**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)

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**Shiur#22: *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba*'s Interpretation of the Text – Part 1**

In our previous *shiur*, we suggested that *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* offers a unique interpretation of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. As noted earlier in this series, Rashi’s commentary on *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a polemical response to Christian claims of supersessionism. Formulated in the positive, this would suggest that while some tend to see the Jews as the despised people, *Shir Ha-Shirim* reaffirms the loving relationship between God and the Jewish people. While of course the Midrashic work was compiled long before Rashi composed his commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim*, it too was constructed under Christian rule.

Following this line of thought, this *shiur* will trace a variety of ways in which *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* strikingly rereads passages in *Shir Ha-Shirim* to accentuate the positive about the Jewish people. In particular, we will note how the Midrash emphasizes the positive from the very beginning of the *sefer*, how it reinterprets verses that seem critical of the Jewish people, how it reads ambiguous verses in ways that shed a positive light on the Jewish people, and how it introduces the Jewish people in verses that do not obviously reference Israel at all.

In next week’s *shiur*, we will explore *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba*’s contribution upon a broader canvas, exploring the larger biblical narratives that are reinterpreted by the Midrash.

**Emphasizing the Positive from the Outset**

From early on, the Midrash goes out of its way to establish the positivity of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Following a series of introductory homilies, the Midrash (1:2) turns to the phrase, “*Yishakeni mi-neshikot pihu*,” “He shall kiss me from the kisses of his mouth.”

The Midrash cites Rabbi Yochanan, who explains the verse to mean that an angel carried each of the Ten Commandments to every member of the Jewish people. Once the angel confirmed the Jew’s desire to accept each *dibbur*, “immediately [the angel] kissed him on his mouth.”

Another view, that of the Rabbanan, suggests that each *dibbur* somehow presented itself to the Jewish people, kissing the people after they accepted that particular commandment.

The Midrash then cites Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, who utilizes a careful reading of this verse to contend that God only spoke some (i.e. two) the commandments directly to the Jewish people: “He shall kiss me from the kisses of his mouth” — but not all the kisses.

Finally, the Midrash cites a similar debate as to whether God Himself sang *Shir Ha-Shirim* or the angels:

It was taught in the name of Rabbi Natan: God Himself in His honored greatness recited it, as it states, “‘The song of songs to Shlomo” — to the King to Whom peace belongs.

Rabban Gamliel said: The Ministering Angels said it: “The song of songs” — the song that the singers on high recited.

Whichever view we follow, the Midrash compellingly establishes that the Sinaitic revelation involved a kiss from God to the Jewish people — either through an angel, the commandment, or God Himself. From the outset, we are confronted with vivid testimony to God’s love for the Jewish people.

**Reinterpreting Ostensibly Critical Verses**

Over the course of the *sefer*, several verses seem to speak negatively about the *raaya*. Following the Midrash’s metaphoric interpretation, these appear to be critiques of the Jewish people; yet in a series of striking reinterpretations, the Midrash spins these verses in a positive direction.

For instance, the *raaya* declares, “I am dark and comely” (1:5). The Midrash first reads these phrases as dialectically related to one another: she grants that she has spiritual shortcomings, yet insists that she nonetheless possesses characteristics that distinguish her positively. Nevertheless, after positing a series of interpretations that run along these lines, the Midrash suggests that even the opening phrase may be read positively:

“I am dark” — this speaks of Achav, as it states (I *Melakhim* 21:27), “And when Achav heard these words [of rebuke for having taken Navot’s vineyard], he tore his clothing, placed sackcloth on his flesh and fasted.”

This is a remarkable reading. The Midrash is suggesting that the darkness refers not to the darkness of sin but the darkness of mourning. This suggests that “I am dark and comely” should not be read as “I am dark but [nevertheless] comely,” but “I am dark [with repentance] and [therefore] comely.”

This remarkable reinterpretation sees our verse as focusing on the positive: even the evil kings of Israel repent and repair their relationship with God. This inversion accents the lengths to which the Midrash goes to seek out a positive interpretation of the verses in *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

A similar phenomenon appears in regard to the second half of the same verse, which reads in its entirety: “I am dark but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem; like the tents of Kedar, like the pavilions of Shlomo.” The Midrash explains:

Just as the tents of Kedar appear ugly, darkened and ragged, but on the inside contain precious stones and jewels; so too Torah scholars, although they appear ugly and darkened in this world, inside they possess Torah, *Mikra*, Mishna, *midrashot, halakhot,* Talmud*, toseftot* and *aggadot.*

Any ill appearance on the part of the Jewish people is merely skin-deep; their darkness is a mere mirage.

**Interpreting Ambiguous Verses Positively**

Here too we may begin with an example taken from the opening chapter of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. The shepherd instructs the *raaya*, “Go out among the pathways of the sheep” (1:8). Many commentaries understand this verse to be the *dod*’s way of deflecting the *raaya’*s advances, yet the Midrash offers a series of differing interpretations, all of which see this as a positive statement by God about the Jewish people.

Similarly, 5:2 features the well-known phrase:

I was asleep, but my heart was wakeful. Hark, my beloved knocks! “Let me in, my own, My darling, my faultless dove! For my head is drenched with dew, My locks with the damp of night.”

At first glance, the larger section beginning with this verse seems to be critical of the Jewish people. For when the *dod* (God) knocks, the Jews are too slow to arise and open the door. However, the Midrash, while acknowledging that the Jews’ sleeping might be taken in a negative sense, sees the *raaya*’s waking up not as too little, too late, but as an allusion to spiritual awakening:

“I am asleep” —

The Jewish people said before God: Master of the Universe!

I am sleeping from the commandments, but my heart is awake for acts of lovingkindness.

I am sleeping from acts of *tzedaka*, but my heart is awake to perform them.

I am sleeping from the sacrifices, but my heart is awake for the recitation of *Shema* and prayer.

I am sleeping from the Temple, but my heart is awake for synagogues and study halls.

I am sleeping from the [travails of the] end, but my heart is awake for redemption.

I am sleeping from the redemption, but the heart of God is awake to redeem me.

Said Rabbi Chiya bar Abba, Where have we found that God is called the heart of the Jewish people? From this verse (*Tehillim* 73:26), which states, “The rock of my heart and my portion is God eternally.”

Three remarkable interpretive elements are present in this passage.

First, the Midrash goes out of its way to see the awakening as heaping praise, rather than scorn, upon the Jewish people.

Second, certainly in its later interpretations, the Midrash understands even the initial phrase, “I am sleeping” not in a negative fashion, but simply as a contrast to the positive approach of the Jew in exile. Of course, the lack of sacrifices and Temple are reflective of the Jewish people’s shortcomings, but that is not the primary focus of the Midrashic interpretation. Instead, the point is that despite the challenges confronting them, the Jews make the best of these difficulties and nonetheless worship God with integrity.

Third, the final interpretation of the Midrash, perhaps the most striking, portrays God Himself as the heart of the Jewish people. This metaphorical internalization of God within the Jewish people provides arresting testimony to the loving relationship between God and His nation.

Later in the same set of verses, we again find a verse that may be understood negatively or ambiguously, but is read in a positive light. The Midrash (5:5) comments, “‘I stood up to open for my beloved’ — I stood up, unlike the nations of the world.” This seems to come out of nowhere. Once again, this is fully consistent with *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba*’s commitment to identifying unexpected opportunities for reading the text as issuing praises of the Jewish people.

**Reading the Jewish People into the Text**

We conclude with a fourth and final trend in the Midrash. Toward the end of the *sefer*, we read that Shlomo had a vineyard. *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* interprets this in relation to the Jewish people:

“There was a vineyard to Shlomo” — this is a reference to the Jewish people, as it states (*Yeshayahu* 5:7), “For the vineyard of God, the Lord of Hosts, is the house of Israel.

“There was… to Shlomo” — the King to Whom peace belongs...

Another interpretation: “A vineyard” — this is the Sanhedrin… “There was… to Shlomo” — the King to Whom peace belongs...

What makes this passage especially striking is that while, in the Midrashic reading, the *raaya* clearly refers to the Jewish people, the vineyard does not. Nevertheless, the Midrash in any case sees the vineyard as another stand-in for the Jewish people. As it does throughout the *sefer*, the Midrash takes yet another opportunity to see the *sefer* as praising the piety of the Jews and the loving manner in which God cares for His people.