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SIGNIFICANT THEMES IN THE SONG OF SONGS
FROM RABBINIC PERSPECTIVE

Ronald William Kaplan

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion
Cincinnati, Ohio 1980

Referee: Professor Eugene Mihaly

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אני לדודי ודודי לי

I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND
MY BELOVED IS MINE

(Song of Songs 6:3)

I DEDICATE THIS THESIS TO MY FIANCÉE,
RANDI MUSNITSKY,
WHO WILL SOON BE MY BELOVED WIFE.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have enjoyed this study of the Rabbinic material, and believe that I have gained from it valuable insight into the Rabbinic perspective on the Song of Songs. I express deep gratitude and appreciation to my advisor, Dr. Eugene Mihaly, for his vast knowledge and helpful guidance, and for his love of the Midrash and the warmth of his personality which he brings to his students. I have been privileged to have studied with him.

The words of Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua may be well applied to Dr. Mihaly:

Let your reverence for your teacher
be as your reverence for God.

(Ethics of the Fathers 4:15)

רבי אלעזר שמוע אומר...: מורא רבך
כמורא שמים. (פרקי אבות ד:טו)

Throughout my life, and particularly during my years of preparation for the rabbinate, my parents and three brothers have supported, encouraged, and inspired me with the love, care, and concern of a loyal family strongly committed to Judaism. The home-environment they have created continues to serve as my model for wholesome Jewish living. May I always be a source of pride to my blessed family.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to Randi Musnitsky, my fiancée, whose entrance into my life has added a new dimension of joy. She has patiently shared the experience of preparing this thesis with me. Her expert typing of the Hebrew texts was only surpassed by her constant willingness to help. Her presence, her lovely smile and glowing personality kept my spirits high. The love poems of the Song of Songs take on personal meaning when I apply them to Randi:

BEHOLD, THOU ART MY FAIR, MY LOVE, YEA, PLEASANT . . .
ALTOGETHER LOVELY. THIS IS MY BELOVED, AND THIS
IS MY FRIEND.

(Song of Songs 1:15, 5:16)

DIGEST

This thesis analyzes the Midrashic and Talmudic commentary on a number of significant themes of the Song of Songs as they appear and are treated in the Rabbinic literature. I trace specific verses of the Song which suggest various subjects that emerge from the Biblical text. Citations from a variety of Midrashic and Talmudic passages provide a clear definition of the Rabbinic interpretation.

The thesis is organized as follows: The first chapter is devoted to a discussion of the Rabbinic controversy over the Songs' inclusion into the Biblical Canon; the second explores the methods of interpretation of the Song of Songs, namely the literal and allegorical approach to the text; the third presents an overview of the range of themes in the Midrash Rabba to the Song of Songs. Each one of the themes is illustrated with several carefully selected examples. The final chapter focuses in detail on the central theme of the mutual love relationship between God and Israel. In this chapter, I go beyond Midrash Rabba into the total literature to find illustrations of this theme.

INTRODUCTION

According to Rabbi Akiba, "The whole world only existed for the day on which the Song of Songs was given . . . It is the Holy of Holies."¹ For centuries the poetic beauty of this sacred love song has enchanted the romantic as well as the student of Bible. The Song's tender language and refreshing message inspire the lovers among us, while others are drawn to its mystical expression of God's intimate relationship with the Jewish People.

In this thesis, I focus upon the main line of Rabbinic commentary to the Song of Songs. My purpose is to research specific verses in the Song which suggest significant themes in the Midrash and Talmud.

I begin by explaining the nature of the Rabbinic controversy and the ultimate acceptance of the Song into the Biblical Canon. I then illustrate the various methods of interpretation, both the literal and allegorical meaning of the text. In the early period of developing Judaism, the Rabbis hoped to create a literature that would encourage optimism and faith among the Jewish communities, despite their dispersion and oppression. The Song's allegoric interpretation assured Jews that God's love for Israel was eternal.

The entire Song of Songs is regarded in the Talmudic and Midrashic literature as an allegorical poem on God, Israel and the Torah. The climax of God's love for Israel was the giving of Torah. Israel expressed her devotion to God by accepting His Laws unconditionally with the words, "All that the Lord has said, we will do and we will obey." (Ex. 24:7) This prompted God to say about Israel, "My twin, My equal" - "I the Lord am not greater than Israel, nor is Israel greater than I."² As R. Yannai and R. Joshua of Siknin explained it in the Midrash³, "Just as in the case of twins, when one has an aching pain in his head, the other feels it also, so God feels Israel's pain saying, 'I am with them in their trouble'." (Ps. 91:15)

The Rabbis sought to demonstrate a reciprocal, intimate and evolving relationship felt between God and Israel. He is their God, their father, their strength, their shepherd, their hope, their salvation, their safety; Israel are His people, His children, His firstborn son, His treasure, dedicated to praising His name. According to the Rabbis, the Scriptures apply endearing epithets such as brother, sister, bride, mother, friend, dove, beloved, perfect one, to express the intimate relation between God and His people. The various Midrashim as well as the Targum to the Song of Songs follow the same tendency.

In light of this interpretation, the Song of Songs was incorporated into the liturgy of the Passover festival,

recited at the eighth day prayer service in commemoration of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, and God's designation of Israel as His Chosen People. For the same reason, pietistic Jews read Shir Hashirim on Sabbath Eve.

Following these background chapters, I explore the range and variety of themes in the Midrash Rabba to the Song of Songs. The purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of the breadth of subjects that the Rabbis treat. In the final chapter, I focus in greater detail on the theme of the mutual love relationship between God and the Jewish People. In this section, I go beyond the Midrash Rabba into the total Rabbinic literature and the Targum. I trace a number of the relevant verses through the literature and cite selected examples from the Midrash, Talmud, and Targum.

Procedure - Methodology

I proceeded in my research by first making a thorough study of the Biblical book, utilizing some of the recent studies on the Song of Songs like that of Christian Ginsburg, Robert Gordis, and Marvin Pope. Then I read and carefully noted the Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabba in order to outline the themes which the Rabbis develop. With the aid of Hyman's Torah Haketuvah V'hamesurah and the indices of the Soncino Midrash and Talmud, I reviewed the Rabbinic commentary in the total literature on specific verses which deal with the mutual love relationship of God and Israel.

Each citation was researched and parallel sources were examined. The parallel passages are referred to in the notes. As the research of the thesis progressed, certain themes emerged which formed the chapter headings.

Following the epilogue and bibliography, I include an index of all Rabbinic passages cited in the thesis.

CHAPTER I
CANONIZATION
THE POSITION OF THE SONG OF SONGS
IN THE SCRIPTURES

The propriety of inclusion of the Song of Songs in the Biblical Canon was questioned from an early time and has continued to be vigorously protested in modern times.¹ Yet it must be said that the evidence for its early acceptance, in spite of various objections, is well attested, and as conclusive as that for any other portion of the Jewish-Christian Scriptures. It has been regarded and transmitted as canonical literature by both the Synagogue and the Church.²

Song of Songs is included in the list of sacred books in the Talmud (Baba Batra 14) and in the Canon of Melito, Bishop of Sardis (second century). It was translated into Greek by Aquila between ca. A.D. 90 and 130, and subsequently by Symmachus and Theodotion before the third century. Since the second century writers on the Song of Songs have challenged the suitability of its inclusion in the Canon.³ The vigor of the challenge to which it was subjected was probably stronger than that to other secular works, as in the case of Esther, Koheleth, and Job.

The Song of Songs is unique among the books of the Bible in form, content, and spirit. The reason for the doubts as to its canonicity is easy to discover. It is the only book in the Canon lacking a religious or national theme, the Divine name occurring only once and then only as an epithet.⁴ Though the book of Esther also makes no mention of God, its national emphasis is clear. There is other secular poetic literature imbedded in the Bible, but the Song of Songs is the only complete work which is entirely secular, and sensuous in character.

More than one factor helped to gain the Song of Songs into the Biblical Canon. In addition to its charm and beauty, the book's content illustrates two basic components. First is the occurrence of Solomon's name in the text,⁵ as in the title "שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשֹׁלֹמֹה" which led to the attribution of the whole book to him. There are also several references to "the king"⁶ identified with Solomon.

Second, and more important, is the Jewish allegorical interpretation of the book, according to which the love of God and Israel is described under the guise of a lover and his beloved.⁷ The Prophets frequently used marital love as a metaphor for the relationship between Israel and God.⁸

The work is ascribed to Solomon, and on this basis perhaps was admitted into the Canon.⁹ Many of the Rabbis of the classical period had their doubts about the propriety of canonizing a collection of secular love songs; therefore, Jewish tradition interpreted the book as a song of love between God (the bridegroom) and Israel (the bride). Thus, "the Solomonic authorship of the book undoubtedly strengthened, if it did not create, the allegorical interpretation of the Song."¹⁰

This combination of factors then, ultimately prevailed over doubts about the sacred character of the Song of Songs. Its canonicity was reaffirmed at the Council of Yavneh (Jamnia) in 90 C.E.

From Rabbinic sources we discern that there was much dissension about the canonicity of the Song of Songs at Yavneh, and that Rabbi Akiba took an active role in the controversy. The discussions at the Synod show that toward the end of the first century the canonical authority of the Song was disputed in certain quarters. The issue was not, however, whether the book was included in the Canon, but rather, whether it should have been.¹¹

Probably the ground of opposition was its nonreligious character; it contains the Divine name (only as an expression of intensity); its love is sensuous, and its only ethical element is the devotion of one man to one woman in marriage. It is quoted neither by Philo nor in the New Testament. But it appears to have gained

popularity, and the probability is that at an early day it was interpreted allegorically by the sages, as a dialogue of love between God and the people Israel. It was on the basis of such an interpretation, aided by the ascription of the book to King Solomon, that led to the Song of Songs' inclusion into the Biblical Canon.¹²

The dispute arose in connection with another book attributed to Solomon, Koheleth. In Mishnah tractate Eduyot, 5:3:

The scroll of Ecclesiastes does not render the hands unclean, according to the view of the school of Shammai [they did not consider it as Holy Scripture], but the school of Hillel say, It does render the hands unclean. [According to them Ecclesiastes is Canonical Scripture.]¹³

With regard to Song of Songs, Rabbi Judah claimed that the Song of Songs defiles the hands (i.e., sacred, hence Canonical) but Koheleth does not render the hands unclean, while Rabbi Jose said that the Song of Songs is disputed. Rabbi Akiba resolved the dilemma with the statement: "The entire universe is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs are the Holy of Holies."¹⁴ The Midrash comments that Shir Hashirim is "the best of songs, the most excellent of songs, the finest of songs," taking it as an allegorical glorification of the relation between God and Israel.¹⁵

The text documenting this dispute reads:

All the Holy Scriptures defile the hands [render the hands unclean, i.e., are sufficiently sacred in character to require the hands to be in a particular state of ritual cleanliness to prevent the books from being handled disrespectfully]. The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes defile the hands [i.e., are Canonical]. Rabbi Judah says, the Song of Songs defiles the hands, but there is some dispute [dissension, disagreement] about Ecclesiastes [Koheleth]. Rabbi Jose says Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands, but Song of Songs is in dispute. Rabbi Simeon says Ecclesiastes is one of the things where the school of Shammai was more lenient than the school of Hillel [the opposite was usually the case, but in this instance, the school of Shammai did not consider Ecclesiastes sacred and therefore the ritual requirements involved in touching the book were less severe]. Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai said, I have a tradition emanating from the 72 elders on the day when Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah was appointed [100 A.D.] president of the Academy that both the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes defile the hands. Said Rabbi Akiba, "God forbid! [literally, forbearance and peace!] No one in Israel has ever disputed the fact that the Song of Songs defiles the hands, for all the ages of the whole world are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings [Hagiographa] are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies. If there was a dispute [if they differed at all] it was only about Ecclesiastes." Rabbi Yochanon ben Joshua, the son of Rabbi Akiba's father-in-law said, "The division of opinion and the final decision were in accordance with the statement of Ben Azzai." [This is the ruling. It was decided that both defile the hands, i.e., Koheleth and Song of Songs were finally declared sacred, Canonical.]¹⁶

Akiba must have understood the Song allegorically. That the allegorical view had difficulty in gaining universal acceptance is clear from the force of his statement in the Tosefta. Rabbi Akiba's regard for the Song of Songs as the veritable Holy of Holies moved him also to protect what he regarded as its profanation in the "banquet houses." Rabbi Akiba said:

He who trills his voice in chanting the Song of Songs in the banquet halls and treats it as a secular song has no share in the world to come.¹⁷

A similar view is expressed in the Talmud, anonymously, "He who recites the Song of Songs like a sort of love song, and pronounces a verse in a banquet house brings evil to the world."¹⁸

Despite the challenge presented over the propriety of including the Song of Songs in the Biblical Canon which failed at Yavneh in A.D. 90, it was ultimately accepted. As we have said, it is widely assumed that the claim to Solomonic authorship and the allegorical interpretation of the Song rescued its canonicity. Objection to treating it "as a secular song" may have been aimed at the bawdy and vulgar renditions of those drinking copiously. Once the Song was accepted as Canonical, the Rabbis emphasized the Song's esoteric religious meaning, especially to counteract its frivolous employment. Their motivation was not to repress sex and the plain, literal meaning of the Song, but to ensure a proper atmosphere for its contemplation.

Hence, the decree "כל כתבי הקודש מטמאין את הידיים",¹⁹ "All Holy Scripture pollutes the hands," applied to the Song of Songs as a holy, inspired book. Wherever, therefore, it is said that a book is "מטמא את הידיים", "polluting or defiling the hands," it affirms that it is Canonical. Thus we are told, "The Song of Songs pollutes the hands because it is inspired."²⁰

CHAPTER II
METHODS OF INTERPRETATION OF
THE SONG OF SONGS

Throughout the centuries, many persons have interpreted the Song of Songs. Few works have inspired such a volume and variety of commentary as this Biblical book. Methods of interpretation have differed as some people understood the text literally as a song of human physical love. Others understood the Song as an allegory expressing a love of God and man.

Literal Interpretation

It was the literal view of the Song of Songs that lay at the basis of the doubts expressed in the Mishnah as to its inclusion in the canon.¹ The Rabbis were well aware that in many circles it was being interpreted literally as a song solely concerned with the love between man and woman. Therefore, some Rabbis condemned it as erotic literature. Nevertheless, the literal view, which was ultimately rejected, won a measure of acceptance even in Rabbinic circles. That the book deals with human love is evident in the following Rabbinic statement:

Solomon wrote three books, Proverbs, Koheleth, and the Song of Songs. Which did he write first? . . . Rabbi Hiyya the Great, said he wrote Proverbs first, then the Song of Songs, and then Koheleth. Rabbi Jonathan said, the Song of Songs he wrote first; then came Proverbs, and then Koheleth. Rabbi Jonathan proved his claim from normal human behavior. When a man is young, he sings songs of love. When he becomes an adult, he utters practical proverbs. When he becomes old, he voices the vanity of things.²

Understood literally, the Song is written in the natural language of erotic lyrical poetry. The poems abound in nature imagery--flowers, fruit, spices, etc.--which carry both literal and sexual-symbolic significance. Robert Gordis claims that the literal understanding of the Song reveals its essence. "The key to the book must be sought in a literal interpretation of the text, as the surest basis for true understanding and lasting appreciation of its greatness."³ According to him, the Song of Songs is an anthology of emotions. "It contains songs of love's yearning and its consummation, of coquetry and passion, of separation and union, of courtship and marriage."⁴

Rabbi Levi ben Gershom (1288-1370) was one of the Rabbis⁵ who rejected the allegorical interpretation and took the Song of Songs in its literal sense. He interpreted the Song as a celebration of the virtuous love between a humble shepherd and shepherdess. Likewise, Ibn Ezra, in the second of three different glosses of his commentary, explains the Song of Songs in a literal sense. He pro-

fesses to give the literal meaning of the narrative, and rejects the mystical interpretation.

On the profoundest level, Rabbinic Judaism saw in the Song, the most intimate human relationship of love, not merely as a legitimate activity, but a divine imperative, the fulfillment of the will of God. Thus, it was possible for a rabbinic student, who was discovered hiding in his master's bedchamber and observing his teacher's intimate behavior, to declare, "This, too, is Torah, and I wish to learn."⁶

Allegorical Interpretation

An allegorical interpretation assumes that the text to be interpreted says or intends to say something other than its literal wording suggests; that it contains hidden within it a deeper, more profound, mystical sense.⁷ This definition has been applied to the Song of Songs.

The allegorical approach to the Song of Songs is the oldest known method of interpretation and was induced by the demand for an ethical and religious element in the Song's content. It prevailed in both the Synagogue and the Church, and has been the predominant interpretation among Jews and Christians for seventeen centuries.⁸

The Jewish interpretation viewed the Song as depicting the unique relationship between God, the bridegroom, and his Chosen People, Israel, the bride. This interpretation

is reflected in the Midrash to Song of Songs and in various other Midrashim of the Rabbinic period. It also is reflected in the Talmud compiled during the first half of the first millennium of the common era.

Rabbinic Method

The period between the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, and the revolt led by Bar Kokhba in 132 C.E. was the setting for the development of the Jewish interpretation of Song of Songs as an allegorical account of the history of the relationship between God and the community of Israel. It was Rabbi Akiba in particular who promoted this method of interpretation. A dictum attributed to Akiba in Aggadat Shir HaShirim reads "Had not the Torah been given, the Song of Songs would have sufficed to guide the world."⁹

The oppression and martyrdom during the Hadrianic persecutions gave rise to interpretations of the Song as alluding to Jewish martyrology and Israel's uniqueness among the nations of the world. The defeated, exiled and persecuted Jewish people had great need of consolation, of reinforced faith that God had not forsaken them and that His love for them had not failed. The allegorical explanation of the Song gave them courage to endure and strengthened their Messianic hope.

Throughout the Rabbinic literature, God, as the King of Kings, the מלך מלכי המלכים and the King of peace מלך שהשלום שלו is the Bridegroom, and His bride is the congregation of Israel, His Chosen People. This theme is fully developed in the Rabbinic literature. Practically every verse of the Song is interpreted as a love story not between man and woman, but between God and His people, Israel. The book reflects historical events that were to take place long after Solomon's time, and it was a permanent reminder of the close relationship that existed between God and the Jewish people.

There is a considerable difference between the Commentaries and Midrashim on the Song of Songs and those on the other books of the Bible. The Rabbinic principle אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוט that no verse of the Torah may be divorced from its plain, literal meaning¹⁰ does not apply to the Song of Songs. On the contrary, the sages of the Talmud explain:

Those who recite a verse of שיר השירים as they would a common song, or who read its verses in inappropriate circumstances, bring evil to the world, because the Torah wraps itself in sack cloth, and standing before the Holy One, blessed be He, complains, "Master of the Universe, Your children have made of me a harp on which mockers play . . ."¹¹

It was this outcry in the Talmud together with Rabbi Akiba's exclamation that Shir Hashirim is the holiest of all Songs, that directed all the teachers of the Midrash and almost all Biblical commentators to interpret the Song of Songs

as an allegory, as a tender poem expressing the eternal love between God and Israel, between מלך שהשלום שלו the King of peace and כנסת ישראל the Jewish people, between מלך מלכי המלכים the King of Kings and עם סגולה God's Chosen People. Numerous interpretations of single verses in the Seder Olam, Sifre, Mekhilta, Pesikta de Rav Kahana, the Jerusalem Talmud, Breshit and Vayikra Rabbah follow this allegorical method of interpretation.

The allegorical interpretation was more fully developed in the Targum. Here the Song of Songs was held in great esteem as it was taken as an historical allegory of Israel's experiences from the Exodus of Egypt to the advent of the Messiah.¹² The Targum turns the Song into a narrative Haggadah, covering the history of Israel from the Exodus of Egypt to the Messianic age of the world to come. The theme of God's choice of Israel symbolized through his gift of Torah is repeated throughout. The Targum extols Israel's unique privilege as the recipient of the revelation of Torah. According to the Targum, Israel's function in history was to implement Torah.

The Targum introduced a detailed interpretation of the Torah, particularly the Oral Law, as the discourse between God and Israel. History is marked by Israel's love for God and her longing for communion with Him. God is the bridegroom, who pledges His love and protection to Israel, the beloved bride. Israel affirms her love for God and promises to obey His Laws.

Essentially, the same interpretation was presented by the medieval commentators, Saadia, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Rashbam. Though commentators differed as to details, the general approach was similar.

Saadia Gaon (892-942) agrees in essence with the interpretation of the Targum, that the Song of Songs relates the history of the Jews from the Exodus to the coming of the Messiah. He also stressed the Oral Laws as did the Targumist. His commentary on the text, however, bears little relationship to that of the Targum. Yet, throughout the allegory, "the beloved" is the Lord and "the loved one" is the congregation of Israel.

Rashi's (1040-1105) commentaries on the Song clearly indicate an allegorical understanding of the text. In the introduction to his commentary he writes of the Song of Songs:

Solomon produced this book by divine inspiration . . . The intent was to show Israel that God did not afflict her willingly, that though He did put her away, He has not cast her off, for she is still His beloved wife, and He her husband, and ultimately will return to her.

Rashi's encouraging allegorical interpretation gave consolation to the suffering Jews in Germany and France.

Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir, or Rashbam (1085-1155), also wrote a commentary similar to that of his grandfather. The Song, according to Rashbam, represents exiled, captive Israel mourning for her lost love, describing her eternal love for God who would one day return to them.

While the commentaries of Rashi and Rashbam, by means of this allegorical interpretation, were giving comfort and hope to depressed Jewish communities in France and Germany, Ibn Ezra (1093-1168), among others, composed a commentary to reassure Jews in Spain. He explained that the Song recounts the past wonderful dealings of God with His beloved people from the time of Abraham, and the blessings reserved for them at the coming of the Messiah, who will gather them together from the dispersion among all the nations.¹³

Christian Method

Christianity, which inherited the Song of Songs from the Synagogue, imposed its own allegorical pattern. It replaced God and Israel by Christ and the Church. In Christian circles, the way for the allegorical interpretation was prepared by the New Testament, where the letters of Paul related the mutual love between the Christ as bridegroom and the Church as his bride. Theologians developed this allegoric interpretation with great imagination and creativity in order to transform and spiritualize the sensual anti-ascetic character of the Song.

Its classical exponent was the Church Father Origen, who, in the third century, devoted ten books to the Song's exposition. He applied the Song to the love of Christ for his Church, or to His love for the Christian souls of the individual believer, or even for the Virgin Mary. His

work greatly influenced subsequent Christian commentators. The Marian interpretation in the Middle Ages identified the Shulamite woman of the Song as the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Heaven.¹⁴ Some followed the approach of the Targum by including the history of the Evangelical Church up to the second coming of Christ.¹⁵ St. Augustine, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and the Reformed Church all wrote of the Song's expression of the Church's love unto Christ.¹⁶ "The Song of Songs is a certain spiritual pleasure of holy minds, in the marriage of . . . Christ and the Church."¹⁷ Some, however, like Theodore, Bishop of Mopsuestia, rejected the allegorical meaning and read it in its literal and obvious sense, as an erotic song.¹⁸ He was condemned in Constantinople in 553 for not subscribing to the allegorical interpretation.¹⁹ In 1545 Calvin expelled Castellio from Geneva on account of his divergent opinions concerning the book, and in 1567, Luis de Leon was convicted by the Inquisition on similar grounds.²⁰

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CHAPTER III

THE VARIETY OF THEMES IN MIDRASH RABBATO SONG OF SONGSIntroduction

Seen as an allegory, the Song of Songs narrates, in symbolic fashion, the unique love-relationship between God and Israel from the days of the Patriarchs and the Exodus from Egypt. The Song extols the steadfast love and protection that God has given His beloved, and describes the fluctuations of loyalty and defection which have marked Israel's attitude toward its divine Lover. On the profoundest level, Rabbinic Judaism saw in the Song of Songs, an exhibition of two basic and exalted imperatives of religion; love of God and the love of man, the most mutual and intimate relationship between the Creator and His creations.

Taken as a whole, the Midrash Rabba is an allegorical interpretation of the Song in which a number of other themes emerge. In this chapter, we shall examine a variety of these subjects that arise from the Biblical text in light of the Rabbinic commentary in the Midrash Rabba. Themes such as peace, God's sovereignty, Torah, the leadership of Moses, the role of the Patriarchs,

the piety of the righteous, proper behavior towards one's fellow men מצות בין אדם להבריו and others are treated in Shir Hashirim Rabba.

Similar views underlie the Targum on the Song of Songs as well as many talmudic interpretations of various verses in the book. We shall consult these other sources in greater detail in the next chapter. There we shall focus on the central theme of the mutual love relationship between God and Israel.

King of Peace

With the first words of the Song of Songs, authorship is ascribed to Solomon: "שיר השירים אשר לשלמה" THE SONG OF SONGS WHICH IS SOLOMON'S. The Midrash to the Song interprets this Biblical verse, "that is, of the King to whom belongs peace" מלך שהשלום שלו where שלמה Shelomo (i.e., Solomon) is rendered as שלום Shalom (i.e., peace) with the possessive suffix.¹ The Midrash advises the reader, "Wherever you find the expression 'King Solomon,' מלך שלמה, the reference is to the 'King whose is peace.'" ² מלך שהשלום שלו.

It is obvious then, that "The King to whom peace belongs," understood as an allegory, must be the Holy One, Blessed be He. We may look to Scripture for Biblical proof. The prophet Isaiah speaks of God as the "one who makes peace"³ and Job affirms, "He makes peace in His high places."⁴ In the liturgy, everyday

in our prayers, we invoke the God of Peace; "May He who causes peace to reign in the high heavens, let peace descend on us and on all Israel."⁵ God is the source of peace, and therefore, מלך שהשלום שלו is seen allegorically in this sense. God is the Creator and Possessor of peace. He is the King of Peace.'

Several times in the Midrash reference is made to this allegoric interpretation. Again on verse 3:7 BEHOLD IT IS HIS LITTER, THAT OF SHELOMO!⁶ של שלמה is understood as של מלך שהשלום שלו.⁷ Then again in the verse KING SHELOMO MADE HIMSELF A PALANQUIN,⁸ Solomon is seen as an allegory for "The King whose is peace."⁹ The palanquin is here understood midrashically, according to the Rabbis, as the holy tabernacle within the midst of which God speaks to the people.¹⁰

Other Rabbis cite the same allegory but in reference to different interpretations of the palanquin. Rabbi Judah b. R. Ilai interpreted מלך שהשלום שלו referring to God's building of the ark.¹¹ Another explanation for the palanquin that the "King to whom belongeth peace" made for Himself, is the world.¹² And yet a third explanation of the palanquin of מלך שהשלום שלו refers to the Throne of Glory.¹³ In almost every context, the usage of המלך שלמה is understood to mean God as the מלך שהשלום שלו.¹⁴

Perhaps even more interesting is the Rabbinic understanding of verse 3:11, GO FORTH, O DAUGHTERS OF

ZION, AND BEHOLD KING SHELOMO.¹⁵ One explanation of "Gaze upon King Solomon" is "the King who produced His creatures in their full perfection" taking שלמה as שלמות . God created the sun, moon, stars, and constellations in their fullness.¹⁶ Bar Kappa contends that Adam and Eve were created בשלמות , in their fullness, as if at 20 years of age.¹⁷ God is the divine King of perfection.

Another explanation renders וראינה בנוח ציון במלך שלמה "The King who made peace (Hishlim) between His works and His creatures,"¹⁸ understanding שלמה as from the same root as השלים.¹⁹ Perhaps the phrase might better be translated, "The God who reconciled His creation for His creatures." He has the power to make peace (hishlim) by making His creations surrender to one another and even by making Himself surrender to His creatures. How so the Midrash asks? "He caused the fire to be at peace with Abraham our father [the fire did not injure Abraham when he was thrown into the furnace by Abimelech]; He caused the sword to be at peace with Isaac [the knife touched Isaac's throat but he was saved]; He caused the angel to be at peace with Jacob [the angel that fought with Jacob had to admit defeat and sue for peace]."²⁰ Hence, God creates or causes peace in the world.

Lastly, another explains במלך שלמה , "The King who has made peace among His creations."²¹ The Rabbis cite numerous examples with proof texts to verify this

assertion, among them, the firmament of snow and the chayot of fire.²² Even between the two parts of an angel, of whom half is snow and half fire, The Holy One, Blessed be He, makes peace.²³ The Midrash cites five Scriptural illustrations.²⁴ Even the natural forces of water and fire, the movement of sun and moon, stars and constellations are reconciled by God. God made peace also between the plagues that He had brought upon Pharaoh.²⁵ Fire and water normally at enmity with one another, reconcile peaceably at the command of the Supreme King of Kings.²⁶ God, then, creates, controls, and sustains peace on earth and in the heavens.

Finally, near the end of the Song we once again see a reference to Solomon in verse 8:11 SHELOMO HAD A VINEYARD in which the Rabbinic understanding is allegorical, מלך שהשלום שלו.²⁷ Shelomo's vineyard is really God's vineyard, namely Israel, as it says in Isaiah 5:7, "For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the House of Israel," or possibly the land of Israel, or perhaps even the Sanhedrin. In each case, however, the Midrash sees שלמה as "The King to whom belongeth peace."

From the illustrations I have cited, it is clear that the Rabbinic understanding of the term מלך שלמה, King Solomon in the Biblical Song is allegorically interpreted in the Midrash as מלך שהשלום שלו --the King whose is peace. This King of Peace is God, the Possessor of

peace who creates peace in the heavens above and on the earth below.

God's Sovereignty

Another subject the Rabbis treat is that of God's sovereignty. There are several verses in the Song which interpreted allegorically demonstrate God's supremacy as Ruler of all the world. He is the מלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה 28 the "Supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He."

R. Meir and R. Judah both expound verse 1:12 WHILE THE KING SAT AT HIS TABLE allegorically, understanding "King" as the Supreme King of kings. Clearly it is God who sitting at His table in the firmament, watches over Israel. R. Eliezer, R. Akiba, and R. Berekiah all give explanations of the verse, and each understands the מלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה as המלך במסבו 29 at His table in the firmament. Lastly, R. Phinehas explains the same verse, "While the Supreme King of kings was yet at His table. . . ." 30 Again, God is King to the Rabbis.

Verse 3:10 in the Song, THE MIDST OF IT [palanquin] BEING INLAID LOVINGLY 31 is understood by Rabbi Berekiah and Rabbi Bun to refer to God's Throne of Glory with which He supremely rules the world. The Rabbis illustrate vividly:

There are four lordly creatures. The lord among the birds is the eagle. The lord among the cattle is the ox; the lord among beasts is the lion; and the lord over all of them is man. . . . The fact that the Holy One, blessed be He has established His throne above the lordly ones proves that "His Kingdom ruleth over all." (Ps. 103:19)³²

And who then firmly established the world? God, as it says, "I myself established the pillars of it."³³ God did so, we are told, for the sake of Israel's acceptance of His sovereignty. "I am the Lord thy God" (Ex. 20:2) and Israel responded, "All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and obey" (Ex. 24:7). With these words Israel accepted God's law and His Kingship.

The most descriptive statement of God's supremacy emanates in the Midrash from verse 7:6, THE KING IS HELD CAPTIVE IN THE TRESSES.³⁴ The "King" is the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He,³⁵ of whom it is written, "The Lord reigneth, He is clothed in majesty. . . . He had girded Himself with strength; the world also is established, that it cannot be moved."³⁶ If we understand "tresses" בְּרִחְטִים as Israel, then it is God who is "held captive" in the midst of Israel. God bound Himself to reside amid Israel with an oath and divine promise to the Jewish patriarchs. By the merit of Abraham and Jacob, Israel was to enjoy God's presence resting in her midst. Reigning over Israel and over all the nations, God is then מֶלֶךְ הַמְּלָכִים, King of heaven and earth, the Supreme Ruler of all the world.³⁷

Thus the subject of God's sovereignty emerges from the Rabbinic understanding of the Biblical text on several levels. God is the "Supreme King of kings" who exercises rule over all the world. With regard to Israel in particular, God resides in their midst for the sake of Israel's acceptance of His sovereignty. This "King of kings" is characterized by the allegorical interpretation מלך שהשלום שלו, the Creator and Possessor of peace. He is the Divine King of perfection and peace.

Torah

In Praise of Words of Torah

The concept of Torah is among the most dominant themes that emerge in the Rabbinic literature. Torah is the supreme joy and most precious possession of the Jew, "The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart" (Ps. 19:9). Torah is considered to be strength, as it says, "The Lord will give strength unto His people" (Ps. 29:11). Israel longed for the giving of Torah, מוזן חוררה because ITS FRUIT WAS SWEET TO MY TASTE.³⁸ God freely gave Torah to Israel, an eternal gift of love, an exiler of life to Israel.

In the Midrashic material on the Song of Songs, there are many such references to Torah. The Rabbis consistently praise "Words of Torah" דברי חוררה and the study of Mishnah, Talmud, Tosefta, חלמוד חוררה. They

exalt the role of the teacher of Torah, and students of the Scripture are glorified. By merit of their studies, they earn a place in the world to come.

In Shir Hashirim Rabba, many verses of the Song are interpreted allegorically to refer to דברי תורה . We shall examine a few of the comments made on these verses.

Solomon's palanquin, in verse 3:10, is said to have been made of gold.³⁹ If the palanquin refers to God's Throne of Glory, then its material substance, gold,⁴⁰ must be Words of Torah, about which the Psalmist writes, "More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold" (Ps. 19:11).

Again in verse 5:11, which describes the physical qualities of the "Beloved," we read, HIS HEAD IS AS THE MOST FINE GOLD. . . ,⁴¹ where head is the Torah, as it says, "The Lord made me as the beginning⁴² of His way" (Prov. 8:22). The creation of Torah, then, preceeded the creation of the world.⁴³ Here, and again in verse 5:14, FIND GOLD refers to דברי תורה .⁴⁴ Rabbi Judan affirmed this in an earlier commentary, explaining that GOLD⁴⁵ refers to the merit of the Torah and the merit of the righteous who study and practice it.⁴⁶

In an explanation of verse 1:2, FOR THY LOVED ONES ARE BETTER THAN WINE,⁴⁷ Words of Torah are compared to water, wine, oil, honey, and milk. Torah, like water, reaches through the entire breadth of the world. It

is a source of life for all the world, and like water it is from heaven. Just as water restores the soul, so does Torah refresh, purify, and cleanse man's body. As R. Simeon b. Yohai taught, "The Torah which God gave to Israel restored their souls to them, as it says, 'The Law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul'" (Ps. 19:8).⁴⁸ R. Hama b. Ukba taught that like water, Words of Torah nurture those who labour over them. The more דברי תורה become ingrained in a man's life, the more reputable he will be. Torah influences a man's mind and heart.

Torah is compared to wine, since like wine, Words of Torah gladden the heart. Just as wine renders a man drunk, so does a man become inebriated with דברי תורה. Torah is furthered compared with oil. As oil makes the head and body feel pleasant, so too does Torah enlighten one's being. And how is Torah likened to honey and milk? As it says, "Sweeter also than honey" (Ps. 19:11) and pure as milk.⁴⁹

Words of Torah then, add life, "For they are life unto those that find them" (Prov. 4:22). According to R. Hama b. Ukba, דברי תורה invigorate those who study them devotedly.⁵⁰ Most descriptive are the words of R. Simeon b. R. Nahum in explaining the verse, LET HIM KISS ME WITH KISSES.⁵¹ Words of Torah are likened to a weapon, as taught by R. Simeon b. Yohai, "The weapons which God gave to the Israelites in Horeb" (Sinai).⁵²

Just as a weapon serves its owner in time of battle, so the Words of Torah serve well all who labour in them with the devotion they require. Moreover, just as a sword has two cutting edges, so the Torah confers life in this world and the world to come.⁵³ One who has occupied himself with דברי תורה has well armed his lips, מנוקקת , to speak.

Words of Torah are said to be "as soft as lilies,"⁵⁴ yet they command obedience in every minute regulation and precept. R. Levi points out that though דברי תורה have no physical force behind them, the laws should be obeyed through self-discipline. The tradition praises the righteous who devote themselves to strict adherence of the Law, and thereby merit the world to come.

Talmud

As to what Torah actually comprises, there is one reference to Rabbinic literature. R. Berekiah interprets the verse, I WOULD CAUSE THEE TO DRINK OF SPICED WINE⁵⁵ to refer to the great collections of Mishnah, the Baraitot, and Toseftot. He cites several compilations authored by Rabbis of the Talmudic period.⁵⁶ Another explanation of the verse refers to the Talmud "which is flavoured with Mishnayot like spiced wine."⁵⁷

Study of Torah

The actual study of Torah, תלמוד תורה , is a subject given much attention throughout Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabba.

Truly, the Rabbis considered the study of Torah the most valuable exercise of one's time. Thus, the rationale for the Rabbinic statement, "תלמוד תורה כנגד כולם",⁵⁸ the mitzvah of Torah study is equal to the performance of all the other mitzvot.

Its value is illustrated in a beautiful parable stemming from the verse, IF A MAN WOULD GIVE ALL THE SUBSTANCE OF HIS HOUSE FOR LOVE, HE WOULD BE UTTERLY SCORNE⁵⁹:

R. Johanan was once going on foot from Tiberias to Sepphoris, accompanied by R. Hiyya b. Abba. As they passed a certain field, R. Johanan said: "This field used to belong to me, and I sold it so that I could devote myself to the study of the Torah." They came to a vineyard and R. Johanan said: "This vineyard used to belong to me and I sold it in order to devote myself to the study of the Torah. They passed an olive press and he said the same thing. R. Hiyya began to weep. "Why are you weeping?" he asked. He replied, "I am weeping because you have not left yourself anything for your old age." He said to him: "Hiyya, my son, think you so little of what I have done in selling a thing which was presented after six days, as it says, 'For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth' [Ex. 22:11] But the Torah was given after forty days as it says, 'And he was there with the Lord forty days' [Ex. 34:28], and it is also written, 'Then I abode in the mount forty days.'" (Deut. 9:9)⁶⁰

When R. Johanan died and was laid to rest, his generation applied to him the verse, IF A MAN WOULD GIVE ALL THE SUBSTANCE OF HIS HOUSE FOR LOVE--for like the love which R. Johanan bore to the Torah.⁶¹ Rabbi Johanan becomes the exemplar of one totally devoted to Torah study.

Thus the value of תלמוד תורה was worth far more than any of God's other creations. Johanan's love for

Torah study illustrated its preciousness; such love could not be assessed in money.⁶² He was willing to relinquish all other possessions for love of Torah and learning. Tradition records that God had decreed, for the sake of Torah and those like Johanan who study Torah, the world was spared from the Flood's destruction.⁶³

How is knowledge of the Torah acquired?⁶⁴ It is written, A FOUNTAIN OF GARDENS, A WELL OF LIVING WATERS, AND FLOWING STREAMS FROM LEBANON.⁶⁵ The Rabbis derive forty-eight qualities by which knowledge of the Torah is acquired corresponding to the forty-eight times the word "well" appears in the Torah.⁶⁶ Since Torah is often referred to in Rabbinic literature as water, the source of life, the connection with WELL OF LIVING WATERS is very appropriate.

Rabbi Azariah further interprets the verse to mean that each student of Torah contributes a trickle, followed by another and another until the halacha issues forth like the forests of Lebanon. In other words, every student of Torah, each person who engages in תלמוד תורה , thereby increases its depth by contributing his understanding.

The Rabbis praise the student who engages himself in Torah-study continuously throughout his life, beginning at an early age and extending through old age. Or perhaps we may understand the Midrash praising the student who devotes the entire day and night to תלמוד תורה ,

beginning early in the morning and continuing until late evening. Thus from the verse HIS HEAD IS . . . BLACK AS A RAVEN⁶⁷ they interpret the word כָּעוֹרֵב as from the same root as מְעִירֵב . Torah is to be studied then both day and night as it says, "Thou shalt meditate therein day and night" (Joshua 1:8).

Of course, the proper attitude for the study of Torah is essential. The negative person asks, "Who can learn the whole of Torah?" But the wise student pledges to learn a segment each day until eventually the whole is learned. The fool asks, "Who can acquire the learning which is in the mind of my teacher?" But the clever students says, "Did not the teacher learn it from someone else?" He sets for himself the task of gradually mastering the learning of his teacher. The pessimist asks, "If I learn Torah, and I forget it, what good do I do?" The optimistic student realizes that the acquisition of Torah is not unrewarded. God recognizes the labour of His students.⁶⁸ God even recalls to them what they have forgotten. He writes it on their hearts, and recalls it to their mind.⁶⁹ Thus, the Rabbis encourage a proper attitude and positive mindset towards תלמוד תורה . They ultimately praise the study of Torah for its own sake, לעצמה , for its own intrinsic reward.

R. Abba b. Meme explained verse 14:3 with great artistry.⁷⁰ Though the study of Torah may cause a student to grow faint, though concentration on the intricacies

of halacha may seem overwhelming, a student will ultimately gain mastery over them. The Rabbis say that, "Whoever is able to conjure with the words of Torah will finally become a king over them."⁷¹ Though חררה can never be totally acquired, through persistent dedication and conscientiousness it can be mastered. "Though thy beginning was small, yet thy end should greatly increase" (Job 8:7). As much as to say that the study of the Torah is at first laborious but afterwards becomes pleasant.⁷²

The reward of such study is, of course, in direct proportion to the efforts devoted to it. The more labor invested in the study of Torah, the greater the reward, i.e., the learning. R. Hiyya comments on THOU, O SOLOMON. SHALT HAVE THE THOUSAND,⁷³ "if one learns Torah with much labor, he receives a thousand; if without much labor, he takes two hundred as his reward."⁷⁴ This is evident in the cases of the tribes of Issachar and Naphtali. Since Naphtali learned the Torah laborously,⁷⁵ they received a reward of a thousand, as it says, "And of Naphtali a thousand captains" (I Chron. 12:35). But Issachar who learned without much labor, only received two hundred for their reward, as it says, "The heads of them were two hundred" (I Chron. 12:33). Therefore, the rewards of חררה equal the labor, i.e., study invested in it.

So great is the influence of Torah, that it has an everlasting effect upon its students. Taken from

the verse, MOVING GENTLY THE LIPS OF THOSE THAT ARE ASLEEP⁷⁶ R. Hanina b. Papa explained, "It is as when one drinks spiced wine." R. Simeon said, "It is as when one drinks old wine; even after he has finished drinking, the taste and scent are in his mouth."⁷⁷ So too among those who engage in תורה תמיד, scholars retain the taste of their learning even after death.⁷⁸ Though the Rabbis meant the previous statement literally, it seems to me that a teacher's scholarship lives on in the hearts and minds of his students. Such is the way Torah is preserved from each generation to the next.

The Exalted Role of Teachers of Torah

Many statements are made in the Midrash concerning the exalted role of the teacher of Torah. Reference is often made to Solomon as teacher, but in light of its allegoric interpretation, the Song of Songs praises all educators for disseminating knowledge of Torah.

In ascribing authorship of the Song of Songs to Solomon, and that of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs as well, the Rabbis praise him as a wise man who's heart is all of wisdom, "The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips" (Prov. 16:23). Through teaching one increases his knowledge. "Through the act of his bringing forth words of Torah from his heart, he adds to his learning in the Torah."⁷⁹ A parable illustrates this point:

A cask, which was full of precious stones and pearls, which had a tight fitting cover, was put away in a corner so that no one knew what was in it, until someone came and emptied it and then everyone knew what was in it.⁸⁰

So the heart of Solomon was full of wisdom but no one knew what was in it until he composed three books proclaiming his wisdom. The learning which he added to the Words of Torah exalted him.⁸¹

Solomon is seen as the prototype teacher.

Had any other man composed them [Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes] it would have been incumbent on you to incline your ear and to listen to them; all the more then since Solomon composed them. . . . He pondered the words of the Torah and investigated the meaning of the Words of Torah. . . . Till Solomon arose no one was able to understand properly the words of the Torah, but as soon as Solomon arose all began to comprehend the Torah. . . . Solomon⁸² penetrated to the innermost meaning of the Torah.

R. Judan used Solomon's example to exalt the role of the teacher:

It is to teach you that whoever discourses on the Torah in public merits that the Holy Spirit should rest on him. From whom do you learn this? From Solomon; for because he discoursed on the Torah in public, he earned the privilege that the Holy Spirit rested on him and he composed three books, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.⁸³

The verse THE CHEEKS ARE COMELY WITH CIRCLET⁸⁴ is explained as referring to teachers of Scripture and of Mishnah and of infants; those who teach conscientiously. These are the Rabbis, who discuss the halacha with one another, like R. Abba b. Mimi and his colleagues.⁸⁵ They penetrate to its depths until they fully understand it.⁸⁶ THY NECK WITH PEARLS: These

are children, the disciples who strain⁸⁷ their necks to hear the Words of Torah that their teachers utter.

What characterizes a teacher? Taken from the verse A CLUSTER [Eshkol] OF HENNA⁸⁸ the Midrash explains "A man in whom there is everything [Ish she hakol]"-- embodying knowledge of Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, Tosefta, and Haggada.⁸⁹ R. Hunna and R. Halafta felt that a scholar should be conversant with the twenty-four books of the Scriptures. In so doing however, he should be modest and be liable to no reproach. R. Tanhuma said, "Just as the spice-maker's chest [Migdalot] is full of all manner of spices, so a scholar should be full of Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, Halachot, and Haggadot."⁹⁰

HIS LIPS ARE AS LILIES:⁹¹ this is a scholar who is proficient in his Mishnah. They are THE KEEPERS OF THE WALLS,⁹² those who expound and administer the Torah, strengthening and protecting its walls. Such men of learning take greater reward than their disciples. Said R. Hillel, the son of Samuel b. Nahman, if the teacher takes on his reward a thousand, the disciple takes two hundred.⁹³ Isn't the statement of the teacher true, "I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, and most of all from my students?" Of course, the scholar must be able to transmit יְשַׁלְּמֵנִי his learning to others in order to be an effective teacher.⁹⁴ Rabbi Alexandri said, "The master receives no reward for his learning until he transmits it to others."⁹⁵

Those sages of the Great Synagogue, Hillel, Shammai, and Rabban Gamaliel the elder, and in the later generations, R. Johanan b. Zakkai, R. Eliezer, R. Joshua, R. Meier, R. Akiba, and their disciples disseminated Torah among ever widening circles of scholars.⁹⁶ And of these it says, NEW AND OLD WHICH I HAVE LAID UP [saved] FOR THEE, O MY BELOVED.⁹⁷ Calling Israel His Beloved, God promises them further generations of scholars to teach and lead Israel in the ways of Torah.

So rare are these men that the Midrash poses the question, if a scholar dies who can replace him? When R. Simon b. Zabdi was laid to rest, R. Ila went in and bemoaned him. He cited the verse "But wisdom, where shall it be found and where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28:12) Substitutes can always be found for most lost things which are necessary for the world. But MY BELOVED IS GONE DOWN INTO HIS GARDEN⁹⁸ indicates the death of a scholar. How does one replace a lost sage? R. Levi asks, where can one of his like be found? Hence, "Wisdom, where shall it be found?"⁹⁹ Thus, the teacher is exalted in this world, and God rewards him in the world to come.¹⁰⁰

In Praise of Students of Torah

There are several references to students of Torah that are worth mentioning here. "Said the Holy One, blessed be He: . . . For the sake of the Torah and those

who study it let the world be spared."¹⁰¹ This claim sets the mood for the praise that students deserve in the eyes of the Rabbis of the Midrash.

Two statements, the first in chapter 6 AND THE POMEGRANATES WERE IN FLOWER¹⁰² and later, in chapter 7, THE POMEGRANATES BE IN BLOSSOM¹⁰³ are interpreted allegorically to refer to children busily learning the Torah, sitting in rows like pomegranate seeds.¹⁰⁴ There God produces the righteous men and women, the prophets and prophetesses who rise to carry God's teachings.¹⁰⁵ These children became disciples of the great sages of Torah. And according to R. Judah b. R. Il'ai, the verse AND MAIDENS WITHOUT NUMBER¹⁰⁶ means there is no end to the number of disciples.¹⁰⁷ For this reason the Rabbis are optimistic and express their hope for the preservation of Torah among their children. Children perpetuate Torah--they become the future's teachers, providing leadership and scholarship to their students.

Students must be diligent in their studies. A parable is told to illustrate the character of R. Bun b. R. Hiyya:

A King had a vineyard which he hired workmen to tend. There was one worker there who excelled all the others. When the King saw how efficient he was at his work, he took him by the hand and began to walk up and down with him. At evening, the workers came to receive their pay, and that man came with them, and the King gave him the same pay as to the rest. The workers began to complain, saying, "Your Majesty, we have worked all day, and this man has worked only two or three hours. Is he to receive the same pay with us?" Said the King to them: "Why are you

so puzzled? This man did as much work in two or three hours as you did in the whole day."¹⁰⁸

So too, R. Bun made as much progress in the Torah during his 28 years as a diligent student would make in a hundred years. Thus, the Rabbis present R. Bun as a model for other students to emulate.

From time to time students may differ with each other, even argue over certain points of the law, but they are in agreement on the fundamentals of Jewish teachings. Verse 6:9 SHE IS ONE¹⁰⁹ means the students "all base themselves on one principle, on one halacha, on one gezerah shavah, on one minor and major."¹¹⁰ Independent of thought and philosophy, but united in their desire to learn and spread Torah, students earn themselves a place in the world to come.

One final verse is applied to students of Torah. R. Judah interpreted LOCKS BLACK LIKE A RAVEN¹¹¹ referring to scholars, who may look repulsive and black in their world, but in the time to come, will have fine appearance, as it says, "The appearance of them will be like torches, they will run to and fro like the lightnings."¹¹² The implication is that students must often deprive themselves of certain leisure and diversion in order to devote themselves to their studies. In the long run, however, they will be the better for it. Maybe that is why God decreed the world to be spared for the sake of those who study Torah.

Moses

In Praise of Moses

There are many references in the Song of Songs which interpreted allegorically, praise Moses as the Jewish leader and teacher par excellence. In fact, Moses is seen as the prototype of Jewish leadership and the Midrash seeks to establish him as the model. Together with Aaron, as שְׁנֵי שֵׁדִיךְ , TWO BREASTS, Moses receives much attention in the Song seen as an allegory.

Time and again Moses is praised and extolled as God's servant and prophet: MY BELOVED SPOKE,¹¹³ refers to Moses.¹¹⁴ It is he who comes to announce God's message of deliverance and redemption. HARK MY BELOVED, BEHOLD HE COMETH¹¹⁵ denotes Moses, the teacher, who assures the people of God's future intentions to deliver them from slavery and to redeem them from idolatry. R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, and the Rabbis all agree on this interpretation;¹¹⁶ God speaks to Israel through Moses.

Moses is described as the most distinguished and the mightiest in the tribes; the most exalted among the tribes. WITH ONE BEAD OF THY NECKLACE¹¹⁷ is repeatedly¹¹⁸ attributed to Moses. He is called King, as in:

Said the Holy one, blessed be He, to Moses: "I have appointed thee king over Israel, and it is usual for a king to decree while others perform. So thou shalt issue commands to Israel which they will perform; and so it is written, 'Command the children of Israel.'" (Leviticus 24:2)¹¹⁹

R. Berekiah and R. Nehemiah see KING of verse 7:6 as Moses, as it says "And he was a King in Jeshurun" (Deut. 33:5).¹²⁰ A KING IS HELD CAPTIVE IN THE TRESSES¹²¹ is also interpreted to mean Moses, who was decreed not to enter the Promised Land on account of his disobedience at the streams (rehatim) of Meribah. He is held "captive" from entering Canaan.¹²²

Moses is said to be "The fairest in the house"¹²³ as it says, "He is trusted in all My House" (Num. 12:7). Moses is singled out among the rest of the world. Even Scripture praises Moses with the words, "Thou hast ascended on high, . . . Thou hast led captivity captive; thou hast received gifts from men; yea, from the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell there" (Ps. 68:19).

One interpretation of IF THOU KNOW NOT, O THOU FAIREST AMONG WOMEN¹²⁴ applies it to Moses, using "women" to mean "prophets." Moses, then, is the fairest among prophets, the most eminent of prophets.^{125,126} He is clearly seen by the Midrash as HIM WHOM MY SOUL LOVETH.¹²⁷ Moses is said to be one who dominates and masters his Evil Inclination.¹²⁸ The whole of his generation depended on him. Because of his merit, the Torah was given through him.¹²⁹ God shielded Israel at the Sea and at Sinai only for the merit of Moses.¹³⁰

Because he was so special, God delivered him from Pharaoh's decree of death. THY NECK IS AS A TOWER OF

IVORY.¹³¹ Condemned to be beheaded, Moses somehow was spared. The sword slipped from the neck of Moses, and the executioner was beheaded in his stead. And so it is written, "For the God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh" (Ex. 18:4). R. Bun applied to Moses the verse, "The righteous is delivered out of trouble. . ." (Prov. 11:8). R. Berekeah cited, "The wicked is a ransom for the righteous" (Prov. 21:18). The Midrash is also quite humorous on this issue: God confounded the Egyptians with regard to Moses:

All the counsellors of Pharaoh became at that time some of them dumb, some deaf, some blind, and some lame. They said to the dumb one, "Where is Moses?" and they could not answer; to the blind, and they could not see; to the deaf, and they could not hear; to the lame, and they could not walk.¹³²

God delivered Moses from the hand of Pharaoh as an act of special favor.

It is only fitting then, that Moses died through the kiss of the Shechinah. The Holy One, blessed be He, says of the righteous: "Their source is from Me"; the Rabbis say: The souls of these righteous will be taken away with a kiss. How do we know that like Aaron, whose soul was taken away by a kiss, it was the same with the soul of Moses? Because it says, "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there . . . according to the word [lit. mouth] of the Lord" (Deut. 34:5).¹³³ For Moses, THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH¹³⁴ meant the gracious kiss of

death from God Himself. According to the legends, there were the souls of six exceptional individuals whom the Angel of Death could not overcome. Among them was Moses who died only through a kiss from the Divine presence.¹³⁵

Moses and Aaron--THY TWO BREASTS .

In the Midrash, Moses and Aaron often share equally the role of leadership. Indeed they support each other. They are most beautifully coupled as שני שדיך THY TWO BREASTS,¹³⁶ a perfect pair, each complementing the other.

Just as the breasts are the beauty and the ornament of a woman, so Moses and Aaron were the beauty and ornament of Israel. Just as the breasts are the charm of a woman, so Moses and Aaron were the charm of Israel.¹³⁷

And so the comparisons continue. Moses and Aaron were the glory and pride of Israel. As breasts are filled with milk, so Moses and Aaron filled Israel with Torah. As a woman feeds a child the milk from her breast, so Moses taught Aaron Torah from his learning; as it is written, "And Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord,"¹³⁸ revealing to him God's ineffable Name.

Moses and Aaron shared alike the responsibilities of leadership.

Just as one breast is not greater than the other, so it was with Moses and Aaron; . . . Moses was not greater than Aaron nor was Aaron greater than Moses in knowledge of Torah.¹³⁹

R. Abba compared them to two fine pearls belonging to a king weighing in perfect balance. So were Moses and Aaron equal. According to R. Hanina b. Papa, God chose

them for the diffusion of Torah and for the glory of Israel. The prophet Samuel said, "It is the Lord that made Moses and Aaron in order to bring up your fathers."¹⁴⁰

Moses and Aaron worked harmoniously together. The combination of Moses, stern and accusing, was offset by the peace-loving Aaron. God smote Egypt by the hand of Moses, and healed by the hand of Aaron.¹⁴¹ They both served as spokesmen for God. MY BELOVED SPOKE AND SAID UNTO ME,¹⁴² indicates according to R. Azariah that both brothers transmitted God's message. Or perhaps it means Aaron acted as the spokesman while God answered Israel's prayers through Moses.¹⁴³ In any case, both men were in direct communication with God, serving as His messengers. Another reference shows that indeed Moses and Aaron were created to be spokesmen; THY CHEEKS ARE COMELY.¹⁴⁴ As cheeks provide for speech, so the purpose of Moses and Aaron was to speak.

The Midrash praises Moses and Aaron. For their sake, God parted the Red Sea. The Torah was given through them at Sinai. R. Jose said, because of Moses and Aaron,¹⁴⁵ three precious gifts were bestowed upon Israel--the well, the manna, and the protecting clouds of glory. When Moses and Aaron died, all three gifts departed and were never restored to Israel from that day.

Each rejoiced in the greatness of the other. "Moses and Aaron went and gathered together"¹⁴⁶ Moses worked shoulder to shoulder with Aaron. He did not assume any

airs of superiority. WITH CIRCLET¹⁴⁷ indicates two brothers who smile¹⁴⁸ on one another. Aaron rejoiced in the greatness of Moses' leadership and Moses rejoiced in the greatness of Aaron.¹⁴⁹ Comrades with a mutual purpose, FRIENDS¹⁵⁰ they are called, Moses and Aaron kissed one another. I WOULD KISS THEE¹⁵¹ as it says in Scripture, "And he went, and met him in the mountain of God, and kissed him" (Ex. 4:27). The Midrash seeks in its praise of Moses and Aaron, to illustrate the love, respect, and reverence each had for the other.

It seems appropriate then, for the Rabbis to explain that the souls of Moses and Aaron were taken away with a kiss of the Shechinah. Aaron went up into Mount Hor and Moses to Mount Nebo, each to receive the kiss of death from God,¹⁵² LET HIM KISS ME WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH.¹⁵⁹ The souls of these righteous returned to God, their source.

Patriarchs and Righteous

One of the more dominant themes seen in the Midrash to Song of Songs is the role of the Patriarchs in Jewish tradition. There is the popular Rabbinic dictum that God established the world on three pillars--Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They constitute for the Rabbis, God's chosen leaders who embodied and demonstrated righteousness, piety, and religious commitment in the face of idolatry and moral depravity. The Patriarchs set the

framework for prophets, sages, scholars, and pious laymen to follow their example. The Midrash also extolls the righteous, and praises them for their perseverance in the shadow of suffering and persecution.

In Praise of the Patriarchs .

FOR THY LOVED ONES ARE BETTER THAN WINE¹⁵⁴ refers to the Patriarchs who are more beloved then the princes of other nations.¹⁵⁵ Even Moses, at a later time, had recourse to the merit of the Patriarchs, as it says, "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants."¹⁵⁶

Many verses of the Song are interpreted to be statements made in praise of one or all the Patriarchs together. MY BELOVED IS UNTO ME AS A BAG OF MYRRH¹⁵⁷-- R. Azariah applied the verse to Abraham, for just as myrrh is the most excellent of spices, so Abraham was the foremost among all righteous men.¹⁵⁸ Commenting on the verse MY BELOVED IS UNTO ME AS A CLUSTER OF HENNA¹⁵⁹ the Rabbis understand CLUSTER to refer to Isaac, who was bound to wood on the alter like a cluster of tied grapes. He atones (כִּפֵּר) for the iniquities of Israel.¹⁶⁰ The last part of the same verse IN THE VINEYARDS OF ENGEDI is understood to signify Jacob who went to his father to receive Isaac's blessing, with his face pallid (כָּרִיב) from fear and shame and dressed in goatskin (בְּגָדֵי גְדֵי עִזִּים) and took the blessings which are in the eye (עֵין) of the world.¹⁶¹ A LILY AMONG THORNS¹⁶² is applied to Jacob, the "lily" among the "thorns" of

Laban's family.¹⁶³ And again later in verse 3:6 WITH ALL POWDERS OF THE MERCHANT, this refers to Jacob, who was flawless before God and in whose seed was found no defect,¹⁶⁴ like the flawlessness of costly powders.

God blesses Israel for the merit of Abraham; MY BELOVED IS LIKE A GAZELLE.¹⁶⁵

Just as a gazelle leaps from mountain to mountain, from valley to valley, from tree to tree, from thicket to thicket, and from fence to fence, so the Holy One, blessed be He, leaps from one synagogue to another synagogue, from one house of study to another house of study. And why all this? So as to bless Israel. For whose merit? For the merit of Abraham, as it is written, "And the Lord appeared unto him by the terebinths of Mamre." (Gen. 18:1)¹⁶⁶

For the sake of the promise which God made to Abraham, as it says, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham" (Gen. 15:18), God eventually will change his harsh treatment of His people from His attribute of Judgement *מדת הדין* to His attribute of Mercy *מדת הרחמים* and will hasten Israel's deliverance speedily like a gazelle. Thus, TURN, MY BELOVED, AND BE THOU LIKE A GAZELLE.¹⁶⁷

R. Nahman praises Abraham as the progenitor of the Jewish people, for the faith that he displayed in God. Thus LOOK FROM THE TOP OF AMANA¹⁶⁸ must refer to Abraham, of whom it is written, "And he believed *האמין* in the Lord" (Gen. 15:6).¹⁶⁹ "And Abraham harkened to My voice" (Gen. 26:5) by recognizing God at an early age of his childhood.¹⁷⁰

Abraham is spoken of with a special sense of love. MY DOVE, MY UNDEFILED, IS BUT ONE¹⁷¹ confirms Scripture, "Abraham was one" (Ezek. 33:24) O LOVE FOR DELIGHTS¹⁷² refers in turn, to Abraham's love for God, on account of which he refused the delights offered to him by the king of Sodom.¹⁷³

R. Berekiah interpreted the verse WE HAVE A LITTLE SISTER¹⁷⁴ as applying to Abraham. While Abraham was still a child, he occupied himself with religious observances and performance of the mitzvot, AND SHE HATH NO BREASTS, the continuation of the verse, illustrates that Abraham was conscientious in his commitment, though at such a young age he was under no obligation to perform religious commandments.

Abraham stood firm in his convictions like a wall throughout his life. The Midrash cites IF SHE BE A WALL, to prove this. Therefore, WE WILL BUILD UPON HER A TURRET OF SILVER¹⁷⁵; i.e., God promises to deliver him and spread his renown throughout the world. Abraham assures God, I AM A WALL,¹⁷⁶ "I stand firm in performing good deeds." AND MY BREASTS ARE LIKE TOWERS, because "I am destined to raise up large followings of righteous men like myself in Thy world." For this pledge, God promises to protect Abraham from any adversary.¹⁷⁷ Abraham then becomes AS ONE THAT FOUND PEACE¹⁷⁸ with God.

Isaac too is singled out for special praise. SHE IS THE ONLY ONE OF HER MOTHER¹⁷⁹ is interpreted to apply

to Isaac, who was an only son to his mother, Sara. Like the other Patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, Isaac is spoken of in loving terms.

Jacob, however, seems to receive the most attention in the allegory. The Rabbis focus their praise repeatedly upon him.

As the last of the Patriarchs, Jacob became the precursor for the priesthood, Levites and kings, according to R. Tanhum.¹⁸⁰ Most interesting is the comment by R. Judan: "All the success which Israel [i.e., the Jews] has with its merchandise today and has in business in their world, is due to the merit . . . of our father Jacob."¹⁸¹ R. Azariah further attributes Israel's success in war due to the merit of Jacob, as well as all the Torah that Israel performs due to the blessing of Jacob.

Israel was allowed to cross the Jordan only through the merit of Jacob.¹⁸² THY HAIR IS AS A FLOCK OF GOATS¹⁸³ is applied to the "flock" of Israel that crossed the Jordan. R. Judan bases this claim on passages found in the Pentateuch, Prophets, and in the Hagiographa¹⁸⁴ that Israel crossed the Jordan only through the merit of Jacob.

Verse 4:7 THOU ART ALL FAIR MY LOVE; THERE IS NO BLEMISH IN THEE¹⁸⁵ is taken to refer to Jacob because he was blameless before God and without flaw. Even the verse HONEY AND MILK ARE UNDER THY TONGUE AND THE SMELL OF THY GARMENTS IS LIKE

THE SCENT OF LEBANON¹⁸⁶ is understood to refer to Jacob in the context of meeting Isaac for his fatherly blessing. R. Johanan said that when Jacob entered his father's chambers, Paradise entered with him; as it says, "See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed" (Gen. 27:27).¹⁸⁷ Jacob was considered the favorite son to his mother Rebecca, since he was wholly righteous. Hence, the verse THE CHOICE ONE OF HER THAT BORE HER¹⁸⁸ applies to Jacob.

It is interesting that there are even a few references in praise of the Matriarchs. AS A LILY AMONG THORNS¹⁸⁹ is applied to Rebecca. R. Isaac informs us that Rebecca was the sister of Laban the Aramean, a trickster and deceiver. Yet living among her brothers and father, and others who practiced deception, she came forth from the midst of them, righteous and virtuous. Therefore, she resembles A LILY AMONG THORNS.¹⁹⁰ Among her Aramean family, Rebecca was lily-white.

Leah too is seen in light of the allegoric interpretation. THE DAUGHTERS SAW HER AND CALLED HER HAPPY:¹⁹¹ this refers to Leah, as it says, "Happy am I for the daughters will call me blessed!" (Gen. 30:13) upon the birth of Gad to Zilpa, Leah's maiden.

I ADJURE YOU, O DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM¹⁹² poses the question, with what did God adjure Israel? R. Hanina said, He adjured them by the Patriarchs and the

Matriarchs.¹⁹³ Then again two verses later, HE PEERETH THROUGH THE LATTICE¹⁹⁴ by this is meant the merit of the Matriarchs. Thus, the noble Jewish Matriarchs also receive praise in the Midrash to Song of Songs.

The Patriarchs, however, as a group, are spoken of the most. It is the Patriarchs who carried out God's will and through whom He executed it.¹⁹⁵ Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob proclaimed the unity of God to the world, and denounced the worship of idols. By their example, the Patriarchs provided a mode of worship, Monotheism, for their descendants after them, AND WE WILL LOOK UPON THEE,¹⁹⁶ as if to say, "You will be the model for the world."¹⁹⁷ By virtue of the merit of the Patriarchs, God bound Himself by an oath to allow His Shechinah to dwell in Israel's midst.¹⁹⁸ Israel throughout the generations, has entreated God by זכרת אבות , the merit of the fathers. For the sake of the Patriarchs, God grants favor upon us, their descendants. In tribute to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Divine Presence took their souls WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH.¹⁹⁹ God Himself leads the righteous to rest in heaven.

In Praise of the Righteous

Within the allegoric interpretation of the Song of Songs, yet another important secondary theme is that of the exemplary role of the righteous in Jewish life. The Rabbis of the Midrash teach us that we may look

to the righteous in each generation for inspiration and guidance. They are the learned sages and scholars of the academies. They are the pious and upright in the communities. They are those among us who live according to the noble moral and ethical standards of Judaism. They are men and women of principle, wisdom, and humility, honorable, practicing justice and fair play with their fellow men. They seek to serve God, their Creator and Protector, and to make wisest use of His gift of life. When forced to deny Him, the righteous rather submit their lives to sanctify God's name. They are tested by the nations of the world, partly because of fear or jealousy, and also because God too tests the righteous in this world. For they will be rewarded in the world to come.

Who are the righteous? R. Eliezar said, "The righteous are compared in Scripture to the most excellent [precious] of the various kinds of plants [flowers] and the most excellent species [finest] of that plant. To the most excellent of plants--namely the שושנה²⁰⁰; and the most excellent species of that plant--namely the שושנת העמקים. Not to the שושנה of the mountains, which soon withers, but to the שושנת העמקים, which continues blooming."²⁰¹ The righteous are AS A LILY AMONG THORNS²⁰² in their performance of acts of piety beyond those prescribed by the Law.²⁰³ Just as the whole purpose of the lily is to give off scent, so the righteous are

created only for the deliverance of Israel.²⁰⁴ Like the pretty-flowered lily among thorns, the righteous of each generation are a pleasure to behold.

R. Judan refers the verse, THE INSIDE THEREOF BEING INLAID WITH LOVE²⁰⁵ to the merit of the righteous who study and practice Torah. They are people irreproachable in piety and good deeds.²⁰⁶ They are men like Joseph, David, and Mordecai,²⁰⁷ illustrious men who were symbols of righteousness in their day. Though God produces the righteous men and women, the prophets and prophetesses, as interpreted from THERE WILL I GIVE THEE MY LOVE,²⁰⁸ the righteous are then obligated to teach others the qualities of righteousness. AND MY BREASTS ARE LIKE THE TOWERS means "we are destined to raise up in Thy world numbers of righteous descendants like ourselves."²⁰⁹ R. Levi felt that the righteous were destined to spring up from Jacob and his descendants.²¹⁰

These are the righteous of every generation who subdue the inclination to idolatry and unchastity.²¹¹ Their moral stature surpasses all others, like those men of the Great Assembly, the majority of the generation of Mordecai and Esther.

God tests the righteous, as it says, "The Lord trieth the righteous" (Ps. 11:5) and "God did prove Abraham" (Gen. 22:1) and "His master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph" (Gen. 34:7). Why test the righteous? HE FEEDETH AMONG THE LILIES.²¹² This means that God imposes only

upon men whose heart is pliant like lilies, i.e., pliant to God's will and ready to accept suffering.²¹³ R.

Elcazar gave the well-known parable:²¹⁴

It is like a man who had two cows, one strong and the other weak. Which one does he apply the yoke to work? Is it not the strong one? So the Holy One, blessed be He, does not try the wicked, because they could not stand the trial.²¹⁵

Rather God tests the righteous who are strong enough to withstand His trials. Good flax, the more it is beaten, the better it becomes. With a potter's furnace, the hotter it is, the greater its jars withstand knocks and resist breakage. So too, "The Lord trieth the righteous."

It was seven²¹⁶ righteous men who brought down the Shechinah to earth and caused her to dwell upon it. How is this proven? "The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein forever" (Ps. 37:29). They cause the Shechinah to dwell upon the land for eternity.

Perhaps this is the reason that the righteous are treated with such respect at their time of death. The Shechinah takes their souls away WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH,²¹⁷ but only at the proper time. God determines the time TO GATHER LILIES,²¹⁸ i.e., to take away the righteous. MY BELOVED IS GONE DOWN TO HIS GARDEN, TO THE BEDS OF SPICES--The Holy One, blessed be He, goes down to His world, to Israel, looks among the synagogues and houses of study to escort the righteous up to heaven.²¹⁹ When is the proper time for the death of the righteous? R. Judah implies that the righteous live until old age:

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 further:

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.

When a righteous man dies young, before his time, it is not good for him, nor is it good for the world. Yet, the Midrash assures us, God knows when it is the right time for this death; only then does He remove the righteous from this world.

God promises the righteous reward that is stored away and kept for them in the time to come, because in the end God will cause His sons to rejoice.²²⁰ As it says, "So shalt thou find grace and good favor in the eyes of God and man" (Prov. 3:4).

Suffering, Martyrdom, and Redemption

The subjects of suffering and martyrdom receive attention in the Midrash. The Rabbis of the Rabbinic period attempted to assign a constructive value to the cruel persecutions that Jews were forced to endure. Martyrdom was exalted as the highest form of Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of God's name. In every age, under every regime to a greater or lesser extent, Jewish communities suffered oppression. Seeking to inspire hope, the Rabbis assured their people that God would

requite their oppressors and ultimately redeem Israel and restore them to His promised land. Song of Songs, interpreted as an allegory of God's special love for Israel, seeks to do just that. It is an expression of God's unique relationship with the Jewish people, an epithalamium honoring Israel, and a statement of commitment to protect Israel living among the nations.

Israel's Suffering

The Midrash asks why does Israel suffer? The Rabbis' reply is that there is a purpose to Israel's suffering. FOR I AM LOVE-SICK.²²¹ "The Community of Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Sovereign of the Universe, the reason for all the suffering which the nations inflict upon me is because I love Thee.'"²²² Israel's love of God, then, incites the other nations' hatred toward Israel. But even in this there is something good, the Rabbis point out. For Israel, all the oppressions which are brought against her make Israel more beloved of God. Suffering brings Israel closer to God. Cruel oppression and hardship strengthen Israel's love of God. It is this same love that the nations of the world resent.

Many of the verses from Song of Songs are then interpreted to express various periods and places where Israel endured suffering. We shall briefly examine them.

According to the Midrash, in comparison to other kingdoms that oppressed Israel, Egypt was the most cruel. TAKE US THE FOXES, THE LITTLE FOXES.²²³ The Egyptians are compared to something consumed by fire, as it says, "they are quenched by a wick" (Is. 43:17). They are likened to worthless lead, as in "They sank as lead" (Ex. 15:10). They are described figuratively as "stubble," and are compared to foxes.²²⁴

The Egyptians were cunning. They devised methods to punish Israel by employing past events in her history. Since God had brought flood upon the world as punishment, so the Egyptians sought to drown the Israelites by hurling their young into the Nile. This is the reason. God retaliated measure for measure by drowning the Egyptians in the Sea.²²⁵ God drowned the foxes.²²⁶

R. Hunan describes the Egyptians as even more diabolical in their devious methods to kill Israelite children.

The virtuous and chaste daughters of Israel adopted the plan of taking their infant sons and hiding them in holes [to save them from Pharaoh's decree]. So the wicked Egyptians used to take their young children and bring them into the houses of the Israelites and pinch them and make them cry, and then the Israelite child would hear the other crying and would commence to cry with him, and the Egyptians then took them and threw them into the river.²²⁷

How many infants did they throw into the river all together? Ten thousand, according to a passage in Ezekiel.²²⁸ R. Levi claimed, sixty thousand.²²⁹ His description of the suffering is even more painful:

What did the Egyptians used to do? They used to bring their children from the schools and send them into the bath houses of the Israelites, and they would see which of the Israelite women were pregnant. They made note of them and returned to their parents and said, "So-and-so has three months to go, so-and-so has four months, or five months." When the period elapsed, the Egyptians used to seize the Israelite children from their mothers' breasts and cast them into the river and watched them drown.²³⁰

So harsh were the Egyptians upon Israel, that the Israelites cried out in their despair: I ADJURE YOU, O DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM . . . WHAT WILL YOU TELL HIM? THAT I AM LOVE-SICK.²³¹ As a sick person yearns and cries out for healing, so the generation in Egypt yearned for deliverance.²³²

R. Berekiah interpreted the verse THE LITTLE FOXES THAT SPOIL THE VINEYARDS²³³ referring to the four kingdoms, enemies of Israel, destined to rule the world. According to the Rabbis they are Babylon, Persia, Greece (or Syria) and Rome, as it says, "There are four things which are little upon the earth" (Prov. 30:24). THE VINEYARDS clearly signifies Israel, as it says in Isaiah, "For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel" (Is. 5:7).

Such was the hardship that Israel was forced to endure under foreign persecution.²³⁴ Israel cries out to God that they can not bear such oppression, one servitude following after another. AT NIGHTS ON MY BED²³⁵-- the nights of bondage in Egypt, Babylon, Media (Persia), Greece (Syria), and Rome--one night follows immediately

on another.²³⁶ Seemingly, there was no break, no intermission between successive disasters, no light of day between the darkness of the nights.

R. Samuel b. Hiyya b. Judan explained similarly RETURN, RETURN, O SHULANMITE²³¹ claiming that the repetitions of the word "return" corresponds to the five powers that subjected Israel. It's a wonder, he exclaims, that Israel came under and emerged unscathed!

Though Israel was chaste and guarded themselves against immorality, A GARDEN SHUT UP IS MY SISTER, MY BRIDE,²³⁸ still she is maligned and abused by the other nations.²³⁹ They taunt Israel by quoting Jewish Scriptures, "And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour" (Ex. 1:13). If they could compel their labor, surely they must have had power over their bodies and their wives!

The Israelites suffered in Babylonian exile under Nebuchadnezzar. HE GAVE OVER THE VINEYARD UNTO KEEPERS²⁴⁰--this refers to Nebuchadnezzar who subjugated Israel into dispersion.²⁴¹ He attacked Israel, and stripped them of the priesthood and royalty [kingdom].²⁴² He attempted to seduce Israel to idolatrous worship. He was a very severe master, who rose to try them and made their wound more painful.²⁴³ He said to them, "Do not listen to the Law of your Father in heaven, but 'Ye shall fall down and worship the image that I have made'"²⁴⁴ (Dan. 3:15). Living in exile, taunted with defilement

and iniquity that surrounded them, Israel longed for deliverance, FLEE AWAY, MY BELOVED, AND BE THOU LIKE A GAZELLE.²⁴⁵ Purify us, O God, and hasten with the speed of a gazelle our redemption!

Redemption did finally occur by the hand of Cyrus, but the Persians inflicted their own method of suffering upon Israel. MY SOUL FAILED ME WHEN HE SPOKE:²⁴⁶ Through the words of Cyrus who decreed that those who had not yet crossed the Euphrates into Israel would henceforth be forbidden to cross,²⁴⁷ and Cyrus' decree, that work on the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple should be ceased,²⁴⁸ caused further despair. THE WATCHMEN THAT GO ABOUT THE CITY FOUND ME;²⁴⁹ That refers to Tattenai, the governor beyond the River²⁵⁰ and his companions.²⁵¹ THEY SMOTE ME, THEY WOUNDED ME; they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem, convincing King Artaxerxes to deny the Jews permission to continue building the Temple started in Cyrus' time.²⁵² Rebuilding did not begin again until the reign of Darius, king of Persia.²⁵³

Israel's Martyrdom

The Rabbinic concept of Kiddush Hashem, martyrdom, is a subject often alluded to in Midrashim. Jews throughout the centuries, have been willing to sacrifice their lives for the sanctification of God's name, as it says, "For Thy sake, we are killed all the day" (Ps. 44:23).

It was the highest form of service to God. As a symbol of Israel's love for God, as expressed allegorically in the Song of Songs, Jews were willing to undergo martyrdom and to love God unto death.

The nations of the world do not understand the Jews' willingness to die for their faith. THAT WE MAY LOOK UPON THEE;²⁵⁴ they ask Israel, How long will you die for your God and devote yourselves completely to Him? As it says, "Therefore, do they love Thee beyond death."²⁵⁵ And how long will you be killed for him? And how long will you do favors for Him from which you obtain no benefit, while He requites you with harm?²⁵⁶ The nations taunt Israel, "Join us, and we will appoint you governors, leaders, and generals."²⁵⁷ Then WE WILL LOOK UPON THEE promising them privileges as the center of attraction of the world.

Martyrdom was first seen during the Babylonian exile, when Jews were forced to choose between idolatry or death. Nebuchadnezzar set up an image and selected three persons from Israel whom he wished to convert. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah refused to worship the idol, seeking rather to give their lives for Kiddush Hashem. Not knowing if God would intercede on their behalf, they firmly agreed to sacrifice their lives for the sanctification of God's name. They and Daniel defied Nebuchadnezzar by saying to him: "We have no need to answer Thee in this matter. There is one God

whom we serve. . . . Be it known unto Thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou has set up" (Dan. 3:16ff). Martyrdom was the only noble course of action. They were prepared to sanctify God's name at the risk of their lives. Perhaps that is the source of the popular oath, "By Him who established the world on three pillars--Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah."²⁵⁸

Numerous other references are made to times when martyrdom occurred. The Rabbis set the somber tone with the interpretation of HINDS OF THE FIELD;²⁵⁹ because the Israelites poured out their blood for the sanctification of My Name like the blood of the deer and the blood of the hind. R. Hiyya b. Abba explained the Rabbinic attitude:

If one should say to me, "Sacrifice your life for the sanctification of God's name," I am ready to do so, on condition only that they slay me at once, but I could not endure the tortures of the great persecution.²⁶⁰

What did they use to do in the generation of the great persecution? They brought iron discs and made them red-hot and put them under their armpits until they expired. Or they brought needles and stuck them under their nails until they expired.²⁶¹

Thus, it is as the Psalmist had written: "Unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up נַפְשִׁי my soul" (Ps. 24:1). The Midrash translates it as נַפְשִׁי "I give up my soul," indicating that they sacrificed their souls for Kiddush Hashem.²⁶² This was the period signified by THE SHADOWS FLEE AWAY . . . UPON THE MOUNTAINS OF BETHAR,²⁶³ a black period of Jewish

history in the shadow of distress and mourning. The Bar-Kochba revolt (132-135 CE) ended with the disastrous defeat at Bethar, where tens of thousands of Jews were killed or captured and sold into slavery.²⁶⁴

For such was their love, LOVE IS STRONG AS DEATH,²⁶⁵ the love the generation of destruction which suffered the Hadrianic Wars and after, held for God, as it says, "Nay, but for Thy sake are we killed all the day" (Ps. 44:23). So great was Jewish martyrdom of that period, that the Midrash states: "If the nations should open all their treasures and offer all their money for the blood of R. Akiba and his companions, who suffered martyrdom for insisting upon teaching and observing the Torah in defiance of the imperial decree, it would never make atonement for them."²⁶⁶

No atonement can be made for the deaths of countless Jewish martyrs throughout the centuries. How long will Israel continue to die for their God? According to the Midrash, forever: "For Thy sake we are killed all the day."

Messianism--Redemption

Suffering, martyrdom, and despair gave way to thoughts of Messianism, a world to come, a time of reward for the righteous and avenge of the oppressors. The Rabbis envisioned a Messianic era of redemption for Israel, a time of blessing and salvation, an eternal peace to

be heralded in by the prophet Elijah. These are dreams for which Jews hoped and prayed. Their Rabbis sought to inspire such dreams. In the Rabbinic literature we find numerous allusions to Messianism in the interpretation of Scripture. Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabba is no exception. Let's look at a few of the examples.

In the Song of Songs, God seemed to be announcing to His beloved Israel the imminent arrival of His Messiah. HARK MY BELOVED, BEHOLD HE COMES.²⁶⁷ R. Judan and R. Hunia both explained that this refers to the Messiah, who will come and say to Israel, "In this month you are to be redeemed"; as it says, "This month shall be unto you the beginning of months" (Ex. 12:2). Since God desires to deliver Israel, He takes no heed of their reckonings, but LEAPS OVER THE MOUNTAINS. He leaps over human calculations and periods, SKIPPING UPON THE HILLS. Since God desires to deliver Israel, He disregards their evil deeds and heeds the righteous and their actions.²⁶⁸ He even disregards Israel's idolatrous worship to redeem them soon. "I the Lord will hasten it in its time" (Is. 60:22).

R. Hiyya and R. Simeon b. Halaftha were more circumspect. While walking one day in the early morning, as they saw the dawn coming up, they said, "Even so shall the deliverance of Israel break forth, as it is written, 'Though I sit in darkness, the Lord is a light unto me'" (Micah 7:8). Deliverance of Israel would be like the

dawn coming up, gradually little by little, then it begins to sparkle, gaining more strength, and then it spreads over the sky.²⁶⁹ Ultimately, the Messiah would come to Israel, though, it might seem an endless wait.

The Sages claim that Elijah will herald the era of peace in the world to come, as it says, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet . . . and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 3:23f). Also, MY BELOVED SPOKE AND SAID UNTO ME²⁷⁰ indicating that God spoke through Elijah and said through the Messiah: THE TIME OF THE ZAMIR IS COME²⁷¹ meaning, the time has come for Israel to be delivered; the time has come for the kingdom of heaven to be revealed, as it says, "And the Lord shall be King over all the earth" (Zech. 14:9).²⁷² After Elijah's proclamation, the Messiah will be heard; THE VOICE OF THE TURTLE IS HEARD IN OUR LAND.²⁷³ This is the voice of the Messiah introducing himself as God's messenger of good tidings,²⁷⁴ indicating a Messianic era, a time for blessing God and repentance.²⁷⁵ The Messiah will guide²⁷⁶ all humanity in the way of repentance before the Holy One, blessed be He.

Meanwhile, Israel looks forward to the Messiah's arrival, I AM MY BELOVED'S AND HIS DESIRE תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ IS TOWARD ME:²⁷⁷ we are fainting אֲנִי חֲשִׁים , but even though we faint, we anxiously await and hope בְּקִרְבִּים²⁷⁸ for the salvation of the Holy One, blessed be He, every day.

And we declare the unity of His name twice daily saying,
 "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One"
 (Deut. 6:4).

Israel declares God's praise, awaiting the day of His Kingdom. Despite life's travails, the Jew is inspired by the hope of God's redemption; a Messianic era which will herald a Kingdom of unity, harmony, and tranquility for all mankind.

Human Relations

Finally, there are a number of subthemes found in the Midrash to Song of Songs that emerge less frequently from an allegoric interpretation of the text, but are worth noting. We might group them under the general heading of נְמִילוּת הַסִּדִּים --deeds of loving kindness, or perhaps even better מִצוֹת בֵּין אָדָם לְהֶבְרֵי --the ways in which people interact with one another; human relations, dealing with your fellow men, etc. The Rabbis, of course, were particularly interested in transmitting the ethical laws of the Torah as well as those of ritual and practice. Chastity, modesty, self-control, and Tzedakah are among them. The Midrash and Talmud are full of legal and aggadic material which stress proper human behavior and attitude.

Chastity

The notion of sexual chastity and morality is explained first in the Song's literal context. If

understood as a love poem expressed between man and woman, Gordis writes, "The whole spirit of the Song of Songs militates against the idea of promiscuity in love, for everywhere the unique relationship of the pair involved is emphasized."²⁷⁹ He cites several references as substantiation: Verse 6:9 MY DOVE, MY UNDEFINED IS BUT ONE and verse 8:8ff WE HAVE A LITTLE SISTER [beloved]

. . . IF SHE BE A WALL . . . AND IF SHE BE A DOOR. .

. . The passage is usually taken to express a contrast between the alternatives of the chastity of the maiden ("if she be a wall") and her looseness ("But if she be a door, etc."). WE WILL ENCLOSE HER WITH BOARDS OF CEDAR-- accordingly the boards of cedar is not a punishment for unchastity. It rather may have been a hint at the gifts with which her suitors hoped to overcome her resistance.²⁸⁰

The maiden proclaims I WAS A WALL against unwelcome suitors, AND MY BREASTS WERE LIKE TOWERS.²⁸¹ It implies that she remains impregnable to them, while her breasts are well-developed, so that she is ready for love, but only with her lover. And in verse 8:11ff MY VINEYARD, WHICH IS MINE IS BEFORE ME stresses the special relationship of the man and his woman to the exclusion of other men. We find complaints by the maiden of advances made by all other lovers, which she rejects: DO NOT GAZE UPON ME²⁸² and also I WAS A WALL²⁸³ to their advances. She rebuffs their strategy of "invasion." The sense of being a "wall" indicates she refuses their

overtures, rather than being compliant like a "door."²⁸⁴
 Her constancy brings her, her lover's favor.²⁸⁵ She
 is motivated by the honorable intention of marriage.
 WHEN SHE SHALL BE SPOKEN FOR,²⁸⁶ when she is mature and
 ready for love and marriage. Then, she declares, she
 will be a "fountain of well-being and joy for her
 lover."²⁸⁷

References to the King imply the bridegroom,
 providing evidence that on a literal level, the Song relates
 to a married love,²⁸⁸ and describes a wedding dance.²⁸⁹
 The lover is king, i.e., the bridegroom, as in THE KING
 WAS RECLINING--AT HIS BOARD . . . MY WELL BELOVED IS
 TO ME, and in A KING CAUGHT IN ITS TRESSES. Thus the
Song speaks of a wholesome, sacred love relationship
 between a man and a woman, that is, marriage. On the
 literal Biblical level then, the Song militates against
 promiscuity in love and unchastity. It exalts the noble
 model of marriage between a maiden and her shepherd.

On the Rabbinic level, the Song of Songs understood
 as allegory, also speaks of sexual chastity. The Song praises
 the Israelites in remaining chaste and moral on a sexual
 level, but in addition speaks of Israel's faithfulness
 to God in the religious sense. There are numerous
 references. A GARDEN SHUT UP IS MY SISTER²⁹⁰ refers
 to the chastity of Israel among the Egyptians. "If they
 could compel their labor surely they must have had power
 over their bodies and their wives! . . . Said the

Holy One, blessed be He: 'My garden is closed shut, but still it is maligned.'"291

R. Phinehas illustrates to prove Israel's fidelity:

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.292

In other words, God testifies about Israel that they were the legitimate sons of their fathers. There had been no unfaithfulness with the Egyptians.

R. Phinehas goes on to explain, A GARDEN SHUT UP refers to the virgins,293 A SPRING SHUT UP refers to the married women; and A FOUNTAIN SEALED refers to the males. All then, are praised for their chastity. We learn from this how admirable were the Israelites. R. Abba b. Kahana gave a similar illustration:

Sarah went down to Egypt and guarded herself against immorality, and all the women guarded themselves for her sake. Joseph went down to Egypt and guarded himself against immorality, and all the men guarded themselves for his sake.294

Here, R. Phinehas concludes, this avoidance of immorality was of itself sufficient merit to warrant the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. Why? Because A GARDEN SHUT UP IS MY SISTER and also THY SENDING FORTH295 was because they kept themselves fenced in from immorality.296 Sarah and Joseph set the noble example of morality and chastity for all Israel to follow.

The Midrash takes its stand against promiscuity and improper sexual activity from several chapters in Leviticus.²⁹⁷ Using verse 5:15 as a pretext, HIS LEGS ARE AS PILLARS OF MARBLE, the Rabbis repeat the injunctions against intercourse with female slaves and intercourse with a wife during her period of impurity.²⁹⁸

Most praiseworthy are the Israelite women. The Rabbis deliberately extoll the virtue of Jewish women, not only on a sexual level but in refusing to succumb to idolatry. THOU ART BEAUTIFUL, O MY BELOVED,²⁹⁹ this refers to the women of the generation of the wilderness for they were virtuous, and refused to participate in the building of the golden calf.³⁰⁰ R. Levi explained the verse AND MAIDENS WITHOUT NUMBER to illustrate that children of other peoples did not know either their fathers or their mothers. But of Israel, each could identify his parents, as it says, "And they declared their pedigrees after their families, by their father's houses"³⁰¹ (Num. 1:18). This implied that there were no illicit births among Israel as there were among the other nations. Lastly, Israelite women were praised for their loyalty and chastity to their husbands, as in AT OUR DOORS ARE ALL MANNER OF PRECIOUS FRUITS.³⁰² The daughters of Israel were extolled for their fidelity, and never diverted astray from their "doors" to know other men.³⁰³

In THY TEETH ARE LIKE A FLOCK OF SHEEP³⁰⁴ the men of Israel are said to have been chaste and virtuous in the war of Midian. The soldiers went in among the Midianite women two together, WHEREOF ALL ARE PAIRED in order to prevent each other from being tempted or seduced.³⁰⁵ Because of that, NONE FAILETH AMONG THEM, none was suspected of sin or immorality. Moses praised them, saying:

Even the emptiest among you is as full of religious observances and good deeds as a pomegranate of seeds.³⁰⁶ For if anyone has an opportunity of committing a sin and avoids it and does not commit it, he performs a highly pious act.³⁰⁷

Israel exhibited chastity and self-restraint.

Despite all the comments praising Israel for her virtue, the Rabbis of the Midrash warn that the inclination to unchastity still exists. Though God created two evil inclinations in His world, the inclination to idolatry has already been uprooted from the Jewish people. Yet God reassures us, "If one can resist the inclination to unchastity, I account it to him as if he had withstood both."³⁰⁸

Modesty

How do the Rabbis interpret references to modesty and self-control? Throughout the ages, Judaism has taught the virtues of humility, moderation, and good taste.

We find these statements in the Midrash:

Just as water leaves a high place and flows to a low one, so the Torah leaves one whose spirit is proud and cleaves to one whose spirit is lowly. Just as water does not keep well in a vessel of silver or gold but in the commonest of vessels, so the Torah resides only in one who makes himself like a vessel of earthenware. Just as with water a great man is not ashamed to say to a lowly man, "Give me a drink of water," so with the words of the Torah, a great scholar must not be ashamed to say to a lesser one, "Teach me one chapter, or one statement, or one verse, or even one letter."³⁰⁹

Torah, then, is the prized possession of the humble.

R. Simeon b. Lakish said, "Just as a bride must be modest, so a Rabbinical scholar should be modest."³¹⁰ The verse THY TEMPLES ARE LIKE A POMEGRANATE SPLIT OPEN³¹¹ indicates that even the most unlearned person in Israel is as full of answers as a pomegranate of seeds.³¹² Therefore, one can always learn from his fellow man.

Self-Control

The Rabbis often interpret verses allegorically in the Song of Songs in order to teach a fundamental lesson of self-control and restraint. LET MY BELOVED COME INTO HIS GARDEN³¹³--according to R. Johanan, "The Torah here gives a lesson in good breeding, that the bridegroom should not enter the bridal chamber until the bride grants him permission."³¹⁴ Such restraint of one's desires was seen advocated in other verses. As mentioned earlier, the Rabbis reiterate the Biblical injunction against approaching one's wife in her period of menstruation. What is it that makes a man control his appetites? R. Levi gave an illustration:

It often happens that a man takes a wife when he is thirty or forty years old and after going to great expense he wants to associate with her, yet if she says to him, "I have seen a rose-red speck," he immediately keeps away from her. What made him keep away from her? Was there a wall of iron between them, or a pillar of iron, or did the serpent bite him, or did a scorpion sting him that he should keep away from her? It was only the words of Torah . . . since it says concerning her, "And thou shalt not approach unto a woman . . . as long as she is impure by her uncleanness." (Lev. 18:19)

So, too, if a dish of meat is laid before a man and he is told that some forbidden fat has fallen into it, he leaves it alone and will not taste it. Now who stopped him from tasting it? Did a serpent bite him that he should not taste it? Or did a scorpion sting him that he should not taste it? It was words of Torah . . . because it is written, "Ye shall eat neither fat nor blood." (Lev. 3:17)³¹⁵

Although Torah dictates law, obedience to it is self-imposed and self-enforced. The Midrash calls upon each Jew to exercise his own adherence to Torah law; to control his own appetites, to restrain his human desires by sublimating them to a lower level of priority.

We already mentioned how admirable the soldiers of Israel were in maintaining their chastity and virtue among the Midianite women.³¹⁶ They resisted temptation to sexual seduction and did not indulge in sin. Moses praised the "chaste and self-restrained" among them. They did nothing immoral, BEHIND THE VEIL.³¹⁷ They were "modest and self-controlled."³¹⁸

So, too, the Israelite women are praised as "The modest and blameless daughters of Israel"³¹⁹ who gladdened their husbands for the forty years that Israel was in the wilderness.

Even the children are praised as exercising restraint to avoid wrong-doing. THE MANDRAKES GIVE FORTH FRAGRANCE³²⁰ refers to the youths of Israel who do not know the taste of sin.³²¹

Thus, the sum total of Israel, men, women, and children are shown to exemplify the virtues of modesty of heart, and self-control of emotions and desires.

Giving Charity

The Rabbis of the Midrash recognized that Tzeddakah can be a problem for some. Yet they seek to explain its importance as part of the mitzvah system. There are several references to the giving of charity in Shir Hashirim Rabba.

I WENT DOWN INTO THE GARDEN OF NUTS³²² is interpreted to illustrate that just as there are different types of nuts--soft, medium, and hard, so too among Jews there are different types of givers. Those who give charity unsolicited--they are the most admirable. Those who have to be asked before they give--at least they give! And those who refuse to give even when asked. To the latter, R. Levi quoted the proverb, "The door that is not opened for good deeds will be opened for the doctor."³²³ How clever and what foresight he had into our day! At the same time, R. Berekiyah quoted another proverb: The giving of a present is good from one who

has inherited wealth, not from one who has robbed it.³²⁴
In other words, the source of the gift is also important.

Israel is praiseworthy in the performance of religious precepts and in the exercise of charity. HOW FAIR AND HOW PLEASANT ART THOU³²⁵ is interpreted to praise Israel in regard to מַצוֹת בֵּין אָדָם לְאָחֵר. Israel is "fair" with regard to affirmative precepts and negative commandments. Israel is indeed charitable, fulfilling the precepts of the field, allowing gleanings, forgotten sheaf and corners for the poor, and in renouncing ownership during the Sabbatical year. How generous Israel is with the distribution of the terumah and the tithes. These are mitzvot of גְּמִילוּת חַסְדִּים of which the Rabbis seek to recognize.

Yet the Midrash wants to encourage the performance of good actions. Though the Rabbis agree that study is most important because it leads to action,³²⁶ they still say LET ME HEAR THY VOICE³²⁷--make yourself be heard through actions and deeds. In so doing, the Rabbis delight: "How pleasant is Israel with good deeds. How fair is Israel in this world and how pleasant in the next world."³²⁸

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CHAPTER IV

THE MUTUAL LOVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND ISRAEL

Introduction

The primary focus of this study is those verses in the Song of Songs which suggest, when interpreted allegorically, the theme of the unique love relationship between God and Israel. We shall explore how, according to the Rabbis, God and Israel express their love for each other; the ways in which the love relationship manifests itself; the conflict between love and covenant; the Rabbinic attempt to reconcile the tension between love and commandment; the idea of "mutual obligations" the Rabbis find implicit in the God-Israel relationship; the central concept of God's special love for Israel and His selection of Israel as His people; and God's gift of Torah the symbol of His love for Israel.

There are many verses in the Song of Songs that either implicitly or explicitly deal with the love theme. Understood literally, the Song enumerates the blissful love of a maiden and her shepherd. Allegorically, the Song extolls the mutual love expressed between the people Israel and her Creator. It was the literal interpretation

against which the Rabbis levelled their strictures and raised the question of including the Song in the Biblical Canon.

Yet, even when understood literally, the work is not lewd or sensate. Man and woman are joined in a psychophysical unity which the poets of the Songs neither hide nor exploit.¹ As Jastrow says of the Song's human appeal, "Love is sacred even in passionate manifestations."² The physical basis of love is extolled in the Song without shame or pruriency. "It serves as the foundation for the spiritual relationship, which is adumbrated in many an incidental phrase and reaches its climax in the great paean to love³ in verses 8:6-7."⁴

FOR LOVE IS STRONG AS DEATH, JEALOUSY IS CRUEL AS THE GRAVE. . . . MANY WATERS CAN NOT QUENCH LOVE, NEITHER CAN THE FLOODS DROWN IT. IF A MAN WOULD GIVE ALL THE SUBSTANCE OF HIS HOUSE FOR LOVE, HE WOULD BE LAUGHED TO SCORN.

Herder describes the Song "holy as a song of pure natural love, the holiness of human life."⁵ For Dr. Gordis, the unabashed attitude toward love is expressed throughout the book. "Thus the basic truth underlying the Song of Songs is emphasized, that natural love is holy."⁶

Through the allegorical interpretation of the Song, the Rabbis glorify the special relationship Israel enjoys with God. Indeed the Rabbis of the Midrash and Talmud revel in what they consider to be the privilege of a "Chosen People." God chose Israel by virtue of a covenant made with the Patriarchs and consummated by

the revelation of God's Laws at Sinai. Israel chose God by accepting His gift of Torah and devoting themselves to it. Thus God and Israel mutually declare their love for each other as an eternal, unconditional relationship. Song of Songs in its poetic beauty, is a passionate dialogue of endearment and commitment, a love story that began with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and continues through history.

Mutual Love

The Song of Songs speaks of a mutual love relationship in which God and Israel are equal partners. Each expresses a love for the other. According to the Midrash, the Song of Songs is "the best of songs, the most excellent of songs, the finest of songs."⁷ Why? Because in all other songs either God praises Israel or they praise Him. In the Song of Moses at the Red Sea, Israel praise Him, saying, "This is my God, and I will glorify Him" (Ex. 15:2). In the Song of Moses before his death, God praises Israel, as it says, "He made him ride on the high places of the earth" (Deut. 32:13). Here, in the Song of Songs, however, Israel praise God and He praises them. He praises them: "Behold thou art beautiful, my beloved" (S. of S. 1:16), and they praise Him: "Behold thou art beautiful, my beloved, verily pleasant" (S. of S. 1:17).⁸ Hence, R. Simon and R. Simeon agree, the Song of Songs is a double song in

its beauty and holiness, being composed of two strands-- Israel's praise of God and God's praise of Israel.

The verse MY BELOVED IS MINE AND I AM HIS⁹ is the ultimate expression of mutual love. Israel claims, "He is my God and I am His chosen nation." He is my God--"I am the Lord thy God" (Ex. 20:2). I am His people and nation, as it says, "Attend unto Me, O My people, and give ear unto Me, O My nation" (Isaiah 51:4).¹⁰ This God-Israel relationship of love is given various descriptions in the Midrash. God is as a father to Israel, and Israel is as a son to Him.¹¹ He is as a shepherd to Israel, and Israel is as a flock to Him.¹² God is the keeper, Israel is His vineyard.¹³ God fights off those that challenge Israel, and Israel fights for Him against those that provoke Him.¹⁴ R. Judah b. R. Il'ai said, "He sang of me and I sang of Him; He extolled me and I extolled Him; He called me, 'My sister, My beloved, My dove, My perfect one,' and I said to Him, 'This is my beloved and this is my friend.'"¹⁵ Verses 1:15 and 1:16 are juxtaposed to represent a dialogue of love. God said to Israel, BEHOLD THOU ART FAIR, MY LOVE and Israel said to God, BEHOLD THOU ART FAIR, MY BELOVED. Israel pledges her love to God by declaring the unity of His name twice daily, saying in the Shema prayer: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). God proclaims his singular love for Israel by saying; "And who is like Thy people, like Israel,

a nation one in the earth" (IISam. 7:23). Israel seeks help only from God and God seeks loyalty only from Israel.¹⁶ When Israel was in distress, she sought assistance only from God. When God wanted his sanctuary to be built, He depended only upon Israel.¹⁷

A variation of verse 2:16 appears again twice in the Song. Verse 6:3 reads I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND MY BELOVED IS MINE¹⁸ and then in verse 7:11 I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND HIS DESIRE IS TOWARDS ME.¹⁹ Each is an expression of reciprocal love between God and the Jewish People. Rav Kahana compared this relationship to the linking of heaven and earth with Jerusalem. Heaven and earth rejoiced with Jerusalem upon the growth of her lilies, nourished by rain from heaven.²⁰ Solomon summed up in the Song of Songs what the prophets Joel and Isaiah had accounted of this rejoicing, I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND MY BELOVED IS MINE, THAT FEEDETH AMONG THE LILIES.

Midrash Rabba on the Song specifies that verse 7:11 I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND HIS DESIRE IS TOWARDS ME indicates that there are three strong desires in the world. Among them is the yearning of Israel toward their Father in heaven. It is as strong as the longing of a woman for her husband and the longing of the Evil Inclination for Cain and men like him.²¹ Israel yearns for God, and declares the unity of His name twice daily, proclaiming the Shema. Midrash Breshit Rabba adds to

the list the desire of rain for the earth. Yet among the four, God's desire for Israel is the strongest.²²

Though they may be deficient in the performance of the mitzvot, Israel reciprocates God's love by hoping for His salvation and reciting the Shema prayer.²³ Midrash Bamidbar Rabba also cites verse 7:11 to explain God's eagerness (פְּתִילָה) to create the universe.²⁴ Israel was the crown of God's creations.

There are various other verses interpreted allegorically to illustrate mutual love of God and Israel. R. Berekiah said that Israel extols God in the Song of Songs and God extols Israel.²⁵ In the Song, Israel begins His praises from above and goes downwards, God commences Israel's praise from below and goes upward.²⁶ In verses 5:11-15 Israel praises God from head to toe, as it were, because God is in the heights among the angels and His divine presence resides among mankind. God praises Israel in verses 7:2-6 from her feet to the hair of her head, because she was on the lowest level and He will raise her up, as it says, "The Lord thy God will set thee on high" (Deut. 28:1). The Midrash illustrates in a parable:

God was like a King who betrothed a lady and said, "I desire to see her," and when he saw her he began to recount her praises, as it says, "This stature is like to a palm tree" [S. of S. 7:8]. She also said "I desire to see him," and when she saw him, she began to sing his praises, HIS MOUTH IS MOST SWEET, YEA, HE IS ALTOGETHER LOVELY.²⁷

Exodus Rabba compares God to an apple tree in its interpretation of Song of Songs as a dialogue between God and Israel. "As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons" (S. of S. 2:3). God and His Torah appeared unattractive to the heathens. Yet to Israel, God's Torah was as food that possessed good taste and fragrance.²⁸ HIS MOUTH IS MOST SWEET; YEA, HE IS ALTOGETHER LOVELY.²⁹ Israel declares her love for God and loyalty to His Torah: "We know of the power of the Torah, therefore, we will not budge from God and His Torah,"³⁰ as it says "Its fruit was sweet to my taste" (S. of S. 2:3).

Bamidbar Rabba cites the verse to allude to the Holy One, blessed be He.³¹ HIS MOUTH IS MOST SWEET; could any morsel be sweeter than God? HE IS ALTOGETHER LOVELY; God rewards Israel and sets them apart from other nations as His chosen. "And I have set you apart from the peoples, that ye should be Mine" (Lev. 20:26). Israel is God's "chosen people." THIS IS MY BELOVED, AND THIS IS MY FRIEND.³² Israel, in turn, brings new friends, proselytes, under the Divine protection.³³

Midrash Tanhuma comments on God and Israel in a similar way.³⁴ Israel praises God from above to below and God praises Israel from below to above. She praises Him from above to below since she brought Him [Shechinah] down from the Heaven to dwell among them. He praises them from below to above since He raised them up

[brought them up] from the desert. Israel lovingly praises God's features from His head to His feet. God lovingly describes Israel's features from her feet to her lips. Such was the reason, says Rabbi Yohanan, that God gave the Torah to Israel, His bride. Thus God raised Israel above the other nations of the world.

R. Abbahu and R. Hanina explained verse 1:15, BEHOLD, THOU ART FAIR, MY LOVE; BEHOLD THOU ART FAIR and verse 1:16 BEHOLD, THOU ART FAIR, MY BELOVED, YEA PLEASANT³⁵ to mean that God praises the community of Israel and she praises Him. If God desires to choose another nation, He can, but He does not, and for that very reason He emphasizes her fairness.³⁶ She also praises Him, saying, "Sovereign of the universe, the anger (af) which Thou bringest upon me is pleasant, because Thou thereby bringest me back and turnest me to better ways."³⁷

Such is the relationship of love built upon mutual trust,³⁸ for R. Phinehas said, the Jews do not forsake God and God does not forsake them. They trust in Him, to fulfill what is said, HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THY FOOTSTEPS.³⁹ This alludes to the feet of the festival pilgrims, who travel to Jerusalem to pray.⁴⁰ God protects their homes while they are gone.⁴¹ Exodus Rabba cites a parable to illustrate God's concern for Israel:

To what could the assembly of Israel be compared?
To a king whose beloved daughter was across the

river; whereupon he stretched out his hand to her, helped her to cross over and then placed her in his coach, as it is said: HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THY STEPS.
 . . .⁴²

So too, God praises His children Israel with this very expression.⁴³

R. Hanina bar Ada, citing this same verse, illustrated Israel's observance of the festivals and God's reward to them.

For the Holy One says to Israel: For My sake you "enclose" yourselves during Passover, and so during Sukkot while you are in your sukkahs in Jerusalem, I too, "enclose" Myself through the Festival: I hold back the winds and the rains in Jerusalem, but in your absence from your fields, for the sake of your crops, I cause winds to blow, clouds to rise, rains to come down, dews to bespangle the ground, plants to spring up, fruits to grow plump. Then during Passover you again enclose yourselves for My sake as pilgrims in Jerusalem, away from your work, but after Passover, you are able to go forth to the harvest, finding your fields full of all manner of plenty because of the winds, the rains, and the dews I brought to your fields during Sukkot.⁴⁴

In this mutual love relationship, Israel and God express love for each other with commitment of actions. Israel manifests her love for God through observance of the mitzvot and celebration of the pilgrimage festivals.⁴⁵ HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THEY STEPS--How comely are the feet of Israel when they go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival pilgrimage.⁴⁶

God manifests His love for Israel through care and protection. Indeed, God continually praises Israel's children and promises them abundant reward.⁴⁷ NEW AND OLD WHICH I HAVE LAID UP FOR THEE, O MY BELOVED.⁴⁸

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."

As it says, "O how abundant is Thy goodness, which Thou has laid up for them that fear Thee; which Thou hast wrought for them that take their refuge in Thee" (Ps. 31:20).⁴⁹ Some say Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are meant by "old ones," and all the worthy men who were in Egypt are meant by "new ones." Alternatively, those with Moses and Joshua, David and Hezekiah are called "old ones," while the companies of Ezra, Hillel, R. Johanan b. Zakkai, R. Meier and his colleagues are termed "new ones."⁵⁰ So too, we in our day might be termed "new ones," for whom God stores up treasures in the world to come. By merit of our ancestors' זכרות אבות and through our own earned merit, we may continue to be worthy of God's love.⁵¹

Other nations have often begrudged Israel the special love God bestows upon her. They taunt Israel that God has abandoned them. They challenge Israel, as to the steadfastness of this relationship. Israel responds rhetorically; "Once I have attached myself to God, can I separate from Him? Once He has attached Himself to me, can He separate from me? Wherever He is, He comes to me."⁵² God and Israel are inseparable, never do the "lovers" part company. Each revels in the warm security that the other provides.

Perhaps R. Jannai sums up best the nature of this mutual love relationship when he tells us that God refers to Israel as, "My twin"⁵³ (teumati): I am not greater than she nor is she greater than I am. How might Israel and God be considered twins? R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi: Just as, if one twin has a pain in his head, the other feels it also, so, as it were, the Holy One, blessed be He, said, "I will be with him in trouble"⁵⁴ (Ps. 91:15). God and Israel share each other's pain, lighten one another's burdens and increase their love and joy together.

God's Love for Israel

God's special love for Israel is a theme which frequently emerges in the Rabbinic treatment of the Song of Songs. God expresses His unique love for the Jewish people through the gift of Torah and the divine presence of His Shechinah to dwell in Israel's midst. God continually reaches out to His people in their time of need. He searches for Israel, seeking to assure them of His love in their time of fear and doubt. The God of mercy is ever willing to accept Israel's penitence and to forgive her her sins. These are the manifestations of a divine love that God endows His "chosen people."

One of the most beautifully poetic and suggestive verses of the Song of Songs is 1:2, LET HIM KISS ME

WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH, FOR THY LOVE IS BETTER THAN WINE.⁵⁵ God demonstrates His deep love for Israel by offering them His most precious possession, His gift of Torah. When Israel readily accepts, God kisses them in joy! R. Johanan tells an interesting story:

An angel carried the utterances at Mount Sinai from before the Holy One, blessed be He, each one in turn, and brought it to each of the Israelites and said to him, "Do you take upon yourself this commandment? So-and-so many rules are attached to it, so-and-so many penalties are attached to it, so-and-so many precautionary measures are attached to it, so many precepts and so many lenient and strict applications are attached to it; such-and-such a reward is attached to it." The Israelite would answer him, "Yes." He then said, "Do you accept the divinity of the Holy One, blessed be He?" and he answered, "Yes, yes." Thereupon he kissed him on the mouth. . . .⁵⁶

The Rabbis however, gave a different version of the story:

The commandment itself went in turn to each of the Israelites and said to him, "Do you undertake to keep me? So many rules are attached to me, so many penalties, so many precautionary measures, so many regulations are attached to me, so many relaxations and rigors; such-and-such a reward is attached to me." He would reply, "Yes, yes," and straightway the commandment kissed him on the mouth and taught him Torah.⁵⁷

God was so pleased with Israel's immediate acceptance of His Torah, that He kissed them on the mouth!

Because of His love for Israel, God delivered His Laws directly to them, and spoke them through His servant, Moses. Again, Rabbi Johanan applies verse 1:2 to Israel when they went up to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah:

It was as if a king wanted to marry a woman of good and noble family, so he sent an envoy to speak with her. She said, "I am not worthy to be even his handmaid, but nevertheless, I desire to hear his proposal 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 of the woman's decision. The king, who was very perceptive, said: "This man is full of smiles, which would show that she consented, and yet he does not give me any clear report, which would seem to show that she said that she wants to hear me propose from my own mouth."⁵⁸

So here, R. Johanan compares, Israel is the woman of good family, Moses is the envoy, and the king is the Holy One, blessed be He. Thus, God spoke directly, proclaiming His laws to Israel, His beloved people.

Exodus Rabba explains the verse similarly:

You find that when Israel stood ready to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai, they wanted to hear the Decalogue from God's own mouth. R. Phinehas b. Harna, the priest, said: Two things did Israel ask of God--to see His likeness and to hear from His own mouth the Decalogue, as it says, "LET HIM KISS ME WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH. . . ."⁵⁹ God thought to Himself: "I will reveal Myself to them and also speak with them mouth to mouth," as it says, "And God spoke all these words saying." (Ex. 20:1)⁶⁰

Hence this Midrash intimates that on account of His great love for Israel, God gave the Torah to them from His own mouth. God Himself spoke to Israel directly and not through Moses as an intermediary.⁶¹ Thus there was a dialogue at Sinai between God and Israel. God spoke to them Torah, and Israel responded, "All that the Lord hath spoken, we will do and obey" (Ex. 24:7).

R. Jose b. R. Hanina illustrated God's special love for Israel in another parable:

It is as if a king was distributing provisions to his soldiers through his generals, officers, and commanders, but when his own son came, he gave him with his own hand.⁶²

R. Isaac compared God's giving of Torah to Israel to a king who fed his son from his own plate. The Rabbis said further, it was as if a king who was eating meat, gave to his son from his own mouth,⁶³ as it says, "For the Lord giveth wisdom, out of His mouth cometh knowledge and discernment" (Prov. 2:6). All of these parables are illustrations of the great intimacy and love of God for Israel implied in the words HIS MOUTH.

God gave Israel His complete Torah as a sign of His total love. R. Simon said in the name of R. Hanina:

It can be compared to a king who had before him a well-laid table with all kinds of dishes thereon. When his first servant entered, he gave him a slice of meat; to the second he gave an egg; to the third some vegetables. When his son came in, he gave him all that was before him, saying to him, "To the others I gave only single portions, but to you I give all." So also God gave to the heathen nations only some of the commandments, but when Israel arose, He said to them, "Behold the whole Torah is yours."⁶⁴

God lovingly taught the Torah unto Israel, explaining each precept separately to them, both its punishment for nonfulfillment and reward for its fulfillment, as it says, LET HIM KISS ME WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH, where "kisses," in the plural, indicates both punishment and reward.

The Targum also related the "kissing" to the giving of the Law:

Said Solomon the prophet: Blessed be the name of the Holy One who gave us the Law by the hand of Moses, the Scribe, a Law inscribed on two tablets of stone, and six orders of the Mishnah and the Talmud by oral tradition, and spoke to us face to face as a man kisses his companion, from the abundance of the love with which He loved us, more than the seventy nations.⁶⁵

The Midrash concludes the exposition of the verse 1:2, FOR BETTER ARE THY LOVED ONES THAN WINE to refer to Israel in regard to the Gentile nations. The numerical value of the three Hebrew letters of the word ויין "wine" equals seventy, alluding to the seventy nations, showing that God loves Israel more than all the other seventy nations.⁶⁶

As we have seen, the Midrash Rabbah offers numerous wordplays and associations of ideas on the kissing, the love, and the wine, applying them in a variety of ways to the words of the Law, the Patriarchs, and Israel.

Rav Kahana cites R. Abun to give verse 1:2 a slightly different interpretation; "Thy love is good because of wine"⁶⁷ where words of Torah are like spiced wine and sweet to the taste. Words of Torah reflect so many facets of God's being, and are the most precious and intimate possession bequeathed to Israel as a sign of His love. The enduring and eternal sign of God's love is His gift of Torah.

There are other verses that symbolically refer to the love which God bore to Israel, as it says, "I have loved, you, saith the Lord" (Mal. 1:2). God

promises to love Israel TILL IT PLEASES,⁶⁸ i.e., until God brings deliverance to usher in His heavenly kingdom.⁶⁹ Verse 2:9, MY BELOVED IS LIKE A GAZELLE is explained to show God's affectionate greeting to Israel. God calls out to them, "My love, My love!"⁷⁰ God initiates the love in the relationship.⁷¹

R. Eleazar b. R. Jose explained the verse THE CROWN WHERE WITH HIS MOTHER CROWNED HIM⁷² by a parable:

A king possessed an only child--a daughter, of whom he was exceedingly fond. He loved her so dearly, that at first he called her "my daughter," and when his love increased, he called her "my sister," and still not satisfied with that, he called her "my mother." So too the Holy One, blessed be He, loved Israel exceedingly and first addressed them as "daughter," as it says, "Hearken, O daughter, and consider" [Ps. 45:11]; when He loved Israel more, He called them "my sister," as it says, "Open to me, My sister, my love" [S. of S. 5:2]; and still not satisfied with that He called them "mother," for it says, "Attend unto Me, O My people, and give ear unto Me, O My nation"--u-le'umi [Isa. 51:4],⁷⁴ where it is written ul'immi⁷³ (and to my mother).

Israel is the cherished "daughter" whom God fathers.

A daughter is subject and owes duty to her father. Israel

is the devoted "sister" whom God trusts and protects.

A sister enjoys the same status as her brother, neither having greater obligations than the other. Israel is the beloved "mother" who crowns God with love and reverence. One is subject to his mother. From that point of view, God endears Israel to Himself with three names of progressively increasing expression of love and intimacy.

With the continuation of the verse, ON THE DAY OF HIS WEDDING, AND ON THE DAY OF THE GLADNESS OF HIS HEART the Talmud⁷⁵ relates the "day of espousal" to the day of the giving of the Law at Sinai, when Israel was like a bridegroom. This refers to God's spiritual love relationship with Israel.⁷⁶ The "Day of the gladness of heart" alludes to the joy of receiving the Law (Ps. 19:9). The Torah is the symbol of Israel's betrothal to God. The revelation at Sinai was, as it were, a wedding ceremony between God and Israel, as is borne out by the text, "Betroth [Sanctify] them today and tomorrow" (Ex. 19:10). The Talmud and Lamentations Rabbah also refer the "day of gladness" to the day of building and eagerly awaited rebuilding of the Temple.⁷⁷ Similarly, the Midrash Rabba refers the "day of joy of heart" to the day of consecration of the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle and the Temple,⁷⁸ when God, as it were, came to dwell among His people. How do we know that the Tent of Meeting symbolized a wedding? Because it is written, "And it came to pass on the day that Moses had finished [Kallot] כלל setting up the tabernacle" (Num. 7:1); the written form is כלל (bride of) which may be translated, "On the day when the bride entered the bridal chamber."⁷⁹ This was the day of God's betrothal to Israel at Sinai, or of God's marrying Israel on Sinai.⁸⁰

The Midrash Pesikta De-Rab Kahana also concludes that the "crown" signifies the Tent of Meeting, which is like a crown, for it was set with precious stones and beautifully adorned with fine linens.⁸¹ Israel lovingly built the Tent of Meeting as a crown in which God would reside.

Among the many terms of endearment expressed by God for Israel, the term "bride" is seen frequently in the Rabbinic literature. R. Berekiah and R. Helbo claimed that there are ten references in Scripture where God refers to Israel as a bride.⁸² Six appear in the Song of Songs and four in the prophetic writings.⁸³

Throughout the Midrash Rabbah to the Song of Songs, Israel is shown to be praiseworthy as God's bride. A GARDEN SHUT UP IS MY SISTER, MY BRIDE⁸⁴ refers to Israel in Egypt, when they were found to be blameless. In Babylon as well, they were found perfect.⁸⁵ The term bride was lovingly applied to Israel, a complimentary term, symbolic of a virgin's chastity.⁸⁶ The virgins, married women and males were all completely chaste.⁸⁷ Therefore, Israel was redeemed from Egypt.

COME WITH ME FROM LEBANON, MY BRIDE⁸⁸ indicates that God led Israel, His bride, directly from the bondage of Egypt to the bridal canopy of Sinai. "I took thee from clay and bricks (lebenim)⁸⁹ and made thee a bride."⁹⁰ Or perhaps it means God redeemed Israel from the Babylonian exile and the captivity of Persia and restored

her to Eretz Israel. "I have done this because of the holiness of My name, and with Me you will return."

God's Shechinah accompanied Israel into exile and on their return from it, as a symbol of His abiding love for them.⁹¹

Pesikta De Rav Kahana cites a parable to illustrate Israel's worthiness of being God's bride:

There is the story of a fatherless child who grew up in a palace. When her time came to be wed, and she was asked, "Do you own anything?" she replied: "Yes, something from my father, and something from my grandfather."⁹²

Similarly the merit that Israel possesses comes from Abraham and Jacob. Thus, "When the Bridegroom putteth on His royal diadem, then the bride bedecketh herself with her garments" (Isa. 61:10)--that is, in her marriage with God, Israel is "bedecked" by her own merit. Therefore, the Midrash states that "you find that when Israel stood at Mount Sinai, she bedecked herself like a bride who (in maidenly reticence) shows only one eye while keeping the other covered."⁹³ Israel blushed in modesty before God at Sinai.

On all the above passages, the Targum understands the term bride as Israel. To verse 4:8, COME WITH ME FROM LEBANON, MY BRIDE, it reads:

Said the Holy One, blessed be He, by His word: "With Me shall dwell the Assembly of Israel, resembling a modest bride. And with Me they shall ascend to the Temple. . . .

The Targum applies verse 4:9 THOU HAST RAVISHED MY HEART, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE to Israel and her scholars, even the least of which was beloved to God:

Fixed upon the tablet of My heart is your love, My sister, Assembly of Israel, likened to a bride who is modest. Fixed upon the tablet of My heart is the love of the least of your righteous scholars.

Verse 4:10 HOW FAIR IS THY LOVE, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE is applied to the divine love for Israel and her saints.

How beautiful to Me is your love, My sister, Assembly of Israel, which is likened to a modest bride. How good to me is your love, more than the seventy nations, and the good name of your saints more fragrant than all spices.

The Targum related the "closed garden and sealed fountain" of verse 4:12 to the modesty of Israel's women, both married and virgin:

And your women who are taken by men are modest as the modest bride and like the Garden of Eden which no man is permitted to enter except the saints. . . . And your virgins are concealed and hidden in chambers and sealed. . . .

As in the Midrash Rabbah on this passage, the Targum deduced that Israelite women were exemplary in avoidance of immorality, which was of itself sufficient merit to procure Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

Finally, the Targum ascribes verse 5:1, I AM COME INTO MY GARDEN, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE to Israel as the modest bride:

Then said the Holy One, blessed be He, to His people of the House of Israel: "I have come into the Temple which you built for Me, O My sister, Assembly of Israel, who is likened to the chaste bride, and I caused My presence to dwell among you. . . .

God grants Israel His Shechinah, His divine presence, to reside among them in their midst, as a symbol of His love.

God's love for Israel is eternal. The prophet Isaiah proclaims, "Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands, thy walls are continually before Me" (Isa. 49:16). Just as it is impossible for a man to forget the palms of his hands, so God promises never to lose sight of Israel. "These may forget, yet will not I forget thee" (Isa. 49:15).⁹⁴ Or as R. Simon ben Kuzi said, "A woman may forget the sucking child, but it is impossible for a man to forget the palms of his hands."⁹⁵ Indeed, God makes of Israel something which can be seen at all times.⁹⁶

God promises His love to Israel for eternity, and pledges it, AS A SEAL UPON THY HEART, AS A SEAL UPON THINE ARM.⁹⁷ God gave Israel His seal of goodness. He "sealed" them for good, i.e., because of His undying love, He irrevocably decreed a happy and glorious future for them.⁹⁸ For God's love for Israel is AS STRONG AS DEATH, as it is written, "I have loved you, saith the Lord" (Mal. 1:2). MANY WATERS CANNOT QUENCH LOVE⁹⁹ is interpreted to mean that if all the nations of the world would endeavor to steal away God's love for His people, the love existing between Him and Israel, they would not succeed.¹⁰⁰ God declares, "I swear to thee that I have not forsaken and I will not forsake them,"

as it is written, "For the Lord will not forsake His people" (I Sam. 12:22).¹⁰¹ MANY WATERS may also refer to idolaters, for even if all the idolaters were to assemble to quench the love between God and Israel they would be powerless.¹⁰² NEITHER CAN THE FLOODS DROWN IT, alludes to their kings and princes.¹⁰³ Even they cannot divert the love God bears to Israel. No force can deter God from His feelings for the Jewish People.

In fact, God loves Israel so much that He mentions then five times in a single verse! Rabbi Yudan cited Numbers 8:19, "And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and to his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the service of the children of Israel in the Tent of Meeting, and to make atonement for the children of Israel, that there be no plague among the children of Israel, when the children of Israel come near the sanctuary." R. Simeon ben Yohai told a parable to illustrate:

A king entrusted his son to a tutor. The king, after giving the tutor specific instructions, kept inquiring: "Has my son eaten? Has my son had something to drink? Did my son go to school? Has my son returned from school?"¹⁰⁴

So too, he concludes, did God anxiously await occasions to keep mentioning the children of Israel.

R. Judah bar R. Simon gave another illustration:

A man sat around making a crown for the king. A passerby saw him and asked, "What are you making?" The man replied, "A crown for the king." The passerby said, "Set in it as many emeralds as you

can possibly set; set in it other precious stones, pearls too, since the crown will be put on the king's head." So the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, "Moses, praise Israel as much as you can; praise them for Me, glorify Israel as much as you can; glorify them because I am to be glorified through them." As it is written, "And He said unto me: Thou art My servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." (Isa. 49:3)

God brings love upon Israel because through Israel, God is loved. The love God invests in Israel is reciprocated back to Him.

Finally, we learn that in His great love, God promises Israel continued existence throughout the ages. THOU ART BEAUTIFUL, O MY LOVE¹⁰⁵ means that God favors Israel. Even though she may temporarily incur God's displeasure through sin, Israel is acceptable to God by reason of her learning, noble deeds, and repentance.¹⁰⁶ According to the Targum, God lovingly praised Israel: "How beautiful you are, My Beloved, at the time your desire is to do My will."¹⁰⁷ Israel is most beloved in her performance of the mitzvot. Out of His deep love, God blesses Israel beneficently. God rewarded Israel as was in His heart to do. R. Johanan told this story:

When Israel stood before Mount Sinai and said, "We will do, and obey," at that moment God called to the Angel of Death and said to him: "Although I have appointed thee as executioner with universal jurisdiction over My creatures, thou hast no power over this people."¹⁰⁸

R. Judah explained that God had freed Israel from the Angel of Death. R. Nehemiah said, freedom from foreign domination. Others said, freedom from tribulations.

In all, God blessed Israel with His enduring love, as it says, "Thou shalt be blessed above all peoples" (Deut. 7:14).

God's Search for Israel

The Song of Songs poetically reveals God's constant search for His beloved Israel. As a groom seeks to shower his bride with love, care, and attention, so does God desire to please Israel with His signs of affection. Love is reinforced, deepened, strengthened, and shared more fully throughout the Song's account.

The Midrashim embellish the divine love for Israel even more. The Rabbis delight in demonstrating from the text, the extent to which God seeks to offer Israel His love. God's efforts are unbounded. He opens His arms to embrace Israel at the very sight of her, but He also asks of Israel to reach out to Him and meet Him half way, and actively, to seek God's love.

In the allegory of the Song, God often alludes to Israel as an innocent, chaste dove, as in THINE EYES ARE AS DOVES.¹⁰⁹ The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "With Me they are like a simple dove, for they obey and do all that I decree upon them."¹¹⁰ Israel received commandments and became distinguished by all manner of precepts, virtues, and good deeds like a dove which is distinguished from other birds.¹¹¹ According to the Talmud, just as the dove is saved by her wings, so Israel

is saved only by the precepts.¹¹² Israel is further likened to a dove, for as the dove symbolizes the bringing of peace to the world, so Israel brings light into the world.¹¹³

In the verse O MY DOVE THAT ART IN THE CLEFTS OF THE ROCK¹¹⁴ R. Ishmael comments:

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, and found a serpent lurking there. When it tried to enter 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 dove should hear and come to its rescue. This was the position of Israel by the Red Sea. They could not go down into the sea, because it had not yet been divided before them. They could not turn back, because Pharaoh and his troops had already drawn near. What did they do? "And they were sore afraid; and the children of Israel cried out unto the Lord" [Ex. 14:10]. Then straightway, "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day." (Ex. 14:30)¹¹⁵

Here R. Ishmael interpreted the verse to indicate God's desire for Israel to seek God's assistance in time of their need. God was available and ready to help Israel. He wanted Israel to seek His help, as it says, LET ME SEE THY COUNTENANCE, LET ME HEAR THY VOICE.¹¹⁶

R. Judah explained the verse in a similar manner:

It is as if a king who had an only daughter desired very much that she should talk to him. But she would not. So what did he do? He made a proclamation saying, "Let all the people go out to the sports ground." When they all went there, what did he do? He signalled to his servants, and they fell upon her suddenly like brigands. She began crying out, "Father, save me." He said to her: "I have been yearning for this so that I might hear your voice."

Had I not done this, you would not have cried out to me, 'Father, save me.'" Similarly, when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt and were oppressed, they began to cry and lift their eyes heavenwards to the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, "And it came to pass in the course of those many days . . . the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried out to the Lord" [Ex. 2:23]. Immediately we read, "And God saw the children of Israel and He heard their groaning" [Ex. 2:24]: the Holy One, blessed be He, heard their prayer and brought them forth from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. It was then that God said, "I wanted to hear your voices. Had I not done so to you, I would not have heard your voice." Referring to that moment He said, MY DOVE IN THE CLEFT OF THE ROCK."¹¹⁷

The Midrash interprets "in the clefts of the rock" to mean "in a tight corner," or "hemmed in on all sides." Israel was "hemmed in" in Egyptian bondage and cried to God for help. The text does not read LET ME HEAR a voice, but rather THY VOICE, the voice of Israel yearning for God's deliverance. This was God's set purpose. He wanted to hear Israel's voice in supplication. Then He willingly responded to their pleas, as it says, "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day" (Ex. 18:30).

The Targum also speaks of God's desire to hear Israel's voices. It equated the "dove in the clefts of the rock" with Israel's predicament at the Red Sea:

As the wicked Pharaoh pursued after the people of Israel, the Assembly of Israel was likened to a dove shut up in the clefts of the rock, with the snake threatening it from within, and the hawk threatening it from without. Thus was the Assembly of Israel shut in on four sides of the world: in front of them was the sea, behind them the enemy pursued, and on two sides the deserts full of fiery serpents which wound and kill men with their sting. Then immediately Israel opened her mouth in prayer before

the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Voice came forth from the highest heaven and thus it spoke: "You, O Assembly of Israel resembling the dove, clean and hiding in the covert of the clefts of the rocks, and in the hidden crevices of the cliffs, show me your countenance and your worthy deeds, and let me hear your voice, for sweet is your voice in prayer in the small sanctuary and your countenance is beautiful with good deeds."¹¹⁸

Here too, God reaches out to Israel, attempting to draw her out to meet Him, to encourage Israel to seek God's love. He yearns for their prayers and supplications,¹¹⁹ as it says, LET ME SEE THY COUNTENANCE, LET ME HEAR THY VOICE in prayer. FOR SWEET IS THY VOICE, AND THY COUNTENANCE IS COMELY.¹²⁰

Thus, this passage and others serve to show that God anxiously searches for Israel, eager to demonstrate His love, care, and protection. He is actively involved in the life of His beloved Israel. God even creates opportunities in which He can express His love to Israel by coming to their defense. All He asks is for Israel to reach out her hand to meet Him.

God's Willingness to Forgive Israel

At times God is angered by His beloved Israel. Because of their disobedience or failure to observe His mitzvot, God seeks to reprimand and punish Israel. Yet the Midrash tells us, God's wrath is muted by a sense of love for Israel. God desires Israel's repentance and therefore attenuates His desire for punishment. Much of the Song of Songs is interpreted to demonstrate God's

willingness to forgive Israel of their sins. Like a loving father, God gently scolds His Israel and pardons them.

R. Simeon b. Yohai taught that after God speaks harshly to Israel, He warmly and lovingly embraces them as a father hugs his children, and reassures them of his love.

God was like a king who spoke harshly to his son, so that the latter was frightened and fainted. When the king saw that he had fallen into a faint, he began to embrace and kiss him, and spoke gently to him, saying, "What ails thee? Art thou not my only son? Am I not thy father?" So too when God commanded Israel, "I am the Lord thy God," straightway their souls left them. When they were dead the angels began to embrace and kiss them and say, "What ails you? Do not fear. Ye are children of the Lord your God" [Deut. 14:1]. And the Holy One, blessed be He, made the words [commandments] sweet in their mouths, and said to them, "Are you not My sons? I am the Lord your God. Ye are My people, ye are beloved unto Me." And so He began to coax them until their souls returned and they began to entreat Him.¹²¹

So God deals gently with Israel, embracing them in love.

R. Judan gave another illustration:

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." She was terror stricken. So when the judge had finished with the others, he said to her, "Where is your son?" He said to her, "What offense 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."¹²²

Thus God tempered Israel's offenses so as to reduce their punishment. God so loved His children that He forgave them with compassion and mercy.

Indeed, God seeks to pardon the penitent who wishes to repent his evil ways and to return to Him. The Midrash interprets HIS MOUTH IS MOST SWEET¹²³ to allude to the Holy One, blessed be He. "For thus saith the Lord unto the house of Israel: Seek ye Me, and live" (Amos 5:4), and again "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11). Could anything be sweeter than this? God welcomes the repentance of Israel from those who regret their former wickedness and change their ways. R. Simeon b. Yohai taught: "Behold, if a man was thoroughly wicked all his life and in the end he became thoroughly righteous, of such a man Scripture says, 'As for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not stumble thereby'" (Ezek. 33:12)¹²⁴ meaning that despite all the transgressions which the sinner has committed against God, the Holy One, blessed be He, accounts them to him as merits. Hence it is written, HIS [God's] MOUTH IS MOST SWEET.

God pleads with Israel to repent. R. Ammi compares God to a poor man asking for alms,¹²⁵ stretching forth His hand to receive Israel's repentance. "My heart yearneth for him, I will surely have compassion upon him, saith the Lord" (Jer. 31:20). The Midrash explains the verse, HARK! MY BELOVED KNOCKETH, SAYING, OPEN TO ME.¹²⁶ Although God willfully accepts Israel's repentance, Israel must take the first steps. She must

make the gesture of seeking forgiveness. God then immediately responds. Israel must "open the door" to God in order to "receive His forgiveness." R. Jassa said, "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: 'My sons, present to Me an opening of repentance no bigger than the eye of a needle, and I will widen it into openings through which wagons and carriages can pass.'"¹²⁷ According to R. Jose, the Holy One, blessed be He, meant: "Make for Me an opening in you, small as the eye of a needle, and I shall make an opening in you so wide that camps full of soldiers and siege engines could enter."¹²⁸ God promises to enlarge Israel's small attempt at repentance. R. Levi said, "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: 'Let go your evil ways and practice repentance even for a flash and know that I am God.'"¹²⁹

R. Tanhuma and R. Aibu explained the verse as saying, "Vow repentance for as little time as it takes to wink an eye, 'and you will be aware that I am the Lord of mercy'" (Ps. 46:11). For, as R. Levi said, "Were Israel to vow repentance even for one day, they would be redeemed immediately." He cites as proof, "We would be the people of His pasture, and the flocks of His land, if only for but one day you would hearken to His voice" (Ps. 95:7). R. Judah b. R. Simon explained that the verse signifies that even if the iniquity of Israel went so far as to deny Him as the root of the universe, God would accept their repentance and let

them return to Him. The implication of the verse is then: "Return, O Israel, even if your rebellion extended 'unto the person of the Lord thy God.'" ¹³⁰ For example, when Israel sinned by building the golden calf, God forgave them this provocation, as it says, "And the Lord repented of the evil" (Ex. 32:14). ¹³¹

R. Eleazar illustrated God's desire to seek Israel's repentance with this comparison:

The way things go in the world, if a man proceeds to abuse his fellow man in public and then after a time wants to make up with him, his fellow man is apt to say, "You abuse me in public, but now you want to make up with me in private? Go fetch the people in whose presence you abused me, and then I will make up with you." The Holy One does things differently. Even if a man proceeds to blaspheme and revile Him in the market place, the Holy One says, "Repent and make up with Me even if in complete privacy, and I will accept thee." ¹³²

God will go to any extent to reach out to Israel for her repentance. She must only lean forward in God's direction.

Finally, what is the efficacy of Israel's repentance? R. Judah II the Patriarch, cited R. Judah bar R. Simon, and said,

Ordinarily, if a man shoots an arrow, how far will it go? Over as much ground as is required to plant one or two "Kor" of seed in [75,000 and 150,000 square cubits]. The power of repentance, however, is so great that it shoots all the way up to the throne of glory! ¹³³

R. Tabumi said, "Repentance whitens the iniquities of Israel like snow," as it says, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isa. 1:18). ¹³⁴

R. Azariah explained the verse WE HAVE A LITTLE SISTER to say that just as a child, whatever he does, is not reprov'd, because he is 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, and they become innocent as a little child, as it says, "For on this day shall atonement be made for you" (Lev. 16:30).¹³⁵ This prompted R. Aha b. R. Abun to agree, "Great is the power of repentance, which can nullify a decree and nullify an oath."¹³⁶

Perhaps the Targum sums up best all the above by applying the following rendition of the verse, OPEN TO ME:¹³⁷ "The Lord of All the World answered and thus He said to Israel: 'Return in repentance, open your mouth, pray and praise Me, My sister, My beloved, Assembly of Israel, likened to the dove in the perfection of your works. . . .'"¹³⁸

The idea being expressed in all of these is that God is always ready to forgive Israel her sins, however, she must take the first steps forward to repent. When Israel comes forward to supplicate God for pardon, He anxiously and readily receives her with mercy and compassion.

Israel's Love for God

Throughout the Song of Songs, according to the interpretation of the Rabbis, God and Israel lavishly

Praise each other with words of endearment. We have seen how the Rabbis interpreted various verses to illustrate God's expression of love for His beloved Israel. Now we shall explore passages in which Israel proclaims her devotion to God, her lover.

According to the Midrash, there are ten expressions of joy that are used in connection with Israel in expressing love for God. In the Song, verse 1:4, Israel declares her love to God using two of these expressions, "rejoicing" (נִילָה) and "gladness" (שִׂמְחָה), WE WILL BE GLAD AND REJOICE IN THEE, WE WILL PRAISE THY LOVE. . . .¹³⁹ The other terms found in the Bible include, joy (שִׂשְׂוָה), song (רִנָּה), breaking forth (פִּצְחוּת), crying aloud (צְהִלָה), exultation (עֲצִלָה), great rejoicing (עֲזִלָה), gaiety (הִדְרָה), and shouting (תְּרוּעָה).¹⁴⁰

Several parables follow which serve to illustrate the nature of Israel's love for God. R. Idi said:

It happened once that a woman in Sidon had lived ten years with her husband without bearing him a child. They came to R. Simeon b. Yohai and requested to be divorced from one another. He said to them: "I adjure you, just as you have always shared a festive table together, so do not part except with festivity." They took his advice and kept holiday and made a great feast and drank very freely. Feeling then in a good humor, he said to her, "My wife, pick out any article you want in my house and take it with you to your father's house." What did she do? When he was asleep she gave an order to her servants and handmaids to lift him up on the bed and take and carry him to her father's house. At midnight he awoke from his sleep, and when the effects of the wine passed from him he said, "My wife, where am I?" She replied, "You are in my father's house." "And what am I doing in your

father's house?" he said. She replied, "Did you not say to me last night, Take any article you like from my house and go to your father's house?" There is nothing in the world I care for more than you."¹⁴¹

The lesson of this beautiful story is clear. Just as the woman says to a mere mortal like herself, "There is nothing I care for more in the world than you," so does Israel say to God, "We care for nothing in the world but Thee." Similarly the Pesikta de-Rav Kahana says, "If one mortal saying to another mortal, 'I have no more precious object in the world than you,' is able to rejoice and bring joy to everybody, all the more will Israel rejoice and give joy. . . ."¹⁴² Hence it is written, WE WILL BE GLAD AND REJOICE IN THEE, in the Holy One, blessed be He.¹⁴³ As it says in Scripture, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God" (Isa. 61:10). Israel rejoices in the God whom they exalt, sanctify, praise, glorify, and bless His holy name forever.¹⁴⁴

Israel sings praises to God when they rise early on the Sabbath and go to the synagogue and recite the Shema prayer with devotion, with one voice, and with one mind and thought. They bless Him when they pass in front of the ark and read a passage from the Torah and the Prophets.¹⁴⁵ R. Judan said, "When Israel read Torah in groups, it can be said of them, CAUSE ME TO HEAR THY VOICE."¹⁴⁶ God listens to their prayers. R. Ze'ira explained it, only when Israel recite the Shema with

one mouth, one voice, one chant, does God hear their voice. R. Levi gave this illustration:

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 those who eat and drink and curse thee, rather take note of those who eat and drink and bless thee and praise thy name." 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 those who blaspheme and provoke Thee, rather take note of Israel Thy people who bless and praise and extol Thy great name with Torah, and with hymns and praises."147

Thus, God listens attentively to Israel praise His name and recite the Shema prayer, while He ignores the curses of the heathen nations.

Several verses in the Song are interpreted allegorically to imply that although Israel suffers and is forced to endure distress, oppression and prolonged persecution, she remains steadfast in her love for God. R. Berekiah said: The Community of Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He, "When Thou distressest me, when Thou painest me, even then Thou art my beloved; Thou actest as my beloved and seest what great man there is in me who can say to the Attribute of Justice, 'Enough,' and Thou takest him as a pledge for me."148

R. Huna applied the verse A ROSE AMONG THORNS¹⁴⁹

to the oppression of Israel under the secular powers and foreign governments. Despite her torment, Israel loved God unflinchingly.

Just as a rose, if situated between thorns, when the north wind blows it is bent towards the south and pricked by the thorns; and a south wind goes forth and bends it towards the north and a thorn pricks it, nevertheless its heart is still turned upwards. So it is the same with Israel, although taxes in kind and other tributes are exacted from them, nevertheless their hearts are fixed upon their Father in heaven, [as it is written,] "Mine eyes are ever toward the Lord." (Ps. 25:15)¹⁵⁰

Even under the oppressive burdens imposed upon her, Israel looks to God for support. And so it is written, "Lord, in trouble have they sought Thee" (Isa. 26:6). For this, Israel promises to "blossom forth in good deeds and utter song before Him."¹⁵¹ Israel, with eyes directed heavenward, will say, "Thou, O Lord, art our Father; our Redeemer from everlasting is Thy name."¹⁵²

Israel is so admirable in their reverence for God, that the angels are jealous of Israel's relationship with God! Ginzberg tells the following story:

When the angels had complained of the fact that man was preferred to them [Man was the epitome of God's creations], God replied: "What, ye wish to precede Israel in chanting songs of praise to Me? They, though 'born of woman' and subject to the evil inclination, conquer their evil inclination and daily proclaim Me as the one God and King, and wait for the coming of My Kingdom and the establishment of My house."--Although man, who is a terrestrial being, is inferior to the angels, he surpasses them by overcoming the evil inclination, which the angels do not possess at all.¹⁵³

Such was Israel's love for their God, as is borne out in Scripture. "The Lord is my strength and song. . . This is my God, and I will glorify Him" (Ex. 15:2).

Israel's Loyalty to God

Time and again the nations of the world taunt Israel and tempt her to disavow her love relationship with God. Despite these attempts, Israel remains loyal to God and His Torah. There are several verses in the Song which we shall consider that the Rabbis interpret allegorically to express Israel's commitment to God.

Perhaps most representative of verses which suggest this theme is 1:2, DRAW ME, WE WILL RUN AFTER THEE. The Midrash provides several different explanations, each ascribing the verse to the loyalty of Israel to God.

R. Judan said, "The community of Israel said to the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the Universe, because Thou hast dealt with my neighbors¹⁵⁴ with strict justice and with me mercifully, we will run after Thee."¹⁵⁵

R. Azariah interpreted it this way: "The Community of Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He; Master of the World, because Thou hast given me the spoil of my neighbors, we will run after Thee."¹⁵⁶ Another explanation specifies that whether Israel is brought into danger (מַסְכִּינִי) or made poor (מַסְכִּינִי) they will remain steadfast to God. A third explanation translates מַסְכִּינִי as מַשְׁכִּינִי, i.e., Take a pledge from me and we

will run after Thee. On account of the destruction of the two Temples which were taken in pledge from Israel, Israel still remains loyal to God, as it is written, "We have given a pledge to Thee" (Neh. 1:7). R. Judah b. Il'ai best sums up Israel's remarkable attitude of commitment:

It is as if a man went and took a wife in a village and said to her, "Arise and come with me." And she said, "To where?" He said to her; "From here to Tiberias and from Tiberias to the Tannery and from the Tannery to the Upper Market, and from the Upper Market to the Lower Market." She replied; "Wherever you go and take me, I will go with you." So Israel said to God: "My soul cleaveth unto Thee." (Ps. 63:9)

Israel's dedication to God might be compared to Ruth's noble example of love and devotion that she pledged to Naomi, her mother-in-law, saying, "Wherever thou goest, I will go. . ." (Ruth 1:16).

Finally, Seder Eliyahu Rabbah attributes Israel's supreme loyalty to God because of God's special relationship with her. God loves Israel with an eternal love, as it is written, "The Lord appeared of old to me, saying, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore, I have remained true to thee" (Jer. 31:2). God is likened to a king who sits while his servants and advisors stand before him. He rests his eyes upon him who loves him. He takes them by the hand and leads them into his innermost chambers. So too God sets His countenance upon Israel who love Him and remain loyal to Him. God brings

only Israel into His chambers, something he had not done to any other nations. Israel willingly follows Him,¹⁵⁷ as it says, DRAW ME, WE WILL RUN AFTER THEE.

In this context, Israel is again likened to a dove. For just as the dove, from the time that she recognizes her mate, never changes him for another, so too, Israel, once they had learned to know the Holy One, blessed be He, have never changed Him for another.¹⁵⁸ Israel remains attached to God, her only lover.

Verse 8:7 MANY WATERS CANNOT QUENCH LOVE, NEITHER CAN THE FOODS DROWN IT is also interpreted to apply to Israel's love for God.¹⁵⁹ Despite temptations posed by heathen nations to give up Torah and love of God, Israel remains loyal.¹⁶⁰ The Midrash Rabbah, like the Targum, equates the "many waters" with the idolatrous nations of the world,¹⁶¹ who seductively coerce Israel to abandon God and Torah. But Israel's unquenchable love could not be challenged.

The other nations taunt Israel, WHAT IS THY BELOVED MORE THAN ANOTHER BELOVED, O THOU FAIREST AMONG WOMEN.¹⁶² They tease her, what does your God have above all other dieties? What is your defender more than other protectors? Yet Israel, impervious to all this, replies, MY BELOVED IS WHITE AND RUDDY,¹⁶³ interpreted to mean God exercises both attributes of mercy and justice. WHITE symbolizes the former and RUDDY the latter. God expressed mercy towards Israel and the attribute of

strict justice with regard to Israel's neighbors. God was merciful to Israel in Egypt and passed over them, but He punished the Egyptians by plagues. He was merciful to Israel at the Red Sea, but He swept the Egyptians into the water. God will be merciful to Israel in the world to come, and the other nations will be judged severely.

According to the Targum, even the prophets ask of Israel, "Which God do you wish to serve, O Assembly of Israel, fairest of all the peoples, and whom do you wish to fear. . . ?"¹⁶⁴ Still, Israel remains committed to God.

The other nations inquire further, WHERE IS THY BELOVED GONE, O THOU FAIREST AMONG WOMEN, WHERE HAS THY BELOVED TURNED ASIDE?¹⁶⁵ They taunt Israel that God has abandoned them. How does the Community of Israel reply to the nations? They say, "What business is it of yours to ask about God in whom you have no share? Once I have attached myself to Him, can I separate myself from Him?"¹⁶⁶ Israel defends God against the accusations of the heathen nations. Despite their attacks, Israel remains loyal. R. Samuel b. Tanhum explained that if not for Israel which made peace between God and His world by accepting His Law, He would have destroyed the whole world to revert back to void and chaos.¹⁶⁷ That means for the sake of Israel's

acceptance of "I am the Lord thy God," God established the pillars upon which the world stands.

The nations try to seduce Israel to abandon God by offering her positions of grandeur and high office. They say to Israel, "How long will you die for your God and devote yourselves completely to Him, as it says, 'Therefore do they love Thee beyond death?'" (S. of S. 1:3). And how long will you be slain for Him, as it is written, "Nay, but for Thy sake are we killed all the day?" (Ps. 44:23) And how long will you do favors for Him which are for Him alone and from which you obtain no benefit, while he requites you with harm? Join us, and we will appoint you governors, leaders, and generals. The nations demand RETURN, RETURN, O SHULAMMITE AND WE WILL LOOK UPON THEE,¹⁶⁸ as if to say "cling to us, come unto us and you will be the center attraction of the world. We will make you commanders, lieutenants, and officers." Israel answers emphatically in the negative;

WHAT WILL YOU SEE IN THE SHULAMMITE. . . . Have you ever heard of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshipping idols that we their descendants after them should so worship? Our fathers did not worship idols, and we will not worship idols! And what can you do for us? Can you perform miracles like that at the Red Sea? Or for Elisha? Or can you provide for the righteous in the world to come, as the Holy One, blessed be He will provide?¹⁶⁹ What greatness would you confer upon us? Can you confer upon us anything like the greatness which God conferred upon us in the wilderness at Sinai?¹⁷⁰

All these passages reflect the many attempts made by the nations from time to time to seduce Israel from their faith, and Israel's loyalty in spite of them. Israel maintains her devotion to God, and declares with one voice, "For such is God, our God, for ever and ever; He will guide us eternally" (Ps. 48:15).

EPILOGUE

The primary purpose of this thesis was to explore the homiletical passages of the Midrash and Talmud which illustrate the unique love relationship between God and the Jewish people. The Rabbinic interpretation of the Song of Songs as an allegory expressing this theme, provided me a wide body of literature to research, a literature rich and beautiful in content.

So profoundly devotional has the book been considered throughout the ages, that the Song has been valued as the most lofty expression of God's selection of Israel as His Chosen People and Israel's declaration of commitment to God's Torah. God expresses His love by the giving of the Law and the redemption from Egypt. Israel expresses her love by the acceptance of the Law and by readiness to undergo martyrdom for the sake of God. The reciprocity of the love of Israel for God and the love of God for Israel is the central theme of the Song's Rabbinic allegory. The Song of Songs "My beloved is mine and I am His," merely transposes the covenant formula "I will be your God and you will be my people."

The Rabbis of the Midrash and Talmud are confident that the nobility of Israel will guarantee her God's favor and the receiving of His blessings. When did all this begin?

As soon as the Holy One, Blessed be He, saw Israel's resolution, saw that they wished to accept the Torah with love and affection, with fear and reverence, with awe and trembling, He said, "I am the Lord thy God." (PR 21:2/3)

And when will the ultimate redemption come? The Midrash relates the following parable:

The greatness of Israel is compared to four things-- to harvest, to wine-gathering, to spices, and to a woman bearing child. To a harvest, because if a field is reaped before its time even its straw is no good, but if in its proper time all its yield is good. Israel is compared to wine-gathering, because when the vineyard is gathered before its time, even the vinegar made from it is not good, but when the grapes are ready to produce wine, then pluck them. Israel is compared to spices because if spices are gathered when they are moist and soft, they do not give off scent, but if gathered when they are dry, they give off sweet fragrance. Finally, Israel is compared to a woman bearing child because if the woman gives birth prematurely, the child will die, but if at the right time, the child lives. (SHP 8:14:1)

So, with respect to Israel's ultimate redemption, even if undeserved it will come in due time, but if merited, if Israel proves worthy, God will hasten it. The Midrash Rabba on the Song of Songs ends with the prayer: "So may it be God's will speedily in our days, Amen."

CODE-KEY OF FOOTNOTE ABBREVIATIONS

DR	DEUTERONOMY RABBAH
ER	EXODUS RABBAH
GR	GENESIS RABBAH
LRM	LAMENTATIONS RABBAH
LR	LEVITICUS RABBAH
MECH	MECHILTA De-RABBI ISHMAEL, Eds. Horovitz and Rabin
MRD	MIDRASH RABBAH: DEUTERONOMY, Soncino Edition
MRE	MIDRASH RABBAH: EXODUS, Soncino Edition
MRG	MIDRASH RABBAH: GENESIS, Soncino Edition
MRL	MIDRASH RABBAH: LEVITICUS, Soncino Edition
MRN	MIDRASH RABBAH: NUMBERS, Soncino Edition
MR	MIDRASH RABBAH: SONG OF SONGS, Soncino Edition
MT	MIDRASH TANHUMA, Zundel Edition
NR	NUMBERS RABBAH
PDRK	PESIKTA De-RAB KAHANA, Mandelbaum Edition
PR	PESIKTA RABBATI, Menachem Mendel Edition
PDRE	PIRKE De-RABBI ELIEZER, I. Menczer Edition
SER	SEDER ELIYAHU RABBAH, Meir Ish Shalom Edition
SHR	SHIR HaSHIRIM RABBAH
SS	SONG OF SONGS

[] INTERPOLATION MADE FOR THE SAKE OF CLARITY OR
BASED ON A PARALLEL READING IN ANOTHER SOURCE

All Midrash Rabbah references are from the Vilna Edition.

All Talmudic references are from Talmud Bavli, Standard Edition.

INTRODUCTION: FOOTNOTES

¹Mishnah, Yadayim 3:5.

²GR 77:1, PR 15:6.

³ER 2:5, PDRK 5:6.

CHAPTER I: FOOTNOTES

CANONIZATION
THE POSITION OF THE SONG OF SONGS
IN THE SCRIPTURES

¹Marvin H. Pope, Songs of Songs (New York: 1977), p. 18. Pope includes a list of writers on the Song of Songs from the second century through the eighteenth century and after on pp. 236, 252.

²Christian D. Ginsburg, The Songs of Songs (New York: 1970), Section 2, p. 2.

³Pope, p. 19.

⁴In SS 8:6.

⁵In 1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12.

⁶In 1:4, 12; 7:6.

⁷Robert Gordis, The Song of Songs and Lamentations (New York: 1974), p. 2.

⁸Hos. 1-2; Jer. 2:2; 3:1-3; Isa. 50:1f; 54:5; 62:4f; Ezek. 16, 23.

⁹Gordis, p. 23.

¹⁰Gordis, p. 2.

¹¹Pope, p. 19.

¹²Gordis, p. 43.

¹³"קהלח איננו ממצא את הידיים כדברי בית שזאי,
ובית הלל אומרים ממצא את הידיים"

¹⁴Mishnah, Yadayim 3:5.

¹⁵SHR 1:1:11.

¹⁶Mishnah, Yadayim 3:5.

¹⁷Tosefta, Sanhedrin 12:10.

¹⁸Sanhedrin 101a.

¹⁹Shabbat 14a.

²⁰Mishnah, Yadayim, 3:5.

CHAPTER II: FOOTNOTES

METHODS OF INTERPRETATION OF
THE SONG OF SONGS

¹Cf. Mishnah Eduyot 5:3; Tosefta Yadayim 2:14; Mishnah Yadayim 3:5.

²SHR 1:1:10.

³Robert Gordis, The Song of Songs (New York: 1974), p. 8.

⁴Ibid., p. 17.

⁵For a full listing of Jewish commentators, see Christian D. Ginsburg, The Song of Songs (New York: 1970) and Marvin Pope, Song of Songs (New York: 1977).

⁶Talmud, Berachot 62a.

⁷Richard N. Soulen, Handbook of Biblical Criticism (Atlanta: 1978), p. 13.

⁸Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, "Song of Songs, p. 420.

⁹Aggadat Shir HaShirim, ed. S. Schechter, 1896.

¹⁰Shabbat 63a.

¹¹Sanhedrin 101a.

¹²See Targum to Song of Songs 1:1 and SHR 1.

¹³Ibn Ezra, however, rejects the mystical interpretation in the second part of his commentary to Song of Songs. He professes to give the literal meaning of the text.

¹⁴Pope, p. 90.

¹⁵See Pope, pp. 112ff and Ginsburg, pp. 61ff.

¹⁶Hugh J. Schonfield, The Song of Songs-Immortal Marriage (London: 1959), p. 20.

¹⁷St. Augustine in The City of God (Book 17:20), translated and edited by Marcus Dods (Hafner Publishing Co., 1948).

¹⁸ See Ginsburg, pp. 65ff and Pope, pp. 119ff for a discussion of Christian commentators on the Song of Songs.

¹⁹ Aage Bentzen, Introduction to the Old Testament, "The Song of Songs," p. 180.

²⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER III: FOOTNOTES

THE VARIETY OF THEMES IN MIDRASH RABBA
TO SONG OF SONGS

¹SHR 1:2:1.

²SHR 1:1:11 רבנין אמרין כל מקום שנאמר במלך שלמה
במלך שהשלום שלו הכתוב מצר, במלך סתם בכנסת ישראל הכתוב מדבר
cf. PDRK 1:2.

³Isaiah 45:7.

⁴Job 25:2.

⁵Siddur Rinat Yisrael, 1973, p. 175, "Kaddish Avelim"
עושה שלום במרוביו הוא יעשה שלום .

⁶SS 3:7.

⁷SHR 3:7:1; 3:7:2; 3:7:3; 3:7:4. The views of
Rabbis Bibi, in the name of R. Eleazar b. R. Jose, and
Rabbi Simlai, and Rabbi Yohanan.

⁸SS 3:9.

⁹SHR 3:9:1, Rabbi Azariah.

¹⁰SHR 3:9:1.

¹¹SHR 3:10:2.

¹²SHR 3:10:4.

¹³SHR 3:10:4.

¹⁴SHR 3:10:3. Yet, one explanation does cite המלך
שלמה as King Solomon, literally. Therefore, it must
follow that palanquin in this context refers to the Temple
which Solomon built.

¹⁵SS 3:11

¹⁶SHR 3:11:1

¹⁷SHR 3:11:1.

¹⁸MR 3:11:1.

¹⁹SHR 3:11:1
cf. PDRK 1:3.

²⁰MR 3:11:1.

²¹SHR 3:11:1

דבר אהר: במלך שלמה: במלך שעשה שלום בין בריוחיו

²²Ezekiel 1:22 and 1:13,14.

²³SHR 3:11:1

אפילו בין מלאך אחד שהציו שלג והציו אש הקב"ה עושה שלום ביניהם

²⁴Daniel 10:6, Psalms 104:3, Deut. 4:24, Daniel 7:9, Job 25:2, Ex. 9:24.

²⁵SHR 3:11:1 אף במכוח פרעה עשה הקב"ה שלום
cf. ER 12:4.

²⁶SHR 3:11:1.

²⁷SHR 8:11:2 on SS 8:11

²⁸SHR 7:6:1.

²⁹SHR 1:12:1.

³⁰SHR 1:12:2.

³¹SS 3:10

³²SHR 3:10:4.

³³Psalms 75:4

³⁴SS 7:6

³⁵SHR 7:6:1.

³⁶Psalms 93:1

יהיה מלך גאות לבש...עז החאזר אף חכונ חבל כל חמור

³⁷In other contexts, God is referred to as איש
the One in whom is all (SHR 1:14:3) and as נדיב ,
a "Prince" (SHR 6:12:1).

³⁸SS 2:3.

³⁹SS 3:10.

⁴⁰SHR 3:10:4

- ⁴¹SS 5:11
- ⁴²רש"י connected with ראשו.
- ⁴³Cf. Lev. R. 19:1.
- ⁴⁴SHR 5:11:1 and 5:14:1 on SS 5:14
- ⁴⁵SS 3:10.
- ⁴⁶SHR 3:10:4.
- ⁴⁷SS 1:2
- ⁴⁸SHR 5:16:3 on SS 5:16
- ⁴⁹SHR 1:2:3.
- ⁵⁰SHR 5:12:1.
- ⁵¹SS 1:2
- ⁵²SHR 5:7:1.
- ⁵³SHR 1:2:5.
- ⁵⁴SHR 7:3:2.
- ⁵⁵SS 8:2
- ⁵⁶SHR 8:2:1; Mishnah of R. Hiyya Rabbah; Mishnah of R. Hoshiah Bar Kappara; Mishnah of R. Akiba.
- ⁵⁷SHR 8:2:1.
- ⁵⁸Mishnah Peah 1:1
- ⁵⁹SS 8:7.
- ⁶⁰MR, p. 310 on SHR 8:7:1.
- ⁶¹SHR 8:7:1
- ⁶²MR, p. 310, Note 4.
- ⁶³SHR 2:2:3.
- ⁶⁴See Avot. 6:6 for the forty-eight qualifications listed.
- ⁶⁵SS 4:15.

⁶⁶SHR 4:15:1.

⁶⁷SS 5:11.

⁶⁸SHR 5:11:2, R. Johanan offered an explanation of verse 5:11 by parable.

⁶⁹SHR 8:14:1, Proof texts from Malachi 3:16 and Jeremiah 31:33.

⁷⁰SHR 5:14:3 on ספיריט and drawing a connection with נתעלף meaning "faint."

⁷¹SHR 5:14:3.

⁷²MR, p. 38, Note 1.

⁷³SS 8:12

⁷⁴SHR 8:12:1.

⁷⁵SHR 8:12:1

⁷⁶SS 7:10 ישנים . Also rendered "Causing the sleepers' lips to murmur," Koren Publ., Jerusalem, 1969.

⁷⁷SHR 7:10:1.

⁷⁸MR, p. 299, Note 4.

⁷⁹SHR 1:1:7.

⁸⁰SHR 1:1:7.

⁸¹The Midrash stresses the word על (upon) giving it the sense of "raising" or "exalting."

⁸²SHR 1:1:8.

⁸³SHR 1:1:8.

⁸⁴SS 1:10.

⁸⁵SHR 1:10:2.

⁸⁶MR, p. 74, Note 1, taking מילל as equivalent to מאלל .

⁸⁷SHR 1:10:2 taking חורוץ as חורין .
אלו החלמידים שחורין צואריהם לשמוע דברי תורה

⁸⁸SS 1:14.

- 89^{SHR 1:14:2} taking אשכלto mean איש שהכל .
- 90^{SHR 5:13:1} taking מהלכותand linking מנדלות . הנדור .
- 91^{SS 5:13}
- 92^{SS 5:7}
- 93^{SHR 8:12:1.}
- 94^{SHR 8:12:1} taking from ישרלימנו האלף לך שלמה .
- 95^{SHR 7:12:1}, deriving from ישרלימנו שלמה . אין הרב נוטל שכר על תלמודו עד שישרלימנו לאהרים
- 96^{SHR 7:14:1.}
- 97^{SS 7:14.}
- 98^{SS 6:2.}
- 99^{SHR 6:2:5.}
- 100^{SHR 2:5:3.}
- 101^{SHR 2:2:3.}
- 102^{SS 6:11}
- 103^{SS 7:13}
- 104^{SHR 6:11:1.}
- 105^{SHR 7:13:1.}
- 106^{SS 6:8}
- 107^{SHR 6:9:3.}
- 108^{SHR 6:2:6.}
- 109^{SS 6:9}
- 110^{SHR 6:9:2 and 6:9:3.}
- 111^{SS 5:11}
- 112^{Nahum 2:5.}
- 113^{SS 2:10}
- 114^{SHR 2:9:5.}

115 SS 2:8

116 SHR 2:8:1 and 2:8:3.

117 SS 4:9

118 Appears five times.

119 SHR 7:6:1.

120 This is one of the few instances in which the Midrash understands "King" to refer to Moses.

121 SS 7:6

122 SHR 7:6:1 linking מלכות to
מה ברהמים של מי מריבה

123 SHR 8:11:2.

124 SS 1:7.

125 SHR 1:7:2.

126 The Midrash goes on to explain why prophets are compared to women. "To show that just as a woman is not ashamed to demand from her husband the requirements of her household, so the prophets were not ashamed to demand the requirements of Israel from their Father in heaven."

127 SHR 3:1:2; 3:2:1; 3:3:1; 3:4:1 on שאהבה נפשי
in SS 3:1, 2, 3, 4.

128 Understanding שלטי as ישלוט ,
the Midrash suggests that Moses stood and ruled over his evil inclination and subdued it.

129 SHR 4:4:1 on SS 4:4 ALL SHIELDS OF THE MIGHTY
MEN.

130 SHR 4:4:1 on SS 4:4 A THOUSAND SHIELDS.

131 SS 7:5

132 SHR 7:5:1.

133 SHR 1:2:5.

134 SS 1:2

135 Pope, p. 160, cf. Tal. Baba Batra 17a.

136 SS 4:5.

137 SHR 4:4:1.

138 Ex. 4:28.

139 SHR 4:5:1. Scripture cites "These are that Moses and Aaron" (Ex. 6:27) and "These are that Aaron and Moses" (Ex. 6:26). In one instance Moses is mentioned first and in the other, Aaron.

140 I Sam. 12:6.

141 See "And the Lord will smite Egypt, smiting and healing" (Is. 19:22).

142 SS 2:9.

143 MR, p. 121, Note 4 on SHR 2:9:5; "Speaking" being of a more peremptory character than "saying."
 ענה is literally "answered."

144 SS 1:10.

145 SHR 4:5:2. Miriam is also included here.

146 Ex. 29:30.

147 SS 1:10.

148 MR, p. 72 on SHR 1:10:1. Literally, "Whose aspect (חַסָּד) is gracious."

149 Numerous Biblical citations appear in the text as proofs.

150 SS 5:1

151 SS 8:1

152 Numbers 33:38--Aaron; Deut. 34:5--Moses.

153 SS 1:2

154 SS 1:2.

155 SHR 1:2:3.

156 Ex. 32:13.

157 SS 1:13 parallels 3:6 PERFUMED WITH MYRRH and 4:6 MOUNTAIN OF MYRRH.

158 SHR 1:13:1 and parallel 3:6:2 and 4:6:2.

¹⁵⁹SS 1:14 and parallel SHR 3:6:2 on SS 3:6
FRANKINCENSE and 4:6:2 on SS 4:6 HILL OF FRANKINCENSE.

¹⁶⁰Linking כפר --"Henna" with כפר --"atoness."

¹⁶¹Linking כרם --"vineyard" with כרום --"pales";
using גרל as a place name and animal skin, translating
עין as "eye" from the name גרל עין.

¹⁶²SS 2:2.

¹⁶³SHR 2:2:1.

¹⁶⁴SHR 3:6:2.

¹⁶⁵SS 2:9.

¹⁶⁶MR, pp. 118-119 on SHR 2:9:2.

¹⁶⁷SS 2:17.

¹⁶⁸SS 4:8

¹⁶⁹SHR 4:8:3 taking מןהמלך from מלמה of the verse.

¹⁷⁰SHR 5:16:1 on SS 5:16

¹⁷¹SS 6:9

¹⁷²SS 7:7

¹⁷³MR, p. 290, Note 2 on SHR 7:7:1.

¹⁷⁴SS 8:8

¹⁷⁵SS 8:9

¹⁷⁶SS 8:10

¹⁷⁷SHR 8:9:1.

¹⁷⁸SS 8:10

¹⁷⁹SS 6:9

¹⁸⁰SHR 3:6:2 and cf. SHR 4:8:3 on SS 4:8 AND
HERMON.

¹⁸¹MR, p. 153, Note 2 on SHR 3:6:3, explains that
Jacob rightfully received Isaac's blessing rather than
Esau receiving it, when confirmed by the angel's blessing
after wrestling him.

182^{SHR 4:4:4.}

183^{SS 4:1}

184^{Parallel passage Genesis Rabba 7:6:5.}

185^{SS 4:7}

186^{SS 4:11}

187^{SHR 4:11:2.}

188^{SS 6:9.}

189^{SS 2:2}

190^{Cf. Lev. Rabba 23:1-6, almost identical passage.}

191^{SS 6:9.}

192^{SS 12:7.}

193^{SHR 2:7:1.}

194^{SS 2:9.}

195<sup>SHR 2:7:1 linking צבאות of SS 2:7, with צביוני
BY THE GAZELLES.</sup>

196^{SS 7:1.}

197^{SHR 7:1:2.}

198<sup>SHR 7:6:1 reference to SS 7:6 KING HELD CAPTIVE
IN THE TRESSES.</sup>

199^{SS 1:2.}

200<sup>The plant חבצלה and שושנה are different enough
for the Midrash to specify that the latter is the most
precious of flowering plants. The שושנה is translated
as lily, daffodil, rose, etc. A beautiful, white flower.</sup>

201^{SHR 2:1:3.}

202^{SS 2:2.}

203^{MR, p. 96, Note 3 on SHR 2:2:4.}

204^{SHR 2:2:6.}

205^{SS} 3:10.

206^{SHR} 8:11:1 on SS 8:11 . . . A THOUSAND PIECES
OF SILVER.

207^{SHR} 6:12:1 on SS 6:12 BEFORE I WAS AWARE MY
SOUL SET ME.

208^{SS} 7:13 שם איתן אה דדי לך and ^{SHR} 7:13:1.

209^{SHR} 8:9:2.

210^{SHR} 3:6:3.

211^{SHR} 7:8:1 on SS 7:8 THIS THY STATURE IS LIKE
A PALM TREE.

212^{SS} 2:16.

213^{MR}, p. 140, Note 3 on ^{SHR} 2:16:2. Commentary
by Issacharben Ashkenazi in "Matnat Kehunah" (16-17th
century).

214^{Cf. Gen. Rabba} 32:3.

215^{SHR} 2:16:2.

216^{SHR} 5:1:1 Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kohath,
Amram, Moses. SS 5:1 באחי לגני --I AM COME INTO MY
GARDEN.

217^{SS} 1:2 and ^{SHR} 1:2:5, cf. Tal. Bav. Baba Batra
17a.

218^{SS} 6:2.

219^{SHR} 6:2:1.

220^{SHR} 3:6:4.

221^{SS} 2:5

222^{SHR} 2:5:1.

223^{SS} 2:15

224^{Cf. ER} 22:1.

225^{From Ps. 63:11.} He shall drag them to the power
of the sword, "understanding מרר as the 'dry bottom of
the sea'" after which the waters returned.

226 "They shall be a portion for foxes" (Ps. 63:11)
 rendering שְׁעִלִים , חֹסֶר --"who went down into the bed
 of the sea. לשְׁעִלֵי

227 MR, p. 136 on SHR 2:15:2.

228 Ezekiel 16:7.

229 According to Num. 11:21.

230 SHR 2:15:2 linking אִחֲזֹר "Take" or "Seize" with חֹזֵר
 --"watched" or "see."

231 SS 5:8.

232 SHR 5:8:1.

233 SS 2:15

234 SHR 2:17:1 on SS 2:17 THE SHADOWS FLEE AWAY--
 וְנָסוּ הַצִּלְלִים .

235 SS 3:1

236 Play on words" בְּלִילֹת --AT NIGHT to mean
 as if to say "nights have come"; implying that
 trouble follows upon trouble, one oppression after another.
 בָּאָה לִילֹת

237 SS 7:1

238 SS 4:12

239 SHR 4:12:1 linking גִּנְתִּי MY GARDEN to מְחַנְיָא
 "maligned."

240 SS 8:11

241 SHR 8:11:1--KEEPERS--Nebuchadnezzar and heathen
 guards set over THE VINEYARD--Israel, God's "fruit."

242 SHR 5:3:1 commentary on SS 5:3 I HAVE PUT OFF
 MY COAT, HOW SHALL I PUT IT ON.

243 SHR 7:8:1.

244 SHR 8:12:1 on SS 8:12 MY VINEYARD,
 WHICH IS MINE, IS BEFORE ME.

245 SS 8:14.

246 SS 5:6.

247 SHR 5:6:1.

248 Ezra 4:21-24.

249 SS 5:7.

250 I.e., Euphrates River implying Israel.

251 Tattenai, Shethar-bozenai and his associates
the Apharesachites as found in Ezra 5:6.

252 In the years 465-424 BCE.

253 Darius II (423-404 BCE).

254 SS 7:1.

255 A paraphrase of SS 1:3 THEREFORE DO THE MAIDENS
LOVE THEE.

256 SHR 7:1:2.

257 SHR 7:1:2.

258 SHR 7:8:1.

259 SS 2:7.

260 Allusion to Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 CE)
and defeat at Bethar during the Hadrianic Wars and after
destruction.

261 SHR 2:7:1.

262 SHR 2:7:1.

263 SS 1:17.

264 See Margolis and Marx, "A History of the Jewish
People," p. 214--perhaps half a million Jews perished.
Others were sold as slaves, many died from famine or
shipwreck.

265 SS 8:6

266 SHR 8:7:1.

267 SS 2:8.

268 SHR 2:8:1.

269 SHR 6:10:1 on SS 6:10 WHO IS SHE THAT LOOKETH
FORTH AS THE DAWN.

- 270^{SS} 2:10.
- 271^{SS} 2:12
- 272^{SHR} 2:13:4.
- 273^{SS} 2:13
- 274^{From Is.} 52:7.
- 275^{MR}, p. 127, Note 2, on ^{SHR} 2:14:1.
- 276^{SHR} 7:5:3. Using as a proof text Zech. 9:1
 "land of Hadroch and Damascus"--בארץ הדרוך ודמשק-- for ^{SS} 7:5,
 WHICH LOOKETH TOWARD DAMASCUS and understanding הדרוך as
 הדריך --"guide" or "lead."
- 277^{SS} 7:11
- 278^{SHR} 7:11:1 understanding תשוקתו as a combination
 of תש --"weak" and תוק --to hope.
- 279^{Gordis}, "The Song of Songs" (1974), p. 83.
- 280^{Gordis}, p. 100.
- 281^{SS} 8:10.
- 282^{SS} 1:6.
- 283^{SS} 8:10.
- 284^{Goldstein and Jay}, "The Songs of Songs" (1975),
 Note 27.
- 285^{Gordis}, p. 100.
- 286^{SS} 8:9
- 287^{SS} 8:10 כמורצת שלום also rendered "a fountain
 of peace."
- 288^{SS} 1:12, 13.
- 289^{SS} 7:6ff.
- 290^{SS} 4:12
- 291^{SHR} 4:12:1.
- 292^{MR}, p. 218 on ^{SHR} 4:12:1.

- 293³ Cf. Lev. Rabba 32:5 and Num. Rabba 20:22.
- 294⁴ MR, p. 219 on SHR 4:12:1.
- 295⁵ SS 4:13.
- 296⁶ SHR 4:12:1 rendering שלחך--THY SHOOTS as "Thy sending forth," from MR, p. 219, Note 2.
- 297⁷ Parashat Kedoshim, Leviticus 18-20.
- 298⁸ SHR 5:15:1.
- 299⁹ SS 6:4
- 300⁰ SHR 6:4:1.
- 301¹ SHR 6:8:1 on SS 6:8
- 302² SS 7:14.
- 303³ SHR 7:14:1.
- 304⁴ SS 6:6
- 305⁵ SHR 6:6:1, cf. SHR 1:6:3 and 4:4:3.
- 306⁶ On verse SS 6:7 THY TEMPLES ARE LIKE A POMEGRANATE SPLIT OPEN.
- 307⁷ MR, p. 264 on SHR 6:7:1, cf. SHR 4:4:3.
- 308⁸ MR, p. 290 on SHR 7:8:1.
- 309⁹ MR, p. 34 on SHR 1:2:3.
- 310⁰ SHR 4:11:1 on SS 4:11
- 311¹ SS 4:4.
- 312² A beautiful story is given in SHR 4:4:5 to illustrate this point.
- 313³ SS 4:16
- 314⁴ SHR 4:16:1.
- 315⁵ MR, p. 282 on SHR 7:3:2.
- 316⁶ SHR 6:6:1.
- 317⁷ SS 6:7

318 SHR 4:4:5 on SS 4:3

319 SHR 4:14:1.

320 SS 7:14

321 SHR 7:14:1.

322 SS 6:11

323 SHR 6:11:1.

324 MR, p. 290 on SHR 7:7:1.

325 SS 7:7

326 SHR 2:14:5.

327 SS 2:14.

328 SHR 7:7:1.

CHAPTER IV: FOOTNOTES

THE MUTUAL LOVE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN GOD AND ISRAEL

¹Int. Dict. of Bible on SS 8:6-7, p. 425.

²Cf. R. Gordis, Kohleleth, The Man and His World, p. 16. (New York: 1968)

³Tur-Sinai, p. 3834, refers to the "love" of the relationship of a maiden and her lover (Gordis, p. 43).

⁴Gordis, Song of Songs, p. 43.

⁵Gordis, p. 44.

⁶Gordis, p. 74.

⁷SHR 1:1:11.

⁸SHR 1:1:11 and MR, p. 19.

⁹SS 2:16

¹⁰SHR 2:16:1.

¹¹See SHR 2:16:1 for Biblical proof texts Is. 63:16, Jer. 31:9, Ex. 4:22, Deut. 14:1.

¹²Ibid, Ps. 80:2, Ezek. 34:31.

¹³Ibid, Ps. 121:4, Is. 5:7.

¹⁴Ibid, Ex. 12:12, Ex. 12:29, Ex. 8:22, Ex. 12:3.

¹⁵MR, p. 139 on SHR 2:16:1.

¹⁶See SHR 2:16:1 for proof texts Ex. 2:23ff, 12:3, 14:10, 25:2.

¹⁷Ibid, Judges 4:3, Ex. 25:8.

¹⁸SS 6:3 אני לדודי ודודי לי

¹⁹SS 7:11 אני לדודי ועלי חשוקאך

²⁰PDRK Braude, p. 487, Supplement Piska 6:3; See Joel 2:23, Is. 61:10.

²¹SHR 7:11:1.

²²GR 20:7.

²³GR 20:7. This is a play on חשיקתו, reading it as two words: חש weak and חקוה hope. Though Israel is weak or deficient in performing good deeds (חשים), they still hope מקוה for God's salvation.

²⁴NR 10:1, play on חשיקתו AND HIS DESIRE IS TOWARD ME and נשוקק "was eager to create."

²⁵SHR 5:16:6 on SS 5:16, HIS MOUTH IS MOST SWEET.

²⁶Cf. Tanhuma KiTissa 18 (p. 122).

²⁷MR, p. 256 on SHR 5:16:6.

²⁸ER 17:2.

²⁹SS 5:16

³⁰MRE, p. 212 on ER 17:2.

³¹NR 10:1, MRN, p. 332.

³²SS 5:16.

³³MNR, p. 335, Note 2 on NR 10:1.

³⁴Tanhuma KiTissa 18 (p. 122).

³⁵SS 1:15-16 הנך יפה רעיתי and הנך יפה דרדי אף נעים

³⁶MR, p. 88, Note 2 on SHR 1:16:1.

³⁷Play on words af אף meaning both "yea" and "anger."

³⁸SHR 7:2:1.

³⁹SS 7:2.

⁴⁰GR 43:9.

⁴¹SHR 7:2:1.

⁴²MRE, p. 173 on ER 15:10.

- ⁴³ER 41:2 and MRE, p. 470.
- ⁴⁴PDRK 28:5 (p. 430-Braude).
- ⁴⁵Tractate Succah 49b.
- ⁴⁶Hagigah 3a.
- ⁴⁷Tanhuma, Lekh Lekha 13 (p. 23).
- ⁴⁸SS 7:14.
- ⁴⁹MR, p. 302 on SHR 7:14:1
- ⁵⁰LR 2:11, cf. SER 10, p. 36.
- ⁵¹Tractate Erubin 21a-21b.
- ⁵²SHR 6:1:1.
- ⁵³תמצי from the text תמצי, MY UNDEFINED, SS 5:2, rendered "My Twin."
- ⁵⁴SHR 5:2:2.
- ⁵⁵SS 1:2
ישקני מנשיקות פיהו כי טובים דדיך מין
- ⁵⁶MR, p. 22 on SHR 1:2:2.
- ⁵⁷Ibid.
- ⁵⁸SHR 1:2:3.
- ⁵⁹MRE, p. 471 on ER 41:3. The word "kisses" being in the plural suggests these two requests.
- ⁶⁰MRE, p. 472 on ER 41:3.
- ⁶¹ER 41:3.
- ⁶²MR, p. 27 on SHR 1:2:5.
- ⁶³SHR 1:2:5.
- ⁶⁴MRE, p. 357 on ER 30:9.
- ⁶⁵Targum of SS 1:2 (see Pope, p. 229).
- ⁶⁶SHR 1:3:1.
- ⁶⁷PDRK 12:5 (Braude, p. 232).

⁶⁸SS 2:7.

⁶⁹SHR 2:7:1.

⁷⁰וְיֵאָמַר דִּי אִרְס דִּי וְיֵאָמַר is an exclamation of love and affection.

⁷¹Jastrow: "Thou art sighing for us first, instead of ouraspiring for Thee."

⁷²SS 3:11, R. Jose read SS 3:11 as "The crown where with He crowned Himself [in calling Israel] 'His Mother.'"

⁷³Play on words וְלֵאמֹר "my nation" and written without the vav וְלֵאמֹר as "my mother."

⁷⁴SHR 3:11:2, cf. ER 52:5, NR 12:8, PDRK 1:3.

⁷⁵Ta'anit 26b.

⁷⁶LR 20:10.

⁷⁷Ta'anit 26b, LMR 33 PROEMS.

⁷⁸ER 52:5, cf. NR 2:25.

⁷⁹NR 12:8.

⁸⁰PDRK 26:9 (Braude, p. 406).

⁸¹NR 12:8 and PDRK 1:3, p. 10.

⁸²SHR 4:10:1, cf. DR 2:37; PDRK 22:5.

⁸³The six citations in SS 4:8, 4:9, 4:10, 4:11, 4:12, 5:1. The four in the Prophets are: Jer. 7:34, Is. 61:10, 49:18, 62:5.

⁸⁴SS 4:12.

⁸⁵ER 15:16.

⁸⁶ER 52:1, cf. Talmud Yoma 75a.

⁸⁷LR 32:5, cf. NR 3:6, 20:22, PDRK 11:6.

⁸⁸SS 4:8.

⁸⁹A play on Lebanon, translating: Come with me straight from the bricks.

- ⁹⁰MRE, p. 282 on ER 23:5.
- ⁹¹NR 7:10.
- ⁹²PDRK 22:9.
- ⁹³PDRK, p. 347, cf. Talmud Shabbat 88a-88b.
- ⁹⁴SHR 8:6:3.
- ⁹⁵PDRK 17:8, p. 314. (Braude)
- ⁹⁶Tal. Ta'anit 4a.
- ⁹⁷SS 8:6.
- ⁹⁸NR 5:6.
- ⁹⁹SS 8:7.
- ¹⁰⁰SHR 8:7:1, cf. NR 2:16.
- ¹⁰¹Ester Rabbah 7:12.
- ¹⁰²ER 49:1.
- ¹⁰³NR 2:15.
- ¹⁰⁴PDRK 2:7 (Braude, p. 32).
- ¹⁰⁵SS 6:4.
- ¹⁰⁶NR 2:5.
- ¹⁰⁷Targum on SS 6:4 (Pope, p. 563).
- ¹⁰⁸MR, p. 306 on SHR 8:6:1.
- ¹⁰⁹SS 1:15, 4:1.
- ¹¹⁰ER 21:5, SHR 2:14:1, cf. Tal. Ber. 53b, 56a;
Git. 45a-b where Israel is compared to a dove.
- ¹¹¹SHR 5:2:2 on SS 5:2 MY DOVE.
- ¹¹²Tal. Ber. 53b.
- ¹¹³SHR 4:1:2.
- ¹¹⁴SS 14:1.
- ¹¹⁵MR, p. 129 on SHR 2:14:2.

¹¹⁶SS 2:14.

¹¹⁷SHR 2:14:2, cf. ER 21:5 where a similar version of the parable is given.

¹¹⁸Targum 2:14 (Pope, p. 401).

¹¹⁹GR 45:4.

¹²⁰SS 2:14.

¹²¹MR, p. 253 on SHR 5:16:3.

¹²²MR, p. 252 on SHR 5:16:2, cf. NR 10:1.

¹²³SS 5:16.

¹²⁴MRN, p. 332 on NR 10:1.

¹²⁵SHR 5:3:1.

¹²⁶SS 5:2.

¹²⁷SHR 5:2:2, cf. the dictum, "If a man commences to purify himself, he is assisted from heaven."

¹²⁸PR 15:6 (Braude, p. 313), cf. PDRK 5:6, 24:12 (Braude, p. 98, 378).

¹²⁹SHR 5:2:2.

¹³⁰PDRK 24:12 (Braude, p. 378, Note 43).

¹³¹SHR 5:5:1.

¹³²PDRK 24:12 (Braude, pp. 378-79).

¹³³Ibid.

¹³⁴SHR 7:5:2.

¹³⁵SHR 8:8:1.

¹³⁶SHR 8:6:2.

¹³⁷SS 5:2.

¹³⁸Targum to SS 5:2 (see Pope, p. 513).

¹³⁹SS 1:4.

¹⁴⁰In SHR 1:4:1 appear proof texts for all ten expressions of joy mentioned.

¹⁴¹MR, p. 49 on SHR 1:4:2, cf. PDRK 22:2.

¹⁴²PDRK 22:2 (Braude, p. 346).

¹⁴³SHR 1:4:2 where the Hebrew בך indicates "in Him" and not "in it," the day, as in Ps. 118:24.

¹⁴⁴SER 6 (p. 32).

¹⁴⁵SHR 8:13:1.

¹⁴⁶SS 8:13.

¹⁴⁷MR, p. 326 on SHR 8:14:1.

¹⁴⁸SHR 1:14:2.

¹⁴⁹SS 2:2.

¹⁵⁰MR, p. 97 on SHR 2:2:5, cf. LR 23:5.

¹⁵¹SHR 2:1:3.

¹⁵²Ginzberg, Legends, vol. I, p. 326.

¹⁵³GR 48:11 (quoted in Ginzberg, vol. 5, p. 24, Note 66).

¹⁵⁴Play on words, reading שכני ^{שכני}"my neighbors" rather than שכני ^{שכני}as in the Biblical verse.

¹⁵⁵SHR 1:4:3.

¹⁵⁶SHR 1:4:4.

¹⁵⁷SER 6 (p. 32).

¹⁵⁸SHR 4:1:2.

¹⁵⁹We have previously seen how the verse was applied to God's love for Israel.

¹⁶⁰SHR 8:7:1, cf. ER 49:1, NR 2:16.

¹⁶¹Citing Isa. 17:12 as a proof text.

¹⁶²SS 5:9.

163_{SS} 5:10.

164_{Targum} 5:9 (see Pope, p. 531).

165_{SS} 6:1.

166_{SHR} 6:1:1.

167_{SHR} 7:1:1, cf. GR 66:2.

168_{SS} 7:1.

169_{SHR} 7:1:2.

170_{NR} 2:4.

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