

Derashah Shabbat Chol haMoed Pesach 5784 ECDP:
“Then They Build Monuments to You”: Shir haShirim and the University Riots
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The Riots

The first thing I saw online when I turned on my computer after Yom Tov was footage from riots on university campuses. From New York to Texas to California there were demonstrations, often violent, claiming to be supporting Aza and protesting university investment in genocide.

These riots have multiple proximate causes.

- Part of it is ignorance.
- Part of it is antisemitism.
- Part of it is an honest social justice campaign.

But whether the cause is sincere or malicious, the effect is a dangerous environment for Jewish students who now need to finish the semester hiding online, and a fertile breeding ground for vehement, venomous hatred of Israel, hatred of Jews, and violence against both.

I have two questions:

- First: Recognizing that the Hand of Hashem is the ultimate driver of our national history, what could be the cosmic Purpose of this awful encounter between Jews and non-Jews, at a time when we just want to come home to Israel in a geulah that Hashem made possible for us in 1948?¹
- And Second: Is there any room for hope in all of this?

I think there are good answers to both questions.

Shir haShirim

Watching the riots, I thought of the fifth perek of Shir haShirim, which we read this morning. It tells a story of Jews seeking spiritual connection and encountering violence.

- Hashem comes looking for us, knocking at our door repeatedly, but we decline to answer.
- Then we finally open the door, but Hashem is gone.
- Determined to find Hashem, we run out into the street - and the city guards find us and they beat us.

What is this story about? Who are these guards who beat us, and why? A midrash in Shir haShirim Rabbah provides an enlightening answer.

Ezra is the answer

Shir haShirim Rabbah, the traditional midrash to Shir haShirim, was composed at a time when Jews were suffering under Christian persecution. The text has an explicit goal of providing those persecuted Jews with encouragement. As Rabbi Yehudah said, “אין דורשין שיר השירים לגנאי אלא לשבח שלא נתן שיר השירים אלא לשבחן של ישראל” – One may not teach Shir haShirim as critical of the Jews, only as positive about the Jews, because Shir haShirim is only supposed to teach the glory of Israel.^{2,3}

On that passage in the fifth perek, on the line מצאוני השומרים, הכוני, פצעוני, that the city guards found me and beat me, the midrash says, זה תתני פחת עבר נהרא וחבריו: These brutal city guards are a reference to Tattenai, the Persian pecha and his allies.

Those who have been learning with me in the daily Ezra Whatsapp know the story of Tattenai. The Babylonians destroyed the Beit HaMikdash and exiled the Jews of Judea. Then the Persian Empire, under King Cyrus, conquered the Babylonians, and King Cyrus sent thousands of Jews back to Israel, to build a new Beit HaMikdash. Eventually we started

¹ Of course, Neturei Karta will answer that returning to Israel is not what Hashem wants us to do. But my question is within the view of the rest of the Torah world.

² Shir haShirim Rabbah 1:12 and 2:1

³ For more on this, see Dr. Tamar Kadari's thesis במדרש שיר השירים רבה למלאכת העריכה at

https://www.academia.edu/42878853/Tamar_Kadari_On_the_Redaction_of_Midrash_Shir_haShirim_Rabbah_dissertation_H_ebrew and my 2022 shiur at <https://yutorah.org/sidebar/lecturedata/1047815/>

building it – until Tattenai, the Persian governor, showed up asking to see our building permit, and we didn't have it. Then he sent back to Persia, seeking to halt the construction.⁴

Says the midrash, this is what Shir haShirim is referring to – the guards beating us are Tattenai and his allies halting construction of the Beit HaMikdash.⁵

Ok. So now we have:

- Us, in our day, trying to live in Israel and being attacked,
- A passage in Shir haShirim in which we seek Hashem and guards beat us,
- A passage in Ezra in which we try to build the Beit HaMikdash and Persians stop us,

How does that answer our questions about our current situation?

Tattenai's End

We need to read the surprising end of Tattenai's story. While Tattenai's letter goes to the Persian capital, we go right on building. And then the permission comes through from Persia; we have official endorsement by King Darius to build the Beit HaMikdash! They even send material support! We complete the building. And the first celebration in this new Beit HaMikdash is Pesach. And here's the best part: ויאכלו בני ישראל השבים מהגולה, the Jews who had returned from exile ate from the korban, and so did האלקי ישראל לדרוש להם, כל הנבדל מטומאת גויי הארץ אליהם לדרוש להם, so did people who abandoned idolatry to seek Hashem, the Gd of Israel.⁶

In other words – We began with disastrous intervention by non-Jews, but we pushed forward in our service of Hashem, we pushed forward in building the Beit HaMikdash, and in the end not only did the non-Jews license us to go forward, but they actually came to join us. Their opposition introduces them to our enterprise, which leads to their conversion.

If they ignore us, that can never happen! We need them to learn about us, so that they will join us.

Now I understand why Shir haShirim Rabbah makes the link, because that's what happens in the fifth perek of Shir haShirim, too. We seek Hashem, and the city guards beat us – but we persist, and then the guards come around. They ask, “מה דודך מדוד? How is your Gd different from all of the other gods?” And we explain to them, דודי צח ואדום, דגול מרבבה, We sing a glorious poem describing the wonders of Hashem, and then those same guards ask, “אנה הלך דודך, היפה בנשים? Where has your Beloved gone? נבקשנו עמך, we will seek Him with you!”

Just like in the days of Ezra, in Shir haShirim the non-Jew has to meet us, even in a hostile way, in order to learn what we are doing and join us in seeking Hashem. They have to know us first.

The Message for Us

The message is that the opposition of the nations can be a step toward them ultimately joining us.

- Once we start looking, we see this repeatedly in Tanach; for example, in the haftorah of Tazria we saw that the Aramean general Naaman blasted Elisha until he was won over.⁷ On Succot we saw Zecharyah describe the nations attacking Jerusalem, and then coming to celebrate Succot.⁸
- A gemara describes a Roman general attacking Jerusalem, and then converting to Judaism.⁹ Roman soldiers come to kidnap Onkelos the convert, and instead they become his students.¹⁰
- And so a gemara teaches that we were sent into exile “only” in order for non-Jews to join us.¹¹

⁴ Ezra 5-6

⁵ The analogy to Ezra fits very well, because that same passage in Ezra also speaks about Samaritans, who tried to convince the Jews to make the new Beit HaMikdash a hybrid, for Judaism and paganism. This is analogous to the part of the passage in which they ask, “What's so special about your Gd?”

⁶ This may refer to Samaritans joining us, rather than Persians; the text does not make it entirely clear, although I think Samaritans are more likely the intent. They also opposed us, in Chapter 4 and later, but it's too much for this derashah.

⁷ Melachim II 5

⁸ Zecharyah 14

⁹ Gittin 56a

¹⁰ Avodah Zarah 11a

¹¹ Pesachim 87b

What do we need to do, in our day? What is the cosmic purpose behind our conflict? Shir haShirim Rabbah is giving us the answer: We need to keep pursuing what we were doing all along. It worked out in Shir haShirim. It worked out in Ezra. It will work out for us. This is the cosmic purpose, and this is the hope.

To quote an observation that is often credited to Gandhi, but was actually Nicholas Klein, a union activist, in 1918. He proclaimed, “First they ignore you. Then they ridicule you. And then they attack you and want to burn you. And then they build monuments to you.”¹²

Rabbi Akiva

I know that this may sound overly optimistic – but that’s what Shir haShirim is about. Remember: the great fan of Shir haShirim among the Sages was Rabbi Akiva; he is the one who declares that Shir haShirim is קדש קדשים, holy of holies. And Rabbi Akiva is the Champion of Hope.

- Rabbi Akiva sees water erode stone and envisions his own growth in Torah.
- Rabbi Akiva sees foxes on Har HaBayit and envisions prophecies of redemption fulfilled.
- Rabbi Akiva sees Bar Kochba the warrior and envisions Mashiach.

Rabbi Akiva wasn’t always right, but he understood that the hope and optimism of Shir haShirim are קדש קדשים, holy of holies.

May we be inspired by that hope and optimism, by the stories of Shir haShirim and Ezra, and merit to push on. And one day, Gd-willing, they will build monuments to us as well.

¹² <https://apnews.com/article/archive-fact-checking-2315880316>