**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 #19: Parallels – Return to *Gan Eden***

As pointed out in a previous *shiur* and as noted by many scholars,[[1]](#footnote-1) there are numerous conceptual similarities between *Shir Ha-Shirim* and the story of man and woman in *Gan Eden*. In this *shiur*, we will outline those similarities, highlight some key differences between them, and explore their significance, particularly in light of the two-narrative theory we summarized in the previous *shiur*.

In both stories, nature is ubiquitous: There is running water, plenty of trees, and repeated references to the word “*gan*,” garden. More broadly, the relationship between humanity and nature is intimate and harmonious. The couple is fully embedded in nature. Both depictions feature a special tree that is intoxicating in its ability to overcome human rationality. The harmony of the natural world reflects that of human relationships.

Further, a number of events in each story share much in common. Both feature a romantically-connected couple who stand at the center of the story. A locked garden appears prominently at some point in the storyline. There are guards who wield the capacity for violence. And the couple’s relationship revolves around their own interactions, with no reference to child-rearing at all.

There are also multiple textual parallels between the two stories. As noted above, the word “*gan*” appears in both stories. The reference to *teshuka*, desire, features prominently as well. As part of the woman’s punishment in *Gan Eden*, she is told that her “urge shall be for [your] husband, and he shall rule over [you]” (*Bereishit* 3:16). Strikingly, in *Shir Ha-Shirim* the same terminology appears, but in the reverse direction: “I am my beloved’s, And his desire is for me” (7:11). We will return to the significance of this reversal, but the similarity is unmistakable. Targum to *Shir Ha-Shirim* (7:9) underscores the textual similarities between the two stories, translating “your breath [is] like the breath of apples” as “like the breath of apples of the Garden of Eden.”

In sum, the verses seem to suggest that *Shir Ha-Shirim* depicts a return to an Edenic state of human experience. (Yael Ziegler develops this theme eloquently [here](http://www.hatanakh.com/en/lessons/paradise-regained-return-gan-eden-shir-hashirim).) This explains the reversal of the subject and object of desire. The curse of the woman being emotionally dependent upon a man will be overturned. Instead, it will be the man who craves the woman. Humanity will exist in concert with nature, and we will live amid luscious botanical surroundings which enhance the experience.

Beyond the language of desire, probably the most allusive Edenic parallel in *Shir Ha-Shirim* appears in 4:12-5:1:

A garden locked Is my own, my bride, A fountain locked, A sealed-up spring.

Your limbs are an orchard of pomegranates And of all luscious fruits, Of henna and of nard—

Nard and saffron, Fragrant reed and cinnamon, With all aromatic woods, Myrrh and aloes— All the choice perfumes.

[You are] a garden spring, A well of fresh water, A rill of Lebanon.

Awake, O north wind, Come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, That its perfume may spread. Let my beloved come to his garden And enjoy its luscious fruits.

I have come to my garden, My own, my bride; I have plucked my myrrh and spice, Eaten my honey and honeycomb, Drunk my wine and my milk. Eat, lovers, and drink: Drink deep of love!

These verses take us a step further in our understanding of the significance of the parallels we have drawn. Initially, the garden is locked, but ultimately the man succeeds in entering. This suggests that it is not just that the love of *Shir Ha-Shirim* represents the relative equality of the Garden of Eden. It is more than that: **The loving relationship between the two restores them to the pristine garden.** Put in terms of the allegory, this means that it is only through a reestablishment of the relationship between God and humanity that the harmony of the Edenic existence can be restored.

Yet, as Orit Avneri [notes](https://musaf-shabbat.com/2016/05/01/%D7%90%D7%9C-%D7%92%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%A2%D7%93%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%90%D7%91%D7%95%D7%93-%D7%90%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%90%D7%91%D7%A0%D7%A8%D7%99/), there are numerous key differences between the stories as well. Gan Eden’s natural world seems fixed, while that of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is subject to the varied seasons; it is a world in flux. One episode takes place in a mythical garden, the other in the very real Land of Israel. God’s explicit presence permeates Gan Eden, but is conspicuously absent from *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Further, when we consider these parallels in light of our two-narrative reading of *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a whole, matters become even more complex. Crucially, the strongest parallels between the story of Eden and *Shir Ha-Shirim* appear specifically in context of the relationship between the *ra’aya* and the prince (see last week’s *shiur* for further details). Chapter 4, for example, in which the *dod* walks into the previously-locked garden, appears specifically in the context of the royal relationship. The same is true of the verse, “I am to my beloved, and upon me is his desire,” which appears toward the end of chapter 7, the climax of the royal relationship.

This association makes much sense. Gan Eden, after all, represents humanity in a pristine state of nature, which is precisely the sort of quality that pervades the royal relationship. Yet, as we have argued extensively, that motif characterizes only one of the two types of relationship set forward in *Shir Ha-Shirim*. The shepherd-*ra’aya* relationship is more complex and less idyllic. It is therefore no surprise that the connections between Gan Eden and *Shir Ha-Shirim* receive far heavier emphasis in the latter sections than in the former.

Even more striking, the end of *Shir Ha-Shirim* – the climax of the shepherd relationship – closes with a scene that arguably symbolizes the opposite image of entering the garden together: “Hurry, my beloved, Swift as a gazelle or a young stag, To the hills of spices!” Instead of entering the locked garden together, the couple flees “to the hills of spices.” This suggests a movement in the opposite direction from the entrance into a locked garden.

This directional distinction sheds new light on the meaning of the parallel to Gan Eden. Gan Eden is an enclosed space of perfection. The *ra’aya* and prince enter into precisely this sort of sacred, defined space. They walk into the royal canopy and invite guests to feast with them in the wedding hall (5:1). The *ra’aya* and shepherd, however, run for the hills. The royal couple enter a pristine circumscribed space, while the *ra’aya* and shepherd temporarily flee civilization to be alone in nature.

On this reading, it turns out that the parallels to Gan Eden are not the exclusive metaphor of the book, but merely serve to accent one of its storylines. The fantastic Edenic existence is one that profoundly captures the royal relationship, but not that between the shepherd and the *ra’aya*. *Shir Ha-Shirim* is comprised of two relationships that run parallel to one another; only the royal is consistent with the idyllic Garden of Eden. Accordingly, instead of telling an entire story, the similarities to Gan Eden help us to tell half of *Shir Ha-Shirim*’s story, deepening our appreciation for both two storylines, which develop in implicit dialogue with one another.

1. See, for example, Francis Landy, “The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98:4, pp. 513-528. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)