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Shir Hashirim Rabbah:
A Study in Figure and Narrative

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Referee, Dr. Richard Sarason

Digest

This thesis is an analysis of the use of figure and narrative in the midrash collection *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. The analysis employs insights from literary theory, psychology, anthropology, history and theology to understand the use and purpose of figurative language in midrash.

This study identifies affective content and issues of relationship as the principal element which distinguishes figurative from other types of Rabbinic discourse. While this is the principal insight, this study considers many other aspects of how figurative language and narrative function in midrash.

The thesis is 190 pages in length and is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter introduces *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* and the issues to be addressed. Chapter two explores the nature of figurative language in general and in religious discourse. Chapter three considers the psychological dimension to figurative language and analyzes the sources and types of figures which appear in *Shir. R.*. Chapters four, five, six and seven contain the major textual studies, each chapter being devoted to a different type of figurative relationship found in the document: king/servant; father/son; lover/beloved; and rivals for the beloved. There follows a conclusion, which summarizes the findings, and a bibliography.

To Robin...
מעין גנים באר מים חיים

...and Avi
וכלו מחמדים

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Acknowledgements

The Psalms were composed in order that Israel might praise God. Therefore with the psalmist I say:

הַלְלוּיָהּ הַלְלִי נַפְשִׁי אֶת־יי אֲהַלְלָה יי בְּחַיָּי אֲזַמְּרָה לֵאלֹהַי בְּעוֹדִי

Concerning *Shir Hashirim*, Rabbi Judah tells us it exists only to extol Israel. In writing this thesis I also find ample reason to extol many in Israel. Throughout my life I have been blessed by my encounters with exceptional people who have shared with me both their intelligence and wisdom.

My deepest gratitude goes to my *rebbe*, Rabbi Paul Citrin, who through his words and through his deeds inspired me to pursue a life of Torah. I am indebted also to Rabbi David Shor, my first Bible teacher. Thanks to Dr. Alan Cooper, who introduced me to the text of *Shir Hashirim*, and Hachan Isaac Yerushalmi, who revealed to me its wondrous interpretive and spiritual possibilities.

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Geoffrey W. Dennis

Chapter 1

Shir Hashirim Rabbah: Testimony to a Relationship

Shir Hashirim Rabbah is a study in relationships. Expanding upon a biblical document devoted to the theme of love, and in keeping with the Rabbinic approach to all biblical materials, this Midrash expands that theme, yet takes it in new directions. It takes the biblical text, which describes the universal love experience through the figures of a man and a woman, and assigns specific tenors to those figures. The Midrash makes the couple in *Shir Hashirim* identifiable in all their specific tenors. In insisting on all this specificity, the Rabbis remove the poems from the realm of the universal and move them to the realm of the particular.

Also in keeping with the tone of *Shir Hashirim*, the Rabbis insist this is no ordinary relationship. In fact, it is the most extraordinary love affair imaginable. It is, so the Rabbis tell us, all about the relationship of a people to its God.

At first imagining, any nexus between the divine and human realms would suggest a kind of "love" which would be ethereal in the extreme, a numinous relationship which would stand outside time, space and, perhaps, all other human experience. But the sages who composed *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* see this relationship between God and his people otherwise. They see it as a "relationship" in the fullest

sense of the term as we understand it: multifaceted; complex in its emotions; riddled with conflict, disappointed expectations, suffering and pain; yet simultaneously infused with hope. In the idiom of today we would say it is a living relationship, but one with a history. In short, it is a relationship very much like a human relationship. Through their rich and often bold use of figurative images, the Rabbis free themselves to invoke the full range of human experience, cognitive, emotional, personal and social in describing the interplay of history, power, powerlessness, loss and renewal that characterizes the Jewish experience.

At the same time, because the paradigm used for this Divine-Jewish relationship is a human one, this relationship is not just soothing or comforting, invoking feeling of a nurturing and protective deity. It is also anxiety-inducing and distressing, as in all intimate and intense human bonds. Yet for the very reason that it invokes all these attitudes and feelings, it is rendered real, albeit often painfully real, for Jews who see themselves as one party in this relationship.

This study is an exploration of how the Sages who composed *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* understand this relationship and how they use images and narratives to articulate a theology of relationship between God and Israel.

Because this relationship is treated as analogous to a human relationship, we will be focusing on the metaphoric

language of rabbinic discourse which uses human figures to represent God and corporate Israel. And because human relationships are more that the mere juxtaposition of two objects, we will be examining the figurative narratives the Rabbis create to illustrate the workings of the relationship.

Reflecting the impressionistic nature of rabbinic figurative discourse, the treatment of the texts in this study will be largely impressionistic. It is an attempt to identify and unpack the tropes of the figures and consider their theological implications. At the same time, we will not hesitate to apply the theories and insights of various disciplines. The reader will find ideas taken from (obviously) literary theory, but also from the fields of anthropology, developmental psychology, and history applied to these texts. This eclecticism is entirely the result of a desire to gain a deeper understanding of the figures and their tenors.

The study is divided into six chapters: the first introduces *Shir Hashirim Rabbah;* Chapter Two focuses on the nature of figurative language and its place in religious discourse; Chapter Three examines the types of figures found in rabbinic midrash; Chapters Four, Five and Six are each devoted to textual analysis of three different kinds of figurative relationships found in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*: king/servant, father/child, and lover/beloved.

An Introduction to the Document

Shir Hashirim Rabbah, also known by the titles *Midrash Shir Hashirim*, *Aggadat Chazita* and *Shir Hashirim Rabati*, is classified in Strack and Stemberger as an exegetical midrash, offering interpretations of the biblical book *Shir Hashirim* verse by verse, and occasionally, word by word. It is one of three existent midrashic collections devoted to *Shir Hashirim*.

Composed probably in the sixth century CE (although S.T. Lachs, following the arguments of Zunz, dates it slightly later, between 650 and 750CE), it includes considerable older material[1]. The work draws heavily on earlier midrashic material, notably *Mechilta deRabbi Ishmael*, *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Pesikta deRav Kahana*, *Bereshit Rabbah* and *Vayikra Rabbah*. The language of the document is largely mishnaic Hebrew and western Aramaic, with heavy use of Greek and some Latin loan words[2] .

The oldest known manuscript of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* is MS Parma De Rossi 1240. Dated to 1270 CE, it includes as well the midrash *Pesikta Rabbati*. Genizah fragments of the work, totaling ten pages, have also been found[3].

First published in Pesaro in 1519 as part of a collection of midrashism on the five *megillot*, it has been reprinted many times, notably in Vilna, with the Pesaro edition as the basis.

Sections of the manuscript and the genizah fragments have been subjected to scholarly analysis, and S. Dunsky has produced a 'corrected' edition, but no scholarly critical edition for the whole text has been produced. The Vilna edition was translated into English by Maurice Simon in 1939, and a new translation, closely based on the Simon edition but using his own apparatus, was published by Jacob Neusner in 1989.

Early in its publishing history it was divided into eight sections, mirroring the eight chapters of Shir Hashirim. On formal grounds Herr divides the work into two sections, the first being a series of five petihtot on verses 1.1-2, and the remainder of the text proceeding in an exegetical structure to the end. This division seems based on the example of *Eicha Rabbah*, which is constructed of two extensive sections, each composed in a distinctly different form. Whether it is logically justified to apply this same division to a brief collection of introductory material is debatable.

Neusner characterizes the document as a coherent, structured work of a unified, if not a single, editorial effort[4]. And certainly in its printed edition, the work seems notably well crafted, with an extensive (for the Rabbis) set of reflection about the midrashic process, well laid out recapitulations of earlier material and, at times, tour-de-force displays of didactic genius, exemplified by the uses in Chapter 1:1.1.8 of a series of *mashalim* to

illustrate the interpretive value of the *mashal* in explicating Scripture.

E. Urbach characterizes the midrashic treatment of *Shir Hashirim* as allegorical. Unfortunately, allegory is a slippery and perhaps overused word in scholarly circles. Many writers apply it, each with great taxonomic certainty about its meaning, yet each writer seems to understand the term somewhat differently. Instead, for our purposes, let us say that there is an over-arching assumption in the Rabbinic approach to *Shir Hashirim* that it is entirely figurative.

In fact, as we shall discuss in greater detail below, the Rabbis ascribed a certainly level of figurative meaning to all biblical texts. In order for them to be able to recontextualize Scripture for themselves and for their community, they necessarily had to assume a figurative intent to Scripture, an intent which transcends the text's meaning in its cultural and original historical context.

Sometimes this figurative assumption was even articulated as a principle of their hermeneutic, as we see with the Rabbinic idiom, מעשי אבות סימן לבנים, *the deeds of the ancestors are paradigms for their descendants.* In their reading of scriptural narrative, the Rabbis often invoke this principle to teach that the stories and actions of the various biblical characters are not simply to be read for their historical or antiquarian value. Rather, the Rabbis believed the reader should recognize that these stories

have a figurative truth, and that the events described in the Bible are paradigms for the experience of Israel, both contemporary and in the future. As an example, look at the experience of Abraham having to migrate from Canaan to Egypt described in Genesis 12.10-17. This story is not simply taken by the Rabbis to be a biographical incident in the life of the patriarch, but as figurative representation of what would happen to Israel, both in the Egyptian exile specifically(*Bereshit Rabbah* 40.6), and in the exile the Rabbis themselves were then experiencing (Ibid., 40.2). This kind of figurative assumption applies across the board to all rabbinic treatments of the Bible, and thus is something *Shir R.* has in common with other midrashic collections.

At the same time, the Rabbis do regard most biblical narratives to be historical, contextual and non-figurative. This assumption is illustrated in the very same section of *Bereshit Rabbah* we were discussing earlier. There the author subjects the same story of Abraham in Egypt to narrative expansion (Ibid., 40.5) indicating that he regarded it to be, in some sense, an actual incident. Here, that passage, as with most texts of the Bible, the Rabbis treat it as having two simultaneous levels of meaning, one contextual, another recontextual/figurative.

It is precisely this issue of dual meaning which distinguishes Shir Hashirim from the other texts of the biblical canon. In the case of this particular document,

the Rabbinic assumption is that there is no contextual, literal meaning to the work. In fact, to read it and treat it as if it were simply love poetry is an affront to the true, only meaning of this document, הקורא פסוק משיר השירים ועשאו כמין זמר...מביא רעה לעולם (Sanhedrin 101a), *(anyone) who recites a verse of Shir Hashirim and treats it as if it were just a love lyric...brings evil on the world.* And since the Rabbinic period, Jewish spokesmen have been adamant in rejecting a contextual reading of *Shir Hashirim* as simply love poetry.

Of course, anyone who has ever listened to popular love songs on the radio recognizes that such lyrics are constructed largely of figurative speech. And what is true of love songs in general is clearly also true of *Shir Hashirim*. Even if one reads it as secular erotic poetry, one is struck by the number of figures, a veritable "garden of metaphor", as Robert Alter aptly, and figuratively, puts it. Even if the Rabbinic readers were to try to read this document contextually or literally, its uniquely rich metaphoric language would quickly force them to direct their energies to explaining the many displacements, juxtapositions, similes and images.

The discourse of love must, of course, rely on metaphor because the emotions involved demand the kind of intense speech that only the vivid power of figurative speech can convey. In fact, the Rabbis would not deny that *Shir Hashirim* is indeed love poetry, and love poetry of the

highest order and deepest emotion. But they insist that that emotion is directed solely to a higher and more specific object. They regard the figurative discourse here to be both more specific and more exulted than simply the universal expression of affection through the device of displacement. They understand the figures to be standing for a specific love relationship, one simultaneously historical and meta-historical, mystical yet grounded in the conventional symbols and acts of Rabbinic religion. This aspect of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, its need to grapple with a uniquely layered and ramified collection of figurative language, is its most distinctive characteristic as a document. At the same time, it is largely dependent for its materials on other Midrash collections, and is only one manifestation of the broader Rabbinic enterprise. In this regard, I must dissent from Jacob Neusner, who declares,

> Song of Song Rabbah stands at the pinnacle of the sublime writings of "our sages of blessed memory" and forms the theological counterpart to the Mishna: a complete and cogent statement of an entire system...I state that for a description of "Judaism"...it suffices that we turn to this amazing compilation alone[5] .

While this exulted assessment movingly echoes Akiba's statement that "had the Torah not been given to Israel, *Shir Hashirim* would have sufficed for the governance of the world" (M. Yadayim 3.5), there really seems very little

internally to the document or in its history of transmission to suggest it was treated anything like a kind of "Summa of Midrash" by subsequent generations of Jews.

But Neusner is correct earlier on when he states that the Rabbis who compiled this work understood that *Shir Hashirim* is "a sequence of statements of urgent love between God and Israel, the holy people". This book is clearly about God's relationship to Israel, past, present and future.

It is more accurate to characterize the work as a particularly skillful reformulation and elaboration of earlier Midrashic materials around several theological themes. Some of these themes are particularly associated with *Shir Hashirim*, others are theological themes common in the Rabbinic treatment of any scriptural text.

The Theological Messages of Shir Hashirim Rabbah

In expounding verse 1.12, WHILE THE KING WAS UPON HIS COUCH, MY NARD GAVE OFF ITS FRAGRANCE, Rabbi Meir took this phrase as a reference to Israel's shortcoming in her relationship with God. In effect, Meir understands the verse to say, "our behavior stinks!" Rabbi Judah, however, interrupts him, declaring,

> "Don't you know, Meir, Shir Hashirim is not interpreted derogatorily, but to praise, because Shir Hashirim was not given except

for the praise of Israel".

As a continued reading of *Shir R.* reveals, Rabbi Judah's cautionary words have little impact on the subsequent course of the exegesis, or the conclusions drawn from it. True, following immediately on the heels of Judah's statement are a number of figurative interpretations of the biblical verse which do serve as praise of Israel. It is not long before, once again, criticism of the Jewish people appears in the interpretations of other sages. However much his peers chose to ignore him, Rabbi Judah's opinion is one of the few times in the text where the sages explicitly state what they think to be the *"kerygma"* of *Shir Hashirim*. Yet in keeping with the ironic way of Rabbinic self-disclosure, this statement is observed to be largely ignored, or at least, honored more in the breach. Perhaps this statement is most indicative of how *Shir R.* is a document of many voices, containing many messages. It may have actually been true that Rabbi Judah interpreted the figures entirely as God's celebration of Israel. Yet by the very fact that the Midrash compilation meticulously records Meir's negative interpretation, the text instructs us that Judah's understanding is only one among many.

As Jacob Neusner has amply illustrated, the sages of the Rabbinic period defined multiple roles for themselves, political, legal, religious and cultural[6] . Foremost among

their roles was that of the teacher. Unlike other religious elites of that time and place, such as the monks of Christianity or the Elect of Manicheanism, the Rabbis did not seek to create for themselves a society separate from the larger Jewish community. Rather, they sought to establish their authority and extend their influence, and with that authority lead and define their community. Through multiple means, political, social, but especially instructional, they sought to educate all Jews to the Rabbinic point of view[7] . *Shir. R.* itself illustrates this in a rare and tantalizingly brief *maaseh*, an ostensively factual story, which serves as a terse introduction to an interpretation. This *maaseh* reports, "As Rabbi was interpreting Scripture, the congregation became drowsy. In order to awaken them, he said, 'One woman in Egypt bore six hundred thousand..'."(4.1.2). The literature they created, while clearly aimed at the most literate and sophisticated segment of their community, namely themselves, was also in some part a resource for their more popular forms of oral education, as this humorous and self-deprecating incident illustrates.

But, as we saw earlier, rare is the occasion where one of them attempts to explicitly outline his interpretation of the theological agenda. Yet through the diverse figurative interpretations that surround Rabbi Judah's declaration, we know that there was more then just the one theological message offered for the text.

As consummate teachers the sages ignored Rabbi Judah in more ways then one. Not only did they refuse to be bound by the parameters of his interpretation, but they generally opted to ignore his need to articulate theology propositionally. Instead they used the vehicles of striking analogy and the memorable image as devices to convey their ideology to those they wished to educate (their disciples) and those they wished to persuade (the rest of the Jewish world). So they leave it to us, the readers, to try to outline for ourselves the theological messages which underlie the figurative reading of *Shir R.*

Naturally, this whole study is premised on the understanding that the Rabbis see *Shir Hashirim* as an account of Israel's relationship to God, but exactly what kind of account is it?

Daniel Boyarin believes the Rabbis see *Shir Hashirim* as a key to the Torah, especially the narrative/historical accounts found in Torah. Thus *Shir Hashirim* serves as a kind of cross reference which allows the Rabbis to better understand the content of Torah, and to access those events and experience them anew[8] . It is in effect, a *mashal* on the Divine - Jewish relationship centered on its seminal moments, or "the nuptials" as Boyarin puts it; the Exodus, the wilderness and Sinai. *Shir R.* , he argues, takes this as its primary approach.

Ephraim Urbach also observes that the Rabbis in *Shir R.* frequently apply *Shir Hashirim* to historical experiences[9].

To this he adds, cryptically, that the Rabbis use this book to express their "mystical-spiritual" interpretations.

Reuven Kimelman, in finding many of the interpretations to be part of an ongoing Jewish-Christian disputation, sees the Rabbis as defending the Jewish claim to chosenness, and arguing on behalf of the continuing validity of the God-Israel relationship in the face of rival claims [10].

Maurice Simon believes that *Shir R.* is intended to be an allegory of the love relationship, which puts special emphasis on the manifestations of this love by each partner. God's love is demonstrated by his redeeming Israel from Egypt (here again, the historical reading is prominent), while Israel's is shown through their willingness to suffer martyrdom for his sake[11].

It is not our purpose to dismiss these insights and interpretations. They are clearly correct, but they are correct within the context of a much broader interpretive vision. The Rabbis offer these diverse interpretations because these elements all serve to illuminate the Divine-Jewish relationship. In all cases, whether interpreting the narrative events of Sinai, making sense of Israel's collective suffering, expounding the place of Torah, all these things are probed for what they reveal about the condition and the conditions of the Divine-Jewish love affair.

Neusner holds that the Rabbis regard the verses of *Shir Hashirim* as statements about "...the fixed truth about God

and God's relationship with Israel...they repeatedly set forth the same point: God loves Israel, Israel loves God, and the Torah is the medium of that reciprocal love" [12]. While somewhat reductionist, this statement is essentially accurate.

I would argue that the theological assumptions underpinning all of Shir R. is that God loves Israel, Israel (at its best) loves God, and Shir Hashirim is a description, in detail, of that relationship. All the questions the sages in Shir R. attempt to address, and all the exegesis they offer, are predicated on those three assumptions. And all three of these theological assumptions are assumptions of relationship. So when the Rabbis articulate them via the "stage dressing" of figurative language, they do so using the clothing of human relationships.

It is this interest in the relational aspect of their religious lives that makes figurative language so useful to the Rabbis. By concretizing this metaphysical connection through the use of extended figures arrayed in social arrangements, the Rabbis imbue this potentially ethereal and incomprehensible relationship with graspable cognitive and potent affective content. Boyarin notes this in explaining how figures in *Shir Hashirim* serves to explain the narrative/historical portions of the Torah: "those situations are rendered axiolically and emotionally sharper by the figures of the poetic text"[13].

Relationships are therefore not only the central message, but also a primary device for the Rabbis. In all the theological agendas identified by scholars, the metaphor of human relationships is not only the over-arching concern; it ultimately reveals itself to be the hermeneutic key to communicating those agendas.

The figures achieve that effect precisely because through them we can map the psycho-social and emotional implications of the situation. It is the use of analogies of human relationship, in all their richness, that permits the Rabbis to encompass so many aspects of their own religious experiences and explain them as elements in the God-Israel relationship. All the incidents of joy and fear, debt and duty, suffering and reconciliation which go to make up the totality of human relationships can be paralleled and applied to the historical and social realities of Jewish experience, realities which in turn are all seen as incidents in the course of a greater, yet analogous metaphysical relationship. This homology is a logical extension of the Rabbinic assumption that God possesses a human-like personality.

Out of this rich figurative matrix, the Rabbis explore and attempt to answer a number of religious questions about this long, difficult relationship such as, Why does God love us? Or, since others claim to be God's beloved, how do we know that our relationship endures? Given the claims of others, is this relationship unique? How does God show his

love? How can we show our love for him? What does he expect from us? If God is in relationship with us, why does he seem so distant? And finally, and most poignantly, is this distance permanent?

The sages of *Shir R.* use figures drawn from the Bible and constructed from their own experiences to address all these questions. They strive to explain all relevant experiences - historical, communal and personal - which have a bearing on them. They utilize experiences which seem to confirm God's love, but they especially focus on those which threaten to challenge that assumption. Their whole theological task, in all its breadth, is to affirm this relationship as valid and enduring. Figure and Scripture, history and psychology are all arrayed in its service.

Notes for Chapter 1

1) Strack and Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, 1992, p. 342.

2) Moshe Herr, "Song of Song Rabbah", Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971, 15:153.

3) Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, p. 343.

4) Jacob Neusner, Israel's Love Affair with God, 1993, p. 25.

5) Jacob Neusner, The Midrash Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries, 1989, p 1.

6) Jacob Neusner, There we Sat Down, 1972, P, 129.

7) Ibid., 1972, p. 130.

8) Daniel Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash, 1992, p. 113, 110.

9) Ephraim Urbach, The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish Christian Disputation, 1963, p. 252.

10) Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbi Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third Century Jewish-Christian Disputation, pp. 569-70.

11) Song of Songs: Midrash Rabbah, vol. IX, 1983, p. vii.

12) Jacob Neusner, The Midrash Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries, p. 190.

13) Daniel Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash, p. 111.

Chapter 2

Figurative Language and Midrash

In order to understand the use of figure specifically in Rabbinic midrash, it would be helpful to first examine what we mean when we speak of a "figure" or "figurative language".

The terms "figurative language", "figure" and "figure of speech" are closely related ideas which are largely indistinguishable in common usage. Efforts have been made since classical times in both literary and linguistic studies to define these terms with more precision. The results have been decidedly mixed.

In fact, a quest for definition first leads to greater confusion rather then greater clarity. This is because figurative language shares overlapping meaning with many other terms which try to describe speech which is not propositional, literal, or "transparent". In English we use the terms "figure", "metaphor", "simile", "parable" and "allegory" in ways that are closely related. At times the resemblance of one term for another borders on the synonymous. For example, one source offers a definition of "allegory" as language that "presents one thought in the image of another..."[1]. Compare this with an explanation of "metaphor" as "...a word which in standard usage denotes one kind of thing, quality or action applied to another"[2]. For the purposes of this paper, any word or concept applied

to another word or concept will be referred to as either a 'figure' or 'vehicle'. The word or concept being represented figurative will from now on be referred to as the 'tenor' or 'subject'.

The overlapping definitions for these terms indicates just how hard it is to pin down what we mean when we use them. Furthermore, the confusion is suggestive of the global nature of figurative language, an issue we will pick up again later.

Some thinkers have developed classifications of these terms. For example, they define metaphors, similes, personifications and other terms in ways that make them subsets of figure. Others reverse the hierarchy and treat a figure as one element in a metaphor[3].

Figurative language may also be subdivided into two groups, figures of speech and figures of thought[4]. A figure of speech involves a departure in the logical order of words for rhetorical effect. An example of this is the figurative effect achieved when an abstract noun is made the subject of an active verb: "Wisdom cries aloud in the streets".

By comparison, a figure of thought involves the change or extension of a word's meaning, such as occurs in the metaphor, "I am a rose of Sharon". Assuming that the author is not performing an act of animism by having a rose address us in the first person, this use of rose is a figure of thought. The speaker identifies herself with a rose. Yet the word "rose" in its standard, denotative use has no

relationship to a human. Instead, the figure serves a connotative purpose. The word's meaning is being extended so that some of the attributes we might associate with roses (beauty or fragrance, for example) are transferred to the speaker. Through a figure of thought, a concept is given a concrete form, or as Pierre Fontanier put it, the figure provides "a stage setting for an idea".

A figure is not simply a substitution of nouns. The figure not only stands in for a tenor, but, as suggested before, through the choice of figure something about the nature of the tenor is highlighted or illustrated . To speak figuratively of a person as a "gazelle" is literally nonsensical, but, if understood figuratively, suggests something significant about the tenor. The audience immediately looks for elements stereotypical of the figure which serve as links to the person. These elements suggested by the image of the figure are often referred to as the tropes of the figure. Perhaps the swiftness, grace, beauty associated with a gazelle are tropes which are meant to reflect similar qualities in the person. At the same time, the figure does not encompass the *Gestalt* of the tenor, it is not a synonym. So, while the use of "gazelle" may highlight some tropes which reflect qualities in the tenor, it suggests little or nothing about other qualities, such as the person's wit, voice or ferocity in battle.

Yet there is even more at work. To say "I am a Rose of Sharon" is not simply another way of saying "I am

beautiful". The trope invoked by the image conveys a great deal more than the simple propositional statement does, but at the same time is more ambiguous. Are we really sure that "beauty" is the message the figure is supposed to convey? Is there another trope we are overlooking? This leads us to the question, why use a figure rather than say what we intend in more transparent language? By using figurative language with all its imprecision, we presumably increase the likelihood of miscommunication. If that is so, what then is the function of figurative language?

Thinkers on the issue of figurative speech seem to regard its function in three ways: rhetorical, aesthetic and anthropological.

The first way of understanding figurative language emerged with the earliest conceptualization of figure in classical times. This understanding treats figurative language as a device of rhetoric, a weapon in the arsenal of persuasion used by a rhetorician[5]. Through a powerful figure, loaded with connotations familiar to the audience, the rhetorician enhances the message he or she wishes to convey. But more then merely coloring or highlighting a idea with a memorable illustration (though this too is a function of a figure, as discussed below), figurative language has the unique potential to, as it were, "carry an argument". In some ways it is essential to the art of rhetoric, which seeks to move the listener from one attitude or position to another advocated by the speaker. Figures are inherently

dynamic. This dynamism is uniquely suited to "moving" a person dialectically, because simply understanding figurative language requires an intellectual "move" on the part of the listener. In order for the figure to make sense, the listener must apply what he knows about the figure to the tenor. This "move" of seeking the resemblances between the figure and the tenor is called the "trope"[6]. The desired result is an analogy which demonstrates that all the associations and attributes assigned to the figure are equally applicable to the tenor, the "reality" in whose stead the figure stands. What makes figurative rhetoric particularly effective is how it engages the listeners into drawing the desired conclusion themselves by having to sort out the analogies (later we will consider the implications that learning theory offers concerning this process). A striking or well chosen figure therefore possesses considerable rhetorical clout.

The second approach treats figurative language as having primarily an aesthetic function. In this tropological approach, figure is a matter of style and an ornament of speech rather then a tool of persuasion[7]. Some literary theory has chosen to focus on the aesthetic nature of figurative language, to the detriment of its rhetorical function.

Finally, there are those who argue that all forms of figure and metaphor are the inevitable product of language. Rather than being a distinctive device within speech, it is

in fact the distinctive characteristic of speech, and all speech is, to a lesser or greater degree, figurative[8]. According to this position, figurative language is inescapable. Even language which we take to convey ideas directly or literally is in fact constructed, at some point, out of a figure. The very word "literal" is a prime example. The root denotes a written letter, and the word thereby connotates fixed, narrow meaning of a letter or word, and by further extension, the exact meaning of any communication, written, oral or behavioral. Yet continuing to reflect the inevitability of figurative usage, the border between "literal" in a denotative and connotative sense is constantly blurred. Consider the phrase "he literally fell over". Employed here the word "literally" is far removed from its denotative root, and could be understood literally or figuratively, depending on the context in which it is used.

This linguistic argument about the global nature of figurative language has, to put it figuratively, the "ring of truth" about it. However, in accepting that figurative language is inescapable in human communication, there is a reductionist risk of regarding it as no more then an autonomic feature of language and failing to recognize that it has a more deliberate and artful role in the creation of meaning. The most sophisticated critics recognize that the use of figure involves all three elements. An inevitable habit of communication is applied in a deliberate and artful

fashion to the cause of persuasion.

It is also important to note that most writings on figurative language regard a figure as a single word or unit of meaning, usually a noun, as in the sentence, "He was a tiger on the battlefield". Here "tiger" is the figure. However, more recent analysis of figurative language has begun to recognize that figurative tropes can be much more elaborate and involve multiple figures creating figurative relationships. Some have called this an "extended trope", in which a figure and its accessory ideas create ideas of relationship[9].

Ultimately, figures are linguistic forms and constellations of forms substituted for real bodies for the purposes of analogy. Through such forms, the expression of ideas, thoughts and feelings are conveyed in a manner different from a simple or common expression.

Figurative Language in the Context of Religious Discourse

Some of what we have learned is helpful in understanding the use of figures in religious discourse. At the same time, expressing religious ideas through figures also reflects unique problems, and how we understand figurative language from a literary perspective does not wholly explain what is happening when we use figures to communicate religious ideas.

This problem is most evident when we examine the role of

analogy in figurative language. Analogy is the crucial mechanism for conveying meaning in figurative discourse. Analogy is also the indispensable tool of religious discourse. The use of analogy in both forms of discourse makes it one of the premier dialectical tools of the Rabbis.

Yet for all the similarity, the analogical process involved in each form of discourse is different, and can almost be characterized as working to opposite purposes. In everyday figurative analogy, figures of thought serve to enliven and make vivid universally known and shared experiences in novel and memorable ways. For example, all humans know the experience of being angry. Because of our universal familiarity with that experience, simply saying "I am angry" requires no translation. We all know what it is to be angry. But such a "transparent" statement does not convey anything about the particular experience of the speaker, or communicate other aspects of the experience, such as the intensity of feeling. Phrased in propositional language, the anger being described remains a well-understood but abstract and removed condition.

By expressing the same experience figuratively, the listener is moved from the denotative to the connotative. Through it the abstract and universal experience of anger gains both drama and particularity. To declare "I am an exploding volcano", or "I feel like a pot boiling over" transforms an abstract universal into a more personal,

vivid and intense expression of the experience.

I would describe this form of figurative analogy as moving the listener from knowledge of a "familiar universal" toward understanding an "unfamiliar particular" experience by the vehicle of a familiar figure.

familiar tenor ----------> unknown particular
(familiar figure)

In everyday speech, figurative language combines two known quantities (the abstract but well understood tenor and the familiar figure) in a novel way which gives new and particular meaning to the tenor.

While religious language also appeals to familiar figures in order to illustrate and make vivid its meaning in a movement which parallels common figurative thought, it simultaneously moves us in quite the opposite direction. In the case of religious language, the figure attempts to make something numinous sufficiently mundane so as be comprehensible. Figures of thought strive to make understandable and human a metaphysical reality which by definition has no true physical analogy and cannot be adequately expressed.

In the case of religious discourse, the denotative reality is not only an abstraction, but also poorly understood by the listener. So while we can claim that all people are thoroughly familiar with anger, we claim just the opposite about God. Spokesmen for Judaism since biblical times have asserted that God is a phenomenon which is both

ineffable and without true analogue.

Given this fact, in religious discourse the purpose of figurative language is not so much to render the familiar novel as it is to make an unknown and poorly understood tenor knowable and accessible through the vehicle of a familiar figure.

understandable analogy<---------- ineffable tenor
(familiar figure)

This distinction in turn leads to another in understanding the unique nature of figurative language in religious discourse.

Most theories of figure assume that it conveys discourse in a way different from common expression. In holding that, they imply that the ideas expressed through figurative language could be said another way [10]. Abrams notes that there are figures of speech which become such common usage that the distinction between tenor and figure is lost, and they cease to function as living figures. For example, the expression "piggyback" is a figurative expression meaning to carry someone or something on the upper back and shoulders. In English this phrase is really the only simple way of expressing that idea. Therefore the figure is "dead". "Piggyback" has become a denotative term. For a figure to really function as such, there must be a common or transparent alternative way of expressing a thought or

concept.

Yet the numinous nature of the things being explored in religious discourse raises the question of whether there really is any way, besides figurative language, to express theological ideas. And if there is no adequate "transparent" way of expressing such an idea, in what way is this still figurative language?

Pierre Fontanier, the French literary theorist, offers us some direction in explaining this problem of religious language. He argues that when a certain word belongs to a certain thing, it denotes it. Such a word constitutes the "proper meaning" of a thing. Yet a figure can also be used to describe the same reality "improperly". Fontanier goes on to acknowledge that one may resort to figure because there is a 'real lack' of the proper word. He goes on to speak of a resulting "lexical lacuna", a gap into which steps "improper" figurative language to convey the meaning. In the case where a figure is used because there is a lexical gap, the figurative process is called "catachresis"[11].

A dictionary defines catachresis as "the misuse or strained use of words". Though this word is used pejoratively in literary criticism, I can think of no more apt word to describe the entire figurative process in religious discourse. All religious figure involves the "improper" and "strained" use of words and associations borrowed from outside religion to convey ideas which lack more denotative expression. All theological use of figure is

"catachresis".

The use of catachresis is common to virtually every religious community, and largely for the same reasons. If it wishes to create a community which extends beyond the circle of those who shared in its defining and seminal experiences, every religion confronts the problem of how to communicate such experiences to those who may not directly have shared in them. Again we return to the issue touched upon in our discussion of figure. In order to endure and grow, religions must construct rhetorical models which explain to the uninitiated the meaning of basically ineffable religious experiences. By its very nature, religious discourse must rely on catachresis, using figures to fill a lacuna, a lacuna that exists not only in language, but in experience itself.

This brief discussion hardly exhausts what can be said about the subject of figurative language, for it seems the nature of figure comes very close to the essence of how we create meaning through language, a topic far beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, for the purposes of this study we will focus our interest on the following elements of figurative language:

Since we are most interested in the theological messages conveyed by the figures, we will concentrate on figurative language as *rhetoric*, as a device of argumentation and persuasion. Given that our study centers on how figures illustrate religious ideas, we will naturally focus on the

more conceptual *figures of thought*, rather than on figures of expression.

And since we are interested in how the Rabbis use figures to communicate their ideas of divine-human relationship, we will emphasize examining *extended tropes* involving multiple figures over single figures, unless the figure in question suggests an implied relationship which addresses our area of theological interest.

We will also consider the question of *catachresis*, the degree to which the Rabbis use figurative language out of preference or necessity, and what those choices reflect in their rhetorical project.

Figure in Midrash and Rabbinic Interpretations of Scripture

So far as we know, the Rabbis have no term for figurative language. They are aware of figurative narrative in the form of the משל and מעשה, but there is little or no evidence that they are self-conscious about of the full scope of how they use figures of thought, or that they have anything approaching a formal theory of figurative language regarding their religious discourse. As a recent critic has noted, the Rabbis are notoriously reticent about explaining their methodology [12].

However, an example of how the Rabbis use figures, whether self-consciously or not, can be seen in an early

passage from *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. Located in a discussion of whether Solomon should be counted among the wicked or the righteous, this passage includes a description of how certain propositional statements included in the discussion are validated from other sources. The passage makes reference to the use of three kinds of proofs,

> You find that righteous beget righteous, wicked beget wicked, righteous beget wicked, and wicked beget righteous, and all of these [claims] have [verification through] a Scripture, a משל and a מליצה (1.1.6).

Given our interest in figures, the presence of the word מליצה (which means 'figure' in modern Hebrew) is quite tantalizing, and hints at some self-consciousness about the way they use figures.

This passage from *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* echoes a verse in the biblical book of Proverbs, "...to understand a משל and a מליצה; words of the wise and their riddles (Prov. 1.6)". English Bible translations and biblical lexicons do in fact offer "figure" as a translation for מליצה, but the question is not so simply resolved. The word appears in only one other place in the Bible, in the book of Habbakuk. There it is used in a very different sense, as meaning a sarcastic remark or satire.

The equivocal meaning of מליצה carries over to its use in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, making it difficult for us to draw definitive conclusions. Because of this, and because the word does not again appear post-biblically outside *Shir*

Hashirim Rabbah until the medieval period, we can not be confident what the authors of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* meant when they used this biblical word in their context.

The passage in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* does offer an example to go along with their use of מליצה. The example they offer is a proverb: "What does a beetle give birth to? Insects worse then itself" (1.1.6). Unfortunately, while we would certainly consider this an example of figurative speech, neither the example given nor the context of its use allows us much evidence to generalize about how the Rabbis regarded figurative language in a programmatic sense.

However, the presentation of both the משל and the מליצה as a type of proof is suggestive of how the Rabbis use figure as a tool to confirm and convey their beliefs.

Introducing beetles and bugs into a discussion of kings and their moral qualities is a shining example of how figure serves the Rabbis in their quest to express their religious ideas. Here, as in figurative language generally, the message is allusive. It requires the listener to draw a parallel. The listeners knows the life of beetles to be physically repugnant, feeding on squalor and manure, and they also know that the byproduct of that life is offspring of equally repugnant caliber. The figure is not transparent in itself, but, placed in the context of dynastic royalty, it invites the listener to apply that image analogously to the less familiar life of kings in particular, and the more abstract realm of morality in general.

Use of figures leaves the parallels implied, and the task of linkage is left to the listener. Through the use of figures, the Rabbis include the listeners in the process of interpretation, and allow a certain latitude to draw the conclusions themselves. But by placing the figure in a highly specific context, where there is a striking juxtaposition between the figure and tenor, the interpretative possibilities are narrowed and channeled toward certain conclusions, at least on a surface reading. Returning to our example, the מליצה about beetles and their offspring could convey a different meaning in a different context, but here it instructs us about the transmission of moral temperament.

Moreover, the Rabbis do employ figures to confront a unique circumstance arising from the central place that sacred text occupies in Rabbinic civilization. In the Bible the Rabbis are the inheritors of a rich tradition of figurative usage and figurative symbols. But in addition to being a source of examples, the Bible simultaneously besets the Rabbis with problems. As mentioned earlier, a figurative vehicle works because it has attributes and qualities familiar to the listener which can be applied analogously to the tenor. Yet it may be that the associations being invoked are culture-bound, and the relationship between the figure and tenor may not be readily available to someone not immersed in that culture. Such a situation forces an audience to a more formal level of

interpretation. The challenge of making sense of figures outside of their cultural and historical context is amply demonstrated by the diverse and often strained explanations of modern Biblical scholars in their efforts to identify the tenors and the analogies at work in Shir Hashirim itself. Many such scholarly interpretations are documented in Robert Gordis' The Song of Songs and in Marvin H. Pope's The Song of Songs: A new Translation with Introduction and Commentary.

Though the temporal and cultural distance is less, the Rabbis confront the same problem and the same task. The Rabbis claim authority to leadership of their religious community through their mastery of a text, Scripture. But the Scripture, which they claim is both eternal and universal in scope, often seems historically bound, parochial and, at times, just obscure. So beyond the already daunting task of making sense out of their own existential condition, the task of the Rabbis is complicated by having to help their community view that situation through the lens of Scripture. Because of this need, they are forced to explain biblical figures which have become opaque over time, and which themselves are in need of interpretation, figurative or otherwise.

But this very situation, which seemingly presents an obstacle to communicating their immediate religious concerns, in the end proves a boon to the Rabbis. For ultimately it is their unparalleled prowess at biblical

interpretation that underpins their authority. And it is their deftness in recontextualizing biblical texts to their own circumstance by giving those texts meaningful figurative interpretation that constitutes their special contribution to the use of figure in religious discourse.

So the uniqueness of Rabbinic use of figure arises from the two-fold nature of their project. First, in common with any religious group, they need to find suitable language to communicate ineffable but crucial religious experiences to their intended audience (and to themselves). Figurative expression is the linguistic tool best suited to the task. At the same time they need to make sense of scriptures which are supposed to anticipate and to teach about those very experiences, but which have become, to use the metaphor of the tenth-century writer Pseudo-Saadya, "a lock to which the key has been lost" [13]. As it turns out, in both cases figurative language with its analogous logic is the vehicle to bring the audience to the metaphysical tenor which needs to be made understandable.

Two Types of Figures in Rabbinic Discourse

In exploring the Rabbinic use of figurative language, therefore, we are really dealing with two types of figures. These figures reflect the two-fold task undertaken by the Rabbis.

The first type of figure is the one already present in the

text of the Bible. Bequeathed to the Rabbis by Scripture, these are figures in search of meaningful tenors. Already existent, they await exegesis suitable to revitalize them for their new audience. An example of this would be the figure of the lily growing amidst thorns found in *Shir Hashirim* 2.2. In order to make religious sense of this figure, in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 2.2.2, Rabbi Eliezer applies it to the Jewish experience in Egyptian exile. Eliezer understands Israel ~~to~~ be the tenor of the lily, and the surrounding Egyptian nation to be the tenor of the thorns. Of course there is much more to be said about this figure and how it is interpreted, but that is not our immediate concern. Suffice for now that it serves to illustrate a type of figure in Rabbinic discourse. In subsequent discussion, we will refer to such a figure drawn from the biblical text as an "exegetical figure".

The second type of figure is that which, while it may be inspired by Scripture, or may serve to explain Scripture, is not limited to the images found in the biblical text being explored. These figures may either serve to further illustrate the text or to explain a religious idea, but their figurative imagery is not wholly derived from the biblical text under discussion.

This type of figurative expansion or 'spin-off' is exemplified by the parable introduced immediately following Rabbi Eliezer's discussion (2.2.3). It too is intended to explain the figure of the lily and the thorns,

> Rabbi Azariah said in the name of Rabbi Judah who received it from R. Simon: A king once had an orchard where they planted a row of fig trees and a row of vines and a row of pomegranates and a row of apples. Then he turned it over to a guard and went away. After a while the king came and inspected the orchard and to learn how it was doing. He found it full of thorns and briars. So he brought woodcutters to chop it down. But when he saw in it a single lily of pink, he took it and smelt it, and was soothed because of it, so the king said, "because of this lily, the orchard is saved"... For the sake of the Torah and those who study it, let the world be delivered.

Obviously, this figurative narrative, while springing from the biblical text, is a 'figure of thought' in its own right. It introduces figures not present in the biblical text (the king, the orchard, the various servants), and integrates them with the stock figures from the verse.

Such an extended figure is not wholly independent of the biblical figure, but is clearly an expansion intended to permit a richer, more complex interpretation of the inherited figure. It is also in these expanded figures that true 'recontextualization' occurs, and we see the Rabbis addressing their own immediate and contemporary concerns.

Even here we should note that the figurative use of a king to stand in for God, or of a garden to signify the world, is not an innovation of this particular text, or even of the Rabbis themselves. It, too, has its origins in the biblical milieu. Yet these familiar figures, some borrowed directly from the text under discussion, others brought from

more distant sources, are combined and presented in a new context, yielding what is in an effect an extended figure used to illustrate another extended figure. The result is a much more complex figure. Such an extended figure is not as purely symbolic as the one-to-one association of figure to tenor we have seen in the earlier exegetical figure. This added complexity allows for fuller exploration of the relational and emotive aspects that the Rabbis find in the divine - Jewish encounter, and it is here will meet the boldest personifications of God and Israel as the Rabbis attempt to map the nature of this relationship for their audience.

In his discussion of early biblical interpretation , James Kugel talks about a similar phenomenon in how biblical stories are treated. Such combinations of images drawn from the biblical verse with outside motifs and characters are called by Kugel "narrative expansions"[14]. This is a very useful term, and while our issues only somewhat overlap with those of Kugel, his characterization of how midrash treats biblical narrative parallels how midrash treats figures in the Bible. Therefore, with a nod to Kugel, we will refer to this type of extended secondary figure as a "figurative expansion" of the biblical figures.

The Psychology of Figurative Language

The Bible provides the Rabbis with a wide array of figurative images for God. Even in the description of the numinous event of creation, the author of the creation story must rely on figurative expression in mentioning God, as when he writes of the ...BREATH OF GOD SWEEPING OVER THE WATERS (Gen. 1.2). Exegetes have debated the intent of this phrase for millennia, but the author is at least alluding to an image of God exhaling to invoke a sense of dynamism ready to transform the static void.

Biblical authors describe God by using figures drawn from human, animal and even inanimate realms. The tone is set early for the use of human figures in describing God by having God declare, LET US CREATE GOD IN OUR IMAGE (Gen. 1.26). From that moment on, specifically anthropomorphic figures are the preferred image for the deity. Notable human figures used to represent God include a father (II Samuel 2.7), a mother (Isaiah 66.13), a king (I Samuel 1.12), a judge (Psalms 7.12), a warrior (Exodus 15.10), a midwife (Job 38.29), a shepherd (Psalms 23.1), a fisherman (Ezekiel 29.4), an old man (Daniel 7.9) and even a woman in labor (Isaiah 42.14).

But the biblical authors did not limit themselves to the anthropomorphic. Zoomorphic figures of God also appear in the Bible. So God is compared to a bear (Lamentations), a leopard (Hosea 13.7), a lion (Amos 3.8), and an eagle

(Deuteronomy 32.11).

Even entities we would consider inanimate or alien are employed as figures for God, usually to convey a sense of immutability. Most famous of these, God is described as a rock (Deuteronomy 32.4). But God is also represented by other non-biological entities, such as the sun, a shield (Psalms 84.11) or a fortress (II Samuel 22.2), or meteorological phenomena, such as clouds and thunder (Exodus 16.10).

As the list above suggests, figures for God are heavily weighted toward the anthropomorphic. Even when the figure chosen is not borrowed from the human realm, the non-human figures used are virtually all animate, or least can be perceived as dynamic and active. Only the figure of the rock suggests tropes like stability and eternality which are essentially inert.

This emphasis on anthropomorphic and animate figures is a function of our own perceptual and psychological needs. While the need to use figure in its largest sense arises from our inability to say anything meaningful about God without such images, the heavy reliance on anthropomorphic figures in religious discourse reflects psychological processes, both perceptual and affective. We make sense of our experience of the world largely through anthropomorphism. Even impersonal forces are personified by us.

The fact that we prefer animate figures is a product of our own perceptual/affective need. Perceptually, we are conditioned to see the world in anthropomorphic terms as a matter of survival. Stewart Guthrie regards this aspect of human perception to be an essential evolutionary adaptation:

> We animate and anthropomorphize because, when we see something as alive or humanlike, we can take precautions. If we see it as alive we can, for example, stalk it or flee. If we see it as human-like we can try to establish a social relationship. If it turns out not to be alive or human like, we usually lose little by having thought it was... in short, animism and anthropomorphism stem from the principle "better safe then sorry"[15].

Implicit in this discussion is the assumption that we are better able to deal with living entities because we possess considerable familiarity with how they behave, that we can more readily make analogies from ourselves and apply them to the thing encountered. The fact that we know, or can impute, the attributes and capacities of something alive and "like us" more easily then we can something alien and "unlike us" is both useful and innate.

Jean Piaget, the developmental psychologist, describes this phenomenon as "animism", and treats it as a "flaw" in reasoning at early stages of human development. Piaget believes children perceive something inanimate as animate because, in effect, they are naive. They make the mistake of categorizing something as living because it behaves dynamically, and because it seems to have a "use", which

children confuse with intention. Piaget considers animism as uniquely associated with childhood, a cognitive strategy which diminishes with developmental progress[16].

Guthrie, on the other hand, argues persuasively that animism is perceptual, and, to a certain degree, constant in humans regardless of developmental stage. Because living things are both potentially the most dangerous and the most controllable, we perceptually seek their patterns in the workings of the world[17].

In considering the role of perception in the use of figurative language, it is helpful to recognize that anthropomorphic and animate figures are the easiest for us to schematize. Since a figure of thought involves identifying a trope that makes sense of the tenor, we prefer animate figures because the tropes of animate beings are the most accessible and readily understood.

psychologists believe that we engage in a cognitive process, structured into the very process of perception, of interpreting what we perceive, of imposing patterns on the information given by our senses, of perceiving data as something already included in our schemata. Innately interpretive beings, we perceive analogously. We make connections and associations between disparate things. This search for pattern and imposition of order on inchoate experience is how we formulate meaning. The psychologist Rudolf Armheim writes,

> ...the cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredient of perception itself. I am referring to...active exploration, completion, comparison...combining, separating, putting in context...[18]

Piaget understands perceptual interpretation as an ordering of experience through the creation of internal models, or schemata[19]. Through a process of matching new data to existing schema and revising those schemata when new data do not fit into any existing mental models, we impose order on the chaotic flood of data which our sensory perception takes in.

Piaget also describes a human tendency to see a cause-and-effect relationship in discrete events which occur close together. Interestingly, he links this phenomenon, which he calls "transductive reasoning", to animism[20]. And again, he assigns it to an early developmental stage, a cognitive tendency which he believes markedly diminishes as our ability to track cause-and-effect relationships mature.

Yet anyone who has ever tried to verbally coax his car into starting or felt a guilty pang that an accident came upon us as retribution for an earlier moral lapse knows that animism and transductive reasoning are not limited to childhood. Even as adults, when confronted with a circumstance where poorly understood forces are at work, we look immediately for a pattern of organization to the event. And the first pattern we look for is the one we understand best, a pattern indicating the purposefulness of a living

entity, preferably a human entity.

Interestingly, even the medieval Jewish philosopher Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides) weighs into this issue by asserting (in his distinctly 'medieval' way), that our decision to envision God anthropomorphically is a psychological one. He argues that, since most people conceive only of entities that are bodies, therefore Scripture describes God as having a body. We conceptualize God out of a necessity to address the numinous in a sensible way (Guide for the Perplexed, I.33; I.59). Maimonides, like Piaget, understands this in developmental terms, and treats this need as one which can and should be overcome. Maimonides even goes so far as to use the developmental stages of a child as an analogy!

Piaget's insights are of interest to us because at the heart of a figure of thought is the bringing together of two disparate entities and engaging the reader in finding the connection between them. In effect, figurative language exploits our natural need to interpret and find meaning. By applying our transductive reasoning to figurative language, the figure helps us move beyond an inchoate religious experience, and imposes order and meaning on it.

The second psychological aspect which comes into play to make anthropomorphic figures of deity so potent and useful is the psycho-social. We discussed above how our capacity for perceptual interpretation makes God comprehensible when "he" is portrayed anthropomorphically, but an

anthropomorphic deity is also one we can engage and relate to. As Guthrie noted earlier, while we can more effectively cope with something we believe is alive (fight or flight), we can also enter into social relationship with something human.

As is well know, from the earliest stages of development, infants show the most interest in sounds which resemble the human voice. Most relevant to Guthrie's claim, they also respond interactively with a human voice much more than with any other aural stimulus[21]. This orientation toward seeking human-like interactions persists in adulthood. Guthrie exhaustively illustrates how human beings, when looking at a group of objects, regularly ascribe social arrangements to them. Both philosophers and social scientists have commented on how we consistently perceive the world in terms of human social relationships.

More than just a perceptual event, we consistently attempt to interact with the non-human. When we do so, we apply the rules of human relationships to those interactive situations. For example, we frequently assume animals, and even machines, understand human language. Illustrative of this is my wife's habit of beginning a reprimand of our dog with the words "Kenzie, you know the rules!", or my own habit of thanking my computer when it boots up without a problem. All this suggests we not only seek out human qualities in the non-human, but we look to engage the non-human world socially.

God as Anthropopath and Anthropomorph

By the same logic, in order for us to enter into relationship with God, a certain amount of anthropomorphism, or at least anthropopathism, is necessary. I say anthropopathism because at the very least we must have some sense of God as 'person'. While it is possible for us to conceive of a non-anthropomorphic God, we cannot easily relate to such a God in any way recognizably religious. Guthrie cites Ian Barbour in this regard,

> Faith in God is an aspect of a personal relationship, resembling...faith in a friend or in one's doctor, or a husband's faith in his wife[22].

But why is being able to relate to God as if he were human so important? Is it not possible to live religiously with a non-anthropomorphic conception of God? Certainly some have tried. Within the Jewish tradition, Maimonides is the outstanding example of an individual who promotes a non-anthropomorphic notion of God as an indispensable basis for a genuine religious life. But his contemporaries found his claim that the incorporeality of God was a basic doctrine of Judaism to be specious. Rabbi Avraham ben David (Ravad) sharply criticizes him, saying "greater men then he (Maimonides) believe God possesses a body". Given the Rabbinic predilection for anthropomorphic speech, Ravad certainly was referring to the Rabbis. As Ravad no doubt

recognized, most people find completely abstracted concepts of deity meaningless and pointless to worship. A concept of God like that posited by Maimonides seems, to use David Hume's words, closer to atheism than to religion[23].

Anthropomorphism is necessary because ultimately religion is grounded in the essential human psycho-social need for relationship. Starting with the groundbreaking research of Harry and Margaret Harlow on the effects of social deprivation on monkeys, psychology has accumulated compelling evidence that social relationships are indispensable for normal human development[24]. As cited by Guthrie, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz characterizes religion as just such a manifestation of the need for social relationship,

> ...rather than detachment, its (religion's) watchword is commitment; rather then analysis, engagement[25].

Everything we have come to know about human perception and cognition, about our psychological needs, and about ourselves as social beings helps to account for why anthropomorphism is a necessary component in religious discourse on the divine. It is necessary because it is the inescapable way we create meaning for ourselves in our interactions with the world. It is also a potent and powerful answer to our craving for social relationship.

This is especially true of Judaism. Encounter and commitment, both social processes, are themes which permeate

biblical religion. As many commentators have noted, the Hebrew word for "faith", אמונה, also carries the meaning of "trust". Both meanings, in their verbal forms, are transitive. Biblical faith requires that adherents "trust in", or "have faith in", someone. Such attitudes of religion as relationship make anthropomorphic portrayals of God not only possible, but indispensable. The Rabbis, as conservators and builders on the biblical tradition, also embrace anthropomorphic depictions of deity.

And from the very earliest stages, this need to relate includes an affective dimension. God is not only portrayed as anthropomorphic, but more importantly as anthropopathic, as possessing a human psyche, i.e., personality. This term is usually applied specifically to ascription of emotion to God[26].

The biblical descriptions of the human-like emotions of God are manifold. Werblowsky considers such affective images of God to be even more prevalent in the Bible than physical anthropomorphisms. Rabbinic literature does little to mitigate such portrayals, and at times seem to revel in their use [27].

Since the ascendancy of Western philosophical thought beginning in classical antiquity, Westernized Judaism has regarded anthropomorphism applied to God as problematic. Despite that, even sophisticated religious thinkers continue to employ anthropopathic language, all the while defending its validity in religious discourse[28].

Psychologically, finding emotion in a situation is also an act of interpretation. We have a very poor understanding of emotions, whether they be our own or those of others. Consider for a moment how much attention and effort we give to appraising and determining the emotional state of a child. Our efforts in such a situation are reflective of both the elusive quality of feeling, and of how we nevertheless avidly seek to identity the emotion involved as an additional tool in determining meaning. Despite their elusiveness, emotions are involved in all human thought and action, and because of that are invaluable in obtaining the fullest possible meaning in a social relationship.

Since deducing the emotion in a situation is helpful, it, too, is an integral part of our perceptual strategy. This has been recognized since the Middle Ages, when the scientist-philospher-monk Francis Bacon noted (as cited by Guthrie), "The human understanding is no dry light, but receives an infusion from the wills and affections". In literature the phenomenon of imputing human emotions to the non-human is recognized as almost universal, and goes by the name of the "pathetic fallacy" [29].

Emotion is an indispensable component in figurative language. While figure carries a descriptive component in its tropes, it also conveys an attitude toward the tenor. As I. A. Richards puts it, metaphoric language in general inculcates "fitting attitudes to experience"[30]. Metaphors are rarely purely descriptive, but also bear emotive force.

True of metaphoric language as a whole, this is all the more true of any anthropomorphic figure. We cannot consider an image of a mother, father, wife, or child without that image invoking some emotional response. The figurative language of the Rabbis taps into this response every time metaphysical relationships are characterized in extended figures as familial. As soon as we read that the relationship of God and Israel is like the relationship of a father and son, our emotions are involved in interpreting the figures. Exactly what kind of emotional content we attribute to such a figure will be highly variable, a complex mix of our culturally conditioned attitudes and our own personal emotional associations with that particular type of relationship.

All of which brings us to the question of whether we can actually claim with any confidence that the anthropomorphic descriptions of deity found in Rabbinic writings are in fact figurative. Is it not possible, as Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Gedliahu Stroumsa have proposed, that the Rabbis take their anthropomorphic descriptions literally, and that the Rabbis believe that God in reality has an anthropomorphic (albeit cosmic-sized) body? That would throw into question whether the Rabbis really are speaking of God in figurative terms when they use anthropomorphic language.

Here it is important to remember a distinction that has been made before, the distinction between anthropomorphism, the ascribing of human physique to God, and anthropopathism,

the ascribing of human personality to God. While it is commonplace to conflate the two under the term "anthropomorphism", I would argue these are two distinct issues as they relate to the Rabbis. It seems quite clear that in their building upon the biblical heritage, the Rabbis take quite seriously the idea that God is anthropopathic. They clearly believe that his personality parallels human personality in both its reasoning and emotional characteristics.

On the other hand, I would argue that, for all its pervasiveness, the Rabbis understood anthropomorphic language as figurative, and that understanding many (but not all) of the physically humanoid descriptions of God literally was regarded as an open problem within Rabbinic Judaism.

That the Rabbis knew anthropomorphism to be a problem is evident within Rabbinic literature itself. We can see this from their discussion in T.B. Megillah 9a, where they consider the Septuagint translation and the changes it makes in the Hebrew original.

This itself is enough to indicate the Rabbis were aware of the issues surrounding physical anthropomorphism, but did that knowledge affect them in their own attitudes? In their own writings they certainly never retreat from anthropomorphic expressions. But by the same token, the literature suggests they did not take their own idioms and images of God too literally[31].

The rhetoric of Midrash itself indicates that the Rabbis clearly understand their anthropomorphic speech to be figurative. When using anthropomorphic images of God, whether in brief analogies or in extended narratives, they almost inevitably frame those images in the language of simile; "God is like...", "God is compared to...", "If one could say...", "it is similar to...". Semantically, a simile makes a comparison, or draws a parallel between two objects without claiming they are one and the same. True metaphor, where one thing is identified as another thing, is rare in Rabbinic discourse. This is especially true when it comes to describing God. The Rabbis are very careful in their choice of rhetoric, and their almost complete reliance on simile over metaphor reveals the figurative nature of their discourse.

And what of the attitude of the particular sages who composed *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*? The text of *Shir Hashirim* offers any commentators who believe God to have a body ample opportunity to expound on that notion. This is especially true of the very body-focused description of the male lover found in Chapter 5.10-16. The authors of Shi'ur Komah lean heavily on *Shir Hashirim*, and precisely this passage, for their concretely anthropomorphic vision of God[32]. Likewise, in Shir Hakavod, composed by the medieval Hasidei Ashzenaz, the writers also clearly allude to this passage in offering their blatantly anthropomorphic image of divinity[33]. Yet when the reader turns to the exegesis of these passages in

Shir Hashirim Rabbah, he discovers that the authors there give these descriptions an entirely different exegetical spin. *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* understands the human lover to be a figure for any number of things: the body ecclesiastic of Israel, the Torah, the world itself; anything, that is, except for God. *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* studiously avoids treating this human figure as representing anything like divinity itself.

All of this indicates two things. First, that the authors of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* understood God to be truly anthropopathic. Indeed, that assumption is central to both their figurative rhetoric and their conception(s) of God. Second, that anthropomorphic depictions of God are indeed to intended to be understood figuratively.

Notes for Chapter 2

1) Paul Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, p. 60.

2) M.H.Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, p. 61.

3) The Rule of Metaphor, p. 17.

4) A Glossary of Literary Terms, pp. 60-61.

5) The Rule of Metaphor, pp. 9-10.

6) A Glossary of Literary Terms, p. 60.

7) The Rule of Metaphor, pp. 45-47.

8) Herbert Brichto, Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics, pp. 31-32.

9) The Rule of Metaphor, p. 51.

10) A Glossary of Literary Terms, p. 60.

11) The Rule of Metaphor, p. 46.

12) David Stern, Parables in Midrash, p. 63.

13) Daniel Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash, p. 105.

14) James Kugel, In Potiphar's House, pp. 3-5.

15) Stewart Guthrie, Faces In the Clouds, p. 5.

16) David R. Shaffer, Developmental Psychology. pp. 215.

17) Faces In the Clouds, pp. 120-21.

18) Rudolph Armheim, Visual Thinking, p. 13.

19) Developmental Psychology, p 59.

20) Ibid., p. 219.

21) Ibid., p. 194.

22) Faces In the Clouds, p. 30.

23) Ibid, p. 178.

24) Developmental Psychology, pp. 421-24.

25) Faces In the Clouds, p. 29.

26) R.J. Werblowsky, "Anthropomorphism", Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 1, P. 317.

27) Jacob Neusner, The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism, 1988, p. 28.

28) A.J. Heschel, The Prophets, Vol. II, p. 44.

29) A Glossary of Literary Terms, pp. 121-22.

30) W.P. Aston,"Emotive Meaning", The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, vol. 2, p. 487.

31) David Stern, Imitatio Hominis, p. 171.

32) Gershom Scholem,"Shi'ur Komah", The Mystical Shape of the Godhead, 1992, p. 22.

33) Schorsch, I., "Poetry and Pietism: The Hymn of Glory", Judaism, Fall 1988, pp. 68-71).

Chapter 3

The Images of Relationship

The Mishna informs us that when Rabbi Akiba, the second century Tanna, heard that an earlier generation of sages had expressed doubts about the sacred nature of *Shir Hashirim*, he declared, "The whole world is not worthy of the day *Shir Hashirim* was given to Israel, for if all the Writings are holy, then *Shir Hashirim* is the Holy of Holies" (M. Yadayim 3.5).

When it comes to the question of poetic and figurative language, the biblical literary critic is tempted to speak in similar terms. As far as poetics are concerned, if all Scripture is figurative, *Shir Hashirim* truly is the greatest source of figures. No other biblical document offers us such a rich visual and metaphoric feast.

With the exception of perhaps the Psalms, other books of the Bible are extremely reticent when it comes to describing the natural environment, in either denotative or connotative terms. By comparison, *Shir Hashirim* veritably floods the reader with images. Nature serves *Shir Hashirim* for both figure and referent, saturating the reader with sensory descriptions.

Likewise, in the main, biblical narratives are frustratingly silent about the physical description of the characters who populate their pages. *Shir Hashirim*, however, revels in describing the human body, figuratively or

otherwise.

Animal, Mineral, Vegetable: Exegetical Figures from Shir Hashirim

The catalog of things named and described in Shir Hashirim is truly impressive. It includes hills, cliffs, pools and valleys; flowers, fruits and spices; rocks, minerals and gemstones; liquids edible and aromatic; animals domestic and wild; humans both regal and lowly. It offers settings pastoral, agricultural and urban, indoors and out. It invokes seasons with all their sensorium and activities, both animal and human.

Some of these images are included because they are the tenors, the objects of the poet's interest. Most of the descriptions which are not overtly figurative are usually embedded in action narratives, which relate a sequence of events,

> I arose to open to my beloved; and my hands dripped with myrrh, and my fingers with flowing myrrh... I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. The watchmen that went around in the city found me, they struck me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me (Shir 5.6-7).

This passage certainly is richly descriptive, but it is not self-evidently figurative. Its images are denotative, and could be a recounting of an actual rather then a figurative incident.

Less common is an image which is offered denotatively without being part of an action or event, as we have with this description of the male lover, MY BELOVED IS CLEAR-SKINNED AND RUDDY...(Shir. 5.10).

Though there are several examples of both these kinds of descriptive images found throughout the text, the overwhelming majority of the images are offered metaphorically. They are intended to serve as figures of speech and thought, dislocations selected to offer powerful tropes for the reader to associate with the referent images, as the continuation of Shir 5.11 demonstrates, ...HIS HEAD IS FINEST GOLD, HIS LOCKS ARE CURLED AND BLACK AS A RAVEN

Robert Alter divides these figures into three types: conventional images, intensive images and innovative images. The first two consist of stock figures, commonly utilized in writings of the biblical milieu, and elaborations of those stock images. The third is an "inventive similitude", a little used or arresting dislocation[1]. *Shir Hashirim* is full of all three types of figures. But more interesting to us than the taxonomy of the figures, per se, is how so many different figures are ultimately employed to illustrate a limited number of tenors. So far as a contextual reading allows us to identify the subjects of all these metaphoric images, those subjects are largely the physical beauty and stature of the male and female body, and the emotions of love, longing and despair. All these varied figures ultimately serve to highlight relatively few tenors

associated with love. Like the song writers of today, the author of *Shir Hashirim* is forever searching for a fresh new way to express the same basic sentiment.

Exegetically, these figures are treated in the same way by the Rabbis. All the richness and diversity of figures bequeathed to them in *Shir Hashirim* are interpreted to refer to a surprisingly limited range of things and ideas. Whatever the original intent of the biblical author, the Rabbis redeploy the figures of *Shir Hashirim* in the service of the love relationship foremost on their mind, and once again, many different images come to stand in for a surprisingly small number of tenors. Neusner describes this phenomenon when he writes,

> ...our sages identify implicit meanings that are always few...time and again we are told that...the poetry of Song of Songs is God's speaking to Israel about (1) the Sea, (2)Sinai, (3) the world to come; or (1) the first redemption, the one from Egypt;(2) the second redemption, the one from Babylonia; and (3) the third redemption, the one at the end of time[2].

A good illustration of this is found in pericope 1.2.3. Here the Rabbis take four different figures found in Shir Hashirim, and tie them all to one tenor, namely Torah,

> FOR YOUR LOVE IS MORE DELIGHTFUL THEN WINE. Words of Torah are compared to water, wine, oil,milk and honey. To water, HO, ALL WHO ARE THIRSTY, COME FOR WATER...{INCLINE YOUR EAR AND COME TO ME, LISTEN, AND YOU WILL BE REVIVED}(Is. 55.1-3)...Just as water is life[sustaining]for the world, as it is written, A SPRING OF GARDENS,A WELL OF LIVING WATERS (Shir.

> 4.15), so the Torah is life[sustaining] for the world, as it is written, FOR THEY ARE LIFE TO THOSE THAT FIND THEM AND HEALTH TO ALL THEIR FLESH Prov. 4.22)...it is compared with wine written, AND WINE WHICH GLADDENS THE HEART OF MAN (Ps. 104.15), so words of Torah rejoices the heart, as it is written, THE PRECEPTS OF THE LORD ARE RIGHT, GLADDENING THE HEART (Ps. 14.9)...it is compared to milk and honey: just as these remain sweet to the end, so too the words of Torah, as it teaches[elsewhere] saying, HONEY AND MILK (Shir 4.11). Just as they are sweet, so too words of Torah are sweet, SWEETER THEN HONEY (Ps. 19.11).

As the exegesis readily demonstrates, the Rabbis link the figures from three *Shir Hashirim* verses to Torah: water (4.15), wine (1.2), and milk (4.11). Surprisingly, oil, a figure which appears several times in *Shir Hashirim*, is identified as standing in for Torah, but this pericope does not explicitly link the idea to a verse from *Shir Hashirim*. Still, the connection is there, since the equation of oil to Torah (among other things) is made one verse later in *Shir R.*:

> YOUR OINTMENTS YIELD A GOOD FRAGRANCE, YOUR NAME IS LIKE FINEST OIL (Shir 1.3)...the reference is to the two Torahs, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah ...(1.3.2).

There is a fabulous economy to Rabbinic use of exegetical figures. Their operating assumption is that all the diverse figures found in Shir Hashirim are in fact dislocations, almost code names, for a very restricted number of objects.

To the modern eye, this seems arbitrary. Rather than seeking out the more obvious tenors suggested by a

contextual reading, the Rabbis seem to impose their pre-selected tenors on the text, regardless of what the reader thinks the tenor ought to be. Yet the interpretations are far from arbitrary. As can be seen in the above example, the Rabbis are careful to both establish that their choice of tenor is plausible, and to make explicit the trope between the figure and the tenor. The link between figure and tenor they achieve through the use of an intertextual reading.

In our example, they show that the prophet Isaiah (55.1-3) used water as a similitude for the word of God. They then offer the 'life-sustaining' trope, to argue that just as water is the prerequisite of life, the same can be said of Torah. So what initially strikes the modern reader as an unjustified leap in association is shown through the rhetoric of Rabbinic exegesis to be a plausible linkage.

We have seen a sampling of how the Rabbis identify the referents for these biblical figures, so the next logical question is, precisely who and what are the tenors of their "highly restricted vocabulary"?

Some of them are temporal, the milestone events of Israel's meta-historic experience, such as the Exodus, the revelation at Sinai, exile, and the anticipated final redemption.

Other tenors are assumed to be luminary personages from that same meta-history: the patriarchs; Moses, who is understood to be one of the two breast (Aaron is the other) of *Shir* 4.5; the notable Israelitė kings, David and his son

Solomon, the latter of whom the Rabbis explicitly identify as the author of *Shir Hashirim*.

Then there are those tenors which the Rabbis identify as the fixed, constant elements in their account of this figurative relationship. A few of these fixed elements are symbols of the covenant, such as the Torah, as we saw earlier. Another is the two tablets Moses brought down from Sinai, which are identified with the figure of the hands of the male lover (*Shir. R.* 5.14.1). There are the lower realms of creation, our world, understood to be the two legs/pillars of the male lover described later in the same passage. The list goes on, a concise and fairly complete catalog of the things which most engaged the Rabbis' religious imagination.

The most complex tenors, the ones which attract the most figurative treatment, are the protagonists, and the antagonists in this relationship, namely Israel, God, and the nations who are rivals for God's affection.

Israel is subject to frequent personification in Rabbinic discourse, as where *Shir R.* identifies Israel with the female subject of *Shir* 4.1, or with the dove in 6.19. Later, in our treatment of expanded figures, we will discuss how Israel is often figuratively portrayed as one individual in tumultuous union with God. For now it is helpful to be aware of how Israel invites complex treatment in part because she is not portrayed very consistently from one Rabbinic figure to another. Many, many figures are linked to Israel,

involving many different tropes and images.

The Rabbis are very deft at dealing with this complexity by subdividing Israel into different groups, each usually assigned its own scriptural figure. Such distinct entities within כנסת ישראל, the community of Israel, include the Sanhedrin (figuratively the "eyes" of feminine Israel in *Shir* 4.2), the Priesthood and the crown (the shields and armor of *Shir* 4.4), and the sages themselves (the bride with honeyed mouth of *Shir* 4.11).

The Rabbis also find in various figures references to Israel's highly variable moral and spiritual condition: righteous Israel and sinful Israel (the woman who is 'black, yet beautiful' of Shir. 1.5), Israel who longs for her divine partner (the woman who opens the door, Shir. 5.1) and Israel who dreads the intimacy of divine encounter (the figure of the veil, *Shir* 4.3). The cataloging of such figures and tenors, all subsumed within Israel, could go on and on.

By comparison, almost the reverse occurs in how the Rabbis treat the rivals for God's affection, the nations who claim to have supplanted Israel. They too are linked to numerous figures, but in *Shir. R.* they often become one, undifferentiated referent. *Shir R.* makes little attempt to distinguish or identify the various real groups who vex Israel. This is actually a reversal of the general trend in other midrashic compilations, which often lavish considerable energy in linking biblical verses to specific

groups, such as Rome, Gnostics, Persians and other groups and nations who have populated Israel's historical experience. One of the few times the authors of Shir R. assign an exegetical figure to a specific rival is in *Shir* 1.6, where the neglected vineyard (understood to be Israel's heritage lost through disobedience) passes to new keepers, and Rome is specified as the new keeper.

It is more common for *Shir R.* to leave the nations an undifferentiated mass (*Shir. R.* 1.2). Even when the exegesis seems to be directed pointedly at the claims of a specific group (in this case, Christians), the tenor remains identified only as אומות העולם "nations of the world" (*Shir* 1.6).

In the long process of Rabbinic discourse, these exegetical figures and their referents have become stock, even stereotyped, like the standard array of characters in a Hollywood action film. The Rabbis were teachers in a traditional milieu, and because of this they valued repetition and the frequent retelling of the same stories. As a result, these same referents were continuously reviewed, if often in recast configurations, each playing its expected roles in the meta-historical and metaphysical drama of the figurative relationship. And because of that very same traditionalism, Rabbinic culture remained conservative, so rarely do we see truly novel conflicts or configurations. The rehearsal and recreation of these divinely infused events is the way of Rabbinic discourse,

and the goal is to reexperience the past and make it present, even eternal. As a result these exegetical figures became part of the Rabbinic "code". The same small groups of tenors were assumed to be encoded in the many figures of Shir Hashirim, which were read accordingly, creating a complex web of tenors, tropes and figures.

But as complex as is the presentation of Israel, the character who emerges from Rabbinic exegesis as the most complex and carefully nuanced is God. Unlike Israel, the Rabbis have less liberty to neatly divide God's character into distinct groups and categories. As the one undivided and powerful actor on the stage of history, all God's conflicts must by necessity be internal. Israel may be understood to be made of discrete conflicting forces. Those different groups within Israel allow the Rabbis to relieve some of Israel's internal 'psychological' tension through a kind of sociological mapping of the stress lines.

The character of God does not enjoy that luxury. God may be represented by many figures, but he remains for the Rabbis an individual, rather than a corporate entity[3]. As a result the conflicting portrayals of him which appear in Rabbinic writings culminate in the impression that God is a deeply conflicted 'person'. The tension these different exegetical figures help to create is really too psychologically potent to remain in the realm of pure 'code', simple symbolic substitution. These conflicts in God's character must be worked out with more subtlety than

the simpler exegetical figures permit. Thus the Rabbinic impulse to create expanded figures.

As this discussion illustrates, the multiplicity of figures in *Shir Hashirim* does not automatically compel the Rabbis to adopt a multiplicity of referents. While they make some effort to refer different exegetical figures to different elements within Israel, the tendency is to treat these many images as referring to a limited repertoire of tenors. This in turn tends to produce a highly symbolic and abstracted reading of the texts. At the same time it creates a highly complex web of associations and tropes around a single tenor.

As Guthrie has explained, even when confronted with groups of abstract figures, the perceptual tendency is to see them as social groupings. In addition to this perceptual strategy there is a psycho-social need to explain these complex groupings of symbols by seeking analogies in the most complex systems known to us, namely ourselves. Thus compelled, the Rabbis turn to a second, more 'human' level of figurative discourse, that of the expanded figure.

The King and his Court:
The Expanded Figures of Shir Hashirim Rabbah

In their efforts to reveal the figures of Shir Hashirim to be symbols of a figurative relationship, the sages initially engage in a kind of cryptography. Seeing Shir

Hashirim as encoded speech, the Rabbis believe the message is embedded in the figures, and that that message addresses issues they regard as most important from their own theological perspective. To break the code they employ intertextual readings from other biblical books, using the related words and ideas found in those verses to link the biblical figures to the sought-after tenors.

The result is a skeletal and symbolic juxtaposition of various events, people and objects. Many of these juxtapositions create tropes which are suggestive of various relationships. Having identified these various figures, the Rabbinic task now becomes fleshing out these relationships and making explicit the meaning of these symbols. To do this they create figurative expansions.

Figurative expansions consist of turning the symbolic groupings into relational situations, usually narratives, which use familiar human relationships as the pattern for the metaphysical relationship under consideration. For the Rabbis, even if the figures are not to be taken literally, the relationships which they serve to map out are. For the Rabbis, it is the relationships that are key, and they are totally homologous to the one they create figuratively.

Narrative expansions usually come in one of three forms: intertextual expansions; intertextual narratives; and *meshalim*.

An excellent example of all three types of these expansions is found in *Shir. R.*'s treatment of *Shir.* 2.14, O MY DOVE,

IN THE CLEFT OF THE ROCKS...LET ME HEAR YOUR VOICE.

Of the three, the first type, the intertextual expansion spells out the figures and their tenors using intertextual readings. By the inclusion of other figures drawn from the intertextual verses, the Sages place the figures into complex relationship with one another. What makes this particular form an expansion rather then a simple exposition of the figures is the introduction of the additional figures which are not found in the base verse itself:

> O MY DOVE, THAT ART IN THE CLEFTS OF THE ROCK... R. Johanan said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: I call Israel a dove, as it is written, AND EPHRAIM IS BECOME A SILLY DOVE WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING (Hos. 7.11). To me they are like a dove, but to the nations they are like various kinds of wild beasts, as it is written, JUDAH IS A LION'S WHELP (Gen. 49.9), NAPHTALI IS A HIND LET LOOSE(ver. 21), DAN SHALL BE A SERPENT IN THE WAY (ver. 17), BENJAMIN IS A RAVENOUS WOLF (ver. 27) and all the twelve tribes are likened to wild beasts. For the nations make war with Israel and say to them, 'What do you want with the sabbath and circumcision?' And the Holy One Blessed be He, makes Israel strong, and they become in the presence of the nations like wild beasts...but with the Holy One, Blessed be He, they are an innocent dove...

Through these intertextual linkages, the assumed tenor of the dove figure is made explicit, but is also immediately embedded in a more complex series of associations. The expansion to include the figures of wild beasts and their relationship to the nations of the world - neither of which is even implied by the base verse - arises from a need of the Rabbis to account for other known animal figures of

Israel found in Scripture, in this case the many animals which the patriarch Jacob uses to describe his twelve sons. These figures of powerful, dangerous, and often unkosher animals seem at odds with the dove, which has tropes of passivity and purity (being a kosher animal suitable for use in sacrifice).

While this expansion simultaneously explains each of the figures by placing them in different contexts, it also creates relationships. Yet these associations are still relatively static compared to the next form of figurative expansion, the intertextual narrative.

Intertexual narratives also make use of intertextual verses, but this time these are applied to the figures in the base verse so as to create a narrative exposition. By constructing a narrative out of these figures, the Rabbis move them from a more static, symbolic relationship into a dynamic, living one.

The following example of intertextual narrative addresses the same base verse. Here again the trope seems to suggest animal relationships to the Rabbis, but now action is introduced into the relationship:

> MY DOVE IN THE CLEFT OF THE ROCKS...LET ME HEAR THY VOICE...It was taught in the school of Rabbi Ishmael:When Israel went forth from Egypt, what did they resemble? A dove which was fleeing from a hawk and flew into the cleft of a rock, but found a serpent lurking there. When it tried to get right in it could not, because the serpent was lurking there, and when it tried to turn back it could not because the hawk was hovering outside. What then

> did the dove do? It began to cry and beat its wings so that the owner of the dovecote should hear it and come to its rescue. This was the position of Israel by the Red Sea. They could not go down to the sea, because it has not yet been divided before them. They could not turn back, because Pharaoh had already drawn near. What did they do? AND THEY WERE VERY AFRAID; AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL CRIED OUT UNTO THE LORD (Ex. 14.10). Then immediately, SO THE LORD SAVED ISRAEL THAT DAY(ibid., 30).

We begin to see how the Rabbis see Shir Hashirim as an account of the Divine-Jewish relationship. By linking the description of the dove in the cliffside to the narrative of the Exodus, the Rabbis remind the reader how God once saved Israel at a crucial moment in its history. The expansion here includes the introduction of a whole new set of figures, none of which are derived from *Shir Hashirim* itself: the hawk, the serpent, the dove owner. These in turn are explicated by use of a scriptural passage, which provides the appropriate tenors. The hawk is Pharaoh's army, the serpent is the barrier of the Reed Sea, and God is the rescuing owner.

Furthermore, the relationship between God and dove/Israel, left vague and ill-defined in the earlier intertextual expansion, is now carefully laid out for the reader. God is the owner of Israel, its master, and more important for this interpretation, its protector. What began as an vague set of symbolic associations is now a vivid characterization of a meta-historical event, one with direct (if still implicit) significance for the Rabbis'

audience: God has helped us in the past because we belong to him, and because we asked for his help.

The final way in which the Rabbis describe Israel's bond to God is through the *mashal*. These are often used, not just to characterize past history, but to illustrate paradigmatic and constant elements in the relationship. Just as X behaves toward Y, so God behaves toward Israel. These *meshalim* are among the most powerful tools in the Rabbinic literary arsenal for figuratively explaining how God and Israel interact. To see some of the dynamics of this form of figurative discourse, we again turn to the interpretation of Shir. 2.14:

> MY DOVE IN THE CLEFT OF THE ROCK...LET ME HEAR THY VOICE...R. Judah said in the name of R. Hama from Kfar Tehumin: It is as if a king who had an only daughter desired very much that she should talk to him. So what did he do? He made a proclamation saying, 'Let all the people go out to the sports ground.' When they went there, what did he do? He gave a signal to his servants, and they fell on her suddenly like brigands. She began crying out, "Father, save me!" He said to her: 'Had I not done so, you would never have cried out, "Father, save me."' So when the children of Israel were in Egypt the Egyptians oppressed them and they began to cry out and lift their eyes to the Holy One Blessed be He...When the Holy One, Blessed be He, heard, He said: 'Had I not done so to you, I should not have heard your voice.' Referring to that moment, He said, MY DOVE IN THE CLEFT OF THE ROCK...LET ME HEAR YOUR VOICE: The voice I already heard in Egypt. And when the children of Israel cried before the Holy One Blessed be He, immediately, SO THE LORD SAVED ISRAEL THAT DAY.

This is a very piquant little tale, veritably brimming

with potent psychological issues and offering a disturbing take on the character of God. Yet for our immediate interests, let us consider only how this figurative story offers the reader the most powerful metaphor for the Divine-Jewish relationship of the three examined. Here the Rabbis make use of a wholly human analogy, one constructed around the relationship of a stubborn daughter and her (awesomely powerful) father, with all its psychological elements. It is, for example, much more emotionally laden then the earlier figure of the protectiveness of an owner for his property.

Not only is this the richest and most nuanced explanation yet applied to the figures of the base verse, it is also the most paradigmatic. It offers the reader an interpretation which describes not just a static juxtaposition of characters, nor only a reference to a historical incident. Instead it portrays God and Israel involved in a constant yet dynamic relationship, one that exists, and will continue to exist, just as father-daughter relationships continue, however difficult. The *mashal* invokes a real bond, one full of conflict and caring, as real as any familial bond.

And at least on a literary level the *mashal*, divorced as it is from a real incident or otherwise bound by time and place, imbues that bond with a sense of eternality. The *mashal* says, in effect, as long as this figurative relationship could exist, so too the relationship between

God and Israel, which parallels it, will continue.

The paradigmatic quality of the *mashal* is made explicit in the protracted *nimshal*, in which God says,'If you would only cry out to me, as you did in Egypt, I would answer you now as I did then.' In this way also, the *nimshal* takes the relationship one step further than did the intertextual narrative, which remained on the plane of explaining the relationship as it existed in the past.

This then is how the Rabbis use the figures of Shir Hashirim to explain the relationship between God and Israel. Using several different expansive techniques and employing Scripture as their building material, the Rabbis create increasingly complex analogies. The Rabbis place these figures in human relationships which they wish to be understood as accurately paralleling the Divine-Jewish one. While they do not expect us to take literally the image of God as father, and Israel as daughter, they do intend that we should regard the figurative situation they have set up as completely analogous. These figurative relationships are, for the Rabbis, true homologies for the bond that exists between Israel and her God.

Notes to Chapter 3

1) Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Poetry, 1985, p. 125-26.

2) Jacob Neusner, Israel's Love Song to God, 1993, pp. 3-4.

3) There are times when the Rabbis come close to creating semi-independent characters, such as the hypostasis which appears between מידת הדין / מידת הרחמים. Such interpretations usually arise precisely to deal with the conflicts in God's character.

Chapter 4

A King and his Subjects: Tropes of Order and Favor

In seeking adequate descriptive and prescriptive language for the metaphysical relationship between Israel and its God, the sages turn most often to the example of human relationships, presenting those as accurate homologies. They invoke the human, first and foremost, because it is our perceptual bias to see the human (i.e., intentionality) in any pattern of organization. On a more conscious and deliberate plane, they employ the analogy of human relationship because it is the most familiar to their audience. Along the same lines, they employ it because human relations are the most complex relationships we know, and the Rabbis clearly see the bond between the Jewish people and God as surpassingly complex and multifaceted.

But part and parcel of that complexity is the fact that humans can enter into many different kinds of relationships - economic, social, sexual, or legal. The list of possibilities goes on and on. That being so, what kind of relationship is most homologous to this metaphysical one? The Rabbis do not hesitate in their choice - they choose them all. Ad hoc to the issue or event under discussion, the Rabbis deploy examples of human interaction drawn from all spheres of activity, whether it be politics, war, business, marriage, or medicine.

Few if any of these analogies are novel to the Rabbis. As

in most of their forms of religious discourse, the figures they use are, by and large, ones they inherit from biblical literature. Looking in the sacred books, the sages see God and Israel depicted through the figures of owner and property, keeper and animal, parent and child, husband and wife. All are used because each conveys something different about the nature of Israel's link to God.

One of the most frequently used biblical homologies, and one picked up with enthusiasm by the Rabbis, is that of the relationship between a king and his subjects, a master and his servants.

In biblical literature, this relationship is presented with all the trappings of royalty as it functioned in the ancient near east[1]. The Rabbis take up this figure, retaining the basic relationship in their analogies, but recasting the particulars to reflect their own experience of the Greco-Roman imperial system[2].

The tropes which they invoke through this analogy are numerous. The most obvious trope for the image of God as a king is that of 'power'. By implication, the image of Israel as his subjects suggests tropes of 'subjection'. Together the relationship offers a complex of tropes which could be associated with an unequal power relationship. Related themes of fear and favor, of security and vulnerability are all expressed through this particular extended figure.

Let us begin the consideration of those themes, and how they emerge out of a single king-subject narrative with a

particularly subtle *mashal*,

> (8.14.1) FLEE, MY BELOVED. R. Levi said: [This may be explained by] a parable of a king who made a feast and invited guests. Some ate and drank and blessed the king, and others ate and drank and cursed the king. When the king noticed it, he was at first inclined to make a disturbance and to upset the feast. The queen, however, came in and pleaded for the guests, saying: 'Your Majesty,instead of noticing these who eat and drink and curse you, rather take note of these who eat and drink and bless thee and praise your name.'...

There are many tropes being played out in this wonderful *mashal*. The *nimshal* thoughtfully decodes all of the figures for the reader, so we are left free to consider the implications of this deceptively simple narrative:

> ....So when Israel eat and drink and praise and extol God, He listens to their voice and is appeased. But when the heathens eat and drink and curse and blaspheme the Holy One, blessed be He, with the lewdness which they utter, at that moment God is ready even to destroy His world, but the Torah enters and pleads saying, 'Sovereign of the Universe, instead of taking note of these who blaspheme and provoke Thee, rather take note of Israel Your people who bless and praise and extol Your great name with Torah, and with hymns and praises'; and the holy spirit cries out, FLEE AWAY, MY BELOVED: flee away from the heathens and cleave to Israel.

Israel, the well-mannered guest who praises the host, is one of the beneficiaries of God's largess. The relationship laid out here is one of favor, a pleasant image in which Israel sits down at God's table. God is presented here as a

vain if rather indulgent monarch. Like any human potentate (perhaps a little too much for the taste of modern readers), God seems to revel in the praise heaped upon him. A surface reading accordingly yields a simple lesson. It seems at first glance to teach the moral of showing gratitude to God.

But this story surrounds Israel with more then just tropes of favor. This *mashal* also tells the reader that Israel possesses both influence and power. Because of the placating influence of Israel's praise (activated, not surprisingly, through the agency of Torah), God chooses to overlook the ingratitude and offensiveness of the other more boorish guests at the banquet.

The very genteel images of the *mashal* mask the darker implications of this homology. The *nimshal* clearly informs us that the banquet is the world. Once again the motif of the king's anger is an anxiety-inducing element. As the pericope spells out, the rude guests stand for the pagan nations who daily affront, even 'curse' God with their devotions to idols. Clearly their ingratitude demands punishment. But God's monumental anger is such that he could potentially upset the whole banquet/world for all the guests/living. The spiritual insecurity of the Rabbis fills even the most idyllic setting. Even when they envision the world as a banquet, it is a feast held on a precipice.

Yet in this insecure world, Israel is the salvific keystone which holds up the entire world. We learn that,

through Israel's merit, all the guests are shielded from the king's wrath and continue to feast on his bounty, uninterrupted. Like Abraham's 'ten righteous men' whom the angels vainly sought in the corrupt city of Sodom, Israel's merit spares the bulk of unrepentant humanity from destruction.

It is a potent claim, and one that must have appealed to a downtrodden, seemingly peripheral people of the Byzantine Roman Empire. Through their own dealings with the imperial court, the Jews of Byzantine Palestine must have well appreciated the influence that accrues to those who enjoy imperial favor. The dearth of much historically useful material from this period makes it impossible for us to determine just how much the Jewish community that produced Shir. R. had such access to the Imperium in real life. Yet clearly, in figuratively envisioning the divine court, the Rabbis taught that Israel was a courtier, bestowing protection (and by implication, some power to withdraw that protection) upon the rest of God's subjects. It is an enviable image, and a comforting one. The Jewish people are simultaneously beneficiary and benefactor.

The *mashal* also assigns an element of passivity to Israel in both roles. Reward and power come to Israel without demonstrating any competence or exceptional qualities. It is enough that Israel is appropriately grateful (they praise and worship God). It is a true *nechemta*, a comforting message, and it comes as no surprise that this *mashal* is the

last to appear in Shir. R., helping to close off the document on a note of uplift.

Yet as even the modern reader can imagine, the relationship between a king and his subjects was not always a secure one, and in all likelihood, faced as the Rabbis were with ongoing exile under the domination of a foreign power, the image of a king and his subjects was as likely to invoke tropes of anxiety and fear as it would security and comfort.

The downside of a power relationship like that of a king and his subjects is neatly captured in another *mashal*, one which appears quite close in the text to our last one, 8.13.1:

> YOU THAT DWELL IN THE GARDENS, THE COMPANIONS HEARKEN FOR YOUR VOICE:CAUSE ME TO HEAR IT. R. Nathan said in the name of R. Acha: [God here is compared] to a king who was angry with his servants and threw them into prison. He then took all his officers and servants and went to listen to the song of praise which they were chanting. He heard them saying: 'Our lord the king, he is the object of our praise, he is our life; we will never fail our lord the king.' He said to them: 'My children, raise your voices, so that the companions who are by you may hear.'...

Here the character of God is radically at odds with the earlier portrayal, even though he remains garbed in the same dramatic persona, that of the all-powerful ruler. In expounding the figures of this verse, Acha understands God to be the speaker, the angelic court to be the "companions",

and Israel the one being addressed. So far so simple, but the *mashal* R. Acha presents to illustrate these figures is startling. He takes his readers from the seemingly idyllic setting of "gardens" mentioned in the verse, and transforms it into a prison. In doing so he completely reverses the mood of the verse, bringing to it a darker, much more pessimistic tone.

This is quite a disturbing story, both in itself and in its tenor, for in it the king/God acts in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. The *mashal* itself offers us no explanation of the offense that led to the imprisonment of the servants. It is not entirely clear that the servants were the offenders, or even that there was any offense at all. In the context of the *mashal* we only know that the king was angered, and that the servants were on the receiving end of that anger.

The conclusion of the *mashal* is equally uncomfortable. In it, the king is not reconciled by either a restitution, a correction or even an apology. Instead, he is swayed by an obsequious display of grovelling on the part of the imprisoned subjects.

This *mashal* also offers a more menacing variation on the theme of God's desire to hear Israel's supplications. We have already seen this theme earlier in *Shir. R.* 2.14, O MY DOVE, IN THE CRANNY OF THE ROCK. But there is a critical change here. In that earlier figure the danger that drives Israel to cry out for God's help is human (Pharaoh) and

natural(the Reed Sea). There God is represented by the dove owner; he is a figure who redeems Israel from precarious external circumstances. In this *mashal*, by contrast, the threat is localized in God himself. Both imprisonment and rescue come from the king's edicts. We will see from examples in future chapters that this is a popular theme in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. Here the analogy to king and servant carries tropes of עונש, of 'punishment'. In other figurative contexts, the meaning will change subtly.

All in all, this is hardly a flattering representation of royal character, or by implication, of God. It is a revealing statement of how Acha perceives Israel's current relationship to its supposed protector and lord. The fact that the king seemingly acts without justification is very suggestive of how Acha perceives God's treatment of Israel. The implication that the king is motivated to torment his subjects solely out of a need to hear their pleas conveys a deep pessimism about Israel's fate and future. That pessimism is only accentuated when we realize that the *gannim*, the "gardens" mentioned in the biblical verse under consideration, have been transformed into a prison in the *mashal*. Does Acha want us to understand these two figures to represent the world? If so, then this extended figure borders on the gnostic in its theology. More likely, he intends us to understand the tenor of the gardens to be the current *galut*, exile.

Since Acha never tells us if their sycophantic praise ever

garners the servants their freedom, the narrative also leaves us with a tremendous gap. Again we must wait until the *nimshal* for a more complete and anxiety-dissipating explanation of motives:

> .....So although Israel are occupied with their work for the six days of the week, on the *Shabbat* they rise early and go to the synagogue and recite the '*Sh'ma*' and pass in front of the ark and read the Torah and a passage from the Prophets, and the Holy One, blessed be He, says: 'My children, raise your voices so that the companions standing by may hear' - the word 'companions' denoting the ministering angels - ' and take good heed that you do not hate one another nor be jealous of one another, nor wrangle with one another, nor shame one another, in order that the ministering angels may not say before Me:"Sovereign of the Universe, the Law which You have given to Israel is not practiced by them, and there is enmity, jealousy, hatred and quarrelling among them," but you in fact are fulfilling it in peace.'

Here God offers a list of possible offenses by Israel which would provoke his anger. This list, which after all, is only suggestive, provides the reader with a surprising measure of comfort. Israel is never actually accused of these transgressions in the pericope, but their mere enumeration allows the reader to fill the gap in the *mashal* via the *nimshal*. Acha is using a powerful didactic strategy. The reader, craving to complete a partial 'image', is inclined to mentally reconstruct the figurative situation to include an interpretation of the king's actions, which justifies them. This is instructive on how to read all Rabbinic *meshalim*. The reader must always read the *mashal*

through the prism of the *nimshal*. However many possible messages may be derived from the ambiguity and gapping of the mashal, it is the *nimshal* that ultimately determines how the figure is to be parsed out.

Likewise, if the prison is understood by the reader as the *galut*, there is no indication in the *mashal* itself that imprisonment will ever end. Yet Acha knows his readers expect that exile will end. As part of the interpretative process, the reader may retroject that expectation into the *mashal*, which in turn relieves some of the pessimism.

We are somewhat relieved to know that the king might have his reasons, that he is not totally capricious. But of course, Acha has never actually said, 'Israel did this'. His pessimism and his doubt linger in the minds of the readers.

The anxiety that Acha raises through this particular figurative portrayal has deep roots in the human psyche - it is the anxiety we feel in the presence of the unpredictable, and our fear that the world, being unpredictable, is perhaps also cruel without purpose. Thus Rabbi Acha artfully exploits and seeks to relieve a significant theological and existential anxiety in his audience. The relatively new field of 'evolutionary psychology' describes this human anxiety/need in terms of trust, "we are designed to seek trusting relationships and to feel uncomfortable in their absence[3]." In the unfolding of this particular figure, we look on anxiously, hoping to find some reason to trust in the morality of God. Acha does indeed provide possible

reasons for trust in due course, but the discomfort we feel until an explanation is offered is instructive, and for the thoughtful reader, never completely resolved.

Universally, humans look for the world to show signs of order, and are disturbed when things work out otherwise. To paraphrase Rabban Gamaliel from another context, the universal human desire is הסתלק מן הספק, to 'flee from doubt'. Guthrie lists uncertainty and fear among the things which contribute most to the religious impulse. He quotes David Hume in this regard: "The primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear". Hume, like many other theorists of religion, argues that part of religion's function is that it allows us to live despite our uncertainty[4].

In the face of the world's fearful capriciousness, religion allows us a measure of comfort and trust which we would otherwise lack. But if this comforting function is all that is at work, what are we to make of this particularly fearful figurative representation of God? Why create an image of God, like this one, which preys so well on our anxieties before it offers us any relief?

Acha seems to choose this characterization of God for several reasons. One is that the characterization seems to fit the evidence as he understands it. Acha, along with many of his co-religionists, may have felt on some level that the Jewish condition of exile and oppression was not justified. Given that, it only seems logical for him to suggest that

his community's experience has all the hallmarks of an arbitrary punishment by a megalomaniacal king. And in light of their own experience, this portrayal must have had a truthful quality for Acha's audience. The 'reality' of the figurative relationship is theologically useful, because in due course the reader transfers some of the 'reality' evident in the situation onto the 'implied' explanation, enhancing its validity.

At this point we must ask, given this gloomy understanding of God's character drawn from the evidence of their own experience, why do the Rabbis not entertain the next logical possibility - the possibility that there is no king at all? The answer to that comes back to the precise nature of the fears and needs we alluded to earlier. Our biggest fear is the fear that the world is indifferent to us. It is the very presentation of God as a person, however much his behavior may seem arbitrary, that holds forth the promise of both a meaningful explanation and a reversal of Israel's fortune.

First of all, we have a need for an explanation. Even insanity is better then meaninglessness in this regard. As Guthrie remarks, a gloomy explanation is always preferable to no explanation[5]. It is dreadful to imagine, as Acha does, a God who apparently acts harshly without justification, but it is intolerable to imagine a world where suffering has no explanation at all. What's more, as is often the case in observing human behavior, actions which

at first glance seems arbitrary, on further exploration are found to have reasons underlying them. It is one of the basic assumptions of clinical psychology that all behavior, even in psychotic individuals, is meaningful. In the case of our *mashal*, we too assume that the king's behavior is meaningful. Even before an explanation is offered, the reader is already hard at work speculating on the king's motives. An explanation is not long in coming, an entirely predictable, if not entirely comforting explanation - Israel sinned, and God punished us. Thus the unfolding of the *mashal* and *nimshal* contains a powerful theological lesson. Even if God's actions seem inexplicable, in time an explanation will be forthcoming.

Still, Acha leaves us with some unresolved disconcerting elements: the image of the king/God urging his captives to sing his praises like so many captured songbirds, helpless before his whim, and the unresolved fate of the captives. Acha leaves us to fill in this gap, and draw our own conclusions.

By characterizing God as an angry king, the possibility of change, while not made explicit, is implied. There is no recourse against a relentless and inhuman force. For that reason, it is the inhuman that invokes in us the most fear. This attitude of the Rabbis is best summed up by the words of Resh Lakish at the very end of *Eicha Rabbah* (5.21.1), where he declares: "If there is rejection, there is no hope, but where there is anger there is hope, because whoever is

angry may eventually be appeased". We know there is always the possibility of reversing a person's actions, even those of a king. We look for trusting 'relationships', because it is in the nature of relationships that they can change. Just as important, as participants in the relationship, we can assert some measure of control. The *mashal* seems to be saying that, however frightening our circumstance, there is the possibility of change, and that possibility is at least partially in our control. Through our words of praise, we have at least influence, if not the power, to restore ourselves to favor in this unequal power relationship with God.

Ultimately this figurative expansion is psychologically wise, confronting the reader with his deepest fears about the capriciousness of the world and then soothing them, all the while never denying or glossing over the existential anxiety the reader may be experiencing.

It is our prejudice to see ancient monarchies as absolutist. This is inaccurate. In the Greco-Roman world the Imperium was not viewed as above accountability to those it governed. Macedonian kings were elected and Roman emperors were deposed, sometimes with alarming frequency. Even in Rabbinic literature, we have hints that the Rabbis regarded the king and his subjects to have a sort of social contract. In explaining how God established his authority as 'king' of Israel, *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael* offers a parable which outlines some of the king's responsibilities: war, public

works, and ensuring adequate water supply (Bachodesh 5). This being the model of ruler-subject relations, the sages use that model as a homology for God's and Israel's relationship. They also use it to explain Israel's existential situation. Not surprisingly, it is the subject, and not the king, who is not living up to the contract. In the following *mashal*, R. Hoshaia draws heavily from the practices of Roman administration in outlining the figurative situation[6]. As part of a longer string of largely positive interpretations of Song 1.12, we once again see how, when employing an expanded figure, the rabbis inject their own theological concerns into the exegesis. This *mashal* contains ideas and attitudes which cannot be readily derived from the text itself:

> R. Pinchas said in the name of R. Hoshaia: WHILE THE KING IS AT HIS TABLE...(MY NARD GAVE FORTH ITS FRAGRANCE): while the supreme King of kings was yet at His table, He had already anticipated [descending to Mount Sinai],' as it says, *And it came to pass on the third day while it was morning that there were thunders, etc.... upon the mount* (Ex. 19.16). He was like a king who had proclaimed, ' On such-and-such a day I am going to enter the city,' and as the inhabitants of the city slept through the night, when the king came he found them asleep,so he ordered trumpets and horns to be sounded, and the governor of the city woke them up and brought them out to meet the king, and the king then went before them till he reached his palace....

It is interesting that this particular narrative is preceded by the famous exchange between R. Judah and R. Meir

as to whether *Shir Hashirim* may be interpreted so as to put Israel in a bad light. Clearly, R. Hoshaia is of the school of R. Meir on this issue, as he seems to go out of his way to give this verse a negative twist. While other interpreters of this verse understand it as praising Israel's readiness to receive the revelation, Hoshaia treats it as an indictment of Israel. Rather than uncertainty, Hoshaia introduces tropes of inadequacy.

Hoshaia chooses not to portray God as the capricious king who menaces with his unpredictability. But he is replaced by an equally threatening persona, the predictable sovereign who may hold his vassals accountable for their failings.

Here again, as in the *mashal* we examined earlier, Hoshaia withholds the full implications of the situation, once again inducing a sense of anxiety in the reader. While we mentally cringe at the city's failure to welcome a powerful personage, we are not told how the king reacts to the city's inadequacy. Hoshaia's contemporary audience was left to fill the narrative gap, imagining (or perhaps recalling from experience) the wrath and retribution from the imperial authorities for failing to extend due courtesy. But as in other Rabbinic figures, the gaping is only provisional. The rabbis are usually loath to leave anything unstated. Rabbi Judan does eventually fill this narrative gap through the *nimshal*, where the *mashal* is paralleled to the historic birth of the king-subject relationship at Sinai. Through the parallel, the reader is invited to apply the fear implicit

in the *mashal* to what is happening in Israel's standing with God. The anxiety that neglecting the king invokes in the *mashal* is intended to illustrate how inadequate Israel should feel as a subject to the divine king,

> ...Israel slept all that night, because the sleep of Pentecost is pleasant and the night is short. R. Judan said: Not a flea worried them. God came and found them sleeping, so he began to rouse them with trumpeters, as it says, *And it came to pass on the third day... that there were thunders and lightnings* (ib. 16), and Moses roused Israel and brought them out to meet the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, *And Moses brought forth the people... to meet God* (ib. 17), and then God went before them till He reached Mount Sinai, as it is written, *Now mount Sinai was altogether on smoke* (ib. 18). It was for this that He taunted them through the mouth of Isaiah, saying, *Wherefore, when I came, was there no man? When I called, was there none to answer? Is My hand shortened at all, that it cannot redeem?* (Isa. 50.2).

From the very beginning of the relationship, God must chastise Israel for her shortcomings. Rabbi Judan uses the *mashal* to tell his readers that at the moment God was ready to fulfill his obligations as sovereign, Israel failed in its duty to receive him with due honor. The effect is to induce greater feelings of inadequacy in his audience. Israel is God's subject, but she is a woefully inept subject, which accounts for her precarious situation now. Should anyone raise the question of whether God has been a good sovereign, through this figure the reader is reminded of Israel's shortcomings as a vassal. Such figures serve to redirect potential anger away from God, and instead serve to

encourage Jews to internalize their anger and blame themselves for their misfortune.

As we have seen in the previous two examples, the figure of a king carries a considerable element of fear along with its trope of power. The tropes of these two king-subject narratives invoke in their readers basic human fears, a fear of uncertainty, and a fear of inadequacy. The former is created through the image of a seemingly arbitrary king, the latter through that of a more dependable but demanding ruler who will hold Israel accountable for its shortcomings.

Yet it is equally true that the trope of royal power also conveys notions of stability and order. As they were for other peoples in other times, the king and his government were perceived by the Jews of Byzantine Palestine as a bulwark against social chaos and the uncertainty that entails. More than people fear power, they fear chaos. This is succinctly expressed by R. Chanina *s'gan haKohanim*, who declared, 'pray for the welfare of the government, since but for the fear of it, men would swallow one another alive' (Mishna Avot 3.2).

Thus the same royal image can create tropes of trust and safety. In fact, the Rabbis frequently use the figures of king and subject to bridge the gulf between our fear of an arbitrary universe and our need for order. Within the human realm known to the Rabbis, the king was the ultimate symbol of social order. Even in the fear-laden narratives we have already examined it is clearly conveyed that any suffering

the vassal experiences is due to inadequacies in himself, not in the King. Still, there remains an anxiety-inducing gap for the Jew about his status vis a` vis God. Responding to this situation, the Rabbis know that using the king-subject figure not only illustrates that gap, but can also be used to bridge it.

This theological bridge-building begins by establishing that being a servant is not just a debased position, but also a protected one. R. Simon effectively equates the status of the people Israel vis a` vis God with that of the Prophets by showing intertextually that both are called 'servants', and therefore the prophets are not allowed to calumniate Israel:

> (1.6.1)LOOK NOT UPON ME THAT I AM SWARTHY R. Simon opened with the text, *Slander not a servant unto his master* (Prov. 30.10), Israel are called servants, as it says, *For unto me the children of Israel are servants*(Lev. 25.55).The prophets are also called servants, as it says, *But He reveals His counsel unto His servants the prophets* (Amos 3.7). Thus said the Community of Israel to the prophets: 'Look not upon me because of my swarthiness [sin]...No one rejoiced more in my sons than Isaiah, yet because he said, *And dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips* (Num. 6.5), God said to him: 'Isaiah, of yourself you are at liberty to say, " *Because I am a man of unclean lips*" (ib.); this is acceptable; but may you say, "*And in the midst of a people of unclean lips I dwell*"? ... when Elijah spoke evil of Israel God said to him: 'While you are accusing these, come and accuse these others,' as it says, *Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus* (I Kings 19.15), R. Abbahu and Resh Lakish were once on the point of entering the city of Caesarea when R. Abbahu said to Resh Lakish, ' Why should we go into a city of cursing and blaspheming?

> Resh Lakish got down from his ass and scraped up some sand and put it in R. Abbahu's mouth. He said to him: 'Why do you do this?' He replied: 'God is not pleased with one who calumniates Israel.'

The theological message is clear. Being a servant is not really such a lowly status in God's eyes if the same term is used to describe the exulted prophets of the past. What's more, this pericope makes clear that the servants of God are entitled to God's protection, at least from the criticism of another servant. Though Israel sin - that is the trope given to "swarthy" - even the Prophets cannot attack Israel with impunity.

Implied in all these figures is a trope which is not commonly associated with a subject or servant in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* - the trope of security, and even power. R. Simon suggests that the status of servant brings with it not only vulnerability and accountability, but also a measure of entitlement.

A common thread conveyed in all these narratives and their expositions is that ultimately Israel determines the quality of this metaphysical relationship. It is a relationship which, for all its potential terror, is at the very least regulated in some sense.

The standard Jewish metaphor for that regulated status is a contractual one. Like conformity to the terms of a contract, compliance with God brings benefits promised in the agreement made at Sinai. Already a cliche in the Bible, the contract metaphor is frequently employed by the Rabbis

to explain Israel's current status, either positively or negatively. In the following narrative, the positive side of this contract is highlighted:

> (7.14.1)BOTH NEW AND OLD WHICH I HAVE KEPT FOR YOU, MY BELOVED...R. Abba b. Kahana said: The Holy One, blessed be He,said: ' Ye lay up for Me and I lay up for you.Ye lay up for Me through the performance of religious precepts and good deeds, and I lay up for you treasures full of more good things than there are in the world.'

In a pretty straightforward piece of Rabbinic exegesis, the theology of מידה כנגד מידה is spelled out, at last in positive terms. It is a choice example of what the Rabbis are striving to do - impose order and symmetry on the seeming chaos and asymmetry of life. Here is a case where one senses that the relationship has been oversimplified for the sake of a sense of order.

This representation offers an utterly consistent interpretation of the world. Explicitly stated is the notion that those who do as they are commanded are rewarded. Implied is the idea that those who neglect their duty are not. And in keeping with what we understand about human psychological needs, it is a system which assures us that the world is completely predictable and without uncertainty.

The problem with this indisputably appealing theological system is well known. Based on human experience, virtue is not consistently rewarded, or vice punished. This is both obvious and long known to students of religion (consider the

story of Job). Despite this, theologies like the one portrayed in this pericope enjoy enduring popularity. Why? A partial answer may be found in the same theories of behavioral learning to which we have already alluded.

In his landmark work on behavioral conditioning, B. F. Skinner identified different kinds of "reinforcement schedules", patterns of reward which serve to reinforce behaviors in animals. Early on, Skinner discovered that behavior does not have to be reinforced every time it occurs for a subject's behavior to become conditioned; even irregular reinforcement given only once in many repetitions of a behavior, was still enough to reinforce that behavior. Called 'variable reinforcement', this is the principle of reinforcement often identified as the factor that makes gambling so addictive[7].

There may be an analogy to this in 'reward and punishment' theologies. If one looks to see virtue rewarded and sin punished, one need only witness episodic examples in daily life for the model to seem valid. Perhaps a person needs to observe only one virtuous act in twenty actually get rewarded in some way to believe that all virtuous behavior will eventually be rewarded. Maybe too, if after a long career of sin a person finally suffers a reversal, variable reinforcement makes this one mishap seem enough to confirm a belief that God punishes the wicked.

In various forms, this particular theological gamble on the true nature of the universe has been woven into the

fabric of Judaism since the book of Deuteronomy.

Whatever the factors at work, this particular figure offers more psychological security to the reader than any we have seen up until now. Israel is assured that there is reward for its labors, even if it must be deferred to the future.

Yet a subject who finds order and security in his government may still desire more. For if there is security in consistency, there is even more in the glow of divine favor. Favor, more than impartiality, was to be valued in the political milieu of the Rabbinic period,

> ...thus would Rabbi Jonathan do when he saw some important personage (i.e., Roman official) arriving in his town: he would send him a gift as a mark of respect and honor. For he thought: What if some lawsuit involving an orphan or widow should be brought before him? At least I will have entree to take the matter up with him[8].

A consistent judge could still be a prejudicial one, especially in dealing with the powerless who offer him no personal benefit. In the power relationship of a king and his subjects, where powerlessness translates into vulnerability, one strengthens one's position by currying favor.

The Rabbis bring both this anxiety and this strategy into their understanding of their relationship with God. The value of gaining and maintaining divine favor is one of the many ideas illustrated by a *mashal* employing the cliche`

figure of the king's orchard, a frequent figure for conveying tropes of favor,

> (2.2.1) LIKE A LILY AMONG THE THORNS... R.Azariah said in the name of R. Judah who had it from R. Simon: A king once had an orchard in which he went and planted a row of fig-trees and a row of vines and a row of apples and a row of pomegranates, and then he handed it over to a keeper and went away. After a time the king came and inspected the orchard to see how it was getting on, and he found it full of thorns and briars. So he brought wood-cutters to cut it down. Seeing in it a beautiful rose, he took and smelt it and was appeased, and said: ' For the sake of this rose the orchard shall be spared. So the world was created only for the sake of Israel. After twenty-six generations the Holy One, blessed be He, inspected His garden to see how it was getting on, and he found it one mass of water. The generation of Enosh was wiped out with water; the generation of the dispersion was punished with water. So He brought wood-cutters to cut it down, as it says, *The Lord sat enthroned at the Flood*(Ps. 29.10), but He saw a beautiful rose, namely Israel, and He took and smelt it, at the time when Israel received the Ten Commandments, and He was appeased, at the time when Israel said, We will do and obey...

In many ways, R. Simon's narrative frames the same issues raised by the first narrative we considered, R, Levi's *mashal* of the grateful and ungrateful guests. In that parable it is the virtue of the grateful guests which delivers all from the king's wrath. But unlike R. Levi's parable, in this figure, it is obvious how the narrative expands out of the logic of the verse. Even the "orchard", while not found in the verse under consideration, is derived from the context of surrounding Shir Hashirim passages (2.3).

The ideological relationship with the earlier *mashal* is entirely symmetrical. As a tenor for the king, God comes across as just and rational, and accordingly the mood of this narrative is much more hopeful than other king/subject *meshalim* we have seen. The issue for both *meshalim* is the same: having divine favor is the key to survival. Both seem to answer the concerns raised by the *mashal* of the imprisoned servants. Even if the world is capricious, currying favor with God will provide a margin of safety. This attitude no doubt is consistent with Rabbi Jonathan's approach to ensuring equity and protection from the Roman imperial authorities.

But whereas R. Jonathan brings gifts to win favor, what can Israel do to win God's indulgence? Devotion to the labors of Torah. This is made explicit in Rabbi Simon's explanation of his figurative tale,

> ...Said the Holy One, blessed be He: For the sake of this rose let the garden be spared; for the sake of the Torah and those who study it let the world be spared.

Earlier it was noted that *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* employs multiple figures to convey tropes about a limited number of tenors. That is manifest here where, once more, the reader is reminded that Torah study is the means of gaining God's affection. To the modern reader this may seem tedious and redundant. Yet the repetition is, in a very important sense, the message. Having called attention to the anxiety that an

unpredictable world creates, the very predictability of the Rabbinic message in their figurative stories is meant to reassure. It is as if the consistency of the theme functions as a prophylactic incantation against an inconsistent universe.

But the figurative presentation of God as king and Israel as subject conveys more than simply tropes of stability, equity and safety. Divine favor, like imperial favor, promises far more - it promises opportunity and material security. The following *mashal* is offered in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* as an illustration of how Solomon fared in light of divine favor. But Solomon is not just a historical figure for the Rabbis. As the archetypal sage, Solomon is also every sage, and as the pious young king (the Rabbis associate *Shir Hashirim* with the early period of Solomon's life), he is a also a cipher for any reader who identifies with the values of Rabbinic piety. This becomes evident in a king-servant mashal which is part of a narrative expansion of I Kings 3.5-9. Wanting to instruct his readers on this incident, R. Simeon b. Halafta deploys tropes of favor which make piety not only a value, but also an asset,

> (1.1.9)THE SONG OF SONGS BY SOLOMON...
> R. Simon said in the name of R. Simeon b. Halafta: [Solomon resembled] a councillor who was a great favorite at the king's court, and to whom the king once said, 'Ask me for anything you want.' Said the councillor to himself: If I ask for silver and gold, he will give me. Said he: I had better ask for the king's daughter, and that includes everything.

One who enjoys the favor of the king can expect certain perquisites, including opportunities for personal enrichment. Using the Rabbinic conventions of anthropopathism, Rabbi Simeon wants his readers to know that the same applies in relationship with God.

There are multiple lessons contained in this *mashal*. The value of wisdom is also a theme. Like Aladdin when he is offered three wishes by the jinn, Solomon shows wisdom and subtlety in what he asks from God. That, too, R. Simeon relates to his readers for didactic purposes. However, the lesson that matters to our discussion is that devoted service to God and the favor that loyalty garners can only enhance Israel's place in the world. A perfect homology is implied by the example of Solomon. If those who win the favor of mortal kings enjoy real benefits on account of their status, then קל וחומר, analogous benefits must also apply for those who win the favor of the King of kings.

Through using the figurative relationship between a sovereign and his subjects, the Rabbis touch upon many of the most basic concerns of their readers. Knowing that our relationship to the divine parallels certain human relationships speaks to many needs. It promises security in the face of uncertainty, protection against vulnerability, and even the hope for material prosperity.

It is notable how these figures reflect those basic human needs identified by the psychologist Abraham Maslow in his

"hierarchy of needs". The lowest three rungs on Maslow's hierarchy are: material/physiological needs, safety and security needs, and needs of belonging.

The figure of Israel as servant addresses all of these needs. But it addresses them incompletely. As we have seen again and again, God as king only relieves some of Israel's insecurity. While the 'kingship' of God gives some sense of certainty, there remains a lingering fear of the king himself, his moods and his demands. Servants can know certainty, but certainty still may not favor those who are on the subservient end of such a power relationship. A servant may gain favor, but he can also wind up in prison.

Faced with that continuing uncertainty, the Rabbis turn again to the Tanakh for other figures which convey other tropes and associations.

Notes to Chapter 4

1) The Sages, 1979, p. 316.

2) Parables in Midrash, 1991, pp. 19-20.

3) "The Evolution of Despair", *Time*, August 28, 1995, Vol. 146 No. 9, p. 56.

4) Faces in the Clouds, p. 11.

5) Ibid., p. 15.

6) Gedaliah Alon, The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age, Cambridge, 1989, p. 213.

7) Mazur, James E., ed., Learning and Behavior, Englewood Cliffs, 1990, pp. 124-128.

8) Talmud Yerushalmi, Shabbat I:3 as cited in Alon, p. 213.

Chapter 5

A King and His Child: Favor, Intimacy and Discipline

Because of the continuing issues of uncertainty which are inherent in a relationship analogous to that of a servant and a king, it is not surprising that the *Tanakh* also employs other figurative expressions to describe the full complexity of the Divine-Israelite relationship.

There is another analogy which brings with it different tropes for God's relationship with Israel. In Moses's final speech addressed to Israel (Deut. 32) the ramifications of this additional figurative relationship are dramatically spelled out. The reader learns that beyond that of mere vassal and a suzerain or a servant and a master, Israel's relationship to God is to be that of a son to a father,

> Because I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God. He is the Rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are justice; a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he.Not his the corruption, but his children are blemished; they are a perverse and crooked generation. Do you thus requite the Lord, O foolish people and unwise? Is he not your father who has bought you? Has he not made you, and established you?...When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he set apart the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the people of Israel. For the Lord's portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance.

With that additional figurative relationship come new associative tropes. As his child, God favors Israel over all other nations. But even more significant than favor

(which we have seen before) is the trope of "security". Just as a father can never "undo" his fatherhood to his child, God may become angry and he may punish, but he will never sever the relationship. Jacob is God's "inheritance", The Children of Israel are his "children". Elsewhere in the Bible this belief in the durability of the relationship is affirmed in the most explicit terms (though in a non-figurative context):

> ...And what one nation in the earth is like your people, like Israel, whom God went to redeem for a people to himself... For *you have confirmed to yourself your people Israel to be a people to you forever*; and you, Lord, have become their God...(italics mine). (II Samuel 7.23-24)

Besides a greater sense of favor and the relationship's durability, the relationship of a father to his child implies a greater intimacy than would seem possible between a servant and his king:

> ...He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye.As an eagle stirs up its nest, flutters over its young, spreads out its wings, takes them, bears them on its pinions; So the Lord alone did lead him... He made him ride on the high places of the earth... he made him suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock (Deut. 32.10-13).

At the same time, there is no promise of relief from suffering. Instead there is the implication that that suffering is meaningful - suffering now surely represents

discipline, even instruction:

> ...Of the Rock that fathered you are unmindful, and have forgotten God who formed you...And when the Lord saw it, he loathed them, because of the provocation of his sons, and of his daughters. And he said, I will hide my face from them....I will heap evils upon them; I will spend my arrows upon them...I said, I would scatter them into corners, I would make the remembrance of them to cease from among men....For they are a nation void of counsel, nor is there any understanding in them ... For the Lord shall vindicate his people, and repent himself for his servants, when he sees that their power is gone, and there is none shut up, or left (Deut. 32.15-16; 19-20; 26; 36).

Just as no (rational) parent inflicts pain on his children without purpose, so Israel's 'father', God, confirms that he will discipline his child, but only for good reason.

In *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, the rabbis once again expand upon and extend this biblical metaphor, using it to better illustrate both their own existential situation and their own theological understanding of that situation.

The figure of parental/child relationship logically begins with tropes of favor. In expounding the verse, KISS ME WITH THE KISSES OF YOUR MOUTH, the rabbis extract from the words tropes of favor and intimacy. The exegesis offers several proposals for the occasion where these adoring and intimate words would have been uttered between God and his people. The answers are predictable to anyone familiar with Rabbinic beliefs: at the Reed Sea, or the Tent of Meeting, or the Temple, or at Sinai. All of these events or

locations represent the high points of intimacy in the relationship.

Having proposed the occasions, they then turn to address the tenor for this figurative expression. What exactly are the "kisses of his lips"?

> (1.2.5)LET HIM KISS ME WITH THE KISSES OF HIS LIPS ...R. Eleazar said: A king had a cellar full of wine. One guest came to him and he mixed a cup for him and gave it to him. A second guest came and he mixed a cup for him and gave it to him. When the king's son came, he gave him the whole cellar.So Adam received seven commandments.... Noah received in addition the prohibition of eating a limb from a living animal...Abraham received the command of circumcision. Isaac inaugurated its performance on the eighth day. Jacob was commanded regarding the sinew of the thigh-vein...Judah received the command of the levirate marriage...[but] Israel "consumed" [all] the positive and negative commandments...

Given what we have already seen of Rabbinic theology, it comes as no surprise to learn that the kisses are understood as a metaphor for *mitzvot*. But in offering a figurative expansion to illustrate the concept, R. Eleazar constructs a narrative that draws on biblical narratives and characters far beyond the figures found in the verse. Instead, intent on using this verse to provide a broader characterization of Divine revelation, this ambitious narrative seeks to schematize the entire history of God's revelation as described in Scripture.

God is once more the king, but now Adam, Noah and the patriarchs are portrayed figuratively as favored servants

who receive from the king's own hand goblets of wine. The goblets are a secondary metaphor for 'kisses', which in turn is the figure for *mitzvot*. Note that though the metaphor has shifted from an 'affectionate' figure (kisses) to a food figure (goblets of wine), both figures are associated with the mouth, as would be expected given the *Shir Hashirim* verse. Israel, by comparison, is the king's son, whose favored status is such that he is given the entire wine cellar (the Torah *in toto*).

Through these figures of father and son, R. Eleazar conveys his opinion of Israel's unique and favored place in God's affection. But there are other interpreters of this verse who think Eleazar does not take the analogy far enough. In order to capture the true intimacy implicit in these familial figures, they offer their own narrative expansions:

> ...R. Yose b. R. Hanina said: It is as if a king was apportioning largesse to his soldiers through his generals, commanders and officers, but when his son came, he gave him from his own hand. R. Isaac said: It is as if a king was eating sweetmeats, and when his son came he gave him from his own hand. The Rabbis said: It is as if a king was eating pieces of meat, and when his son came he gave him from his own hand. And there are those who say, he took it from his mouth and gave it to him, as it says, *For the Lord gives wisdom, out of His mouth comes knowledge and discernment* (Prov. 2.6).

Here the 'oral' aspect of the verse (...KISSES OF YOUR MOUTH) is explored for its intimate tropes. In a motif borrowed from the *Tanakh*, food serves to symbolize both

God's word and his favor. The Rabbis employ this familiar figure with visceral effect.

For the first interpretations, the intimacy of the divine-Jewish relationship is made concrete through the willingness of the king to feed his son "from his own hand". But that is still not intimate enough for some. In a climatic interpretation, the king takes a morsel from his own mouth and offers it to his child. It is not clear whether, in using the expression מנעה מפיו (removed it from his mouth), the Rabbis are only shaping the narrative to the proof text that follows or whether they are also describing the practice of pre-mastication. In traditional cultures it is not uncommon for a parent to chew a piece of food in order to soften it before feeding it to a small child. A variation in this practice may underlie the wording of Gen. 25.28. If this is in fact the intent of the image, then it is one of unparalleled intimacy. What could be more evocative of God's closeness to Israel than seeing God as the divine parent carefully feeding his beloved child literally mouth-to-mouth? Of course the tenor assigned to this image is far less sensuous. The morsel is revelation, and the 'orality' here is the oral nature of verbal communication. Yet the intimacy implicit in 'oral' revelation and its reception is deliberate. It is even alluded to in the wording of Eleazar's earlier exposition, in which Israel literally אכל, "consumes" the commandments.

The tropes of favor and intimacy conveyed by these

parent-child figures are so powerful that the Rabbis use them to address many issues throughout the collection. While Torah is the primary privilege Israel enjoys in its role as God's beloved child, it is not the only one. Shir Hashirim R. 3.9.1 uses a *mashal* to describe the *mishkan* of the wilderness as a manifestation of God's favor and as a symbol of his desire for intimacy with Israel:

> 3.9.1 KING SOLOMON MADE HIMSELF A PALANQUIN. R. Azariah in the name of R. Judah b. Simon interpreted the verse as applying to the *mishkan*....R. Judah b. R. Il'ai said: It is as if a king had a young daughter, and before she grew up and reached maturity he used to see her in the street and speak to her in public, in an alley or in a courtyard, but after she grew up and reached maturity he said, 'It is not appropriate for my daughter that I should converse with her in public. Make her a pavilion, and when I desire to talk with her, I will do so in the pavilion.' Thus it is written, *When Israel was a child, then I loved him* (Hos. 11.1)...At Sinai they saw Him face to face... But after Israel had stood before Mount Sinai and received the Torah and said, *All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and obey* (Ex. 14.7), so they had become completely God's people. The Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'It is not becoming for my people that I should speak with them in the open. Let them therefore make for Me a *mishkan*, and whenever I desire to speak with them, I shall speak with them from the midst of the *mishkan*' ; and thus it is written, *then Moses went in before the Lord that He might speak with Him*...(ib.34.34). KING SOLOMON MADE HIMSELF: [Solomon - שלמה - here refers to] the King who possesses peace(i.e., God).

Once again, the Rabbinic concept of God's intimate relationship to Israel is concretized through a vivid narrative expansion that utilizes the figure of a parent

and child. In this case, God is the King (of course), but Israel is portrayed as his *daughter*. This choice is quite deliberate, and is intended to foreground tropes of modesty.

Implicit also are tropes of sexuality and the danger which accompanies sexual situations in Rabbinic thought[1]. The theme of modesty also sublimates the threat of uncontained sexuality. The association of sexual metaphors with the worship of God is one which goes back to the Bible, though as we will see, this 'sexual' trope will play a larger role in other figurative relationships.

That association serves to explain why God would feel it necessary to create an enclosed space to commune with his child, whereas before he manifested himself openly and publicly. From the simple exercise of assigning tenors to the figures of the verse being explicated (Solomon = God; palanquin = *mishkan/beit hamikdash)*, this narrative expansion goes on to serve double duty: it explains God's rationale for why, after he has made himself publically manifest throughout the Exodus narrative, he commands the erecting of the *mishkan* to serve as the locus for his presence, while at the same time it emphasizes the special, exclusive nature of Israel's relationship to God after the giving of the Torah. Yet as important as the parent-child figures are to engage the emotions of the reader, even more critical to this figure is the historical context assigned this *mashal* in its *nimshal*. The closeness expressed through

this figure is intended to seem unparalleled to the reader. In a two-pronged exegetical move, it simultaneously emphasizes the unique nature of the relationship, yet by setting it in the wilderness, it reminds the reader that such intimacy is a thing of the past. This formulation of proximity in the past invokes nostalgic feelings of loss and longing for a relationship which no longer seems as close as it once was.

The same can be said for other king/child *mashalim* that use the events of the biblical past as their setting. We observe that nostalgia for the past is wedded to tropes of nurturing and parental care in 2.5.2,

> SUSTAIN ME WITH RAISIN CAKES, REFRESH ME WITH APPLES, FOR I AM FAINT WITH LOVE. R. Simon b. Yohai taught: At the time Israel went out from Egypt what did they resemble? A king's son who got up from an illness, whereupon his tutor said to the king: 'Let your son now go to school.' The king answered: 'My son has not yet recovered his color and is still pale from his illness. So let him recuperate for about three months and eat and drink, and then he can go to school. So when the Children of Israel went out from Egypt among them were many who were scarred from their work with mortar and bricks. The ministering angels said to God: 'Now the hour has arrived, give them the Torah'. The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: 'My sons have not yet recovered the health which they lost among the bricks and mortar. So let my sons rest for three months with the [miraculous] well [of Miriam], with manna and quails, and afterward I will give them the Torah. And when will that be? *In the third month'* (Ex. 19.1).

The derivation of exegetical figures from the biblical verse are fairly clear. The speaker is Israel, who is weak

and pleads for sustenance. The two elements introduced into the narrative expansion which are not logical implications of the verse itself are the setting of Israel's distress and the source of Israel's distress. The text dictates neither element, so Simon b. Yohai's choices are revealing of his own theological perspective.

According to Simon b. Yohai, the setting for these words was the Exodus. So here again this moment of God's nurturance is placed in an ideal past. Never before and never since has Israel known such favor and care as it knew at that time. This sense of nostalgia for the past is already evident in the latter prophets. For the Rabbis, this biblical trope becomes a major element of their ideology.

Yet even more intriguing is the cause of Israel's distress. The proximate cause of Israel's enfeebled condition is clear - the hard labor of enslavement in Egypt. Because of this, the figures carry on and expand the same tropes of parental caring we have seen earlier. This nurturing portrayal of God makes for marked contrast with rabbinic descriptions of divine caring which are not grounded in any specific time or circumstance. Such uncontextualized narratives tend to be more conditional and less intimate.

Yet even here there is already a foreshadowing of what is to come. Because, while Egypt was the proximate cause, what was the ultimate source of Israel's debilitation? Was

it not God himself, who placed Israel in Egypt and left them there for four hundred years? That idea is certainly present in an interpretation which precedes this section. There the phrase, כי חולת אהבה אני 'for I am love sick', is read as 'for I am sick [because] of your love'. According to this interpretation, God afflicts his child to make the child draw closer. God is the source of Israel's illness. That is certainly not the way matters are formulated in our passage, but by editorially placing such an interpretation before the one we are examining, this interpretation "colors" and even coerces the reader's understanding of what follows.

Here we see presented a version of an important Rabbinic concept, יסורין של אהבה, 'chastisements of love'. In the previous chapter, we noted that the Rabbis use king-servant metaphors to explain the suffering of Israel largely in terms of punishment. That approach to accounting for Israel's predicament is summed up by the refrain which appears frequently in *Eicha Rabbah*, "because Israel sinned, they were exiled" (petikhtot 9; 24). But as we have seen, this response to catastrophe seems at times too simplistic. The punishment Israel experiences seems disproportionate to its supposed crimes. This evident disparity demands a more complex understanding of suffering, especially if the Rabbis intend to retain a notion of relationship with God. The parent-child metaphor - and the emotional complexity it entails - allows for more subtle and multifaceted

interpretations, especially by exploring the dynamics of 'discipline'. Its association with parental love allows the Rabbis more latitude in explaining both God's behavior and their own situation.

The Rabbis clearly also have a nostalgic eye for the past. In this they are building on a strand of thinking already found in the Tanakh. This can be seen in Jeremiah 2.2-3;5,

> ...I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride - how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest... Thus said the Lord: What wrong did your fathers find in me that they abandoned me...?

The Rabbis use these images to emphasize how things have changed, to instruct their readers on how an intimate and nurturing relationship in the past has become distant and punitive in the present.

But the figures employed by the Rabbis also illustrate what is constant in the relationship between Israel and God at all times. We have already seen an example of this in the *mashal*(8.13.1) of the king who imprisons his servants. The mechanism of 'constancy' develops even in *mashalim* which are assigned to the identifiable past, such as 2.14.1, the story of the king who set his servants against his daughter in order to make her call out for his help. Even though this *mashal* is assigned to the seminal

historical events of Israel's past, it nevertheless should be understood as a statement about an on-going divine strategy for gaining human attention. The *darshan* achieves this temporal displacement by means of what Marc Bregman calls
the "narrative present". Through the use of the narrative present, the actual present of the reader is merged with the past event described in the midrash[2].

In 2.14, tropes of longing are conveyed through the emotional image of a parent and child, but the rabbinic belief in divine longing for Israel transcends any particular figurative homology. It is a theme which permeates *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. The notion is also at work in the *mashal* of the king who imprisons his servants. In all these figures, God is the source of Israel's distress. There too, distress serves as incentive for Israel to turn toward God.

But as often as the Rabbis of Shir. R. interpret their current situation as divine prodding, they do on occasion offer other interpretations of Israel's predicament. And when they do, they once again look to elements of the parent-child relationship to aid in their understanding. Suffering is also a manifestation of divine discipline for Israel's wrongdoing. But even here the trope of inattentiveness is also present, as well as a striking emotional reversal:

> 8.12.1 MY VINEYARD, WHICH IS MINE, IS BEFORE ME. R. Hiyya taught: [God is here likened] to a king who was angry with his son and handed him over to his servant. The latter thereupon began beating him with a stick, saying, ' Don,t listen to your father.' The son said to him: ' Stupid fool! The only reason why my father handed me over to you was because I did not obey him, and you say to me," Don,t listen to your father"?' So when as a result of Israel's transgressions the Temple was destroyed and Israel were exiled to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar said to them, 'Do not listen to the law of your Father in heaven, but instead *you should fall down and worship the image that I have made* (Dan. 3.15)' the children of Israel said to him: 'Stupid fool! The only reason why God has delivered us into your hand is because we bowed down to an image, as it says, *She saw... the images of the Chaldeans portrayed with vermilion* (Ezek. 23.14), and you say to us, " Fall down and worship the image which I have made"! Woe to that man!' Thereupon God said: MY VINEYARD, WHICH IS MINE, IS BEFORE ME.

Exegetically this *mashal* functions to provide an occasion for God to utter the words of the *Shir Hashirim* verse. For our purposes, though, it serves to demonstrate how Israel's suffering is assigned meaning through a parent-child analogy. God justifiably punishes Israel for ignoring him.

What is remarkable in this particular figurative narrative is how the justification for Israel's affliction is put in the mouth of the victim. This arrangement serves to radically mitigate the severe nature of the punishment described in the *nimshal*. After all, the horrendous suffering that followed on the fall of Jerusalem is being compared to a harsh (but hardly devastating) disciplinary action. In *Eicha Rabbah*, this very same historical tragedy

is graphically explored in all its pathos and visceral horror. By comparison, using the analogy of parental discipline pulls the reader in exactly the opposite direction. It distances the reader from the true horror and places it in a figurative context that makes it seem a reasonable and almost a routine course of events like those found in any parental-child relationship. The emotional distance of this figure from its tenor is remarkable precisely because it reverses the more common function of figurative language, to render the abstract more immediate. This novel rhetorical effect makes this quite memorable. This is an example of how a metaphor, rather than simply 'vivifying' the tenor, actually overshadows the entity it is trying to illustrate. Because it is so important to the Rabbis that the readers accept the on-going validity of the relationship, they have, in effect, sacrificed the reality. Parental discipline is simply not a felicitous analogy for the slaughter, famine and enslavement associated with the events of the *Hurban*. The metaphor determines the emotional response to those events. It does more than contextualize them in terms of a relationship. It effectively strips them of the power they have when confronted unmediated. This is perhaps emotionally necessary for the relationship to endure, but it is manifestly an act of psychological denial.

The following pericope suggests that there is a benevolent purpose behind God's affliction of Israel.

Exegetically this begins with the patriarch Jacob(3.6.3):

> ...OF ALL THE POWDERS OF THE MERCHANT: This means our father Jacob...R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Helbo: It is written, *And there wrestled a man with him* (Gen. 32.25). From these words we do not know who was in control of who, if the angel was in control of Jacob or if the angel was in control of Jacob until is written, *And he said: Let me go, for the day is breaking* (ib. 27). The angel said to Jacob: 'Let me go, for my turn has come to chant praises [in the divine chorus].' This shows that the angel was in the power of Jacob. In what form did he appear to him? R. Hamai b. R. Hanina said: He appeared to him in the form of the guardian angel of Esau, as it says, *...For to see your face is like seeing the face of God* (ib. 33.10).'Your face,' he said, 'resembles your guardian [angel].'

After offering an interpretation of why God attacks Jacob with an angel, Rabbi Helbo extends the same interpretation to why God besets Israel with enemies:

> [It is comparable to] a *mashal* of a king who had a tame lion and a savage dog; he set on the lion and incited it attack his son, saving, 'If the dog comes to attack my son, my son will say, I prevailed against the lion, cannot I prevail against the dog?' So when the other nations come to attack Israel, the Holy One, blessed be He, says to them [the attacking nation]: 'Your guardian angel could not resist their ancestor, and shall you prevail against them?'

Though the exegetical context of this *mashal* is the specific experience of Jacob, the nimshal makes clear that the tenors of these figures have been recontextualized to the Rabbinic present. This is common exegetical move in Jewish literature, portraying an individual as a metonymy

for the community[3].

Entering into the reading, the tame lion is Esau's angel. The wild dog is Esau (a figure within a figure, for 'Esau' is a well-known Rabbinic figure for Rome, the oppressing power that besets Israel). This linkage of Dog->Esau->Rome leads implicitly to the metonymous tenor, a conclusion made explicit in the *nimshal*. Then, intriguingly, Jacob and his children are collapsed into the single figure of the King's son.

The tropes of this figurative representation are tropes of 'training' or 'preparation'. Framed in a parent-child relationship, it suggests that the past trials of Jacob/Israel (the ancestor) were intended as parental instruction to help Israel (the descendants) cope with the present. The fathers had to endure God's 'tough love' so that Israel would be able to endure a cruel future. Still, Rabbi Helbo leaves us with an open question: If past suffering is indicative of God educating Israel, what is present suffering? Is it 'simply' punishment for convenantal violations, or is it, as suggested elsewhere, another effort by God to revitalize an intimate relationship? In the context of Shir. R., that brings us back to יסורין של אהבה, the notion that God afflicts Israel out of longing and out of a desire for Israel's devotion.

While the parent-child figure can be employed to illustrate many theological points, the unique function of this figure is to reassure the reader that the afflictions

God sends are both chastisements of love and within the capacity of Israel to bear. God the father acts only in the best interests of his child and only in the interests of strengthening the relationship.

Not only does the image of the divine parent reassure the reader that Israel's distress is both purposeful and bearable, it also permits the introduction of tropes of indulgence, at least for Israel's future. God the harsh parent of Israel's present will eventually revert to the doting parent known in the past. The following figurative expansion illustrates this possibility, in addition to its other exegetical functions:

> (8.8.1) WE HAVE A LITTLE SISTER: this is Israel. R. Azariah said in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon: In the time to come all the [celestial] princes of the nations of the world will come and accuse Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He, saying, Master of the Universe, these (nations) worshipped idols and those (Israel) worshipped idols, these acted lewdly and those acted lewdly, these shed blood and those shed blood. Why do these go down to Gehinnom while those do not?' The Holy One, blessed be He will say to them: 'WE HAVE A LITTLE SISTER: just as a child, whatever he does, is not reproved, because he is but a child, so too however much Israel may be defiled by their iniquities throughout the year, the Day of Atonement comes and atones for them, as it says, *For on this day shall atonement be made for you'* (Lev. 16.30).

This narrative is entirely a convention of the Rabbis. While the verse demands that the implied 'family' be explained, the portrayal of an assembly of national guardian angels as part of God's 'family' is not a necessary consequence of the figures contained in the

verses.

The figures of this pericope are complex and there is considerable slippage between the vehicles and their tenors. Implied, but never stated, in this figure is the notion of a divine 'family'. The reader is already familiar with figures of 'parent' and 'child' in rabbinic discourse, but the usual context for such relationships, that of a family network, is rarely addressed. This reluctance to utilize the metaphor of family may be partly due to the need in figurative discourse to simplify and highlight the significant elements in the figures which foreground the desired tropes. In such discourse, the full range of associations which we would normally link to "parent" and "child" are screened from the reader by the *darshan* as ephemeral.

Here however, the idea of family, while not foregrounded, is imputed to the figure because it is exegetically forced on the Rabbis by the verse itself, not becuase it is a figure the *Darshan* wishes to explain. The image of a 'sister' compels the reader to further widen his associations to 'parent-child' metaphors.

R. Judah makes a virtue of this exegetical necessity by creating out of the verse a fascinating figurative narrative. The implied family is here explained as a divine one. Each nation of the world has a guardian angel which must advocate for its respective charges at the final judgement. At first the proceedings strike the reader as

judicial, certainly a familiar characterization of God and his angels. Yet when God invokes the *Shir Hashirim* verse in Israel's defense, we not only have God and Israel in a familial context, but must include the angels themselves - WE HAVE A LITTLE SISTER, he tells them. From this R. Judah constructs exegesis which reassures the reader that Israel will not suffer the same fate as other nations. Israel, the 'baby' of the 'family' is to be indulged. Though Israel may currently bear divine judgement, that suffering is always kept in bounds by the atoning capacity of Yom Kippur. The 'family of nations' however, can only look forward to unbounded suffering in the time to come.

The boundaries of this particular family are ambiguous. It seems that while the national angels are part of the family, excepting Israel, the nations themselves are not. As we will see, the reluctance to use the figure of a family seen here is characteristic of Rabbinic figurative discourse. The Rabbis do make occasional use of the 'family' metaphor in their theological instruction, but it is not their preferred figure.

As evidenced by the varied uses of these figures seen so far, the image of parent-child relationships carry potent tropes of security, intimacy and discipline, which the Rabbis put to good use in explaining to their readers the complex dynamics of the Divine-Israel relationship.

The Choice One: An Excursus on the Figure of Family

It has already been suggested at the end of our last discussion that the Rabbis prefer to use the relatively simple figures of 'parent' and 'child'. Even though the larger family unit can be a powerful literary vehicle, there are only a few figurative images of 'extended family' to be found in Rabbinic theological discourse. Why? For two reasons. The first is exegetical. The simpler dyadic parent-child figure is better suited to address those themes the Rabbis wish to foreground - themes of intimacy, uniqueness and the special nature of the relationship between God and Israel. The more complex dynamics inherent in a multi-member family render such a figure more difficult to use for the *darshan*. Such 'family' figures seem to arise only when there are more than two figures in a verse that need to be accommodated. That was clearly the case in R. Judah's exegesis from earlier in this chapter. Because of its many possible tropes, the image may be difficult for the *darshan* to 'control', to call attention to only those tropes and associations the *darshan* wishes to highlight. By the same token, such a complex figure may be subject to greater misinterpretation by the reader, and after all, the usual function of figurative language is to concretize and clarify, not to render an idea more ambiguous. The following pericope may help demonstrate this problem. Here the preference of the *darshan* seems to be to

highlight the uniqueness of Israel's relationship to God. But because the figures contained in these verses already suggest a 'familial' theme, the metaphor is forced to the fore:

> (6.9.5) Another interpretation: MY DOVE, MY UNDEFILED, IS UNIQUE. This is the Community of Israel, as it is written, *And who is like your people Israel, a unique nation in the earth* (II Sam. 7.23). SHE IS THE ONLY ONE OF HER MOTHER: as it is written, *Attend to Me, O my people, and give ear unto Me, O my nation* (Isa. 51.4), where the word *le'umi* (my nation) is spelled le'imi (to my mother). SHE IS THE CHOICE ONE (*BARAH*) OF HER THAT BORE HER: R. Jacob b. Abuna interpreted [the word *bara*] before R. Isaac: Beside her (bar minah) there is no child to her that bore her. THE DAUGHTERS SAW HER, AND CALLED HER HAPPY:as it is written, And all nations shall call you happy (Mal. 3.12).

This is a multilayered exegesis. It begins with a "lover-beloved" trope in the Shir Hashirim verse itself. The fact that *the darshan* turns this into a 'parent-child' analogy undergirds this rather complex collection of exegetical moves. That analogy is determined both by the language of the verses, particularly ...THE ONLY ONE OF HER MOTHER..., and by the first intertext introduced, II Samuel 7.23, a verse we have already identified as part of the paradigmatic statement on God and Israel as metaphoric father and son. But the next verse from *Shir* takes us in a surprising direction. The idea of unparalleled exclusivity found in the II Samuel verse is reinforced, but the verse changes the figure of God from a father to a mother! Yet

the next phrase,... THE CHOICE ONE OF HER WHO BORE HER..., threatens to undermine that exclusivity ('choice' suggests 'favored' while admitting there are 'others', though less favored). This exegetically forces the *darshan* to deal with the possibility that there are others who could claim to be 'daughters' of God. Rabbi Jacob struggles mightily against admitting this exegetical possibility, but the next phrase, ...THE DAUGHTERS SAW HER..., compels him to admit the nations into this *mishpachah*, although he explores the issue no further.

Again, as in R. Judah's exegesis from the previous section, we see a reluctance to treat the nations as part of a familial figure. The reason the family metaphor was not fully developed in either R. Judah's exegesis or in the example above seems to be a reluctance to credit all nations with having positive, familial-type relationships with Deity. The Rabbis of *Shir. R.* clearly associate tropes of favor and love with the image of family, and they are loath to grant that God may have such feelings toward the nations.

This is confirmed by the example of a figurative expansion where the image of a family is explicitly introduced with all its positive associations. Here, however, the 'family' is (exclusively) the House of Jacob:

> (7.2.2)R. Hananiah ben R. Ibi said: It is written here, HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE YOUR FOOTSTEPS, not

'in the sandal'(singular), but IN SANDALS (בנעלים). There are two conclusions (נעלים): the conclusion of Pesach and the conclusion of Sukkot. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: 'You conclude before Me at Sukkot, and I conclude before you at Pesach. You conclude your work before Me at Sukkot and I open the heavens and cause winds to blow and bring clouds, make rain fall and make the sun to shine, make plants grow and ripen produce, and arrange a table before each one according to his needs and each body according to its wants. I close [the Heavens] before you at Pesach and you go out and reap and thresh and winnow and do all that is required in the field and find it rich in blessing.' R. Joshua b. Levi said: By rights, the Eighth Day of the festival should have followed Sukkot after a period of fifty days, as Shavuot follows Pesach. But since at the Eighth Day of the festival summer turns to autumn, the time is not suitable for travelling. [God was like] a king who had several married daughters, some living near by, while others were a long way away. One day they all came to visit their father the king. Said the king: ' Those who are living near by are able to travel at any time. But those who live at a distance are not able to travel at any time. So while they are all here with me, let us make one feast for all of them and rejoice with them.' So with regard to Pentecost which comes when winter is passing into summer, God says, 'The season is fit for travelling.' But the Eighth day of Assembly comes when summer is passing into autumn, and the roads are dry and hard for walking; consequently it is not separated by a period of fifty days. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'These are not days for travelling; so while they are here, let us make of all of them one festival and rejoice.' Therefore Moses instructs Israel, saying to them, *On the eighth day you shall have a solemn assembly* (Num. 24.35). Thus we may say, HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE YOUR FOOTSTEPS IN SANDALS/CONCLUSIONS.

This exquisite example of rabbinic exegesis offers sweetly idyllic images of family. R. Hananiah uses the wording of Shir. 7.2 to explore a small calendric curiosity, the difference in the ways the "pilgrimage

festivals" of Pesach and Sukkot conclude. According to the Rabbinic interpretation, Shavuot, which occurs a distant fifty days later, serves as the conclusion of Pesach. By comparison, the conclusion of Sukkot occurs on the eighth day, now called Shemini Atzeret. As discussed in the Talmud, this issue is given a utilitarian explanation which revolves around the difficulties of travel to Jerusalem to and from the Diaspora communities during the fall rainy seasons. R. Hananiah takes up these halakhic discussions and imbues them with a touching affective quality: God, the loving father, wishes to make it possible for all Israel, his children, to attend the festivals.

Through R. Hananiah's metaphor, the sacred calendar reflects the rhythms of family life. God and Israel seem the archetypal 'happy family'. The result is quite engaging. Notice too that here there is no hesitation to explore familial figures, because here the exegete has complete control over who constitutes the divine 'family'.

Which brings us back to the question of why 'family' is not a more popular image in rabbinic figurative discourse. As demonstrated by the last two pericopes, figures of family can simultaneously be the vehicles for themes of rivalry and security. Presumably, this 'malleability' should make the familial metaphor more attractive to the Rabbis, not less.

Perhaps a reason for the relative dearth of these images is the lack of interpretative precedents. Unlike the

father-son image found in Deuteronomy and elsewhere, the biblical writers rarely used the whole constellation of the family as a theological metaphor. Without the biblical precedent as a starting point, the Rabbis do not embrace the extended family as a figure on par with biblically inspired dyadic images: 'king and subject', 'father and son' or even 'husband and wife'.

Since the figure of an extended family has neither biblical precedent nor greatly serves the purposes of the Rabbis, it makes sense that there are comparatively few characterizations in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* of God and Israel as members of a larger family unit.

Notes to Chapter 5

1) David Biale, Eros and the Jews, pp. 50-52; 57-59.

2) Marc Bregman, "Past and Present in Midrashic Literature", Hebrew Annual Review, 2 (1978), pp. 45-49.

3) Such metonymy is evident in the Bible (Ps. 69 and the 'servant cycle' of II Isaiah). It is even structured into this narrative by the name of the individual protagonist, Jacob/Israel, who bears the name of the entire nation.

Chapter 6

Lover and Beloved: A Narrative of Estrangement and Reconciliation

As we saw in the previous chapter, using the metaphors of God as 'king' and God as 'father' gives the Rabbis great freedom in expressing complex and multi-faceted interpretations of the Divine-Jewish relationship. Israel the servant knows God the king as a figure of power, authority and order. Israel the son knows their divine father as a figure of security, intimacy and discipline. The importance of the 'father-son' image is the powerful affective dimension it introduces into the relationship. God the king controls, but God the father cares. God the king protects, but God the father nurtures.

There is another even more important metaphoric relationship to be found in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. It is the image of God and Israel as man and woman. This is usually specified as either groom and bride or husband and wife, depending on the exegetical occasion.

Like the other images, this one also has its roots in the language and rhetoric of the Bible. Israel as God's betrothed is an image that appears in the Bible as early as Hosea (8th century BCE) and as late as III Isaiah (5th century BCE)[2]. In other words, it is a metaphor 'with legs'. And like the 'father - son' analogy, this figurative relationship is latent with affective associations.

However, this image is special and it dominates the Jewish understanding of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. In the *mashalim* included in *Shir. R.*, this 'marital'-analogy makes up the plurality of images. The Rabbis who composed Shir. R. also reveal a certain self-consciousness about the defining place of this metaphor.

This can be partly explained by the large amount of sexual/marital imagery found in the biblical *Shir Hashirim*. There are not many references to kings in *Shir.* and virtually no references to servants. Likewise there is only a minuscule amount of parent-child imagery. However, the text abounds with language nuptial, sexual and marital. It is this convergence between the metaphoric language of Shir Hashirim and the use of marital imagery found elsewhere in the Bible which makes this the dominant motif for Rabbinic discourse in this document. The Rabbis are themselves aware of how biblical imagery both in and outside Shir Hashirim foregrounds this analogy,

> 4.10.1 HOW FAIR IS THY LOVE, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE. R. Berekiah and R. Helbo in the name of R. Samuel b. Nahman said: In ten places in Scripture Israel are called 'bride,' six here [in the Song of Songs], and four in the prophets. The six here are, *Come with Me from Lebanon, my bride* (4.8); *you have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride* (ib. 9); HOW FAIR IS YOUR LOVE, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE ib. 10); *Your lips, O my bride, drop honey* (ib. 11); *A garden shut up is my sister, my bride* (ib. 12); *I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride* (V, 1). This makes six. The four in the prophets are: *The voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice*

> *of the bride* (Jer. 7.34); And *as a bride adorns herself with jewels* (Isa. 61.10); And *gird yourself with them, like a bride* (ib. 59.18); And *as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride* (ib. 57.5).

The pericope then presents God as a groom. But in curious twist, this analogy is left implicit,

> ...Correspondingly, the Holy One, blessed be He, put on ten robes... The purpose of these robings is to punish the nations of the world for preventing Israel from carrying out the ten commandments which they bound closely round them like the ornaments of a bride.

Jacob Neusner in his translation parenthetically identifies these as "nuptial" robes. Later he correctly notes that the exegetic treatment of the base verse "...takes for granted that the lover, God, speaks of the beloved"[1]. Thus the 'robes' serve as a metonymy for 'groom'. It is evident from the symmetry of this passage that the Rabbis make the equation of Israel/bride and God/groom. Their hesitation, however, to explicitly call God "groom" it is worth noting and is a subject to we will return later.

Previously I suggested how a parent-child relationship communicated an intimacy of connection that Rabbis want us to regard as homologous to the intensity of God's bond to Israel. The Rabbis associate that same intimacy with the marital bond. This reflects what has been said before about how the Rabbis deploy multiple and varied figures to

express a limited repertoire of tenors. However, two elements distinguish the intimacy of a marital relationship from a parental one. These elements make it more than just a different means of saying the same thing. The first element is that the Rabbis recognize the marital relationship as a uniquely intense one. The second is that, despite its intensity, a marriage in Rabbinic culture is subject to dissolution. These two factors make nuptial and marital imagery valuable vehicles for conveying Rabbinic theology.

In *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* the reader is explicitly informed about the special intensity of the marital bond. The Rabbis do this propositionally, a rarity in Rabbinic discourse, in Shir. R. 7.10.1,

> I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND HIS DESIRE IS TOWARD ME. There are three strong desires. The yearning of Israel is only toward their father in heaven, as it says, I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND HIS DESIRE IS TOWARD ME. The longing of a woman is only for her husband, as it says, *And your desire shall be to thy husband* (Gen. 3.16). The longing of the evil inclination is for Cain...

It is tempting to conclude that this claim for the special intensity of the marital bond is solely the product of lexicographical exegesis, that it is only the appearance of the word תשוקה in relationship to marriage that drives the Rabbis to make this statement. Therefore it is important to remember that rabbinic culture accepted the statements of the Bible as *a priori* factual and valid

statements about reality. And just to confirm that the rabbis recognize the special nature of the marital bond, one should refer to the *maaseh avot* found in *Shir. R.* 1.4.2, about a particular married couple where the bonds of marital love prove powerful enough to compel God to action.

Moreover, in both the exegetical and narrative passages these statements of marital love are explicitly treated as analogous to the love of Israel for God.

Aside from the acknowledged deep bond and emotional intensity of marriage, the Rabbis also find marital relationships theologically useful because of their narrativity. All marriages go through stages: courtship, wedding, and even divorce and reconciliation. Building on the same insight of the prophetic authors, the Rabbis find this narrativity of relationship the ideal metaphor for the meta-historical past, present and future of God and Israel. Just as any marriage has its high and low points, its periods of bliss and periods of estrangement, so too God and Israel are a couple with a long history (but hopefully, a future).

In fact the treatment of Israel's history with God as a kind of marital narrative is a *leitmotif* of the rabbinic reading of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. The Rabbis explain the events of the Exodus as a courtship, Sinai a wedding and the condition of exile as a period of estrangement which, under certain conditions, will resolve in a reconciliation that restores the connubial bliss of the past. What follows

is a mapping of that narrative.'

I.

Shir Hashirim Rabbah envisions the events of the Exodus and the Wilderness as a kind of courtship. God woos Israel, and is won over by her charms and attributes. This analogy is explored in loving detail in 4.9.1,

> YOU HAVE RAVISHED MY HEART, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE, YOU HAVE RAVISHED MY HEART. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'You had one heart in Egypt, and you gave Me two hearts.' YOU HAVE RAVISHED MY HEART WITH ONE OF YOUR EYES; with the blood of the Pesach and the blood of the circumcision. WITH ONE BEAD OF YOUR NECKLACE: this refers to Moses, the most honored and the mightiest in your tribes. Another explanation: YOU HAVE RAVISHED MY HEART, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE: Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Ye had one heart by the Red Sea and ye gave Me two hearts.' YOU HAVE RAVISHED MY HEART WITH ONE OF YOUR EYES: when you stood before Me at Mount Sinai and said, All that the Lord has said will we do, and obey (Ex. 24. 7). WITH ONE BEAD OF YOU NECKLACE: this is Moses, the most distinguished and the mightiest in thy tribes. Another explanation: YOU HAVE RAVISHED MY HEART, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'You had one heart in the wilderness and you gave Me two hearts.' YOU HAVE RAVISHED MY HEART WITH ONE OF YOUR EYES: at the setting up of the Tabernacle, as it says, *And on the day that the tabernacle was erected.* (Num. 9.15). WITH ONE BEAD OF YOUR NECKLACE: this is Moses, the most exalted among the tribes. Some explain thus: The women of the generation of the wilderness were virtuous,and when that deed of shame was about to be executed, they thought the matter over and would not give any of their earrings for the making of the calf. Also when they were told that they were forbidden to their husbands, they immediately separated themselves. Another interpretation: YOU HAVE RAVISHED MY HEART, O MY SISTER, MY BRIDE: Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'You had one heart when the spies were sent, and

you gave Me two hearts,' namely Caleb and Joshua, as it says, except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite, and Joshua the son of Nun (Num. 32.12). WITH ONE BEAD OF YOUR NECKLACE. This is Moses, the most distinguished and the mightiest among your tribes. Another interpretation: YOU HAVE RAVISHED MY HEART, O MY SISTER, MY BRIDE Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'You had one heart in Shittim and you gave Me two hearts.YOU HAVE RAVISHED MY HEART WITH ONE OF YOUR EYES: this alludes to Phinehas, as it says, Then Phinehas stood up, and made judgment and that was counted to him for righteousness WITH ONE BEAD OF YOUR NECKLACE: namely, Moses.

This pericope translates the redundant lover's confession in Shir. 4.9. into a narrative of God's growing infatuation with Israel. This exegetical alchemy is all the most amazing since the narrative is not advanced through the usual device of a word-by-word parsing, but through a series of (normally static) דבר אחר statements.

But for all its rhetorical ingenuity, the metaphor it employs is simplicity itself. Israel is a woman. Just as a woman adorns herself with jewelry, Israel adorns herself with righteous deeds. These adornments make her attractive to her suitor. God was drawn to Israel in the beginning of the relationship because she was obedient to his word and performed worthy deeds. Left unstated here, but underlying this and most Rabbinic treatments of the past, is the implication that if Israel were to similarly adorn herself today, God would once again be enamored of her.

The infatuation is reciprocal. In the throes of hero worship Israel is captivated by God's mighty deeds;

> (5.2.2) MY LOVE... because they fell in love with Me beside the Red Sea and said, *This is my God and I will glorify him* (Ex.15.2).

II.

Perhaps it would be more useful, in modern terms, to say that the Rabbis (as did Jeremiah before them) are describing the Exodus as the courtship and the wandering in the wilderness as the honeymoon, for the Rabbis seem to regard Sinai as the locus of the nuptials. It is the place of greatest intimacy, where the relationship is consummated. This idea is implied with lusty vividness in Shir R. 4.8.1,

> COME WITH ME FROM LEBANON, MY BRIDE, WITH ME FROM LEBANON. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: ' Come with Me from Lebanon.' We have learned elsewhere: 'A virgin is allowed twelve months from the time the bridegroom claims her to prepare herself for the wedding.' I, however, did not observe this rule, but while you were still busy with the bricks and mortar I hastened to redeem you. The sensual Ahasuerus said, *Six months with oil of myrrh...* (Est. 2.12) ... I, however, did not wait so long...

The exact exegetical structure of this passage is puzzling. Perhaps, as M. Simon proposes in his translation notes, the Rabbis intend their audience to read לבנון as a pun, intended to be read as לבנים. Thus the verse should be understood as saying "Come with me from (your) bricks, my

bride"[3]. Be that as it may, the implication is that God, seized with ardor for Israel and eager to consummate the relationship, rushed her from Egypt to... where? The passage does not say. But it is made clear elsewhere.

> 1.2.3 (LET ME KISS HIM WITH THE KISSES OF MY MOUTH)...R. Johanan interpreted the verse as applying to Israel when they went up to Mount Sinai. It was as if a king wanted to marry a wife of good and noble family, so he sent an envoy to speak with her. She said: 'I am not worthy to be his handmaid, but all the same I desire to hear from his own mouth.' When the envoy returned to the king, he was full of smiles, but he would give no clear report to the king. The king, who was very discerning, said: 'This man is full of smiles, which shows that she consented, and he does not give any clear report, which would seem to show that she said that she wants to hear from my own mouth.' So Israel is the woman of good family, Moses is the envoy, and the king is the Holy One, blessed be He. On that occasion, *And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord* (Ex.19.8)...

Once again verse 1.2, with its trope of intimacy, serves as the occasion for a mashal in which God and Israel are brought together. We have seen this before in pericope 1.2.5, where the 'oral' image of verse 1.2 inspired a nurturing figure. Here the figure of a man and a woman courting immediately foregrounds the sexual trope inherent in the verse. The implication of the figures chosen is that Sinai is the moment of 'physical contact'. But the Rabbis retreat from this association rapidly, and THE KISSES OF MY MOUTH are neutered and transformed into a divine speech act which Israel insists on hearing without the intermediacy of

Moses. Still, despite the coy redirection of the Rabbinic figures, the sexual sub-text remains in the mind of the reader. Sinai is understood to be the moment of greatest intimacy between God and Israel on many levels: communicative, caring and 'physical'. Earlier we read in 5.2.2 how Israel became enthralled with God at the Red Sea. Returning to a later portion of that same pericope, we learn that love found its full expression at the great theophany:

> ...MY PERFECT ONE, [meaning] my 'whole hearted' one who became devoted to me at Sinai and said, *All that the Lord has said we will do and we will obey* (Ex.24.7).

Read in the context of 'marital' figures, Israel's convenantal commitment is reinvisioned as a kind of wedding day. Time and again the Rabbis use the image of lovers to reinforce the uniqueness of the moment at Sinai and to fill their readers with a nostalgic longing to recapture that past intimacy. The Rabbis try to create in their readers a longing to recapture the pristine relationship Israel only knew with God at Sinai.

III.

Today it is conventional to think of marriage as a relationship centered around the mutual affection of the partners. Historically, however, the family has been a much

more complex entity. The Rabbis knew a marriage as an institution with economic, legal and political functions. These different social roles for marriage in Rabbinic culture made it a particularly apt metaphor for the all-encompassing nature of the Sinaitic covenant. For example, when *Shir Hashirim* speaks in aesthetic terms, such as describing the physical beauty of the Beloved, the Rabbis sometimes assign to these images ethical referents. So also in 4.9.1 we saw how the 'beads' of the necklace worn by the bride become historic individuals, such as Moses. But the metaphor runs even deeper than that. In near-eastern cultures, the jewelry worn by the bride on her wedding day is more than just an aesthetic enhancement. It is often part of the dowry, the real financial contribution a bride brings to the economy of the family being created. Such jewelry is an investment that provides a cushion against future hard times. Knowing this suggests a deeper analogy at work in the interpretative process of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. Moses is not just the most beautiful 'bead' on the necklace of Israel's leadership, he is a bridal 'treasure' for present Israel to draw upon. What this analogy suggests is the Rabbinic ideology of זכות אבות, the 'merit of the fathers'. At the risk of being a tad too casual in explaining the analogy, Moses should be thought of as a spiritual trust account which future generations of Jews can draw against when they face a shortfall of worthy deeds and righteous leaders in their own generation.

The Rabbi's figurative treatment of the bride's 'ornaments' is interpretively quite sophisticated. There is a subtle analogy between the economy of a marriage and the metaphysical economy of the divine-Jewish 'marriage' at Sinai. The metaphor is subtle, but not invisible. This analogy was more apparent to a generation of Jews familiar with the economic and social conventions of traditional societies.

Similarly imaginative and religiously instructive interpretations are offered using another nuptial image, the exchange of presents between the couple at the time of betrothal,

> (4.12.3)Another interpretation: YOUR LIMBS (שלחך) ARE A PARK OF POMEGRANATES. It compares it to a park of pomegranates, as one ordinarily says, 'What did So-and-So send (shalah) to his betrothed? Pomegranates.' R. Hanina and R.Simon disputed. One said: She [the Community of Israel] presented to Him [God] thirteen things, and He presented to her thirteen. She presented to Him thirteen, as reported in the book of Exodus: And this is the offering... gold, and silver, and brass; and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats, hair; and rams' skins dyed red, and sealskins, and acacia wood, onyx stones, and stones to be set(Ex. 25.3-7). He presented to her thirteen, as explained in Ezekiel (16.10- 12): *I clothed you with richly woven work* ...And shod you with sealskin: in return for the sealskins [of the tabernacle]. *And I wrapped fine linen upon your head:* in return for the fine linen and goatskins. *And covered you with silk*(משי). R. Aibu said: This means, He made them to be something (ממש) in the world. R. Judah b. R. Simon says- It means, He ringed them with the clouds of glory, as it says, *The pillar of cloud... did not depart* (ימיש)(Ex. 22.22). *I also arrayed you with ornaments;* this refers to their weapons....And I put bracelets

> upon your hands: this refers to the two tablets of the covenant on which were engraved the Ten Commandments...*And a chain on your neck*: this refers to words of Torah...*And I put a ring:* this refers to the holy crown (of Davidic royalty). *And jewels in your ears*: this refers to the plate (of the High Priest)...*and a beautiful crown upon your head*: this is the Shechinah...Which are the remaining three? *Thus you were decked with gold and silver... and your renown went forth among the nations* (Ezek. 16. 13, 14).

A clever word play initiates this particular homily, effectively subverting the actual meaning of the verse, which is overtly sexual. Yet while the Rabbinic reinterpretation is certainly a 'strong' reading, as Harold Bloom would put it, it is not high-handed. The Rabbis keep their reading within the orbit of connubial relationships, if only in the most modest and circumspect sense.

Having moved the meaning of the verse from the sexual to the material domain of marriage, the Rabbis use the image of gift exchange to expound the benefits granted to Israel for being God's partner. Of course, Israel brings its gifts - precious and semi-precious materials for the construction of the mishkan (which, not so incidentally, is treated elsewhere in Shir. R. as a symbolic bridal chamber). God's gifts are more diverse than Israel's, but many of them are no less material. Not surprisingly, one of God's wedding gifts is his presence in the midst of the community. The divine logos is also given, as represented metonymically by the Ten Commandments.

But he also provides prosperity in the forms of fabrics,

gold and silver. He provides providence as symbolized by the protective cloud and wondrous weapons. And he grants fame, political and religious power to Israel through the offices of the Dividic kingdom and the priesthood. So through this nuptial analogy the Rabbis assure their readers that Israel's relationship to God is one which promises to fulfill all Israel's spiritual, psychological and material needs. In other words, it is a marriage made, as it were, in heaven.

But of course, all of these marvelous benefits are placed in the ideal past. The Exodus and Sinai were the high water marks of the relationship. The relationship familiar to the Rabbis and their readers in their own time is whole different. Now Israel lacks both power and prosperity and God seems a neglectful, if not cruel spouse. What went wrong in this most perfect of partnerships, and why has God seemingly turned from ardorous to abusive regarding the object of affection?

IV.

The Rabbis clearly regard themselves and all Israel as far removed from the halcyon days of Sinai and the wilderness. The relationship between God and Israel has deteriorated, almost to the point where it seems severed. Gone is the sense of God's infatuation with his people, gone are the symbols of God's patriarchal protection which were the betrothal gifts. Political autonomy is gone, as is the cult. Both prosperity and providence are apparently a thing of the past. Surely this means that God's presence and God's relationship with Israel are at an end. But the Rabbis insist not. Instead, the Rabbis muster all this evidence on behalf of just the opposite conclusion. All Israel's suffering reflects God's determination to regain Israel's attention and affection.

> (1.4.3)DRAW ME (משכני), WE WILL RUN AFTER YOU Because you incited against me my evil neighbors (שכני). R. Abun said: It was as if a king was angry with his queen and incited evil neighbors against her, until she began to cry out, "My lord king, save me". So of Israel it is said, *The Sidonians also and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, and you cried to Me and I delivered you from their hand* (Judges 10.12). Another interpretation: DRAW ME, WE WILL RUN AFTER YOU: Bring me into danger (מסכינני) and we will run after Thee. Another explanation: Make me poor (ממסכינני) and we will run after You. This idea is the same as in the saying of R. Aha: When the Jew is reduced to eating carobs, he becomes repentant...

The idea undergirding this series of interpretations should be familiar by now. It is in fact one of the major messages of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. This same idea has been the subject of repeated figuarative treatment (2.14.2). God places Israel in distress so as to drive his people to turn to him.

The string of interpretations are all based on wordplays with משכני. Though there are three distinct interpretations which make up this pericope, they are a unit unified by the exegetical strategy. In some ways this is a counterpoint to the passage which listed God's betrothal gifts (4.12.2). The *mashal* which opens this passage determines the understanding of what follows. Where once protection and prosperity were the symbols of the union, the husband now withholds them from his wife. In keeping with the conventions of Rabbinic *mashalim*, this husband is also a king. Still, the designation is more than just a convention.Because he is aking, we presume it remains in his power to protect her if he so choses.

Note that there is one element introduced into this *mashal* which has not appeared in previous figures where God uses suffering to command Israel's attention. That is the element of God's anger. God as the dovecote owner and God as the fahter are not portrayed as acting out of anger. This *mashal* brings us closer to the first *mashal* we studied, the angry king who imprisons his servants

(8.13.1). This is perhaps suggestive of the parallels Rabbis saw in the nature of being a king and being a husband, but we have too little sociological data on the Rabbinic institution of marriage to draw too much from the analogy.

But we can speculate that anger in the context of a husband-wife figure would raise for the reader the spectre of divorce. The idea is not expressed here explicitly, but it is elsewhere in Rabbinic literature[4].

Divorce has always been a factor in Jewish marriage since Biblical times. Certainly there seems to be the assumption that marriages will be and should be perpetual (Gen. 2.24). At the same time, there is a marked antipathy toward divorce (Mal. 2.16). Both these social attitudes are tranmitted to the Rabbis (B.T. Sotah 2a; Gittin 90b).

In the realm of religious discourse divorce, like marriage, has a long history. The same prophets who compared Israel's covenant with God to a marriage, also spoke in motifs of marital estrangement, or even divorce (Hos.2.4; Jer. 3.8; Isa. 50.1).

Knowing as we now do the Rabbinic prediliction for picking up and expanding on biblical langauge, symbols and theology, it should come as no surprise that the Rabbis find the figures of an estranged couple useful in expounding their theologies. In particular the pathos such figures evoke make for both a memorable image and potent characterization of the intensity the Rabbis attribute to

the relationship between Israel and its God.

> (6.5.1) TURN AWAY YOUR EYES. R. Azariah in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon said: [God is] like a king who was angry with his queen and expelled her from his palace. What did she do? She went and pressed her face against a pillar outside the palace. When the king passed by, he said: 'Remove her from my sight (take her back inside), because I cannot bear to see her [thus]...

The exegetical strategy for this verse is simple, the message direct and clear. The Rabbis provide a narrative expansion that gives a context to a verse which apears to be direct discourse. The speaker is God, who asks Israel to turn away her beautiful (and accusing?) eyes because he cannot bear to see her when she is suffering. Like the king of this story, the Rabbis believe the all-seeing God is so emotionally overwhelmed by the misery and suffering of his people Israel that he must ask her to 'divert her eyes', lest the gaze breaks his will and he relent of his anger. This vivid image teaches the reader two lessons: first, that God can be moved to change his mind. Just like any person involved in a maritial relationship, Israel has some power to sway him. And what must Israel do to effect this change of heart? Invoke his pathos. The Rabbis argue that God can be so moved by their suffering that it compels him to relent of his actions.

> ...So when the Beit Din proclaim a fast and men of distinction fast, God says, 'I cannot bear it, FOR THEY HAVE OVERCOME ME; it was they who caused Me to stretch forth My hand against My

> world.' When the Beit Din proclaim a fast and the children fast, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, 'I cannot bear it, FOR THEY HAVE OVERCOME ME; they declared Me King over them and said, *The Lord shall reign for ever and ever,* (Ex. 15.18. When a fast is proclaimed and the old men fast, God says, 'I cannot bear it, FOR THEY HAVE OVERCOME ME; they accepted My kingship at Sinai and said, *All that the Lord has said will we do, and obey*' (Ex. 24.7); and it is written, *I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon among them that know Me* (Ps. 87.4)....

The second lesson is that, even in his anger, just as a husband still remembers the love which first brought him to marry this woman, God still loves his people and has not forgotten their courtship at Sinai. The bonds arenot totallysevered. As R. Phinehas makes clear, despite the fact that God has withdrawn his protection, he has not withdrawn his presence,

> ...R. Phinehas said in the name of R. Hama b. Hanina b. Papa: It is written, *Also among the rebellious, that the Lord God might dwell there* (Ps.68.19): even though they are rebellious, God makes His Divine Presence abide among them. For what merit? For having said, '*All that the Lord has spoken will we do, and obey.*'

For all God's fury, he is not contemplating a divorce. This is an overarching idea in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. While other midrashic collections include *mashalim* in which the a possiblity of 'divorce' between God and Israel is raised (if only to be rejected), in *Shir. R.* the idea of divorce is only brought up once and there it is put in the mouth of a rival. Neither God, Israel, or the 'omnipotent narrator'

ever speak of the subject.

So *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* wants its readers to understand that God afflicts Israel to, in effect, 'get her attention'. The image of husband tormenting his wife is (and is intended to be) deeply disturbing. For the modern reader who lives in an age where 'spousal abuse' is a major social issue, this seems a less than felicitous image.

Could it be that this image never raised an eyebrow among the Rabbis? One could make the argument that Rabbinic culture was so unreflectively 'patriarchal' (in the feminist sense rather than the anthropolocial sense) that the thought of a husband abusing his wife through all sorts of tortures and deprivations was both seemly and right. However, the Rabbis are very ambivalent about God's behavior toward Israel, as the *nimshal* indicates. The real life expereinces of the Rabbis is that 'God is beating up on us'. So the Rabbis are quite self-conscious about the grotesque aspects of this analogy. The most startling example of this is found in *Shemot Rabbah*,

> (31.10). Another explanation of IF YOU LEND MONEY TO ANY OF MY PEOPLE (Ex. 22. 24). It is written, *Refuse silver did men call them* (Jer. 6.30). When Israel was driven from Jerusalem, their enemies took them out in fetters, and the nations of the world declared: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, has no desire for this people, for it says, *Refuse silver did men call them.*' Just as silver is first refined and then converted into a utensil, again refined and turned into a utensil, and so many

> times over, until in the end it breaks in the hand and is no longer fit for any purpose, so were Israel saying that there was no more hope for them of survival since God had rejected them...When Jeremiah heard this, he came to God, saying: 'Lord of the Universe! Is it true that you have rejected your children?'.... It can be compared to a man who was beating his wife. Her best friend asked him: 'How long will you go on beating her? If your desire is to drive her out, then keep on beating her until she dies; but if you do not wish her [to die], then why do you keep on beating her? ' His reply was: 'I will not divorce my wife even if my entire palace becomes a ruin.' This is what Jeremiah said to God: 'If your desire be to drive us out [of this world], then smite us until we die,' ...but if this is not [your desire], then *'Why have you smitten us, and there is no healing for us?'* God replied: ' I will not discard Israel, even if I destroy My world,' as it says, *Thus says the Lord: If heaven above can be measured... then will I also cast off all the seed of Israel* ... (Jer. 31.37).

It remains a question whether either the author or the reader of this paricular passage found it either comforting or hopeful. Perhaps it is comforting, but only in a particularly contorted way. It effectively communicates the notion that God has no intention of abandoning Israel, but the reader is left wondering whether this is a good thing or not. Sadly, the analogy drawn between the power of a husband in the Rabbinic laws of divorce and God's absolute power in the covenant is disturbingly neat. God, like any Jewish husband, holds all the cards. Since he will not release Israel from his abusive power, the people have no choice but submit or face further torments.

No such bald statement of grievence with GOd is found in Shir Hashirim Rabbah. Afterall, as Rabbi Judah reminds both Meir and the reader, "Shir Hashirim is only for praise...".

Still, there are small, implicit protests against the condition of Israel in exile. We have seen before hints of resistence to accepting the validity of retributive theology. Other figures have presented God as punishing Israel arbitrarily or disproportionately. 7.14.1 presents another such image, a figurative narrative which (implicitly) praises Israel, but also implicitly criticizes God,

> AND AT OUR DOORS ARE ALL MANNER OF PRECIOUS FRUITS. Members of the school of R. Shila and the Rabbis gave different explanations of this. Members of the school of R. Shila said: It is like the case of a virtuous woman to whom her husband [on going away] left only a few articles and little money for her expenses; yet when he returned she was able to say to him, 'See what you left me and what I have saved up for you. What's more, I have even added to what you left.'

The figurative associations for this *mashal* are simple. The Rabbis treat this passage as direct speech, Israel addressing its covenantal partner. The "precious fruits" are good results of God leaving his Torah in Israel's possession. The word פתחינו,"our doors", provides the students of R. Shila with the exegetical occasion for introducing the husband and wife figures. The word suggests that God and Israel share a house (Gen. 18.10). The domestic tropes invite elaboration. What the *darshan* brings into the figures is the whole narrative of abandonment. God, who in those parables we have just discussed is

forever present and seeking the attention of a disinterested Israel, is here portrayed as a neglectful husband. While the narrative never actually states that the husband deserted his wife, the criticism of his action is implied by the fact that he left her to her own devices with few resources. This extra data not only highlights the ingenuity and virtuousness of this woman (she surpasses the אשת חיל of Proverbs 31), but shows the husband to have been at least thoughtless, if not neglectful, of this worthy partner. The reader is left wondering, does this man deserve such a woman? The *mashal* concludes with the words 'See what you left me and what I have saved up for you. What's more, I have even added to what you left.' The implied criticism is let stand without a response from the absentee husband. The reader completes the gap left by the *darshan*. One senses that the man is left speechless with shame.

When these issues are transferred from the figures to the tenors, the message becomes quite pointed. God has given Israel Torah, but little else. Israel has found God's providence in short supply and God himself seems nowhere to be found. Yet Israel has been both loyal and diligent in caring for what little God has provided. God is deserving of at least an unstated reproach.

The conclusion to this pericope artfully uses the second stich of the verse to provide God's answer, again, a verse of direct speech. But where in *Shir Hashirim* it is the

continuation of a single discourse, R. Abba b.Kahana's interpretation turns the entire verse into a dialogue,

> NEW AND OLD WHICH I HAVE LAID UP FOR YOU, O MY BELOVED. R. Abba b. Kahana said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'You lay up for Me and I lay up for you. You lay up for Me through the performance of religious precepts and good deeds, and I lay up for you treasures full of more good things than there are in the world.' R. Abba b. Kahana b. Judan said:His store, however, is greater than ours, as it says, *How abundant is Your goodness, which You have laid up for them that fear You; which you have made for them that take their refuge in You..* (Ps.31.20).

God does not express any regret or apology (though such sentiments have been credited to God in other *mashalim* in other rabbinic collections). Instead the reader is promised that the future will bring the restoration of the relationship. This movement from intimacy, to estrangement to reconciliation underpins, with variations, most of the figurative narratives we have examined. A non-figurative account of this process is summarized in 1.2.4,

> LET HIM KISS ME WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH... R. Judah said: When Israel heard the words, I am the Lord your God, the knowledge of the Torah was fixed in their hear, they learned (it) and did not forget. They came to Moses and said,'Our master, Moses, would you be an intermediary between us?' as it says, *Speak with us, and we will hear* [but after hearing God's voice they said]*...now therefore why should we die?* (Ex. 20.16; Deut. 5.22). What profit is there in our perishing?' They then became inclined to forget what they had learned. They said: Just as Moses, being flesh and blood, is transitory, so his

> teaching is transitory. Immediately they came a second time to Moses and said: 'Our master, Moses, would that God be revealed to us a second time! Would that He would kiss us WITH THE KISSES OF HIS LIPS! Would that He would fix the knowledge of the Torah in our hearts as it was!' He replied to them: 'This cannot be now, but it will be in the days to come,' as it says, *I will put My Torah in their inward parts and in their heart will I write it* (Jer.33.33). R. Nehemiah said: When Israel heard the command 'You shall not have...', the Evil Inclination was removed from their heart. They came to Moses and said to him: ' Our master Moses, would you become an intermediary between us, as it says, *Speak with us and we shall hear... now therefore why should we die*. What profit here in our perishing? ' Immediately the Evil Inclination returned to its place. They returned to Moses and said to him, 'Moses, would God reveal Himself to us a second time? Would he kiss us WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH? He replied to them: 'This cannot be now, but in time to come it will be, as it says, *And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh*(Ezek. 34.26).

The metaphor of man and woman is employed in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* to tell one narrative. This narrative is always the same, even if a given man/woman *mashal* only addresses one element of that narrative. Just as human relationships develop from infatuation to disillusionment, estrangement, and reconciliation, so too the relationship of God and Israel will follow the same trajectory. All these figures are intrinsically hopeful. They either state or imply that restoration of the pristine relationship Israel knew at Sinai is possible, if not inevitable. The Rabbis universally hold that Israel is still in the middle of this narrative, alienation is still the condition of the relationship. But if not now, in time to come, God and his spouse Israel will be reconciled.

The Modest Ewe: An Excursus on the Treatment of Sexuality in Shir Hashirim Rabbah

The Biblical book *Shir Hashirim* brims with sexuality and sexual allusion. Therefore any examination of how the Rabbis employ the figures it contains must necessarily wonder about how they respond to this aspect of the book. After all, if *Shir Hashirim* is the description of how God and Israel love each other, and the Rabbis use human relationship as a figure for the divine-Jewish one, the sexual implication of the relationship seems unavoidable. Yet surprisingly, the sages who composed *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* do, in large part, skirt the issue. In dealing with passages that describe the physical beauty of the lovers, the common interpretative strategy is to subvert any overtly sexual figure by assigning it a non-erotic tenor. We have seen this at least once before in the interpretation of 4.12 ...*your limbs are like a garden of pomegranates*... For another example, consider the treatment of verse 4.10,

> ...THY TWO BREASTS, namely, Moses and Aaron. R. Johanan interpreted the verse as referring to Israel before Mount Sinai...YOUR LIPS ARE LIKE A THREAD OF SCARLET: this refers to their exclamation before the Ten Commandments... AND YOUR SPEECH IS COMELY: this refers to their exclamation after the Ten Commandments... At that moment Moses began to extol them saying,

> YOUR TEMPLES (רקתך) ARE LIKE A POMEGRANATE SPLIT OPEN: the emptiest (הריקן) among you is as packed with knowledge of the Torah as a pomegranate with seeds...

In the few cases where the Rabbis do pick up on the sexual tropes of an image, they assign its sexual meaning entirely to the human domain, though, as always, linked to the historical memory of Israel's experience,

> (4.12.1)A GARDEN SHUT UP IS MY SISTER, MY BRIDE. R. Judah b. R. Simon in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi made a comparison to a king who had two daughters, elder and younger, whom he neglected to marry. He left them many years and went abroad. The daughters thereupon took the law into their own hands and found husbands, and each one took from her husband his signature and his seal. When the king returned home, he heard tales about his daughters that they had misbehaved themselves. So he issued a proclamation that all the people should assemble in the stadium, and he himself came and held court there. He said to his daughters: 'Have you really acted thus and misbehaved yourselves?' Immediately each one produced the signature and seal of her husband. He summoned his son-in-law and asked him whom he had married. He replied: 'I am your first son-in-law, the husband of your elder daughter., 'What is this? ' he said to him.' This,' he replied,' is my seal and this is my ring., Similarly with the second. The king then said,'My daughters have guarded themselves against immorality, and do you malign and abuse them? I swear that I will punish you.' So do the nations taunt Israel saying, *And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigor* (Ex.1.13). If they could compel their labor, surely they must have had power over their bodies and their wives!, Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said, A GARDEN SHUT UP IS MY SISTER, MY BRIDE. What is meant by A GARDEN SHUT UP (גן נעול)? Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'My garden is closed shut, but still it is maligned (מתגנא).' R.
>
> Phinehas said: At that time God summoned the angel

> who has charge of conception and said: ' Go forth and form them with all the features of their fathers.' And whom did their fathers themselves resemble? The founders of the families; and so it says of Reuben, *The families of the Reubenites* (Num. 26.7). R. Hoshaia said: From Reuben, the Reubenites; from Simeon, the Simeonites..... R. Phinehas said: A GARDEN SHUT UP refers to the virgins; A SPRING SHUT UP to the married women; A FOUNTAIN SEALED to the males. It was stated in the name of R. Nathan: Why the repetition, A GARDEN SHUT UP and A SPRING SHUT UP? Because intercourse with a woman may be in two ways,natural and unnatural...there was not one profligate among them...

While God seems concerned with the sexual lives of his people, the Rabbis shy away from using sexual images to characterize God's own behavior toward Israel. We see this again with the erotically charged verse *Let my beloved come into his garden*(4.16),

> R. Johanan says: the Torah provides a lesson in good manners, that the bridegroom should not enter the bridal chamber until the bride gives him permission. How do we know? Because it says, LET MY BELOVED COME INTO HIS GARDEN.

Again, God is concerned with the sexual life of people, but the Rabbis opt not to find sexuality in God or his own relationships. Why do the Rabbis use so many other aspects of human relationship as illustrations for the relationship of God and Israel but become coy when the relationship is a sexual one?

The origins, as with most Rabbinic thought, may be found in the Bible. From the very beginning of the canon, the

Bible studiously avoids assigning any sexual attributes to the Deity. The very fact that God effects the creation of the world through a speech act rather than through a generative act, as is so common to other creation myths, is indicative of this reluctance to associate sexuality with God. We also see a reluctance in otherwise anthropomorphic descriptions of God to suggest he has generative organs (Isa. 6.2)[5]. By the same token, the Bible portrays God as concerned with the sexual and reproductive lives of his people[6]. As we have seen, *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* mirrors all these biblical preoccupations.

Still, given the overtly sexual character of *Shir Hashirim* and the *leitmetaphor* the Rabbis assign to the text, these particular biblical scruples would seem ripe for subversion.

Another factor affecting this reticence may be the remarkably ambivalent attitude about sexuality found in Rabbinic culture, something not evident in biblical culture[7]. Reflections of Rabbinic sexual ethics can in fact be seen throughout *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. The most obvious of these is the Rabbinic belief that the study of Torah serves to sublimate undesirable sexual impulses:

> I WENT DOWN INTO THE GARDEN OF NUTS. Just as nuts are broken with a stone, so the Torah is called 'stone' and the evil inclination is called 'stone'. The Torah is called 'stone', as it says, *And I will give you the tables of stone* (Ex. 24.12). The evil inclination(יצר הרא)is called 'stone',as it says, *And I will take away the*

> *stony heart out of your flesh* (Ezek. 36.26). R. Levi said: Suppose there is a lonely place which is infested with brigands. What does the king do? He stations guards there to watch it, so that they should not waylay travellers. So the Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'The Torah is called "stone", and the evil inclination is called "stone"'. Let one stone guard against the other.'

The erotic term 'garden' (see above) seems to be glossed over completely to focus on the 'nut', but the sexual trope rêmains. Though it is not clear from the *mashal*, the nut which the 'stone' of Torah cracks is the יצר הרע, a term which is understood to particularly describe the sexual impulse. Thus the study of Torah 'breaks' or, at the very least, 'guards against' the libido. Ultimately, the גזירה שווה hermeneutic employed to connect the יצר הרע with Torah hints that the Rabbis see a more generic connection between the two than might seem to be the case at first. Such is also suggested by how we earlier saw the exegete respond to the sensual (and vaginal) image of the split pomegranate,

> ...YOUR TEMPLES (רקתך) ARE LIKE A POMEGRANATE SPLIT OPEN: the emptiest (הריקן) among you is as packed with knowledge of the Torah as a pomegranate with seeds...

In the end it can be said that while the midrashic reading of *Shir Hashirim* does not comfortably embrace the association of God with the eroticism of the text, neither does it totally efface that association. At rare moments, not even the Rabbis can resist introducing sexual overtones into the relationship. Occasionally, when the erotic language of *Shir Hashirim* virtually screams out,"!דרשני", as

a description of the relationship, the Rabbis take tentative steps, turning each mitzvah into an intimate act of divine embrace (2.6.1),

> Another explanation: LET HIS LEFT HAND BE UNDER MY HEAD: this refers to the fringes.AND HIS RIGHT HAND EMBRACE ME: this refers to the phylacteries. Another explanation: LET HIS LEFT HAND BE UNDER MY HEAD: this refers to the recital of the shema. AND HIS RIGHT HAND EMBRACE ME: this refers to the Prayer. Another explanation: LET HIS LEFT HAND BE UNDER MY HEAD: this refers to the sukkah. AND HIS RIGHT HAND EMBRACE ME: this refers to the cloud of the divine presence in the time to come, as it says, *The sun shall be no more your light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light to you* (Isa.60.19). What then shall give light to see? *The Lord shall be your everlasting light* (ib. 20).

The final interpretation, which equates the cloud of the *shekhinah* to a lover's embrace points toward a more quasi-erotic understanding of Israel's relationship with God, an interpretation which will only flourish with the rise of medieval mysticism. But when the kabbalists finally do move beyond Rabbinic ambivalence to expound their sexual theology, it will still be *Shir Hashirim* which serves as their inspiration[8].

Notes for Chapter 6

1) Jacob Neusner, Song of Song Rabbah: An analytical Translation, Atlanta 1989, pp. 66-71.

2) B. M. Metzger and M.D. Coogan,eds., The Oxford Companion to the Bible, New York 1993, pp.496.

3) M.Simon, Midrash Rabbah, London 1939, vol.IX,p.205.

4) Eicha Rabbah 1.1.3; Shemot Rabbah 30.10.

5) In his book, Eros and the Jews, David Biale proposes that biblical descriptions of God do in fact include, at least, female secondary sexual organs (p 26). This is a controversial argument and this writer remains skeptical of his conclusions.

6) Miles, God: a Biography, pp. 89-92.

7) Eros and the Jews, p. 35.

8) Gershom Scholem, Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition, pp. 36-42; Arthur Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism",

Chapter 7

The Rivals: Jealousy and Anger

The Rabbis are rarely transparent in their hermeneutics of figurative language. But just as the opening chapter of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* offers a glimpse into Rabbinic thinking about the value of parables, there is one passage which talks, parenthetically, about the Rabbinic understanding of figurative language. This passage illustrates how the blending of inherited biblical images and Rabbinic assumptions makes for unique exegetical results,

> (2.15.2). TAKE US THE FOXES, THE LITTLE FOXES. When other kingdoms are described figuratively in the Scripture, they are compared to fire, as it says, *And I will set My face against them; out of the fire are they come forth, and the fire shall devour them* (Ezek. 15.7). But when the Egyptians are described figuratively, they are compared to something which is consumed by fire, as it says, *They are quenched as a wick* (Isa. 63.17). When the other powers are described figuratively, they are compared only to silver and gold, as it is written, *As for that image, its head was of fine gold* (Dan. 2.32). But when the Egyptians are described figuratively, they are compared only to lead, as it says, *They sank as lead* (Ex. 15.10). When the other powers are described figuratively, they are compared to cedars, as it says, *Behold, the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon* (Ezek. 31.3).... But when the Egyptians are described figuratively, they are compared only to stubble, as it says, *It consumes them as stubble* (Ex. 15.7). When the other powers are described figuratively, they are compared to beasts of prey, as it says, *And four great beasts came up from the sea, diverse one from another* (Dan. 7.3), and it is

> also written, *The first was like a lion* (ib. 4). But when the Egyptians are described figuratively, they are compared to foxes, as it says, TAKE US THE FOXES; keep them for the river. R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon said: The Egyptians were cunning, and therefore they are compared to foxes. Just as a fox is always looking behind him, so the Egyptians looked behind them....

As with any Rabbinic figurative expansion, there are two elements to this pericope. One is the culling and gathering of figurative images about biblical nations found scattered throughout scripture. The second element is the assumption the Rabbis bring to the figure. In this case the assumption is that much of *Shir Hashirim* is actually describing the Exodus. Extrapolating from the scriptural use of animal figures to describe the gentile nations, the exegete here concludes that the 'foxes' must refer to Egypt. But can he prove this, given that there is no internal evidence in the verse to justify this equation? The *darshan* proceeds from this exegetical leap to construct a brilliantly symmetrical series of figurative comparisons. And since the Exodus is the moment of Egypt's greatest wickedness against Israel, Egypt becomes subject to the most unflattering characterizations. The Bible calls the other nations precious 'gold', but Egypt it compares to base 'lead'. The Bible characterizes other nations as majestic cedars (even the villainous Assyrians!), but Egypt as lowly stubble. Finally, the verse under consideration is brought into play, and the logic of identifying the 'foxes' with Egypt seems, if not inescapable, reasonable. Then, in a passage

of unusual exegetical transparency, the exegesis actually tells of the tropes the reader is expected to associate with "foxes" (cunning and wariness) and the homily proceeds. Once again we see how Rabbinic ideology is a synthesis of inherited attitudes and their own concerns. The Rabbinic attitudes toward non-Jews therefore are expressed in the dialectic between their inherited literature and their own feelings.

Since the time of the Prophets, Judaism has struggled with the question of how God relates to the non-Jewish world. That God, for good or for bad, cares about Israel has been an axiomatic assumption of all Jewish religious literature prior to the modern era. But does God care about the gentile nations? This question had been addressed to some extent by all the Jewish literature that precedes the Rabbis. The answers to that question have been multivocal. There were those who said "no", God's concern extends only to Israel. Accepting such an answer, there is little more that the respondent needs to say. The gentile world is rendered theologically irrelevant.

But if the answer is "yes", then a whole range of issues must be addressed, and the answers accordingly will be multivalent. How much does God care, and for what reasons? Is his concern contingent, based solely on how the nations of the world impinge upon Israel, God's beloved? Or may God have a relationship without the Sinaitic referent? And if God cares about the nations *qua* nations, how does that

impact on God's relationship with Israel? Could God not reject his beloved people for another?

In social psychology a "dyad" is a relationship between two people. It is considered the most stable social relationship. By comparison, a three-way relationship is inherently unstable as each partner struggles to create a stronger dyadic relationship with one of the other members. Such struggles are the source of the emotion popularly called jealousy, the anxiety that another has displaced us in the affection of someone important to us. Psychologically, dyadic relationships are the most desirable and the most stable. Yet from a literary point of view, stability is the death of narrative. Someone once observed that every good love story is a love triangle. There must be some kind of struggle for the affections of the protagonists to make for an interesting tale.

The biblical account of the relationship between God and Israel features such a triangle. That triangle is formed by the struggle of God to win the allegiance (and affection)of his chosen people against competing gods. And the emotions associated with God in this triangle are feelings of anger and jealousy.

By the Rabbinic period, that story seems resolved in the main. At least in so far as the Rabbinic point of view may be taken as reflective of the social reality, the literature leaves the impression that Israel was pretty much squarely in God's corner.

For the Rabbis, the relationship confronts a new triangle. This struggle revolves around the claim of other nations to be the first object of God's affection. Now it is Israel, not God, who has to contend with a rival, and correspondingly it is Israel who must grapple with anger and jealousy.

The treatment of the nations in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* is therefore a reflection of this struggle. Here we also see another example of Neusner's observation that the Midrash uses many figures to express a limited number of tenors. In the case of the gentile nations, they are variously portrayed as inanimate things, animals, or various kinds and classes of people. The sheer variety of these different figurative treatments suggest multiple Rabbinic positions. Undergirding all of these positions, though,are the keenly felt emotions of anger and jealousy. The importance (and the threat to Israel) of the nations for each exegete can, to some extent, be gauged through the figures used and the emotional tone of each pericope.

The modern reader may at times be disturbed by the crude and contemptuous attitude the sages manifest toward non-Jews. Without excusing or dismissing the problems these passages create for us, it is important to keep in mind that anger manifest in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* is the response of a jealous lover to a threat and should be read accordingly. For all its multivocality, it is a document stridently defending the positions and values of the

Rabbinic community while aggressively taking on all (Jewish or non-Jewish) who might challenge those positions.

Furthermore, it must be remembered that *Shir Hashirim* is itself the locus of a polemical struggle. Two religious communities, the Jews and the Church, claim that this document is uniquely addressed to their respective groups.

Finally, it should be noted that the harsh tone taken in many of these polemical materials is characteristic of the general tone of pre-modern discourse. Dismissive and contemptuous language of the most inflammatory type (to our ears) was the common currency of polemics in this period.

To understand why the Rabbis determine that certain figures in *Shir Hashirim* represent the nations, we must return to the ideas of Stewart Guthrie on the function of anthropomorphism. We may also reverse his logic. Assigning an anthropomorphic quality to a thing grants it the assumption of being more complex, important and dangerous than it actually is in reality. Conversely, stripping a human (or in our case, a human community) of all human qualities can be an act of diminishing, or even dismissing the threat(man being the measure of all things, perceptually speaking) of that person or group.

That is not always the case, of course, as can be seen in Jacob's deathbed speech in Gen. 49. There Jacob describes each tribe using non-human figures. Comparing Reuben to water is clearly intended to dismiss that tribe as weak. Yet comparing Judah to a lion is a positive

association. And calling Benjamin a "ravenous wolf" is seemingly ambiguous. In all cases, it depends of the tropes the author wishes to call to mind through his figure. We will see the kind of tropes non-human figures convey when they are assigned to the nations of the world.

> (7.3.3)Another explanation: YOUR BELLY IS LIKE A HEAP OF WHEAT. Is not a heap of cedar cones fairer than one of wheat? [The reason the figure of wheat is chosen] is because the world can exist without cedar cones but it cannot exist without wheat...R. Isaac said: Just as before wheat seed is taken out for sowing it is carefully measured and when it is brought in from the threshing-floor it is again measured, so when Israel went down to Egypt they were carefully counted...R. Hunia said regarding the remark of R. Isaac: Just as the farmer pays no attention to the baskets of dung or of straw or of stubble or of chaff, because they are not worth anything, so the Holy One,blessed be He, pays no attention to the other nations,because they are not worth anything, as it says, *All the nations are as nothing before Him* (Isa.60.17).To whom,then, does He pay attention? To Israel, as it says, *When you count the sum of the children of Israel*...(Ex. 30.12),and again, *Count the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel* (Num. 1.2).

The exegesis of this verse is straightforward, the message both harsh and unmistakable. Just as wheat, an éatable cereal, is the "staff of life" for humanity, so by analogy is Israel indispensable to God. In creating a point of comparison, the *darshan* introduces his own figure, the heap of cedar cones. This seed is both fragrant and attractive (both sensuous and sensual), yet it is largely useless to human beings. From this the reader should

understand that the nations of the world, though attractive (an ambiguous metaphor - what is it about the gentile nations which the *darshan* wishes to characterize as 'attractive'?), have no value in the eyes of God. In Rabbi Isaac's exposition, the comparison becomes even more invidious. The nations are now (metaphorically) chaff and dung, lacking even the aesthetic charm of the cedar cones. Of course, neither chaff not dung is totally useless to a farmer, but in terms of the emotive content of the image, the nations are stripped of their sensuous and sensual tropes, and now occupy a place somewhere between 'annoying' and 'offensive'.

The figure for God is humanity in the first part, the farmer in the second. God has a use for Israel. But if, like wheat, Israel is 'indispensable' he also has a need for her. The *darshan* says the 'world' depends on Israel, not God. Yet the relative value of these materials in the *mashal* is in reference solely to human need. God is the implied beneficiary of Israel's existence. This sense of God's dependency on Israel is not explored here, though it is not unfamiliar to us from earlier chapters.

Above all else, though, note the considerable hostility directed against the gentiles. It is both intense and highly defensive. It is a response to the challenge of non-Jewish groups to Israel's claim to be the beloved people of God. This challenge is especially menacing in light of Israel's historic subjugation. Responding to this challenge

dominates how *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* addresses the non-Jewish world.

> 4.7.1 WHERE IS YOUR BELOVED GONE, O YOUR FAIREST AMONG WOMEN. The other nations say to Israel: 'Where has your Beloved gone? From Egypt to the Red Sea, to Sinai? Where has your Beloved turned [now]?' What does the Community of Israel reply to the nations? ' What business have you to ask about Him when you have no share in Him? Once I have attached myself to Him, can I separate from Him? Once He has attached Himself to me, can He separate from me? Wherever He is, He comes to me.'

The verse is tailor-made to raise this most critical question. Yet the exegetical treatment is simple, an emphatic assertion. Absent are the usual intertextual passages and prooftexts to buttress Israel's rebuttal. It is formulated as a programmatic response to the central thesis put forward by non-Jews. In the next passage the reader sees the Rabbis confront the challenge in its specific historical form. The claims from the Christian community demand a more elaborate biblically-based response,

> ...R. Nehemiah said in the name of R. Abun: The other nations have neither planting nor sowing nor root; all three we learn in one verse, *Scarce are they planted, scarce are they sown, scarce has their stock taken root in the earth* (Isa. 60.24). But Israel have planting, as it says, *And I will plant them in this land* (Jer.32.41). They have sowing, as it says, *And I will sow her unto Me in the land* (Hos. II, 25). They have a root, as it says, *In days to come shall Jacob take root* (Isa. 27.6). The following parable will illustrate this. The straw, the chaff, and the stubble were arguing

> with one another, each claiming that for its sake the ground had been sown. Said the wheat to them: 'Wait till the threshing time comes, and we shall see for whose sake the field has been sown.' When the time came and they were all brought into the threshing-floor, the farmer went out to winnow it. The chaff was scattered to the winds; the straw he took and threw on the ground; the stubble he cast into the fire; the wheat he took and piled in a heap, and all the passers-by when they saw it kissed it, as it says, *Kiss the grain (בר)* (Ps. 2.12). So of the nations some say, 'We are Israel, and for our sake the world was created,' and others say, 'We are Israel, and for our sake the world was created.' Says Israel to them: 'Wait until the day of the Holy One, blessed be He, comes, and we shall see for whose sake the world was created'; and so it is written, For, behold, the day comes, *it burns as a furnace...*(Mal. III, 19); and it is written, *You shall fan them, and the wind shall carry them away* (Isa. 61.16). But of Israel it is said, *And you shall rejoice in the Lord, you shall glory in the Holy One of Israel* (ib.).

The claims of the rival are made explicit here. It is the supercessionist claim of the Christian church (which in Rabbinic parlance is always a socio-political entity, a 'nation').[1] The response that 'time will tell' is the standard Rabbinic statement of confidence, as we saw in 4.7.1. Now, however, R. Nehemiah buttresses the Rabbinic position by constructing an intertextual narrative around a *mashal*. In perhaps the strongest element of his polemic, Nehemiah concludes by using verses from Malachi and Isaiah, the very prophets so popularly quoted in Christian prooftexting. The weakest element would seem to be that Nehemiah never directly refutes the Christian claim, 'we are Israel'. There seems to be an element of denial, in the psychological sense. Nehamiah refuses to even admit there

is an issue here. But this silence may be part of Nehemiah's argument. That the Jews are the beloved Israel of Scripture is so self-evident, that Nehemiah does not bother to refute the Christian claim on this count. In effect, the Church is treated as if it is not a rival at all. Therefore the only question which needs to be taken seriously is the question of whether God has simply abandoned Israel.

Of course, the Church is never mentioned by name, but the identity of the rival in this passage is beyond doubt. No other community in the ancient world challenged the Jewish claim to be the authentic Israel. While *Shir. R.* retains the convention of Rabbinic literature that treats all gentile groups as one undifferentiated mass, this document has a wealth of identifiably anti-*Christian* material. This aspect has been thoroughly explored by E. Urbach.

But what is the basis for the general charge of the nations that Israel is forsaken by God? The basis is two-fold. One is the nature of ancient theology, which understands prosperity and degradation to be clear signs of divine favor and disfavor. The other is the historic fate of Israel. Therefore the Rabbis regard their *galut* to be a direct result of Israel sinning against God. So in some sense the Rabbis do believe that Israel is currently in disfavor. Based on the Rabbi's own ideology, the nations would seem to have a strong case that the relationship is

at an end. This use of their own ideas against them may also account for the fury of the Rabbinic response. The case against Israel *is* strong, the Rabbis reply, but not decisive, for the history of the relationship comes to refute the argument,

> (5.16.2) R. Samuel b. Nahman said: On three occasions God remonstrated with Israel and the other nations rejoiced greatly, but in the end they were covered with shame. When the prophet said to them, *Come, and let us reason together, says the Lord* (Isa. 1.18), the nations rejoiced saying, 'How can they argue with their Creator? Who can argue with his Creator? Now He will destroy them from the world.' But when God saw the nations rejoicing, He gave it a good turn for them, as it says, *Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool* (ib.).The nations were discomfited and said, 'Is this an answer, or is this a rebuke? He has only come to amuse Himself with His sons.'...R. Judan said: [God was]like a widow woman who went to the judge to complain against her son. When she saw the judge ordering punishment by fire, by pitch, by various punishments and whippings, she said: 'If I tell the judge of the offenses committed by my son, he will kill him.' When he had finished [with the others], he said to her, 'Where is your son?' He said to her, 'What offence has your son here committed against you? ' She said to him: 'Sir, when he was in my womb, he kicked me.' He said to her: ' This is no case.' And so it is written, *In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and by his strength he strove with a godlike being* (ib. 4).

The point of the exegetical passage is clear, and intended to be particularly galling to Israel's critics. God indeed condemned Israel, but reconsidered and comforted her precisely because of the conclusions drawn by the

nations that Israel's suffering signified rejection. The full arc of the relationship has not yet been reached.

The *mashal* which is intended to illustrate the point is peculiar in the extreme. In it, the figure of the judge has an ambiguous tenor. Is it the nations who are the judge, or is it God? God seems to be presented in the particularly weak and vulnerable figure of a widow woman who must, in effect, withdraw her complaint lest the judge dole out too severe a punishment. Clearly the element of her prevarication, "he kicked me in the womb" is the product of the exegetical need to link the *mashal* with the Hosea verse. Still, that hardly explains the pathetic figure of God and the implicitly powerful figure of the nations. Is this perhaps a powerful statement of how at least one Rabbi saw the balance of power in the world? God must at times have seemed like a weak widow woman to Jews who daily encountered the power and authority of gentile powers over their lives. But for all its strangeness and pathos, the point is made. Sin is not enough to make God reject his son.

Though sin is not enough to compel God to abandon the relationship, what if a new suitor enters the picture at the moment of estrangement? Could not God find another people to love while Israel is exiled in disfavor? Is there any credence to be given to the Christian claim? Though R. Nehemiah felt no need to take the Church seriously as a

rival or usurper of Israel's status, other exegetes did, at least up to a point,

> (1.6.2)FOR THE SUN HAS TANNED ME...It happened once that a lady had an Ethiopian maidservant who went down with her companion to draw water from the spring, and she said to her companion: 'To-morrow master is going to divorce his wife and marry me.' 'Why?' said the other. ' Because,' she replied, ' he saw her hands all stained.' 'Foolish woman,' said the other. 'Listen to what you are saying. Here is his wife whom he loves exceedingly, and you say he is going to divorce her because once he saw her hands stained. How then will he endure you who are stained all over and black from the day of your birth!' So because the other nations taunt Israel saying, ' This nation degraded itself,' as it says, *They exchanged their glory for an ox that eats grass* (Ps. 104.20), Israel reply to them: 'If we who sinned only once are to be punished thus, how much more so you.'....

The modern reader must first overlook this pre-modern judgement of beauty based on skin color in order to see the analogy at work. The point is simple. Israel is estranged from her partner because of sin. Another faith community claims to have correspondingly come into favor. But the exegete responds, how can this be? Combining apologetic with polemic, he employs a simple קל וחומר argument. Yes, the Jews have sinned, but the gentile nations are even more steeped in sin than they. Would God reject Israel for a flaw and then turn around and embrace another who bore an even bigger blemish? The argument is simple and logically satisfying.

What is it that makes Israel among all the nations of the world such an attractive partner? Not surprisingly, it

is the acceptance of the covenant at Sinai:

> (2.3.1) AS AN APPLE-TREE AMONG THE TREES OF THE WOOD.R. Huna and R. Aha in the name of. R. Jose b. Zimra said: The apple-tree is shunned by all people when the sun beats down, because it provides no shadow. So all the nations refused to sit in the shadow of the Holy One, blessed be He, on the day of the giving of the Torah. You might think that Israel was the same? No, for it says, FOR HIS SHADOW I LONGED, AND I SAT THERE: I longed for Him and I sat; it is I that longed, not the nations. R. Aha b. R. Ze'ira made two comparisons. One is this. The apple-tree brings out its blossom before its leaves. So Israel in Egypt declared their faith before they heard the message, as it says, *And the people believed; and they heard that the Lord had remembered* (Ex. 4.31).

This was the great moment which distinguished Israel from the nations, and established their relative value in the eyes of God. Once the nuptials had been spoken and the relationship 'consummated' with the erection of the *mishkan* to serve as the bridal canopy, the other nations were reduced to a subservient role, existing only as instruments and witnesses to the working out of the Divine-Israel relationship,

> (2.14.1) R. Joshua b. Levi said: Had the nations known how beneficial to them was the tent of meeting, they would have encompassed it with camps and forts [to protect it]. For until the *mishkan* was set up they used to hear the voice of the Divine utterance and scatter in fear from their camps, as it says, *For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God...*(Deut.5. 23). R. Simon said: The utterance came forth in two contrasted forms-as an elixir of life to Israel and a deadly poison to the other

> nations. An elixir of life to Israel- *As you have heard, and live* (Deut. 4.33); you heard and you lived. A deadly poison to the other nations-they heard and died. Therefore the text says, *Under the apple-tree I awakened you* (Israel) (Shir. 8.5) 'Out of the tent of meeting.' R. Hiyya taught: From that point the voice was cut off, and it did not go outside of the tent. R. Isaac said: Before the tent of meeting was set up, prophecy was found among the other nations, but after the tent of meeting was set up, prophecy ceased from them. *From that point, I held him, and would not let him go* (ib. 3. 4). Should you object that Balaam son of Beor also prophesied, the answer is that he prophesied for the benefit of Israel...

From Sinai onward, God's voice became a tree of life for his beloved people, a poison apple to the nations. And from that moment onward, all that the nations do of note is done for the benefit of the Jews.

There is no compromise on the idea that the relationship between God and Israel holds center stage in human history. The Rabbis will grant that the nations have their place in God's universe, but it is usually as auxiliaries to the unfolding drama of Israel's salvific history.

Since the writing of second Isaiah, there has existed a belief that one of the functions of the nations is to serve as witness to the unfolding drama of Israel's salvation. The following passage brings this idea into the Rabbinic milieu without direct reference to the biblical sources,

> (4.12.1) BEFORE I WAS AWARE, MY SOUL SET ME UPON THE CHARIOTS OF MY PRINCELY PEOPLE, R. Hiyya taught: [Israel may be compared] to a king's daughter who was gathering stray sheaves, when the king passed

> by and recognized her, so he sent his friend to take her and place her by him in his carriage. Her companions thereupon began to gaze at her in astonishment, saying, 'Yesterday you were gathering sheaves and today you sit in a carriage with the king!' She said to them: 'Just as you are astonished at me, so I am astonished at myself'...So when Israel were in Egypt they had to work with bricks and mortar and they were repulsive and contemptible in the eyes of the Egyptians. Thus when they became free men and were delivered and placed in authority over the whole world, the nations were astonished and said: 'Yesterday you were working with bricks and mortar, and to-day you have become free and lord it over the whole world.' And Israel said to them: 'Just as you are astonished at us, so we are astonished at ourselves'; and they applied to themselves the verse, BEFORE I WAS AWARE, MY SOUL SET ME....

This is an example of a biblical idea taken over wholesale by the Rabbis. There is nothing unique to the rabbinic concerns mirrored in this passage, except the implied promise of Isaiah that just as God in the past redeemed Israel from Egyptian exile and the nations were amazed, so too will it happen in the messianic future. Ultimately, this statement is a wish fulfillment fantasy and a pathetic articulation of the gulf between Jewish self-estimation and Jewish social reality.

What will be the fate of these rivals once God comes to reclaim his own? In keeping with the angry tone of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* (which is only for the praise of Israel, not for the praise of the world), they will be satisfyingly chastened and deeply contrite,

> (4.8.2) LOOK FROM THE TOP OF AMANA. R Hunia said

> in the name of R. Justa: The exiles are destined to break out into song when they reach the Taurus Munus, and the nations of the world are destined to bring them like princes to the Messiah. How do we know? Because it says, LOOK (תשורי) FROM THE TOP OF AMANA; the word תשורי indicates an offering, as it says, *There is not a present (תשורה) to bring to the man of God* (I Sam. 9.7).... Moreover, the nations will bring the Israelites themselves as a gift to the Messiah. How do we know? Because it says, *And they shall bring all your brethren out of all the nations for an offering to the Lord, upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon swift beasts* (Isa. 64.20)... And so it is written, *Give unto the Lord families, you peoples* (Ps. 94.7). R. Aha said: It is not written here, 'You peoples, give to the Lord the families,' but' [Give...] families, you peoples'' give to the Lord glory and strength: that is: 'When you bring them, ye shall not bring them contemptuously but with glory and strength....

Thus, in a sense, the nations are transformed into supplicants. Israel, once treated with contempt and disdain, becomes the choicest offering that the peoples can find to assuage God's anger at them. The rivals get their comeuppance when the relationship between God and Israel is finally and decisively affirmed. But will the return of Israel to the bosom of its beloved God atone for the suffering Israel has experienced under their rule? Will there be a reconciliation for them also? Toward the end of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* the answer is given, the ultimate fate of the nations pronounced. In this passage the nations are deemed to be as water,

> (8.8.1) MANY WATERS CANNOT QUENCH LOVE. MANY WATERS: these are the nations of the world, as it says, *Ah, the uproar of many peoples, that roar like the*

> *roaring of the seas* (Isa. 17.12). CANNOT QUENCH LOVE: the love which the Holy One, blessed be He, bears to Israel, as it says, 'I have loved you, says the Lord (Mal. 1.2). NEITHER CAN THE FLOODS DROWN IT: these floods are the other nations, as it says, *In that day shall the Lord shave with a razor that is hired in the parts beyond the River... now therefore, behold, the Lord brings up upon them the waters of the River* (Isa. 7.20; 8.7). IF A MAN WOULD GIVE ALL THE SUBSTANCE OF HIS HOUSE FOR LOVE: if the nations should open their treasures and offer their money, for one word of the Torah, they would never succeed in making atonement. Another explanation: IF A MAN WOULD GIVE ALL THE SUBSTANCE OF HIS HOUSE FOR LOVE. If the nations should open all their treasures and offer all their money for the blood of R. Akiba and his companions, it would never make atonement for them. HE WOULD UTTERLY BE SCORNED.

Like a good romance novel, the unworthy rival gets only what's coming to him. The relationship between God and Israel concludes as it began - an exclusive relationship. The nation may rage against Israel like the floods but, as were the Egyptians, when the time comes they will be quickly dispersed like water.

The many figures for the nations in effect convey one tenor: futility. Ultimately their claim to a relationship with God is a delusion and their ascendancy ephemeral.

Browser among the Lilies: Displacement and Justification

That the nations of the world are held responsible and condemned for their oppression of Israel is not surprising. That was the everyday reality of Jewish life in the rabbinic era. At the same time, it is one of the great puzzles of Rabbinic theology. It constitutes a great inconsistency in thinking. For *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* clearly regards the suffering of Israel, and especially the martyrdom of the *tzaddikim*, to come from heaven. How can the nations be condemned when they lack free agency? As mere instruments in the divine system of sin and punishment, they can hardly be held culpable. But this has been an issue in Jewish theology since God hardened Pharaoh's heart and proceeded to smite him hip and thigh. One wonders whether - at least in part - the furious anger we saw manifest against the nations in the previous section is not a displacement, a redirection of anger from the real target to another, safer entity. In this case, given the drift of rabbinic theology, that anger should be squarely directed at God, for it is God who has consumed Israel,

> (6.2.1)MY BELOVED IS GONE DOWN TO HIS GARDEN, TO THE BEDS OF SPICES...R. Jose b. R.Hanina said:The second part of this verse seems to contradict the first. The text ought to have run, 'My beloved is gone down to feed in his garden;' and you say IN

> THE GARDENS! But in fact MY BELOVED refers to the Holy One, blessed be He; To HIS GARDEN refers to the world; TO THE BEDS OF SPICES indicates Israel; TO FEED IN THE GARDENS indicates synagogues and houses of study; AND TO GATHER LILIES: to take away the righteous in Israel. What is the difference between the death of the old and the death of the young? R. Judah and R. Abbahu each gave an answer. R. Judah said: When the light of a lamp is allowed to burn itself out, it is good for the lamp and good for the wick. But if it is not allowed to burn itself out, it is bad for itself and bad for the wick. R. Abbahu said: If a fig is gathered when it is ripe, it is good for itself and good for the fig-tree. But if it is gathered while still unripe, it is bad for itself and bad for the tree....

This string of figures is more intriguing for what is left unsaid than for what is said. The exegetical strategy is simple. Each figure in the verse is assigned a tenor. The 'beloved' is God, the 'garden' is the world (both well established vehicles). But then the reader learns the 'bed of spices' is Israel and the 'lilies' are the righteous (martyrs?) whom God 'gathers'. What follows is remarkable. Through a series of metaphors, Rabbis Judah and Abbahu explain why premature death is undesirable. This is a very elliptical discussion, but it seems to spring directly from the death of the righteous. In each metaphor, whether of a wick or a fig, it is concluded that the premature removal of each is bad for the object and bad for its source. The reader must plug in his own tenors, but it is hardly difficult. God 'gathering' the righteous in their youth is unfair to them and a misfortune for Israel. The

extraordinarily circumspect nature of this pericope suggests just how distressing and threatening this issue is for the Rabbis. It rather seems like the universal human habit of talking in euphemisms around an unpleasant topic.

But the point is established. The premature gathering of the righteous is bad for them and bad for Israel. So why does God do it? The exposition of Shir. 4.2 continues and responds to these issues:

> ...(6.2.3)R. Samuel b. Nahman said: [God is] like a king who had an orchard in which he planted rows of nut-trees and apple-trees and pomegranates, and which he then handed over to the care of his son. So long as the son did his duty, the king used to look out for good shoots wherever he could find one, and take it up and bring it and plant it in the orchard. But when the son did not do his duty, the king used to look out for the best plant in the orchard and take it up. So when Israel does the will of God, He looks out for any righteous person among the other nations, like Jethro or Rahab, and brings them and attaches them to Israel. But when Israel do not do the will of God He picks out any righteous and upright and proper and God-fearing man among them and removes him from their midst.

This *mashal* in defense of God is a variation on the מידה כנגד מידה argument. God rewards Israel with righteous converts when Israel is faithful, and punishes Israel by removing the righteous among them when Israel strays. But there is also the implication that in doing this God does not in fact punish the righteous, but benefits them. It almost sounds like they are taken into 'protective custody' against the corrupting influence of less righteous Jews.

Shir Hashirim Rabbah is much concerned with the fate of Israel's martyrs. In a way this is a logical concern, much like the claims of the nations is a logical concern. For if God loves Israel as much as *Shir Hashirim* suggests and the Rabbis claim, an accounting must be offered for why this seems such an abusive relationship. Why God afflicts Israel with the nations and slays the God-fearing among his people must be explained. Given the claim of God's love for the Jews, these issues should be a source of significant anger, and that is exactly what is evident in the text. But if the relationship is to survive, the Jewish side must come to terms with its anger and find a means of explaining and justifying the pain inflicted. The Rabbis do this by displacement and internalization, but never by blaming God,

> ...THEREFORE DO 'WORLDS' (עלמות) LOVE YOU ... R. Berekiah said: Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, because You bring light into the world Your name is magnified in the world. And what is the light? Redemption. For when You bring us light, many proselytes come and join us, as for instance Jethro and Rahab. Jethro heard the news and came, Rahab heard and came. R. Hanina said: When God performed a miracle for Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, many heathens were converted, as it is written, *When he sees His children, the work of My hands, in the midst of him, they shall sanctify My name* (Isa. 23.23). What comes next? They also that err in spirit shall come to understanding... Another explanation of MAIDENS is that it refers to the generation of destruction (על מות), as it says, *For your sake are we killed all the day, we are counted as sheep for slaughter* (PS. 44.23). Another explanation is that THEREFORE MAIDENS LOVE THEE refers to Israel, as it says, *But because the Lord loved you and because he would keep the*

> *oath*...(Deut. 7.8). Another explanation Because you have hidden (העלמת) from them the reward of the righteous [in the time to come], in regard to which R. Berekiah and R. Helbo said: The Holy One, blessed be He, will one day lead the choir of the righteous in the future world. How do we know? It is written: *Mark well her ramparts* (Ps. 48.14). The word is spelled לחילה(her dance): Righteous on this side and righteous on that side, and the Holy One, blessed be He, in the center, and they will dance before Him with zest, and point Him out one to another with their finger and say, *Such is God, our God, for ever and ever. He will guide us eternally*(ib. 15). [What is the meaning of עלמות?] In two worlds He will guide us-in this world and in the next... Another explanation of עלמות: Akilas translates the word athnasia, a world in which there is no death, and they indicate one to another with the finger and say, For this is God our God for ever and ever, He will guide us above death. He will guide us in two worlds, as it is written, *For the Lord thy God will bless you* (Deut. 15.6), and in the next world, as it is written, *And the Lord will guide thee continually* (Isa. 58.11).

The nations and Israel are blamed for Israel's degradation, but God must in the end be excused. For to continue to love God, Israel must retain confidence that her suffering will be rewarded and God's actions will ultimately be vindicated, in the next world if not in this.

Notes for Chapter 7

1) The Syriac Church father Aphrahat mirrors this Rabbinic characterization of Christianity. He calls Christendom "the nation of nations".

Conclusion

The texts we have discussed all show how midrashic discourse uses figure to convey theological lessons. Though there seems to be no formal Rabbinic method for its use, the Rabbis use it routinely and effectively to dramatize their scriptural interpretations. Figurative language is one of the most potent rhetorical devices the Sages have for instructing their audience in a variety of religious ideas. In some cases, because of the ineffable nature of what they are trying to express, figurative language is the only way to describe their religious ideas.

Among these ideas, the most important is that God is engaged in an ongoing relationship with Israel and that this relationship is homologous to various human relationships. The Rabbis build upon the figurative language bequeathed to them in their sacred literature, Scripture. This material provides the Rabbis with ample examples of both figurative and anthropopathic images of God. However, in order to better address their own historical and religious context, the Sages expand and elaborate upon these figures. They then array them in narrative situations which are simultaneously novel yet familiar to their intended audience. While figures of the non-human world, whether animate or inanimate, are occasionally used, the Rabbis overwhelmingly favor human figures and human relationships in their metaphoric

discourse. Figures of masters and servants, parents and children, husbands and wives are all presented as completely analogous to the relationship of God and Israel.

Unique to these analogies of relationship are the subtle complexities and affective content of their tropes. Because of their anthropomorphic nature, the figurative images and narratives of the Rabbis are emotionally engaging and personally compelling. Through them the Rabbis make the Divine-Jewish relationship powerfully real and tangible.

As presented in these figurative narratives, the Rabbis hold that the Divine-Jewish relationship involves multiple dynamics. From the figures of a king and his servants the Rabbis emphasize the powerless and vulnerable nature of human existence and our utter dependence upon a God who may do as he wills with his creatures. Yet as anxiety-producing as this is, the very fact that a relationship exists means that we have it in our power to influence God and curry his favor to our own benefit. God may at times seem as arbitrary as any oriental potentate, but owing to his anthropopathic nature, we have the capacity to influence him in his attitudes and actions toward us.

From the figure of the parent and child, the Rabbis emphasize that Israel is especially favored by God. This favor, however, goes beyond the favor which a servant may cultivate through his obsequiousness. God's favor toward is Israel reflects God's unique emotional investment in his people. That this favor is emotionally grounded assures the

Rabbis and their audience that the relationship is enduring and not subject to termination. Whatever may be made of the suffering of other peoples, Israel suffers because God in his capacity as a loving parent must discipline his beloved son. Israel may suffer because it sins, but that suffering is not indicative that the relationship is terminated.

The figures of God as lover and Israel as the beloved comprise the master motif of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*. With these figures, the pathos and importance of the Divine-Jewish relationship is brought to its highest statement. God and Israel are life partners, to the exclusion of all other claims. The particular narrativity that the Rabbis construct around these figures serves effectively to explain the historical experience of Israel. From the idyllic early courtship, the relationship has both evolved and decayed. The exilic condition of Israel is indicative of a current estrangement in the relationship. But the emotional bond between God and the Jewish people is ultimately too powerful to be denied. The Rabbis see their condition as a mid-life crisis in the relationship which will ultimately be transcended. The analogy of lover and beloved, for all its pathos and pain, is a hopeful and therapeutic analogy. Love is as strong as death, God will summon Israel back into his embrace and a total restoration awaits Israel in the future.

The figure of the rivals serves to reassure Jews that though other faith communities may claim to have displaced

Israel in God's affection, there is really no contest. Other peoples may be (optimistically) servants in God's service, but only Israel is family, with all the privileges attendant on that status.

Emotion and its role in relationship permeates every aspect of Rabbinic figurative language. In a sense, the figurative discourse of the Rabbis is an affective theology. It constructs, recapitulates, enacts and dramatizes a network of associations between God and Israel built upon feelings and emotional bonds. Beyond the notion of covenant, beyond the moral mechanism of retributive theology, the Rabbis use figure to articulate a collective form of 'personal religion'. In *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, the individual human relationship with God is enlarged and applied to the corporate experience of the Jewish people.

Religion is an act of engagement. For ideas of the Divine to be both understandable and useful to the religious personality, the cognitive content of religion must be conveyed in affectively compelling forms. The figurative images of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* are just such forms. Filled with images which are simultaneously comforting and disturbing, powerfully dramatic and homely, these figures are religious discourse of the highest order.

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