**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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***Shir Ha-Shirim***

**Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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**PLEASE PRAY FOR A REFUA SHELEIMA FOR THIS CHILD,   
ZACHARIA MORDECHAI BEN RENA CHAIA**

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**Shiur #24:**

**When Did Shlomo Write His Works?**

This *shiur* will consider the classic Midrashic debate as to when in his lifetime Shlomo authors his three books: *Mishlei*, *Kohelet* and *Shir Ha-Shirim*. We contend that this Midrashic dispute may well reflect dueling interpretations of the message and literary significance of *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

First, let us cite the classic dispute, as recounted in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 1:10:

[Shlomo] wrote three books: *Mishlei*, *Kohelet* and *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Which of them did he write first?

This is a matter of dispute between Rabbi Chiya the Great and Rabbi Yonatan.

Rabbi Chiya the Great says that he wrote *Mishlei* first, then *Shir Ha-Shirim*, then *Kohelet*. And he offers a proof from the following verse (I *Melakhim* 5:12): “The parable (*mashal*) he spoke was three thousand” — *mashal* refers to the Book of *Mishlei*. “And his song (*shiro*) was one thousand and five” — this is *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Then he wrote *Kohelet* at the end [of his life].

The *baraita* of Rabbi Chiya the Great disputes this teaching: the *baraita* says that he wrote all three at the same time, and our teaching says that he [wrote] each one on its own.

Rabbi Chiya the Great taught: Only toward the end of his life did the divine spirit rest upon Shlomo, and he composed three books: *Mishlei*, *Kohelet* and *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Rabbi Yonatan says: He wrote *Shir Ha-Shirim* first, then *Mishlei*, then *Kohelet*. And he brings a source from the way of the world: [it is] just as a youth recites words of song, when he matures, [he recites] parables, and when he grows old, [he recites] words of vanity.

Rabbi Yannai the brother-in-law of Rabbi Ami says, “All agree that he composed *Kohelet* last.”

Four views appear to emerge from the Midrash:

1. Shlomo wrote all three books at the same time.
2. Shlomo wrote *Mishlei*, *Kohelet* and then *Shir Ha-Shirim*.
3. Shlomo wrote *Mishlei*, *Shir Ha-Shirim* and then *Kohelet*.
4. Shlomo wrote *Shir Ha-Shirim*, *Mishlei* and then *Kohelet*.

Perhaps most memorable is the view of Rabbi Yonatan, author of the fourth opinion in our list, who maintains that Shlomo was following “the way of the world” in composing *Shir Ha-Shirim* at a young age, *Mishlei* in middle age and *Kohelet* in his twilight years.

While this view is memorable and oft-cited, the other opinions are less regularly considered. What is the basis for this dispute?

To this Midrash we may add another significant source. The Gemara *Bava Batra* 14b, in listing the *sefarim* in *Tanakh*, enumerates *Mishlei*, *Kohelet* and then *Shir* *Ha-Shirim*. Rashi (s.v. *Shir*), seeking to account for the language of the Gemara, writes that it appears Shlomo composed *Shir Ha-Shirim* close to his old age. He also refers to *Mishlei* and *Kohelet* as *Sifrei Chokhma* (Wisdom Literature). This seems to be a variation on the second opinion we noted in our summary, which holds that Shlomo composed *Shir Ha-Shirim* last.

What differentiates Rashi’s reading of *Bava Batra* from the view cited in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba*, however, is that whereas the Midrash suggests that Shlomo composed all three books while elderly, Rashi seems to see the Gemara as implying that only *Shir Ha-Shirim* was composed during Shlomo’s later years. This seems to be the inverse position of Rabbi Yannai, who maintains that everyone agrees that *Kohelet* was composed last. It emerges that according to Rashi's reading of the Gemara, we have an additional perspective that requires consideration.

How, then, are we to understand this range of views, particularly the difference of opinion as to whether *Shir Ha-Shirim* was composed while Shlomo was young or old?

Let us begin with Rabbi Yonatan’s explanation, which refers to *Shir Ha-Shirim* as “*divrei zemer*” (words of song). The suggestion seems to be that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a youthful, perhaps almost carefree work.

This may offer insight into those who challenge Rabbi Yonatan’s timeline. Perhaps they maintain that *Shir Ha-Shirim* is not nearly as innocent as Rabbi Yonatan suggests. After all, *Shir Ha-Shirim* not only records the ups and downs in the couple’s relationship, but is also a complex coming-of-age narrative in which the *raaya* overcomes her own tragic past. Far from a youthful love song, *Shir Ha-Shirim* mixes ecstasy with real-life struggle in a way that cannot be characterized as “*zemer*.”

Seen from this perspective, we may begin to draw a larger distinction between the concept of *zemer* and that of *shira*. While Rabbi Yonatan sees *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a form of *zemer*; others disagree and refer to *Shir Ha-Shirim* not as a *zemer* but as a *shir*. What is the difference between a *shir* and a *zemer*? A *zemer* is a song, but a *shir* is something far more sophisticated, approaching the status of poetry.

This leads us to a second, related explanation for the dispute between the two views. *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a complex work of literature that requires tremendous sophistication to appreciate. Despite the depth of *Mishlei* and *Kohelet*, *Shir* *Ha-Shirim* is unique among the three, as encapsulated in its status as *shira*.

As Rashi notes, *Mishlei* and *Kohelet* fall clearly under the rubric of what is commonly termed Wisdom Literature. Both books are clearly didactic in nature. While each, in its own way, poses considerable interpretive challenges and contains profound pearls of wisdom, neither approaches the literary and interpretive brilliance of *Shir Ha-Shirim*. *Shir Ha-Shirim* is more challenging to grasp inasmuch as it does not obviously present itself as part of the Wisdom Literature, lending it a literary sophistication that suggests that it is the product of an extremely mature mind.

This also helps to account for the different introductions of each book. *Kohelet* is introduced with “The words of Kohelet, son of David, King in Jerusalem.” Similarly, *Mishlei* opens, “The proverbs of Shlomo, son of David, King of Israel.” Only *Shir Ha-Shirim* begins with the double language, “the Song of Songs,” alluding to its unique status as a particularly profound *shira*.

The distinction between *shira* and *zemer* might help to illuminate a passage in BT *Sanhedrin* (101a), which declares:

Whoever reads a verse from *Shir Ha-Shirim* and renders it a form of song (*zemer*) and whoever reads a verse at a banquet house in an untimely manner bring evil to the world, as the Torah girds sackcloth and stands before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and says before Him: Master of the Universe, Your children have rendered me like a harp on which clowns play.

The Gemara draws a distinction between *shira* and *zemer*. This fits nicely with our suggestion that *zemer* refers to a mere song, while *shira* is a type of artistry. This connects as well to the view expressed in *Da’at Mikra*, cited in *Shiur* #21, that we recite *Shir Ha-Shirim* on Pesach owing to its status as *shira*.

A brief consideration of the term *shira* lends support to this thesis. The most sublime biblical songs are called *shira* and are laid out in unique fashion when written down by scribes. *Shira* is often associated with divine inspiration. In fact the entirety of the Torah is famously called a *shira*.

Rabba said: Even if one has inherited a Torah scroll, there remains a duty to write a scroll for oneself, as it says (*Devarim* 31:19): “And now, write for yourselves this *shira*.” (BT *Sanhedrin* 21b)

This is surely a testament to the breadth and depth contained in the Torah.

Beyond these questions regarding the uniqueness of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, there may be a final debate between Rabbi Yonatan and his rabbinic peers. Rabbi Yonatan assumes that Shlomo acted as we might expect of anyone, perhaps becoming increasingly cynical as his life progressed and his youthful idealism dimmed. Rabbi Yonatan’s colleagues, however, may see Shlomo as embodying a rather different quality. Instead of discussing “words of vanity,” is it possible that despite all of life’s challenges, Shlomo never lost his vigor, retaining his passion until the end?

In the end, the rabbinical question as to when Shlomo composed *Shir Ha-Shirim* underscores not only issues about Shlomo’s own life; more pertinent for our purposes, it expresses significantly differing perspectives on the meaning of *Shir Ha-Shirim*.