**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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**Shiur #23:**

***Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba*'s Interpretation of the Text - Part 2**

In last week’s *shiur,* we traced a variety of ways in which *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* rereads passages in *Shir Ha-Shirim* to accentuate the positive about the Jewish people. This *shiur* will demonstrate that beyond reinterpreting specific passages in *Shir* *Ha-Shirim*, the Midrash offers a unique reading of numerous major sections of *Tanakh*.

**Jewish Piety in Egypt**

The level of religious commitment exhibited by the Israelites throughout their Egyptian servitude is questionable at best, yet the Midrash offers an unexpected commentary on the following verses (3:1-4):

Upon my couch at night I sought the one I love — I sought, but found him not.

“I must rise and roam the town, through the streets and through the squares; I must seek the one I love.” I sought but found him not.

I met the watchmen who patrol the town. “Have you seen the one I love?”

Scarcely had I passed them when I found the one I love. I held him fast, I would not let him go until I brought him to my mother’s house, to the chamber of her who conceived me.

The Midrash comments:

"Upon my couch at night" — this is the night of Egypt.

"I sought the one I love” — this is Moshe.

“I sought, but found him not.

“‘I must rise and roam the town, through the streets and through the squares,’” the vineyards and the countryside.

“‘I must seek the one I love’” — this is Moshe.

“I met the watchmen who patrol the town”— this is the tribe of Levi. This is what it states, “Pass and return from gate to gate” (*Shemot* 32:27).

“‘Have you seen the one I love?’” — this is Moshe.

“Scarcely had I passed them when I found the one I love” — this is Moshe.

“I held him fast, I would not let him go until I brought him to my mother’s house” — this is Sinai

“To the chamber of her who conceived me (*horati*)” — this is the Tent of Meeting, for from there the Jews became obligated in teaching (*horaya*).

The implication is remarkable. In the plain reading of *Sefer Shemot*, the Jews are regularly skeptical of Moshe’s ability to serve as the redeemer. They demand evidence of Moshe’s legitimacy and bitterly blame him for the increased workload.

Nevertheless, according to this Midrash, they are constantly searching for him and awaiting his return throughout the process of the Exodus. They seek him in the streets and among the Levites, to no avail. When, at long last, they find him, they cling to him until he has brought them to Sinai and enabled them to construct the Tabernacle.

While the Midrash, true to its terse, non-discursive form, does not develop what this might mean for our reading of the Exodus, we may extrapolate that it would yield a far sunnier outlook, at least toward the people’s level of trust in Moshe throughout the story. This is consistent with the Midrashic notion that Moshe is punished with the skin disease of *tzara’at* for initially expressing skepticism about the Jews’ willingness to believe in him.

**Splitting of the Sea**

Without a doubt, the Splitting of the Reed Sea is one of the most miraculous events in Jewish history; the Midrash expands on this, focusing on the relationship between God and the Jewish people that is manifest at the Sea. The Midrash begins with the following suggestion:

“He shall kiss me from the kisses of his mouth.”

Where was this stated?

Rav Chinena bar Papa said: It was stated at the Sea. This is what it states (1:9), “To the horse among the chariots of Pharaoh.”

While the Midrash does not elaborate on the precise meaning of this kiss, one point emerges clearly: the Splitting of the Sea, in some sense, is not only an outgrowth of God’s love for the Jewish people but is also a direct expression of love.

This motif becomes clearer in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba’s* excursus on the verse, “My dove in the cleft of the rocks” (2:14):

Rabbi Elazar interpreted the passage with reference to Israel at the time when they were standing at the Sea. “My dove, in the cleft of the rocks...” — they were hidden within the secret part of the Sea.

“Let me see your face” is what is referred to in [the verse] (*Shemot* 14:13): “Stand by and witness the deliverance of the Lord...”

“Let me hear your voice" is talking of the Song [of the Sea], as it says (ibid. 15:1): "Then Moshe and the Israelites sang..."

“For your voice is sweet" is talking of [other occasions of] their singing.

“And your face is comely” — because the Israelites saw [the wonders performed by] God's “finger” and said: “This is my God and I will laud Him..." (ibid. 15:2)

In the retelling of the Midrash, the events at the splitting of the Sea manifest divine revelation and genuine caring. The Jews are protected (“hidden”) among the waves. Witnessing God’s deliverance is to see the visage of the Lord. God, in turn, desires to hear the Jews’ Song, as captured in the phrase “Let me hear your voice.” “And your face is comely” refers to the Jews’ praise of God in the wake of His miracles.

**Free Acceptance of the Covenant**

Perhaps most far-reaching is *Shir Ha-Shirim* *Rabba’s* treatment of the Jews’ acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. A classic aggadic passage (BT *Shabbat* 88a) records that God “held the mountain over the Jews like a barrel” and coerced them to accept the Torah. However, a number of passages in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* suggest that the Jews accept the Torah willingly; more broadly, they portray the Sinaitic Revelation as animated by love more than fear.

The first relevant passage reads:

Another interpretation: “He shall kiss me from the kisses of his mouth.”

Rabbi Yochanan said: An angel would remove the Commandment from before Hashem and bring it before each member of the Jewish people, and say: “Do you accept this Commandment? It contains such and such laws, such and such punishments, such and such decrees. It also contains such *mitzvot*, such leniencies and stringencies, such and such rewards.”

The Jew responded, “Yes.”

[The angel] responded and said, “Do you accept the divinity of God?”

[The Jew] answered, “Yes and yes.”

[The angel] immediately kissed [the Jew] on the mouth. (1:2)

This passage presents each Jew as having accept the Commandments out of free will, after which the angel kisses each one. Consistent with the larger approach to *Shir Ha-Shirim*, the thrust of this entire passage runs counter to the apparently fear-based presentation in Tractate *Shabbat*.

Later, commenting on the verse “My dove in the cleft of the rock,” the Midrash records:

Rabbi Akiva explained the verse in regard to the Jews at the moment they stood at Sinai. “My dove in the cleft of the rock” — that they were hidden by the secret part of Sinai. (2:14)

While this passage is terse, the context in *Shir Ha-shirim* enables us to understand the Midrash’s intent. “Dove” is a term of endearment, suggesting that the fact that the Jews are hidden by Sinai is not a sign of coercion but of love (perhaps God seeks to grant them shade from the hot desert sun). This is reinforced by the parallels between this passage and the Midrash’s language in regard to the Splitting of the Sea, in which the Midrash similarly asserts that God protects the Jews in the cleft of the water.

A final passage, toward the end of the book, clinches the point:

“Beneath the apple tree I awakened you.”

Paltion of Rome expounded and said: Mount Sinai was torn and stood in the heavens, and the Jews were placed beneath it.

As it states, “You approached and stood beneath the mountain.

Another interpretation: “Beneath the apple tree I awakened you” — this is Sinai.

And why is it compared to an apple tree? Rather, just as the apple tree produces fruit during the month of Sivan, so too the Torah was given during the month of Sivan. (8:5)

**Conclusion**

A brief passage toward the end of *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* offers a fitting conclusion to our discussion of the Midrash’s unique perspective on *Shir Ha*-*Shirim*:

“For strong as death is love” (8:6) — love is strong as death, namely the love that God has for you. This is what it states (*Malakhi* 1:2), “I love you, said God.”