**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Shir Ha-Shirim**

**Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

Dana Petrover (Batsheva bat Gittel Aidel Leba)

and Marvin Rosenberg (Meir Chaim ben Tzipporah Miriam)

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In memory of six friends and family,
strong pillars of the Montreal Jewish community,
who have left us in the past 7 years.
All were אוהבי עם ישראל, אוהבי ארץ ישראל, אוהבי תורת ישראל.

Joseph (Yosie) Deitcher

Avrum (Avy) Drazin

Rabbi Joseph Drazin

Leibel Frisch

Israel (Mutch) Yampolsky

Dr. Mark Wainberg

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**Shiur #18: Understanding the *Sefer* According to our Reading**

Having completed our study of the verses of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, in this *shiur* we will seek to tie together some loose ends by summarizing the novel textual reading of the *sefer* that we have set forward throughout our study. The remaining *shiurim* in this series will consider a variety of key themes that arise throughout the study of this work, including some major implications of our reading of the *sefer*.

As noted in a previous *shiur*, interpreters tend to variously read *Shir Ha-Shirim* as either an extended drama or a series of distinct stories that are bound together in a single work. We have sought to demonstrate that there are in fact two narratives that run in parallel throughout the *sefer*, one between the *ra’aya* and the princely *dod* and the other between the *ra’aya* and the shepherd.

The first is blessed with “smooth sailing”: the couple does not grapple with any tensions and consummates their relationship with marriage in chapter 4. The verses detailing this relationship focus on the physical aspects of their mutual attraction, particularly the beauty of the *ra’aya*, as well as the couple’s communion in nature. The *ra’aya* has no friends that we know of; we hear only of the women who unsuccessfully call upon her to rejoin the dance (7:1). She lacks a clear-cut biography. Finally, this relationship seems to climax in chapter 7 with an intensification of that physical attraction. To the end, this relationship is lacking in drama or complexity.

The second narrative tells a different story. The woman’s beloved is a shepherd and this relationship is plagued by drama. We are privy to both the physical and especially the emotional aspects of their relationship, and we know much more about the woman’s biography. She apparently has no relationship with her father; he has either died or is no longer involved in his children’s lives. Her brothers have taken advantage of her, subjecting her to brutal physical conditions by instructing her to guard their vineyards and not tend to her own. Her appearance and self-confidence suffer as a result. She begins the book as a self-conscious young woman, convinced that she is better off dreaming about a romantic relationship than actually attempting to engage in one, and twice adjures her friends, the Daughters of Jerusalem, to precisely this effect. After the second vow, she wanders the streets searching for her beloved, but is physically harmed by the city’s watchmen.

Yet despite the considerable challenges she confronts, the woman ultimately recognizes that her beloved will disappear from her grasp if she does not act swiftly. After he knocks on her door and she opens it too late, she becomes determined not to allow him to disappear. Instead of satisfying herself with an idealized imaginary relationship, she passionately describes the shepherd’s qualities to her friends and begins to overcome her initial reservations.

By the end of the *sefer*, she has transcended her brothers’ abusive treatment, asserting her physical and emotional maturity. Setting aside any concern about the public propriety of the relationship, she determines that her love is too valuable to squander over the possibility of social opprobrium. She declares her love to be as intense as death and that she prefers this love (represented by her vineyard) to a royal relationship (represented by Shlomo’s vineyard). And, as with any true relationship, it doesn’t end with “happily ever after,” but it does conclude with her insistence that he flee to a place where they can be left alone.

The verses toggle back and forth between the two “storylines” in the following order:

1:1 - introduction to book (superscription)

1:2-4 - beginning of royal relationship; references to kissing and wine; explicit reference to king

1:5-8 - beginning of shepherd relationship; mistreatment at the hands of the brothers, and the *dod’s* hesitancy to enter into a relationship with her

1:9-2:3 - pristine praises of the royal relationship

2:4-3:12 - return to the shepherd relationship; oath #1; the beloved hiding in nature; foxes that ruin vineyards; wandering the city at night; oath #2; her rejection of a royal wedding

4:1-5:1 - lavish praise accompanying the royal wedding; reference to woman as *kalla*; friends invited to participate in wedding meal

5:2-6:3 - Refusal to open the door for the shepherd at night; second scene in which she wanders the city at night; explanation to friends as to what makes the *dod* unique

6:4-7:14 - climax of the royal relationship: reciprocal descriptions of beauty; refusing the ladies’ call to dance; the couple seeking to be alone in nature

8:1-14 - resolution of the shepherd relationship: fear of negative judgment of their relationship; the final vow; love until death; rejection of brothers’ protectiveness; rejection of work in Shlomo’s field; running to hills of spices

In just eight alternating sections (setting aside the superscription), the verses outline two competing storylines. Indeed, on our accounting, the number of verses dedicated to each is very similar: 55 to the royal relationship and 61 to the shepherd.

Yet even as they tell radically different stories, there are clear literary parallels between the two narratives. In particular, Israel – its botany, wildlife and locations – serve as the backdrop to both narratives. The terms “*kerem*, vineyard” (1:6, 1:14, 2:15, 7:13, 8:11-12), “*tapuach*, apple tree” (2:3, 2:5, 8:5), “*yona*, dove” (1:15, 2:14, 4:1, 5:2, 5:12, 6:9), “*chalav*, milk” (4:11, 5:1, 5:12), and Levanon (3:9, 4:8, 4:11, 4:15, 5:15, 7:5) appear in both storylines.

Furthermore, the name Shlomo, a clear royal reference, ironically appears specifically in the shepherd sections (1:5, 1:7, 3:9, 3:11, 8:12). The phrase “*mi zot*, who is this,” which introduces a paean to the woman’s beauty, appears in both as well (3:6, 6:10, 8:5). And the term “until the day ends,” an ambiguous gesture in which the *ra’aya* suggests that the *dod* flee to the hills, appears in both contexts as well (2:17, 8:14). The word “*chekh*, his mouth,” also appears in both places (5:16, 7:10).

Moreover, just as the *ra’aya’s* mother plays a key role in both the opening and final chapters of the *sefer*, she also appears prominently in 6:9:

Only one is my dove, My perfect one, The only one of her mother, The delight of her who bore her. Maidens see and acclaim her; Queens and concubines, and praise her.

The royal context of this verse is clear from the references to maidens, queens, and concubines, so it is particularly significant that the mother appears in this context, just as she does in the first and final chapters of the book, which describe the *ra’aya’s* complex family dynamics.

Perhaps most striking of all, in response to the Daughters of Jerusalem in chapter 5, the *ra’aya* offers a series of praises that is highly reminiscent of the sort of praises that generally appear in context of the royal couple. Indeed, a number of these same phrases appear in chapters 5 and 7 respectively.

All these parallels make it plain that the two love stories are closely intertwined. This, of course, begs the question: What exactly is the nature of that intertwining? Many variations on this question might be raised. For instance, is the woman the same person in both narratives? On the one hand, she is called the *ra’aya* in both stories; on the other, her circle of friends and love interests are clearly different from one another. And what about the man? While at first glance they seem to be two different characters entirely – one a shepherd, the other a king – it is plausible that they really are mere metaphors for different types of relationships in which the woman engages. After all, both individuals are referred to by the name “*dod*,” which suggests an affinity, possibly even an identity, between the two personas. These questions remain ultimately unanswerable.

Given these ambiguities, on the *peshat* level, what can we say with confidence about the relationship between the two love stories of *Shir Ha-Shirim*? What is clear is that there are key qualitative differences between the two stories. The royal relationship is physical and static. There is little movement in the relationship; from “*yishakenu mi-neshikot pihu*” (1:2) to “*dodi tzafanti lach*” (7:14), it begins and ends in passion and zeal.

By contrast, the story of the *ra’aya* and the shepherd is filled with zigs and zags. More than that, as we noted early on in this series, it features the *ra’aya* as the protagonist. Specifically, *it is a coming-of-age story about the woman*. She begins defeated, unwilling to believe in her own virtuosity, and eventually recognizes that she cannot view herself as a victim and may not permit herself to be defined by her suffering. Instead of relying solely on her friends’ advice, she must accept responsibility for her own decisions. And she must seize the opportunities that come her way, lest she forfeit them forever. As a result of her personal growth, her relationship with the shepherd is not just physical, but deeply emotional as well, for it is born of a profound process of self-awareness that the shepherd himself identifies as her “finding peace” (8:10).

Having offered our unique reading of the *peshat* of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, we are prepared to consider its allegorical significance. As we discussed earlier in the series, the commentators debate whether the story represents the relationship between the Jewish nation and God or the individual who seeks out God. We also noted, with R. Soloveitchik, that the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive and that the book’s allegory may well operate on multiple planes.

Applying our two-narrative theory to the allegorical meaning of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, then, we may suggest that both as individuals and as a community, there are moments of radical discontinuity in our relationship with *Hashem*. Like the royal relationship, there are periods of sheer bliss. These are significant and welcome. Yet there are other moments, no less significant, in which, like the *ra’aya*, we feel inadequate standing before God. This in turn impedes our capacity to enter into a meaningful relationship with Him.

Like the *ra’aya*, we are all imperfect and experience challenges throughout our lives; the same is true for the Jewish People as a whole. Yet we can all work toward achieving a level of self-development that enables us; we can stand on our own two feet and develop mature relationships with Hashem. *Shir* *Ha-Shirim* suggests that the depth of our relationships with our fellow humans and God is contingent upon our own self-growth, maturity, and sense of independence. Self-understanding is the prerequisite for establishing relationships with others and is essential to our relationship with God.