

The National and Personal Calling of Shir Hashirim

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Since its inclusion in the canon, Shir HaShirim has presented its readers with formidable interpretive challenges. Aside from the question of how a book that is apparently a collection of love poetry fits within the sacred contours of Tanakh, the twists and turns of the relationship between the lovers – at times forlorn yet at other times fulfilled – represent a whole different set of cruxes. Jewish interpreters in ancient and medieval times were well aware of these difficulties and attempted to address both issues in their writings.

Famously, Rashi opens his introduction to his commentary on the sefer by referring to the multi-valiancy of Scripture:

One statement of God, these two I heard. One verse extends to a number of explanations, and the final thing is that a verse does not stray from its literal meaning.

אחת דבר אלהים שתיים זו שמעתי, מקרא אחד
יוצא לכמה טעמים וסוף דבר אין לך מקרא
יוצא מידי פשוטו

The commentary's ambitious goal is to somehow link classical midrashic interpretations with the Sefer's passionate plot despite the apparent gap between the two. Rashi explains that on the whole, the overarching approach of the midrashim is to recount Jewish national history, and particularly, the relationship between God and the Jewish people. By using this approach, Rashi also attempts to account for the complex trajectory of the lovers' relationship:

And I say that Solomon saw with a holy spirit that the Jewish people were eventually to be exiled, exile after exile, destruction after destruction, and in order to mourn in the exile for their glory of old, and to remember the love [God had] to make of them a chosen one of all the nations, so they should say "let me go and return to my original husband, for it was better for me then than now" and that [God] should remember His kindness and the level He raised them to, and all the goodness He said He would give them at the end of days.

ואומר אני שראה שלמה ברוח הקדש
שעתידין ישראל לגלות גולה אחר גולה
חורבן אחר חורבן ולהתאונן בגלות זה
על כבודם הראשון ולזכור חבה ראשונה
אשר היו סגולה לו מכל העמים לאמר
אלכה ואשובה אל אישי הראשון כי טוב
לי אז מעתה ויזכרו את חסדיו ואת
מעלם אשר מעלו ואת הטובות אשר
אמר לתת להם באחרית הימים

The numerous points of exile and destruction in the national story are represented by the moments of distance between the lovers. Interestingly enough, the high points in the relationship are seen as a kind of nostalgia for the initial love that God showered on Israel during the formative years of her existence.

A good example of Rashi's method can be found in his comments to Shir Hashirim 1:5:

I am black, but attractive, daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.

Rashi: I am black in my actions, and attractive in the actions of my ancestors, and even in my actions there are attractive ones, if I have the iniquity of the golden calf, to contrast that I have the merit of the acceptance of the Torah.

שְׁחֹרָה אֲנִי וְנֹאֲרָה בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם
כְּאֶהֱלִי קֶדָר כִּירְיָעוֹת שֶׁל מֶה:

רש"י: שחורה אני במעשי ונאה
אני במעשה אבותי ואף במעשי
יש מהם נאים אם יש בי עון העגל
יש בי כנגדו זכות קבלת התורה

In other words, according to Rashi, all of the signifiers in this verse refer to national issues that can be located in the distant, formative past.

Although the Rambam did not author a commentary on Shir Hashirim, it is clear that the sefer held great importance in his religious phenomenology. The Rambam describes the nature of proper love of God⁴⁷:

What is the proper love? One should love God with a great, abundant, strong love to the point where one's soul should be bound with the love of God, until one is obsessive over it, lovesick, as one who cannot stop thinking about a woman, and contemplates it constantly, while awake, while eating and sleeping, greater than that should be the love of God in the heart of His lovers, as we are commanded "with all of your heart and all of your soul" and that is what Solomon said in the form of parable "for I am sick with love" and all of Shir HaShirim is a parable for this concept.

Hilkhot Teshuva 10:3

וכיצד היא האהבה הראויה הוא שיאהב את
ה' אהבה גדולה יתירה עזה מאוד עד שתהא
נפשו קשורה באהבת ה' ונמצא שוגג בה
תמיד כאלו חולה חולי האהבה שאין דעתו
פנויה מאהבת אותה אשה והוא שוגג בה
תמיד בין בשבתו בין בקומו בין בשעה
שהוא אוכל ושותה, יתר מזה תהיה אהבת
ה' בלב אוהביו שוגגים בה תמיד כמו שצונו
בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך, והוא ששלמה אמר
דרך משל כי חולת אהבה אני, וכל שיר
השירים משל הוא לענין זה.
הלכות תשובה יג

True, all-encompassing love of God can be compared to the lovesick emotions that one lover feels for another. For our purposes, the final line of the halakha is of particular importance: "And all of Shir Hashirim is a parable for this matter." That is, the Rambam reads the story of Shir Hashirim as reflecting the overpowering love that a person experiences if they fulfill the mandate of loving God with all their heart. Unlike Rashi, it would seem that the Rambam locates Shir Hashirim both in the present and on an individual plane – not in the distant, national past.

The Voice of My Beloved Knocks

*I sleep, but my heart is awake; Hark! My beloved knocks:
'Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled; for my*

אני ישנה ולבי ער קול דודי דופק
פתחי לי אחתי רעיתי יונתי תמתי

⁴⁷ See also Hilkhot Teshuva 10:6.

head is filled with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.' I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them? My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my heart was moved for him. I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with flowing myrrh, upon the handles of the bar. I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had turned away, and was gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. The watchmen that go about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my mantle from me. 'I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, what will you tell him? That I am love-sick.'

Shir Hashirim 5:2-8

שׁוֹר אֲשֵׁי נִמְלָא טַל קִנְצוֹתַי רְסִיסֵי לַיְלָה:
 פָּשַׁטְתִּי אֶת בְּתוּנְתִי אֵיכָכָה אֶלְבָּשְׁנָה
 רַחֲצֵתִי אֶת רַגְלֵי אֵיכָכָה אֶטְנַפֵּם: דּוֹדֵי
 שְׁלַח יָדוֹ מִן הַחֹר וּמְצֵי הַמּוֹ עָלָיו: קִמְתִּי
 אָנֹכִי לַפֶּתַח לְדוֹדֵי וַיִּדְדֵי נָטְפוּ מוֹר
 וְאֶצְבְּעֹתַי מוֹר עָבַר עַל פְּפוֹת הַמְּנַעוֹל:
 פִּתַחְתִּי אָנֹכִי לְדוֹדֵי וְדוֹדֵי חָמַק עָבַר
 נִפְשִׁי יִצְאָה בְּדַבְּרוֹ בְּקִשְׁתִּיהוּ וְלֹא
 מָצָאתִיהוּ קִרְאתִיו וְלֹא עָנְנִי: מָצָאתִי
 הַשְׂמָרִים הַסְּבִיבִים בְּעִיר הַכּוֹנֵי פְצָעוֹנֵי
 נִשְׂאוּ אֶת רִדְדֵי מַעְלֵי שְׁמַרְיָה הַחַמּוֹת:
 הַשְׂבָּעֵתִי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם אִם
 תִּמְצְאוּ אֶת דּוֹדֵי מִה תִּגִּידוּ לוֹ שְׁחֹלַת
 אֶהְבֶּה אָנֹכִי:
 שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים ה:ב-ח

The great emotional force of these *passukim* lies in their ability to completely draw the reader into the story, encourage her to identify with the protagonist, and ultimately, to frustrate this sympathy by marking the “beloved”’s laziness as, paradoxically, both understandable and inexplicable. The question burns: What is the meaning of the female lover’s inertia? Why does she not simply get herself out of bed and open the door for her lover, instead of enjoying a few moments of rest that will inevitably lead to frantic searching?

Although we can only speculate, it is nevertheless worth asking how the Rambam understands the tumultuousness of the lovers’ relationship if their story is supposed to exemplify the highest level of human love of God. Rav Soloveitchick’s insight about the ideal religious experience is instructive in this regard. In a celebrated footnote at the beginning of *Halakhic Man*, the Rav argues against the view that the most sublime height to which a religious person can aspire is a sense of spiritual tranquility:

... This popular ideology contends that the religious experience is tranquil and neatly ordered, tender, and delicate; it is an enchanted stream for embittered souls and still waters for troubled spirits...

... And second, this ideology is intrinsically false and deceptive. That religious consciousness in man’s experience which is most profound and most elevated, which penetrates to the very depths and ascends to the very heights, is not that simple and comfortable. On the contrary, it is exceptionally complex, rigorous, and tortuous. Where you find its complexity, there you find its greatness. The religious experience, from beginning to end, is antinomic and antithetic... Religion is not, at the outset, a refuge of grace and mercy for the despondent and desperate, an enchanted stream for crushed spirits, but a raging, clamorous torrent of man’s consciousness with all its crises, pangs and torments...

Perhaps the Rambam reads the lovers’ ups and downs as related to the tumultuous experience of a complex religious life.

When we look at the writings of another towering figure of the twelfth century, R. Yehuda Halevi, we find an approach to Shir Hashirim that appears in some senses closer to Rashi's view. R. Yehuda Halevi also understands the narrative as expressing the national past. HaLevi focuses, however, not only on the formative period of Jewish existence, but rather on the specific moments of exile and return to the Holy Land.

... It is this very sin that has prevented us from achieving that which God promised us for the second temple... this means that the Divinity was prepared to settle in the Second temple as it had previously provided that the Jewish people would all agree to return to Israel eagerly. Instead, only some returned, while the majority-including the important leaders-remained in Babylon. They preferred subservience in the Diaspora, so that they would not have to part from their home and affairs.

Perhaps this is what Solomon meant when he said "I am asleep but my heart is awake" in that he compared Diaspora Jewry to one who is asleep... "A voice my beloved knocks" refers to God's beckoning call to return to Israel... When it later says "I have removed my coat" this refers to the sluggishness of the Jewish people to return, just as one who is too lazy to don his coat and join his friend outside... "My beloved sent his hand through the door latch" refers to Ezra and Nehemiah, and other prophets who enticed the people to return, until some finally agreed to return...

God in turn repaid them with what was hidden in their hearts, in all that all the holiness that returned was in a diminished state, commensurate to their diminished state.

On further reflection, it is possible that R. Yehuda Halevi did not only associate Shir Hashirim with the national history of displacement and return, but rather he too may have seen the role of the individual in this history. In a well-known passage in the Kuzari, the Jewish sage – who should perhaps be read as an expression of R. Yehuda Halevi himself – is forced to admit to the King of Khazar that his daily supplications to return to the Land of Israel are no more than the “chattering of birds”:

Kuzari said: If so, then you must have a limited affection for your Torah. You have not made Israel your goal, nor your place of living and dying. Yet you say in your prayers 'Have mercy on Zion' for it is our life's home... I see that all your knee-bending and bowing toward Israel is mere flattery or some insincere custom.

Rabbi said: ... you have shamed me, King of Khazar... And so our recitations of such prayers as 'bow down to the mount of His holiness', "blessed are you who returns His Divine Presence to Zion and the like are merely like the warble of the parrot and other birds who imitate human voices; we do not think about what are we saying when we say these and other prayers. It is as you say, Khazar King.

We might speculate that in HaLevi's own personal reading of Shir HaShirim, he merged the individual and national aspects of exile and redemption to and from the Holy Land. His devastatingly beautiful poetry on Zion, as well as the traditions about his personal sacrifice to make aliyah, line up quite well with the personalization of this motif.

Partially relying on R. Yehuda Halevi's approach to the book as a whole but updated to reflect the miraculous events of recent Jewish history, Rav Soloveichik sees in this passage both the incredible promise of the founding of the State of Israel, and also the aching sense, felt less than a decade later, of missed opportunities:

What was our reaction to the beckoning of the voice of the Beloved, to the munificence of His loving kindness and miracles? Did we get out of our beds and immediately open the door, or did we continue to rest like the Lover, and were we too lazy to get out of our beds? "I have washed my feet, how shall I soil them?" ... Orthodox Jews should have hastened to perform so great a mitzvah, to plunge with joy and enthusiasm into the very midst of this holy work: the building and settling of the Land. However to our regret, we have not reacted that way.

When a miracle does not find its proper answering echo in the form of concrete deeds, an exalted vision degenerates and dissipates...

Let us be honest and speak openly and candidly. We are critical of certain well-known Israeli leaders because of their attitudes to traditional values and religious observances. Our complaints are valid... however... we could have extended our influence in shaping the spiritual image of the Yishuv if we had hastened to arouse ourselves from our sleep and descend to open the door for our Beloved Who was knocking... Had we established more religious kibbutzim, had we built more houses for religious immigrants, had we created an elaborate and extended system of schools...

The Rav does not merely associate the climax of the book with the Jewish national history of exile and return. By emphasizing the issue of personal responsibility, he locates the story in the present and on a personal key. In other words, there are elements here of the three approaches that we have outlined.

The triumph of the founding of the State of Israel is something that everyone in our generation, regardless of age, has experienced personally. And so is the brunt of the Rav's critique that we have squandered the full realization of this opportunity at the very moment of its actualization. At the end, it is the Rav's compelling interpretation of contemporary events in light of the promise and tragedy of Shir Hashirim's description of the *dod's* knocking, that still remains seared on the consciousness of our community, over fifty years on.

Yeshiva University can take pride in the hundreds of alumni who have personalized the epic story of national redemption and uprooted their families to be part of what will hopefully constitute the final return to the Land of Israel. At the same time, we must remember that this is only the first response to the Divine "knocking." One hopes that even at this late date it is still possible to answer the Rav's call and bring about real change in Israeli society, to engage all elements of Israeli society and bring the State's people and leadership into the encompassing and loving embrace of God.