**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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***Shir Ha-Shirim***

**Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**May we all have a happy, kosher and healthful Pesach!**

**Shiur #25:**

***Shir Ha-Shirim*, A Retrospective**

Through the ages, *Shir Ha-Shirim* has captured the imaginations of countless thinkers, Jewish and Christian alike. Origen, the early Church Father, produced ten volumes of writings dedicated to explicating the allegorical meaning of the book. Much later, Bernard of Clairvaux delivered eighty-six homilies on just the first two chapters of the book.

In our tradition, a long line of Jewish thinkers have been drawn to *Shir Ha-Shirim*. Rabbi Akiva famously declares it “Holy of Holies,” proclaiming that the entire world is not equivalent to the day *Shir Ha-Shirim* was given to Israel (Mishna, *Yadayim* 3:5).

Rambam, in a pivotal passage regarding the importance of serving God out of love, insists that “the whole book, *Shir Ha-Shirim*, is an allegory on this subject” (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:3).

In the Kabbalistic tradition, it is telling that the first major medieval work, composed by Ezra of Gerona (c. 1160 – c. 1238) is a commentary on *Shir Ha-Shirim.*

Accordingly, *Shir Ha-Shirim* plays a pivotal role in Jewish liturgy and the calendar. It serves as the basis for many phrases in *Shir Ha-kavod* (the Song of Glory, popularly known for its introductory phrase, “*Anim Zemirot”*), a key text emerging from the Chasidei Ashkenaz circles of the 13th century. It also provides the foundations for the enigmatic, controversial mystical text *Shiur* *Koma*.

The phrase “*Lekha Dodi*,” as well as a number of additional key words and images in Rav Shlomo Ha-Levi Alkabetz’s Friday night prayer, is taken from *Shir Ha-Shirim* (7:12). *Yedid Nefesh* and *Berach Dodi* (recited in some communities on the seventh night of Pesach) draw heavily on *Shir Ha-shirim* as well.

Rav Shlomo Ganzfried, in *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh* (128), suggests that the words “*Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li,*” “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (6:3) are an acronym for the name of the month of Elul. In addition to reading the book publicly on *Shabbat Chol Ha-mo’ed Pesach*, we have seen that many have the practice to read *Shir Ha-Shirim* on *Erev Shabbat* or at the conclusion of the Pesach Seder.

*Shir Ha-Shirim* is also the basis for a disproportionate number of names of books of law and lore in the Jewish library, including: *Yeriot Shlomo* (from 1:5), *Be-ikvei Ha-tzon* (from 1:8), *Torei Zahav* and *Nekudot Ha-kesef* (1:11), *Tzeror Ha-mor* (1:13), *Eshkol Ha-kofer* (1:14), *Kol Dodi* (2:8), *Kol Ha-tor* (2:12), *Avkat Rokhel* (3:6), *Elef Ha-magen* (4:4), *Shiltei Ha-gibborim* (4:4), *Har Ha-mor* (4:6), *Pardes Rimonim* (4:13), *Peri Megadim* (4:13; see also 4:16), *Be’er Mayim Chayim* (4:15), *Kol Dodi Dofek* (5:2), *Arugat Ha-bosem* (6:2) and *Ha-elef Lekha Shlomo* (8:12). As Torah study has long been considered a centerpiece of a life of serving and loving God, it is no coincidence that *Shir Ha-Shirim* has served as a source for the names of countless Torah works.

In modern times, a set of pivotal verses has become a battleground for political Zionism, one of the most divisive issues debated over the past one hundred and twenty years. The series of vows with which the *raaya* adjures the Daughters of Jerusalem is famously interpreted by some as barring the Jews from returning prematurely to the Land of Israel. The precise import and contemporary relevance of the Gemara’s discussion (BT *Ketubot* 111a) animates many of the earlier and later controversies surrounding the legitimacy of the nascent Religious Zionist movement.

Later, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik made *Shir Ha-Shirim* a centerpiece of this larger view of serving God. *Kol Dodi Dofek* (*The Voice of My Beloved Knocks)*, his reflections on the Holocaust, centers in large measure on the pivotal passage depicting the *raaya’s* hesitancy to arise and answer the knock of her beloved. (This echoes Rav Yehuda Ha-Levi’s classic critique of the Jews of the Second Temple Era, who failed to return from Babylonia and Persia to Israel en masse, on the basis of this same passage.) In addition, *Uvikashtem Mi-sham* (translated as *And from There You Shall Seek)*, a recondite, poetic portrayal of the Rav’s religious phenomenology, opens with and centers throughout on *Shir Ha-Shirim* and the deeper experience of the impassioned seeker.

Why does *Shir Ha-Shirim* attract so much attention? We may cite a number of intertwined factors. The subject matter appears to be salacious, which surely provokes curiosity about the work. The explicit nature of the content, especially its incongruity with the considerably less graphic nature of other biblical texts, certainly drives even further interest in the explicitly sexual nature of the book, leading countless scholars to feel compelled to offer allegorical renderings of the text, which in turn generate greater interest.

*Shir Ha-Shirim* also contains a series of highly memorable scenes. The pastoral depictions of the animals, botany and natural background of Eretz Yisrael are immensely beautiful.

Moreover, the sheer beauty and intricacy of the poetry truly renders this “the Song of Songs.” Dramatically, the action of Chapter Five, in which the woman initially refuses to open the door for her beloved, and finally responds too late, is immensely memorable, as are her adjurations of the Daughters of Jerusalem.

These scenes and others generate tremendous pathos, particularly for the modern reader who is comfortable analyzing the surface meaning of the words. We identify with the characters and wish to learn more about them, particularly the woman, who experiences and ultimately overcomes a series of cryptic tragedies. *Le-havdil*, coming-of-age stories have long been a compelling literary genre, and *Shir Ha-Shirim* in many ways spins precisely such a yarn.

The larger theme of love is obviously central to Christianity; but crucially, especially as we have seen in our reading of the Midrashic text, *Shir Ha-Shirim* *Rabba* is seen by many rabbinic interpreters as a poignant reminder that the reciprocal loving relationship between God and His people is a foundational Jewish value as well, one which cannot be ceded to the Christians. What is more, as per Rashi’s interpretation, *Shir Ha-Shirim* is also interpreted by some leading medieval commentaries as offering a comprehensive response to the Christian claim that the seemingly-endless exile proves the Christian doctrine of Supersessionism.

On a more mundane level, *Shir Ha-Shirim* seems to be just the right length to allow for a range of interpretations. At one hundred and seventeen verses, it is just long enough to represent a complex and layered narrative, but short enough to be accessible to the reader willing to invest in its understanding.

Perhaps above all, though, *Shir Ha-Shirim* offers seemingly endless *peshat* and allegorical interpretive possibilities throughout the text of the book. Coupled with our intuitive sense that something sublime is being conveyed, *Shir Ha-Shirim* alludes toward the infinite. It is perhaps for this reason, more than any, that Rabbi Akiva demonstrates such profound insight in declaring *Shir Ha-Shirim* to be Holy of Holies.