Text Immersion:

Song of Songs

Text Immersion Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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Contents

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The Mystery of Tirzah

Text Immersion Essay #1

You, my companion, are as beautiful as Tirzah[1]
Comely as Jerusalem
Song of Songs 6:4

We know that Jerusalem is a city: the city where God tested Abraham; the city where the Temple was built; the Promised Land's heart; the "joy of all the earth" and the "perfection of beauty."[2] But what do we know about Tirzah? As we will see, modern commentators tell us that Tirzah, like Jerusalem, is also a city. However, problems abound: how can we compare a woman to a city (whether the city of Tirzah or Jerusalem)? Another problem for modern commentators who read Tirzah as a city is, in doing so, they consciously reject an ancient reading of the text. The Septuagint, Samaritan and Vulgate[3] all understood Tirzah to mean "pleasing." The only source of agreement among the ancient translations, the rabbinic midrash and modern commentators is that whether Tirzah is a place, a person or an adjective, Tirzah is "female" and an enigma. Almost no one will mention that Tirzah is one of Zelophehad's five daughters in the book of Numbers. Tirzah is one little word with so many possibilities!

As I immersed myself into the world of love, innuendos and spirituality, I expected to clash with the rabbinic midrash on Song of Songs. The rabbis[4] discussing these midrashim are men. In all the rabbinic texts, they discuss almost anything, with two exceptions. The

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[1] Tirzah is one of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 26:33, 27:1, 36:1-12 and Joshua 17:3-6.
[2] Psalms 48:3 and 50:2.
[3] The Septuagint (Greek), Samaritan and Vulgate (Latin) are ancient Bible translations. These were completed no later than the 2nd century of the Common Era. This is important because this is the same time period that rabbinic Judaism began. While the rabbinic midrash on Song of Songs was probably not completely edited until as late at the 8th century, some of the material within the midrash is probably at least as old as ancient texts, such as the Septuagint, Samaritan and Vulgate.
[4] Throughout this paper, when I refer to "the rabbis" I am referring to the editors of the midrashim, either Numbers Rabbah or Song of Songs Rabbah, depending on which text I am referring to at the moment. It is difficult, if not impossible, to give a date to when these rabbis lived. Song of Songs and Numbers Rabbah (the rabbinic midrash on Song of Songs) might be as late as 8th century of the Common Era. But some of the material within the midrashim can easily be as old as first century of the Common Era.

rabbis show anxiety with anything that has a potential to be interpreted as "changing the laws of the Torah" and they are uncomfortable talking about women. Discomfort with these two topics does not keep the rabbis from discussing them; it just means that the rabbis do not acknowledge their discomfort as they dissect these topics, making matters more complicated than they might actually be. Conversely, the modern commentators I referred to are living in a time of semi-equality between the sexes. However, I was surprised to discover that it was among modern commentators, that I was alone in reading Tirzah as a woman. For me there is value in exploring the possibility that Tirzah was a woman. Throughout this paper, I will contrast this reading of the text with the other possibilities presented.

I researched ten modern commentators.[5] Most of these commentators reveal that the ancient texts, such as the Septuagint, translated "Tirzah" as a word that means "pleasing." However, among these ten commentators, Marvin Pope is the only one who chooses to translate Tirzah according to the ancient reading of the text as "pleasing." Pope translates Song of Songs 6:4 as, "Fair you are, my darling, verily pleasing."[6] Six other commentators choose to understand Tirzah as a city.[7] In addition to acknowledging the ancient tradition for translating "Tirzah," these six commentators also concede that it is problematic to compare a person to a city and they are not sure how this is intended. However, the parallel structure is

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[5] Two of the commentators I looked at did not address the question of Tirzah at all (but both scholars mention that Song of Songs 6:4-10 is a *wasf*, an Arabic style love poem describing physical attributes of the lover). The two scholars are White, John B. "A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Poetry." Montana: Scholars Press ©1975; and Walsh, Carey Ellen. "Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs." Minneapolis: Fortress Press ©2000.

[6] Pope, Marvin H. "The Anchor Bible: Song of Songs." Yale University Press ©1995, p. 7.

[7] Murphy, Roland. " The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or Song of Songs." Minneapolis: Fortress Press ©1990, p. 175. Kravitz, Leonard and Kerry M. Olitzky. "Shir Hashirim: A Modern Commentary on the Song of Songs." New York: URJ Press ©2004, p. 73. Falk, Marcia. "Love Lyrics From the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs." Sheffield: The Almond Press ©1982, p. 124-126. Knight, George A.F. and Friedemann W. Golka. "Revelations of God: A Commentary on the Books of the Song of Songs and Jonah." Edinburgh: The Handsel Press Limited ©1988, p. 31-32. Longman III, Tremper. "The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Song of Songs." Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. ©2001, p.178-179. Bloch, Ariel and Chana Bloch. "The Song of Songs: A New Translation." Berkeley: University of California Press ©1995, p. 188-189.

so strong for these six scholars, that for the sake of flow, grammar and structure, it makes sense to them to read the text as comparing the woman to two different cities. Thus they render Tirzah as a place.

It is perplexing how a woman and a city might be like each other; in addition, Jerusalem and the city of Tirzah, referred to in the first book of Kings, are bitter enemies, with Jerusalem in Judea and Tirzah in the northern kingdom.[8] So how are these cities grouped together as a symbol of beauty? Modern scholars try to understand what might be special about the city of Tirzah: perhaps it was a city of great royal beauty.[9] Or maybe the author of Song of Songs chose Tirzah simply because the root of its name means "pleasant."[10]

As a city, Tirzah serves as a tool for scholars to assess when the Song of Songs may have been written. Roland Murphy tells us that at one time Tirzah was not only a city in the northern kingdom, but the capital of the northern kingdom, from Jeroboam's time to Omri's rule (circa 920-880 BCE) and that soon after, Samaria became the capital (thus making it unlikely that Song of Songs was written after Samaria became the capital).[11]

In my eyes, a commentator's task is to give the reader as much information as is known about the language, the history and the context. In this way, most scholars tell us what they know about the city of Tirzah according to the Book of Joshua and the first Book of Kings.[12] A commentator does not need to hold the answers to every question. A commentator's task is to give information about the language, provide relevant history and to draw attention to interesting connections with other texts. Sometimes a word shows up too

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[8] Longman, p.179 and Falk, p. 124.
[9] Bloch, p. 189.
[10] Kravitz, p.73.
[11] Ibid., p. 175.
[12] Joshua 12:24, 1 Kings 14:17, 15:21,33, 16:6,8,9 (twice),15,17,23 and 2 Kings 15:14,16.

many times for a commentator to effectively point out every possible nuance. However, when a word shows up a limited number of times with only one, two or three possible meanings, the commentator has a responsibility to refer to all the possibilities, even if he or she does not know what conclusion to draw from such a reference. Tirzah appears in the Bible a total of eighteen times[13] and has no more than two or three possible meanings. Thus, to deny the simple reference that Tirzah is one of Zelophehad's five daughters in Numbers 27, 36 and Joshua 17 seems like a failure on the commentators' part. Only one commentator, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, acknowledges the connection between Tirzah in the Song of Songs and in Numbers and Joshua.[14] She does not stipulate what the connection might be; Eskenazi simply states that the potential connection exists.

As grammatically and structurally sensible it is to read Tirzah as a city, we should remember, as Pope states, "The ancient versions [i.e. Septuagint] did not recognize *trsh* as a proper name in spite of the parallelism with Jerusalem and the comparative particle *k* before both words."[15] Nor does rabbinic midrash read Tirzah as a proper name (for a person or city).

Before we look at the rabbinic midrash on Song of Songs, we should take a closer look at Numbers 27 and its rabbinic midrash. As we will see, in Song of Songs Rabbah, the rabbis ignore the notion that Tirzah could be a woman. Yet in the midrash relating to Numbers 27, we learn that the rabbis know of Tirzah and they have much to say about her and her sisters. Thus, when discussing Song of Songs Rabbah, we cannot claim that the rabbis deny that Tirzah could be a woman because perhaps they are not familiar with the

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[13] Four times as Zelophehad's daughter in Numbers 26:33, 27:1, 36:11, and in Joshua 17:3. Thirteen times as a city in Joshua 12:24, 1 Kings 14:17, 15:21,33, 16:6,8,9 (twice),15,17,23 and 2 Kings 15:14,16. And once in the ambiguous Song of Songs 6:4.

[14] Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn and Andreal L. Weiss. "The Torah: A Women's Commentary." New York: URJ Press ©2007, p. 972.

[15] Pope, p. 558.

narrative found in the Book of Numbers. Tirzah is one of five daughters who appear twice in the book of Numbers and once in the book of Joshua.[16] These daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, challenge Moses, saying they should inherit the land that would have belonged to their father. Prior to this incident, daughters did not have the right to inherit anything, including land. The daughters argue that their father, Zelophehad, died in the wilderness and left no sons. The daughters also state that their father was not part of Korah's revolt and, as such, he did not forfeit his inheritance.[17] Had their father survived the desert journey, he would have inherited land and been able to transfer that land, in his name, to future generations. The five daughters argue their case well, and Moses (with God's approval) changes the law accordingly.[18]

This is the only instance in the Torah when a divine law is changed.[19] While God approved of the change, it was the daughters who brought the need for change to God's attention. When addressing the text in Numbers 27, the rabbis of Numbers Rabbah tell three stories. The first explains why the five daughters deserve the honor of being mentioned by name. In the second story, the rabbis address the timing of why this happens at this point in the Bible. The third story tells us how, according to the rabbis' understanding, the five daughters did not create change in the law.

In the first story, the rabbis elaborate on why the five daughters are honored to be mentioned by name.[20] The rabbis explain that the five daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah,

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[16] Numbers 27:1-11, 36:1-12 and Joshua 17:3.
[17] As the *Torah: A Women's Commentary* explains on page 972, "By distancing their father from Korah, who had rebelled against Aaron (see Numbers 16), the daughters legitimate themselves in at least two ways. First, they explain that their father did not forfeit his inheritance (Num 26:11). Second, they distance themselves from suspicion of illegitimate challenge to authority."
[18] Numbers 27:8-11.
[19] Torah: A Women's Commentary, p. 971.
[20] Numbers Rabbah 27:1.

Milcah and Tirzah were among the women who "held up fences."[21] One of those "fences" was when the men were building the golden calf, and the women refused to contribute jewelry for the project.[22] In this way, perhaps when the rabbis expound on Song of Songs 6:4, they do consider the possibility of Tirzah as an individual person, but as a woman among many women in the desert.[23]

In the second story, the rabbis seem to think that this story about Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah is out of place.[24] Thus they try to understand the narrative's literary setting. First they explain that Moses is addressing issues of inheritance, so the timing is right. They also suggest that the encounter with the five daughters might have been God's way of trying to appease an unwritten concern that Moses has regarding his relationship with his wife, Tziporah. Moses has been busy leading the Israelites out of Egypt and trying to establish the community and its laws. Through most of the four books that span Moses' life, we hardly ever see Tziporah. Thus the rabbis imagined that Moses felt guilty at being absent in his marriage. Bringing Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah – as strong independent women – before Moses, is God's way of letting Moses know that Tziporah is taking care of herself.[25]

In the third story, the rabbis explain that the daughters began making their request with the local tribal leader. As he did not know the answer, this leader would turn to his own

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[21] Freedman and Simon's translation, which they understand to mean fences "in the moral sense" p. 836.
[22] Rashi, a Jewish commentator from the 11th century, refers to this midrash in tractate Megilla 22b. That the women did not contribute jewelry to the golden calf is an often repeated story. It is also from this story that the rabbis connected Rosh Hodesh to women. "A midrash teaches that each of the Rosh Chodeshim was originally intended to represent one of the twelve tribes of Israel, just as the three major festivals (Pesach, Sukkot and Shavu'ot) each represent one of the three patriarchs. However, because of the sin of the Golden Calf, the holiday was taken away from the men and given to women, as a reward for the women's refusal to participate in the construction of the Golden Calf." (Tracey R. Rich at http://www.jewfaq.org/women.htm#Holiday)
[23] I want to add that Tirzah would have been one of the women at Sinai when the people built a golden calf, and then when they received the Torah.
[24] Numbers Rabbah 27:1.
[25] Ibid.

chief, and so on, all the way up to Moses. If Moses answered the question directly, he would have simultaneously risked having the people see him as God, and he would have disrespected all those leaders before him. Thus, as a matter of respect and appearances, Moses does as the others did: he addresses his own "boss." As such, the women did not instigate change, God did.[26]

These three stories address each of the three potential problems that arise from the text. First, women are hardly ever mentioned by name. The rabbis explain that Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah are mentioned out of a need to explain something that is unusual and out of character for most of the biblical text. The rabbis' reasoning (from their perspective)[27] honors the women. The next concern for the rabbis is the placement of the story. They ask why the story about Tirzah and her sisters is here in Numbers 27. However, it is unclear where the rabbis think would be a better setting to discuss women's inheritance rights. The rabbis again praise the women for bringing up the issue of inheritance when Moses is addressing inheritance for the men. In addition, the rabbis wonder about Moses' relationship with his own wife, Tziporah. And finally, did these five daughters create change in the Torah, the only place in the Torah where such a change appears to have been made?[28] According to the rabbis no change took place in the law.

These three midrashim reinforce how unusual it is for biblical texts to include narratives about women and how unusual it is for the text to provide women's names. These midrashim also demonstrate the rabbis' uneasiness with the possibility that anyone is capable

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[26] Numbers Rabbah 27:5.

[27] The reason I say "from their perspective" is that the incident of the women not providing jewelry is not in the Torah. It is a rabbinic midrash that seems to be overused to explain why women do things differently than men (for example – that women are more spiritual than men and thus do not need to pray in order to access God.) In this light, the midrash can be seen as patronizing. See footnote 21.

[28] Eskenazi, p. 972.

of changing God's divine laws. Most importantly, these midrashim make it clear that the rabbis are familiar with the narrative found in the Book of Numbers; the rabbis know that according to the text, a woman named Tirzah lived.

With Numbers Rabbah in mind, I expected the rabbis to be uncomfortable with Song of Songs' reference to Tirzah, for not only is she one of five presumably powerful women, she is linked to the only mention of "change" in the Torah. While I expected the rabbis to find Song of Songs 6:4 problematic, I did not think they would completely ignore the possibilities of "Tirzah" as the reference to a woman. On the one hand, it is possible that reading Tirzah not as a proper name for a city or person, fell in line with the general tradition of the times – for as we saw, ancient texts such as the Septuagint did not understand Tirzah to refer to a city either. On the other hand, as we will soon see, the rabbis' reading goes much further than simply translating Tirzah as just one other word, "pleasing." Further, it is possible that the narrative of the five daughters is so problematic for the rabbis that they did not want Song of Songs' readers to consider Tirzah as a name. The rabbis of the midrash knew their scriptures thoroughly; they were well aware that Tirzah might refer to a city or even to a person and chose to ignore those possibilities.

In Song of Songs Rabbah the rabbis focus on its theme as a love poem between God and His bride, the people Israel. That the biblical canon includes a book with such sexually ambiguous and erotic material *is* problematic for the rabbis. Even if in Judaism we have a tradition that does not consider sex to be a sin, Judaism is not a religion that provides sexually explicit how-to manuals, either. The rabbis find meaning and value in Song of Songs when they look at the text through a spiritual lens, translating the Song into a love poem that describes the passionate (and complicated) relationship between God and the

people Israel. Contrary to some people's beliefs, the rabbis do have some foundation within the language of the text to extrapolate as they do. We find references to King Solomon[29] and to the colors and materials of the Temple.[30] And we (somewhat unexpectedly) find language of war as well.[31] These, in addition to various locations, names and spices, give us a sense that there is something more to this poem than just two lovers.

It is fascinating to watch how the rabbis play out their understanding of the Song as a whole, through this verse in particular. In Song of Songs Rabbah the rabbis do not read "Tirzah" as the name of a person or city. They approach the word as if it were an unusual form of another word. For the most part, the rabbis understand "Tirzah" to be related to "Rotzeh" – wanting or desire. Both words have the same shoresh/root.

> The midrash opens with three possible ways of understanding Song of Songs 6:4a.
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> 1. Rabbi Yehuda ben Simon says that "Tirzah" is a reference to korbanot/sacrifices, the sacrifices that you desire to offer. Rabbi Yehuda makes the connection with the use of the word "Rotzeh" in Leviticus 1:4, which is specifically referring to sacrifices. He then goes on to explain that "as pleasant as Jerusalem" is a reference to the "holy ones of Jerusalem." The "holy ones of Jerusalem" are those who did not turn to idolatry when surrounded by people doing so. As proof text he cites Ezekiel 36:38.
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> 2. Another rabbi tells us that "Tirzah" refers to the women in the desert (this opinion reads "Tirzah" with the letter "ayin"). When the people were in the desert waiting for Moses' return from Mount Sinai, the men grew impatient and built a golden calf. The women did not contribute jewelry to build the calf. This opinion tells us that not worshiping the golden calf was not a passive act – the women were virtuous, strong and held their own. Further, this opinion reads "as pleasant as Jerusalem" as "as pleasant as the few good people of Jerusalem." That is, there were more idol worshippers in Jerusalem than there were good people – but the good people were still there. Just like in the story of the golden calf, the majority (the men think of the men as majority) were worshipping the calf, but (a few) good women were not.
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> 3. Yet another opinion reads "K'Tirzah" as "when you want to offer sacrifices out of your own will (but not because I command you to)." This is again a play on the word "rotzeh" desiring/wanting. This opinion then references Numbers 7:3 to show an

[29] Song of Songs 1:1, 3:7,9,11, 8:11,12.
[30] Song of Songs 1:9, 3:9-11, 5:14,15.
[31] Song of Songs 4:4, 6:4,10.

example of when God was happy because the people brought what their heart moved them to bring; no one told them to bring these items.

It is interesting to note that the rabbis do not read Tirzah either as the name of a specific person or place. That is, while we can understand the "risk" of referring to Tirzah as one of Zelophehad's daughters, one would not think there is a risk in referring to Tirzah as a city. Further, due to the structure of the verse (Tirzah as a parallel to the city of Jerusalem), it is in the rabbis' favor to argue that Tirzah is a city. The question then becomes, do the rabbis have a purpose in reading Tirzah the way they do? The answer seems to be "YES."

Song of Songs does provide enough material for the rabbis to read it as a love poem between God and the people Israel. However, their reading is not obvious to the reader. Thus, the rabbis have to work to make a clear connection and they do want to make their case as strong as they possibly can. The desire to read the Song of Songs as a divine love poem influences how they understand each verse of the text. The remainder of the midrash on Song of Songs 6:4a focuses not on Song of Songs but on Numbers 7:3, "[The chieftains of Israel] brought their offering before the Lord: six draught carts and twelve oxen, a cart for every two chieftains and an ox for each one."[32]

As we saw above, the rabbis arrive at Numbers 7:3 as a "proof text" to show an example of a time when the people brought offerings to God out of their own free will. From this point in the midrash, the rabbis appear to have digressed from their analysis of the Song of Songs: they attribute meaning to the "numbers" (Why six and twelve?[33] And what did the text mean by "a cart for every two chieftains and an ox for each one"?). The rabbis want to make it clear that God did not command these offerings, in which case, the rabbis want to

[32] Jewish Publication Society ©1988, 1995 translation.
[33] While not important for this paper, I do want to share that the rabbis – here – count six matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah and Zilpah and Bilhah (!).

determine whose idea it was to bring all these things to offer up to God; the rabbis determine that it was Isaachar. In determining that the tribe of Isaachar told the people what to bring, the rabbis seem to introduce the idea of "oral law." The discussion about Isaachar then leads to the last part of the midrash on Tirzah: these offerings that the chieftains brought, and how long they lasted. There is a discussion among the rabbis that these offerings (including the draught carts) lasted until a certain destination, such as Gilgal, Nob, Gibeon or Shiloh.[34] Then the rabbis say that these offerings survived hundreds of years, until King Solomon built the first Temple – here, too, as they have done along the way, the rabbis[35] offer "proof texts:" 2 Chronicles 7:5 and Numbers 7:7,8. The oxen that King Solomon sacrifices at the dedication of the Temple were the very same oxen in Numbers 7:3. Then R. Meir says,

> They [the offerings from Numbers 7:3] are still standing today, without blemish, without having aged, without any impure imperfection. These are alive and enduring today. And if to the oxen, assigned by man for the work of the Temple, God gave them a long life that they should endure for ever, how much more so [would God do this to the people] Israel, who cling [of their own will] on to God.[36]

Finally R. Meir cites a "proof text" that uses the words "cling" and "alive." I find this ending fascinating. R. Meir expresses a feeling of awe towards the fact that Jews have existed as long as they have. Much of the writings in the Torah concern the building, preservation and rituals of the Temple and its sacrifices. Rabbinic Judaism is the re-imagining of a new religion that would have to survive without either the Temple or the sacrifices. In a sense, the rabbis did not know what would become of the people Israel. And by the time that R. Meir makes his statement (or more accurately, by the time this midrash is compiled, which is very

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[34] Song of Songs Rabbah, R. Yudan and R. Huna in the name of Bar Qappara, say the draught carts and the oxen will endure until they reach Gilgal. R. Abun says that it will be until they reach Nob, R. Abba says Gibeon and R. Levi says Shiloh.
[35] Rabi Hama offers the prooftext.
[36] God here has a long title, "The Life of All Ages."

late, perhaps the late 7th century), there exists a sense that our people should not have survived as long as we have.

The reason the rabbis appear to take a detour is because they begin by saying that Song of Songs 6:4 reads, "You are beautiful to Me when you sacrifice [out of your own desire to do so]." But the Temple no longer stands. Does this mean that God no longer finds the people Israel to be beautiful? The rabbis do not want to answer in the negative, thus their long winding road to find a favorable answer: If God took care of little things such as draught carts and oxen to last forever, how much more so would God take care of the people Israel who continue to cling to God [out of their own free will]. Connecting "Tirzah" to "desire out of free will" becomes crucial in order to make this point.

However, the rabbis specify "sacrifice" as what preserved the people Israel as a people. Without sacrifice, we risk disappearance. This is a problem, as we have not sacrificed since 70 CE. But the midrash continues on, telling us how God has preserved sacrifice-related insignificant things to last forever. And if God bothered to preserve insignificant things, how much more so, would God want to preserve the people Israel (even without sacrifice).

Here the rabbis emphasize how much God appreciates it when we offer sacrifice of our own volition. In a sense, the rabbis acknowledge a level of autonomy: that not everything we do is within the boundaries of law, of what we are commanded to do. Sometimes, we do things out of our own volition.

Surprisingly, the rabbis' ardent desire to avoid discussing Tirzah as a woman, demonstrates more recognition of that possibility than modern commentators' complete denial. If we rely on a modern commentator, we might not realize that Tirzah has a third

possibility beyond a city or "pleasing." The rabbis, however, build a wonderful and complex case to support their reading of the text, which excludes the possibility of Tirzah as a proper name. If we rely on the rabbinic midrash alone, we are likely to ask, "Why are the rabbis so troubled by this verse?" Such a question could inspire us to investigate until we discover Tirzah in the book of Numbers and Joshua. In an odd way, it is the rabbis' discomfort with the word Tirzah that creates the possibility that Tirzah is indeed a woman.

I cannot explain the parallel between Tirzah and Jerusalem or what a woman might have in common with a city. Even if the verse as a whole does not make much sense, at least the very first part of the verse, "You, my companion, are as beautiful as Tirzah" does. This beginning leads me to wonder about Tirzah. What might she have been like? For this is a possible role model for the woman in the Song of Songs. In the book of Numbers and Joshua the five sisters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, always appear together. On the one hand, they are strong women to be able to instigate change in the Torah. On the other hand, how do they differ from one another? What would cause Tirzah to stand above her sisters and be alluded to in the Song of Songs?

No one has a comprehensive answer. However, there is value in exploring all the possibilities and allowing our minds to wander. For better or worse, whenever I read this verse, I will always wonder about the woman behind the name.

Learning from Song of Songs

Text Immersion Essay #2

I know that I love Song of Songs and that there is value in reading and learning from the text. While I had heard about Song of Songs prior to attending Hebrew Union College, I never really had the opportunity to study this text until my third year at the rabbinic seminary. From this personal experience, I made the unfounded assumption that Song of Songs does not receive much attention from the Reform Movement. This unfounded assumption led to the question, "Do progressive Jews incorporate Song of Songs into their lives, whether through study or another medium?" The answer is "yes." In this paper, I will demonstrate a variety of ways through which the text becomes available to the congregation. At the conclusion of this paper, I will share how I envision Song of Songs to play a role in my rabbinate.

Song of Songs is most commonly known as an erotic love poem. While there is a consensus that this is a beautiful love poem, there is also discomfort as to what settings are appropriate for such a poem. For example, I am a fan of Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman," but I cannot imagine standing before a congregation and reading the lines,

> Men themselves have wondered
> What they see in me.
> They try so much
> But they can't touch
> My inner mystery.
> When I try to show them,
> They say they still can't see.
> I say,
> It's in the arch of my back,
> The sun of my smile,
> The ride of my breasts,
> The grace of my style.
> I'm a woman
> Phenomenally.
> Phenomenal woman,
> That's me.

That I would be uncomfortable delivering this poem from the pulpit does not mean that its sensuality and empowerment should be ignored. This poem is a sensual poem that inspires confidence in women. One important difference between Angelou's poem and the Song of Songs is that the latter is an ancient text that made it into the biblical canon. Song of Songs is a biblical and sacred text that also has a place within later Jewish tradition. In Song of Songs Rabbah, the rabbis[1] provide a collection of midrashim on Song of Songs.[2] In addition, the rabbis deemed the book to be read at Passover, and Song of Songs has long been associated with Jewish weddings.

Not only does Song of Songs have a place within Jewish tradition, but its sensual and poetic language could attract Jews, who have no interest in text, to text study. It has been noted through various studies that the population of unaffiliated Jews is huge and growing. But it is also my experience that sometimes, unaffiliated Jews need to find their own path into Judaism. Some Jews find that connection through widely known rituals, such as Shabbat, a time when God commands us to rest and rejoice. Others connect through less widely known venues, such as the study of musar, a Jewish spiritual curriculum.[3] With this in mind, I wondered whether Song of Songs, as a text that can appeal to the imagination differently than other biblical texts, could also serve as an entryway into Judaism for Jews who are looking to reconnect.

Song of Songs can enter into our lives in three different ways:

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[1] Song of Songs Rabbah was probably completed by the 8th century CE. While the final version has a late date, some of the material within Song of Songs Rabbah is much older. This text, like most rabbinic texts was compiled and edited over many centuries.

[2] Rabbah means "great commentaries." Not all biblical texts have their own Rabbah collection.

[3] Musar is a method of teaching Jewish values that focuses on self-improvement. The musar process takes place within a group. Individuals share which character traits they want to improve and both the individual and the group are responsible for helping this individual achieve his/her goals.

1. **Ritual/Religion**: Song of Songs is appropriate for weddings, Passover, liturgy and as an expression of divine love. In this category, I will describe both rituals that have long been part of our Jewish tradition and newly created rituals.

2. **Text Study**: Song of Songs is a text that offers a great deal of inspiration regarding various facets of life (examples forthcoming).

3. **Relationship & Sexuality**: Song of Songs is a practical Jewish tool to teach and learn about relationships and sexuality within a Jewish context.

I will work backward through this list. It can be difficult for people to talk about their ideas of relationships and sexuality on a personal context. As an erotic poem, Song of Songs provides a medium through which Jews can engage in conversation regarding sexuality and relationships without delving into the personal. Because Song of Songs is filled with double entendres and innuendos, even a simple debate concerning the uncertainties of the text can be helpful. For example, there is no consensus among Bible scholars as to whether the lovers of the Song are fantasizing about each other, have physical encounters of any kind, or (specifically) whether they ever have intercourse. Even if the Song is only a description of the lovers' fantasies, the text remains highly erotic. Carey Ellen Walsh reads the Song of Songs on two levels, one of which could serve as a model, or at least a jumping off point for a discussion, on the role that desire plays in relationships.[4] Further, Walsh explains the difference between pornography and erotica. Pornography is about the goal – pictures and language that will help a person climax. Erotica is not about the goal, but about the journey,

[4] The other level she makes use of is the rabbinic midrash to explore how the Song can enhance one's spirituality. I don't present the other level in this paper because a) it's not relevant and b) I am using her material to demonstrate how the text can be used for relationships/sexuality. However, Walsh is not a rabbi (nor Jewish), thus this is not an example of how *she* uses the text in a Reform context. Walsh, Carey Ellen. "Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs." Minneapolis: Fortress Press ©2000.

the process, the desire. Erotica is about enhancing one's senses and deepening the desire between partners and allows for "more play with imagination."[5] From there, Walsh goes on to describe how powerful the lovers' desires are for each other. From Walsh's perspective, the lovers do not have intercourse; rather, the entire poem is foreplay with each lover expressing desire for the other. Thus one can use the text to talk about the differences between pornography and erotica and/or the role of desire in a healthy relationship, all within a Jewish and/or biblical context.

How the lovers describe the other's physical attributes (Song of Songs 4:1, "Your eyes are as doves from behind your veil/Your hair like a flock of goats"; 5:11, "His head is as the finest gold/his locks are curled/and black as raven") can in itself serve as a topic of discussion for building healthy relationships. Some of the metaphors in the text can take some time to understand. However, it is helpful to know that the lovers use metaphors from the world they know: the world of agriculture, garden, animals and materials they are familiar with. In this way, the text can be used to help encourage us to describe our partners with the language of the world we live in, or perhaps to discuss whether it is important to express our desire for the other and the different ways through which we can do that.

The possibilities for drawing from the text to talk about relationships and sexuality are endless and well documented, and I would like to add one more. Phillip Hankin wrote a three-week camp curriculum called "Shir HaShirim – Ancient Love Poetry or the Holy of Holies?" that is worth noting. Hankin writes the curriculum in such a way that the text becomes accessible on at least two levels. On one level, Hankin creates the opportunity for the campers to study the text through three different lenses: "1) as a universal love poem, 2) as a religious text about Israel's love relationship with God, and 3) as a universal text about

[5] Ibid., pp. 41-45.

relationships."[6] On another level, each of these lenses provides the teenage campers a platform to talk about their understanding of love and sexuality. Is love divine? Is love only about relationships? How are love and sex related? In this way, Hankin is able to make the text relevant to teenagers by interweaving ancient text with current teenage issues.

Finally, the topic of relationships and sexuality is relevant to all age groups.[7] Teenagers are just beginning to explore and understand how to build relationships and how to express their sexuality. Adults (married or single) are trying to maintain a level of interest and desire. And seniors (meaning seniors in nursing homes and/or requiring supervised care, not just people over 60) might be looking back wondering what to do with their memories and asking, "What now?" Since Song of Songs can be read as a book of desires that is never consummated, perhaps memories can have the same pleasing effect. In truth, we cannot know how seniors will answer, "What now?" However, it is naïve for us to think that seniors in nursing homes have stopped thinking about love and desire. It would be an interesting exercise to listen to how seniors answer this question. In this way, Song of Songs can be made accessible to all age groups; this erotic love poem can serve as an intergenerational entryway into text study.

Another possible entryway into Song of Songs is through direct engagement with the text. In the "text study" category, we find Song of Songs used as a source of inspiration in the same way that many other texts are used. For example, one contemporary rabbi[8] invokes Song of Songs 4:16 ("Awake O north wind/ Come south wind!") as a metaphor of conflict

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[6] Hankin, Phillip. "Shir HaShirim – Ancient Love Poetry or the Holy of Holies? A 3 week Summer Camp Exploration" Curriculum Guide 2000, p. 4.

[7] In her book "Engendering Judaism" (1998), Rachel Adler agrees with me on this point. She writes, "The metaphoric mode out of which polymorphous eroticism [of Song of Songs] operates serves as an erotic common denominator, a kinship in the sexual experience of women and men, heterosexuals and homosexuals, young people and very old people." (p. 147)

[8] I did an informal survey of rabbis I know regarding their Song of Songs practices. For the sake of privacy, I am not providing names.

resolution: that is, as the coexistence of opposing forces. As another example, at my internship, I was able to make a connection between Exodus 8:16 in parshat vaera and Song of Songs during a regular Saturday morning Torah study. In this verse, God tells Moses to relay to Pharaoh, "Let My people go that they may worship Me." Thus, God did not take the Israelites out of Egypt to be a free autonomous people; rather God took the Israelites out of Egypt so that we would be free to serve God (in a sense, we went from being eved mitzraim to eved Adonai). In reading this Exodus passage, a congregant expressed discomfort at the idea that we serve God only because we are commanded to. This congregant prefers to serve God out of a divine spark within us. I responded that the rabbis also discuss this tension. When the rabbis read Song of Songs 6:4 ("You, my companion, are as beautiful as Tirzah"), they translate this verse to mean, "You are beautiful when you sacrifice to me out of your own desire [without being asked]." On the one hand the rabbis follow all the laws because they feel commanded by God. On the other hand, the rabbis also have a sense that there are things we should do without being asked.

Saturday morning Torah study serves as an informal manner of engaging with the text. Another informal approach is when a rabbi quotes from Song of Songs in a sermon. The focus in a sermon is on one or two verses that may or may not be within context. Another form of text study is through formal adult education classes during the week or with "scholar in residence" type programs. In an adult education class setting, the teacher has the opportunity to choose a lens through which the class will engage with the text. Rabbi Jocee Hudson[9] and Susan Halpern[10] have written two different adult curricula that incorporate Song of Songs. I have included Halpern's curriculum as an example in the next category. Hudson's

[9] Hudson, Jocee. "Finding Emotion in Biblical Poetry." Curriculum guide 2005.
[10] Halpern, Susan. "Five Scrolls: A Guide to Jewish Living." Curriculum guide 1993.

curriculum connects the students' emotions with biblical poetry. Hudson writes that "engaging this holiest of literary expressions may give us tools to explore and express our own deepest spiritual meanings, feelings, and beliefs."[11] Hudson includes Song of Songs in the curriculum to demonstrate how Torah poetry speaks of love. She then encourages her students to think about how Song of Songs' love poetry compares to our expressions of love today.[12]

While adult education and chevruta (learning in groups or at least with a partner) is a popular method of learning, there are those who like to study on their own. One rabbi[13] revealed to me that from time to time he refers to Song of Songs for personal study because he loves Hebrew (Israeli) poetry in general. Israeli poets often make use of biblical verses, which includes Song of Songs. Thus through reading poetry, on occasion he finds himself studying from Song of Songs.

Finally, the "ritual/religious" category refers both to traditional and modern applications of Song of Songs in Jewish rituals. First, Song of Songs is one of five megilot, scrolls: Ecclesiastes, Esther, Song of Songs, Ruth and Lamentations. All five megilot can be found in the third section of the Tanakh, Ketuvim/writings. Each megilah connects to a different holiday: Ecclesiastes – Sukkot; Esther – Purim; Song of Songs – Passover; Ruth – Shavuot; Lamentations – Tisha B'Av. It is common that Reform synagogues will read (or present adaptations of) the Book of Esther on Purim. However, reading the other four megilot (including Song of Songs) in Reform synagogues varies from community to community. There are Reform Jewish communities that study Song of Songs during the Shabbat of

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[11] Hudson, p. 2.
[12] One activity that Hudson recommends is for students to compare some verses from Song of Songs with expressions of love in fashion or celebrity magazines.
[13] For the sake of privacy, I am not providing names.

Passover, but not many. I imagine that in part, whether or not a community studies from Song of Songs at Passover depends on whether that community has a culture of studying together every Shabbat. When that is the case, there is a natural setting to present and study Song of Songs. Another natural setting would be adult educations classes that change topics with some frequency. This too depends on the culture of a synagogue; some synagogues have ongoing weekly classes and others offer different topics each semester. As I mentioned earlier in the paper, Halpern created a curriculum for adults on the "Five Scrolls," that incorporates Song of Songs. She created this curriculum "[i]n order to help adults find new connections with our Jewish calendar.... [The connection with the Jewish holidays] also makes these scrolls more important for it demonstrates that within the course of a year we may have different views of God, and our relationships to our world. We then are able to see that our search and struggles in life can be enriched by the unique perspective of these five scrolls."[14] In addition to formal study relating to the holidays, another way to consciously connect Song of Songs with Passover is to include various pieces (such as verses 2:10-11) that have been set to music during a service near or during Passover, as we have sometimes done at HUC.

Musical adaptations of Song of Songs are not only used during daily or Shabbat worship services, but they are often used at weddings. In addition to Song of Songs being present through music I find that most Reform rabbis I know read select verses from Song of Songs at weddings.[15] How much text is used at weddings varies from rabbi to rabbi. However, it is hard to imagine a wedding where the phrase "*Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*"[16] is not used. One rabbi shares that he interweaves Song of Songs 5:10-16 with parts of

[14] Halpern, p. 5
[15] Informal survey (see footnote 8).
[16] Song of Songs 2:16, "My beloved is mine and I am his."

I Samuel 18-20 (David and Jonathan) or Song of Songs 7:2-8 with parts of Ruth 1 (Ruth and Naomi). Song of Songs is poetic and romantic and belongs in weddings. By using these texts, which can be read as narratives of same sex relationships, this rabbi makes this divine love poem even more accessible in a same-sex wedding ceremony.

Just as Song of Songs belongs in the wedding ceremony, so does the Song have a place in the marriage. In "A Day Apart: Shabbat at Home," Noam Sach Zion proposes that a couple can read verses from Song of Songs to each other. Zion seems to suggest this in place of Eishet Hayil (after Shabbat candles have been lit and blessed, and before saying Kiddush over wine), although he does not explicitly say so. In Zion's own words, "Selections from the Biblical Song of Songs may be recited as a verbal renewal of one's love. For a couple, here is the chance to reaffirm formally their love for one another and the sanctity of their mutual commitment, something too often taken for granted in the course of a busy week." He then goes on to talk about Eishet Hayil and that not all women or couples might appreciate the poem as gender roles have changed (and Eishet Hayil is very gender-role specific).

The most surprising adaptation of Song of Songs in a Reform setting was when HUC received the Yanov Torah. During the Shoah, a community of Jews saved a Torah scroll by smuggling pieces of it into the camps. Once the Shoah ended, they sewed the pieces back together. It is not a complete Torah scroll, but its story of survival is impressive and renders itself holy. This Torah scroll was passed from the hands of survivors to an emigrating Jew who made his way to the United States. Once in the United States, the immigrating Jew brought the Yanov Torah to Rabbi Erwin Herman (*z"l* may his memory be for a blessing) thirty years ago. With the help of a congregant, Rabbi Herman bought the Torah scroll. The congregant who helped purchase the Torah scroll bought it with a mission, "We ask you

[Rabbi Herman] to carry it from temple to temple, from place to place, from synagogue to synagogue, wherever you travel in this world. Tell its story to Jews and non-Jews alike; let it be understood by all that although millions of Jews have been murdered, our Torah will live forever. The Yanov Torah testifies to that truth."[17] Rabbi Herman donated the Torah to HUC so that its students could continue to carry on the mission. HUC gracefully accepted the honor with a "wedding" ceremony. As part of the ceremony, Karen Sherman read, "We are taught in Talmud Pesachim a description of the marriage between God and Israel. God, the groom, is betrothed to the community of Israel, the bride, who is arrayed in beauty. The Torah represents the ketubah, the wedding contract, between God and the people of Israel. As is our custom, we welcome this Yanov Torah under the chuppah." Once the Torah and chuppah holders entered the sanctuary, the community greeted the Torah with the traditional liturgy that opens weddings ceremonies "*Brucha haba'ah b'shem Adonai* – Welcome and may you be blessed in the name of Adonai."[18] When HUC received the Yanov Torah in November of 2008, it was the first time I witnessed a ritual that mirrored the midrashic understanding of the Song of Songs: marriage between the people Israel and God.

In conclusion, as a unique biblical text (no other biblical text is as erotic and gender-confusing as Song of Songs), Song of Songs could serve as an entryway into text study and/or Judaism in general. Because Song of Songs has the potential to be accessible to a wide audience, it is all the more important that we try and make better use of it. It is surprising that I did not have a conscious opportunity to study Song of Songs prior to the spring of 2005. I now suspect that I was probably more exposed to Song of Songs than I realize because some

[17] Harrison, Donald H. "Saga of Yanov Torah recounted at Yom Hashoah Rites." *San Diego Jewish Press-Heritage*, May 9, 1997.
[18] November 6, 2008 Tefilah service at HUC.

of the ways in which we make use of the text are subtle (music, select quotes) and perhaps out of context, it would have been harder to make the connection to Song of Songs.

On a different, but also personal note, in the spring of 2005, I thought I was leaving the rabbinic seminary. I reduced my course work, I found a part time job, and I was making use of the resources at the Jewish Vocational Center to figure out what path I wanted to take. I had not realized (until the writing of this paper) that it was during this time, that I first began to study Song of Songs with Tamara Cohn Eskenazi. She brought in large Georgia O'Keefe posters and hung them around the classroom. She repeatedly said, "If you don't see anything besides flowers, I won't tell you what else might be there." I remember perking up, hooking on to my first lesson on "double entendre." Who knows? Could that have been enough to bring me back on the path of rabbinic studies? Could it at least have played a role in that decision? Maybe. This is a strong memory for me and it really is astounding to find the timing connection. This discovery definitely reminds us that as educators, we never really know how the work we present will impact another. We just have to trust that the material we are working with is important in and of itself.

Song of Songs as a Healing and Redeeming Text

Text Immersion Essay #3

Song of Songs is an erotic love poem filled with innuendos. How can a book full of double-entendre have merited inclusion in the biblical canon? Any paper addressing this question must refer to Rabbi Akiva's answer, "God forbid! No man in Israel ever disputed the status of the Song of Songs … for the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holiest of holy."[1] Rabbi Akiva read Song of Songs as an allegory of God's love for the people Israel, and for him, the poem's survival in the canon made absolute sense. Here we will explore how looking at Genesis adds value to this question. Song of Songs survived the canon because it is part of the narrative on human sexuality. Without this love poem, the Bible would contain only stories of heterosexual inequality. We will also delve into the significance of Song of Songs' placement, immediately after the book of Job.

We begin with Carey Ellen Walsh, whose work *Exquisite Desire*[2] focuses on how women's desire is expressed in the Bible. For Walsh, Song of Song's placement in the Bible is not the focus; however, her observations add value to our conversation. By comparing and contrasting various aspects of desire between Song of Songs and other biblical books, predominantly Genesis, she demonstrates that Song of Songs models a much healthier relationship. While Walsh will not say that Song of Songs heals the broken relationships she finds in Genesis, she does begin to set the stage for us. Thus, it is worthwhile to look at some of the Genesis narratives she contrasts to Song of Songs.

Walsh seems to focus on three themes surrounding desire: old age, jealousy, and power dynamics. When speaking of desire in old age, Walsh refers to Sarah and Abraham. In

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[1] Mishnah, Yadayim 3:5, as translated in Sid Z. Leiman, "The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence," 2nd ed. New Haven: Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences © 1991, p.121.

[2] Walsh, Carey Ellen. "Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs." Minneapolis: Fortress Press ©2000.

her old age, Sarah laughs[3] at the possibility of "having pleasure again" with Abraham. As Walsh writes, "[Sarah's] exclamation hints that intercourse for her has been enjoyable and is still missed."[4] According to the narrative of Sarah and Abraham, this couple is no longer sexually active in their old age. The story also leaves us to wonder whether sexual expression still plays a role in their lives. While we, the readers, assume the lovers of Song of Songs to be young, there is nothing in the text that prohibits the idea of lovers at old age. When we look at the language and the flow of the text, it is possible to say that the author of Song of Songs is someone reminiscing about his/her younger days. Walsh herself writes that the language of Song of Songs does not create a linear and logical narrative from the first chapter to the end. Rather, the language is chaotic and the themes change quickly. According to Walsh, the language is muddled at times due to a passionate and ravished heart; passion gets in the way of logic and linear thinking. Other scholars, such as Marcia Falk, read Song of Songs as a collection of poems that may or may not be related to one another.[5] Yet, I think one possibility for understanding the confused or dream-like language is someone reminiscing about their younger days. In this way, Song of Songs is not about sexual activity, but about the expression of desire, appropriate at every age.

While we are left wondering how much Sarah and Abraham express their wanting for one another, Rachel and Leah leave no doubt of their desire for Jacob. Concerning the narrative[6] of Rachel and Leah, Walsh discusses a desire that seems to revolve around jealousy. Clearly the two sisters compete for Jacob's love. The text tells us that Jacob loves Rachel more than he loves Leah. However, Leah is the one who bears children easily. One

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[3] Genesis 3:16.
[4] Walsh, p. 148.
[5] Falk, Marcia. "Love Lyrics from the Bible (Bible & Literature)." Sheffield: Almond Press © 1982.
[6] Genesis 30:1-24.

day, Leah's eldest son Reuben comes home with mandrakes and gives them to his mother. In an attempt to encourage her womb to open and provide a child for Jacob, Rachel begs the fruitful Leah for one of her "mandrakes."[7] Leah provides her sister with a mandrake in exchange for an extra night with Jacob. Rachel's and Leah's narrative demonstrates two kinds of want: yearning to be with a partner, and longing to have (more of) his children. While Walsh understands this scene to be about both women's desire for their husband,[8] this scene also tells us about the women's desire to have Jacob's children. Wanting more children is not always synonymous with a desire for one's partner.

We should also note that the word "dudaim/mandrakes" appears only six times in the Bible. Five of those times are in Genesis 30, in the story of Leah and Rachel. The sixth appearance is in Song of Songs,[9] simply as an aphrodisiac and not as part of a complex love triangle:

> Let us rise early to the vineyards
> ...
> There I will give you my love
> The mandrakes give forth a fragrance
> And at our door are choice fruits.[10]

The jealousy we find between Rachel and Leah is absent in Song of Songs. Again, while the placement of Song of Songs may not be the focus of Walsh's comparisons, her observations further the significance of why Song of Songs is in the Bible at all. It is interesting to note that Song of Songs reflects a healthier desire than in the story of Rachel and Leah. We will

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[7] According to the "Torah: A Women's Commentary," mandrakes were love fruits, "known as an aphrodisiac as well as an aid to conception." Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn and Andreal L. Weiss. "The Torah: A Women's Commentary." New York: URJ Press ©2007, p. 167.
[8] Walsh, p. 149.
[9] Song of Songs 7:14. Further, Ariel and Chana Bloch point out, "The association of mandrakes with sex may rest in part on the fact that the sound of the word *duda'im* is similar to *dodim* "lovemaking." The poet plays with these sound associations in the present text [Song 7:14], hence *doday* and *duda'im* in proximity (7:13-14), and *dodi* "my lover" in nearly every verse of this section (7:10,11,12,14)." From "Song of Songs: A New Translation," Berkley: University of California Press © 1995, p. 208.
[10] Song of Songs 7:13a,d,14a,b – my translation.

delve into jealousy further when we discuss the groundbreaking work of feminist scholar Phyllis Trible.

As one reads about Jacob and his wives, it can be hard to determine who is the head of household. On the one hand, Jacob is the man in the relationship; he decides when the family must move and where to live. On the other hand, Rachel and Leah know how to manipulate their set of circumstances in their favor. Manipulation can be seen as a form of decision making. The important point is that at all times, someone is always in charge. The relationship between Rachel, Leah and Jacob is never equally mutual.

Potiphar's wife, like Rachel and Leah, tries to manipulate a situation in her favor by trying to seduce Joseph the household servant. It is here that Walsh makes one more relevant comparison that will be all the more important as we look at other works. She looks at Potiphar's wife's desire for Joseph in Genesis 38.[11] Potiphar's wife's adulterous desire for Joseph is about power dynamics. In her case, she may not be able to manipulate Potiphar or other men of equal status, but she can try to dominate a servant, a man of a lower rank. In most biblical scenarios, men's relationships with women focus on men having control over women. When there are narratives about heterosexual relationships, men usually dominate the women. In some narratives, a man dominating a woman is an expression of inequality, but not of violence. Such is the case of Abraham and Sarah – without consulting Sarah, Abraham tells her to pretend to be his sister and offers Sarah up to Pharaoh.[12] In other narratives, a man dominating a woman is a violent expression, such as the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34. In Genesis 38, the scene of Potiphar's wife and Joseph is an unusual and

[11] Walsh, p. 149.
[12] Genesis 12:10-20 and also in Genesis 20:1-18.

somewhat violent[13] case of a woman in power trying to seduce a male house servant. As we will see, in Song of Songs neither partner is dominating the other. A mother of Jewish feminist theology,[14] Rachel Adler, adds to this discussion when she writes,

> In Song of Songs, there is no sexual dominion. The man's sexual feelings and behaviors are not privileged above those of the woman, nor is her sexual subjectivity portrayed as violative. Both are subjects of desire: givers, gazers, and wooers. The lovers of the Song are a match, not because one opposes the other or complements the other or possesses the other, but because each acclaims the other.[15]

Adler's quote along with the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Rachel and Leah, and Potiphar's wife highlight just how refreshing Song of Songs is. Walsh recognizes that the expression of desire in Song of Songs is healthier than what we find in the various stories in Genesis. Although Walsh does not focus on the importance of Song of Song's literary setting, she begins to make a case for why Song of Songs survived the biblical canon. Walsh also helps set the stage for two other scholars for whom the placement of Song of Songs in the Jewish canon is important.

While Walsh compares and contrasts various stories in Genesis to Song of Songs, Phyllis Trible focuses on only one story. Trible places her attention on Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 and 3. The story of Adam and Eve provides the first biblical narrative about intimate relationships. For Trible, Genesis 2 and 3 also offer many themes that relate to Song of Songs. In the chapter titled, "Love's Lyrics Redeemed," Trible approaches Song of Songs in two ways. She dedicates the first half of this chapter to her own structure of Song of Songs. She sees in the text a "symphony of eroticism" in five movements – 1:2-2:7, 2:8-3:5,

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[13] Joseph is thrown into jail for rejecting Potiphar's wife's advances.
[14] Description provided on the Barnes and Noble website!
[15] Adler, Rachel. "Engendering Judaism." Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society © 1998, p. 135.

3:6-5:8, 5:9-8:4, and 8:5-8:14.[16] For Trible these five movements are simultaneously distinct from one another in character and they also overlap in themes and in language. Exploring these five movements, Trible makes the following observation,

> Through the convergence of form and content, these patterns [of the five movements] recall cyclical designs throughout Genesis 2. Moreover, several themes in Genesis 2:21-24 have also enhanced our reading of this musical score: the creation and consummation of sexuality; an erotic poem; emphasis upon the female in the design of the literature; and the absence of God when female and male unite.[17]

It is the last theme that is most relevant in the first half of Trible's chapter. Song of Songs has many speakers: the woman-lover, the man-lover, the male and female chorus, and the woman-lover's brothers. God does not have any lines. As a matter of fact, the last time God speaks in the Bible is in the book of Job, which immediately precedes Song of Songs.[18] Trible finds God's silence in the presence of human sexuality intriguing. She notes that in Genesis 2:23, after God created woman and presented her to Adam, God was silent or disappeared from the scene when Adam speaks his first words. Adam's first words, provided in the text,[19] are,

> This one at last
> Is bone of my bones
> And flesh of my flesh.
> This one shall be called Woman,
> For from man was she taken.

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[16] Trible, Phyllis. "God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality." Philadelphia: Fortress Press © 1978, p.152.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn. *Song of Songs as an 'Answer' to Clines's Book of Job.* "Reading from Right to Left: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of David J. A. Clines" edited by J. Cheryl Exum and H. G. M. Williamson. London: Sheffield Press © 2003, p. 139 footnote 10.
[19] In Genesis 2:19, we learn that Adam named all the animals. But the text does not quote Adam's words. Thus, Genesis 2:23 is the first time that the Torah quotes Adam.

Trible reads these words as the Bible's first erotic words. In this very moment, God is not present, just as God is not present in Song of Songs.[20] Thus Trible leads us to see that Genesis 2 and Song of Songs begin to parallel one another.

The parallels between Genesis 2 and Song of Songs are also thematic. Thus, it is to the second half of Trible's "Love Lyrics Redeemed" chapter where we should turn our focus. If we accept Trible's observations, Song of Songs has tremendous healing powers. She demonstrates connections between Song of Songs and Genesis through five garden and four language themes. In this paper, we will focus on two themes: jealousy (or absence thereof) and the garden.

In the discussion of Rachel and Leah we demonstrated that jealousy plays a role in women's desire in Genesis. Here, Trible not only demonstrates the absence of jealousy in Song of Songs, she points out that the opposite of envy is exposed. Here, the lovers are proud of each other and want others to admire them. Trible writes,

> [T]he woman [in Song of Songs] herself exults that other women, as well as men, adore her mate. In their attraction for him, she finds joy, not jealousy:
>
> your name is oil poured out;
> therefore, the maidens love you.
> Draw me after you, let us make haste.
> The king has brought me into his chambers.
> We will exult and rejoice in you;
> we will extol your love more than wine;
> rightly do *they* [masculine] love you.
> (1:3b-4, RSV)
>
> Similarly, the man rejoices that other men, as well as women, delight in his partner:

[20] In *Engendering Judaism* Adler asks, "Do human sexuality and human sexual expression reflect the divine image?" (p. 134) This question creates an interesting contrast to Trible's remarks that God is absent in those very moments of eroticism and sexual expression.

O you who dwell in the gardens,
my companions [masculine] are listening for your voice;
let me hear it.
(8:13, RSV)
The maidens saw her and called her happy;
the queens and concubines also, and they praised her.
(6:9b, RSV)

> Throughout the Song, Eros [love] is inclusive; the love between two welcomes the love and companionship of many.[21]

For Trible, the narrative on human sexuality begins in Genesis 2 and is only restored in Song of Songs. In Genesis 2, when woman was first created, life and sexuality in the Garden of Eden were a delight. But when disobedience and punishment created inequality, that inequality was not restored until Song of Songs. Thus it is important for her (and our) overall argument to show that one of the most difficult and negative emotions is missing from the Song.

Trible's most significant biblical comparison is between the Garden of Eden and the garden in Song of Songs. She writes, "A garden (*gan*) in Eden locates the tragedy of disobedience in Genesis 2 – 3. But the garden itself signals delight, not disaster, and that perspective reverberates in the Song of Songs."[22] The garden motif itself has many sub-themes that connect the Genesis narrative with Song of Songs. In the Genesis narrative, Adam and Eve can eat and enjoy anything their hearts' desire from the garden, except from one tree, the tree of knowledge of good and bad.[23] Such prohibition leads to curiosity, which then leads to disobedience. In the garden of Song of Songs, no tree, no plant, no flower or spice is left untouched. Everything is within the lovers' reach. In Genesis, there is tension between humans and animals. The snake plays a role in inspiring Eve's and Adam's act of

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[21] Trible, p. 159. "RSV" stands for "Revised Standard Version," the Bible translation that Trible quotes here.
[22] Ibid., p. 152.
[23] Genesis 2:17, JPS translation.

disobedience. Just as the plants are completely accessible in Song of Songs, so are the animals in complete harmony with humans. The animals become a metaphor for love, such as Song of Songs 4:1-2,

> Behold you are beautiful my companion
> Behold you are beautiful
> Your eyes are as doves from behind your veil
> Your hair like a flock of goats that
> Gallop from mount Gilead
> Your teeth are like a freshly shorn flock
> Coming up from the washing
> They each have a twin
> None childless among them

Further, Trible writes that in the Garden of Eden, "To till and keep the garden of Eden was a delight until the primeval couple disobeyed, causing the ground to bring forth thorns and thistles and work to become pain and sweat."[24] In Song of Songs, man and woman turn work back into the pleasure that it once was. For example, in the first chapter the woman says,

> My mother's sons were livid with me
> They placed me as keeper of the vineyards,
> But my vineyards I did not keep.[25]

From this verse we learn that the woman has a "job." Yet she turns her "job" into a metaphor for the fact that she did not "keep" herself away from her lover.

Through all the parallels Trible sees, Song of Songs seems to complete a cycle that began long ago in Genesis. In the beginning all was well between man and woman. Even the man's first words allude to an expression of desire. Sadly, they were punished for their disobedience and chaos ensued and the relationship between man and woman became unequal. In the course of all the narratives that follow, relationships turn into a power struggle to define who must dominate whom. Most often men rule over women, until we

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[24] Trible, p. 157.
[25] Song of Songs 1:6 – my translation.

arrive at Song of Songs. Here there is no dominance, only mutuality. Here there is no jealousy, only pride and a desire to share their love with others.

I agree with Trible in saying that Song of Songs closes a circle of intimacy that begins in Genesis. But I also believe, as does Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, that there is a connection between the book of Job and Song of Songs. For Eskenazi, there is great significance in the fact that Song of Songs is placed immediately after the book of Job. The book of Job tells the story of a man, Job, who lived a righteous life, who did everything as he was supposed to. Then, because of a bet God made, Job's children die, his fortune disappears and he is inflicted with pain from head to toe. After sitting in silence, listening to his "friends" defend God's actions against him, Job begins to speak and demand that God appear directly before him to explain how a righteous man can suffer so. Towards the end of the book of Job, God speaks from the whirlwind. God's speech is a beautiful poem about the wonders of creation and how much work goes into maintaining the world. As Eskenazi tells us, "Job is all too keenly aware of God's power, having just become its victim. He does not question God's might; he questions God's 'right' or righteousness. To this question, he receives no genuine answer."[26] Thus, as beautiful and as moving as God's speech is, God does not answer Job's question, "Why does one suffer?" Rather, God almost seems to say that one person's suffering in the sea of all creation is insignificant. Yet Job poses an important question that many had asked before, and many have continued to ask since, "Why does one suffer?"

Eskenazi provides seven possible ways we can interpret Song of Songs as a response to Job. While each of the seven possibilities descends from a different method of analysis, all methods lead to the same place: love. As Eskenazi writes, "Song of Songs exists so that when

[26] Eskenazi, *Song of Songs as an Answer to Clines's Job*, p. 129.

we have reached the limits of a dialogue with God we might turn and face each other and perceive anew what it means to have been created in the image of God."[27]

Eskenazi's interpretation of the significance of Song of Songs' placement immediately after the book of Job is made much more powerful when we know that from this point on in the Jewish canon God will not speak again in scriptures. This is all the more reason why we must continue to turn to each other and rely on each other for love and support. Walsh's and Trible's observations illustrate how complicated relationships are and that Song of Songs serves as a model in what we should strive for. In addition, if it were not for Song of Songs, it would be hard to tolerate the many and difficult problematic texts in the Bible. We read and study Bible because it is a sacred text. However, I do not know whether I would be able to read and study the disturbing texts within our tradition, if Song of Songs was not a part of it. In other words, if my tradition consists only of problematic texts, what is my reward? But if my tradition consists of the difficult and of the sweet, then the sweet makes the difficult text tolerable. Just as Song of Songs adds to the sacredness of the text because of its sweetness, it also adds holiness as an answer to Job. Eskenazi's message serves a wide audience: For those who suffer, lose their footing and are struggling to find their connection back to God, they can turn to others for support and to find their way back.

[27] Ibid., p. 139.