



Pesach VIII Song of Songs April 11, 2015 / 22 Nisan 5775

On the 8th day of Pesakh, we read the Song of Songs (Shir haShirim) as part of the morning service. It is a truly unique book in the Tanakh. Its poetry, its extended use of a woman's point of view, and its focus on the natural world and physical attraction all mark it as distinctive in biblical literature. It is beloved to us for both its poetic and its allegorical virtues, as a representation of the loving relationship between God and the people Israel. As with all literature, the variety of ways in which it can be enjoyed is the proof of its greatness.

Adopting the view that the Songs of Songs is an allegorical description of the relationship between God and the Jews can lead us to new insights into that relationship. If the people and God are lovers, what are the contours and content of that love? It obviously lacks the physical component that is so prominent in the Songs of Songs, but our tradition is filled with other possibilities.

The first is intimacy. When a loving relationship begins, its depth is measured by its intimacy. Do the lovers feel an attraction to one another? Do they share common values, beliefs, hopes for the future? Will their initial attraction be augmented by shared experiences over time? The Torah employs the language of intimacy during the Torah reading for the intermediate Shabbat of Pesakh when it quotes God as saying "Ki matzata khein b'einai v'aida'akha," 'You have gained My favor and I have come to know you.' The verb 'come to know you' carries the specific meaning of intimate knowledge, including sexually intimate knowledge between people, the same allegory employed by the Songs of Songs.

A second aspect of a loving relationship is loyalty. A lack of loyalty in a relationship constitutes a betrayal of trust that is difficult or impossible to repair. Loyalty in a human relationship is the soil in which the early words and acts of our love take root and flourish in future years. That same trait also pertains to our relationship to God. The covenantal relationship described throughout the Torah makes explicit just how jealous a lover God is. The effort required by our ancestors to remain loyal to one, universal God was enormous, requiring sometimes drastic measures of enforcement. All traces of any competing god - or lover - had to be gotten rid of, destroyed, forgotten. 'Throw away your old love letters, the gifts from old boyfriends,' God says, 'I won't have any of that stuff around.'

A third marker of a loving relationship is shared time together. For human relationships, that means birthdays, anniversaries and family gatherings. The Torah has something similar in mind when it teaches us that God commands our attention during the three harvest festivals, Pesakh,

Shavuot and Sukkot. These are 'date nights' with God. Two of them are more like week-long getaways, one in the fall and the other in the spring. In order to establish their love for God, our ancestors brought offerings to the Temple and then, when the Temple no longer existed, offered words and songs to God in the communal setting of the synagogue.

Each of the aspects of love I have mentioned - intimate knowledge, loyalty and shared time - mark a healthy relationship between us and God, just as they do between two people. And just as Shir haShirim reminds us of the dimensions of our love for God, it also serves as a great source for expressing plain old human love. It is the source for the popular phrase "I am my beloved's, and he is mine" and "I have found what my soul loves," as well as many others. Toward its end it offers words that can apply to relationships human and divine: "Let me be a seal upon your heart, like the seal upon your hand, for love is as fierce as death, passion is mighty as Sheol." Even those of us with the slightest poetic sensitivities understand those words and images. Using the same terms that an allegorical reading of the poem applies to God, we can also find the words for our own flesh and blood lovers.

This week's Haftarah commentary is reprinted from one originally written for the Unraveller for April 13, 2012 by Rabbi Jeff Pivo, spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Judea in Long Grove, IL. Rabbi Pivo has been at Beth Judea since July 2011, after serving at synagogues in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He graduated from UCLA with a degree in Jewish Studies in 1994 and received his Masters in Hebrew Literature and was ordained as rabbi in 2000 at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.