

Scene

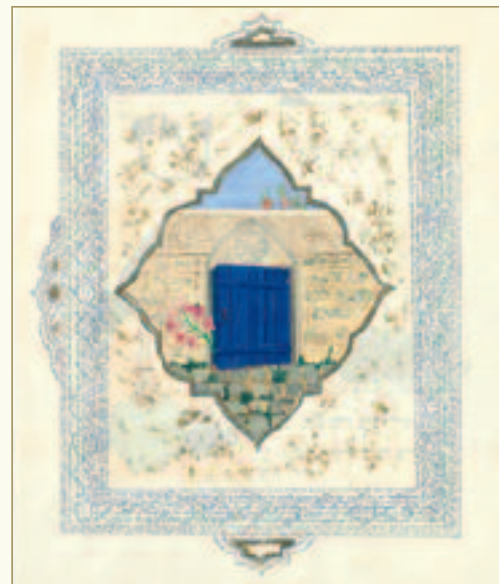
This painting shows the door into the walled garden as it slowly swings open to welcome the visitor. The slightly ajar door affords just a glimpse of the lush garden inside. A single lily plant springs through the narrow opening to rise over the neglected and weedy ground. The land outside the garden has been sorely neglected and weeds sprout from the rough pavement. A micrographic border surrounds the painting.

Interpretation

The slow opening of the gate begins to reveal the symbolic message of love hidden within. The scene alludes to a famous midrash about the role of the Ten Commandments in the corrupted world. One day, the Rabbis tell, as the king traveled through his lands, he happened upon an old orchard just outside his palace. This orchard had once been a paradise, planted with pomegranates, grapes, roses, and figs. Sadly, its caretakers had neglected it, allowing the fine plantings to wither and become overgrown with thorns. Suddenly, just as the king was about to order the orchard razed, he noticed a single stalk of fragrant, rose-colored lilies rising from the weeds. Catching sight and scent of the flowers, he ordered, "For the sake of the lily, let the orchard be saved!" The Rabbis compared the role of the Ten Commandments in the world to that of the lily in the overgrown orchard: only for the sake of the commandments does God allow the corrupt world to survive. I introduce The Song of Songs with this midrash to present the notion that the world exists for the sake of the spiritual and human love expressed in The Song of Songs.¹

The carved frieze surmounting the wall presents a grapevine motif commonly found in structures from the Second Temple period. The present example is drawn from a Jewish sarcophagus in the collection of the Israel Museum.

The micrographic border includes a selection of biblical texts. According to the *Targum*, The Song of Songs is the ninth in the series of ten great songs to be sung in the course of pre-messianic human history.² The micrography is worked in a wave pattern common to mosaics and frieze-painting of the Second Temple period in Jerusalem and bears the texts of these 10 songs. The songs include: (1) Psalm 92, sung by Adam upon his first Sabbath; (2) the Song of the Sea, sung by Moses and the Children of Israel following the parting of the Red Sea; (3) Numbers 21:17, the song sung by the Children of Israel when the well of water was given them; (4) *Ha'azinu*, in Deuteronomy 32, the song that Moses sang as he prepared to finally leave the people; (5) Joshua 10:12, the song that Joshua sang, calling upon God to cease the motion of the sun during the battle with Gibeon; (6) the triumphant Song of Deborah in Judges 5; (7) Hannah's hymn of thanks to God, in 1 Samuel 1; (8) David's song of gratitude for the miracles that God had performed for him, recorded in 2 Samuel 2; (9) Solomon's Song of Songs (first line only included here); and (10) the song sung by the redeemed and returning exiles written by Isaiah, recorded in Isaiah 30:29. The full text of each of these songs is included in the micrography.



Commentator's Notes

¹ Song of Songs Rabbah II:2:3, 95–96, also found in *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (London: Soncino Press, 1961), XXIII:3, 293.

² A. J. Rosenberg, trans., *The Books of Esther, Song of Songs, Ruth* (New York: Judaica Press, 1992), *Song of Songs*, 2.

2:15

טו
אֶחָזֶה-לָנוּ שׁוֹעָלִים שׁוֹעָלִים קְטָנִים
מְחַבְלִים כֶּרֶמִּים וְכֶרְמֵנוּ סָמְדָר:



JPS Translation

¹⁵Catch us the foxes,
The little foxes
That ruin the vineyards—
For our vineyard is in blossom.

Alternate Translation

¹⁵Catch the foxes for us—
the little foxes ravage vineyards—
and our vineyards are in bloom.

Scene

Here we see a scene of grapes ripening against the garden wall. A shadow cast by a skulking fox contrasts with the brightly sunlit wall.

Interpretation

This passage emphasizes the difficulty of overcoming a force that threatens the sanctity of life. Throughout Jewish lore, grapes and wine symbolize joy and sanctification. Every ritual of the Jewish life cycle involves expressions of gratitude for the divine gift of the vine. The midrash compares the foxes to Egypt, which, with Divine assistance, Israel overcame at the Red Sea.¹ Indeed, the Rabbis might have had in mind the Egyptian fox-deity Anubis, a god of death and the underworld.

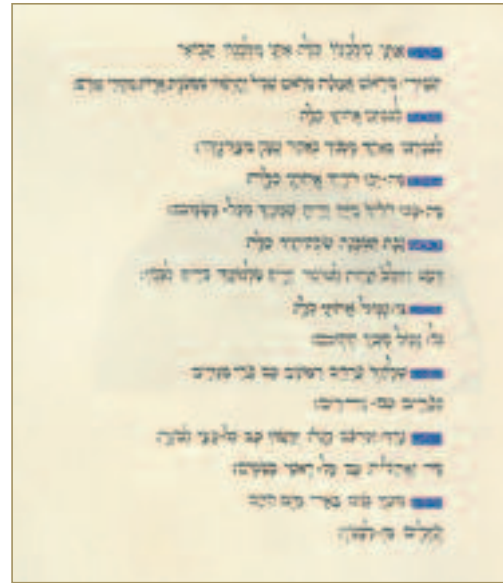
A note on the grapes is in order here. Wine grapes develop their sweetness according to the amount of sunshine falling upon them. Growers manipulate their grapes' flavor by altering their sun exposure by selectively trimming the leaves that shade the young grapes. Here, then, we see vines bearing grapes, with leaves trimmed to produce the sweetest fruit.

Commentator's Note

¹ Song of Songs Rabbah II:15:1, 134–35.



אֶחָזוּ - לָנוּ שְׁעָלִים
שְׁעָלִים קִטְגִּים
מַחְבָּלִים כְּרִמִּים
וְכִרְמִינוּ סִמְזָרִ:



4:8–15

"אתי מִלְבָּנוֹן כָּלָה אֹתִי מִלְבָּנוֹן תְּבוֹאִי תְשׁוּבִי | מֵרֹאשׁ אֲמָנָה מֵרֹאשׁ שֵׁנִיר וְחֶרְמֹן
 מִמַּעֲנוֹת אֲרִיֹת מִהַרְרֵי גִמְרִים: " לִבְתִּי אֶחָתִי כָלָה לִבְתִּי בָאֶחָד מֵעֵינֶיךָ
 בָּאֶחָד עֵנֶק מִצִּוְרֶיךָ: " מִהַיָּפוֹ דִּדְךָ אֶחָתִי כָלָה מִהַטֵּבֹ דִּדְךָ מִיֵּן וְרִיחַ שְׁמֶנֶךָ
 מִפֶּלֶשִׁימִים: " נִפְתַּת תִּטְפְּנָה שְׁפֹתֶיךָ כָלָה דָּבֵשׁ וְחֶלֶב תַּחַת לְשׁוֹנְךָ וְרִיחַ שְׁלֹמֹתֶךָ
 כְּרִיחַ לְבָנוֹן: " גֵּן | גְּעִיל אֶחָתִי כָלָה גֵּל גְּעִיל מֵעֵן חֲתָנִים: " שְׁלֹחֶךָ פְּרִדִּים רְפוּגִים
 עִם פְּרִי מִגְדִּים כְּפָרִים עִם־גִּרְדִּים: " גִּרְדִּי | וְכִרְפֶּם קָנָה וְקִנְמֹן עִם כָּל־עֵצִי לְבוֹנָה מֵרֹ
 וְאַהֲלוֹת עִם כָּל־רֹאשֵׁי בְשָׂמִים: " מֵעֵן גִּבִּים בָּיָר מִיָּם חַיִּים וְנִזְלִים מִן־לְבָנוֹן: " עֹדִי
 צָפוֹן וְבוֹאִי תִימָן הִפִּיחִי גִנִּי וְזָלוּ בְשָׁמִי יָבֵא דוֹדִי לְגִנִּי וְיֹאכַל פְּרִי מִגְדָּיו:

JPS Translation

8From Lebanon come with me;
 From Lebanon, my bride, with me!
 Trip down from Amana's peak,
 From the peak of Senir and Hermon,
 From the dens of lions,
 From the hills of leopards.
 9You have captured my heart,
 My own, my bride,
 You have captured my heart
 With one [glance] of your eyes,
 With one coil of your necklace.
 10How sweet is your love,
 My own, my bride!
 How much more delightful your love than wine,
 Your ointments more fragrant
 Than any spice!
 11Sweetness drops
 From your lips, O bride;
 Honey and milk

Alternate Translation

8"Come with me from Lebanon,
 my bride,
 come with me from Lebanon,
 look from the peak of Amana,
 from the peak of Senir and Hermon,
 from lions' dens,
 from leopards' mountains.
 9"You have ravished my heart,
 my sister; my bride,
 you have ravished my heart
 with one of your eyes,
 with one link of your necklace.
 10"How beautiful is your love,
 my sister; my bride,
 how much better is your love than wine,
 and the scent of your fragrance than all spices!
 11"Honey drips from your lips, Bride,
 honey and milk are under your tongue,
 and the scent of your gowns is like the scent of Lebanon.

Are under your tongue;
 And the scent of your robes
 Is like the scent of Lebanon.
¹²A garden locked
 Is my own, my bride,
 A fountain locked,
 A sealed-up spring.
¹³Your limbs are an orchard of pomegranates
 And of all luscious fruits,
 Of henna and of nard—
¹⁴Nard and saffron,
 Fragrant reed and cinnamon,
 With all aromatic woods,
 Myrrh and aloes—
 All the choice perfumes.
¹⁵[You are] a garden spring,
 A well of fresh water,
 A rill of Lebanon.

¹²*"My sister, my bride, is a locked garden,
 a locked well,
 a sealed spring.*
¹³*"Your branches are a pomegranate orchard
 with the finest fruit,
 with henna and spikenard.*
¹⁴*"Spikenard and saffron,
 cane and cinnamon,
 with every type of frankincense tree,
 myrrh and aloes,
 with all fine spices.*
¹⁵*"A garden spring,
 a well of flowing water,
 and a stream from Lebanon."*

Scene

The man sings of the attractions of his woman's body, comparing her to the pleasures of the natural world. Within the walled garden, the curtains, whose fluttering created havoc at the opening of the poems, sway only gently now as the lovers embrace on the couch. The cast-off bedcover lies crumpled on the ground. Someone has gathered the spilled jewels into a heap at the base of their righted cask, near the closed door. The fountain sprays water high into the air, and grapevines grow from behind the couch to encircle the window. In the window we glimpse the landscape of the northern mountains and the pale sky of dawn.

Interpretation

The privacy of the now-united lovers is complete; the door of the garden is closed. Entirely wrapped up in each other, the lovers are no longer vulnerable to the insecurities and temptations of the outside world. Similarly, in a lengthy series of expositions on the phrase "my sister, my bride, is a locked garden" the Rabbis compare the shut garden to steady adherence to divine law as the key to Israel's national survival. Jacob's sons Reuben and Simeon are praised for not changing their names when going down to Egypt (notably, the midrash suggests Greek and Latin names as the aliases they might have adopted in disguise); Sarah and Joseph are praised for avoiding the ubiquitous immorality of the Egyptian society into which they were taken captive.¹ Just as a literal understanding of the text focuses on the beauty the lovers find in being united, midrash uses the walled garden as a metaphor for the strength and beauty of the Jew's single-minded devotion to God. Within the loving embraces of the woman and man, of Israel and God, the jewels are gathered into one glittering treasure trove at the foot of the righted cask, expressing the unity of all beautiful things, while the fountain, the symbol of Torah, purls with its own refreshing music.

Alternate Translator's Note

9. **my sister, my bride** In ancient Semitic languages "sister" did not necessarily mean a blood relation; it could also mean a close female friend (Pope, *Song of Songs*, 480).

Commentator's Note

¹Song of Songs Rabbah IV:12:1, 218–19.