hide me in the shelter of His sacred tent / & set me high upon a rock. // Then my head will be exalted / above the enemies who surround me; // At His sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; / I will sing and make music to the Lord. (27:1-6) A song of ascents. // Lord, remember David / and all his self-denial. // He swore an oath to the Lord, / he made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob: // “I will not enter my house / or go to my sleeping-couch, // I will allow no sleep to my eyes / or slumber to my eyelids, // Till I find a place for the Lord, / a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob.” (132:1-5)

David does not merit to build the Temple, but he devotes his life to its construction, preparing blueprints, assembling building materials, and readying his son Shlomo to build it. In David's era, the relationship with God is like the period of betrothal between God and the Nation of Israel. With this attitude, God is called “dod” in Shir Ha-Shirim.

Since the verse uses these 2 attitudes, we have no choice but to say that Shir Ha-Shirim cannot be understood in its simple sense, but rather as a metaphor for the love between God and Israel.

## Sefirat HaOmer: Machshava / Musar

### Days of Tikkun Ha-Middot

By Rav Shlomo Levy



Based on: <https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/pesach/days-tikkun-ha-middot>

From the second day of Pesach until Shavuot, we count the 49 days of sefirat ha-omer. What is the purpose of these days?

Let us first consider the fundamental prohibition of the week of Pesach (Shulchan Arukh, OC 447:1): “Even the smallest amount of leaven on Passover makes whatever mixture it is in — whether of its kind or of another — forbidden, even to derive benefit from it.”

This halakhic principle means that if even a tiny crumb of chametz falls into a large dish on Pesach, all of the food becomes forbidden. The Zohar (Bereishit 226b) explains the spiritual significance of chametz on Pesach in the following manner:

Israel began to enter the holy portion of the Holy One, blessed be He, and to destroy the leaven from within them. These are the mistaken alternatives that hold sway among the pagan nations, which are called “other gods” or “foreign gods.” They are called leaven as well, the Evil Inclination. [Israel began] to enter the matza, to enter the holy portion of the Holy One, blessed be He.

Even a tiny “crumb” of the yetzer ha-ra, the Evil Inclination, can cause tremendous damage to one's spiritual wellbeing.

Now let us consider the words of R. Elazar Ha-Moda'i (Yoma 76a): “Which attribute is greater, that of good or that of punishment? You must say that it the attribute of good over the attribute of punishment.” Applying this to our case, if 1 crumb of the yetzer ha-ra can cause tremendous damage, 1 crumb or 1 spark of the yetzer ha-tov, the Good Inclination, must have the capacity to bring about massive achievements. At times, we may underestimate the power of 1 moment of mitzva fulfillment, of repentance, or of good deeds. However, we must recall that such a moment contains within it staggering potential.

This touches upon an essential aspect of the character of Pesach. The holiday of Passover is an occasion on which God expresses His passionate love for the Jewish People. Indeed, we read in Shir Ha-Shirim about God's eagerness to bring about the Exodus: “Listen! My beloved! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills” (2:8). On Pesach, we have the opportunity to connect to God quickly, without preparation. Although Pesach commemorates a 1-time event, it is the source from which the Jewish People derive power to continue our journey.

In parallel, the holiday of Pesach is also the starting point for the period of sefirat ha-omer. Counting from the day of the offering of the omer reflects a process that is the opposite of Pesach. When it comes to sefirat ha-omer, there are no shortcuts or express lanes. On the contrary, we must work toward Shavuot in an intensive and gradual manner. As we count, we make our way slowly and moderately towards the Giving of the Torah.

In fact, both approaches are essential; neither can exist without the other. On the one hand, it is necessary to have an orderly framework in order to advance, to accomplish, and to achieve. One-time phenomena have only a short-term effect. For this reason, a strong and stable foundation is indispensable. On the other hand, there is great importance to remembering unique events, those that defy the norm, and we must extract the maximum from such occurrences.

For example, if a poor person knocks on the door, the homeowner may not claim that the mitzva of tzedaka is not included in his

daily schedule of serving God. One must rejoice when a mitzva falls into his lap, as if finding a great treasure; the mitzva must be carried out willingly and wholeheartedly. This is true when it comes to the fulfillment of mitzvot, which express our love for God, but also when it comes to events in which we sense God's love for us.

Thus, it is only the combination of the 2 which creates an even, effective path to proceed in the service of God.

To what are we supposed to dedicate the days of sefirat ha-omer? This is a period of tikkun ha-middot, improving our attributes, bettering our character. Some mistakenly believe that the essence of serving God is to fulfill active mitzvot, while tikkun ha-middot is an esoteric pursuit for the righteous and saintly. But although fulfilling the mitzvot is indeed a critical element of divine service, at the core of the human mind and soul lie the middot. It is specifically these middot that define the self of any person, not practical actions.

However, tikkun ha-middot is not only significant in terms of improving one's interpersonal behavior; this pursuit also connects one to the Torah. Every mitzva in the Torah is tied to 1 of the middot, so that improving middot allows a person to connect, truly and deeply, to the Torah itself.

Let us consider, for example, Rambam's organization of his Mishneh Torah. He places a unique set of mitzvot in the Book of Ahava (Love or Adoration): prayer, blessings, circumcision, tefillin, and tzitzit. This is because one must work on the attribute of love in order to improve one's relationship to these mitzvot.

Unfortunately, many people are unaware of this point, and thus they fail to sufficiently invest in tikkun ha-middot. If a father sees his son fail to wash his hands before eating bread, he will certainly rebuke him, but will he do the same if his son exhibits arrogance? Often he will not, and sometime he may in fact be pleased by his son's aggression and strength.

These are issues that are certainly central to the days of sefirat ha-omer, a period of tikkun ha-middot. Over the coming days, we must work harder to improve our character. This will allow us to be fully prepared for the holiday of Shavuot, as a prerequisite for receiving the Torah anew — as we do each year.

## Shevi'i shel Pesach: Tanakh

### The Song at the Sea

By Rav Michael Hattin



Based on: <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-beshalach/beshalach-song-sea-0>

#### INTRODUCTION

And it came to pass that when Pharaoh sent the people forth, the Lord did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was near. This was because the Lord said: “lest the people have a change of heart when they see warfare, and return to Egypt.” So the Lord caused the people to turn towards the way of the wilderness, to Yam Suf, and the people of Israel went up from the land of Egypt armed. Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him, for he had surely exacted an oath from the people of Israel saying: “the Lord will surely remember you and you shall then take my bones out of here with you!” (13:17-19).

Last week, we read of Israel's triumphant march from Egypt. Their former taskmasters looked on in disbelief, now bent over and broken by the final hammer blow of the slaying of their first born, as Israel took leave of them, seemingly forever, and journeyed forwards to the land of Canaan. Unexpectedly, though, God redirected their buoyant steps away from the more traveled route along the Mediterranean coastline, the so-called “Way of the Land of the Philistines,” to instead enter the foreboding wilderness beyond Yam Suf. There, He bid Israel to encamp along the coast of the azure sea, and with profound relief they did so. The people were only too happy to break from their ceaseless march and to serenely contemplate their first true taste of freedom, even as the deep blue waves rhythmically lapped at the rocky shore.

But that moment of existential tranquility was short-lived, as Pharaoh's charioteers, thirsting for vengeance, unexpectedly appeared on the horizon like a whirlwind. The people of Israel were instantly thrown into a frenzied panic, many of them now fervently wishing that they had never left the cruel crucible of Egyptian bondage at all. Others, few in number, spoke of fighting, of dying as proud, liberated men, but most looked on petrified and paralyzed, intellectually aware of the dawning danger but emotionally unable to take any initiative to secure their own survival.

#### FROM DESPERATION TO SALVATION

Overwhelmed, the people cried out to God while focusing their intense distress on hapless Moshe (14:11-12):

They said to Moshe: “were there no graves in Egypt that you took us out to perish in the wilderness? What have you done to us

to take us out of Egypt? Did we not say to you while we were yet in Egypt: “Let us alone to serve the Egyptians, for serving them is better than perishing in the wilderness”?

Though himself unsure of God’s intentions, Moshe responded with confidence and with courage (14:13-14):

Moshe said to the people: “Do not be afraid! Be steadfast and you will see the salvation of God that He will do for you this day, for though you see Egypt today, you will never see them again. God will wage war for you, while you be silent!”

Soon thereafter, the sea miraculously parted, and Israel descended uncertainly into its depths, while the ensuing Egyptian pursuit was forcefully and violently checked by the cascading waters. Triumphant, the people of Israel broke forth in song, praising God’s matchless prowess and now faithfully embracing Moshe as their rightful leader. The Song at the Sea, whose soaring and lyrical verses comprise Chapter 15 of Sefer Shemot, is one of the great epic songs of the Hebrew Bible. Before considering some of its general motifs, we take note of its curious graphical appearance, for in the Torah scroll (and in good editions of the Tanakh) it stands out from the rest of its context as something that is visually unique.

#### THE UNIQUE GRAPHIC FORM OF THE SONG

The Rabbis of the Talmud referred to this graphic form in the following passage (Megilla 16b):

Rabbi Chanina bar Papa said: Rav Sheila of Kefar Timrata expounded that all of the passages of Biblical song are written as “half bricks arranged upon whole bricks” and “whole bricks arranged upon half bricks.” The exceptions to the rule are the list of the rogue Haman’s 10 sons (Esther 9:6-9) and the list of the kings of Canaan, for they are composed as half bricks arranged upon half bricks, and whole bricks upon whole bricks. What is the reason for the distinction? So that they should have no resurgence from their downfall.

Rav Sheila means to say that each line of the song is divided into a stitch of text (half brick) that is then separated by a blank space (whole brick) from the concluding stitch of text, while the next line of song inverts the sequence, like this:

Then Moshe and the people of Israel sang this song to God and they said: I will sing out to God for He was triumphant,	horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea!	My strength
and song are God, He is my salvation,		this is my Lord and I will glorify Him, the Lord of my ancestors
and I shall exalt Him.	God is a man of war, God is His name.	Pharaoh’s chariots
and his host He cast into the sea,		his choicest captains have been drowned in the sea of reeds...

The overall effect of the technique is to create an appearance of stacked elements, as each line of text sits solidly above a space and each space above a line. The commentaries regarded the visual impact of the form as suggesting unusual stability, like a section of wall that had been solidly constructed by alternating its successive layers of bricks. They interpreted the graphic structure literally, as an expression of the enduring permanence or truth of the song’s message.

#### THE GRAPHIC FORM OF OTHER SONGS

In contrast, the defeated Canaanite kings mentioned in Yehoshua chapter 12 (or the ten sons of Haman named in Megillat Esther chapter 9) are arranged as lengthy lists, like this:

These are the kings of the land that Yehoshua & the people of Israel struck down, on the western side of the River Jordan. (Their territories extended) from Ba’al Gad in the Lebanon valley to the cleft hills that ascend to Se’ir; Yehoshua gave it to the tribes of Israel as an inheritance in accordance with their divisions. (The lands included) the hills, the lowlands, the plain, the streambeds, the wilderness and the dry southern lands, the territories of the Chittite, Amorite, Canaanite, Perizite, Chivite, and Yevusite.

The king of Yericho	one;
The king of the A'i by Beit El	one;
The king of Jerusalem	one;
The king of Chevron	one...
All of the kings thirty	and one (12:7-24).

Here, each line of the song is devoted to the mention of a single 1 of the vanquished kings. It is divided into a longer stitch of text (whole brick) that is then separated by a blank space from the shorter concluding stitch of text (half brick). Each successive line repeats the sequence, effectively creating 2 discrete columns of text separated by a large space.

As above, the reason advanced by the Talmud to explain this other atypical form draws its inspiration from the world of structural engineering. Up until the modern period and the advent of steel-reinforced concrete and curtain wall construction, a building’s

maximum height was strictly controlled by the relatively limited compressive strength of its material. Greater height could only be achieved by widening the base of the structure so that the load could be more widely distributed. Buildings that attempted to maintain a uniform floor area over the course of their rise would become inherently less stable once the design limits of their material had been reached, and typically could not exceed 6-8 stories. Thus, suggests the Talmud, the written form of these other songs is also an integral part of their interpretation. The tall, slender columns of text preserving the names of wicked Haman's 10 sons, comprising 11 lines or 'stories', are not only a literary record of their infamy but also an unspoken prayer that, having been toppled and deposed, their acts of villainy not recur. The list of Canaan's conquered kings, of even greater 'height', expresses the silent hope that Israel's triumph over their evil not be undone.

#### THE SONG AT THE SEA AND THE SONG OF DEVORAH

There is only 1 other example in the Tanakh of a song that shares the graphic form of our Song at the Sea and that is the triumphant ode sung by Devorah and Barak after their great and crushing victory over Yavin the King of Chatzor. This menacing Canaanite tyrant, ably assisted by his henchman Sisera, harshly oppressed the Israelites some 2 centuries after the events of the Exodus as recorded in Sefer Shoftim (Book of Judges, ch. 4-5). Gathering 900 chariots of iron to the floodplain of Kishon, Sisera intended to crush the northern tribes of Israel whose forces had gathered opposite on the slopes of Mount Tavor, but a sudden downpour that turned the plain to impassable mudflat put an abrupt end to his plans. Inspired by the prophetess Devorah and the chieftain Barak, the Israelite irregulars now descended from the hillside and overwhelmed the well-trained and better-equipped foe, inflicting a stinging defeat that was not soon forgotten by the inspired balladeers of later centuries (see Tehillim ch. 83).

While we cannot recount all of the details of the dramatic episode here, suffice it to say that the 2 accounts share many thematic parallels: both feature powerful, oppressive overlords armed with numerous chariots, both describe an Israelite people ill-prepared for battle and psychologically overawed, and in both situations miraculous and unexpected salvation is unleashed by torrents of rushing waters as the yoke of the tyrant is cast off forever. It is therefore quite natural that Devorah and the Israelites would have experienced God's exploits at the wadi of Kishon as a potent memory of Israel's experiences at the shores of Yam Suf, and for the text of Sefer Shoftim to have emphasized that link by employing a similar graphic convention.

At the same time, however, there are also pronounced differences between these 2 songs. Chief among them is that the song of Moshe and Israel, only about 2/3 the length of Devorah's epic, is a more narrowly focused and repetitious composition. It describes God's might in effecting the immediate victory over Pharaoh and his host (Shemot 15:1-5), and then, as is frequently the case in Biblical poetry, describes it again utilizing different language and imagery (15:6-12). It goes on to intimate in the Egyptian defeat the future downfall of all of Israel's foes (15:13-16), concluding with a prophetic and proleptic vision of Israel achieving stability and permanence in their land and ultimately building the Temple to glorify God (15:17-19). Suffused with inspiration, our Song's final note is decidedly eschatological in tone, proudly proclaiming for all of the world to hear: "God will reign forever and forever!" (15:18).

#### THE UNDERLYING THEME OF THE SONG AT THE SEA

When we analyze the matter closely, we discover in fact that there is only 1 single subject that is discussed in the Song at the Sea, and that is God's saving might – present and future: God overthrew the Egyptians, God foiled Pharaoh's nefarious plan, God will lead His people to Canaan and overwhelm the surrounding nations hostile to Israel's mission, and in the end God will prevail and rule forever. The relative textual length assigned to the present and future salvations is understandably skewed: the downfall of Pharaoh and his host – immediate and vivid – accounts for the first 12 verses of the song; the hopes of victory over the Canaanites and surrounding peoples and the final vision of the Temple – far-off and indistinct – comprise its last 7 verses. Remarkably, according to the Song's central theme, Israel's role in securing its own salvation was and will be correspondingly small!

The Song's central message of Divine concern and involvement, of Divine power and commitment, of eventual ascendancy and triumph, is one that cannot be repeated enough. The people of Israel often seem to find themselves at the crossroads of 1 crisis or another, overwhelmed by dread and uncertain how to proceed. The Song at the Sea points a way through the dark and deep waters, even as the enemy, enflamed with murderous intent, follows in hot pursuit. As has happened so many times in the past, the fortunes of Israel can be transformed in an instant, and certain defeat can suddenly become glowing victory. So may it be God's will.

**Wishing all of our readers and their families a חג כשר ושמח!**

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