**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

**Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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In memory of Tzvi Alexander ben Reuven Bell z”l

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**Shiur #04: The Words “*Shir Ha-Shirim*”**

As we segue from our introductory *shiurim* to the text, we turn to the book’s title, “*Shir Ha-Shirim*.” As we will see, this is not simply a question of the meaning of this opening phrase; it will open our eyes to two fundamentally different approaches to the study of *Shir Ha-Shirim* and will allow a pathway for us to develop a novel reading of the *sefer* as we make our way through it.

The more prevalent, and perhaps more obvious, interpretation is that the term *Shir Ha-Shirim* seeks to single out this song from many others. The simplest version of this position is to see *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a superlative. This approach is adopted by the *midrash*:

The Song of Songs: The most praiseworthy of songs, the highest of songs, the most attractive of songs. (1:11)

Similarly, Rashi (1:1, s.v. *shir*), based on the *midrash* (*Tanchuma*, *Tetzaveh* 5), argues that this is the most beloved of all songs. Rashbam (ibid.) explains along the same lines as his grandfather Rashi: “The song that is more praiseworthy than all other songs, as in, ‘He is the God of gods and Master of masters’ – the greatest of most awesome of all powers, and the greatest master above all masters.”

Indeed, as Immanuel of Rome, a medieval writer, notes (cited in JPS, p. 24), this meaning parallels other repetitious phrases in *Tanakh*, such as *kodesh kodashim* (*Vayikra* 7:18), *havel havalim* (*Kohelet* 1:2), and *melech malchaya* (*Ezra* 7:12), in which this terminology similarly denotes a superlative. We might add that it is seems to be no coincidence that R. Akiva terms *Shir Ha-Shirim* “*kodesh kodashim*,” emphasizing precisely this parallel.

A variation on this theme is offered by a number of commentators, including Ibn Ezra, Metzudat David, and Ralbag. Ibn Ezra (Introduction), followed by Ralbag (1:1, s.v. *shir*) and Metzudat David (ibid.), explains that given that Shlomo composed over a thousand songs (I *Melakhim* 5:12), the point of this opening verse is that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is the greatest of all the songs Shlomo composed.

Others suggest that *Shir Ha-Shirim* means to single out this song not as greater than other songs, but as distinctive in other respects. For instance, one French commentator suggests, along similar but slightly different lines, that this song was compiled by later “men of wisdom” (following *Bava Batra* 14b, this might refer to Chizkiya and his assistants), who compiled these songs from among the many other songs written by Shlomo. Alternatively, R. Yosef Kara (1:1, s.v. *u-feirusho*) suggests that this is simply one of the many songs composed by Shlomo.

All the aforementioned commentators, in one way or another, understand “*Shir Ha-Shirim*” to mean “one song out of many others.” Other commentators propose an alternative explanation, however. On their view, *Shir Ha-Shirim* means not one of many songs, but a song comprised of many smaller songs that have been stitched together into one. For instance, *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* (1:10) cites a debate as to whether “*Shir Ha-Shirim*” refers to one song or three. The *midrash* explains that the latter view reads the verses in the following manner: “*Shir*” means one song, and “*shirim*” means two songs, equaling three. While the *midrash* does not elaborate what it might mean for *Shir Ha-Shirim* to comprise three songs, this view seems to indicate that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is indeed a combination of many smaller units.

In his Introduction, Malbim goes further, explaining that the verse in *Melakhim* does not mean that Shlomo composed 1,005 songs, but that he composed *Shir Ha-Shirim*, a larger song that can be divided into five sub-units, concluding with a section entitled “the song of 1,000.” (We will dedicate next week’s *shiur* to analyzing Malbim’s novel reading of the *sefer*). Netziv simply states that *Shir Ha-Shirim* refers to a song comprised of many songs.

In a different vein, *Midrash Lekach Tov* cites a view that *Shir Ha-Shirim* comprises all the other songs in *Tanakh*, or even spans all the events in *Tanakh*. Strikingly, in the same breath, *Lekach Tov* suggests that this is the greatest of songs. This may open the door to the possibility that the text is intentionally ambiguous and hints to both readings simultaneously. As we have seen and will continue to see, there is so much about *Shir Ha-Shirim* that is ambiguous and subject to varied interpretations; this may well already be hinted to in the title itself.

This second interpretation is crucial, as it touches on a thorny set of questions that continue to vex commentators until today: Is there any organizational principle to *Shir Ha-Shirim*? If so, what is it? Is *Shir Ha-Shirim* a drama, perhaps one played out in multiple acts? Is it simply a number of loosely associated verses or shorter songs that were connected? Are the songs distinct from one another, while there remains a larger logical flow to the work? According to the interpretation that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a single song comprised of many, the book’s title may be alluding to the final position that we mentioned: It is at a single song with some sort of overarching narrative or organizing set of principles. It is a symphony comprised of multiple movements.

Netziv’s commentary to 1:1 offers an excellent example of this possibility. Citing a number of midrashic statements, Netziv contends that different parts of *Shir Ha-Shirim* were authored by different individuals: Shlomo, Moshe, and someone living during the days of Avraham Avinu. While Shlomo did not compose every verse in the book, he was nevertheless responsible for organizing *Shir Ha-Shirim* into a coherent whole. (This parallels the *gemara* in *Bava Batra* 14b, which, as we understood it, seems to suggest that while Shlomo was the author, Chizkiya and his assistant compiled the *sefer*.) Netziv goes on to compare this to *Tehillim*: Although *Chazal* attribute *Sefer Tehillim* to David, in fact, according to tradition, some ten other authors contributed various chapters of the book. Nonetheless, since David compiled, added to it, and edited the work as a whole, *Tehillim* is attributed to David. And the same is true of *Shir Ha-Shirim*: Shlomo may not have authored the entire book, but he edited and pulled it together into a unified work, and so the entirety is attributed to him.

More recently, in his *Acharekha Narutza*, R. Yuval Cherlow suggests that we may divide *Shir Ha-Shirim* into four sections: 1:1-2:7; 2:8-3:5; 3:6- 6:3; and 6:4-8:14. For Rav Cherlow, there is a larger plot that unfolds over four acts. Key to the narrative is that it concerns a love story between a king and a shepherd’s daughter. The major difficulty in their relationship is that they emerge from such radically different worlds that they find it extremely difficult to acculturate to one another’s language and lifestyle. In the first song, the woman feels especially distanced from the king’s lifestyle, and she questions whether she is fit for him. The second song, in Rav Cherlow’s telling, is similar to the first but reversed: Here it is not the woman who hesitates to respond to the man, but the king who is unsure whether or not to pursue a relationship with the shepherd. In the third song, they have decided to marry, but even then the shepherdess is put off by the presence of the other women in the king’s castle. This leads her to leave the king and return to her mother’s home. She remains unresponsive to his knocks on the door, even in the middle of the night, until she finally “wakes up” and decides to reunite with her husband and seek him out. In the fourth and final song, the king explains palace life to the woman, especially the presence of some sixty concubines, and that these do not detract from the uniqueness of their relationship. The couple reunites, even as the closing verses suggest that not all is perfect at the story’s conclusion and that the love dance will continue for the two lovers from different backgrounds.

Rav Cherlow goes on to explain that the *nimshal* regards the Jews’ relationship with God: We are mere shepherds who are uncertain of ourselves, confront our flaws on a regular basis, and must learn to trust our capacity to connect with the divine realm. God, the King, is almost indescribable, does not confront these existential fears and “lives” an altogether different sort of existence. The enduring drama of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is the attempt of finite, flawed humans to establish meaningful, loving relationships with an infinite, perfect God.

While the particulars of Rav Cherlow’s explanation differ radically from that of Netziv, both take their cue from the term *Shir Ha-Shirim*. It is a song comprised of many smaller ones – whether that means that Shlomo culled and edited many songs that were composed by himself and others (Netziv) or that it is a drama in four acts about our relationship with God (R. Cherlow). Either way, for many diverse commentators, the phrase *Shir Ha-Shirim* is key to unlocking the mysteries of this opaque work.