

Showing Up To and For Each Other

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שיר השירים ב:יד

יוֹנֵתִי בְּחִגְיוֹי הַסֵּלַע בְּסֶתֶר הַמִּדְרָגָה הָרְאִינִי אֶת מַרְאִיךְ הַשְּׁמִיעִנִי אֶת קוֹלְךָ כִּי קוֹלְךָ עָרֵב וּמַרְאִיךָ נְאוּהָ:

Shir ha-Shirim 2:14

My dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the cover of the steps, let me see your appearance, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your appearance is comely.

In Sephardic communities with roots in Turkey, Greece, and the Netherlands, it is this verse that opens the traditional reading of Shir ha-Shirim during the first days of the Pesah holiday (some chant it after the Seder, and others during the day in synagogue). Classical sources tell us that Shir ha-Shirim is read during Pesah because its romantic descriptions are actually poetic renderings of the Exodus from Egypt.¹ But what is it about this verse that makes it the one to initiate the reading of this remarkable book on this definitive holiday?

The Ralbag² offers one perspective on this *pasuk* that helps us answer this question, as well as provides a frame to elevate our Pesah experience. He writes,

¹ This is certainly clear from many *midrashim* on Shir ha-Shirim. Also see the comments in the Sefer Abudraham, Tefillat Musaf u'Frushah.

² R. Levi ben Gershon, 14th c. Southern France.



רלב"ג שיר השירים ב:יד

שהוא יאמר לה שבמקומות הנעלמים יצטרך שתראה אליו מה שהושג אליה באמצעות החושים עד שיעשה מזה גזרה כוללת עם ההשגות.

Ralbag on Shir ha-Shirim 2:14

[The male character] is saying to [the female character] that since she is in hidden places it is necessary that she share what can be best understood about herself through the medium of some of these senses until he can develop a more general understanding from them.

This rather abstract comment actually gives some rather practical guidance. Being truly understood can be a great challenge. Our hearts are very often mysteries to one another. The Ralbag understands the *pasuk* he comments upon as giving voice to a profound desire to work through that mystery. In doing so, he posits that such work rests on a two-way responsibility. The person hoping to be “seen” or understood needs to make themselves present and their voice heard. The person hoping to better comprehend needs to give their attention and try their best to understand the other.

This guidance bears striking similarity to what research has shown as necessary skills when we sit and study with another person, namely “**listening**” and “**articulating**.” In this context, “listening” is about “an openness toward something that may not be easily grasped because of its elusiveness...”³ Meanwhile, “articulating” embodies a responsibility to express oneself as clearly as possible, even if one’s idea is still in progress. It is a dynamic that is beautifully encapsulated in the talmudic phrase: “מנאי ומינך תסתיים שמעתא” - from me and from you will the learning be clarified.”⁴ If this is the lens for the reading of Shir ha-Shirim at Pesah, the

³ Elie Holzer with Orit Kent, *A Philosophy of Havruta*, p. 109.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 16b.



holiday becomes an invitation to celebrate the emergence of our people in a way that requires us to show up to and for one another, for the sake of better understanding who each of us is.

From this vantage point, the design of the Seder takes on additional valence. Throughout the evening we create moments “where our perception is limited”—we alter the course of a normal meal. For example, the Talmud assumes that one explanation for the two dippings of first *karpas* and then *maror* is “so that the children will ask,” with no other reason necessary.⁵ Similarly, the practice of *akirat ha-shulhan* (removing the table), which is echoed by many today in the lifting or removal of the Seder plate, is also assumed by the Talmud to be nothing other than the prompt for children’s questions and to lead into Mah Nishtanah.⁶ And how many meals have a game at the end, where children find a hidden *matzah*? In other words, the Seder primes us to accept Shir ha-Shirim’s invitation to link telling the Exodus story together with the project of putting ourselves out there, as well as working to more deeply understand others.

What does that look like? For many of us, we are likely already good at one of these things: either we more readily listen to what others share with us, or we tend to be an open book, expressing what is on our hearts and minds. But in either case, we can take the Seder nights and Pesah as a whole as a chance to dig more into both. The ritual and text of the evening can serve as our platform. On the night of questions, put some out there can give you and others the chance to be present for and with each other. For example, you can ask someone you’re sitting next to about a Seder memory, and share your own. If you are leading the Seder, you can provide a prompt for people to turn and talk about, like, “How might you have felt if you were living through the events of the Exodus?” In doing so, we tell that Exodus story a bit

⁵ Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 114b.

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more fully, and we also provide and perceive glimpses of one another that we might not have otherwise.

“*Yonati be-hagvei ha-sela...*” It isn’t just another line in another book of the Tanakh. It is **the** line that helps us understand that the Exodus story is also a story about each of us, and that each of one of those stories needs both someone to tell it as well as another to bear witness to it. We can be that for each other and, in that way, experience a bit of redemption. All we have to do is to really show up.

