**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

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**Shiur #09: *Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:9-14**

In this *shiur*, we will analyze *Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:9-2:3, which, according to most commentators, comprises a single unit of praises between the *dod* and *raya*.

The man opens:

I have likened you, my darling, To a mare in Pharaoh’s chariots:

Your cheeks are comely with plaited wreaths, Your neck with strings of jewels.

We will add wreaths of gold To your spangles of silver. (1:9-11)

First, it is worth noting that the opening phrase “*le-susati*” is likely to be understood as a poetic form, along the lines of its usage in *Tehillim* 118 (as in “*gamal alaychi*”) and elsewhere.

It is also noteworthy that for the commentators who view *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a presenting a panoramic overview of Jewish history, such as Targum and Ibn Ezra, verse 9 is an obvious reference to Pharaoh. Ibn Ezra, for example, sees it as a reference to the Jews’ looting of the Egyptians, whereas Targum (following *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba*) interprets it as a reference to *Shirat Ha-Yam*.

This is the first time we encounter the terminology of *raya*, which we will need to track carefully as we move through the *sefer.* Clearly, the *dod*’s overall depiction of the *raya* is focused on her stately character. This appears to be consistent with the descriptions of the beloved as a king of sorts in 1:2-4, whether literally or figuratively, and stands in contrast to the earlier and later depictions of the *dod* as a shepherd. It appears, then, that if 1:2-4 describes the relationship between the woman and a royal and 1:5-8 describes a very different set of ambivalent interactions between the woman and a shepherd, we have now returned to the royal relationship.

We now turn to verse 12, in which the *raya* responds:

While the king was on his couch, My nard gave forth its fragrance.

This verse is highly ambiguous and is subject to two opposing interpretations among the commentators, as is reflected in a debate cited in the *midrash*:

“While the king was on his couch”: R. Meir and R. Yehuda [debated this issue]. R. Meir says: While the King of Kings, the Blessed One be He, was on his couch in heaven, the Jews emitted a bad odor, and said to the Calf, “These are your gods, O Israel.” R. Yehuda said to him: Enough, Meir! We do not interpret *Shir Ha-Shirim* negatively, but rather positively, for *Shir Ha-Shirim* was only given for the praise of the Jewish People. What, then, does it mean, “While the king was on his couch?” While the King of Kings, the Blessed One be He, was on his couch in heaven, the Jews emitted a positive odor before Mount Sinai, declaring, “All that God says we will do and listen.” (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 1:12)

The general contours of this Tannaitic debate play themselves out among the medieval commentaries. On the one hand, following R. Yehuda, many see this as the *raya*’s affirmative response to the *dod*. Metzudat David (1:12, s.v. *ad*), in explaining the *nimshal*, sees this as a positive description of the *raya*’s actions in comparison with those of idolaters; while she exudes a positive fragrance, others emit the spiritual stench of idolatry. Similarly, Ibn Ezra (s.v. *midrash amra*) claims that this is an allusion to the Jewish People asking *Hashem* to recall the covenant of Avraham, whose reputation spread throughout the world. Alternatively, he suggests that it is a reference to the *ketoret*.

According to these commentaries, our verse exemplifies the dialogical nature of the communication in the love song that is a hallmark of *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

But this positive interpretation, while plausible, must contend with two difficulties. First, the woman seems to be praising herself in this verse. Is that appropriate? Does it reflect well on her? Is that not inconsistent with much of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, in which the characters overwhelmingly praise one another, not themselves? Second, according to Rashi and the midrashic reading, given that verse 9 references the redemption from Egypt, a verse with reference to incense might well be taken as a reference to the shortcomings of the Jews in the desert, particularly the worship of the Golden Calf.

Accordingly, Rashi (s.v. *ad, nirdi*), consistent with the view of R. Meir, reads the verse as follows: Despite all the good you have done for me, we repaid you unkindly with the sin of the Golden Calf. Instead of citing R. Meir, however, Rashi bases his interpretation on the *gemara* in *Shabbat* (88b), which sees in this verse both a positive and negative description of the Jews’ behavior:

Ulla said [regarding the Golden Calf]: Insolent is the bride who is promiscuous under her wedding canopy. R. Mari, son of the daughter of Shmuel, said: What [is the] verse? “While the king was still at his table, my nard [gave off its fragrance].” Rav said: The affection is still upon us, as it is written, and did not write, “It reeked.”

While the *gemara* does conclude that God still loves us, it reads 1:11 as a reference to the sin of the Golden Calf, prompting Rashi to offer the same interpretation. In a variation on Rashi, Rashbam (s.v. *ad*) explains that while the king was in the *mesiba,* our scent wore off – a reference to the sin of the Golden Calf. In yet another variation on the midrashic view, *Lekach Tov* (s.v. *ad*) suggests that as soon as the king was at Har Sinai, we offered the scent of the *ketoret* to the Golden Calf.

Having reviewed the two basic orientations offered by the commentators, as well as the in-between perspective offered by the *gemara* in *Shabbat*, let us return to the dispute between R. Meir and R. Yehuda, particularly the latter’s objection. R. Yehuda’s assertion that the entire raison d’etre of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is to praise the Jewish People is remarkable. The classic view holds that *Shir Ha-Shirim* reflects the (at times tumultuous) loving relationship between God and the Jewish People – not that it specifically comes to praise the Jews! R. Yehuda’s formulation suggests a slightly alternative reading of the entirety of the book. We would expect the king to receive praise; the fact that the shepherdess, representing the Jewish People, receives praise in equal measure is a remarkable statement about her stature.

We now turn to the concluding verses in this section of the dialogue, in which the *raya* continues her response:

My beloved to me is a bag of myrrh lodged between my breasts.

My beloved to me is a spray of henna blooms from the vineyards of En-Gedi. (13-14)

It is significant that in these two verses, she invokes the terminology “*dod*” for the first time in the *sefer*. Just as in regard to the term “*raya*,” we will closely track where and when the man is termed the “*dod*” throughout the course of the *sefer*.

From an allegorical perspective, what is the larger framework in these two *pesukim*, and how do they relate to verse 12? Rashi (s.v. *nirdi*), following *Shabbat* 88b, explains that despite the sin of the Golden Calf, we still remained beloved to God. Alternatively, Metzudat David (s.v. *ad*) understands the verses to mean that notwithstanding our shortcomings, we were overcome by God’s love for us and continued to desire to cling to Him.

Reflecting on these verses more generally, alongside the emphasis on the stately physical characteristics and jewelry associated with the *raya*’s beauty in verses 9-11, verses 12-14 evince a clear focus on the motif of scent: “My nard gave forth its fragrance”; “My beloved is a bag of myrrh”; and “My beloved is a spray of henna from vineyards.” These seem to be signs of royalty, expensive scents that are only available to the wealthy. This lends further credence to our contention that this section describes the relationship what we have previously termed the “royal relationship” between the man and woman.

**1:15-2:3**

Verses 1:15-2:3 continue the previous section, in which we encounter a fully-blossoming loving relationship between the *dod* and *raya*. Verses 15-16 further accentuate the magnetism and reciprocity between the *dod* and *raya*:

Ah, you are fair, my darling, Ah, you are fair, With your dove-like eyes!

And you, my beloved, are handsome, Beautiful indeed! Our couch is fair. (1:15-16)

In itself, verse 15 is doubled; the *dod* calls the *raya* “fair” twice. Then, in her immediate response, the *raya* echoes the *dod*’s couplet, and adds the word “*af*, even,” suggesting that she is not just echoing his compliments but adding her own. The sense that the two are moving in synch, while simultaneously uplifting one another to ever-deeper levels of connection, is quite evident here.

It is also significant that this seems to be the first instance in which the man speaks first, which in itself suggests a different aspect of the reciprocity that so beautifully characterizes their relationship.

Looking more carefully at the specific praises each one heaps upon another in these two verses, we will begin by examining the phrase “*einayikh yonim*,” which JPS translates as, “With your dove-like eyes.” A number of points are striking. First, taken literally, the man does not compare her eyes to those of a dove, but equates them; instead of saying that her eyes are **like** those of a dove, he says that her eyes **are** doves. This moves us beyond simile to something bordering on personification, and suggests that the reciprocity between the two lovers deepens their feelings for one another. Additionally, it is noteworthy that we have now transitioned, in the space of a short number of verses, from physical beauty to jewelry to fragrances to animals. The sheer range and vividness of these verses not only enhances our appreciation for the love, but is clearly an essential aspect of the poetic experience with which the reader is meant to engage. Finally, the exact meaning of the equation between her eyes and doves is unclear: Either it means that her eyes are like those of doves, or that her eyes are beautiful, just as a dove is beautiful. Either way, the sense of softness with which the dove is characterized comes through in the comparison.

She responds by “upping the ante” and goes so far as to describe their bed. While it is not clear whether this refers to a special bed designated for the wedding or simply the bed in their home, it is clear that early on in the *Megilla*, the degree of passion has already reached an extremely high level in pitched intensity, just as it did in 1:2, which centers on the kissing motif. Alternatively, as *Da’at Mikra* (p. 13 note 33) notes, citing R. Shimon of Sens, in Mishnaic Hebrew the word *eres* refers to grape vines (see *Mishna Pe’ah* 7:7), which might also be the intention here.

If we accept the simple view that “*eres*” refers to the couple’s bed, the final verse of the chapter continues the woman’s description of the contours of the couple’s home:

Cedars are the beams of our house, Cypresses the rafters. (1:17)

The concluding phrase, “*rahitenu berotim*,” is slightly ambiguous. Indeed, Rashi (s.v. *rahitenu*) strikingly comments that he “does not know whether it is the language of beams or the language of bolts; but I do know that we taught in the language of the Mishna, ‘the *rehitim* of a person’s house testify as to his [behaviors].’” Either way, she is clearly describing their home in adulatory fashion.

Taking 1:16-17 together, then, the *raya* is stressing that the *dod* is handsome and sweet, and the same is true of their bed. But then she emphasizes that not only is there intimacy, but stability as well. Their house is built not only on tender emotion, but also upon a firm foundation of cedar and cypress. Far from tumultuous, which accurately depicts their relationship in future sections in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, here the *raya* indicates that their relationship is balanced and well established.

The opening three verses of chapter 2, the concluding verses of this literary unit, beautifully conclude this set of perorations between the woman and man:

I am a rose of Sharon, A lily of the valleys.

Like a lily among thorns, So is my darling among the maidens.

Like an apple tree among trees of the forest, So is my beloved among the youths. I delight to sit in his shade, And his fruit is sweet to my mouth. (2:1-3)

Simply by glancing at the speaker of each verse, we can easily detect what is transpiring: She begins by describing herself as a flower; he responds by developing her language, reinforcing and adding to her description; and she concludes by continuing to use praise drawn from fauna, evoking images of apples, apple trees, and luxuriating beneath the tree’s shade.

Still, the opening verse is curious. For perhaps the second time (depending on our interpretation of 1:12), the woman sees the need to describe herself in positive terms, suggesting that she might feel the need to establish herself as beloved, perhaps pointing to some degree of insecurity. Whatever the reason for her need to establish herself, he clearly is convinced, and goes so far as to describe her as not just a beautiful lily, but a lily among thorns. She is incomparably more attractive than all the other woman whom he might otherwise pursue. (Alternatively, following the *midrash*, Rashi, s.v. *ke-shoshana*,suggests that despite all those who seek to lead her astray, she remains faithful to her beloved, a reference to God.)

Looking back at this larger section, the man and woman use a host of sensuous and vivid images, in increasing reciprocal fashion, to express the intensity of their love for one another. More specifically, drawing on the references to jewelry, king, party (*mesiba*), house, and bed, Amos Chacham (*Da’at Mikra*, p. 16) contends that this is a single section of praise between a *chatan* and *kalla*, which they sing to one another at their wedding. Indeed, the reference to their bed and the rafters of their shared home seem to suggest a fully consummated marital relationship. This complements the overall tenor of the unit that runs from 1:9-2:3: a fully formed, impassioned, yet firmly-established relationship, in which there seems to be not a care in the world. This is consistent with the opening section of 1:2-4 and contrasts with 1:5-8, in which the woman sees the need to justify herself to the daughters of Jerusalem, we hear a suggestion that her father has died and her brothers mistreat her, and her beloved shepherd seems to play “hard to get.”

Taken together, the text increasingly suggests that what we have here is not a single plotline or a series of loosely connected songs, but two parallel, alternating love stories, which will continue to develop in implicit dialogue with one another as the *sefer* proceeds.