

A Love Song for Passover?

*Source Sheet by Beth Schafer
Based on a sheet by Melissa Buyer-Witman*

On Passover, it's traditional to read from *Shir ha Shirim* or the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon is the first of the five Megillot (scrolls) of Ketuvim (Writings) the last section of the Tanakh (Bible). Scripturally, it is unique in its celebration of sexual love. It gives "the voices of two lovers, praising each other, yearning for each other, proffering invitations to enjoy". The two are in harmony, each desiring the other and rejoicing in sexual intimacy; the women (or "daughters") of Jerusalem form a chorus to the lovers, functioning as an audience whose participation in the lovers' erotic encounters facilitates the participation of the reader.

So you must be asking yourself... Why in the world do we read Song of Songs on Passover??

Song of Songs 1:9-15

(9) I have likened you, my darling,
To a mare in Pharaoh's chariots: (10)
Your cheeks are comely with plaited
wreaths, Your neck with strings of
jewels. (11) We will add wreaths of
gold To your spangles of silver. (12)
While the king was on his couch, My
nard gave forth its fragrance. (13)
My beloved to me is a bag of myrrh
Lodged between my breasts. (14) My
beloved to me is a spray of henna
blooms From the vineyards of
En-gedi. (15) Ah, you are fair, my
darling, Ah, you are fair, With your
dove-like eyes!

שיר השירים א':ט'-ט"ו

(ט) לְסָסְתִּי בְּרֻכְבֵּי פָרְעֹה דְּמִיתִיךָ
רַעֲיָתִי: (י) נָאוּ וְלִחִילֶךָ בְּתָרִים
צִנְאִירֶךָ בְּחֲרוּזִים: (יא) תּוֹרֵךְ זָהָב
נִעְשָׂה־לְּךָ עִם נִקְדֻּת הַכֶּסֶף: (יב)
עַד־שֶׁהִמְלִיךְ בְּמִסְבּוֹ נִרְדֵּךְ נָתַן רִיחוֹ:
(יג) צִלְזֹר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדוֹדִי לִי בֵּין שְׂדֵי
יָלִין: (יד) אֲשַׁכֵּל הַכֶּפֶר וְדוֹדִי לִי
בְּכַרְמֵי עֵין גִּדִּי: (טו) הִנֵּה יָפָה
רַעֲיָתִי הִנֵּה יָפָה עֵינֶיהָ יוֹנִים:

- This is just a taste of the salacious and steamy love poetry in the Song of Songs. What do you notice about the text?
- What might you predict be the reason for 1) including it in the Tanach and 2) reading it on Passover?

It's a Metaphor!

Song of Songs 1:2-5

- (2) Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for thy love is better than wine.*
- (3) Thine oils have goodly fragrance, thy name is ointment poured forth, therefore do young maidens love thee.*
- (4) Draw me, we will run after thee. . . .*
- (5) I am black, but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem!*

Rashi's interpretation of the same verses

Israel addresses God, saying:]

- (2) Communicate your innermost wisdom to me in loving closeness, for your friendship is dearer than all earthly delights.*
- (3) Like the scent of goodly oils is the spreading fame of Your great deeds; Your very name is Flowing Oil, therefore have nations loved You.*
- (3) Upon perceiving a mere hint that You wished to draw me, we rushed with perfect faith after You into the wilderness. .*
- (4) Though I am black with sin, I am comely with virtue, O nations who are destined to ascend to Jerusalem!*

- How is Rashi understanding the Song of Songs?
- Rabbi Akiva himself argued strongly that the allegory was the only way to interpret the book; "All the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." And that's how it comes to be in the Bible. Commentators understood the connection between Shir Hashirim and Pesach to be the awesome physical realization of the relationship between God and Israel. Why do you think this allegorical reading was so important to the commentators?

- How does that understanding sit with you? What are the implications for reading this as love poetry between God and the People of Israel?
- The Zohar tells us that Song of Songs embodies the entire Torah, the story of the exile in Egypt, and the redemption of Israel from there, as well as from the other oppressors, so that by reading it we are enhancing the mitzvah of recounting the story of the Exodus. How does the Zohar connect Shir HaShirim to Passover?

Think Relevant Themes!

Song of Songs 2:10-13

(10) My beloved spoke, and said unto me: 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. (11) For, lo, the winter is past, The rain is over and gone; (12) The flowers appear on the earth; The time of singing is come, And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; (13) The fig-tree puts forth her green figs, And the vines in blossom give forth their fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

שיר השירים ב:י-י"ג

(י) עָנָה דוֹדִי וְאָמַר לִי קוּמִי לָךְ
רַעֲיָתִי יַפְתִּי וּלְכִי לָךְ. (יא) כִּי הִנֵּה
הִסְתּוּ [הַסְתִּיו] עָבַר הַגֶּשֶׁם חָלָף
הָלָה לֹו. (יב) הִנָּצְנִים נִרְאוּ בָאָרֶץ
עֵת הַזְמִיר הִגִּיעַ וְקוֹל הַתּוֹר נִשְׁמָע
בְּאֶרְצֵנוּ. (יג) הִתְאַנָּה חֲנֻטָּה פְּגִיָּה
וְהִגְפָּנִים סָמְדָר נָתְנוּ רִיחַ קוּמִי לְכִי
[לָךְ] רַעֲיָתִי יַפְתִּי וּלְכִי לָךְ.

- What themes do we see in this primary text that might connect it to Passover?
- Are there any other holidays that match well with this kind of nature-themed poetry?
- How does this connection sit with you? Is it strong enough?

What about the Text itself?

Song of Songs 2:14

(14) O my dove, you are in the clefts
of the rock, in the covert of the cliff,
Let me see your face, let me hear
your voice; For sweet is your voice,
and your face is comely.'

שיר השירים ב':י"ד

(יד) יונָתִי בְּחִגְיֵי הַסֵּלַע בְּסִתְרֵי
הַמְדִּירָגָה הִרְאִינִי אֶת מַרְאֵיךְ
הַשְׁמִיעִינִי אֶת קוֹלְךָ כִּי קוֹלְךָ עָרֵב
וּמַרְאֵיךְ נָאוֹה.

- R. Eliezer decoded the verse in the hour that Israel stood at the sea.
- My dove in the **cleft of the rock** in the hiding place of the steep [Song 2:14], that they were hidden in the **hiding place of the sea**
- Show me **your face**; this is what is written, "Stand forth and **see the salvation of the Lord**" [Exod. 14:13]
- Let me hear **your voice**; this is the singing, as it says, "Then **Moses sang**" [Ex. 15:1]
- For your **voice is lovely**; this is the **Song (of the Sea)**
- And **your face** is beautiful; for Israel were pointing with their fingers and saying "This is **my God** and I will **beautify** Him" [Ex. 15:2].

Rabbi Eliezer uses prooftexts to find the connection between the Exodus story and Shir haShirim.
How does he do this?

But No Happy Ending?

Song of Songs 3:1-4

(1) By night on my bed I sought him
whom my soul loves; I sought him,
but I found him not. (2) 'I will rise
now, and go about the city, In the
streets and in the broad ways, I will
seek him whom my soul loves.' I
sought him, but I found him not. (3)
The watchmen that go about the city
found me: 'Have you seen the one I
love?' (4) Scarce had I passed from
them, When I found him whom my

שיר השירים ג':א'-ד'

(א) עַל־מִשְׁכְּבִי בַלַּיְלוֹת בִּקְשָׁתִי אֶת
שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי בִקְשָׁתִיו וְלֹא
מָצָאתִיו: (ב) אָקוּמָה נָא וְאֶסֹבְבָה
בָּעִיר בַּשּׁוּקִים וּבִרְחֹבוֹת אֲבִקְשָׁה אֶת
שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי בִקְשָׁתִיו וְלֹא
מָצָאתִיו: (ג) מְצֹאוֹנֵי הַשָּׁמַרִים
הַסֹּבְבִים בָּעִיר אֶת שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי
רְאִיתָם: (ד) כִּמְעַט שְׁעַבְרָתִי מֵהֶם
עַד שֶׁמָצָאתִי אֶת שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי

soul loveth: I held him, and would
not let him go, Until I had brought
him into my mother's house.

אַחֲזִיתִיו וְלֹא אֶרְפוֹנוּ עַד־שֶׁהֵבִי אֹתוֹ
אֶל־בֵּית אִמִּי ...

- If we read the text as a metaphor of the love that exists between the People and God, then this doesn't bode well for our relationship with God.
- What are the implications? Why is comparing our relationship to God of that of young love somewhat problematic?
- Even when young love doesn't evolve into a deeper partnership, some of us look back fondly on the "chase" - is there worth in "chasing" a relationships with God? How do we hold tight so it blossoms into a more mature and mutual love?

The Holiness of Romantic Love

Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of the Cistercian order of monks in the Middle Ages, wrote in his commentary on the Song of Songs: "Love is alone sufficient by itself; it pleases by itself, and for its own sake. It is itself a merit, and itself its own recompense. It seeks neither cause, nor consequences beyond itself. It is its own fruit, its own object and usefulness. I love, because I love; I love, that I may love."

There are a number of specific values that are part of this notion of the holiness of sexuality. First, we are created by God. This means that our genitalia are also created by God. The sex drive is also God's rather than Satan's creation. Our bodies are a gift to us from God. There is nothing disgusting about any part of them.

Even more important is to remember that what makes humans special is that we are created in the image of God. To treat another person as an object is to deny at that moment this basic teaching of Judaism. In that way, sex is different from other pleasures, such as food. Even if we eat food without appreciation of it as a gift or without any awareness of the holiness of the act, at worse we hurt ourselves by self-destructive eating habits. Sex (except for masturbation) involves another person.

This concept of treating another person with respect is called *kavod ha-beriot*, “respect and honor for all human beings.” The potential to hurt someone else is particularly present in sex because the act, no matter how “casual,” involves vulnerability. You are naked before another person. If the Torah urges us to take special care of the widow, orphan, and stranger because they were particularly vulnerable in ancient Israelite society, how much more so, when we lie naked physically and emotionally with a lover. Knowing our common vulnerability, we need to be especially protective of the other person in their nakedness.

Final Thoughts

Song of Songs 7:11-14

(11) I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me. (12) Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages. (13) Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see whether the vine hath budded, whether the vine-blossom be opened, and the pomegranates be in flower; there will I give thee my love. (14) The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and at our doors are all manner of precious fruits, new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved.

שיר השירים ז:י"א-י"ד

(יא) אֲנִי לְדוּדִי וְעָלַי תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ: (ס)
 (יב) לֵכָה דוּדִי נִצַּא הַשָּׂדֶה נָלִינָה
 בְּכַפְּרִים: (יג) נִשְׁכִּימָה לְכַרְמִים
 נִרְאֶה אִם פָּרְחָה הַגֶּפֶן פִּתְחָה הַסְּמִדָּר
 הִנְצִו הָרְמוֹנִים שֶׁם אָתֵן אֶת־דִּדִּי לָהּ:
 (יד) הַדּוּדָאִים נִתְנוּ־יָרִיחַ
 וְעַל־פֶּתַח־יְנוֹ כָּל־מִגְדִּים חֲדָשִׁים
 גַּם־יִשְׁגִּים דוּדִי צִפְנֹתִי לָהּ:

- Is Shir HaShirim about two young lovers, or the relationship that God has with the Israelite people (and us)?
- Do you think Passover is the best time of year to read this text? Why or why not?