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Kollel & Midreshet Yom Rishon
Sunday Morning Learning Programs for Men and Women

Tanach Yom Iyun

How Jews Read Shir Hashirim



Rabbi Shalom Carmy
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Chapter One

Overt Halakhah and Covert Love

A

As the setting sun of the Sabbath eve ignites the western horizon, and the Sabbath Queen, delicate, pleasing, and graceful as a bride, emerges from the rosy blaze of sunset, the strains of the Song of Songs course into a world becoming pure and sanctified, wrapped in the serenity of calmness and rest.

The Shulammite, blackened by the sun, yearns for her heart's chosen one. Her lover, who pastures his flock among the lilies, has sworn eternal love to his pure dove. The lover longs for his faithful bride; his soul thirsts for her.

The most beautiful of women wanders about within the city walls in the pale, moon-enchanted nights. Early in the dewy, sun-drenched mornings she goes out into the orchards. She is looking for the beloved of her soul, who is standing among the shadows, watching from the byways, peering through the cracks. Lovesick, she searches for her partner. She searches for him but cannot find him. Has her lover left her and forgotten her for eternity? Has he forgotten the affection of their wedding day and departed from her forever?

The lad with the beautiful eyes skips along the hills, toward his dear bride. He pursues the Shulammite, who hides in rock crannies and behind cliffs. He is attracted by her grace, her image

continually before his eyes. He is full of longing, aflame with yearning. With quick steps he approaches his partner, but he does not meet her. The hour of their meeting has arrived; at this very moment the lad retreats and hides among the rocks.

"You are beautiful, my beloved, your eyes are doves," he sings (Song of Songs 1:15), hidden among the ancient, glorious hills. He sees her, but cannot be seen. He is very, very close to her, but also immeasurably distant.

"And you, my beloved, are handsome and pleasing," she replies (Song 1:16) from among the tender river-shoots. Trembling, she rushes out to greet her lover. Her heart pounds: Will he appear from the quiet, glowing horizon? Will he alight before her in the orchard lanes? She hears the rustle of footsteps on the hills, in the valleys, among the tender river-shoots, and in the garden paths where the almond and pomegranate trees blossom. She bestirs herself and goes out to greet him.

Suddenly the echo melts away and disappears in the sun-drenched distance. He will love her forever; he will always remember the grace of her youth. Just as the bridegroom delights in his bride, so will he delight in her. He has not sent his partner away, nor has he handed her a bill of divorce. Yet, in spite of all this, their love cannot be realized, their yearning cannot be fulfilled completely. But why? Why must he flee from her at the moment that she pursues him? Why does he not look and see that she is mad with longing and yearning? Why does he not say to her, "Lift your eyes and see that I have fulfilled my vow and arrived"?

B

The beloved returns home from her wanderings from mountain to mountain, from hill to hill, along winding roads and twisting paths. Tensely alert, her entire being pleads for her lover's arrival. She is a tempest of yearning for him, totally absorbed in listening for the slightest rustle. Her whole being asks, "Where has my beloved gone?" Her entire self pleads, "If you meet my beloved,

tell him this: that I am faint with love" (Song 5:8). She sobs in her agony, loneliness, and suffering.

Suddenly her lover appears from the obscurity of the dark night, knocking on his dear one's door and whispering faithfully, "Let me in, my sister, my darling, my faultless dove! For my head is drenched with dew, my locks with the drops of the night" (Song 5:2). Now I have arrived, I have kept my word, I have fulfilled the vision. Your desire has been fulfilled, your longing has not been in vain. I have yearned for you; I, the companion of your youth, am now here. You shall follow me and never be separated from me.

The beloved awakens from her sleep and listens to the gentle voice of her lover. His voice burns its way into her heart, kindling there an ancient flame. It is suffused with both enchantment and desire.

Nevertheless, the beloved refuses to rise from her bed and open the door to her lover. The cold of the moonless, starless night, deep weariness, laziness, and fear combine to paralyze her will and bind her legs. Why should she refuse to undo the latch and open the door to her lover? Hasn't she been searching for him day and night? Hasn't she been pursuing him, asking passersby if they have seen him, adjuring the daughters of Jerusalem (Song 2:7, 3:5) and suffering insults, blows, and spiritual torment on his behalf? What has happened? Has all her sense of yearning evaporated under the oppressive torpor of loneliness just at the moment when her lover has arrived? Has the hidden force that stirred her spirit during the days filled with wandering and the nights filled with anticipation and anxiety subsided just at the moment that her lover has fulfilled his pledge and his footsteps are heard at the entrance to her tent? Does desire no longer permeate her being, is the urgency no longer alive within her? At the very moment of fulfillment and realization, the hour of redemption and deliverance, has it all vanished and been silenced? "I have taken off my robe – am I to don it again? I have bathed my feet – am I to soil them again?" she responds in lunatic indifference (Song 5:3).

Yet, after a moment the beloved leaps off her bed, her hands dripping myrrh on the handles of the bolt. She opens her abode to her lover. The flame of yearning is sparked once again; her spirit is restored. Her love rages. Her soul's joy returns. Her heart is afraid yet expands toward her lover. The door opens – but the lover is not there. "I rose to let in my beloved.... But my beloved had turned and gone!" (Song 5:5–6).

C

The scarlet-clad daughters of Jerusalem are astonished, and they whisper among themselves. This sort of game – what is its character? The guards on the city walls doze off in the dimness of the cold night and sink into a wondrous dream about the desired one, overflowing with love, who has promised his beloved eternal affection yet runs away from her, and about the daughter of nobles, drunk with yearning, who seeks her soulmate yet eludes him. A lover who yearns yet hides, a bride who conceals herself – what does this mean? As the last rays of the sun set and the dimness of the twilight between the profane weekday and the sacred Sabbath approaches, both the reader of the Song of Songs and the listener are confused, asking, "This mischievous game of enamoredness and rejection, of running after and running away, of tension and disappointment, of searching and hiding, of disclosure and concealment – what does it mean?"

Steeping themselves in this paradoxical love and this strange yet bold and adventurous yearning, those who observe the Sabbath and call it a delight invite the lover to go out and greet his bride, the Sabbath Queen, and invite the beloved to answer her lover's knock, to be her husband's crowning glory and to bring him into her dwelling safely and joyously. But will they meet?

AND FROM THERE YOU SHALL SEEK

D

The Halakhah asserts, "All the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies" (*Mishnah Yadayim* 3:5).¹ The Song of Songs is the most wonderful and most astonishing poem of the divine ontic dialectics. It is the poem of the creation and the Creator in general, and of the Jewish nation and its God in particular.

The sun-blackened Shulammite – the creation – in her lowly, turbid state yearns for her heart's choice: God.

The lover/Creator loves His beloved/creation.

The Creator has captured the heart of His creation; the Eternal has captivated the spirit of every living thing.

The Creator has promised the creation that He will never abandon her. The creation has drawn the Creator's heart with one of her eyes that gaze upon the face of eternity. Finitude has drawn the heart of infinitude with one coil of her necklace.

The Creator loves His creation, yet He nevertheless rests in a hidden place, in the shade.

The creation craves her Creator, yet she nevertheless refuses to open the doors of her dwelling!²