**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

**Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Shiur #02: Authorship**

In last week’s *shiur*, we considered the degree and quality of sanctity that *Chazal* ascribed to *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Closely related to this subject is the question of its authorship. From a traditional standpoint, in light of the opening verse, it is generally assumed that Shlomo is the book’s author. This is also based in part on the fact that Shlomo composed some 1,005 songs (see I *Melakhim* 5:12). For example, the *midrash* writes:

Said R. Yudan: This comes to teach you that anyone who recites words of Torah in public merits the divine presence. And from whom do you learn? From Shlomo, for by way of his having recited words of Torah publicly, he merited that the divine presence rested upon him, and he recited three books: *Mishlei*, *Kohelet*, and *Shir Ha-Shirim*. (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 1:8)

Many medieval commentators similarly identify Shlomo explicitly as the book’s author, including R. Yeshaya of Trani and others.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Yet this seemingly straightforward traditional claim is complicated by a number of sources. First, the ascription to Shlomo is understood by some commentators as a suggestion not that Shlomo wrote these songs, but rather that they were written in his honor (*Da’at Mikra*, p. 1, n. 2). In support of this view we may marshal the second section of chapter 3 (v. 6-11), which features an apparent paeon to Shlomo and his wedding. (There is also a third reference to Shlomo at the end of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, but it does not provide evidence of authorship.) While it is plausible that Shlomo wrote part of his book in the third person, most simply understood, it is fairly difficult to assume that Shlomo authored at least this part of the book, as well as the verses toward the very end of the *Megilla* that reference the vineyards of Shlomo (8:11-12).

Furthermore, the Rabbis (*Shavuot* 35b; *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 1:8; cited by Rashi, *Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:1) assert that the term Shlomo in *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a reference to God. Presumably, this is part of the Rabbis’ larger goal of locating references to the divine in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, lending support to their thesis that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a sacred, allegorical book. But for our purposes, at first glance, it also seems to suggest that Shlomo is not necessarily the book’s author.

It must be granted, however, that this latter point may not be pertinent to the question of authorship. As Amos Chakham notes (*Da’at Mikra*, pp. 11-12), the same set of *midrashim* take for granted that Shlomo authored *Shir Ha-Shirim*. How can these two perspectives be reconciled? Assuming that we ascribe divine inspiration of Shlomo’s authorship, the *midrashim* might simply mean to suggest that Shlomo wrote the book under divine inspiration. Alternatively, the *midrash* might be assuming that the verse does not mean to ascribe authorship to God, but rather to say that it is dedicated to Him. This would be consistent with the larger midrashic view that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is an allegory for the love relationship between God and the Jewish People.

Further complicating the picture, the *gemara* (*Bava Batra* 14b) identifies Chizkiya and his assistant as the authors of *Yeshayahu*, *Mishlei*, *Shir Ha-Shirim*, and *Kohelet*. This is presumably motivated by a verse in *Mishlei*, which records that “these too are proverbs of Shlomo, which the men of King Chizkiya of Yehuda copied” (25:1). At first glance, this directly contradicts the view that Shlomo wrote *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Yet here too there may be a straightforward resolution. As *Da’at Mikra* notes (p. 11), the *gemara* likely means to convey that while Shlomo wrote the initial poems of the *Megilla*, Chizkiyahu and an assistant redacted them into a single work, and they are therefore responsible for the final version.

A similar view – albeit one that attributes this process not specifically to Chizkiyahu, but generally to men of wisdom – is presented by an anonymous French rabbi whose commentary is extant only until the end of chapter 3:

The Song of Songs: The most unique of the songs that were to Shlomo. For there were many songs, as it states, “And his song was 1,005” (I *Melakhim* 5:12), and this is one of them. And one may suggest that from among those songs, men of wisdom selected these songs and combined them, in order to teach about God and the Jewish People.

Perhaps most fascinating is the possibility that the author was female. This suggestion is presented by R. Yitzchak Arama in his commentary *Akeidat Yitzchak* (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:1):

The Song of Songs: It states that one maiden, who was not from royal stock or among the princes, for she was a shepherd, was struck by a passion for Shlomo. And due to her love for him and the desire of her heart, she composed for him many songs. And behold, this is the most praiseworthy of them. Alternatively, Shlomo, her beloved, established it for her sake.

This position is cited (and rejected) by another medieval French commentator, who writes:

That is to Shlomo, from the songs that refer to Shlomo, as in, “that was to the king Achashveirosh” (*Esther* 1:9). Alternatively, Shlomo’s beloved composed it about him, as it states in the book, “Shlomo the king made a palanquin for himself” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 3:9), “Behold Shlomo’s bed” (ibid., 3:7). But this is mere emptiness, for in the entire book it does not state the beloved’s name, only that of Shlomo. So it appears that Shlomo composed it...

While we might not necessarily assume that a female in fact authored part or all of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, this suggestion does highlight a key feature of the story: It is overwhelmingly told from the perspective of the woman. Even verses that emphasize the theme of reciprocity, such as “*Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li*,” are conveyed from her vantage point. The book opens and closes with her words.

On the basis of the observation of the importance of the woman’s perspective in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, Rabbi Shalom Carmy offers an eloquent explanation:

What makes *Shir Ha-Shirim* unique within the canon, however, is… that the experience is articulated primarily through the agency of the *human* partner. Because the book begins and ends with her voice, even the voice of the Beloved is heard as she quotes it. This presentation of the human side in the encounter ensures that Song of Songs is more than a restatement, in obscure poetic language, of ideas expressed just as adequately in other biblical genres.

The history of God’s relationship with Israel and, by the same token, His relationship with the individual human soul, is a love story. Inevitably, such a story is not free of suffering, failure, misunderstanding, and unhappiness...

The prophetic literature, partly because it concentrates on God’s action and partly because it is a literature of commands and demands, tends to speak in terms of “binary oppositions,” obedience and disobedience, faithfulness and betrayal. The Jew who recites *Shir Ha-Shirim* late on Friday afternoon knows that such an account leaves out something essential about Israel’s relationship to God, just as it fails to comprehend fully the individual’s struggle before God. Without Song of Songs in the Bible, without Song of Songs in life, this gap would remain unfilled.

Returning to Shlomo’s precise role as author, perhaps the best model for the traditional view of authorship is the one widely ascribed to *Tehillim* and King David. While the Rabbis say that David composed *Tehillim*, it is clear that by this, they meant that David was the primary author of *Tehillim*, while multiple sections were composed by other authors, such as Moshe Rabbeinu and the sons of Korach.

In conclusion, in light of *Chazal*’s association between Shlomo and his three biblical works – *Shir Ha-Shirim*, *Mishlei* and *Kohelet* – it is worth reflecting on the relationship between the three.

In the introduction to his commentary on *Shir Ha-Shirim* (see also *Ha’amek Davar*, *Bamidbar* 29:12*, Devarim* 16:8), the Netziv argues that *Kohelet* and *Shir Ha-Shirim* are to be seen as inversely related. *Kohelet*, he contends, was originally delivered before a large gathering of Jews and gentiles on Sukkot. 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. Reading *Shir Ha-Shirim* according to the classic midrashic interpretation that it is an allegory for the love between God and the Jewish people, the 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.

The Netziv’s comparison between *Shir Ha-Shirim* and *Kohelet* notwithstanding, taken from a lexical standpoint, there is more reason to compare and contrast *Shir Ha-Shirim* with *Mishlei*. Indeed, *Shir Ha-Shirim* appears to have more in common with *Mishlei* than any other biblical work. First, *Mishlei*, along with *Kohelet* and *Iyov*, are generally considered to comprise what is widely regarded as the “Wisdom Literature” of the Bible. *Shir Ha-Shirim*’s place in this literature is highly questionable. Certainly, in the technical sense it does not qualify for inclusion among the Wisdom Literature, as this is not its direct subject matter. Yet there are a series of parallels to *Mishlei* suggesting that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is closely associated with this literature.

Throughout *Mishlei*, wisdom is regularly personified as a woman, which leads to many structural similarities between the books. R. Judah Leon Abravanel, R. Don Isaac Abravanel’s son, goes so far as to claim that all of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a paeon not to a woman, but to wisdom personified as a woman. Even if we disregard this reading, the very suggestion indicates that the analogies between the two books are difficult to overlook.

In her recent erudite book, *Song of Riddles*, Geulah Twersky offers a comprehensive summary of the parallels between the two books:

Themes in the Song that occur also in Proverbs include the reciprocal nature of love (Prov. 8:17); the invitation to love and its embrace (Prov. 4:6, 8); a stress on fidelity (Prov. 5:15-18); doe and deer as metaphors (Prov. 5:19); and repeated references to a mother (explicitly in Prov. 1:8, and implicitly in 5:20, 8:32). Similar language referring to a bed, such as משכב (Prov. 7:17, Song 3:1) and ערש (Prov. 7:16, Song 1:16), also link the two. Further tropes in Proverbs connecting it with the Song are wisdom and mankind being drawn together in an Eros-like bond; the themes of seeking and finding (Prov. 8:17); wisdom personified as a woman playing a proactive role (Prov. 1:2, 1:20, 18:1, 8:2); the happiness or blessedness of the man who finds her (Prov. 3:13); waiting for the beloved at the door (Prov. 8:34); and the stress on riches in Proverbs chapter 8.

Even this thorough list does not even represent the totality of the parallels Twersky notes between the books.

At the same time, as numerous other scholars also note, there are a series of inverse comparisons between *Shir Ha-Shirim* and *Mishlei* chapter 7, in which the woman represents not wisdom personified, but rather a seducer.[[2]](#footnote-2)

What are we meant to make of these parallels? I would suggest that *Shir Ha-Shirim*, at least on a *peshat* level, presents itself as a parallel opposite of *Mishlei*. In *Sefer Mishlei*, the book explicitly presents the woman as allegorical, in some cases embodying wisdom, elsewhere seduction. What is more, in chapter 7 of *Mishlei*, the passion is mono-directional, with the woman seeking to seduce the man. In *Shir Ha-Shirim*, by contrast, even if we ultimately read the story as allegorical, on the *peshat* level the woman is presented as an actual person, the love is physical and impassioned, and it is bi-directional.

This leads us to the classic discussion as to when exactly Shlomo composed his various works. Many are familiar with the classic midrashic view that Shlomo wrote *Shir Ha-Shirim* in his youth, *Mishlei* in his middle age, and *Kohelet* as an old man. As the *midrash* puts it:

R. Yonatan said: He wrote *Shir Ha-Shirim* first, then *Mishlei*, and then *Kohelet*. And he brings support for it from the way of the world: When a person is young, he says words of song; when he gets older, he says parables; when he gets old, he says, “All is empty.” (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 1:10)

R. Yonatan represents the classic view – namely, that Shlomo began as young and idealistic, yet “soured” as he grew older and experienced life’s vicissitudes. But this is not the only view expressed by *Chazal*:

R. Yose says: In his older years, close to his death, the divine spirit rested upon him and he recited these three books: *Mishlei*, *Shir Ha-Shirim*, and *Kohelet*. (ibid.)

R. Yose maintains that Shlomo wrote all three as an old man while experiencing divine inspiration. Indeed, Rashi (*Bava Batra* 14b, s.v. *shir*, as noted by Rashash, ibid.) prefers this view. We understand the logic for the view that Shlomo’s perspective shifted throughout his life. What is the basis for Rashi’s preferred view?

Apparently, instead of reading these books as reflecting an evolution in Shlomo’s viewpoints, they are meant to represent parallel truths, all of which attempt to tackle the central questions of life from an alternative perspective. *Kohelet* grapples with the meaning of life by considering and exploring a range of philosophical standpoints; *Mishlei* provides a series of more specific recommendations and parables that exhort the reader to live life properly; and *Shir Ha-Shirim*, speaking in poetry instead of prose, offering a series of snapshots of the emotional intensity of life in regard to intimacy, the aspiration for wisdom (according to R. Judah Abravanel), and the relationship between God and the Jewish People.

1. See <https://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/pesah/alst.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a helpful summary, see Twersky, *Song of Riddles*,pp. 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)