**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**PESACH 5778**

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**In memory of Pinhas ben Shalom (Paul) Cymbalista z”l**

**Niftar 20 Nissan 5752.**

**Dedicated by his family.**

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**These Pesach Shiurim are dedicated in memory of Sidney Gontownik, brother of Jerry Gontownik, on the occasion of Sidney's upcoming eighth Yahrzeit, on the 24th of Nissan.**

**May his memory be for a blessing.**

**The Gontownik Family**

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**Dedicated in memory of
HaRav HaGaon R. Chaim Heller zt"l,**

**whose yahrzeit falls on the 14th of Nissan,
by Vivian S. Singer.**

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**Holy of Holies**

Ha-Rav Yaakov Medan

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

# For the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which *Shir Ha-Shirim* was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy, but *Shir Ha-Shirim* is the holy of holies. (*Yaddayim* 3:5)

# This declaration of R. Akiva is the clear ruling of the Sanhedrin. This verdict is based on the identification of the male beloved (*dod*) and the female companion (*raya*), the lovers mentioned in this book, with God and the Nation of Israel.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, can this be proven from the text itself?

# On the simplest level, these verses appear to be erotic poetry, love songs between a man and a woman of flesh and blood. What is the textual basis for declaring them sacrosanct?

**“Your Waist is a Mound of Wheat”?!**

If we read *Shir Ha-Shirim* in its simplest sense, we are left somewhat dumbfounded by the description of the female form of the companion, as spelled out in 7:2-5:

# Your graceful legs are like jewels,    the work of an artist’s hands.Your navel is a rounded goblet    that never lacks blended wine.Your waist is a mound of wheat    encircled by lilies.Your breasts are like two fawns,    like twins of a gazelle.

# Your neck is like an ivory tower.Your eyes are the pools of Cheshbon    by the gate of Bat Rabim.Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon    looking toward Damascus.

# Your head crowns you like the Carmel.    Your flowing hair is like crimson;    the king is held captive by its tresses.

# Some of these descriptions are bizarre, and they do not seem complimentary at all. The companion’s waist being like a mound of wheat does not appear flattering in the least. “Your eyes are the pools of Cheshbon” does not appear appropriate, and “Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon” seems profoundly strange. Nor does it seem logical to declare “Your breasts are like two fawns.”

There is a common solution to all of our questions: These appellations describe the body of a female gazelle (*tzeviya*), not of a human woman. This is not particularly surprising, as the beloved is also compared to the *tzevi* in appearance (2:9) and behavior (2:8, 2:17). The nose of the gazelle is large and prominent, and its eyes are large and clear like “the pools of Cheshbon.” Its white belly is particularly noticeable when contrasted with its yellow-gray hide, much like a white mound of wheat amidst a field of stalks. The *tzeviya* is also known for its warm maternal nature, so that when its twins nestle close to suckle, they obscure her breasts.

Still, other descriptions in *Shir Ha-Shirim* do seem appropriate for a human woman: “Your hair is like a flock of goats” (4:1); “Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon” (4:3), etc. But these descriptions relate only to the upper, exposed parts of the body, not those that are usually concealed.

Clearly, some aspects of the relationship described in *Shir Ha-Shirim* must be understood as metaphorical. Indubitably, King Shelomo had no intention to write a love song between a *tzevi* and a *tzeviya*! Since we have no choice but to say that this book employs parables, there is nothing to stop us from seeing *Shir Ha-Shirim* as an analogy for the relationship between God and the Jewish People, rather than between flesh-and-blood human beings.

**The Companion and the Land of Israel**

Let us consider another description of the *raya* (4:1-5):

# Your hair is like a flock of goats    descending from the hills of Gilead.Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,    coming up from the washing.Each has its twin;    not one of them is alone.Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;    your mouth is beautiful.Your brow behind your veil    is like a pomegranate slice.Your neck is like the tower of David,    built with courses of stone;on it hang a thousand shields,    all of them escutcheons of warriors.Your breasts are like two fawns,    like twins of a gazelle    that browse among the lilies.

The descriptions of the beauty of the *raya* are based on the geographical and topographical beauty of the Land of Israel. Her black hair is like a herd of black goats coming down from the mountains of Gilead to quench their thirst in the Jordan. Clearly, the reference is to the Damascus goat common to the area. The white teeth of the *raya* are like the white sheep coming out of the Jordan to climb back to Gilead.

The exceptional term used for mouth here is *midbar* (which might also refer to her speech), inescapably recalling the *midbar*, the wilderness of the pastureland, characteristic of the eastern lands of the Tribe of Binyamin (see *Shoftim* 20:42). The pomegranate slice (*pelach ha-rimon*) to which the *raya*’s brow is likened recalls the place name Sela Ha-Rimon, adjacent to the *midbar* of Binyamin (see ibid. v. 47; *I Shemuel* 14:2). The conclusion invokes “two fawns (*ofarim*), twins of a *tzeviya*,” recalling more sites in the same area of eastern Binyamin: Ofra, Taybeh (Tzeviya).

Elsewhere, the *raya* is compared to capital cities – to Jerusalem and to Tirtza in the tribal lands of Menasheh (6:4). *Pelach ha-rimon* is mentioned there as well (6:7), perhaps a reference to Gat Rimon, a priestly city in Menasheh (*Yehoshua* 21:25).

The beginning of the seventh chapter is also notable:

Come back, come back, Shulamit;
    come back, come back, that we may look upon you!

Why would you look upon the Shulamit
    as on the dancing of twin camps?

Regarding the appellation Shulamit, once cannot help but think of Shunamit, the term for women from the town of Shunem (*I Melakhim* 1-2; *II Melakhim* 4), next to Givat Ha-Moreh in the Yizre’el Valley. The final phrase as well, “*mecholat ha-machanayim*,” recalls two places on the east bank of the Jordan, Avel Mechola and Machanayim. The verses then go on to explicitly invoke Cheshbon, the tower of Lebanon and the Carmel, as noted above.

The idea is clear: the beauty of the *raya* is like the beauty of the Land of Israel. Now, if the *raya* is compared to the Land of Israel, it is reasonable to assume that this is a metaphor for the People of Israel; the Torah is its soul, while the Land of Israel is its body.

**“Like the Tents of Kedar”**

Let us return to the first chapter, in which the following metaphor is employed to describe the *raya* (recall that Kedar is the second-born son of Yishmael):

Dark am I, yet beautiful,
    daughters of Jerusalem,
like the tents of Kedar,
    like the curtains of Shelomo.
Do not stare at me because I am darkened,
    because the sun has gazed upon me.
My mother’s sons were angry with me
    and made me take care of the vineyards;
    my own vineyard I had to neglect.

The simple meaning of the verse is easy enough to grasp, as we follow the thread of each idea: Dark am I [like the tents of Kedar], yet beautiful [like the curtains of Shelomo]. The *raya*’s tan is considered uncomplimentary, so she feels compelled to justify her sun-blasted appearance due to hard labor outside. Nevertheless, at the same time she claims the beauty of Shelomo’s curtains, the finest materials worked by the finest artisans. Though her sunburnt appearance is far from impressive, her inner beauty remains, the *raya* maintains. Thus, the metaphor is a pavilion that looks like the tents of Kedar from the outside but the curtains of Shelomo from the inside.

In fact, just such a paradox of a structure is what Moshe constructs in the desert. The *Mishkan* has two sets of curtains: The inner ones were made of the finest materials by the finest artisans, connected by golden claps, but its outer appearance is blackened, like the tents of Kedar, and its outer curtains are connected by bronze clasps (*Shemot* 26:1-11):

Make the tabernacle (*Mishkan*) with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and sky-blue, crimson and scarlet yarn, with cherubim woven into them by a skilled worker…Then make fifty gold clasps and use them to fasten the curtains together so that the tabernacle is a unit.

Make curtains of goat hair for the tent over the tabernacle — eleven altogether… Then make fifty bronze clasps and put them in the loops to fasten the tent together as a unit.

These goatskin curtains are black, and they can be seen to this day in Bedouin tents. These curtains are durable and able to withstand inclement weather, and they protect very well the inner curtains, which depict, through their cherubim, the Divine Presence.

The *raya* in *Shir Ha-Shirim* is thus similar to the structure of the *Mishkan*. This description is not appropriate for a flesh-and-blood woman; it makes much more sense as a metaphor for the Nation of Israel.

**Shepherd and King**

Let us devote some time to the *dod*, the beloved of the *raya*. The poem describes him sometimes as a shepherd and sometimes as king. As a shepherd, the tents of Kedar are quite appropriate, as shepherds in the wilderness would indeed make their tents out of goatskin curtains. As a king, they are Shelomo’s curtains, which have regal glory.

But what flesh-and-blood person fits this bill, being both a shepherd and a king? The king and the shepherd do not exist in the same social class; how can the poem synthesize them into one character? It makes sense that this character is not flesh-and-blood at all, but rather a metaphor for God Himself, as He was the shepherd while the Israelites made their way through the wilderness. The shepherd leading a flock through the wilderness must be armed with staff, sword, or crook to drive off malefactors, be they animal (predators) or human (thieves).[[2]](#footnote-2) David notes this (*I Shemuel* 17:34-35):

But David said to Shaul, “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock,I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it.”

Just as the shepherd must protect the flock of sheep or herd of goats, human leaders must protect those who put their trust in those leaders (*Yirmeyahu* 23:2-4):

Therefore, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done, declares the Lord.3I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing, declares the Lord.

The shepherds who have scattered God’s flock will be replaced with faithful ones (*Mikha* 5:4-5):

And he will be our peace
    when the Assyrians invade our land
    and march through our fortresses.
We will raise against them seven shepherds,
    even eight princes of men,
Who will rulethe land of Assyria with the sword,
    and enter the gates of the land of Nimrod.
He will deliver us from the Assyrians
    when they invade our land
    and march across our borders.

Just as the shepherd guards the sheep, God protects His people, and He saves them from every malefactor and misfortune throughout their sojourn in the wilderness. At that time, God could be described as a shepherd in the tents of Kedar.

However, in the days of Shelomo, once the Israelites have entered the Land taken possession of it and they have reached a period of peace and tranquility, God no longer appears as a shepherd, but rather as a king. He is the victorious monarch leading his armies to His sanctuary, to His temple, to the curtains of Shelomo (*Tehillim* 24:7-10):

Lift up your heads, you gates;
    be lifted up, you ancient doors,
    that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
    The Lord strong and mighty,
    the Lord mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, you gates;
    lift them up, you ancient doors,
    that the King of glory may come in.
Who is he, this King of glory?
    The Lord Almighty —
    he is the King of glory.

The description of the *dod* as a *ro’eh* and as a king complements the descriptions of the *raya* with terminology taken from the *Mishkan*. These two phenomena point to the fact that the members of this couple are God and the Nation of Israel.

**“A Song of My Beloved as to His Vineyard”**

The partner of the *raya* has two appellations: sometimes “*dod*” and sometimes “Shelomo.” Obviously, this is not meant to be a case of polyandry, with one woman having two lovers. Since the *dod* is God, the poet must mean to allude to two different ways of divine manifestation. Sometimes He reveals Himself as a *dod* and sometimes as Shelomo.

There is another place in *Tanakh* in which we find a double metaphor for God, and there as well He is referred to as a *dod*. This is the famous parable of the vineyard from the Book of *Yeshayahu* (5:1-2).

Let me sing, I pray you, for my loved one,
    A song of my beloved as to his vineyard
My loved one had a vineyard
    on a fertile hillside.
He dug it up and cleared it of stones
    and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
    and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he sought a crop of good grapes,
    but it yielded only bad fruit.

The vineyard in this metaphor represents the inhabitants of Judea, or perhaps the inhabitants of Jerusalem. God is both “my loved one (*yedidi*),” who is singing the song, as well as “my beloved (*dodi*),” who owns the vineyard. Since this is about the construction of Jerusalem, it makes sense that these two appellations alluded to the great kings of Israel – King David, who is referred to as “*dod*,” and King Shelomo, whose other name is Yedidya (*II Shemuel* 12:24-25). God is sometimes a *dod*, and this is how he relates to David. At other times, He appears as He revealed himself to Shelomo, as the Talmud (*Shevuot* 35b) declares: “Every ‘Shelomo’ mentioned in *Shir Ha-Shirim* is sacred [as a reference to God]: the Song to Him whose is the peace (*asher ha-shalom shelo*).”

The name Shelomo in *Shir Ha-Shirim* compares the partner to a king in his palace, with servants obeying his word. The relationship of Shelomo and his *raya* is marriage in the fullest sense of the word. We find mentions of a bridal canopy, a bed, a private chamber, wine, and kisses:

The song of songs, which is of Shelomo.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
    for your love is more delightful than wine.
Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;
    your name is like perfume poured out.
    No wonder the young women love you!
Take me away with you — let us hurry!
    Let the king bring me into his chambers.

We rejoice and delight in you;
    we will praise your love more than wine.

How right they are to adore you! (1:1-4)

Look! It is Shelomo’s bed,
    encircled by sixty warriors,
    the noblest of Israel,
All of them wearing the sword,
    all experienced in battle,
Each with his sword at his side,
    prepared for the terrors of the night.
King Shelomo made for himself the palanquin;
    he made it of wood from Lebanon.
Its posts he made of silver,
    its base of gold.
Its seat was upholstered with purple,
    its interior inlaid with love.
Daughters of Jerusalem, come out,
    and look, you daughters of Zion.
Look on King Shelomo wearing a crown,
    the crown with which his mother crowned him
on the day of his wedding,
    the day his heart rejoiced. (3:7-11)

Shelomo had a vineyard in Baal Hamon;
    he let out his vineyard to tenants.
Each was to bring for its fruit
    a thousand shekels of silver. (8:11)

These descriptions fit the era of King Shelomo, a period of peace and tranquility throughout the land:

So King Shelomo ruled over all Israel (*I Melakhim* 4:1)

The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank, and they were happy. And Shelomo ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Shelomo’s subjects all his life. (Ibid. vv. 20-21)

For he ruled over all the kingdoms west of the Euphrates River, from Tifsach to Aza, and had peace on all sides. During Shelomo’s lifetime, Judah and Israel, from Dan to Be’er Sheva, lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree. (Ibid. vv. 24-25)

On the other hand, in places in which *Shir Ha-Shirim* mentions the *dod*, we find searching, temporary separation, momentary encounters, and concealment. The relationship of the *raya* with the *dod* reflects the period of betrothal, during which the love between the partners is passionate and not bound by institutions, shattering all rules and frameworks, in which there are absences and crises:

All night long on my bunk
    I sought the one my heart loves;
    I sought him but did not find him.
I will get up now and go about the city,
    through its streets and squares;
I will search for the one my heart loves.
    So I sought him but did not find him.
The watchmen found me
    as they made their rounds in the city.
    “Have you seen the one my heart loves?”
Scarcely had I passed them
    when I found the one my heart loves.
I held him and would not let him go
    till I had brought him to my mother’s house,
    to the room of the one who conceived me. (3:1-4)

I slept but my heart was awake.
    Listen! My beloved is knocking:
“Open to me, my sister, my companion,
    my dove, my flawless one.
My head is drenched with dew,
    my hair with the dampness of the night.”
I have taken off my robe —
    must I put it on again?
I have washed my feet —
    must I soil them again?
My beloved thrust his hand through the latch-opening;
    my heart began to pound for him.
I arose to open for my beloved,
    and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with flowing myrrh,
    on the handles of the bolt.
I opened for my beloved,
    but my beloved had left; he was gone.
    My heart sank at his departure.
I sought him but did not find him.
    I called him but he did not answer.
The watchmen found me
    as they made their rounds in the city.
They beat me, they bruised me;
    they took away my cloak,
    those watchmen of the walls!
Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you —
    if you find my beloved,
what will you tell him?
    Tell him I am faint with love. (5:2-8)

These descriptions recall verses from *Tehillim* in which King David delves into the difficult periods of distance in his relationship with God. His passionate love, his powerful yearning for an encounter, his ecstasy when the longed-for rendezvous is finally realized.

#### Of David:

The Lord is my light and my salvation —
    whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life —
    of whom shall I be afraid?

When the wicked advance against me
    to devour me,
it is my enemies and my foes
    who will stumble and fall.
Though an army besiege me,
    my heart will not fear;
Though war break out against me,
    even then I will be confident.

One thing I ask from the Lord,
    this only do I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
    all the days of my life,
To look upon the pleasantness of the Lord
    and to seek him in His temple.
For in the day of trouble
    He will keep me safe in his dwelling;
He will hide me in the shelter of His sacred tent
    and set me high upon a rock.

Then my head will be exalted
    above the enemies who surround me;
At His sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;
    I will sing and make music to the Lord. (27:1-6)

#### A song of ascents.

#### Lord, remember David    and all his self-denial.

He swore an oath to the Lord,
    he made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob:
“I will not enter my house
    or go to my sleeping-couch,
I will allow no sleep to my eyes
    or slumber to my eyelids,
Till I find a place for the Lord,
    a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob.” (132:1-5)

David does not merit to build the Temple, but he devotes his life to its construction, preparing blueprints, assembling building materials, and readying his son Shelomo to build it. In David’s era, the relationship with God is like the period of betrothal between God and the Nation of Israel. With this attitude, God is called “*dod*” in *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Since the verse uses these two attitudes, we have no choice but to say that *Shir Ha-Shirim* cannot be understood in its simple sense, but rather as a metaphor for the love between God and Israel.

1. It is possible, following the view of Rambam (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:3) and some of the early Kabbalists, that the *dod* and the *raya* are God and the human soul. This is the approach taken by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik in *U-Vikashtem Mi-Sham.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Indeed, the Hebrew term for shepherd, *ro’eh*, actually means “breaker.” The same roots gives us *ra’ua* (cracked or broken), *terua* (staccato or broken sounds), or *re’ut ruach* (broken spirit or disappointment). Thus, the *ro’eh* has the job of breaking any wild animal or thief who might threaten the flock. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)