**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

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In memory of Tzvi Alexander ben Reuven Bell z”l

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**Shiur #06: The Role of *Peshat* in *Shir* *Ha-Shirim***

Having examined the classical range of views regarding the parable of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, we will now tackle the thorny question as to the status of the *peshat* of *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

As a general rule, “*ein mikra yotzei midei peshuto*, “a verse cannot be removed from its face context” (*Shabbat* 63a). This means that midrashic and allegorical interpretations are not meant to replace the simple reading of a text, but to complement it.

Yet *peshat* does not always denote the most literal reading of a text. For example, the Torah teaches that one “may not place a stumbling block before a blind man” (*Vayikra* 19:14). This is generally understood to refer to one who intentionally offers poor counsel to another, such as bad business advice, or one who leads another person to sin. What if one literally places a stumbling block before a blind person? R. Eliyahu Mizrachi (ad loc.) states that such a person does not violate the prohibition of “*lifnei iver*.”[[1]](#footnote-1) At first glance, we might understand this to mean that the words “*lifnei iver lo titen mikhshol*” are to be understood only on the level of *derash*, not *peshat*. But this would be an incorrect understanding of Mizrachi’s principle. Mizrachi does not mean to say that we must ignore the *peshat* of *lifnei iver*, but rather that the *peshat* refers not to literally placing a stumbling block, but to misleading another person or causing another to sin.

Conversely, there are instances in which tradition determines that we do not follow the *peshat* at all. Classic examples include “an eye for an eye” and counting the *omer* “*mi-macharat ha-Shabbat*,” the day after Shabbat (as opposed to the day after the first day of Pesach).

This leads us to our central question: May *Shir Ha-shirim* be legitimately read on the level of *peshat*? Put differently, to take a cue from the *lifnei iver* example, is the non-literal reading the *peshat* or *derash*? Is there any value to the study of the face meaning of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, or is it to be understood as an example that defies the general principle of *ein mikra yotzei midei peshuto*?

Strikingly, R. Soloveitchik insists that the allegorical rendering is the *peshat* of *Shir Ha-Shirim*:

The allegorical character of the Song of Songs is a firm principle of the Halakha, upon which are founded both the physical sanctity of the scroll of Song of Songs as not to be touched (*Yadayim* 3:5) and the sanctity of the name Shlomo, occurrences of which in the Song of Songs are interpreted allegorically as appellations for God. The aggadic tradition also interprets the Song of Songs symbolically... The book cannot be interpreted according to *peshat*. In all of the rest of the Torah, we are permitted to interpret the verses according to either the midrashic reading or the plain sense... In this case, the symbolic method is the only one we can use. Anyone who explains this book in accordance with the literal meaning of the words, as referring to sensual love, defiles its sanctity and denies the Oral Torah. (*U-Vikashtem Mi-Sham*, pp. 289-290, n. 124)

In a sermon published at the end of his *Haggada*, Dr. Norman Lamm presents a similar position:

The first striking fact about the Song of Songs is the way it is understood in the Jewish tradition. It does not at all mean what the words say. Outwardly, it is a love song between a shepherd and shepherdess. But Judaism has maintained that *Shir Ha-Shirim* must not be regarded as a pastoral love song, but rather as a song of intense devotion between Israel and God, and that therefore it is filled with the most divine mysteries and the most sublime secrets…. R. Barukh Halevi Epstein, the author of *Torah Temima*, explains: Other passages of the Bible which are interpreted as having a deeper meaning are read on two levels – the outer meaning and the inner, deeper one. But the Song of Songs is the one parable in which the Jewish tradition most ostensibly abjures any acceptance of the plain meaning of the text and insists only upon its esoteric meaning.

Some modern scholars maintain that this was the commonly accepted school of thought among *Chazal*, certainly until the period of the *Rishonim*, but see a shift having taken place at that juncture:

The allegorical reading of the song as a description of the relationship between God and the Jewish People dominated the interpretive tradition of the first millennium, including the *Targum Shir Ha-Shirim*, *Midrash Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba,* and scattered references throughout rabbinic literature. Even the Karaites, those so-called “literalists,” considered the Song as absolutely concealed, with no exoteric meaning, i.e., its literal meaning is the allegory.

This monolithic view held sway all over the Jewish world, both East and West, until the time of Rashi (1040-1105) in Northern France and his followers in the *peshat* school of biblical interpretation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There were even a number of 19th century thinkers who, citing this non-*peshat* perspective, went so far as to maintain that due to licentiousness and the possibility of misunderstanding, we should no longer teach this book(!).[[3]](#footnote-3) Needless to say, the latter position has been roundly rejected in all Jewish corners, yet it does tell us something about the degree of discomfort some rabbinic thinkers continued to feel so many years after *Shir Ha-Shirim*’s canonization.

Perhaps most commonly associated with the non-*peshat* school is the much-maligned Artscroll commentary, which offers an allegorical rendering in line with Rashi’s commentary in lieu of a typical English translation. (A running *peshat* commentary appears on the bottom of the page.) As formulated in the original introduction to the commentary (1977):

The Song is an allegory. It is a duet of love between God and Israel. Its verses are so saturated with meaning that nearly every one of the major commentators finds new themes in its beautiful but cryptic words. All agree, however, that the true and simple meaning of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is the allegorical meaning. The literal meaning of the words is so far from their meaning that it is false... Has it been misinterpreted by fools and twisted by scoundrels? Most assuredly, yes!

R. Nosson Scherman, Artscroll’s editor, defended the decision in an interview with R. Dovid Bashevkin in *Jewish Action* magazine, citing consultations with two outstanding giants of the 20th century American Jewish community:

We don’t provide an exact translation of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. On the literal level, it’s a love story with explicit expressions. We spoke to R. Yaakov Kamenetsky and R. Moshe Feinstein before we started working on the translation, and they were unanimous in their opinion that the only honest translation of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is the allegory. To translate *Shir Ha-Shirim* literally is to miss the whole point of the work. So in the ArtScroll *Shir Ha-Shirim*, we provide an allegorical translation, primarily based on Rashi*.* In the commentary below the text, we provide a literal translation. And we were attacked for this! *Moment Magazine* ran a review of the entire ArtScroll project and devoted most of it to attacking us for not translating *Shir Ha-Shirim* literally as an erotic love song. A sign of the times, isn’t it?

**RDB: Did you respond to that attack?**

**RNS:** No, there was no point. There are people who insist on believing what they want to believe. These are people who adhere to the “don’t-confuse-me-with-the-facts-my-mind-is-made-up” school of thought. But as we explain in the introduction to our *Shir Ha-Shirim*, the traditional commentators unanimously agree—not the Bible critics, but those who follow the *mesora*—that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is not to be translated literally because it’s not meant to be literal; it’s an allegory.

Yet, as many have noted, the reliance on Rashi to elide *peshuto shel mikra* is highly ironic. For despite Artscroll’s partial citation of Rashi’s Introduction to *Shir Ha-Shirim*, Rashi presents one of the clearest arguments in favor of following *peshuto shel mikra* in our understanding of *Shir Ha-Shirim*:

*God has spoken once; twice have I heard it* (*Tehillim* 62:12): A single verse of Scripture may bear multiple interpretations" (*Sanhedrin* 34a). After all is said and done, no scriptural verse may be interpreted in a way that deviates completely from the simple, literal meaning. While the prophets spoke allegorically, one must interpret their allegories according to the structure of the text and the sequence of the verses, one following the next... I have endeavored to preserve the literal meaning of the text and to interpret the verses in sequence. I shall also cite the *midrashim* of our Sages, each one in its appropriate place...[[4]](#footnote-4)

Citing the aforementioned rabbinic dictum that “*ein mikra yotzei midei peshuto*,” Rashi clearly maintains that there are two levels of interpretation of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Thus, Rashi himself suggests that it is appropriate to present *peshuto shel mikra* as the literal rendering of the text, alongside its allegorical interpretation.

Similarly, Rashbam’s commentary, edited and published by Sarah Japeth, offers the same two-tiered interpretive approach. Much as in their respective commentaries to Chumash, Rashbam focuses the bulk of his attention on explicating the *peshat*, whereas Rashi expends more energy on offering the allegorical, midrashic understanding, and is less systematic in his presentation of the *peshat* meaning of the verse. Still, their basic orientation – that *Shir Ha-Shirim* comprises both *peshat* and *midrash* – is one and the same. Much the same may be said for other commentators ranging from Ibn Ezra to Metzudat David to Malbim. Similarly, Amos Chacham, author of the *Da’at Mikra* commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim*, comments that whereas the *midrash* deals only on the level of *derash*, Rashi and Ibn Ezra certainly accept both the *peshat* and allegorical readings (*Da’at Mikra*, p. 5).

What is more, there are indications that even the Midrash accepts a *peshat* level of interpretation to the book. For instance, in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba*, R. Yochanan derives from a verse in *Shir Ha-Shirim* “that a bridegroom should not enter the bridal chamber unless the bride gives him permission” (4:16). That a *halakha* can be derived from the *peshat* of *Shir Ha-Shirim* seems to clearly indicate that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is read on a *peshat* level as well, or this derivation would be absurd.

There is good reason to value a *peshat*-based translation. First, let us recall that the native Hebrew speaker will in any case read *Shir Ha-Shirim* in accordance with its face meaning. Second, much of the pathos of the book is lost when one jumps over the *peshat* and goes straight to the allegorical meaning. *Shir Ha-Shirim* is poetry, and something fundamental is lacking when the reader does not appreciate the book’s emotional intensity. Dr. William Kolbrener puts the point this way:

The second verse of the first chapter of the Song allows a comparison. King James offers: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine,” rendered by Artscroll as, “Communicate your innermost wisdom to me again in loving closeness.” Not only clunky and abstract, Artscroll also erases the passionate physicality, the eros, from the work. The King James translators – here, the Cambridge Company of translators led by Francis Dillingham – show why the 1611 translation of the Bible is the most Hebraic of works in the most Hebraic of periods of English Literature. They do not shy away from presenting the physical, even the fleshly meaning of the original Hebrew, for they also understood that the tangible world serves to express the divine. Adam Nicolson, in a book on the King James Bible, writes that the superficial and surface style of the American World Bible recalls the atmosphere of a “1930s bathing party.” Artscroll evinces not a bathing party, but a philosophy seminar where mention of the body might seem uncouth, vulgar.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Further, As R. Netanel Wiederblank notes,[[6]](#footnote-6) even R. Soloveitchik did not necessarily mean to deny the *peshat* of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Rather, his point is that:

while Rashi, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra all elucidate the verses according to *peshat*, they see the *peshat* as an allegory. What R. Soloveitchik maintains is that the claim that *Shir Ha-Shirim* on a level of *peshat* is a collection of love poems, entirely lacking in religious content, is false. Regarding such a basic and uncontested issue the position of *Chazal* reflects a tradition which cannot be debated, even on a level of *peshat*. Hence, R. Akiva (Tosefta, *Sanhedrin* 12:10) said if someone treats *Shir* *Ha-Shirim* as a love song, he has no portion in the World to Come.

In other words, R. Soloveitchik does not claim that *Shir Ha-Shirim* has no *peshat*; all he means to say is that the significance of the *peshat* is as an entranceway to understanding the midrashic interpretation.

Yet we might take one step further. First, regarding the argument from R. Akiva’s statement, R. Akiva may well be critiquing those who see *Shir Ha-Shirim* as *merely* a secular love song, and accordingly sing it at secular venues. The *peshat* may be significant both in its own right and as a vehicle to the allegory. Second, as noted, the halakhic derivation suggests that *Shir Ha-Shirim* does contain an independently meaningful level of *peshat*. Third and most important, there is a larger philosophical issue at stake regarding the legitimacy of the *peshat* reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Throughout the centuries, many Christian readers sought to read *Shir Ha-Shirim* as purely allegorical (in accordance with Christian dogma), as they were inclined to see fleshly pleasure as sinful. The philosophical and religious ascetic will tend to ignore the *peshat* of *Shir Ha-Shirim* altogether, instead casting the book as exclusively a metaphor for the relationship between man and God. But one who believes that this-worldly enjoyment, when refined and consistent with Jewish values, has a spiritually positive value, may be inclined to embrace *peshuto shel mikra* for precisely this reason.

Finally, there is one more point that must be made in support of encouraging close study of the *peshat*. As Ralbag stresses in his Introduction to *Shir Ha-Shirim*, the commentaries offer a wide range of interpretations of the text. The best way to decide among these varying interpretations is by engaging in a careful reading of the text itself. Moreover, as in any biblical work, there are countless literary nuances that can only be explicated by way of a close study of the *peshat*. Finally, as we will seek to demonstrate throughout the course of our study, a close *peshat* reading yields new possible interpretations, which enable us to deepen our understanding of the *sefer* more generally.

To take just one recent example, in his book *Acharekha Narutza*, R. Yuval Cherlow proposes a novel reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim* that relies on a close reading of the *peshat* in an effort to uncover the book’s deeper religious message. While we will not dwell on his interpretation at this stage, suffice it to say that through a careful rereading of the *peshat*, he is able to uncover not only new aspects of the *peshat* narrative, but of the book’s larger narrative as well. R. Cherlow himself makes the point:

A direct, unmediated reading of *Tanakh*, prior to turning to the commentaries, also allows for a unique encounter of each individual with the word of God. Every human being encounters the Torah in a unique fashion appropriate to his unique soul, and this profound internal encounter between the soul of the individual and the Torah reveals to him new insights.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Following R. Cherlow’s model, and in accordance with the arguments we have offered, we will utilize a careful *peshat* reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a way of arriving at a deeper understanding of the book’s allegorical significance.

1. See, however, *Minchat* *Chinukh* 232, who disagrees and maintains that we are supposed to read the verse literally as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://thetorah.com/song-of-songs-the-emergence-of-peshat-interpretation/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cited by Dr. Zvi Yehuda, *Sinai*, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Translation from <http://realiajudaica.blogspot.com/2011/04/on-reading-and-translating-shir-ha.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://openmindedtorah.com/uncategorized/eros-and-translation/ Dr. William Kolbrener. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Jewish Action*, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Pirkei Ha-Avot* (Alon Shvut, 2005), p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)