



WWW.PROJECTZUG.ORG

The Seder and the Song of Songs: A Love Story in Four Scenes

An excerpt of a Project Zug course
from Rabbi Aviva Richman

SESSION 1 In Egypt: Love in Hard Times

◆ Song of Songs

In Hebrew, Shir Ha-Shirim. Strictly speaking, the Song of Songs is not one poem but several stitched together. Traditionally, these poems were written by King Solomon, son of King David. While David was renowned for his musical ability and therefore associated with the Psalms, Solomon was renowned for his wisdom and connected to the biblical books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.

PEOPLE LOVE TO TELL AND RETELL THE story of how they fell in love, relishing in the highlights, the pivotal moments, and even the challenges and obstacles that stood in the way. In some respects, the Exodus is a love story, too—the tale of the burgeoning relationship between God and Israel. For this reason, it is fitting that the Song of Songs◆—the great biblical love poem traditionally understood allegorically as a story about the love between God and Israel—is customarily read publicly on the Shabbat of Pesah.

We will explore in this course a *midrash* that further links the text of Song of Songs to the Exodus story and highlights four pivotal moments representing when God “fell in love” with us, and when we “fell in love” with God.



First, ask your *havruta* this question:

Do you relate to the metaphor of “love” as a way of describing the divine-human relationship? Why or why not?

THE VERSES

The first thing to do when learning a *midrash* is to examine the verses upon which it is based. Take a look at them in their own right here before moving to the first part of the *midrash* below.

SOURCE #1 ס

שיר השירים ב:א-ג

¹אֲנִי חֲבַצְלֵת הַשָּׁרוֹן
שׁוֹשַׁנַּת הָעֲמָקִים:

²כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה בֵּין הַחוֹמִים
כֵּן רַעִיָּתִי בֵּין הַבָּנוֹת:

³כְּתַפּוּחַ בְּעֵצֵי הַיָּעַר
כֵּן דּוּדִי בֵּין הַבָּגִים

בְּצִלּוֹ חִמְדָּתִי וַיִּשְׁבְּתִי
וּפְרִיו מְתוֹק לְחִכִּי:

Song of Songs 2:1-3♦

¹I am a rose of Sharon,
A lily of the valleys.

²Like a lily among thorns,
So is my darling among the maidens.

³Like an apple tree among trees of the forest,
So is my beloved among the youths.

I delight to sit in his shade,
And his fruit is sweet to my mouth.

Questions from Rabbi Aviva Richman

In the allegorical reading of this book, the male speaker (who describes his “darling” as “a lily among thorns”) is God and the female speaker (who describes her “beloved” as “an apple tree among trees of the forest”) is Israel.

1. Try to extrapolate from the description of the earthly relationship to a heavenly one between us and God. What do these images tell us about the kind of relationship God has with us? What do they tell us about the kind of relationship we have with God?
2. Can you identify the images in the verses with aspects of the divine-human relationship? For example, who are the “maidens” in the allegorical reading? What is the “tree”? What are the “fruits”?

♦ Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah

An early collection of *midrashim* (approx. 6th-7th centuries CE) anchored around the Song of Songs. It is part of what we call “Midrash Rabbah,” the “Great Midrash,” a loose anthology of *midrashim* that covers the five books of the Torah and the five “Megillot” (Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Esther, Ruth, Lamentations).

♦ shadow (*tzilan*)

I.e. protection.

♦ Ramses

Joseph brought his family to Egypt during a terrible famine. According to Genesis 47:11, they settled in an area called Ramses (elsewhere called Goshen). Additionally, Exodus 1:11 names Ramses as one of the garrison cities built by the Israelite slaves.

♦ sanctified feast

As understood midrashically, this verse is about the first Pesah in Egypt (“the night of the sanctified feast”). Therefore, it proves that the Israelites sang a song that night. Today we replicate this with our recitation of Hallel.

THE LOVE OF SEDER NIGHT

Our *midrash* from Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah♦ atomizes the phrase “a rose of Sharon” (*havatzelet ha-Sharon*) in four different ways, each evoking different linguistic resonances. This section of the midrash connects the phrase “*havatzelet ha-Sharon*” to the words “*havivah*,” “*tzilan*,” and “*shirah*,” and links each of these words to the departure from Egypt. (Take the whole course to learn the other three sections!)

SOURCE #2 ס

שיר השירים רבה ב:א

דָּבַר אַחֵר, אֲנִי חֲבֻצֶלֶת
הַשָּׁרוֹן, אֲנִי הִיא וְחֲבִיבָהּ
אֲנִי, אֲנִי הִיא שֶׁהֵייתִי חֲבוּיָה
בְּצֶלֶן שֶׁל מִצְרַיִם, וְלִשְׁעָה
קָלָה בְּנִסְגִי הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
לְרַעְמֶסֶס, וְהִרְטַבְתִּי מַעֲשִׂים
טוֹבִים בְּשׁוֹשְׁנָה, וְאָמַרְתִּי
לְפָנָיו אֵת הַשִּׁירָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר
(ישעיה ל, כט): הַשִּׁיר יִהְיֶה
לָכֶם בַּלַּיִל הַתְּקַדֵּשׁ חָג.

Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah 2:1

Another interpretation: “I am a rose (*havatzelet*) of Sharon.” I am she, and beloved (*havivah*) am I; I am she who was beloved in the shadow (*tzilan*)♦ of Egypt, and in a short time the Holy Blessed One gathered me to Ramses♦ and I bloomed with good deeds like a lily, and I said before [God] a song (*shirah*), as it is said: “You will have song on the night of the sanctified feast” (Isaiah 30:29 ס).♦

Questions from Rabbi Aviva Richman

1. While the word “shadow” could have scary connotations, here it may refer more to shelter, reminding us that Egypt was originally kind to our ancestors, giving them “shade” during a famine, and describing the Israelites’ time there as being somewhat sheltered. Do you think it is virtuous or inappropriate to remember this aspect of our history in Egypt on Seder night? Why or why not?
2. Read through this midrashic lens, celebrating the paschal offering on Seder night itself (even prior to actually leaving Egypt) becomes a climax of our love for God and God’s love for us. What do you think about this aspect of the Seder? Have you ever experienced the night in this way?

♦ Psalms 113-118

This is an ancient grouping of psalms sung in the Temple—and in traditional services today!—on new moons and other holidays. The Seder is the only occasion when Hallel is sung at night, instead of during the day.

♦ Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai

The houses of Hillel and Shammai. While it is not totally clear what bodies these refer to, it is likely that the 1st century CE rabbinic scholars, Hillel and Shammai, had disciples and students whose opinions are quoted in our sources under the names of “Beit Hillel” and “Beit Shammai” respectively. Their debates are frequent throughout Rabbinic literature. In terms of actual practice, we today almost always follow Beit Hillel—as indeed we do in this case.

♦ The Tosefta

The Tosefta is a collection of early Rabbinic teachings (1st-3rd centuries CE in the Land of Israel), a companion to the Mishnah (from roughly the same time and place).

♦ redemption

The second cup of wine is drunk on this blessing, “Who redeemed Israel.”

♦ Egypt

Psalm 114 begins with the words “When Israel left Egypt.”

3. The love here is described as blossoming over a long period of time, from Jacob’s descent to Egypt to the slaves’ liberation. What kind of love have you experienced that builds up over time like this? What does this characterization say about the love between God and us?
4. The “song” in the verse is understood to be Hallel, the psalms we sing at Seder night (Psalms 113-118). ♦ In what ways might singing be an expression of love?

HALLEL AND REDEMPTION

The structure of the Seder has us begin Hallel on the second cup of wine, said on the blessing of redemption before the meal, and complete the psalms after the meal—but there is a disagreement as to how much of Hallel should be sung in the first part. This is the subject of an early debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, ♦ and their argument underscores the significance of this initial song that we recited while still in Egypt. While we are still in the midst of uncertainty, with nothing other than the hope of redemption, how can we sing a song of thanksgiving?

SOURCE #3

תוספתא פסחים י:ט

עד היכן הוא אומר?

בית שמאי או' עד אם הבנים
שמחה.

ובית הלל אומ' עד חלמיש
למענו מים. וחותם בגאולה.

אמרו בית שמאי לבית הלל
וכי כבר יצאו שמזכירין יציאת
מצרים?

Tosefta ♦ Pesahim 10:9

How much of Hallel do you say [on the second cup of wine]?

Beit Shammai say: Until the end of Psalm 113 (□) (“a joyful mother of children”).

But Beit Hillel say: Until the end of Psalm 114 (□) (“the flint into a fountain of waters”). And [the leader] closes with a blessing for redemption. ♦

Beit Shammai said to Beit Hillel: Had they left yet so that we should mention the Exodus from Egypt? ♦

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

◆ sixth hour

In Rabbinic time, the sixth hour is roughly midday.

אמרו להם בית הלל אפילו
הוא ממתין עד קרות הגבר
הרי אילו לא יצאו עד שש
שעות ביום! היאך אומר את
הגאולה ועדין לא נגאלו?!

Beit Hillel said to them: It wouldn't even be enough to wait until the rooster crows—they didn't really leave until the sixth hour!◆ How can you say the blessing for redemption if they hadn't yet been redeemed?

Explanation from Rabbi Aviva Richman

Beit Shammai think we have to stop our recitation of Hallel **before** the words that describe Israel leaving Egypt, because at this early part of the night the Israelites had not in fact left Egypt. They understand the Seder as a reenactment of the Exodus—thus it is appropriate to discuss leaving Egypt only at the time our ancestors actually left. But Beit Hillel think we **should** recite those words. In the same reenactment, they point towards Hallel as referring to an anticipated departure from Egypt that hasn't yet come to pass.

Questions from Rabbi Aviva Richman

1. Which model do you find more compelling? How close a reenactment of the Exodus should the Seder be?
2. What decisions would you make in crafting your Seder if you were trying to follow Beit Shammai's path of as close a reenactment as possible?

Beit Hillel respond to Beit Shammai with a contradiction in their opinion. Beit Shammai think that the timing of the Seder should roughly coincide with the actual timing of the Exodus—and yet, both Beit Hillel **and** Beit Shammai agree that they say the blessing of “redemption” with the first part of Hallel. This blessing celebrates the redemption from Egypt; but the redemption hasn't happened yet within the reenactment since the Israelites were not redeemed until around 12pm the next day. So, say Beit Hillel to Beit Shammai: would you suggest that we hold off reciting the blessing of redemption until 12pm the following day!? Clearly, the answer is that no one expects the Seder to last upwards of 16 hours! It is inconsistent, say Beit Hillel, to delay Hallel in order to coincide with the time of redemption and not to delay the blessing for redemption. In this blessing for redemption early on in the night, argue Beit Hillel, it is only appropriate that we sing about marching out of Egypt even as our feet were still firmly planted and waiting, inside.

◆ For Further Reflection ◆

1. The *midrash* traces an arc where our relationship with God climaxes in finding our own voice based on the word “Sharon,” interpreted playfully as “the one who sings.” What do you make of the fact that this first moment of singing goes all the way back to Egypt, before we were redeemed?
2. What can these sources about an early song teach us about the power to imagine, hope, and vision beyond current realities and limitations, and the way this can propel us into relationship with God?
3. When you reflect back on a relationship that has been in your life for a long time, what does it mean for you to give weight to the earliest formative moments? How did these early moments affect your sense of self-expression? How might that map onto your understanding of what it means to be in relationship with God?

