**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

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**Shiur #07: Malbim’s Novel Interpretation of *Shir Ha-Shirim***

In previous weeks, we analyzed the underlying symbolism of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. We noted that whereas according to many *midrashim*, Rashi, and Ibn Ezra, the *sefer* is a metaphor for the relationship between God and the Jewish People, Rambam and the mystics view *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a metaphor for an individual’s passionate relationship with Hashem.

This week, we turn to the interpretation of R. Meir Leibush Malbim, who, in the introduction to his commentary *Shirei Ha-Nefesh*, presents an innovative spin on the viewpoint of Rambam and the mystics. In doing so, he simultaneously addresses many of the other fundamental questions we have raised in previous chapters, including the meaning of the phrase “*Shir Ha-Shirim*,” the identity of “*Benot Yerushalayim*,” and the proper division of the *sefer*.

Malbim begins with two starting assumptions. First, not only is Shlomo the author of the book, but the events described in *Shir Ha-Shirim* are intended as a metaphor for his own life experiences. Second, the phrase “*Shir Ha-Shirim*” should be understood not as “the greatest of songs” (as numerous *midrashim* and Rashi maintain), but as “the song comprised of numerous songs” (following Radak and others). It is for this reason that Malbim entitles his commentary “*Shirei Ha-Nefesh*,” the “Songs of the Soul,” not “*Shir Ha-Nefesh*,” the “Song of the Soul.” Accordingly, Malbim sees *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a self-revealing description of Shlomo’s religious struggle, conveyed through the drama of a compelling love story.

How does Malbim interpret the *sefer*, both on the level of *peshat* and that of metaphor? Regarding the former, Malbim posits an arresting interpretation of the storyline, which we may term the three-character theory. Whereas most commentators see the story as detailing a romance between two individuals, Malbim introduces a third personality. On his telling, a woman (the *raya*) has fallen in love with and is betrothed to a shepherd (the *dod*). But King Shlomo, despite having countless wives and concubines, falls in love with the young lady and seeks her hand in marriage. To ensure that she does not escape and reunite with the *dod*, Shlomo sets guards, the *Benot Yerushalayim*, to ensure that she does not escape. Yet despite the king’s best efforts, she eventually not only escapes, but even persuades the *Benot Yerushalayim* to abandon their royal charge and to support her efforts to be reunited with her beloved.

Following this line of thought, Malbim divides the narrative into five sections, with a concluding song at the *sefer*’s end. As noted in a previous *shiur*, this is how he interprets the verse inI *Melakhim 5:12*, which describes Shlomo’s songs as “five and one thousand.” As opposed to most commentators, who understand that Shlomo composed 1,005 songs, Malbim interprets the verse to be saying that Shlomo authored the five songs that comprise the sections of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, as well as a final song, entitled “the song of one thousand.”

After the opening verse, which introduces the five songs, Malbim outlines each of the five sections, which he sees as an unfolding drama. In the opening act, which runs from 1:2-2:7, the *dod* seeks out the *raya*, who is being guarded by the *Benot Yerushalayim*. He secretly urges her to escape and join him. In response, the *raya* explains that while she desires to join him, she is restrained because “the king has brought [her] to his inner chambers” (1:4).

Continuing to describe her situation, the *raya* continues speaking, but, in order to avoid detection, she pretends to be speaking to her guardswomen: “I am dark, but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem — like the tents of Kedar, like the pavilions of Solomon. Don’t stare at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has gazed upon me. My mother’s sons quarreled with me. They made me guard the vineyards, my own vineyard I did not guard” (1:5-6).

Toward the end of the scene, somehow, she manages to temporarily escape her captors and reunite with her beloved: “He brought me to the banquet room and his banner of love was over me… His left hand was under my head; his right arm embraced me” (2:4,6). Yet the *Benot Yerushalayim* catch the *raya* and, in accordance with their duty, restore her to captivity. To this she responds with a refrain that we encounter on multiple occasions throughout *Shir Ha-Shirim*: “I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by hinds of the field: Do not wake or rouse love until it please!” (2:7). By this, according to Malbim, she means to say that they ought not interfere with her natural, loving relationship with the *dod*, and instead impose an artificial love with the king. Since there are no humans in the field, she appoints the gazelles and hinds as witnesses over the proceedings.

In the second scene (2:8-17), the *dod* once again secretly approaches the *raya*, urging her to “Arise, my darling; My fair one, come away” (2:10). Yet she is tucked away by her captors, hidden “in the cleft of a rock” (2:14). The *raya* therefore creates a diversion, which is described in 2:15: “Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards — for our vineyard is in blossom.” This verse seems out of place. What exactly does it mean, and how does it fit the larger flow of the text? Malbim explains that with the onset of spring, the *raya* is creating a diversion intended to distract the *Benot Yerushalayim*. Specifically, she points out that if the daughters of Jerusalem are the king’s guards, it is also their responsibility to ensure the integrity of the king’s vineyard. Accordingly, the *raya* urges them to run and protect the king’s vineyards from the onslaught of the foxes. This diversion once again enables the *raya* to “run the other way” and be reunited with the *dod*: “My beloved is mine and I am his, who browses among the lilies” (2:16). Yet she knows that their time together is short, for the *Banot*, for reasons of their own safety, must return by the day’s end: “When the day blows gently and the shadows flee, set out, my beloved, swift as a gazelle or a young stag, for the hills of spices” (2:17).

The third section (3:1-5:1) is significantly longer than the previous two. Here, instead of the *dod* taking the initiative, it is the *raya* who takes the first step:

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. (3:1-4)

Yet the *Benot Yerushalayim* once again track her down, and she reiterates her insistence that love cannot be coerced and that their attempts to convince her to love the king will ultimately conclude in failure (3:8).

At this stage, the *raya* develops yet another ruse. *Shlomo Ha-Melekh*, she notes, had constructed a wedding canopy in which he hoped to marry the *raya*. If the role of the *Benot Yerushalayim* is to ensure the king’s marriage to the young woman, suggests the *raya*, they should inspect the beauty of the canopy and ensure it is fit for the wedding day. Moreover, she urges, “maidens of Zion, go forth and gaze upon King Solomon wearing the crown that his mother gave him on his wedding day, on his day of bliss” (3:11). While the guardswomen inspect the canopy, the *raya* flees into the arms of her beloved. This time, due to their distraction, the *dod* and *raya* are able to spend an extended period together, at least as measured by the full chapter (four) dedicated to their expressions of mutual love. Finally, at the beginning of chapter five, “order” is restored, and the *raya* is retaken by her captors.

The fourth section (5:2-16) witnesses arguably the key turning point in Malbim’s retelling. Her beloved knocks on the door, but by the time she arises to open the door, he has left. She escapes in the middle of the night, wandering the streets in search of her beloved. Yet the city guardsmen find her wandering the streets at night and they apprehend her, calling the *Benot Yerushalayim* to take back the suspect. Upon their arrival, for yet a third time, the *raya* insists that they cannot coerce love:

I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem! If you meet my beloved, tell him this: that I am faint with love. (5:8)

Seemingly exasperated by her incorrigible attempts to reunite with her beloved, the *Benot Yerushalayim* finally express their curiosity: “How is your beloved better than another, O fairest of women? How is your beloved better than another that you adjure us so?” (5:9).

Given this opening, the *raya* takes full advantage, singing the praises of her lover to her captors:

My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy, preeminent among ten thousand.

His head is finest gold, his locks are curled and black as a raven.

His eyes are like doves by watercourses, bathed in milk, set by a brimming pool.

His cheeks are like beds of spices, banks of perfume; his lips are like lilies; they drip flowing myrrh.

His hands are rods of gold, studded with beryl; his belly a tablet of ivory, adorned with sapphires.

His legs are like marble pillars set in sockets of fine gold. He is majestic as Lebanon, stately as the cedars.

His mouth is delicious and all of him is delightful. Such is my beloved, such is my darling, O maidens of Jerusalem! (5:10-16)

It is at this point, the opening of the fifth and final narrative song, that the *Benot Yerushalayim* are finally swayed by the plight of the *raya*. Instead of again restoring her to royal captivity, they join her side, inquiring: “Where has your beloved gone, O fairest of women? Where has your beloved turned? Let us seek him with you” (6:1). With their support, she not only finds her beloved, but is free to engage in the most extended dialogue with the *dod* that we find throughout the *sefer*, which runs from chapter six through nearly the end of the book.

Finally, after this dialogue, she turns back to the *Benot Yerushalayim*, with a slight shift in phraseology from her previous formulation: “I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem: You cannot not wake or rouse love until it please!” According to Malbim, the daughters of Yerushalayim have finally granted that they cannot stand between the *dod* and *raya*. The *raya* points to this reality in this sentence; instead of urging the *Benot Yerushalyim* not to interfere, she is finally free to explain to them that they now see that her initial urgings were in fact correct.

She concludes by turning back to the *dod*, urging, “Be a seal upon your heart, like the seal upon your hand. For love is fierce as death, passion is mighty as Sheol. Its darts are darts of fire, a blazing flame” (8:5). In other words, despite her escape from the *Benot Yerushalayim*, she fears that the king will still seek her out. Accordingly, she beseeches her beloved to constantly stand vigil over her, so that “until death do they not part.” With this request, the author concludes by reflecting the extraordinary intensity of the love between the two: “Vast floods cannot quench love, nor rivers drown it. If a man offered all his wealth for love, he would be laughed to scorn” (8:6). No one, not even Shlomo himself, can stand in between two lovers.

Finally, *Shir Ha-Shirim* concludes with what Malbim refers to as “the song of a thousand.” This section introduces a more youthful sister, who seems to be vulnerable to the king’s desires. Malbim explains that the *raya* has a sister, whom she fears will also be taken by the king. She begs the *dod* to help to protect her younger sister, and he reassures her that she will be safe. She concludes by insisting that she has no interest in deriving benefit from the king (symbolized by his vineyard), despite the fact that it is so valuable that it brings in 1,000 coins for each of its guards.

So much for the drama of *Shir Ha-Shirim* on the level of *peshat*. But what could it possibly represent? For Malbim, Shlomo is writing autobiographically about his own spiritual struggles. The *dod* represents Hashem and pure spirituality; “Shlomo” (who craves the woman) represents material desire; and the *raya* is the soul. The drama of *Shir Ha-Shirim* for Malbim, like Rambam and the mystics, is that of the individual, rather than the entire Jewish nation. Yet it is far more specific than that. The soul, which is inherently spiritual in nature, finds itself trapped inside a body, and is therefore led astray by its desire to pursue material pleasure. This temptation is represented by Shlomo, who, despite his great spiritual achievements, married many women and was led astray by material desire. At the same time, he strove to be reunited with his soul. The soul is thus caught between being trapped in the material body and its desire to be united with its master.

On Malbim’s reading, the instinctual desire of the soul is to cling to God, but the material desires – represented by Shlomo (who, perhaps unexpectedly, casts himself in the role of material desire) and his emissaries (the *Benot Yerushalayim*) – repeatedly seek to distract the soul from its ultimate spiritual mission. While the struggle continues throughout one’s life (and thus for the overwhelming majority of the *sefer*), according to Malbim, a resolution is only achieved after death, when the soul frees itself from the shackles of this world (“For love is fierce as death, passion is mighty as Sheol”) and enters the World to Come. It is only at this final stage – the culmination of *Shir Ha-Shirim*’s fifth song – that the soul is able to cling to the divine.

While it is far from the only plausible reading of the *sefer*, Malbim’s approach to *Shir Ha-Shirim* is novel, highly stimulating, and serves as a powerful conclusion to our discussion of the various commentaries’ readings of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. It also vividly illustrates the potential significance of rendering *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a song comprised of numerous sub-units.

Having completed our survey of the major questions and commentators’ viewpoints regarding *Shir Ha-Shirim*, we turn to the text and will begin analyzing the *sefer* section by section.