

## Pesach: The Holiday of Love

By Karen Miller Jackson<sup>1</sup>

Each of the *shalosh regalim* is paired with one book from the *ketubim* section of the Bible. On Sukkot we read *Kohelet*, on Pesach, Song of Songs and on Shavuot, the book of Ruth. On Pesach, this book-holiday connection is particularly notable. Not only is Song of Songs read in many synagogues on Shabbat *chol hamoed* of Pesach (just as we read *Kohelet* on Shabbat *chol hamoed* Sukkot and Ruth on Shavuot), but there is also a custom in many families to read the entire Song of Songs after completing the already lengthy Seder. What is it that bonds Song of Songs to the holiday of Pesach?

Song of Songs is an allegorical work, which through history has led to a wide spectrum of interpretation, within both Jewish and Christian sources. It is not immediately clear why Song of Songs should have anything to do with the holiday of Pesach, since taken literally the book is a love song between a lover and a beloved. In fact, it is the only book in the Bible, besides *megillat* Esther, which does not mention God's name, and which does not have a religious "feel" to it.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there is a well-known debate in rabbinic literature as to whether Song of Songs should even be included in the biblical canon.<sup>3</sup>

Song of Songs is not exactly the first book which comes to mind in attempting to commemorate such a great miracle as *yetziat mizrayim*. It is not known exactly when it became customary to read Song of Songs on Passover. While other Torah readings for *chol ha-moed* Pesach are mentioned in the Tosefta, the reading of Song of Songs is first mentioned in a significantly later work, *Masechet Soferim*,<sup>4</sup> which is dated to the mid 8<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Leibowitz, Yeshayahu. *Discourses on the Jewish Holidays*, Israel, 1999, pg. 86.

<sup>3</sup> Tractate *Yadayim*, chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> Tabori, Joseph, *Jewish Festivals in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996.

century.<sup>5</sup> However, it is the interpretation of Song of Songs which imbues it with religious meaning and offers the possibility of interpreting each verse as applying to different points in the relationship between God and Israel.

One thread within this tapestry of interpretations understands the love song as referring to the story of the exodus from Egypt. While this may seem a stretch at first glance, there are several “hints” to the connection between Song of Songs and Pesach in the *peshat* (literal meaning) of the book itself. Even though it is rarely obvious what historical period Song of Songs might be allegorizing, there is one verse which seems to be a direct reference to a historical character and biblical event. Song of Songs 1:9 reads:

לססתי ברכבי פרעה דמיתך רעיתי:

I have compared you, O my love, to a horse in Pharaoh's chariots.<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, in his book on Jewish holidays, *Sefer Hatoda'ah*, points out the connection between this verse and the Song at the Sea in the book of Exodus.<sup>7</sup> There we read:

...סוס ורכבו רמה בים...מרכבת פרעה וחילו ירה בים ומבחר שלשיו טבעו בים סוף:

**Horse and driver** He has hurled into the sea...

**Pharaoh's chariots** and his army He has cast into the sea.<sup>8</sup>

Another reason given by Rabbi Kitov for reading Song of Songs on Pesach, is that just as Shavuot has famously been portrayed as the marriage between Israel and God, where *har Sinai* is the *chuppa* and the Torah the *ketuba*, Pesach represents the engagement and courtship between God and Israel. This metaphor is seen in the Haggadah's use of Ezekiel 16. There it says:

ורב: כמה שנאמר ואעבר עליך ואראך מתבוססת בדמין ואמר לך בדמין חיי ואמר לך בדמין חיי.

רבבה כצמח השדה נתתיך ותרבי ותגדלי ותבואי בעדי עדיים שדים נכנו ושעריך צמח ואת ערום ועריה.

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<sup>5</sup> Strack, H.L. and Stemberger, G. *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Song of Songs 1:9

<sup>7</sup> Kitov, Eliyahu Rabbi. *Sefer Hatoda'ah*. Yad Eliyahu Kitov: Jerusalem, 1996, pg. 295.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 15:1 and 4.

“And numerous,” as it is said: “I passed over you and saw you wallowing in your bloods, and I said to you ‘By your blood you shall live,’ and I said to you ‘By your blood you shall live!’ I caused you to thrive like the plants of the field, and you increased and grew and became very beautiful your bosom fashioned and your hair grown long, but you were naked and bare.”<sup>9</sup>

In Ezekiel 16, God goes on to enter a covenant with Israel, traditionally understood as a marriage covenant. Here God’s rescue of Israel from slavery marks God’s declaration of commitment to Israel.

Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz suggested another connection between Song of Songs and Pesach.<sup>10</sup> He points out that Song of Songs is filled with imagery of springtime. The rose, the lily, the apple tree, the fig trees, the vineyards, the pomegranates in bloom, the grazing of the sheep and the leaping of the gazelles – all remind one of the freshness, newness and sweetness associated with springtime. Moreover, it states:

כי הנה הסתיו עבר הגשם חלף הלך לו.  
הנצנים נראו בארץ עת הזמיר הגיע וקול התור נשמע בארצנו:  
For now the winter is past,  
The rains are over and gone.  
The blossoms have appeared in the land,  
The time of pruning has come,  
The song of the turtledove  
Is heard in our land.<sup>11</sup>

This all corresponds with Pesach, which we celebrate each year in *chodesh ha-aviv* (the springtime) and the exodus itself which occurred in *chodesh ha-aviv*.<sup>12</sup> And so, the exodus is compared to the beginning of the relationship between God and Israel. Just as spring is the time for flowers and fruit to blossom anew, it is also a chance for God and Israel to re-declare their love and devotion to each other as was done through the exodus from Egypt.

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<sup>9</sup> Pesach Haggadah, *magid* section.

<sup>10</sup> Leibowitz, Yeshayahu. *Discourses on the Jewish Holidays*, pg. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Song of Songs 2:11-12, translation by JPS Bible.

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 23:15.

In interpreting Song of Songs as an allegory for the exodus, the rabbis add new meaning to this seminal event. First, the exodus is transformed from a one-sided story of God's choosing Israel to the initiation of a relationship, based on love and commitment. Moreover, the dialogue in Song of Songs, between the lover and beloved, presented a model for the rabbinic interpreters of a relationship of reciprocal choice.

This reciprocity can be seen in the following midrash on Song of Songs<sup>13</sup>:

אני חבצלת השרון: אמרה כנסת ישראל לפני הקב"ה רבוננו של עולם חביבה אני שחיבתני מכל האומות...  
השרון: שאמרתי לך שירה על ידי משה.  
דבר אחר חבצלת חביבה אני שהייתי חבויה בצל מצרים ולשעה קלה כנסני הקב"ה לרעמסס והרטבתי  
במעשים טובים כשושנה השרון שאמרתי שיר ורון לפניו שנאמר השיר יהיה לכם כליל התקדש חג (ישעיה  
ל:כט)

"I am a rose (*chavatzet*) of the valley," I am the one and beloved (*chavivah*)  
am I...

"The Sharon," Because I said before Him a song (*shirah*), through Moses, as it  
says, "Then Moses and the Israelites sang."

Another interpretation –

"I am a rose (*chavatzet*) of the valley," I am the one and beloved (*chavivah*)  
am I.

I am the one who was hidden (*chavuya*) in the shade (*tzel*) of Egypt and in a  
brief space, the Holy One blessed be He, brought me to Raamses, and I  
blossomed forth in good deeds like a rose, and I chanted before Him the song, as  
it says, *For You, there shall be singing, as on a night when a festival is hallowed*  
(Is. 30:29)

There are numerous wordplays in this midrash. *Chavatzet* is audibly connected to *chavivah*, *chavuya*, and *tzel*. The word Sharon is connected to *shir*, or song, a reference to either the song at the sea or the song mentioned in Isaiah, which is understood here as the song Israel sang to God as praise for His taking us out of Egypt.

The midrash continues to apply the verse to other historical events, but it is this section on the exodus which is relevant here. There is a mutual move toward each other on the parts of God and Israel expressed in this midrash. God moves us to Raamses, our first step in leaving Egypt, and Israel takes the next step in this dance by doing mitzvot and by

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<sup>13</sup> Midrash Tehillim (Buber edition) *mizmor* 1

praising God through song, both signs of Israel's initiative which are absent in the original narrative in the book of Exodus.

Hence, the intertwining of the Song of Songs and Pesach is an expression of one facet of the holiday. Through reading Song of Songs in the midst of Pesach, and at the culmination of the Seder, the holiday is more than a time to mark the miraculous rescue of Israel from Egypt. It is also an opportunity for Israel and God to put the past year behind them and start their relationship afresh. On Rosh Hashanah this renewal occurs out of our awe and beseeching of God and God granting forgiveness. On Pesach, which also marks a new year,<sup>14</sup> the relationship is like a newly blossoming flower, once again provided with a chance to grow and thrive. On Pesach we have the opportunity to experience and renew God's love for us as well as our love for God.

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<sup>14</sup> The month of Nissan is called rosh hashanah with regard to the cycle of the Jewish calendar and for counting the length of a king's reign (Mishna Rosh Hashanah 1:1).