**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

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**Shiur #11: *Shir Ha-Shirim* 3:6-4:11**

The concluding verses of chapter 3 are perhaps the most enigmatic in all of *Shir Ha-Shirim*:

Who is she that comes up from the desert, Like columns of smoke, In clouds of myrrh and frankincense, Of all the powders of the merchant?

There is Solomon’s couch, Encircled by sixty warriors Of the warriors of Israel,

All of them trained in warfare, Skilled in battle, Each with sword on thigh Because of terror by night.

King Solomon made him a palanquin Of wood from Lebanon.

He made its posts of silver, Its back of gold, Its seat of purple wool. Within, it was decked with love By the maidens of Jerusalem.

O 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. (3:6-11)

There are numerous difficulties here. First, the opening phrase, “*Mi zot*,” “Who is she,” suggests that the chorus anticipates the arrival of a woman. Yet they answer by describing the glory of Shlomo’s bed, and then Shlomo himself. There seems to be a mismatch between the chorus’ question and answer. Second, the description of Shlomo’s glory, albeit on his wedding day, does not seem to fit the style of anything else we encounter in *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Third, while there are other military allusions in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, this description of warriors in this section seems to depart radically from anything else we encounter in the book. Fourth, the daughters of Zion, who praise Shlomo, play a different role here than anywhere else in *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Fifth, the word “*apiryon*” is highly unusual, and requires explanation. Sixth, it is unclear what it means that the inside of the *apiryon* was “decked with love by the daughters of Jerusalem.”

These difficulties led some scholars to suggest that the opening verse was randomly inserted here or that the entire section was originally from an earlier work that was later incorporated into *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Yet while the section is enigmatic, there do seem to be a few clues as to its significance, as well as its relevance to the remainder of the *sefer*. The phrase “*Mi zot*” appears on two other occasions in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, both in relation to the woman:

Who is she that shines through like the dawn, Beautiful as the moon, Radiant as the sun, Awesome as bannered hosts? (6:10)

Who is she that comes up from the desert, Leaning upon her beloved? Under the apple tree I roused you; It was there your mother conceived you, There she who bore you conceived you. (8:5)

This seems to suggest that here too, the reference is to the woman, and that this is a particularly important phrase in our attempts to decipher *Shir Ha-Shirim*. This is in contrast to commentators who suggest that “*mi zot*” in fact might refer to Shlomo’s bed, or that it might be rendered “what is this” in the context of these verses.

Additionally, the words “*ke-timrot ashan*” parallel a classic text in *sefer* *Yoel*, where the divine presence at the End of Days is described with the same terminology:

Before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, I will set portents in the sky and on earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. (3:3)

Some religiously inclined thinkers suggest that this is a hint to an element of divine revelation in *Shir Ha-Shirim*; one might even suggest that this is part of *Chazal*’s basis for reading the book as allegorical. Yet there is an alternative that better fits *Shir Ha-Shirim*: **the woman herself is the revelation**. As noted, this would fit with later usages of the phrase “*Mi zot*” throughout the book.

Further, as we will see, the military imagery, references to Shlomo, and usage of the number sixty all appear elsewhere in the *sefer*.

This reinforces the conclusion that while this section certainly departs in its overall literary form from much of the book, in more specific ways it echoes a number of textual elements we encounter elsewhere.

How does the continuation fit with the opening verse? Following *Da’at Mikra*, we can envision the following scene: As the shepherdess returns from a long day’s work and “ascends from the desert,” she is described by her friends as if she is a revelation of beauty. They go on to imagine her perfect match: King Shlomo on his wedding day. This fits nicely with the majority of commentators’ explanation for the word *apiryon* – namely a canopy, likely a wedding canopy. It is woven with love from the daughters of Jerusalem because it is the greatest desire of the maidens of Israel to marry the king. Yet only the shepherdess is worthy of such an honor.

Still the section leaves us wondering as to the woman’s own thoughts as to this aspiration. After all, assuming this is indeed the shepherdess – note that she specifically is said to ascend from the desert, and that both other usages of the phrase “*Mi zot*” appear in context of the shepherdess – who is in love not with Shlomo but with another simple shepherd, she is acutely aware that she is unlikely to merit a lavish celebration of any sort, never mind that of a royal wedding. Instead, as we will see in our discussion of 8:11-12, she ultimately rejects Shlomo’s vineyard and is satisfied with guarding her own, a metaphor for her acceptance of her love life as it is.

**4:1-11**

After the perplexing interlude in the second half of chapter 3, chapter 4 (through 5:1) is dedicated to a second round of uninterrupted impassioned conversation between the *dod* and *raya* (after 1:9-2:3).

Verses 4:1-7 offer the *dod*’s first extended monologue in the *sefer*, and it is worth seeing these verses together:

Ah, you are fair, my darling, Ah, you are fair. Your eyes are like doves Behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats Streaming down Mount Gilead.

Your teeth are like a flock of ewes Climbing up from the washing pool; All of them bear twins, And not one loses her young.

Your lips are like a crimson thread, Your mouth is lovely. Your brow behind your veil [Gleams] like a pomegranate split open.

Your neck is like the Tower of David, Built to hold weapons, Hung with a thousand shields— All the quivers of warriors.

Your breasts are like two fawns, Twins of a gazelle, Browsing among the lilies.

When the day blows gently And the shadows flee, I will betake me to the mount of myrrh, To the hill of frankincense.

Every part of you is fair, my darling, There is no blemish in you.

The *dod* begins his vivid description at the top of the woman’s body and moves downward from there. This is consistent with the sensuous style of the *dod* and *raya*, which engages the reader’s visual senses, among many others.

Additionally, he twice refers to the physical characteristics that are hidden behind her veil, suggesting that this is a song sung at the wedding or in an intimate environment after the wedding. We will see further evidence for this hypothesis in the next *shiur*, when we discuss 5:1.

The *dod* also picks up on a number of elements from earlier in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, such as the dove, (seemingly out-of-place) military motifs, deer, and browsing among the lilies. The military references fit best with the contention that this section describes the royal prince and the *raya*, not the shepherd and shepherdess. This is also consistent with what we find in 1:9-2:3.

Furthermore, these seven verses clearly form a single mini-literary unit, with the man beginning by declaring, “Ah, you are fair, my darling, Ah, you are fair,” and ending, “Every part of you is fair, my darling, There is no blemish in you.” This closing description not only circles back to his initial description of the woman, but also adds to it: Having spoken of the various parts of her body, the man is now convinced not only that is she fair all in all, but that each individual limb is fair. This helps to explain the significance of the multiple references to twins that appear in this section (4:2,5). And the reference to her lack of blemishes may be a play on the word “*teom*,” which is very similar to the word “*tam*,” indicating perfection.

Another textual point is worth noting: The phrase “browsing among the lilies” not only echoes earlier descriptions, but also concludes his physical description of the beauty of her various body parts. This leads to verse 6, in which he again imagines them fleeing “when the day blows gently And the shadows flee.” In general, the closing two verses of this section (4:6-7) are highly reminiscent of the closing verses of the peroration at the end of chapter two (2:16-17), again suggesting an intentional literary unity between these two sections in particular.

The next part of the description of his beloved begins not with the top of her body, but with the uppermost points near the Land of Israel:

From Lebanon come with me; From Lebanon, my bride, with me! Trip down from Amana’s peak, From the peak of Senir and Hermon, From the dens of lions, From the hills of leopards.

You have captured my heart, My own, my bride, You have captured my heart With one [glance] of your eyes, With one coil of your necklace.

How sweet is your love, My own, my bride! How much more delightful your love than wine, Your ointments more fragrant Than any spice!

Sweetness drops From your lips, O bride; Honey and milk Are under your tongue; And the scent of your robes Is like the scent of Lebanon. (4:8-11)

Fascinatingly, the term “*libavtini*,” which appears twice in verse 9, is nowhere else in biblical Hebrew used as a verb, even as the words *lev* and *levav* together appear over 750 times in the Bible. This may suggest that the *dod* is so overtaken by his emotions for his beloved that he feels compelled to invent a new word in order to express himself. Extant language simply does not include sufficiently rich language to fully express his inner emotional world. Moreover, some see *libavtini* as a fusion of *lev*, heart, and *lahav*, flame.

As in previous sections, the doubling – parallel to the motif of twinning we noted previously – is a constant throughout these verses: “From Lebanon come with me; From Lebanon, my bride, with me!”; “Trip down from Amana’s peak, From the peak of Senir and Hermon”; “From the dens of lions, From the hills of leopards”; “You have captured my heart, My own, my bride, You have captured my heart”; “With one [glance] of your eyes, With one coil of your necklace”; “How sweet is your love, My own, my bride! How much more delightful your love than wine, Your ointments more fragrant Than any spice!”

Also noteworthy is the reference not only to the many spices that have already figured prominently in the book – as well as to references to jewelry, wine, the phrase, “How sweet/*mah yafu*,” as well as her lips – but also the reference to “honey and milk,” which are closely associated with the Land of Israel. As noted in a previous *shiur*, a case can be made that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is at once a love song between a man and woman as well as a love song regarding the Land of Israel.

Like the previous section, this section also opens and closes with the same term, that of Lebanon. It seems that Lebanon was associated with exotic places and scents, and the text picks up on this.

Also noteworthy is the term “*dod*,” which here, as in the opening verses of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, is used to refer not to a person but to love itself (some maintain that it carries specifically sexual connotations). That the *dod* describes the “*dodim*” of the *raya*, from a textual perspective, suggests an even deeper level to the relationship between them.

Taken together, the most central term in these four verses is the word “*kallah*, bride,” which appears in the opening clause of each verse. This lends further support to the hypothesis that these verses were meant to be sung by a groom for his beloved during or after their wedding. This commonality, together with the parallel motif of starting at the highest point and moving downward, suggests that 4:1-7 and 4:8-11 go hand-in-hand.

In our next *shiur*, we will argue that the following set of verses comprises a continuation – and conclusion – of the same unit that we began to explore in this *shiur*.