

The Lovers

The heart . . . needs relationship. Our minds might insist that we go directly to the Infinite when we think of God, but the heart doesn't want the Infinite; it wants a You it can confide in and take comfort in. The poetry of Shir Ha-shirim, the Song of Songs, speaks this language.

—ZALMAN
SCHACHTER-SHALOMI

The Song of Songs as Allegory

The only book of Tanakh to which Rashi, the classic medieval biblical commentator, wrote an introduction was the Song of Songs. In it, he builds on the rabbinic understanding that the book is an allegory for the relationship of God and Israel. He sees the distance described between the lovers as the effects of Jewish exile, and the dream of reuniting as expressive of the dream of redemption. Throughout the Song, the lovers pine for each other—as Israel and God both yearn to be reunited; both are now in exile and both are to be redeemed.

The Song of Songs

CHAPTER I

THE SONG OF SONGS, OF SOLOMON:

May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
your love is sweeter than wine.

*Yishakeini mi-n'shikot pihu,
ki tovim dodekha mi-yayin.*

How sweet the smell your ointments,
what a fragrant perfume your name,
how maidens so love you!

Pull me toward you; let us run together!
Let the king bring me to his chambers.

*We shall rejoice and delight in your love,
we shall savor your love more than wine,
for your love is true.*

Daughters of Jerusalem,

I am sunburned, yet beautiful,
dark like the tents of Kedar,
beautiful like Solomon's pavilions.

Don't stare at me for being burnt by the sun—
my brothers were jealous of me,
they made me guard the vineyards—
I could not tend my own vines.

*Al tiruni she-ani sh'harhoret, she-sh'zafatni ha-shamesh,
b'nei imi niharu vi, samuni noteirah et ha-kramim,
karmi sheli lo natarti.*

Tell me, my beloved:

Where do you pasture?

Where does your flock rest at noon?

Why should I be a wanderer
following your friends' flocks?

O, loveliest of women!

*If you have no idea,
follow the tracks of the herds,
and graze your goats
close by the sheds of the shepherds.*

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים

פרק א

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשֹׁלֹמֹה:

יִשְׁקֶנִי מִנְּשִׁיקוֹת פִּיָּהוּ כִּי-טוֹבִים דְּדִידְךָ מִיַּיִן:

לְרִיחַ שְׁמֹנֶיךָ טוֹבִים שְׁמֹן תוֹרֵךְ שֶׁמֶךָ

עַל-פִּי עֵלְמוֹת אֲהַבְּוֹה:

מִשְׁכְּבֵי אֲחֵרֶיךָ נְרוּצָה הִבֵּיאֵנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ הַדְּרִי

נְבִילָה וְנִשְׁמַחַח לִּי נִזְכַּרְתָּה דְּדִידְךָ מִיַּיִן

מִיִּשְׁרָיִם אֲהַבְּוֹה:

שְׁחֹרְתָה אֲנִי וְנִאֲוָה בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם

כִּאֲבֵלִי קִדְר פִּירֵיעוֹת שְׁלֹמֹה:

אֶל-תִּרְאוּנִי שְׁאֲנִי שְׁחֹרְתוֹת לְשִׁזְפוֹתֵי הַשְּׁמֶשׁ

כִּי אֲמִי נִחְרַבְּוֹי שְׁמֹנִי נִטְוָה אֶת-הַפְּרָמִים

כִּרְמֵי שְׁלִי לֹא נִטְרַתִּי:

הַיְדִידָה לִּי שְׁאֲהַבָּה נִפְלְאוֹ

אֵיכָה תִרְעָה אֵיכָה תִרְבִּיץ בַּצְּהָרִים

שְׁלֹמֹה אֲהִיָּה כְּעַטְוִיהָ עַל עֵדְרֵי תְּבָרִיךְ:

אִם-לֹא תִדְעִי לָךְ הַיְפֹתָה בְּנָשִׁים אֲצִי-לֹךְ בְּעַקְבֵי הַצֹּאן

וְרַעֲלִי אֶת-גְּדִידֵיךְ עַל מִשְׁכְּבוֹת הָרְעִים:

THE SONG OF SONGS שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים Jewish tradition understood the Song of Songs as an allegory of the love between God and Israel. Since Shabbat is seen as the time when Israel and God once again find each other, it was natural that the Song of Songs—where lovers repeatedly lose each other, search for each other, and find each other again—came to be recited as an introduction to Shabbat. The traditional observance of Shabbat emphasizes physical pleasure (such as eating, resting, and rejoicing in good company) as integral to its spiritual delight, much as the Song of Songs points to a spiritual fulfillment through its portrayal of physical love.

Many scholars believe that the Song of Songs should not be read as a continuous narrative, but rather as a series of individual, but connected, poems. The book is tied together through the figures of its three main characters: the female lover, the male lover (indicated in English by indented stanzas), and a chorus of “the daughters of Jerusalem” (printed here in italics). The chorus sometimes urges love on and sometimes urges restraint.

The Song of Songs can be seen as a series of internal dialogues, voiced as if in a dream. Here, the poet begins by imagining her lover in the third person. Soon, however, the vision becomes more intense, and she addresses him as if he were present. This alternation of mood is characteristic of the Song of Songs. At times, the lovers are close—hugging and kissing one another—but at other times they are hidden from each other. Viewing the Song of Songs as an allegory, one can understand this duality of closeness and distance as characteristic of the divine-human encounter. Since the Song of Songs is composed of a series of poems, we have used bold in Hebrew to set off these individual sections.

SUNBURNED Sunburned skin is associated with a lower social status, a fair complexion being the mark of those who could afford not to work outdoors. In ancient Egyptian and Greek art, the women are shown as having lighter skin than the men, probably because the women worked indoors. The Shulamite's need to account for her dark skin sounds apologetic; on the other hand, since her dark skin may have contributed to her singularity and attractiveness, she may be boasting, not apologizing. (Ariel and Chana Bloch)

MY BROTHERS The circumstances of life frequently do not allow us to engage in “self care.” We can see the female figure as a personification of how we are prevented from “tending our own vines”; they have gone unattended because of the obligations and the demands of work, of family, or even of friends. Shabbat may be a moment when we can stop to center ourselves.

For I Am Sick with Love

What is the appropriate love of God? It is that you should love God so powerfully that your soul is bound up with the love of God and is constantly captured by it, as if one were sick with lovesickness, as when your consciousness is not freed from the love of your beloved but you think of your beloved at all times: when you lie down and when you rise up, when you are eating and when you are drinking. The love of God should be even more than this in the hearts of Godlovers; it should be present constantly, as we are commanded: "you shall love Adonai, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul." This is what Solomon expressed metaphorically, saying, "For I am sick with love." The entire Song of Songs is an allegorical description of this love.

—MALMONIDES

I picture you, my beloved, as a graceful steed in Pharaoh's cavalry;

your cheeks gorgeously adorned with bangles, your neck with pearls.

We shall fashion rings of gold with silver inlay for you.

As the king lies down, my perfume spreads its fragrance. My lover is like a spray of myrrh, lying on my breast.

My beloved is a garland of henna in the vineyards of Ein Gedi.

You are beautiful, my beloved; you are beautiful, with eyes like doves.

You are handsome, my beloved, oh so graceful! Our couch is a flourishing garden, the beams of our house, the cedars, the rafters, the cypresses.

CHAPTER 2

I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valley.

Like a lily among the thorns, so is my beloved among the young women.

Like an apple tree in a vast forest, so is my beloved among the young men: in its shade, desire grew in me and I lingered, its fruit sweet on my tongue.

Ani havatzelet ha-sharon, shoshanat ha-amakim. K'shoshanah bein ha-hohim, ken rayati bein ha-banot. K'tapu-ah ba-atzei haya-ar, ken dodai bein ha-banim . . .

He brings me to his wine-press, his banner of love over me. Heviani el beit ha-yayin, v'diglo alai ahavah.

Prop me up amidst the flowering buds, bed me by the apple trees, for I am sick with love. His left arm under my head, his right caressing me . . .

I would make you swear, daughters of Jerusalem, by the hosts or the hinds of the field, lest you rouse and wake love before it is ready.

I PICTURE YOU דְּמִיְתִיךָ. Like much of the Song of Songs, this passage is announced as a dream sequence, with the word *dimitiikh*, "I imagine you," here translated as "I picture you." The dream sequence ends with the lovers meeting in the forest. The fulfillment of love is seen here as coinciding with a return to nature. We might think of it as a return to the Garden of Eden: a fresh beginning untainted by any failures in the relationship.

The voices of the man and woman alternate in this passage. The woman talks of fragrance, and the man responds with a visual image. In Hebrew, the alternation of voices is clear. The man addresses the woman, "Oh, how beautiful!" (*himakh yafah*)—which we have translated here as "handsome," in order to make the change in speakers obvious.

STEED לְסִטְנֵי. Some translate this word as "mare," since the image is applied to a woman. The poet, however, may intend to evoke the strength and power of a stallion—as a description of feminine grace.

APPLE TREE תְּפוחֵי תְּפוחֵי. Apples, which is what the word means in modern Hebrew,

were unknown in the ancient Near East, so the allusion is to an unknown fruit. The metaphor evokes the surprise of walking in a forest and stumbling upon edible fruit.

IN ITS SHADE בְּצֵלוֹ. Or, "in his shadow." The image of a shadow introduces another dream sequence.

HOSTS תְּבוֹאוֹת הַחַיִּים. The word inevitably evokes the phrase *Adonai Tz'va-ot*, "Lord of hosts," especially in this context of oath-taking. However, given the surrounding nature imagery, it may equally refer to a host of animals—both the female hinds, mentioned in the next phrase, as well as the male gazelles and stags, mentioned in the following verse.

לְסִטְנֵיךָ בְּרֻכְבִּי פָרְעֹה דְּמִיְתִיךָ רֵעִי:

נֶאֱנֹחַ לְחַיִּיךָ בַּתְּלוֹת צְוֹאֵרְךָ בַּחֲרוֹזִים:

תּוֹרֵי זֵהָב נַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ עִם נְקֻדֹת הַבֶּסֶר:

עַד-שֶׁהִמְלִיךְ בַּמִּסְבֵּי נִרְדֵּי נִמְן רֵיחוֹ:

צְרוּר הַמֶּרֶץ | הוֹדֵל לִי בִּין שְׂדֵי יִלְנִי:

אֲשַׁלֵּל הַכֶּפֶר | הוֹדֵל לִי בְּכַרְמֵי עֵינֵי גְדִי:

הַנֶּהָר יִפֹּחַ רֵעִיךָ הַנֶּהָר יִפֹּחַ עֵינֶיךָ יוֹנִים:

הַנֶּהָר יִפֹּחַ הוֹדֵל אֶף נְעִים אֶפְרַעֲשֻׁבוּ רֵעִנְךָ:

קְרוֹת בְּתֵמִנֵי אֲרוֹזִים רְהִיטֵנוּ בְּרוֹתִים:

אֲנִי תְּבַצֵּלֶת הַשָּׁלוֹן שׁוֹשַׁנַת הָעֲמָקִים:

כְּשׁוֹשֵׁנָה בֵּין חֲרוֹזִים בֵּין רֵעִיךָ בֵּין הַבָּנוֹת:

כְּתַפּוּחַ בְּעֵצֵי הַיַּעַר בֵּין הַבָּנוֹת:

בְּצֵלוֹ הַמְדוּתִי וְיִשְׁבַּתִּי וּפְרִי מִתּוֹק לְחִפִּי:

הֵבִיאֲנִי אֶל-בַּיִת הַיַּיִן וְדִגְלוּ עָלַי אֲהָבָה:

סִמְכוּנִי בְּאֲשִׁישׁוֹת רִפְדוֹנִי בַּתְּפֹחוֹתִים:

בֵּי-חֻלּוֹת אֲהָבָה אֲנִי:

שָׁמְאֵלוּ תַחַת לְרֵאשֵׁי וַיִּמְיְנוּ תַחְבֻּקָנִי:

הַשִּׁפְעִתִּי אֲתַכֶּם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם:

בְּצִבְאוֹת אֹף בְּאֵילוֹת הַשָּׁדָה:

אִם-תִּעֲוִירוּ | וְאִם-תִּעְוְרוּךְ אֶת-הָאֲהָבָה:

עַד שֶׁתִּחַפְּצוּ: