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שִׁיר

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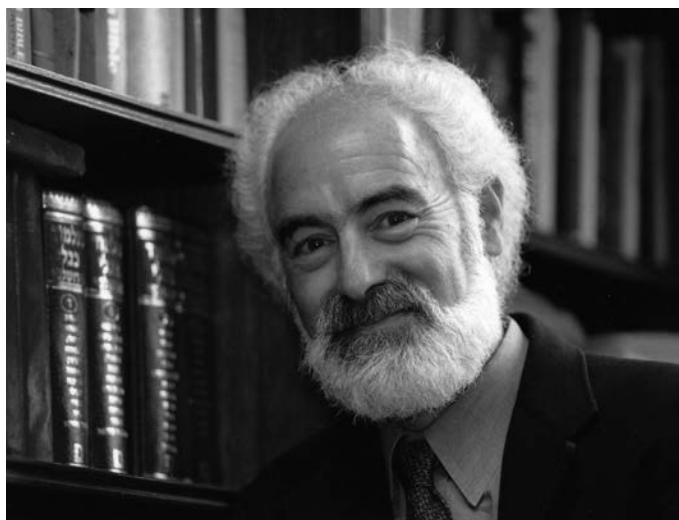
SONG OF SONGS שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים

The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation
Commentary by MICHAEL FISHBANE



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INTRODUCTION

Songs of Love

Israelite Songs or Songs of Israel

The Song of Songs is a wondrous collection of love lyrics—songs of passion and praise between a young maiden and her beloved, nestled in the heart of the Hebrew Bible. Scenes from the natural world abound, as the young pair make their way around the countryside and invoke all they see and smell in the world to express their inner feelings and laud one another's beauty. There are plants and fruit growing in the orchards, sheep and gazelles moving on the hills, and oils and spices in profusion. Each and all convey the impressions that the loved one makes on the eye and heart.

However, readers of this love and bounty will find no references to God and Israel, the Exodus and Sinai, or any other event of the sacred history recorded in Scripture. Nor will they find references to covenant obligations and religious observance—even the love of God—in these lyrics. How can we understand this? Do these songs of human desire and delight mean just what they say? Or might they conceal some hints of sacred history and worship, and not be as secular as they seem? Readers past and present have pondered this matter and taken different positions.

Some take these songs in their most straightforward sense and celebrate their occurrence in the Bible. What could be more wondrous, they say, than robust love lyrics between a young maiden and her beloved in the national literature of ancient Israel? The heart of the maiden speaks longingly of love's fulfillment—addressing herself, her beloved, and her friends. And the youth responds in kind, with his own songs of praise—invocations to be with him in the fields, and exclamations of how her body stirs him so. Reciprocally, the pair express their love via images of flora and fauna, royal cities, and armored towers. The many expressions of love bloom and burst like the natural world all around, only to reappear in ever-new forms. In such ways the Songs suggest the mysteries of love and longing, filled with pathos and possibility. How special all this is, a precious portrait of the earth and the emotions in ancient Israel!

So readers of the Song of Songs are bound to ask: How did these lyrics enter the Hebrew Bible? How were they sanctioned by the sages who culled the writings of the past and produced a sacred scripture? Did they regard these songs as straightforward outpourings of human love?¹ Or did these lyrics convey some hint of religious love found elsewhere in the Bible? We cannot know for sure; but one may well suspect that some sages looked at these love lyrics and recalled similar expressions of covenant love in the prophetic literature. After all, the ancient prophets repeatedly rendered the theme

of covenant love (between God and Israel) in terms of marriage tropes. For them, nothing so fully expressed the ideal of religious faithfulness as the bond of marriage, just as nothing so starkly manifested covenant disloyalty as “cheating” with foreign gods.

From the earliest times, this topic found expression in such prophets as Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. Hosea speaks initially of faithless Israel as a harlot, who betrays her husband and children and then formulates national restoration and covenant renewal in terms of the espousals of marriage (Hos. 1:2–8; 2:20–22). Jeremiah lauded Israel for her ancient devotion and faithfulness, called it bridal love (Jer. 2:2), and was puzzled how a bride could forget her adornments and slink off with other lovers (vv. 32–33). The prophet Ezekiel spoke of covenant marriage and idolatrous betrayal in even starker terms—adding bold erotic tropes to the mix (Ezek. 16:4–14). These themes of marriage and divorce also recur in the exilic prophecies of Isaiah (Isa. 50:1; 54:4–8). The topic thus penetrated the soul of the people. It provided the strongest similes of consolation for the people in exile: “(Just) as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you” (Isa. 62:5).²

In the light of these texts, which give explicit allegorical expression to the relationship between God and Israel in terms of love and betrayal, it was perhaps inevitable that some sages might suppose that the Song of Songs dealt with such matters as well—except that the tropes and topics found there were implicit, requiring explication for their covenant features to be seen. Thus, how the Song’s earthy topics might be related to the covenant of Sinai, or to occasions of sin and rebellion, was a task for rabbinic exegesis.

Yet the possibility that the Song was a hidden allegory of covenant love would save its songs from their apparent surface sense, aligning them with various biblical and rabbinic themes. Sages imbued with this insight might even regard their interpretations of the Song as extending the concerns of the ancient prophets. Seen in this way, the Song of Songs offered a theological possibility otherwise missing in the Hebrew Bible. It offered the opportunity to present the entire history of Israel in terms of love dialogues between God and Israel.³ Arguably through these or similar considerations, the Song entered the canon of Scripture as *the* religious lyric par excellence.

⁷I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem,
By gazelles or by hinds of the field:
Do not wake or rouse
Love until it please!

הַשְׁבַּעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם
בְּצִבְאוֹת אוֹ בְּאֵילוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה
אִם-תִּעְרְרוּ | וְאִם-תַּעֲרֹרוּ
אֶת-הָאַהֲבָה עַד שֶׁתִּחַפֵּץ: ט

Peshat

7. I adjure you.../By gazelles or by hinds of the field This oath invokes the energies of nature by means of two erotic images, the gazelle and the hind.¹⁵² The association of an *'ayelet* (roe) with love occurs in Prov. 5:19, likewise in a charged erotic image. Here the terms are plural (*bi-tzva'ot o' be-'aylot ha-sadeh*), which evoke a counterpoint with (oaths customarily taken in the name of?) “the LORD of hosts” (*tzeva'ot*) or the Almighty God (*'el shaddai*).¹⁵³

Perhaps her formula uses an old Israelite incantation recited as a love charm (a related type occurs in ancient Mesopotamia).¹⁵⁴ This would also explain the subsequent references to the arousals.

By gazelles This reference prefigures the maiden's designation of her beloved as a gazelle (in vv. 9, 17). The image connotes erotic energy; indeed, it was so used in an ancient Mesopotamian potency incantation (e.g., “By the love [power] of the gazelle...copulate with me”).¹⁵⁵

you, O maidens The addressee, though female, is referred to by the masculine plural pronoun *'etkhem*, which suggests that the oath formula is generic. This would also explain the masculine plural verbs by which she proceeds to address her female friends.¹⁵⁶

Do not The repeated oath formula *'im-’im* (literally “if...if”) has the force of a double negative (i.e., “do not...or”); cf. Saadia. Such a construction evolves by a transformation of the conditional clause into its consequence (thus: *if* you do this or that, then the following will result; hence, do *not* do it!).

Do not wake or arouse / Love until it please The precise import of this appeal is uncertain. On one possibility, the maiden beseeches her friends neither to arouse nor disturb love *while* it is in force; on another, they are requested to refrain from any interference *until*

the time is ripe. The difference depends on how one construes the temporal phrase *'ad she-* (“now that; until”) in this passage. In the first instance, their love has become an event; in the second, it has not yet been stimulated or occurred (see further Immanuel). The oath's erotic imagery (see above) supports the second alternative. In this regard, the verbs *ta'iru* and *te'oreru* seem to indicate an emotional, erotic arousal (for the variants, cf. *ha'ir* and *'orer* in Isa. 42:13 and Song 8:5, respectively).¹⁵⁷ That is, the verbs have the force of an incantation for arousing love. Significantly, *'ahavah* (“love”) is personified and governs a verb of eruptive desire (i.e., “until desire comes,” *'ad she-yagi'a heifetz*; Immanuel). Possibly, such verbal charms were accompanied by stimulants believed to arouse love (see below). If so, the maiden's prior request for aid has nothing to do with medicinal support, but is rife with innuendo and desire.

wake or rouse The verb *ta'iru* is causative (*hif'il*) in form; the verb *te'oreru* is a *pi'el* of a middle-weak verb (the so-called *pollet* form). The effect of this verb doubling is a further intensification of meaning (Rashbam). In Isa. 51:9, the same verb *'uri* is used to invoke or appeal to the divine arm to “arise” again—as in ancient times, when it destroyed the sea serpent Tannin (“Dragon”); the related verb *'oreir*, in Job 3:8, is also used to “arouse” the dragon Leviathan.

Stylistics. Verses 4–5 and 6–7 are two speeches in parallel form. The first clause of each is descriptive (vv. 4 and 6), and addressed to the female companions; the second clause of each is an imperative of action (vv. 5 and 7), related to acts of love. Further, the first clause in each group uses the particle *ve-* (“he brought me...and his banner”; “his left hand...and his right,” in vv. 4 and 6); whereas the second clause in each is marked by parallelisms (“sustain me with *x*” // “refresh me with *r*”; “deer” // “hinds”;

“awaken” // “arouse,” in vv. 5 and 7). The combined effect is to create a twofold intensification. The concluding phrase, “until it please,” stands syntactically outside the double adjuration concerning the arousals of love; it functions like an exclamation point. It is the semantic and topical climax of the maiden’s speech.

Derash

7. *Do not...until it please* Since antiquity, this passage has been applied to messianic impulses. Love and its longings—spiritual and national hopes—must be deferred “until” their proper time.¹⁵⁸ According to R. Helbo, God adjured Israel “not to rebel against the kingdoms; not to force the end-time; not to reveal their mysteries to the nations; and not to go up from the exile en masse [literally: like a wall]” (SongsR 2.vii.1; cf. B. Ket. 111a).¹⁵⁹ The first, second, and fourth adjurations have clear political implications and seem designed to inhibit premature messianic awakenings; the third may allude to esoteric messianic calculations.¹⁶⁰ Rabbi Oshaya spoke for many generations when he stated that God tells the exiles: “Wait for me—and I shall make you like the host of the heaven.”¹⁶¹ Such a view valorizes divine providence and constrains human initiative; but it also blurs the line between pious restraint (reliance upon God) and impious passivity.

What spiritual lesson does deferral teach? Perhaps a humble attentiveness to the events of the everyday, without imposing human will thoughtlessly or reducing the mystery of life to pragmatic assessments. The religious spirit must live “in the between,” spurred by ideals without giving them (undue) messianic warrant. Prophecy may point to the future; but it

cannot pinpoint it. The conditions of deferral may constrain idolatrous presumptions, both spiritual and political.

Remez

7. The soul yearns to sustain the most sacred moment. Turning inward, she urges her worldly qualities (“maidens of Jerusalem”) not to disrupt this experience of “love until it please!”¹⁶² The self perceives, while still enthralled, that this state should not be disturbed (Malbim)¹⁶³ and allowed to mature. The soul’s achievement of intellectual insight or spiritual transport is thus experienced as incomplete, and the self wants it to complete its inherent development (Ibn Tibbon; Ralbag).¹⁶⁴ But this beginning has elicited a new consciousness. The soul is now able to perceive the beloved’s advent (see v. 8).

Sod

7. *I adjure you* The helpers of the soul are addressed—not by a command for direct action (as in v. 5), but by a request for inaction through an oath. Under the impress of mystical love, the soul invokes restraint: “do not wake or rouse” this love *while* it is in a state of desire.¹⁶⁵ The soul confesses its ecstasy and the need to sustain it. She begs her friends neither to break the spell of love nor interfere with its rhythm. Supernatural love can abide no natural intervention. That is why she invokes “gazelles” and “hinds of the field”—these animals symbolize natural love and its stimulation.¹⁶⁶ But spiritual love is of a different, more transcendent kind (Ibn Sahula).

128. The noun *peri* connotes the “fruit” or result of an action in biblical and rabbinic Hebrew.

129. According to Ibn Aqnin, the “apple” indicates the benefits (*ma’alot*) of the divine qualities.

130. Malbim also regards “his fruit” as connoting divine care or providence; viz., the “apple” is the separate intellect which gives benefits to the human soul. Immanuel regards the “shade” to be the inner aspect or spiritual dimension of this divine element (though not the essence).

131. For Al-Fawwāl, the “fruit” symbolizes the actualization of the self via the soul’s perfection (that is, its proper nourishment and development from the higher powers).

132. Ibn Sahula and other kabbalistic commentators perceive in the tree the flow of sefirotic vitality—from highest sources to the Shekhinah below. See Z. 1:85a–b.

133. Thus Riq, Rid and Tamakh, among medieval commentators; Murphy, 137 and Exum, 118, among moderns.

134. So also Rashbam.

135. So also Immanuel, referring to it as a “banner/standard of the camp” (*degel mahaneh*), as commonly in the account of the tribal wanderings in the desert; cf. Num. 2:3, 10, 18, 25. For the phrase “each [household] (*ish*) under its standard (*diglo*),” see Num. 1:52. NJPS, “man.” For other instances where *ish* refers to households, see Exod. 12:4; 16:16; Num. 2:2, 34.

136. See already Gordis, “The Root D-G-L,” 204.

137. For another proposal, see Riq’s interpretation of the verbal noun in terms of *digulo*, meaning his splendor or majestic bearing.

138. In the text, the exemplary slip of the tongue is *’ahavta* (as in the Shema, to “love” God) vs. *’ayavta* (“hate”).

139. Immanuel observes that due to the imbibing of the wine (the virtues of wisdom), the soul has become attractive to the divine powers—and attracted toward the divine, as well. (On “wine” here, see the Peshat.)

140. See the fundamental study by H. Lewy, *Sobria Ebrietas. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Antiken Mystik* (Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1929).

141. Also noted by Anon. 2 and Immanuel.

142. Cf. Ibn Aqnin: the terms denotes intensification or strengthening (*bizzuq*).

143. So also Fox, who stresses illness; but the context argues the contrary. See below.

144. Cf. Ps. 109:22 and comments of Radak and R. Menahem Ha-Meiri, ad loc.

145. This understanding is also found in Maharzu, and in YefQol at greater length.

146. See *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:3.

147. See Samuel Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 105. Cited by Bloch & Bloch.

148. Also noted by Bloch & Bloch. For the image, see Keel, 90 (no. 44).

149. It is referred to by Semitists as an *iprus* form. A classic example is *’az yashir* in Exod. 15:1, meaning “then (Moses and Israel) sang.” For the grammatical issue, see IBHS §31.1.1.

150. Ginsburg renders this “Let his left hand” and also gives it a present-future aspect.

151. Ibn Aqnin interprets this passage to indicate that the soul needs ongoing “support” in order to acquire the proper intellectual perfection.

152. In the Assyrian love lyric noted above (n. 10), the woman’s thigh is compared to a “gazelle in the field”; see Nissinen: 589, l. 5. The animals’ energy or power presumably inspired the Septuagint reading of *’ayelet as dunameisin* (presumably reading the noun as the abstract *’ayalut*, despite the parallel term).

153. This echo of the powers above and below is already suggested by the comment of R. Eleazar in SongsR 2.ii.18.

154. Note the incantation invoking *belit Seri* (“goddess of the field”) in Šurpu VII 67–68. See E. Reiner, *Šurpu—A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations* (Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft 11; Graz, 1958).

155. For this spell, see Robert D. Biggs, *Ša.Zi.Ga: Mesopotamian Potency Incantations* (Locust Valley, N. Y.: J. J. Augustin, 1967), 26. It is noted also by Fox, who rejects it in favor of taking the gazelles and other animals as euphemisms for God. My suggestion is that the author plays on a series of divine terms, yet without contradicting their vivid erotic and earthy quality—something the Mesopotamian incantations make clear. According to Ibn Ezra and Rid, the animals are metaphors for the women, whom she is adjuring by their lives. This seems unlikely, as is the assumption that the animals are connected to goddesses of love, proposed by T. K. Cheyne, “New God Names,” 104–5.

156. The reason for this may be Late Hebrew blending of pronouns; cf. Ruth 1:11 (mentioned orally by C.H. Gordon, decades ago). For late linguistic features in the Song, see the Introduction.

157. Rashbam suggests that the verb *ta’iru* has the sense of *tasiru*; i.e. the maiden requests that the maidens/nations not try to “remove” or dissuade her of her love. Rashbam follows the tradition in Rashi—and uses this to indicate Christian attempts to convert Jews. His etymology is odd but reflects a recurring interpretation in Ashkenaz at that time. On this matter, see Japhet, *Rashbam*, 174 n. 22.

158. In AgShir, *’ad she-tehpatz* refers to the advent of redemption; cf. Piyyut 14 (e) (p. 143), where the phrase means *’ad qeitz pela’ot*—“until the end of the wondrous (events).”

159. SongsR reads *ya’alu homah*, “they went up [like a] wall”; the version in B. Ket. 111a (see the ensuing reference) has *ya’alu be-homah*, “they went up in [the formation of] a wall.” Based on the latter, my conjectural emendation is a slight orthographic correction of *ke-* for *be-*; hence the reading “like [or: as] a wall.”

160. The precise meaning is uncertain. Some have suggested esoteric teachings in general; others suggest that the secret of Jewish calendar calculations (lunar–solar adjustments) are involved.

161. This interpretation trades on a pun between the adjuration of “hinds” (*tzeva’ot*) and the divine promise to make Israel as numerous as the “hosts” (*tzeva’ot*) of heaven.

162. Immanuel understands the maiden’s address to the daughters of *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem) to indicate that the soul is ready for *sheleimut* (perfection).

163. Malbim interprets the passage to indicate that the elements of the body are aroused from sleep and seek to disrupt the conjunction; but the soul doesn’t want this conjunction to be disturbed.

164. Thus Ibn Tibbon understands the phrase *’ad she-tehpatz* (until it please) to indicate a process, and that one must learn the proper “order” of love (that is, *’al ha-seider*).

165. See the Peshat for such meanings for *ta’iru*, *te’oreru*, and *tehpatz*. Regardless, the mystical layer requires its own assessment of the phrases. Since diverse sensibilities are involved, different meanings may be discovered in the same words. I thus give two different meanings to the verbs and take the adverb *’ad* to mean “while” and not “until.” The goal is to render a coherent spiritual sense to the Sod.

166. Offering supernal referents, many mystical commentators regard the “gazelles” and “hinds” as transcendental qualities. Cf. RẒra, ad loc.

167. The Masoretic punctuation denotes a conjunction between *gol* and *dodi*, and a disjunction between them and the next phrase.

168. See the discussion in GKC §136d. In other cases, *hinneih* may convey surprise; see C.L. Miller-Naudé and C.H.J.

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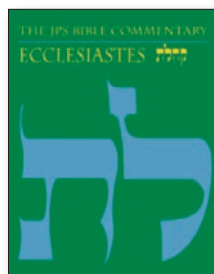
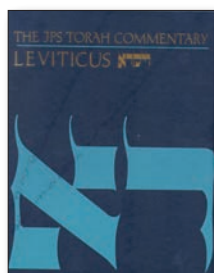
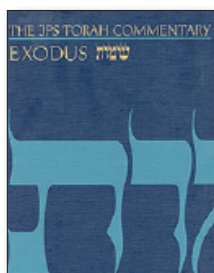
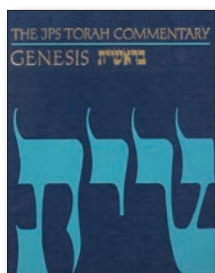
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