**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

**Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

Dana Petrover (Batsheva bat Gittel Aidel Leba)

and Marvin Rosenberg (Meir Chaim ben Tzipporah Miriam)

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In memory of six friends and family,   
strong pillars of the Montreal Jewish community,   
who have left us in the past 7 years.   
All were אוהבי עם ישראל, אוהבי ארץ ישראל, אוהבי תורת ישראל.

Joseph (Yosie) Deitcher

Avrum (Avy) Drazin

Rabbi Joseph Drazin

Leibel Frisch

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**Shiur #21: Why Do We Read *Shir Ha-Shirim* on Pesach?**

In this *shiur*, we will consider the reason we read *Shir Ha-Shirim* on Pesach. We will first identify the source and precise parameters of the practice, and then survey a variety of possible explanations for this *minhag*. Finally, we will propose an explanation that shines a new light on how the Rabbis of the *midrash* read *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

The earliest extant source for the practice of reading *Shir Ha-Shirim* on Pesach is *Massekhet Sofrim* (18:14). Perhaps unexpectedly, *Massekhet Sofrim* mentions nothing about reading *Shir Ha-Shirim* (or any other *Megillot* on their respective holidays) on Shabbat *Chol Ha-Mo’ed*. Instead, it records the practice of reading the *Megilla* over the course of the final two nights of Pesach in the diaspora.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There is another recorded custom regarding the proper time to read *Shir Ha-Shirim* on Pesach. *Chayei Adam* (130) records that some have the practice to read *Shir* *Ha-Shirim* after the *seder*, explaining that this is in fulfillment of the obligation to relay the story of the Exodus until one falls asleep on the *seder* night. Similarly, *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh* (119) records the practice of reading *Shir Ha-Shirim* on the *seder* night. Accordingly, many *Haggadot* print the *Megilla* at the end of the *seder*.

The Rema (*Orach Chaim* 490:9) records the more familiar practice to recite *Shir Ha-Shirim* on *Shabbat Chol Ha-Mo’ed*.[[2]](#footnote-2) While the Rema does not explain the logic underlying this *minhag*, a range of proposals have been offered.[[3]](#footnote-3)

On a technical level, a number of early commentators (*Machzor Vitri, Hilkhot Pesach* 106; *Sefer Ha-Manhig,* pp. 416-7; *Abudarham,* p. 266; *Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim* 490:8, cited by *Mishna Berura* 17, and others) note that the *dod* compares the *ra’aya* to “a horse in Pharaoh’s fleet” (1:9), which may be seen as an allusion to the events of *yetziat Mitzrayim*.[[4]](#footnote-4) Machzor Vitri adds that the entirety of *Shir Ha-Shirim* alludes to the four stages of redemption. As such, the entire theme of the *sefer* is consonant with the events of the Exodus.

Others (*Otzar Dinim U-Minhagim*, p. 414) note that just as Pesach is called the Spring Holiday, *Shir Ha-Shirim* similarly invokes the verdant change of seasons in connection with the evolving relationship between the *dod* and *ra’aya*:

For now the winter is past, The rains are over and gone.

The blossoms have appeared in the land, The time of pruning has come; The song of the turtledove Is heard in our land. (2:11-12)

*Da’at Mikra* (p. 15) offers an alternative explanation for the association between *Shir Ha-Shirim* and Pesach, noting that of all the holidays, Pesach is most closely associated with songs, including those sung at the *seder* and the Song at the Sea. Singing *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a natural extension of Pesach’s motif of *shira*.

The Vilna Gaon, in his commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim* (2:8), contends that the verse on which he is commenting (“Hark! My beloved! There he comes, Leaping over mountains, Bounding over hills”) alludes to Moshe echoing God’s promise to redeem us throughout history. This historical process, which culminates with the coming of *Mashiach*, begins with the Exodus.

As previously noted at the beginning of our series (*shiurim* 2-3), Netziv elaborates on the relationship between *Shir Ha-Shirim* and Pesach in a unique direction; it is therefore worth reviewing his contention here. In the introduction to his commentary on *Shir Ha-Shirim* (see also *Ha’amek Davar*, *Bamidbar* 29:12, *Devarim* 16:8), Netziv argues that *Kohelet* and *Shir Ha-Shirim* are to be seen as inversely related. *Kohelet*, he contends, was originally delivered as oratory on Sukkot before a large gathering of Jews and gentiles. Accordingly, its message, as a generic book of wisdom, was universal in scope. This is consistent with the themes of Sukkot, which is in many ways a universal holiday. By contrast, *Shir* *Ha*-*Shirim* was taught on Pesach in front of a Jewish crowd.[[5]](#footnote-5) Reading *Shir Ha-Shirim* according to the classic midrashic interpretation that it is an allegory for the love between God and the Jewish People, Netziv contends it was appropriate for Shlomo to teach *Shir Ha-Shirim* to an exclusively Jewish audience on Pesach, a holiday whose themes are far more particularistic than those of Sukkot. This is the reason that we continue to read *Kohelet* publicly on Sukkot and *Shir Ha*-*Shirim* on Pesach.

Picking up on his theory that *Shir Ha-Shirim* was originally recited by Shlomo Ha-Melech on Pesach in celebration of the completion of the First Temple, Netziv seeks to understand Shlomo’s precise intention in composing and reciting this song in public. He explains by pointing to an anomaly with regard to Pesach: Since the major event of the holiday is the Exodus, which is celebrated on the 15th of Nissan, why does the holiday continue for another six days? (Apparently, he does not believe that the Splitting of the Sea merited a holiday in its own right, perhaps because it was merely the completion of the events, whose crux has already transpired on the 15th.)

Netziv answers that the final six days of Pesach are intended to inspire the Jews in their loving connection and devotion to God. Moreover, the final day is termed “Atzeret” by the Torah to indicate that the day’s goal is to retain the lessons and inspiration of the previous days and take them forward into the year to come. *Shir* *Ha-Shirim* was delivered on Atzeret by Shlomo to inspire the Jews toward increased loving devotion to God.

Furthermore, Shlomo recognized that with the completion of the Temple, many pious individuals would now be subject to the new stricture against offering sacrifices on *bamot*, private altars. This significantly increased the risk that such inspired individuals might struggle with their diminished opportunities to serve God and be tempted to offer private sacrifices. Accordingly, Shlomo taught *Shir* *Ha-Shirim* to exhort the nation to continue their dedication to worship God lovingly, particularly through the Temple sacrifices and Torah study.

In his commentary on the *Machzor*, R. Lord Jonathan Sacks offers his own typically eloquent interpretation, suggesting that *Shir Ha-Shirim’s* message and that of the Exodus are the same: They both represent a love story in which faith born of love trumped sheer rational calculation:

The message of Hosea, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah is that the Exodus was more than a theological drama about the defeat of false gods by the true One, or a political narrative about slavery and freedom. It is a love story — troubled and tense, to be sure — yet an elopement by bride and groom to the desert where they can be alone together, far out of sight of prying eyes and the distractions of civilization.

That is the theme of the Song of Songs. Like God summoning His people out of Egypt, the lover in the song calls on his beloved, “Come… let us leave” (2:10). The beloved herself says: “Come, draw me after you, let us run!” (1:4). Then, in an image of extraordinary poignancy, we see the two of them emerging together from the wilderness: “Who is this, rising from the desert, leaning on her beloved?” (Song. 8:5).

Israel, leaning on God, emerging, flushed with love, from the wilderness: that is the Exodus as seen by the great prophets. Nor were they the first to develop this idea. It appears, fully fledged, in the book of Deuteronomy, where the word “love” appears twenty-three times as a description of the relationship between God and the people. When we read the Song of Songs on Pesach as a commentary to the Exodus, it spells out Jeremiah’s message. God chose Israel because Israel was willing to follow Him into the desert, leaving Egypt and all its glory behind for the insecurity of freedom, relying instead on the security of faith.

Beyond these varied explanations, there is one final explanation – perhaps the most compelling – for the connection. A number of rabbinical sources see a particularly powerful connection between *Shir Ha-Shirim* and *yetziat Mitzrayim*. For instance, *Otzar Ta’amaei Ha-Minhagim* (p. 296) notes that *Shir Ha-Shirim* *Rabba* contains many passages that read *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a commentary on the Exodus. This view has been extensively developed by the scholar Daniel Boyarin.

In support of this view, we will cite just two examples of *Shir Ha-Shirim* *Rabba*’s reading of the Exodus. *Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:14 reads, “My dove in the cleft of the rock in the hiding place of the steep. Show me your visage. Let me hear your voice, for your voice is lovely and your visage is beautiful.” *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* explains that R. Eliezer maintains that this verse refers to the hour that Israel stood at the sea. Immediately before splitting the sea, as it were, God reflected on His love of the Jewish People.

In another verse, the beloved calls his lover to come out of hiding and show her face (2:14). This is seen as a parallel of the verse in Exodus in which the people are called upon to “stand forth and see the salvation of God” (14:13).

Accordingly, *Shir Ha-Shirim*, on the classic rabbinical view, is not incidentally connected to Pesach; it is a pivotal commentary to the Exodus, which underscores that the Exodus did not just comprise a series of stunning miracles, but was the outgrowth of the intimate reciprocal relationship between God and the Jewish People. We will explore the precise nature of this commentary in greater depth in next week’s *shiur*.

1. *Massekhet Sofrim* also mentions this practice earlier in the same chapter (14:3), where it rules that one must recite the blessing “*al mikra Megilla*” even though it is written in *Ketuvim*, not *Chumash*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Rema writes that one should omit a *berakha*, unlike the ruling of the *Massekhet* *Sofrim* and the later ruling of the Vilna Gaon. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a useful summary, see Zvi Ron, “Reading *Shir Ha-Shirim, Ruth, Eicha* and *Kohelet*,” in *Hakirah* 23, pp. 265-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In support of this interpretation, see *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 2:1, which interprets the verse “to a horse in Pharaoh’s fleet” to refer to drowning of the chariots in the Reed Sea. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This echoes the position of R. Saadiah Gaon, who asserts at the end of his Introduction to *Shir Ha-Shirim* that “Shlomo prophesied it on Pesach.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)