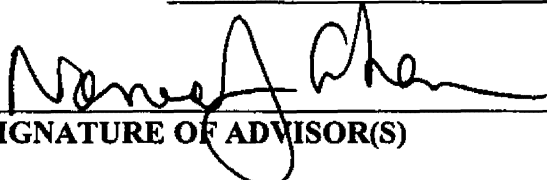


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WITH ME: RABBINIC RESPONSES
TO CHRISTIANITY IN MIDRASHIM
ON THE SONG OF SONGS


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My Mother's Sons Quarreled With Me: Rabbinic Responses to Christianity in Midrashim on the Song of Songs

Joshua Adam Rose

Summary

Number of Chapters: Seven Chapters

Contribution of the Thesis: The thesis demonstrates that *midrashim* on the Song of Songs up through the seventh century reflected rabbinic concerns about the religious and cultural environment of late antiquity. In particular, the *midrashim* examined in the thesis constitute a rabbinic response to the emergence of Christianity. The work analyses the historical backdrop of Christian-Jewish relations in the period; discusses the mechanics, wordplay, textual references and the major ideas at work in each passage; and offers an overarching analysis of the major themes in the *midrashim*.

Goal of the Thesis: The goal of the thesis was to understand how the Song of Songs served as a point of conflict between the Jewish community and the early Church.

Division of the Thesis: The thesis is composed of an introduction explaining the content and purpose of the thesis, a brief historical overview of Jewish-Christian relations in late antiquity, five chapters examining *midrashim* on Books two through six of the Song of Songs, an analysis of the major polemical themes within these *midrashim*, and a conclusion summarizing the essential findings of the thesis.

Types of Material Used: The thesis draws upon *midrashim* in Hebrew and in English translation as well as scholarly secondary source material (books and articles) on rabbinic approaches to the Song of Songs and on the historical context of rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity.

**My Mother's Sons Quarreled
With Me*: *Rabbinic Responses
to Christianity in Midrashim
on the Song of Songs***

JOSHUA ADAM ROSE

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination**

**Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinical Program
New York, New York**

**February 6, 2007
Advisor: Dr. Norman J. Cohen**

* Song of Songs 1:6

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Introduction

I chose to write about *midrashim* on the Song of Songs for two reasons. First is my love for *midrash* in general. Jewish literature is often separated into *halachic* (legal) and *aggadic* (literary) categories. This is an artificial division that obscures something essential about Jewish life. Even more precise clarifications explaining that the boundaries between the two are sometimes blurry miss the central point: that each type of literature is bound to the other. *Aggadah* helps uncover the religious and moral implications of legal discourse and so informs its interpretation and application; *halachah* assures that Jewish life does not become mere storytelling and interpretive play by helping us determine the moral and religious course of our lives, one guided toward holiness and righteousness.

Midrash is to me the finest illustration of the unity of these two dimensions of Jewish experience. Behind the brilliant wordplay, the subtle literary allusions, the clever juxtapositioning of disparate verses, the startling images and gorgeous language, is a reflection on essential questions about Jewish life and how it should be lived. Circumcision, the laws of Passover, the laws of the Temple - each is mined for the meaning it can give to our lives and the insight it can offer Jewish people in their relationship with God.

The second reason is my desire to learn more about how Jews living in period of fundamental change were able to use the Jewish past to make sense of the present. In the wake of the Temple's destruction - an event that could have been interpreted as the end of the Covenant - how did Jews find meaning in a tradition that was centered around the Temple? As they faced a competing messianic religious culture that used Jewish language and ideas and then saw that culture become widespread and politically

triumphant, how did they continue to find promise and hope of redemption? Such questions are historical but more important, they are religious: they help us understand how to adapt to new circumstances and to express a meaningful vision of the Jewish future that is linked to the Jewish past.

The unique nature of the Song of Songs – a love poem that makes no reference to God or, with the exception of brief allusions to Solomon and Jerusalem, to Jewish life generally – offers both opportunities and challenges to the midrashist. The text is a kind of blank canvas that enables the author to address whichever issues are most pressing in the contemporary situation. In doing so, the author faces the challenge of weaving this unique text into the fabric of Jewish literature and theology so that the *midrashim* emerge out of the tradition and not simply the author's imagination. In addition, the exegetically open-ended nature of the Song of Songs made it alluring also to the Christian community. Therefore, Song of Songs Rabbah was a promising work for such investigation. It dates roughly to this period of tremendous upset and ferment in Jewish life. I was interested to see whether Song of Songs Rabbah would reflect any kind of engagement with Christian ideas and challenges.

Other scholars had pointed the way in this kind of work. Arthur Marmorstein alludes to the Song of Songs Rabbah in the context of his study of third century midrashic polemics and offers insights into how the Song was used to respond to Christian challenges.¹ Ephraim Urbach's brief but powerful study of some passages of Song of

¹ Arthur Marmorstein, "Judaism and Christianity in the Middle of the Third Century," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 10 (1935): 223. See also J. Rabbinowitz and M.S. Lew, eds., *The Arthur Marmorstein Memorial Volume: Studies in Jewish Theology* (London: Oxford University Press), 1950.

Songs Rabbah compared rabbinic readings to those of Origen.² He concludes that Origen modeled his interpretations on those of the midrashic authors. Reuven Kimmelman was the first person to study the topic in depth.³ His careful linguistic analysis of the *midrashim* on the first part of Book One of the Song of Songs compared Rabbi Yohanan's reading of the Song to Origen's. Kimmelman gives convincing evidence that these the two communal leaders, having encountered one another in Caesarea in the Third Century CE, engaged in an unacknowledged polemical dialogue in their reading of the Song of Songs. My work extends the path laid down by these scholars, examining Song of Songs Rabbah and other midrashic works on Books Two through Six of the Songs for signs of polemical intent by the authors.

I approached the topic by reading Song of Songs Rabbah in its entirety, looking for ideas that would have been areas of contention between Christians and Jews or that appeared to address theological or cultural conflict. Seven major themes captured my attention after subsequent readings: Israel's performance of *mitzvot*, the importance of Temple and Tabernacle, redemption and the Messiah, circumcision, the importance of the Oral Law, rabbinic authority, and Israel's relationship with the nations. Some of these topics became less prominent as my research moved forward (such as, for example, Rabbinic authority), while others became much more so (such as the Temple and Tabernacle).

Thus, this thesis is built around those Song verses that led to the most prominent polemical material in the primary midrashic work on the Song of Songs. My next step

² Ephraim Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretations of Canticles," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971): 257.

³ Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbi Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation," *Harvard Theological Review* 73.3-4 (1980): 567.

was to identify *midrashim* from other collections on these same verses. Using both *Sefer Torah ha-Ketuvah v'ha-Mesurah* and the software of the Bar Ilan Responsa Project, I identified the midrashic material associated with these verses. Choosing material from compilations shaped up to the seventh century, I then read all of these *midrashim*, again looking for passages addressing the primary topics of interest. The most promising of these passages are gathered together in this work.

The Thesis begins with a brief overview of the history of Jewish-Christian relations in the early centuries of the common era. My goal in this historical essay was to highlight the contacts and tensions between the Palestinian Jewish and Christian communities and to demonstrate that there was significant engagement between Christians and Jews. It was this historical environment which gave shape to the major themes in the *midrashim* collected here.

Following this is the midrashic material connected with Books Two through Six of the Song of Songs, each Book separated into its own chapter. Each chapter is divided into subsections based on the relevant verse of Songs. At the beginning of each is the Song of Songs verse in Hebrew, followed by my translation. Beneath this is the English translation of the *midrash* or *midrashim* relevant to that verse of the Song of Songs. Following this is my analysis of the *midrashim* containing an explanation of the mechanics, wordplay and textual references of each, as well as a discussion of the major ideas at work in the passage.

An analytical summary at the end of the work reviews the most prominent themes in the *midrashim*, exploring them through the lens of the religious tensions

between the two communities. While the historical chapter at the beginning of the thesis examines the political and cultural environment, this analysis seeks to understand the core theological issues at play between the two communities.

The conclusion summarizes my work, addresses areas for further research on the topic, and reflects on the significance of my findings.

In the *midrashim* that follow the reader will find the ideas of greatest importance to the Jews of late antiquity. These are carefully woven and artistic literary reflections on the most pressing concerns of the day: Israel's state of subjugation to those who hold power and the meaning of its political situation; the significance of the rituals that bind the community together separate it from others and link it to its past; the loss of Jewish sovereignty and reflections on why tragedy has befallen the community; God's apparent absence at times of Israel's greatest need; the possibility of restoring Israel's relationship with God and finding meaning in the present; hope for the future and thoughts about how Israel can help bring about redemption.

In short, the *midrashim* record our ancestors' attempts to make sense of their world and their role in it. I hope that these beautiful and sometimes strange letters from the past help us to do the same in our own time.

Chapter One:

*A History of Jewish-Christian
Relations in Late Antiquity*

This brief essay will review the history relevant to an understanding of the *midrashim* in the thesis. It begins with a survey of cultural and institutional features of the Jewish community of late antiquity. Following this the growth of Christianity is described. The focus of the essay is on the contact between the Christian and Jewish communities. After describing the nature of the relations between Christians and Jews the essay focuses on Caesarea, an important center for both religions in this era, to view their relationship in greater detail. The argument of the essay is that Jewish and Christian communities were in very close contact in the Palestine of late-antiquity. It is against this background of proximity, hostility, and cooperation that the *midrashim* within this thesis were composed.

The Jewish Community

The rabbinic authors that produced the *midrashim* cited in this thesis were part of a dynamic culture. That culture changed over the centuries, as seen in various historical sources, but its essential features can be described.

The official head of the Jewish community was the Patriarch. In both Palestine and in the diaspora he represented the Jewish community to the Roman government. Internally the Patriarch "exercised triple power of legislator, judge, and administrator" through his role as the head of the Sanhedrin, the "supreme legislative authority of Palestinian Jewry."¹

¹ Michael Avi-Yona, *The Jews of Palestine: A Political History from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), 60.

This was the formal power structure that enabled the Jews to govern themselves and to navigate their interaction with Roman authorities. The norms and ideals of the broader rabbinic culture that undergirded this formal power structure would persist long after its institutions ceased to exist (in the early 5th century). This culture was characterized by the study and interpretation of the Torah and the application of a growing oral legal tradition to the challenges of daily life and the broader issues facing the community. In addition, significant components of rabbinic Judaism included:

The rabbinic academy (*beit midrash*), the court of law associated with it, the ordination of one another by the rabbis...and the prestige of these scholar-teachers as individuals and as a collective elite...²

Changing circumstances within the community saw the steady decline of the power of the Patriarch and simultaneously, the growing influence of these rabbinic scholars. As the influence of the rabbis increased, the power of the Patriarch seemed an anomaly so that by the third century leading rabbis argued that rabbinic power should be matched with that of the patriarchate.³ Internally the declining status of the patriarch was marked by the distribution of patriarchal powers among five leaders. Externally the decline was illustrated by Rome's recognition of the authority of the rabbis over the patriarch in the third century.⁴

² Tessa Rajak, "The Jewish Community and its Boundaries," in *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, ed. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak (Routledge: London 1992), 11.

³ Avi-Yona, 119.

⁴ Avi-Yona, 120-21.

It is in these centuries of growth and ferment that the midrashim cited within this thesis were written. The ideas in these passages are those of a vibrant culture growing in strength, but also confronting new problems and challenges.

Christianity and Judaism

Rabbinic culture developed alongside Christianity. The Church drew on Jewish culture in a number of ways. To even speak of Christianity in the formative period before the composition of the Gospels is to distort history with anomalous language. Jesus was of course a Jew, part of the emerging rabbinic world. The central themes in the New Testament are expressed in "language which was common currency among the Jewish people."⁵ Long after the communities split in the last quarter of the first century, though, the Church continued to revere the holy books of Judaism. In spite of the efforts of at least one prominent Church father,⁶ the Hebrew Bible remained part of the canon of the Church. Jewish methods of reading the Bible were borrowed by the Patristic writers (see below). Beyond this textual and ideological shared heritage, though, as Yitzhak Baer writes, "the earthly and metaphysical foundations of the Christian ecclesiastical organization are based on the legacy inherited from the Jews."⁷

By the end of the Bar Kochba revolt (135 CE) the theological, institutional and cultural gulf between the communities was too great to bridge. As the Church sought increasingly to expand its role and influence within the gentile world what may have

⁵ Yitzhak Baer, "Israel, the Christian Church, and the Roman Empire from the Time of Septimius Severus to the Edict of Toleration of AD 313," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 7 (1961): 79.

⁶ John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 161.

⁷ Baer, 79.

remained of the shared vocabulary and outlook was lost amidst the crucial differences that had developed.

The Growth of Christianity

In the second century the young religion grew slowly in Palestine. It was primarily urban at this point and took hold in no more than thirteen cities. For the most part these were removed from major centers of Jewish life.⁸ Caesarea, one of these Christian cities, would not become an important Jewish center until the following century.⁹

Devastating financial and political crises in the third century Roman Empire was fertile ground for the spread of this missionizing, salvific religion. In Palestine and elsewhere Christianity grew at a greater rate during this period.¹⁰

Contact Between the Communities

As Christianity grew, the voices on both sides became more shrill: Patristic writers and the institutional voice of the Church grew virulently anti-Semitic while rabbinic writers were bitterly hostile to Christianity. In religious debates representatives of each community would attempt to defend their ideas and expose as fraudulent those of their counterparts as audiences watched. This public disputation was a feature of the communities from the era of the Gospels, but in the third century it manifested in Palestine.¹¹ Confrontation between Christian and Jew were more common in Palestine

⁸ Avi-Yona, 138.

⁹ Lee. I Levine, *Caesarea Under Roman Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 62.

¹⁰ Avi-Yona, 145.

¹¹ Gager, 154.

than in the diaspora. References to disputes between the rabbis and the *minim* (sectarians) are common in Palestinian sources but very rare in Babylonian sources.¹² Palestinian rabbis were engaged more often in social discourse with those outside of the rabbinic universe than were their Babylonian counterparts. This interaction extended to both non-Jews and to *minim* (heretics) who accepted the Bible but rejected rabbinic interpretations of it.¹³

The fact that these early midrashim originate in Palestine (or are attributed to Palestinian rabbis) may be explained by the frequent contact between rabbis and those outside their community that characterized Palestinian Jewish culture.¹⁴ Yet the rabbis in Palestinian sources only rarely identify their opponents as Christians. In none of the *midrashim* in this thesis do the authors identify those with competing ideologies or those who torment the Jews as Christians. Descriptions of debates in Palestinian sources vaguely identify the other disputants as members of "the nations," but "everything points to gentile Christians as the true antagonists."¹⁵ The scarcity of explicit references to Christians or *minim* in Palestinian texts is difficult to reconcile with the fact that contact and tension between the communities was so common in the area. This contradiction could be explained by a difference in language of which we are not aware or by the fact that Palestinian rabbis deliberately concealed their true target from a Hebrew-reading public.¹⁶

¹² Richard Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 71.

¹³ *ibid.*, 5

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 73.

¹⁵ Gager, 157.

¹⁶ Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society*, 73-74.

Though the official record of Patristic and rabbinic writing indicates that the boundaries between the communities were rigid, among ordinary Jews and Christians these boundaries were more fluid. In fact, one reason for the vehemence of Church anti-Semitism was the presence of what some scholars call "Judaizing Christians": Christians who took on practices of their Jewish neighbors (or maintained such practices after their conversion to Christianity).¹⁷ Such people, who saw themselves as "both Jew and Christian" and who "observed the Sabbath, joined in Jewish fasts and festivities, and respected the awe and sanctity of the synagogue" were not marginal but rather saw themselves as members of the Church.¹⁸ Government edicts, Church council proclamations and other official documents indicate that the Jewish community continued to draw converts from the Christian world and to exercise influence over the religious practices of Christians into the fifth century.¹⁹ In late antiquity Palestinian religious communities mixed together, blurring the picture painted by the *midrashic*, legal and Patristic record/writing. Rather than two distinct and opposed communities, there were

Jewish Christians and gentile Christians, [and] gentile Christians who lived like Jews. Christian Judaizing offers evidence of how diverse interactions were between Christians and Jews, and attests to the indistinct, fluid boundaries among members of each group.²⁰

¹⁷ Michele Murray, *Playing a Jewish Game: Gentile Christian Judaizing in the First and Second Centuries CE* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁸ Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak, "Introduction," in Lieu et al., *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, 88-89.

¹⁹ Louis Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 413.

²⁰ Murray, *Playing a Jewish Game*, 9.

While this historical record complicates the reading of sources such as the *midrashim* in this volume, it also contributes to their understanding. The richly diverse and complex social environment gave shape to the ideas expressed in the midrashic literature of the era.

Caesarea

The city of Caesarea exemplifies the kinds of diverse social interactions that contributed to the religious ferment of the early centuries of the common era. As a center of both Jewish and Christian scholarship it offered many opportunities for interaction among leaders from both communities. As a large urban center it also brought together in a relatively small area a large number of Jews and Christians (as well as Samaritans).

Caesarea had long been important in Christian life, as the Gospels attest.²¹ By the third century, though, Caesarea was the most important Church in Palestine, though Jerusalem remained the official center of Palestinian Christian life.²² It was home to the Church father Origen as well as to Eusebius. Origen's extensive library at Caesarea played an important role in Jewish-Christian relations because it contained all of the extant works of Philo.²³ His writing became increasingly polemical upon his arrival in Caesarea, both because the city had a vibrant and contentious religious life and because

²¹ See, for example, Acts 10:1-48.

²² Richard Ascough, "Christianity in Caesarea Maritima," in *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima*, ed. Terence L. Donaldson (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 165.

²³ *ibid.*, 167

he improved his knowledge of Jewish texts in Hebrew (which he learned from a Jew) so he could encounter the Bible directly.²⁴

Caesarea was also home to important Jewish scholars. Bar Kappara started his school there in the late second century. Following him was Hoshaya, who started his school in Caesarea at the same time as did Origen.²⁵ In addition, both Abbahu and Yohanan called Caesarea home, though they resided elsewhere.

Though Christians did turn to rabbis for guidance in studying the Bible and to discuss theological questions,²⁶ the relationship between the communities was contentious. Origen engaged in public disputations with the rabbinic sages which he alludes to in his writing.²⁷ Though the names of the rabbis who must have engaged in such debates are not always known, Abbahu's role as a key figure in public engagement with the Christian community is clear.²⁸ Debates were not merely opportunities for lively social exchange. Rather, they were forums that the leaders on each side saw as important in the matter of conversion. As noted above, Christians were drawn to Judaism and expressed their interest through conversion or simply by adopting Jewish practices. Rabbis worried about losing members of the community to the Caesarean Church. The severe "competition for social space" in Caesarea and the Christian claim that "its beliefs

²⁴ Ruth Clements, "Origen's Hexapla and Christian-Jewish Encounter in the Second and Third Centuries," in *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima*, 305.

²⁵ Levine, *Caesarea Under Roman Rule*, 57-58.

²⁶ Clements, "Origen's Hexapla," 305.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 312-13.

²⁸ Levine, *Caesarea Under Roman Rule*, 62.

were universal in their applicability" made the Church particularly aggressive in trying to bring people into the fold.²⁹

The rabbis were perhaps drawn to engage in such public disputes with Christian leaders because ordinary Jews and Christians in Ceasarea lived lives in such close proximity and engaged in social discourse that the rabbis viewed as threatening (Levine 61). Jewish influence on their Christian neighbors in Caesarea, evidenced by the anxiety of Christian writers, indicates that there was substantial intermingling among Jews and Christians.³⁰ They must have shared ideas and practices that the leaders of each community saw as undermining essential religious commitments.

The interaction between these two religious communities in this important city indicates a range of contacts between Christians and Jews. Social interaction and sharing of religious practices demonstrated that the lines separating the communities could be blurred even as scholars tried to make divisions more prominent. Interaction between the communities in Caesarea "spans a whole spectrum, from peaceful coexistence – even cooperation – at one end to physical conflict at the other, with various stages of implicit competition, overt competition, and hostile confrontation in between."³¹

The relationship between the Jewish community and the Christian community in late antiquity was characterized by increasing contact and engagement. At times this engagement was benign and perhaps even beneficial. Ordinary Christians and Jews built

²⁹ Terence Donaldson, "Concluding Reflections," in *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima*, 335.

³⁰ Michele Murray, "Jews and Judaism in Caesarea Maritima," in *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima*, 146.

³¹ Donaldson, 333.

communities together and even shared knowledge. They were close enough and communicated peaceably enough that the Christian community adopted or retained many Jewish practices. Over time, the elites of both communities began to express their mutual hostility and even fear. As the communities drifted apart theologically and culturally, the Church and the rabbis became increasingly opposed to the ideas and influence of one another. With this background in mind, let us turn to the texts that grew out of this history of Jewish-Christian engagement and learn how this history manifests in the midrashic literature of the period.

Chapter Two:
*Midrashim on Book Two of the
Song of Songs*

Song of Songs 2:1

אֲנִי חַבְצֵלֶת הַשָּׂרוֹן שׁוֹשַׁנַּת הָעֲמָקִים

I am a crocus of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.

~~~~~

## Texts

### *Song of Songs Rabbah 2:1*

*I am a rose (chavatzelet)<sup>1</sup> of Sharon.* Said the Community of Israel: I am the one, and beloved (*chavivah*) am I. I am she whom the Holy One, blessed be He, loved more than the seventy nations. A ROSE OF SHARON: so called because I made Him a shade (*tzel*) by the hand of Bezalel, as it is written, *And Betzalel made the ark* (Exodus 37:1). *Of Sharon:* so called because I chanted to him a song (*shirah*) together with Moses, as it is written, *Then sang Moses and the children of Israel* (ib. 15:1). Another explanation: *I am the rose of Sharon:* I am the one, and beloved am I. I am she who was hidden (*chavuyah*) in the shadow (*b'tzel*) of Egypt, and in a brief space the Holy One, blessed be He, brought me to Raamses, and I blossomed forth in good deeds like a rose, and I chanted before Him the song, as it says, *Ye shall have a song as in the night when a feast is hallowed* (Isaiah 30:29). Another explanation: *I am a rose of Sharon.* I am the one and beloved am I. I am she who was hidden in the shadow of the sea, and in a brief space I blossomed forth with good deeds before Him like a rose, and I pointed to Him with the finger (opposite to me), as it says, *This is my God, and I will glorify Him* (Exodus 15:2). Another explanation: *I am a rose of Sharon.* I am the one, and beloved am I. I am she that was hidden in the shadow of mount Sinai, and in a

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout I have kept the English translations of the various editions of these *midrashim* (listed in the Bibliography). Their translation of both the *midrash* and of the Song of Songs verse remains unchanged, even when theirs varies from my own translation. All transliterations have been modified for consistency.

brief space I blossomed forth in good deeds before Him like a lily with hand and heart, and I said before Him, *All that the Lord has said will we do, and obey* (Exodus 24:7)....

## Analysis

This *midrash* weaves together three themes critical to the self understanding of the Jewish community of late-antiquity: Israel's redemption, its status *vis a vis* the nations, and the construction of the Tabernacle<sup>2</sup>. The word חֲבַצְלֵת, *crocus*, is read as חֲבִיבָה, "beloved." God's affection for Israel distinguishes Israel from the nations. The full wordplay on חֲבַצְלֵת explains the reason for Israel's special status: its commitment to God. חֲבַצְלֵת is connected to both צֶלַע, "shade," and בִּצְלָאֵל, Betzaleil, the craftsman of the Tabernacle. The claim of the *midrash* is that Israel is beloved and therefore favored above the nations because it constructed the Tabernacle to shelter God<sup>3</sup>. The second part of the passage referring to Egypt appears to be a completely separate thought, but in fact may also tie into the priestly rituals of sacrifice and purification: the verse before the Isaiah passage cited refers to the ascent to הָרִי, "mountain of God." Song of Songs Rabbah 2:1 returns to the theme of Israel's relationship with the nations. Thus, the redemption from Egypt and the observance of the rituals of sacrifice are linked together. These other nations have not, as Israel has, followed the commandments – to build the Tabernacle, to earn redemption – and so do not create a צֶלַע, shade or shadow, for God.

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<sup>2</sup> Here, as elsewhere, the Tabernacle stands in for the Temple, as well. The *midrashist's* continual use of the Tabernacle in this literature is not only a look back to Israel's ancient past as documents in the Torah, but also a glance back to its more recent past of the priestly cult of the Temple before its destruction in the year 70 C.E.

<sup>3</sup> An artful counterpoint to this idea appears in Song of Songs Rabbah 2:10, in which Song 2:3 (בְּצֵלֹת חֲמֻדָּי (וְיִשְׁכְּתִי)) is said to indicate that "all the nations refused to sit in the shadow of the Holy One, blessed be he, on the day of the giving of the Law" but that Israel loved God and sat in God's shadow. This same *midrash* appears in *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* 12:10.

Nonetheless, Israel lives its earthly existence in their צל until the time of the redemption described in Psalm 98.

The word צל is used not only as a wordplay with חֲכָמָה, but also allows the *midrashist* to bring in significant episodes related to physical darkness in Israel's history. In these cases the link between the various kinds of darkness and the word צל is implied by context but not made explicit. Isaiah 30:29 is used to refer to the Passover, which commenced at night. Here darkness was a prelude to the central moment of redemption in Israel's history. The passage also alludes to the shadow of the Sea. This could be a reference to the darkness of Israel's anxiety, surrounded by water and pursued by the enemy. More likely, though, the walls of water on Israel's right and left (Exodus 29:29) cast a shadow on the people. This protective darkness allowed Israel to move to freedom. Finally, the children of Israel stand in the shadow of Mt. Sinai. The basis for the author's claim that Israel stood in its shadow is most likely the idiom in Exodus 19:17 and Deuteronomy 4:11, which has Israel standing "under" the mountain. In each instance cited by the *midrash*, the protective shadow of these central events in Israel's history allows the nation to "blossom," following the reference to *crocus* and *lily* in the Songs verse. Thus, in the darkness of Egypt, in the midst of the Sea, and at Sinai, the flower Israel was cultivated so that it could reach maturity and blossom in beauty. Only upon accepting the commandments with the phrase וְעָשָׂה וְנִשְׁמָע, "we will do and heed" (Exodus 24:7) does Israel's beauty flower fully. Israel's acceptance of the commandments illustrates that the nation is fully developed and most beautiful.

## Song of Songs 2:2

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כְּשׁוֹשָׁנָה בֵּין הַחֹרְחִים כֵּן רַעֲיָתִי בֵּין הַבָּנוֹת

*Like a lily among the briars, so is my love among the young women.*



### Texts

#### *Song of Songs Rabbah 2:6*

R. 'Azariah said in the name of R. Judah who had it from R. Simon: A king once had an orchard in which they went and planted a row of fig-trees and a row of vines and a row of apples and a row of pomegranates, and then he handed it over to a keeper and went away. After a time the king came and inspected the orchard to see how it was getting on, and he found it full of thorns and briars. So he brought wood-cutters to cut it down. Seeing in it a beautiful rose, he took and smelt it and was appeased, and said: 'For the sake of this rose the orchard shall be spared. So the world was created only for the sake of Israel. After twenty six generations the Holy One, blessed be He, inspected His garden to see how it was getting on, and he found it one mass of water. The generation of Enosh was wiped out with water; the generation of the dispersion was punished with water. So He brought wood-cutters to cut it down, as it says, *The Lord sat enthroned at the Flood* (Psalm 29:10), but He saw a beautiful rose, namely Israel, and He took and smelt it, at the time when Israel received the Ten Commandments, and He was appeased, at the time when Israel said, *We will do and obey* (Exodus 24:7). Said the Holy One, blessed be He: For the sake of this rose let the garden be spared; for the sake of the Torah and those who study it let the world be spared.

## Analysis

The present *midrash* links the rabbinic attitude toward the nations with Israel's acceptance of the *mitzvot*. The use of Exodus 24:7's *וַעֲשֵׂה וְשָׁמַע*, *we will do and heed*, in connection with the flower imagery echoes the idea in the previous *midrash* that Israel is a delicate object that must be cultivated and will one day be chosen by God. This passage also suggests that Israel's acceptance of the *mitzvot* has universal redemptive power: it was only on account of Israel's assent that all peoples were spared a destruction like that of the flood. The rabbis celebrate their salvific gesture on behalf of others because "for the sake of the Torah and those who study it" the world was saved.

This is not a claim of national, but rather religious superiority. Before Israel's commitment to covenant there was nothing at all to distinguish Israel from other peoples. Rabbi Joshua describes only the lack of physical distinctions which likely suggest a lack of spiritual distinction. More importantly, he points to practices which now distinguish Israel and are therefore proof of Israel's commitment to the commandments. Israel's status as redeemer of nations, then, is not tied to Israel's *a priori* status as a favored people, but rather to Israel's acceptance of the covenant.

This passage also contains a double allusion to the Noah story. The *midrash* is premised upon the occurrence of the flood and the ability of Israel to prevent its recurrence by their righteousness and commitment to observe the *mitzvot*. A more subtle reference to the story may be in God's taking the rose and smelling it, just as God smelled the *ריח-גִּיחוֹחַ*, *pleasing odor*, of the sacrifices. This is God's signal that the flood need not destroy the earth. The image calls to mind Noah's sending forth the *יוֹנָה*, "dove"



whose return with the olive branch signals the drying of the waters. The use of the word יָנָה is a further hint that the midrashic author is subtly playing off of the flood story. Just as the dove's plucking of the olive branch signals to Noah that the time of destruction was past, so does God's picking the rose indicate that the time of Israel's suffering has gone. And just as the Noah story culminates in the creation of a new relationship between God and humanity, the *midrash* hints that the current "flood" of Israel's suffering will be followed by Israel's redemption. Israel will be able, like Noah, to usher in a new creation by following God's covenant.

## Song of Songs 2:3

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כְּתִפּוֹחַ בַּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר כֵּן דֹּדִי בֵּין הַבָּנִים בָּצֵלוֹ חִמַּדְתִּי וַיִּשְׁבְּתִי וּפְרִיּוֹ מִתּוֹךְ לַחֲפִי

*Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my love among the young men – in his shade I have loved and sat, and his fruit is sweet on my palate.*



### Texts

#### ***B. Shabbat 88a***

R. Chama the son of R. Chanina said: What is the meaning of that which is written, *Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest?* Why are the Jewish people compared to an apple tree? To tell you that just as in the case of an apple tree its fruit precedes its leaves, so, too, Israel put *we will do* before *we will hear* (Exodus 24:7).

#### ***Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 12:10***

*As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons [of mankind] (Song 2:3).* R. Huna and R. Aha citing R. Yose ben Zimra, said: The apple tree – as all shun it because it gives no shade, so the nations of the world shunned the Holy One of the day of the giving of the Torah. Should you imagine that Israel also shunned the Holy One as giving no shade, the verse goes on to say *Under His shadow I delighted to sit.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Song of Songs Rabbah 2:1 for a different use of צל.

R. Ahawa bar Zaira said: Even as the apple tree puts out its blossoms before its leaves, so Israel at Sinai put “doing” before “hearing”<sup>5</sup> (Exodus 24:7).

### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 2:12***

R. Levi said: Israel formed three...expectations by the Sea: they looked forward to the Torah, they looked forward to the standards, they looked forward to the tabernacle. They looked forward to the Torah, as it is written, *For his shadow I longed, and I sat there*. They looked forward to the standards<sup>6</sup>, as it is written, *I longed*. They looked forward to the Tabernacle, as it is written, *And I sat* (*yashavti*), for so it says, *For I have not dwelt* (*yashavti*) *in a house since the day that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt* (II Samuel 7:6). [The reference to standards] concurs with the dictum of R. Menaheman: *And they went out into the wilderness of Shur* (Exodus XV, 22): this teaches us that they prophesied with regard to themselves that they were destined to be formed into camps, standards, and rows (*shurot*) like the lay-out of a vineyard. *And his fruit was sweet to my taste*. R. Isaac said: This refers to the twelve months which Israel spent in front of Mount Sinai regaling themselves with the words of the Torah. What was the reason? Because *its fruit was sweet to my taste*. To my taste it was sweet, but to the taste of the other nations it was bitter like wormwood.

## **Analysis**

B. *Shabbat* and *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* both demonstrate the rabbinic fascination with Exodus 24:7's *וַיַּעַשׂ וַיִּשְׁמָע* and point to the theological importance of the verse. In this *midrash* and many others like it, the order of the verbs in the sentence (first *וַיַּעַשׂ*, “do,” and after it *וַיִּשְׁמָע*, “hear,” sometimes translated “understand” or “obey”) emphasizes Israel's commitment to the actual performance of the *mitzvot*. The analogy also suggests

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<sup>5</sup> This appears also in *Song of Songs Rabbah* 2:10.

<sup>6</sup> This is a reference to *וַיִּגְדְּלוּ עָלָיו אֶת־הָבָה* in the next verse of *Song of Songs*, 2:4.

the favored status of the performance (תפוצה) of the commandments – the fruit of the apple tree, and not the leaves, are considered more desirable. It also could be construed to mean that the fruit (reward) of the commandments is the doing of them. Such an idea could be seen to be a corollary to the idea, expressed in so many of these *midrashim*, that the reward for adherence to *mitzvot* is future redemption: at a time when Jewish suffering may have made the idea of redemption seem impossibly distant, this image of the *mitzvot* bearing immediate fruit may have been a source of comfort.

All three of these passages emphasize Israel's favored status among the nations. Both B. *Shabbat* and Pesikta d'Rav Kahana indicate that Israel's performance of the *mitzvot* earns them the special status that they enjoy. The precise meaning of the shade imagery in Pesikta d'Rav Kahana is not clear. The meaning might be that the other nations were unable to perceive the protective possibilities of Torah and thus rejected it as being like an apple tree, which gives no shade. Alternatively, it might be that Israel agreed to accept the Torah despite the fact that they, too, understood that it offered no shade. After accepting it they discovered that it allowed them to sit under God's shadow. Finally, the Pesikta d'Rav Kahana may be playing subtly off the imagery of B. *Shabbat* in which the acceptance of *mitzvot* – the fruit – must precede the leaves – the source of the shade. Song of Songs Rabbah does not emphasize the performance of the commandments, but rather Israel's distinguishing itself by its willingness to accept a revelation rejected by other nations.

## Song of Songs 2:5

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סמכוני באשיות רפדוני בתפוחים כי חולת אהבה אני

*Sustain me with sweet cakes, refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love.*



### Texts

#### ***Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 12:3***

R. Isaac began his discourse with the verse by reading *Stay me with the two fires (ishot)* – the fire of Abraham and the fire of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

Another comment: *stay me with the two fires* – the fire of Moriah and the fire of the bush.

Another comment: *stay me with the two fires* - that is, with the laws which are closely reasoned (*m'ushashot*) and precisely expressed.

#### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 2:16***

*Stay ye me with dainties.* This means, with two fires (*ishot*), with the heavenly and the earthly. Another explanation: *Stay ye me with dainties*: with two fires-the Written Law and the Oral Law. Another explanation: *Stay ye me with dainties*: with many fires-with the fire of Abraham, and of Moriah, and of the bush, with the fire of Elijah and of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Another explanation: *Stay ye me with dainties*: this refers to [closely-reasoned] (*m'ushashot*) [laws]. *Refresh me with apples*: this refers to the *haggadot*, which have a fragrance and taste like apples. *For I am love-sick.* Said the Community of Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Sovereign of the Universe, all the maladies which Thou bringest upon me are to make me more beloved of Thee.'

Another explanation: *For I am love-sick*. The Community of Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Sovereign of the Universe, the reason for all the sufferings which the nations inflict upon me is because I love Thee.'

Another explanation: *For I am love-sick* – 'Although I am sick, I am beloved of Him.' One taught: While a man is well he eats anything he gets; when he is sick, he wants only dainties. R. Isaac said: Formerly the main outlines of the Torah were known to all, and people sought to learn some lesson of Mishnah or of Talmud; but now that the main outlines of the Torah are not known, people seek to learn some lesson of Scripture, of *haggadah*. R. Levi said: Formerly everyone had enough for his necessities and people were eager to learn something of Mishnah, *halachah*, or Talmud; but now that they have not enough for their necessities, and still more that they are worn out with the oppression, they want to hear only words of blessing and of comfort.

## Analysis

In these *midrashim* אֶשֶׁתִּשׁוֹת is read as a plural form of the word אֵשׁ, "fire," which is then interpreted in various ways. In Song of Songs Rabbah, the first explanation of the two fires is that they represent the "heavenly and earthly." This may refer to the presence of God in heaven and on earth (many other *midrashim* discuss the divine presence within the Temple or elsewhere). Alternatively, it could refer to both the divine and human halves of the covenantal partnership. Though the comments that follow are separated from this one with the term דְּבַר אַחֵר ("another comment"), this first interpretation may be the lens through which to view them as well. The written Torah could be seen as "heavenly" because its composition was in heaven and only then revealed to Israel through Moses. The Oral Torah was created on earth by the rabbis who received its ideas from Sinai. The fire of Abraham may refer to Abraham's righteousness or to the

experience of his near-martyrdom, an act of earthly commitment (though admittedly due to heavenly intervention), while the fire of Moriah refers to the heavenly fire sent to consume the offering of the ram. Song of Songs Rabbah uses the same images to explain the fire as does Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, but changes their order.

In Pesikta d'Rav Kahana the pairing of the fires of Moriah and the bush draws out a tension between revelation and observance. In midrashic retelling of the Akedah the 'fire of Moriah' is the fire that comes down to consume the ram instead of Isaac, signifying God's acceptance of the offering – of both the ram and, more importantly, of Isaac. In this case the pairing of the two fires alludes to God as redeemer, signaling the initial redemption of Isaac – who symbolizes Israel – and then the eventual redemption from Egypt which follows the episode with the bush. The two fires are very different in the rabbinic imagination. The fire of Moriah was the result of the commitment to follow God's command to act in a certain way. Abraham and Isaac are paradigmatic of the performance of *mitzvot* – the willingness to put God's command into action: Abraham because he followed God's command to offer his son, and Isaac because the midrashic tradition imagines him to have offered himself willingly. This willingness ultimately leads to the redemption of Isaac through the intervention of the angel and God's acceptance of the ram in Isaac's stead. Moses' encounter at the bush is of a different order. It *precedes* the people's commitment to *mitzvot* and is the first moment in a series of miracles leading up to Sinai. It is a prelude to revelation, not a reward for observance.

Both *midrashim* use the wordplay with "closely-reasoned" to highlight the art of halachic reasoning. Song of Songs Rabbah demonstrates the rabbinic privileging of legal reasoning over biblical exegesis – even in this exegetical work – in its closing reflections.

In the first, God loves Israel apparently *in spite* of their sickly state of halachic ignorance. In the second, Rabbi Levi bemoans the fact that people now seek the simpler pleasures of Torah and *haggadah* over the more substantial and worthy study of Talmud. The distinction between the Oral and Written Torah is of particular note, as this was an important part of rabbinic theology and a focal point of the conflict between the rabbis and the early Church. Rabbinic emphasis on the Oral Law was a key issue in separating the Jewish community from the Church, which embraced the Bible as revelation but rejected the authority of the Talmudic tradition.

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana's alludes to martyrdom in its use of the three characters who survive Nebuchadnezzar's punishment by fire (Daniel 3:6). The "fire of Abraham" seems to do the same in its reference to the Genesis Rabbah 42:4 story in which Nimrod casts Abraham into a furnace. For the Jewish community of late antiquity martyrdom was idealized and these stories were occasionally used to draw attention to the deeds of contemporary heroes who had died at the hands of the Roman Empire. Martyrdom stories could also be used as a potent symbol of Israel's willingness to endure ongoing persecution and difficulties for the worship of God. Though Song of Songs Rabbah 2:16 does not describe acts of martyrdom it nonetheless explores the oppressive nature of the relationship between Israel and the nations.

The midrashic play on חולת אהבה, *sick with love*, serves two functions here. First, it plays on the relationship of love between God and Israel that is prevalent in so much of the *midrash* (indeed, taken as the presumed meaning). The phrase is used as an analog to earthly love, with Israel's longing for her beloved so strong that it overwhelms her sense of wellbeing. The phrase also draws attention to the painful nexus of commitment to God



and persecution by earthly powers. Here sickness describes Israel's lowly state and ongoing suffering at the hands of the governments who have power over her. The contrast between Israel's favored status *vis a vis* God on the one hand and its despised status *vis a vis* the nations is nowhere expressed as powerfully or concisely as it is through this play on the phrase חולת אֶמְבָּרָה.

## Song of Songs 2:8

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קול דודי הנה זה בא מדלג על ההרים מקפץ על הגבעות

*The voice of my beloved – here it comes, leaping on the mountains, jumping on the hills.*



### Texts

#### *Song of Songs Rabbah 2:21*

*Hark my beloved, behold he cometh.* R. Judah and R. Nehemiah and the Rabbis gave different explanations of this. R. Judah said: *Hark my beloved, behold he cometh*: this refers to Moses. When he came and said to Israel, 'In this month ye will be delivered,' they said to him, 'Our teacher Moses, how can we be delivered? Did not the holy One, blessed be He, say to Abraham, And they shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years (Genesis 15:13), and so far only two hundred and ten have passed? He said to them: 'Since God desires to deliver you, He takes no heed of your reckonings, but *Leaps over the mountains*, The *mountains* and *hills* mentioned here refer to the calculations and periods. He leaps over calculations and periods and terminuses and in this month ye are to be delivered. R. Nehemiah said: *Hark my beloved, behold he cometh*: this refers to Moses. When he said to Israel, 'In this month ye are to be delivered,' they said to him, 'Our teacher Moses, how can we be delivered, seeing that we have no good deeds to our credit? He said to them: 'Since God desires to deliver you, He disregards your evil deeds. What then does He heed? The righteous among you and their actions, as for instance Amram and his *Beth Din*.'

#### *Song of Songs Rabbah 2:22*

*Leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.* Mountains is a name for courts of justice, as it says, *I will depart and go down upon the mountains* (Judges

11:37). And in this month ye are to be redeemed, as it says, *This month shall be unto you the beginning of months* (Exodus 12:2). The Rabbis say: *Hark my beloved, behold he cometh*: this refers to Moses. When he came and said to Israel, 'In this month ye are to be redeemed,' they said to him: 'Our teacher Moses, how can we be redeemed seeing that all Egypt is defiled with our idolatrous worship?' He replied:, Since God desires to deliver you, He takes no heed of your idolatry, but *Leaps over the mountains, mountains being only a name for idolatry, as it says, They sacrifice upon the tops of the mountains, and offer upon the hills* (Hosea 4:13). And in this month ye are to be redeemed, as it says, *This month shall be unto you...*

R. Judan and R. Hunia also gave different explanations. R. Judan in the name of R. Eliezer the son of R. Jose the Galilean, and R. Hunia in the name of R. Eliezer b. Jacob, said: *Hark my beloved, here he comes*: this refers to the Messiah. When he will say to Israel, 'In this month ye are to be redeemed,' they will say to him, 'How can we be delivered, seeing that the Holy One, blessed be He, has sworn that He will subject us to the seventy nations?' He will give them two answers and say: 'If one of you is carried away to Barbary and one to Sarmatia, it is as if all of you had been carried off there. And again, this state levies troops from all the world, from every nation, and so if one Cuthean or Barbarian comes and rules over you, it is as if all of his nation had ruled over you and as if you had served the whole seventy nations. Hence in this month you are to be delivered after all, as it says, *This month shall be unto you the beginning of months, etc.*'

#### ***Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska 314***

*As an eagle that stirs up her nest* (Deuteronomy 32:11) – this refers to the future as it is said, *Hark my beloved, behold he comes* (Song 2:8). Spreads abroad her wings, as it is said, *I will say to the north give up and to the south keep not back* (Isaiah 43:6) Beareth them on her pinions – as it is said, *and they shall bring their sons in their bosom* (Isaiah 49:22)

### ***Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezar, Chapter 48***

For the sake of the merit of the Patriarchs, for they are the mountains of the world, and for the sake of the merit of the Matriarchs, for they are the hills of the world, and concerning them the scripture says, *the voice of my beloved, he comes leaping on the mountains, skipping over the hills.*

### **Analysis**

These three *midrashim* each reflect a particular rabbinic view about the key to Israel's redemption. Each looks forward to redemption and (except for Sifrei) seek to explain what will bring it about. In the Song of Songs Rabbah passages the slavery in Egypt is used as a backdrop for the discussion of redemption. The central question in the *midrash* is the length of the period of bondage of the people Israel. The passages use several different interpretations of the same phrase to arrive at the conclusion that the passage is about Messianic redemption. In Song of Songs Rabbah 2:21 the הרים, *mountains*, are understood to be the calculation of time which will be "lept" over in an unexpected reduction of Israel's period of suffering. הרים is interpreted in 2:22 first as a reference to "courts of justice" and then to "idolatry" or the idolatrous Egypt – always a symbol of Rome, the current oppressor - which will be "lept" over as the period of its persecution of Israel is brought to a quick halt.

Sifrei uses Isaiah to refer to the ingathering of the exiles and the rebuilding of the Temple. If the destruction demonstrated divine displeasure with Israel, the ingathering of the exiles in the messianic era and the reconstruction of the Temple would demonstrate Israel's meriting of divine approval and reward.

In Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezar, the הרים, *mountains* refers to the merit of the patriarchs and the גבעות, *hills* the merit of the matriarchs. Whereas the Song of Songs Rabbah passages tie redemption to Israel's observance of *mitzvot* (or, in Song of Songs Rabbah 2:21, the establishment of halachic courts) Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezar suggests that only by the merit of the ancestors will Israel be redeemed. Egypt is used here as a backdrop for describing the contemporary situation of the rabbis. Throughout midrashic literature Pharaoh's cruelty and the period of slavery can be seen as a description of the Jewish people's lack of sovereignty and their ongoing suffering at the hands of governments.

Song of Songs Rabbah's use of Exodus 12:2, *This month shall be to you the beginning of months*, may have a dual significance. The *midrash* employs the verse to refer to the end of the Egyptian bondage and Israel's commemoration of the Exodus. This particular passage had additional importance for the rabbis, though, because it is understood to be the first commandment in the Torah given to Israel as a people.<sup>7</sup> The second function of the verse is to commemorate Israel's performance of this first commandment, which can be seen to represent the entire system of *mitzvot* and foreshadows the revelation at Sinai. The placement of Exodus 12:2 here highlights both divine redemption and Israel's role in it through the observance of *mitzvot*.

The verse is used very differently in the first and second parts of Song of Songs Rabbah 2:22. In the first, Moses promises that in spite of Israel's idolatry the people will be redeemed. In the second, Israel is promised that in spite of the apparent impossibility of the termination nations' subjection of Israel, the redemption will be fulfilled. This

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<sup>7</sup> See Rashi on Bereishit 1:1, where he asks why the Torah did not begin with this first commandment.

passage also uses Exodus 12 to emphasize the importance of Israel's performance of *mitzvot*, suggesting that earnest adherence to the covenant will hasten Israel's salvation.

The defilement by "idoltrous worship" can be read not only as an indictment of the spiritual errors that were at the heart of Egypt's cruel conduct, but also of the contemporary environment of the Jews of late antiquity. The phrase is used initially to point to Israel's idoltrous worship – a constant concern of rabbis living within religiously diverse environments in which adherence to Judaism was at times a liability. It is then used to refer to the practices of the Egyptians who, as noted above, could be used to represent the practices, religious and political both, of the society within which the midrashic authors were living. Hosea 4:13 is used to signal to the reader that קררים refers to idolatry, because of the use of high places in the performance of offerings. The midrashist reverses the intended meaning of Hosea in using it to indict Egypt. Hosea's language is actually directed toward Israel. The rabbi's double concern with idolatry – their condemnation of it within the larger society and their concern that the community would fall under its sway – may explain why this passage from Hosea is used in this way. The midrashic author claims, though, that the adherence of the other nations to idolatry will induce the anger of God and speed the redemption of Israel – a message of some comfort for the rabbinic leadership of late-antiquity living under the subjection of "idoltrous" peoples.

At the end of Song of Songs Rabbah 2:21 and in the beginning of 2:22 redemption is tied into the functioning of (rabbinic) courts. This retrojection of rabbinic values on the redemptive message of the Torah highlights the significance of *halachah* and rabbinic adjudication in the worldview of the rabbis. The striking claim of both of

these *midrashim* is that the adjudication of legal disputes within the framework of *halachah* is central to God's salvation of the Jews. God is portrayed as *leaping upon* the "courts of justice" in Song of Songs Rabbah 2:22, a striking image which vividly suggests that the courts literally give God a foothold on which to move the world toward redemption. Exodus Rabbah 1:13 relates that Amram headed the Sanhedrin in Egypt and that seems to be the basis for his use here as one who established courts of justice. This *midrash* suggests that the merit earned by Amram's leadership of these courts amidst the oppressive environment of Egypt can overcome the stain of Israel's idolatry in Egypt.

Rabbinic courts were a major source of rabbinic power in late antiquity and were also contentious. The authority of these courts was challenged when Jews sought to have matters adjudicated by non-Jewish courts. Amram's successful establishment of a court within Egyptian society during the time of Jewish oppression may be an idealization of the rabbis' view of their own task. Legal rulings were not simply a method of managing and governing the community – they were a signal of the people's adherence to the covenant. Such courts and their rabbinic administrators thus had messianic significance.

## Song of Songs 2:9

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דומה דודי לצבי או לעפר האילים הנה זה עומד אחר פתלנו משגים מן  
החלונות מציץ מן הסרכים

*My love is like a deer or a hart; behold, he stands behind our wall,  
gazing from our windows, staring from our lattice.*



### Texts

#### ***Tanhuma (Buber) Exodus 1.10, Shemot***

R. Eliezar ben Pedat said: Whether the Temple is destroyed or not destroyed, the Divine Presence has not moved from its place, as stated *The Lord is in His Holy Temple* (Psalm 11:4). And where is it shown? Where it is stated *my eyes and my heart shall be there for all time* (I Kings 9:3)...R. Elieazar ben Pedat said, see what is written, *And let him build the House of the Lord God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem* (Ezra 1:3). He has not moved from there. R. Aha said: The Divine Presence has never moved from the West Wall of the sanctuary. Thus it is stated *There he stands behind our wall*. Ergo, *The Lord is in His holy temple*.

#### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 2:24***

*Behold he standeth behind our wall*: behind the walls of synagogues and houses of study. *He looketh in through the windows*: from between the shoulders of the priests *He peereth through the lattice*: from between the fingers of the priests. *My beloved spoke and said unto me*: What did he say to me? *The Lord bless thee, and keep thee* (Numbers 6:24).

#### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 2:26***

... *Behold he standeth behind our wall*: behind the western wall of the Temple. Why so? Because God has sworn to him that it will never be destroyed; nor will the Gate of the Priests or the Gate of Huldah ever be destroyed till God shall



renew them. *He looketh in through the windows*: this refers to the merit of the patriarchs. *He peereth through the lattice*: by this is meant the merit of the matriarchs. *My beloved spoke and said to me* (2:10): What did He say to me? *This month shall be unto you the beginning of months* (Exodus 12:2)...

## Analysis

These *midrashim* assert the ongoing presence of the Divine in the Temple even after its destruction. Song of Songs Rabbah 2:24 cleverly recasts the priest's outstretched fingers as the *lattice*. The *midrash* may allude back to priestly performance in the Temple or to the priestly benediction in the synagogue which commemorated it. Tanhuma and Song of Songs Rabbah 2:26 understand *behind our wall* to be a reference to the Western wall in Jerusalem, the only wall left standing after its destruction by the Romans. Thus God's presence is permanent. It is not dependent on the ongoing performance of priestly rituals, but rather tied to the place of historic and religious significance.

The destruction of the Temple was often understood by the rabbis as divine punishment for Israel's transgressions. This *midrash* complicates that view somewhat – although it does not refute it - by portraying God as continuing to dwell at the Temple. This midrashic message is notable for several reasons. First, it conveys hope that God has not turned away from the people in their moment of suffering. It also reinterprets the meaning of this change in the relationship with God, suggesting that even as Israel suffers God's punishments the covenant endures. This recasts God's anger, which caused the destruction, so that it becomes not a final rebuke or abandonment but rather a painful moment in a continuing relationship. In addition it suggests the ongoing importance of

the physical space of the Temple in Jerusalem, even after the destruction. Finally, it reiterates the importance of the Temple rituals and suggests that the destruction does not indicate that the system of *mitzvot* is no longer in place. Perhaps the Temple rites cannot be performed, but God's presence surely affirms the enduring importance of the *entire* covenant and all of its rituals.

The conclusion of Song of Songs Rabbah 2:26 with the utterance of the beloved, *This month shall be to you etc...* draws out two points. First is the redemption of God by Israel, since the verse recalls the beginning of the liberation from Egypt. The verse also refers to Israel's obligation to observe the *mitzvot*, since the passage from Exodus 12 is understood to be the first commandment in the Torah given to all Israel.<sup>8</sup> In this case, the *midrash* makes an argument that neither God's presence nor hope for redemption are absent from the destroyed Temple, but their endurance is contingent upon Israel's observance of *mitzvot*.

The final Song of Songs Rabbah passage refers to the matriarch and patriarchs, though by which exegetical means is not clear. Perhaps by having the windows symbolize the "merit of the patriarchs" and the lattice the "merit of the matriarchs" the *midrashist* preserves the modesty of the matriarchs. More significantly, God peers at Israel because of the merit of the ancestors. Because of the righteousness of those who came before, Israel is able to draw God's attention and maintain the relationship in the present. By placing reference to their merit just after the promise of renewal of the Temple the *midrash* suggests that that the messianic future will be possible only through

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<sup>8</sup> See note seven, above.

the deeds of Israel's ancestors. By juxtaposing this imagery with *My beloved spoke to me* the *midrash* imagines God speaking through the patriarchs and matriarchs, saying *This month shall be to you*. Here Israel's past and future come together: Israel's progenitors call to the people and remind them of the redemption from Egypt with this Exodus 12 verse. Yet in so doing they also remind Israel of its present bondage (through reference to the Temple) and the possibility of future redemption based on their own actions. Finally, the verse calls to mind the obligation to observe *mitzvot* - so Israel is guided along the redemptive path by allusion to the covenant.

## Song of Songs 2:10

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עֲנֵה דָוִדִי וְאָמַר לִי קוֹמִי לָךְ רַעֲיָתִי יָפְתִי וְלִבִּי לָךְ

*My beloved answered and said to me, "Arise, my love, my beautiful one - and go."*



### Texts

#### *Song of Songs Rabbah 2:27*

*My beloved spoke and said unto me:* R. 'Azariah said: Are not 'speaking, and 'saying, the same thing? What it means, however, is: 'He spoke to me by the hand of Moses and said to me by the hand of Aaron.' What did He say to Me? *Rise up my love, my fair one.* *Rise up* means: 'bestir thyself.' Another explanation: *Rise up:* O daughter of Abraham, to whom were addressed the words, *Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred* (Genesis 12:1). *My love, my fair one:* O daughter of Isaac, who drew close to Me and glorified Me on the altar *And come away,* O daughter of Jacob who listened to his father and his mother [and went away], as it says, *And Jacob hearkened to his father and his mother, and went to Paddan-aram* (Genesis 28:7).

### Analysis

The text describes Israel as benefitting from the merit of the patriarchs. The *midrash* connects the phrase לָךְ רַעֲיָתִי יָפְתִי וְלִבִּי לָךְ, *Arise, my love, my beautiful one - and go*, to the journey of the patriarchs. Why are both of the verses used here refer to the departure of the patriarchs from their place of birth? These acts of leaving home seem to pale in comparison to the brief reference to Isaac's act of glorification of God. It may be that Abraham and Jacob are seen as archetypes of the person more dedicated to God than

to the surrounding environment – embodiments of the idea that devotion to God is more significant than devotion to material circumstances. Isaac's self-sacrifice is then the ultimate expression of this same idea: his willingness to offer his life for the sanctification of God's name demonstrates his prioritizing the heavenly above the earthly. This is yet another passage casting Isaac's near-sacrifice by Abraham in Genesis 22 as an act of enlightened self-sacrifice and drawing near to God. In the rabbinic imagination Isaac's act is a potent symbol of martyrdom – an all too present reality in the life of the Jewish community of late antiquity.

The patriarchal journeys also refer to the journeys of Israel. The subject could be the journey from the familiar land of Egypt required for the redemption described in the Torah. The Torah tells of the difficulty of leaving the safety and familiarity of Egypt in Exodus 14:11-12 when the people protest against their fate in the desert.<sup>9</sup> Israel's exile following the destruction of the Temple could also be the focus of the *midrash*, with the patriarchal journeys used as a lens through which to understand Israel's plight. Both of these journeys of Israel result in the gathering of the people in the land and Jewish religious and political autonomy – one in the distant past and the other in a hoped-for future.

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<sup>9</sup> Israel declares there *מִמָּתְנִי בַּמִּדְבָּר אֶת-מִצְרָיִם*, *מִמָּתְנִי בַּמִּדְבָּר*, "it would have been better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the wilderness!"

# Song of Songs 2:11

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כִּי הָיָה חֶסְתּוֹ עָבַר הַגֶּשֶׁם חָלַף הַלֵּךְ לוֹ

*For the winter has passed, and the rain ceased and gone.*



## Texts

### *Song of Songs Rabbah 2:33*

Another explanation: *My beloved spoke and said unto me.* He spoke through Elijah and said through the Messiah. What did he say to me? *Rise up my love, my fair one and come away.* R. Azariah said: *For lo, the winter (ha-s'tav) is past:* this refers to the kingdom of the Cutheans which seduces (*m'sitah*) the world and leads it astray by its falsehoods, as we read, *If thy brother, the son of thy mother, entice thee—(y'sit'cha)* (Deuteronomy 13:7). *The rain is over and gone:* this refers to the subjection of Israel.

*The flowers appear on the earth:* the conquerors have appeared on the earth. Who are they? R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Isaac: As it is written, And the Lord showed me four craftsmen (Zechariah 2:3), namely, Elijah, the Messiah, Melchizedek, and the War Messiah. *The time of the zamir is come:* the time has come for Israel to be delivered; the time has come for uncircumcision to be cut off; the time has come for the kingdom of the Cutheans to expire; 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* (Zechariah 14:9). *And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land:* Who is this? This is the voice of the Messiah proclaiming, *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger of good tidings* (Isaiah 52:7)...

## Analysis

The *midrash* interprets נִסְיָן as “seduction.” The reference to Cutheans is obscure – in other contexts it refers to the Samaritans but the portrayal of them as seducers and as the “son of thy mother” who entice Israel suggests that the term might refer to Christians.<sup>10</sup> While Samaritans were a challenge to Jews in Caesarea in particular, they did not pose the same kind of threat as did the Christians, who wielded greater power and influence, and won more converts. The reference to the “subjection of Israel” also points to Christianity, since the Samaritans did not have real power over the Jewish community. This *midrash* is unusual because it is so explicit about its polemic intent – spelling out in much more direct language what is just between the lines in so many of the *midrashim*. It is clear evidence that the Song was used as an exegetical tool to respond to the threat of the Christian community. The promise of the interpretation is that the time of the “seducers” has passed. This foreshadows the messianic hopes that are made explicit in the rest of the passage, that the redemption of the Jewish people will involve the destruction of the national powers that oppress them (“*The rain is over and gone*: this refers to the subjection of Israel.”)

Some material alluding to Song 2:12 has been included here because it is inseparable from the explication of verse 11. *Midrashim* in this section and the next use the *time of the zamir has come* to refer to circumcision. In this *midrash* the time for the “uncircumcision to be cut off”<sup>11</sup> refers to both to the end of the kingdom of the

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<sup>10</sup> See Song of Songs Rabbah 4:8 on Song of Songs 4:3 where the נִסְיָן, “Cuthean,” challenges R. Jonathan by claiming that Mt. Girizim is holier than Moriah. Girizim was the site of Samaritan worship.

<sup>11</sup> See “Analysis” in connection with 2:12 below for an exploration of the meaning of this phrase.

“Cutheans” and to Egypt. The juxtaposition of these two oppressors of Israel illustrates how Egypt was used as the paradigmatic experience of suffering, repeated throughout Israel’s history. The trials of Israel in the Exodus formed the background against which the rabbis explained their contemporary situation. Just as Egypt is used to refer to Israel’s present predicament, so is Zechariah’s promise of redemption an expression of rabbinic hope for future.

The author uses the word נִצְּנִים in verse twelve to pun on “conquerors” or “victors,” moving the passage from a description of Israel’s subjection to a prediction of its victory. The material from Zechariah quoted in the verse is brief enough to hint at the material that follows, which is explicit in its foretelling of the military punishment of Israel’s persecutors. Verse four of Zecharia 2 continues:

נֹאמֶר, מַה אֵלֶּה בָּאִים לַעֲשׂוֹת; נִיאָמַר לֵאמֹר, אֵלֶּה הַקִּרְנוֹת אֲשֶׁר-זָרוּ אֶת-יְהוּדָה כְּפִי-אִישׁ לֹא-  
נָשָׂא רֹאשׁוֹ, נִנְבְּאוּ אֵלֶּה לְהַסְרִיד אֹתָם, לְגִדּוֹת אֶת-קִרְנוֹת הַגּוֹיִם הַנִּשְׂאִים קֶרֶן אֶל-אֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה  
לְזִרְתָּהּ

*And I said, 'What are these [four craftsmen] coming to do? And He said, 'These are the horns that scattered Judah so that no one would lift his head. They are coming to scare them, to cast down the horns of the nations who lifted the horn over the land of Judah to scatter her.*

Messianic material is always both religious and political, as the messianic age involves a religious requirement (Israel’s fulfillment of the covenant) with political implications (the ingathering of the exiles and the establishment of Jewish sovereignty). The Zechariah material emphasizes the combination of these two dimensions but is perhaps more emphatic in its prediction of Israel’s eventual military and political triumph than many



*midrashim*. The passage affirms the religious dimension of the situation nonetheless: the ruling powers act against God's will and ultimately God's power will result in the destruction of their rule.

## Song of Songs 2:12

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הנצנים נראו בארץ עת הזמיר הגיע וקול התור נשמע בארצנו

*The flowers appear in the land, the time of singing has arrived; the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.*



### Texts

#### *Song of Songs Rabbah 2:29*

*The flowers (ha-nitzanim) appear on the earth: the conquerors (netzachot) have appeared on the earth. Who are they? Moses and Aaron, as it says, And the Lord spoke unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying (Exodus 12:1) The time of singing (zamor) is come; the time has come for the uncircumcision to be cut off (tizamer); the time has come for the Egyptians to be pruned (yizameiru); the time has come for their idolatry to be uprooted, as it says, And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments (ib. 12)...*

### Analysis

In the first line of Song of Songs Rabbah 2:29 Moses and Aaron are viewed as the redeemers or conquerors נצנים who bring the salvific message and political leadership in Israel's time of need. This passage is followed immediately by a reference to the "pruning," זמיר of the foreskins (i.e. circumcision), establishing the relationship between Israel's redemption and performance of this all-important mitzvah. The link between pruning and circumcision is a rich one. It calls to mind the offerings of crops because of the pruning of fruits. The pruning of a tree is necessary for its further growth and bearing of fruit, so the metaphor suggests that the pruning of the foreskin in circumcision is

required for Israel's future flowering. The image also hints that everything that is grown – the foreskin of the male or the fruits of the field – are God's. Finally, it recalls the command to be fruitful (Genesis 1:28), where this verb which lends itself to agricultural and human generation is first used.

The act of circumcision signified Israel's willingness to accept the commandments and the people's realization that their salvation depended on this commitment. By juxtaposing the reference to Moses and Aaron with the reference to circumcision, the *midrash* highlights the relationship between Israel's leadership and the community's acceptance of *mitzvot*. Though indeed its leaders are the *זקנים*, the redemption hinges on Israel's performance of the *mitzvah*.

Beyond emphasizing the role of the *mitzvot* in the life of Israel, though, this passage points to the difference between Israel and others. In Exodus 12 the command to circumcise simultaneously marks Israel's obligation to differentiate itself by observance of *mitzvot* and foreshadows the coming destruction of Israel's oppressors. The successive puns on *הקזיר* first "it is time for the uncircumcision to be cut off" and then for the "Egyptians to be pruned" draws out the dual function of the act. Seen as a distinguishing sign between Israel and the nations, circumcision also represented proper conduct and submission to God – precisely the qualities that from the rabbinic perspective Israel's oppressors, whether the Egyptians or the contemporaries of the rabbis, did not manifest. Therefore the time for "idolatry to be uprooted" has come.

This discussion of circumcision, both here and above in Song of Songs Rabbah 2:33 (in connection with Songs 2:11) elevates this powerful ritual to a vehicle of worldly

redemption. The suggestion is not that the “pruning” of the foreskin will be fulfilled when all people begin to circumcise themselves. Instead it is tied together with the destruction of Israel’s persecutors, so that the redemptive message of the passage – Israel’s salvation and the destruction of its enemies – is itself the act of circumcision. This binds together the Jewish ritual of circumcision with the redemption its observance merits.

The image also portrays the imperfect, pre-messianic world as “uncircumcised.” In this way, rabbinic theology is projected onto the world at large. Only when the messiah is brought about (by Jewish fulfillment of *mitzvot*) will the entire world pass into a covenant with God – through the “cutting off” of Israel’s tormentors. Just as each male Jew must enter into the covenant with God by removal of the foreskin through circumcision in order for the messianic era to arrive, so, too, must the entire world have its foreskin removed in fulfillment of messianic hope.

## Song of Songs 2:14

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יוֹנְתִי בְּחִגְוֵי הַסֵּלַע בְּסִתְרֵי הַמְּדִרְגָּה הָרְאִינִי אֶת מַרְאֵיךְ הַשְּׁמִיעִינִי אֶת קוֹלְךָ כִּי  
קוֹלְךָ עֲרֵב וּמַרְאֵיךְ נָאוֹה

*My dove is in the clefts of the rock, in the crag of the cliff. Show me  
your countenance, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet  
and your countenance lovely.*



### Texts

#### ***Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Massekta Bahodesh, Parshah 3***

Below the mount (Exodus 19:17). Scripture indicates that the mount was pulled up from its place and the people came near and stood under it, as it is said, *And you came near and stood under the mountain* (Deuteronomy 4:11). Of them it is declared in the traditional sacred writings: *Oh my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock. Let me see your countenance* – that is, the twelve pillars erected for the twelve tribes of Israel; *let me hear your voice* – that is, when responding to the ten commandments; *for sweet is your voice* – after having received the ten commandments *and your countenance comely* – when: *all the congregation drew near and stood before the Lord*. (Leviticus 9:5).

#### ***Exodus Rabbah 21:5***

*O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock*. It should have said, 'A dove that is in the clefts of the rock'; what is the significance of 'my dove'. Said R. Johanan: God addressed Israel: 'O my dove,' for see what it says, *And Ephraim is become like a simple dove, without understanding* (Hosea 7:11). 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; but against idolaters they are as stubborn as beasts,' for it says, *Judah is a lion's whelp* (Genesis 49:9), *Benjamin is a wolf that raveneth* (ibid. 27), *Dan shall be a serpent in the way* (ibid. 17). The reason why they are

so stubborn against the heathen is because the latter say to them: 'What do you expect to obtain from this Sabbath which you observe and from this rite of circumcision of yours?' When they try to annul these commandments, Israel become as stubborn as wild beasts, but towards God they are like an innocent dove, obeying all His decrees, as it says, *And the people believed* (Exodus 4:31), and *All the words which the Lord hath spoken will we do* (ibid. 24:3). For this reason does it say, *O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock*.

### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 2:29***

R. Huna and R. Aha in the name of R. Aha b. Hanina interpreted the verse, following R. Meir, as referring to the Tent of Meeting. *My dove in the cleft of the rock*: because they are hidden in the shelter of the Tent of Meeting. *Let me see thy countenance*; as it says, *And the congregation was assembled at the door of the Tent of Meeting* (Leviticus 8:4). *Let me hear thy voice*, as it says, *And when all the people saw it, they shouted* (ibid. 9:24). They chanted a beautiful song because they saw a new thing; therefore they chanted a new song. *For sweet is thy voice*: this refers to the song, and *thy countenance is comely*: as it says, *And all the congregation drew near and stood before the Lord* (ibid. 9:5).

R. Tanhuma said: They [R. Huna and R. Aha] interpreted it, following R. Meir, as referring to the Tent of Meeting; I too will interpret it, following the Rabbis, as referring to the Temple. *My dove in the cleft of the rock*: because they were hidden in the shelter of the Temple: *Let me see thy countenance*: as it says, Then Solomon assembled, etc. (I Kings 8:1). *Let me hear thy voice*: as it says, It came even to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one (II Chronicles 5:13). R. Abin said in the name of R. Abba Cohen b. Daliah: It is written, *And all the people answered together* (Exodus 19:8), and it is also written, *And all the people answered with one voice, and said* (ibid. 24:3). Till when did that voice stand by them? Until, it came even to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one.' *For sweet is thy voice*: this refers to the song; and *thy countenance is comely*: this refers to the offerings, of which it says, And Solomon offered for the sacrifice of

peace-offerings, etc. (I Kings 8: 63). What 'oxen, are referred to? The four wagons and the eight oxen (Numbers 7:8).

## Analysis

The Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael ties Song 2:14 both to the giving of the commandments and to the construction of the Tabernacle (by the reference to Leviticus 9). For the rabbis the Temple represented Israel's ongoing commitment to observance of the *mitzvot*. The *midrash* thus links together different scenes from the Bible, collapsing the distance in the narrative (and in time) that originally separated these two moments of encounter with God. In the mind of the *midrashist*, both are part of a whole – a voice and face together – because both are part of Israel's historic, ongoing, and future commitment to the fulfillment of the *mitzvot*. Just as the lover cannot greet the beloved without a face and a voice, so, too, can Israel not face God without an embrace of the commandments and a commitment to the rituals of the Temple. That the *midrash* closes in reference to Leviticus 9 points to the continuing importance of the sacrificial system to the rabbis of late antiquity. Even in the absence of the Temple – or because of it – exegetes saw in its sacrificial rites the fullest expression of commitment to covenant.

Exodus Rabbah combines the commitment to observance with a reflection upon the surrounding nations' hostility to Jewish practices. The passage lauds Israel for its assent in Exodus 24:3 to perform God's commandments. The *midrash* indicates that the verse uses the possessive *My dove* instead of 'a dove' because the people assented to perform the commandments (signified by the verb  $\text{הִשָּׁמַע}$  in the Exodus verse). That is, in promising to perform the *mitzvot*, Israel became the beloved one of God, a Divine possession. This *midrash* points to the tension that the rabbis often expressed between the

eternal value of the covenant (because of God's commitment to Israel) and the present cost of practicing it (because of the nations' derision and subjugation of Israel). The *midrash*, then, is to be understood in the context of Israel's ongoing confrontation with those who reject the idea that the commandments are to be observed.

Song of Songs Rabbah explores the meaning of the Tabernacle and Temple in light of Song 2:14. God's presence is contained in these structures – they are not just “houses of worship” and places for the people to gather to fulfill the commandments, but actually places for the people to encounter God. Song 2:14 speaks of מְרֹאֵיךְ which is translated here as *countenance*. This translation is slightly misleading because the noun could refer in a more general way to “your appearance” or “the sight of you” and it is this meaning on which the midrashist plays.

מְרֹאֵיךְ is taken to refer to the appearance of Israel before the Tabernacle and Temple, respectively - the moment at which God gazes at the face of His beloved Israel. Both Leviticus and Kings point out that the people are assembled together to be in the presence of God's Tabernacle/Temple.<sup>12</sup> The gathering together and offering sacrifices is presented as a moment of great intimacy between God and Israel, when one says to the other, *Show me your countenance, let me hear your voice*.

Alternatively, Meir's exposition could be understood in the opposite way, presenting the gathering of the people at the Tent of Meeting as the point at which *Israel* gazes at *God*. The connection to this part of Leviticus may stem from the appearance of God at the culmination of the passage in 9:23. There God is said to יֵרָא, *appear*, a word

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<sup>12</sup> See Leviticus 8:4 and I Kings 8:2.



with the same root as Song 2:14's מֶרְאֵיךְ. R. Tanhuma may be led by a similar strategy to the Kings passage: after the placement of the ark in the Temple and the ensuing celebration, God נִרְאָה (appears) to Solomon.

Just as Egypt in the *midrashim* always represents the contemporary Jewish community's experience of subjugation, so, too, does the Tabernacle always refer to the Temple. The Tabernacle, therefore, is not simply a recollection of Israelite history, but an allusion the rabbis' very recent past and their present theological concerns. In Song of Songs Rabbah 2:29 this connection is made particularly clear by the juxtaposition of R. Meir and R. Tanhuma's interpretations, the former referring to Leviticus and the Tabernacle and the latter to the Temple.

Chapter Three:  
*Midrashim on Book Three of the  
Song of Songs*

## Song of Songs 3:4

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כִּמְעַט שְׁעַבְרָתִי מֵהֶם עַד שֶׁמָּצֵאתִי אֶת שְׁאֵהְבָה נַפְשִׁי אֲחֻזָּתִיו וְלֹא אֶרְפֶּנּוּ עַד  
שֶׁהֵבִיאֲתִיו אֶל בֵּית אִמִּי וְאֶל-חֲדָר הַזֹּרֵתִי

*I had almost left them when I found the one my soul loves! I  
grasped him and would not let him go until I had brought him to  
my mother's house, to the room of the one who conceived me.*



### Title

#### **Leviticus Rabbah 1:10**

*From the Tent of Meeting* (Leviticus 1:1). Said R. Eleazar: Even though the Torah was given as a fence at Sinai, they were not punishable in respect thereof until it was repeated in the Tent of Meeting. This may be compared to an edict which has been written and sealed and brought into the province, but in respect whereof the inhabitants of the province are not punishable, until it has been clearly explained to them in the public meeting place of the province. So, too, with the Torah: even though it was given to Israel at Sinai, they were not punishable in respect thereof until it had been repeated in the Tent of Meeting. This is indicated by what is written, *Until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of my teaching. My mother's house means Sinai; The chamber of my teaching means the Tent of Meeting for thence Israel were commanded the teaching [i.e. the Law].*

#### **Leviticus Rabbah 1:12**

*From the tent of meeting* (Leviticus 1:1). Said R. Eleazar: Even though the Torah was given as a fence at Sinai, they were not punishable in respect thereof until it was repeated in the Tent of Meeting. This may be compared to an edict which has been written and sealed and brought into the province, but in respect whereof the inhabitants of the province are not punishable, until it has been clearly explained

to them in the public meeting place of the province. So, too, with the Torah: even though it was given to Israel at Sinai, they were not punishable in respect thereof until it had been repeated in the Tent of Meeting. This is indicated by what is written, *Until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of my teaching.* *My mother's house* means Sinai; *The chamber of my teaching* means the Tent of Meeting for thence Israel were commanded the teaching [i.e. the Law].

### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 2:13***

*Out of the tent of meeting* (Leviticus 1:1). R. Eleazar said: Although the Torah was proclaimed at Sinai, Israel were not punished for breaches of it until it was explained to them in the tent of meeting. It was like a decree which was written and signed and sent to a province, but the inhabitants did not become liable for disobedience to it till it had been publicly explained in the province. So although the Torah was proclaimed on Mount Sinai, they did not become liable for breaches of it until it was explained to them in the tent of meeting, as it is written, *Until I brought him to my Mother's house* -this is Mount Sinai--and to the *Chamber of my teaching (horati)* - this is the Tent of Meeting, since from that point Israel were held liable for [violating] their teachings (*hora'ah*).

### ***Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Massekta d'Shirata, Parshah 3***

*And I will glorify Him.* R. Akiba says: I shall speak of the prophecies and the praises of Him by whose word the world came into being, before all the nations of the world. For all the nations of the world ask Israel, saying, *What is thy beloved more than another beloved, that you dost to adjure us?* (Song of Songs 5:9), that you are so ready to die for Him and so ready to let yourselves be killed for Him? For it is said, *Therefore do maidens love thee (ibid. 1:3)* meaning they love Thee unto death...But the Israelites say to the nations of the world: Do you know Him? Let us but tell you some of His praise: *My beloved is white and ruddy (ibid 5:10).* As soon as the nations of the world hear some of His praise, they say to the Israelites, *We will join with you,* as it is said, *Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? Whither hath they beloved turned him, that we may seek*

*him with thee? (ibid 6:1).* The Israelites, however, say to the nations of the world: You can have no share in Him but *My beloved is mine and I am his (ibid 2:16)...*

And the other sages say: I will accompany him until I come with Him into his Temple. To give a parable, a king had a son who went away to a far away country. He went after him and stood by him. Then the son went to another country, and the king again followed him and stood by him. So also, when Israel went down to Egypt the *Shechinah* went down with them, as it is said: *I will go down with thee into Egypt (Gen 46:4).* When they came up from Egypt the *Shechinah* came up with them as it is said, *And I will surely bring you up again (ibid.).* When they went into the sea the *Shechinah* was with them, as it is said, *And the angel of God...removed etc (Exodus 14:19).* When they went out into the wilderness the *Shechinah* went with them, as it is written, *And the Lord went with them by day.* Until they brought Him with them to His holy Temple, as it says: *Scarce had I passed from them, when I found him whom my soul loveth.*

## Analysis

This extensive Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael passage draws on several themes and on many verses outside of Chapter 3. This *midrash* casts the dialogue of the Song as one between Israel and the nations. The verse is also used as a dialogue between God and Israel. Israel's persecution is one of the central themes of the *midrash*. The author transforms the subjugation of Israel into a hopeful vision of its religious power. Israel's response to the nations' taunts is to praise God, inspiring the persecutors to become proselytes, so they can *seek Him with thee* (Song 6:1). The unique relationship between Israel and God stirs the nations' desire to convert to Judaism. Rather than embrace these would-be converts to Judaism, the Jews respond that their relationship with God is exclusive ("You can have no share in Him"). Israel's persecutors have their cruel taunts turned back on them. Israel's devotion to God, once the focus of the enemies' derision, is

now the source of Israel's joy and its tormentors' downfall. The nations' exclusion from both Israel's covenant and its fate, once the source of their superiority, is now revealed to be the source of their downfall.

The desire for God's presence is first addressed by the nations in their dialogue with Israel. This becomes the subject of the discourse of "the other sages," who explain that God has always been present. Here *בֵּית אִמִּי וְאֶל-חֶדֶר הוֹרָתִי*, *My mother's house...the room of the one who conceived me*, refers to the Temple, the final destination in the long journey undertaken by God and Israel together. By linking the narrative of the Israelites' journey with the Temple, the *midrash* presents the Temple as the focal point of that journey – the resting place for both Israel and God. Just under the surface of the *midrash*, which sees God as present through all of Israel's suffering and celebration, is the implication that now too – at the time of the composition of the *midrash* – God is present with Israel. If the *Shechinah* could dwell with Israel in Egypt and remain until the construction of the Temple, the author suggests, so too will God remain with Israel until the reconstruction of the Temple.

The word *הוֹרָתִי* may connect the Song verse to the parable introducing the theme of God's continual presence. The king's search for his son eventually leads to their eventual return together to the royal home, the room of *הוֹרָתִי*. The Tabernacle is the home of the king, where son and father are reunited. The *midrash* does not explain how *הוֹרָתִי* is to be understood. If it is drawing off of the interpretations given in the other sources, the word could refer to both conception and instruction. If the former, the *midrash* claims that Israel was given new life with the construction of the Tabernacle and the performance of its rites. For the rabbis, of course, the Tabernacle represented the

Temple, and perhaps the reader is to understand the 'birth' as a promise of new life (or even resurrection) in the future when the Temple is rebuilt. If the *midrash* intends instead to refer to instruction (which seems more likely) then the Tabernacle (and, again, the Temple) is the place where Israel learns from God.

Both Leviticus Rabbah 1:10 and Song of Songs Rabbah 2:13 distinguish between two historical moments in the life of the Jewish people – revelation and the construction of the Tabernacle. The former states that after the construction of the Tabernacle Israel was נצתו, "commanded," while the latter asserts Israel became נתחייבו, "liable" for any violation of the Torah. Both *midrashim* pun on Song 3:4's הוֹרָתִי, linking it to the Hebrew verb "to teach." The suggestion is that Israel was not fully instructed in the meaning of revelation until the construction of the Tabernacle and was thus not considered liable for (or commanded in regard to) the Torah.

This claim that the moment of Israel's culpability for violations of the covenant began with the construction of the Tabernacle has two implications. One is the diminution of the significance of those violations of the law that occurred between revelation and the construction of the Tabernacle. This would include the episode of the Golden Calf.<sup>1</sup> The Tabernacle is thus the antidote to the calf. Its laws and construction surround the Golden Calf episode in Exodus, a fact that the midrashic author draws out. The other is to elevate the significance of the Tabernacle in relation to revelation. Recast in this way, revelation at Sinai becomes an event dependent of the construction of the

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Marmorstein points out that a major theme of Christian polemics of the second and third centuries was the idea that "the rejection of Israel was due to the sin of the Golden Calf." He argues that Song of Songs Rabbah here, in 2:11 and 8:2 "defends the worship of the Calf by assuming that Israel was not liable for punishment until the Law was expounded to them in the Tent of Meeting." See Arthur Marmorstein, *Studies in Jewish Theology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 198-201.

Tabernacle for completion. Revelation is in a sense only half of the covenant: the legal contract is not sealed, so to speak, until the signatories accept responsibility for its fulfillment and human beings create a place for God's presence. This linking of revelation to the Tabernacle also suggests, of course, that the Torah cannot be properly understood without the implementation of priestly rituals at the Tabernacle - the symbol of the future Temple.



## Song of Songs 3:6

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מי זאת עלה מן-המדבר כְּתִימָרוֹת עֶשֶׂן מְקַטְרֶת מֶר וּלְבוֹנָה מִכָּל אֲבָקֶת רוּחַל

*Who is this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the powders of the merchant?*



### Texts

#### ***Leviticus Rabbah 30:1***

When R. Eliezer son of R. Simeon died, his generation applied to him [this verse]. What is the implication of the expression, *among all the powders of the merchant*? That he was a teacher of Scripture and Mishnah, a poet and a preacher.<sup>2</sup>

#### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 3:7***

*Who is this coming up from the wilderness?* Israel's elevation is from the wilderness; her decline is from the wilderness; her death is from the wilderness, as it says, *In this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die* (Numbers 14:35). The Torah came from the wilderness, the tabernacle from the wilderness, the Sanhedrin from the wilderness, the priesthood from the wilderness, the service of the Levites from the wilderness, royalty from the wilderness, as it says, *And ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests* (Exodus 19:6); and all the excellent gifts that God bestowed on Israel came from the wilderness.

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<sup>2</sup> This passage also appears in Song of Songs Rabbah III:13

### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 3:8***

*Perfumed with myrrh.* This refers to our father Abraham. Just as the myrrh is the foremost of spices, so our father Abraham was the foremost of all the righteous. Just as myrrh makes the hands of anyone that gathers it smart, so Abraham our father used to afflict and castigate himself with penances. Just as myrrh emits its fragrance only when put in the fire, so Abraham's virtues were brought out only in the fiery furnace. *And frankincense:* this refers to our father Isaac, who was offered on the altar like a handful of frankincense...

### ***Tanhuma (Buber) Numbers 1.2, Bemidbar***

Then the Lord spoke unto Moses in the Sinai desert...The Holy One said to Israel: Because you said to Moses (in Numbers 20:5) *Why did you bring us up from Egypt?...* When you were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and when I brought you out from there I had you lie down under clouds of glory and raised up three redeemers for you to serve you as stated- in Micah 6:4 *And I sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam before you.* Through the merit of Moses you ate manna, a food which even the Holy ancestors had not seen, as stated (in Deuteronomy 8:3) *So he afflicted you with hunger but fed you with manna.* Through the merit of Aaron I surrounded you in clouds of glory, as it is stated (in Psalm 105:39) *He spread a cloud for a cover and a fire to give light at night....* There were seven clouds: one from above, one from below, one from each of the four winds, and one before you. He smote snakes and scorpions, leveled mountains and valleys for them, and burned the thornbushes so that they sent up smoke. When all the kings of the East and West saw this, the peoples of the world said: *Who is this that comes up from the desert like columns of smoke?*

It is also written (in Deuteronomy 29:4) *I led you forty years in the desert; your clothes did not wear out.* In the case of a baby, all the time that it was growing its garments and clothes were growing along with it. Now the well came through the merit of Miriam, who uttered a song by the waters....R. Berechaya the Priest said in the name of R. Levi: The matter is comparable to a king of flesh and blood who has a province. So he sends high-ranking people into its midst to conduct their

affairs and administer their justice. Who has to be responsible for their maintenance? Do not the people.... But the Holy One did not act like that. Instead he sent out Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, as stated in Micah 6:4, *And I sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam before you.* Thus through their merit Israel was sustained.

### ***Tanhuma (Buber) Leviticus 2.2, Tzav***

The Holy One said to [Balaam, who, serving as “an advocate for the nations of the world,” sought to win God’s favor with sacrifice]: O Evil One, if I had desired offering, I would have spoken to Michael and Gabriel, and they would have presented offerings to me. It is so stated (Psalm 89:7) *For who in the skies is comparable to the Lord, is like the Lord among the children of Gods?* Among the children of Abraham are Isaac and Jacob <These are the ones who are> the rams of the world. The Holy One said to him: What do you desire? To deceive yourself before me? <To persuade> me to accept offerings from the gentiles? You are not able. He said to him: *It is an oath, (Leviticus 24:8): An everlasting covenant on the part of the children of Israel, they say so that I only accept offering from Israel.* It is so stated (Leviticus 6:1-2 [8-9]): *Command Aaron and his children, saying: <this is the Torah of the burnt offering הָעֹלָה>* When the nations said What is this, whereby Israel is presenting offerings and sacrificing? The Holy One said to them: *This is the Torah of the burnt offering (Leviticus 6): Who is this that comes up עֹלָה from the desert <like columns of smoke perfumed with myrrh and frankincense>...? (Exodus 19:3) Then Moses went up עָלָה to God.*

### **Analysis**

Israel’s ingratitude and the merit of the “three prophets” – Moses, Aaron, and Miriam – are the themes of Tanhuma (Buber) Numbers 1.2. Israel’s complaints about its suffering are met with God’s recollection of everything that has been done for them during their long journey. The Song verse is taken to refer to Israel’s journey up from the desert under God’s care. God’s protective presence is represented by the pillars of smoke.

This clear demonstration of divine protection was obvious to the nations but not to Israel. Though the passage recollects Israel's errors, it can be seen to be an affirmation of hope: even the faithless generation that was unaware of God's protective power was not abandoned by God. How much more hope is there, then, for the generation that remains sure of God's ongoing presence and committed to the keeping of the covenant. Israel's sinful conduct, the *midrash* suggests, cannot sever its connection to God – both because of God's grace and the merit of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. God's reminder that even as they complained and suffered in the desert Israel continued to be under the divine watchful eye is of course also a message of hope to the rabbis' own generation.

The beginning of the Tanhuma (Buber) Leviticus 2.2 (not quoted here) compares the priestly sacrifices of Leviticus 6 to Abraham's offering of Isaac. Balaam's attempts to ingratiate himself with God fail and the *midrash* returns to Leviticus 6 and Israel's burnt offerings in the passage quoted here. The *midrash* plays on the connection that it has established between the binding of Isaac on the altar and the sacrifices of Israel in the desert. The use of the *Akedah* gives literary and historical context to the sacrificial system and calls to mind the merit of the patriarchs.

More significantly, though, it introduces the idea that Israel itself is an offering turned to smoke, as it were, on the altar of her history. Abraham offered his son on the altar and so, too, is Israel offered as a sacrifice as it accepts a fate of suffering in hope of future reward. Just as the offering of Isaac was accounted as a sacrifice even though he lived, the author hints, so, too, will Israel continue to live in spite of the pain of its struggle. In a passage not quoted here but appearing just before this selection Balaam asks, through Micah 6:7, *Shall I give my first-born for my transgression?* As in Micah,

the offer is rejected. The *midrash* is likely using this verse to hint that Israel's status as God's first-born in Exodus 4:22 (in both Micah and Exodus, the same Hebrew word, בְּכֹרִי, is used). This seems a likely response to the Christian notion that Jesus was the son of God who would suffer in history in order to bring redemption.

The Song verse lends itself to the idea that Israel is the offering because as it comes out of the desert the speaker observes *columns of smoke*. By juxtaposing the appearance of עֹלָה, meaning both "burnt offering" and "coming up" or "ascending," in both Leviticus 6 and Song of Songs 3:6, the midrashist draws out this imagery, suggesting that Israel itself is an offering. Moses' own ascent to God – עֹלָה – in the closing verse from Exodus frames that offering as one that brings the people closer to God. God's claim to Balaam in the beginning of the passage quoted here that the patriarchs "are the rams of the world" is a further suggestion that the midrashist intends to portray Israel as a sacrificial offering. This discussion should be understood in light of the historical environment of the authors of the *midrash* who struggled to make sense of the persecution and suffering. The link between the "evil one" Balaam and the rabbis' view of their contemporary persecutors is left unstated; but with Balaam serving as the nations' "advocate," it hardly needs to be.

Song of Songs Rabbah 3:8 also discusses the self-sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac. The "fiery furnace" most likely refers to the passage in Genesis Rabbah in which Abraham is thrown into the furnace by Nimrod.<sup>3</sup> Isaac is similarly seen as offering himself as frankincense on the altar. The glorification of suffering – of the willingness to

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis Rabbah 44:16

endure it and of its capacity to beautify a person as would these spices – surely reflects the attempt of the author or authors to compare their situation to that of the patriarchs. Those rabbis who died as martyrs were idealized by the community in such *midrashim*. They were heroes of the rabbinic period for embodying the sacrificial ethic and defying earthly powers to demonstrate commitment to the heavenly power. But the fate of Abraham and Isaac in these *midrashim* did not need to be understood literally in order to give meaning to these stories. Israel's subjection to oppressive governments that at times prevented them from or punished them for practicing their religion can be understood as a kind of national symbolic martyrdom, celebrated in the rereading of these texts.

Song of Songs Rabbah 3:7 and Leviticus Rabbah 30:1 both emphasize practices and texts particular to the Jews. Leviticus Rabbah lauds Eliezar for having been a teacher of both Scripture and Mishnah. This is notable because the Church rejected the canonicity of the Oral Law that governed the halachic lives of Jews. Song of Songs Rabbah 3:7 also celebrates that which was unique to the Jews – the institutions that tied into Israel's ritual and political institutions: the Torah, the Sanhedrin, the Tabernacle, the priesthood and the kingdom. In the environment within which the midrashists wrote, these texts and institutions helped define the boundary between themselves and their coreligionists and formed the basis for the organization of Jewish life.

Song of Songs Rabbah 3:7 uses Song 3:6, *Who is this coming up from the wilderness*, to explore the dual meaning of Israel's experience in the wilderness. The wilderness was a place of hardship and "death," as the *midrash* has it, a place of wandering and trial. Israel's long and difficult journey into the wilderness is described as a descent. Yet it was here that Israel was given the institutions and practices that would

define them and be the basis of their future redemption. Only by this descent, the *midrash* suggests, could Israel ascend (in line with Song 3:6). Thus Israel's suffering is recast as a necessary prelude to its relationship with God.

This midrash also alludes to sacrifice by playing off of the *Coming up* of the Song's verse. It begins by claiming that Israel's עִלּוּיָה, "elevation," was from the desert. This verb plays on the word עֹלָה, "burnt offering." The wordplay resonates with the references to the priestly rites alluded to in the passage. The suffering of Israel's experience in the wilderness was a kind of offering to God that allowed the people to ascend to God. Israel is the sacrifice itself, surrendering itself to its fate to draw nearer to God and bring about its own salvation.

## Song of Songs 3:7-8

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הִנֵּה מִטָּתוֹ שֶׁלֹּשְׁלֹמֹה שְׁשִׁים גִּבּוֹרִים סָבִיב לָהּ מִגִּבּוֹרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּלֶם אֲחֻזֵּי חֶרֶב  
מִלְמָדֵי מִלְחָמָה אִישׁ חֶרֶבוֹ עַל-יָרְכוֹ מִפֶּחַד בְּלִילוֹת<sup>4</sup>

*Behold, Solomon's bed - sixty soldiers surround it, from among the soldiers of Israel. All of them sword-bearers, learned in war, each with his sword on his thigh in fear of the night.*

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Texts

Numbers Rabbah 11:3

On this wise ye shall bless. This bears on the Scriptural text, *Behold, it is the litter of Solomon, etc.* R. Simeon b. Yohai expounded it as referring to Solomon, *Behold, it is the litter of Solomon, i.e. of King Solomon. Threescore mighty men are about it;* sixty mighty men stood round his bed at night and they were *Of the mighty men of Israel.* They all handle the sword and are expert in war . Why did he do this? *Because of dread in the night;* for he was afraid of the evil spirits, lest they should harm him....

When Moses said to [the "sixty myriads" coming out of Egypt] that the Holy One, blessed be He, had said to him, summarily, *No uncircumcised person shall eat thereof* (Exodus 12:48), each one took a knife and placed it upon his thigh and had himself circumcised. Who circumcised them? R. Berekiah taught in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai that Moses circumcised them, Aaron uncovered the corona, and Joshua gave them the wine to drink... Others say that Joshua circumcised them, Aaron uncovered the corona, and Moses gave them the wine to drink. Hence it is written, *Circumcise again the children of Israel the second time* (Joshua. 5:2); from which it can be inferred that he had circumcised them the first

⁴ These verses are presented together because they are addressed together in the *midrashim*.

time. And *circumcised the children of Israel at the hill of the foreskins* (5:3), What was the *Hill of the foreskins*? It was the place, said R. Levi, which they had made into a hill by means of the foreskins. This explains, *Every man hath his sword upon his thigh.*'

What is the exposition of the text, *Because of dread in the night*? They were unable to offer the Passover sacrifice, for it is written, *No uncircumcised person shall eat thereof*. But if the Israelites had not offered the Passover sacrifice they would have died on the Passover night as the firstborn of the Egyptians had died; for it says, *And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and there shall be no plague upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt* (Exodus 12:13). This explains, *Because of dread in the night*.

Numbers Rabbah 14:18

The rams sixty, the he-goats sixty, the he-lambs of the first year sixty (Leviticus 7:88). This number symbolises the sixty myriads of Israelites who came out of Egypt, it symbolises *sod* (counsel), the numerical value of which is sixty, it alludes to the *threescore queens*, to the Second 'Temple, which was built with dimensions of sixty by sixty, *The height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits* (Ezra 6:3), to Elisha who served Israel sixty years, to the *Threescore cities, all the region of Argob* (Deuteronomy 3:4), to the text, *And Isaac was threescore years old* (Genesis 25:26), and to the sixty letters in the priestly benediction, as it says, *Threescore mighty men are about it*. The sacrifice of each prince consisted of three varieties for the peace-offerings, each bringing fifteen animals. This corresponded to the verse beginning with, *The Lord bless thee* (Numbers 6:24), which consists of fifteen letters. Each variety comprised five animals, in allusion to the five letters by which each successive verse exceeds the preceding one. How so? The verse beginning with: *The Lord bless thee* consists of fifteen letters. The verse beginning with, *The Lord make his face to shine* (ibid. 25) exceeds it by five letters, since it is composed of twenty letters. The verse beginning with, *The Lord lift up* (ibid. 26) exceeds the verse beginning with, *The Lord make His face to shine* by five letters, since it consists

of twenty-five letters. And because the priestly benediction ends on a note of peace--*And give thee peace* (ibid.)--the princes presented peace-offerings as a symbol of this.

Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Massekta d'Pischa, Parshah 14

About six hundred thousand men on foot (Exodus 12:37). Sixty myriads – these are the words of R. Ishmael. For when it say *behold it is the litter of Solomon; threescore mighty men are about it* it means, behold the litter of Him who is the possessor of Peace, sixty myriads of men are about it, *of the mighty men of Israel. They all handle the sword, and are expert in war...*

Analysis

Each of these *midrashim* understand *sixty* in the verse to allude to the entire community of Israel, the “sixty myriads” that came out of Egypt. Numbers 11 reads *Every man has his sword on his thigh* as a reference to circumcision and the *dread of night* as a reference to the Passover sacrifice, which was to be eaten at night. The author plays on the appearance of *sword on his thigh* alongside *dread of the night* to by connecting to Exodus 12, where circumcision is tied to the Passover, and in particular 12:48, which states that only those were circumcised were to partake of the Passover offering. In this retelling of the story and of the Passover, the *midrash* imagines the Jews motivated to practice circumcision because of their fear of God’s wrath. Here circumcision is by implication an act to distinguish Israel from its sinning neighbors – from those who, without being uncircumcised, demonstrate their ignorance of the divine will. Without circumcision, Israelites would be indistinguishable from their Egyptian neighbors and thus subject to God’s terror. Having performed this rite, they are protected

from it. Thus the Song is tied to the two blood rites of Exodus 12, both of which signal Israel's readiness for salvation.

The Temple is a major theme of the midrashic material on this verse. Numbers Rabbah 14 is a somewhat complicated numerological wordplay weaves together the number sixty from the Song verse and in Numbers 7. The *sixty soldiers* are incidental to the primary exposition of the various appearances of the word *sixty*. These *sixty soldiers* become central when the *midrash* describes the priestly benediction, which is said to be alluded to by the *sixty soldiers*. Less important than the mathematical accounting that enables the author to link the verse of Songs to the priestly benediction is the tying of the sacrificial rites to the Song of Songs. The *midrash* follows the tradition that Solomon constructed the Temple and so the *sixty soldiers* around his *bed*, here understood as the Temple, are those uttering the priestly benediction. The priests thus become *soldiers*, גִּבּוֹרִים, who protect this holy construction. In the absence of true military might and the capacity to protect itself with actual גִּבּוֹרִים, the midrashist proposes that those who recite the priestly benediction might still shelter Israel.

Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael brings together these two readings. The *midrash* understands *Solomon* as God, reading it as the King of Peace. The phrase *sixty soldiers* is understood to describe the sixty myriads of Israelites (as in Numbers Rabbah 11:3). But here Israel is not imagined to be in Egypt but rather surrounding the Temple, where the King of Peace resides. Israel is portrayed as God's protector and the defender of the Temple.

Like Numbers Rabbah 14, this *midrash* links the גִּבּוֹרִים with the protection of the Temple, giving a slightly military feel to Israel's relationship with God. This idea is particularly interesting against the background of the author's environment, who most likely composed the *midrash* while Israel was manifestly unable to protect the Temple. Indeed, not only had the Temple been destroyed, but Israel was without a military force. Even in the absence of the Temple, these *midrashim* promise, though, Israel is not powerless. The priestly benediction of Numbers Rabbah 14 can still be recited within the liturgy and thus the "priests" can continue to serve as the גִּבּוֹרִים of the Temple – perhaps those who await its reconstruction. Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael might be read to suggest that Israel protects the Temple which, even in its destruction, is still the dwelling place of the King of Peace. Israel's power comes from its service of God *via* its commitment to the covenant. Thus, Israel's powerlessness is reread to suggest a potential for future triumph.

Song 3:9

אפריון עשה לו המלך שלמה מעצי הלבנון

King Solomon made a palanquin for himself from the wood of Lebanon.



Texts

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, Piska 1:2

King Solomon made Himself a Pavillion. By pavilion is meant the Tabernacle; *King Solomon made himself.*⁵ That is, the King of the universe needing a means of private communication made [it for] himself. In explanation of the verse, R. Judah bar Ilai told the parable of a king who had a young daughter. Before she was old enough to show the signs of puberty, he felt free to talk to her wherever he saw her – whether in the market, in alleys or in lanes, he felt free to talk to her. But after she came of age and showed the signs of puberty, He said: It does not suit the deference owed to my daughter that I speak to her in public. Make a pavilion for her, and I will speak to her in privacy within the pavilion.

So was it between God and Israel. At the beginning when Israel was a child in Egypt then in My love of Him I used to cry out, [wherever I saw him] *O Son of Mine!* (Hosea 11:1). Thus it came about that the children of Israel saw Me in Egypt when I said *I will go through the land of Egypt* (Exodus 12:12); they saw me at the Red Sea *when Israel saw the great Hand* (Exodus 14:31); they saw Me at Sinai when, according to Scripture, *The Lord spoke with you face to face* (Deuteronomy 5:4). But once they accepted the Torah and hence were regarded by Me as a people come of age (*l'umah sh'leimah*) I said, It no longer suits the

⁵ The text following this line suggests that the midrashist interprets שלמה המלך not as “King Solomon” but as “The King of Peace,” i.e. “the King of the universe.”

deference owed to My children that I speak to them in public. Make the Tabernacle for Me, and then I shall speak to them [in privacy] from within the Tabernacle. Thus scripture: *And when Moses went into the Tent of Meeting that He might speak with him, etc.* (Numbers 7:8-9).

Numbers Rabbah 12:4

And it came to pass on the day that Moses had made an end, etc. (Numbers 7:1). This bears on the Scriptural text, *King Solomon made himself a palanquin* (Song of Songs 3:9) *Palanquin* signifies the world, which is constructed in the form of a canopy. *King Solomon* (*Sh'lomo*) denotes the Holy One, blessed be He, who, having effected peace (*shalom*) between fire and water, mixed them with each other and made a firmament from them; as it says, *And God called the firmament Heaven-(shamayim)* (Genesis 1:8). He called it *shamayim* because it consisted of fire (*eish*) and water (*mayim*). *Of the wood of Lebanon* (Song of Songs 3:9) signifies that the building of the world commenced from the spot on which the Temple was to stand. R. Jose b. Halafta said: Why was it called Foundation Stone? Because thereon began the foundation of the world. Hence it is written, *Out of Zion the perfection of beauty, God hath shined forth* (Psalm 50:2). *He made the pillars thereof of silver—(kesef)* (Song of Songs 3:10). *Pillars* signifies the firmament; as is borne out by the text, *The pillars of heaven tremble* (Job 26:11)...

The inside thereof being inlaid with love (Song of Songs 3:10). That alludes to the fact that after all the rest of the work of creation was accomplished He created Adam and Eve to rule over all.... *From the daughters of Jerusalem—(yerushalayim)* (ibid.), namely, that all created beings will be afraid (*yere'im*) of them and wholly devoted (*mushlamim*) to them; as you read, *And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, etc.* (Genesis 9:2). Another exposition: *Palanquin* signifies the world. Why was it called A *palanquin* (*apir'yon*)? Because He created it, that men may be fruitful (*periah*) and multiply in it. This accords with the text, *He created it not a waste, He formed it to be inhabited* (Isaiah 45:18).

Song of Songs Rabbah 3:19

King Solomon made himself a palanquin. R. 'Azariah in the name of R. Judah b. Simon interpreted the verse as applying to the tabernacle. *A palanquin*: this refers to the tabernacle. Said R. Judah b. R. Il'ai: It is as if a king had a young daughter, and before she grew up and reached maturity he used to see her in the street and speak to her in public, in an alleyway or in a courtyard, but after she grew up and reached maturity he said, 'It is not becoming for my daughter that I should converse with her in public. Make her therefore a pavilion, and when I require to converse with her, I will do so within the pavilion.' So it is written, *When Israel was a child, then I loved him* (Hosea 11:1). In Egypt the Israelites saw God in the open, as it says, *For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians* (Exodus XII, 23). At the Red Sea they saw Him in the open, as it says, *And Israel saw the great work--lit. 'hand' (ibid. 14:31), and the children pointed to him with the finger, and said, This is my God, and I will glorify Him (ibid. 15:2).* At Sinai they saw Him face to face, as it says, *And he said: The Lord came from Sinai* (Deuteronomy. 33:2). But after Israel had stood before Mount Sinai and received the Torah and said, *All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and obey* (Exodus 24:7) ...*King Solomon made himself*: the King whose is peace.

Song of Songs Rabbah 3:23

Another explanation: *A palanquin*: this is the world. *King Solomon made for himself*: the King whose is peace. *Of wood of Lebanon*: this intimates that it [the world] was formed out of the earthly Holy of Holies, as we have learnt [in B. Yoma 53b, 54b] "When the ark was taken away, a stone was left in its place which had been there from the days of the early prophets, and which was called *sh'tiah*. Why was it called *sh'tiah*? Because on it, all the world was based (*hushtah*), as it says, *Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined forth* (Psalm L, 2)..."

King Solomon made for himself: the king whose is peace. *Of the wood of Lebanon*: this refers to the celestial Holy of Holies, which is exactly opposite (*m'kuvan*) the lower holy of holies, as it says, *The place (machon)... for Thee to dwell in* (Exodus 15:17)- that is, exactly opposite to *Thy dwelling place*. *He made*

the pillars thereof of silver: as it says, *The pillars of heaven tremble* (Job 26:11). *The top thereof of gold*: this refers to the words of Torah, of which it says, *More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold* (Psalm 19:11). *The seat (merkavo) of it of purple*: (Song of Songs 3:10) as it says, *To Him that rideth (rocheiv) upon the heaven of heavens, which are of old* (Psalm 68:34). *The inside thereof being inlaid with love*: R. Berekiah and R. Bun in the name of R. Abbahu said: There are four lordly creatures. The lord among the birds is the eagle; the lord among cattle is the ox; the lord among beasts is the lion; and the lord over all of them is man. The Holy One, blessed be He, took them and engraved them on the Throne of Glory, as it says, *The Lord hath established His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom ruleth over all* (Psalm 103:19). The fact that He has established His throne above the lordly ones proves that *His kingdom ruleth over all*.

Analysis

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana and Song of Songs Rabbah 3:19 differ in their reading of *הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁלָמָה*. Pesikta d'Rav Kahana understands *הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁלָמָה* as “King of peace” and Song of Songs Rabbah 3:19 more literally as “King Solomon” (but includes the “King of Peace” interpretation at the end). In both *midrashim*, the subject constructs the Tabernacle to provide a locale for communication between God and Israel.

Another difference between the two is that Pesikta d'Rav Kahana uses Exodus 12:12 (*I will go through the land*) while Song of Songs Rabbah 3:19 uses Exodus 24:7 (*We will do and obey*).⁶ Both passages emphasize human agency by arguing that Israel reached “maturity” when it accepted the Torah. Song of Songs Rabbah 3:19 puts

⁶ The Song of Songs of Rabbah 3:19 passage has been abbreviated here. Following the quotation of Exodus, it is the same as the Pesikta d'Rav Kahana.

additional emphasis on Israel's role in establishing and maintaining a relationship with God because that relationship hinges on Israel's performance of commandments. The subtle emendation changes the emphasis from an act of divine might to one of human righteousness and obedience.

In these texts the erection of the Tabernacle – and by extension the Temple and the entire sacrificial system – is presented as the high-point in Israel's relationship with God. The construction of the Tabernacle and the rites performed within it signal Israel's maturity and the resulting change in the nature of its relationship with God. Earlier encounters with God are somehow unbecoming of Israel now. The texts also suggest that it would be beneath Israel's dignity to experience the divine unmediated by the *mitzvah* system as symbolized by the Tabernacle. This recasts the early history of Israel's Exodus and the period in the desert as a time of Israel's immaturity. Pesikta d'Rav Kahana's reference to God's desire to have a place of "private communication" with Israel suggests that Israel's changing relationship with God involves a greater level of exclusivity. Though God is universal, an intimate relationship with God is only available to Israel because of its observance of the rites of the Tabernacle and Temple.

The *midrash* mixes the metaphor of king-daughter and groom-bride. In both *midrashim*, Israel's immaturity is described by an unselfconscious relationship with God in which God frequently visits her. Thus far, the relationship could be viewed through the lens of either metaphor. This relationship changes at Sinai, however, in a moment that is difficult to interpret using the father-daughter metaphor. God's revelation and Israel's acceptance (again the two *midrashim* describe this scene differently) appear to constitute a courtship. This change of metaphor is appropriate to the bride-groom

imagery and the sexual suggestiveness of the Song of Songs itself. The bridal imagery indicates that the kind of intimate encounter described in the Song is only appropriate for a people who can discover God in 'private quarters,' i.e., the Temple. Israel is now ready for a mature, intimate relationship with God. Both metaphors offer a vivid portrait of the intimacy (familial or marital) between God and Israel.

The allusion to Israel's increasing maturity in preparation for its exclusive encounter with God is strongly suggestive of a sexual relationship. Once the king's daughter has reached a certain level of sexual maturity, it would be inappropriate for her to have contact with any man (even her father) in public. This retrojection of rabbinic ideas about sexual modesty onto the Torah narrative allows the rabbis to bring together the notion that the Temple is a meeting place of God and Israel with the idea that Israel moved to a higher level of spiritual awareness in its relationship with God. This recasts the Torah narrative, which describes Israel's constant wavering and transgression, as a story of Israel's steady development and growing intimacy with God. The *midrash* thus hints at the consummation of the relationship between the groom God and the bride Israel. This potent imagery suggests a monogamous relationship in which God favors Israel and Israel is loyally observant of its (marriage) covenant.

Like Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, Song of Songs Rabbah 3:23 interprets Song's מְלֶכֶת הַשָּׁלוֹם as "King of Peace." The *palanquin* is interpreted as the world, not the Temple. The startling assertion that the world was "created out of the Holy of Holies" is derived from the claim that the world (*palanquin*) was made from *the wood of Lebanon*, which was also used in the construction of the Temple. The stone in Song of Songs Rabbah 3:23 is the foundation stone of the particular site of Jewish worship and of the entire

world. This image succinctly captures the argument throughout this section of Song of Songs Rabbah – that the particulars of Jewish worship and the universality of the Jewish God are not contradictory. Song of Songs Rabbah 3:23 may reflect this same tension, emphasizing the connection between the divine and earthly visions of proper worship.

The second section of Song of Songs Rabbah 3:23 excerpted here claims that the heavenly Temple corresponds to the earthly Temple. Between heaven and earth is a bond that allows the architecture of the Temple in Jerusalem to mirror that of heaven. This bond between heaven and earth is emphasized by the appearance on the “throne of glory” of four earthly animals. This is a variation on the microcosmic Temple of Numbers Rabbah 12:4 (see below). There, the Temple is given new importance because it is seen to both reflect and contain the world. Here the sanctity of the Temple is attested to by the fact that it bridges the earthly and the heavenly. Though it is a physical structure on earth, it mirrors something that is beyond time and space, the Temple within which dwells the Divine.

In Numbers Rabbah 12:4 Solomon’s *palanquin* is understood to refer to the Temple. The Temple is presented as central not only to the relationship between God and Israel, but to the entire universe. It is seen as a microcosm of all of creation. Only part of the *midrash*’s extensive and creative linkage between the Temple and features of creation are excerpted here. Each feature of creation is connected to some aspect of the Tabernacle. The re-narration of the creation story continues with the introduction of Adam and Eve who, as in the Genesis story, are given sovereignty over creation. Yet the last section of the *midrash* excerpted here introduces a radical shift from Genesis. *Palanquin*, אַפְרִיז, is imagined by the midrashist to connect to the root פרה and thus

God's command in Genesis to be fruitful. The linkage of the Temple to creation is now complete. In the midrashic retelling of the story, God created the Temple as a microcosm of the universe. The imperative for human beings to be *fruitful* (Genesis 1:28) is connected to the worship of the Temple. Both procreation and Temple worship are life-giving acts fulfilling the purpose of human existence.

Song of Songs 3:10

עמודיו עשה כסף רפידתו זהב מרכבו ארגמן תוכו רצוף אהבה מבנות
ירושלם

*Its pillars he made of silver, its back of gold, its seat is purple,
inlaid with love by the young women of Jerusalem.*



Texts

B. Bava Batra 14a

[The Talmud quotes a Baraita on the dimensions of the ark]: How much of the ark did the tablets take up? Six *tefachim*. One and a half *tefachim* remain there. Subtract from these half a *tefach*: one and a half fingerbreadths for one wall and one and half fingerbreadths for the other wall. One *tefach* remains there, in which two rods were positioned, as it is said, *King Solomon made himself a sedan-chair of the wood of Lebanon. He made its pillars of silver, its back of Gold, its seat of purple wool...*⁷

Song of Songs Rabbah 3:20

He made the pillars thereof of silver: this refers to the pillars, as it says, *The hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver* (Exodus 27:10). *The top thereof of gold*: as it says, *And thou shalt overlay the boards with gold* (ibid. 26:29). *The seat of it of purple*: as it says, *And thou shalt make a veil of blue, and purple* (ibid. 31).

The inside thereof being inlaid with love: R. Judan said: This refers to the merit of the Torah and the merit of the righteous who study and practise it. R. 'Azariah said in the name of R. Judah who had it from R. Simon: This refers to the

⁷ This same text appears in Leviticus Rabbah 4:20

Shechinah. One verse says, *So that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord* (I Kings 8:11), and another verse says, *And the court was full of the brightness of the Lord's glory* (Ezekiel 10:4). How can these two verses be reconciled? R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi: To what can the tent of meeting be compared? To a cave adjoining the sea, which the sea overflows when it becomes rough. Though the cave is filled, the sea loses nothing. So the tent of meeting was filled with the glory of the divine presence, and yet the world lost nothing of the *Shechinah*. When did the *Shechinah* rest on the world? On the day when the tabernacle was set up, as it says, *And it came to pass on the day that Moses had made an end, etc.* (Numbers 7:1)⁸

Analysis

B. *Bava Batra* and Song of Songs Rabbah 3:20 illustrate the tendency of the *midrashim* to see in this part of the Song direct allusions to the Tabernacle and Temple.⁹ The clear reference to Solomon's construction makes such interpretations likely. Yet there is in some of these *midrashim* additional elements that draw attention not to physical features of the Temple's construction but to the theology that forms its foundation. In addition to connecting Song to the construction of the Tabernacle, these *midrashim* also emphasize that it was a physical space occupied by the Divine. The *midrash* addresses a key theological problem presented by this notion: how can an infinite God occupy a finite space? It answers that even as God filled the Tabernacle, God's presence in the universe was not diminished.

⁸ The same passage appears in Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 1:2 with a brief interjection concerning R. Gamliel. This same interlude appears in Song of Songs Rabbah at the end of 3:21.

⁹ See the passage from B. *Bava Batra* 14a cited in this section, B. *Megillah* 10b (where נֶאֱמַר appears to refer to the covering of the ark), Song of Songs Rabbah 3:20-23, and Numbers Rabbah 4:20.

Also at work in this passage is a meditation on the meaning of the Tabernacle as a meeting place of God and humanity. Using a verse from Kings, the author draws our attention to the difficulty of the human encounter with the divine. Without resolving fully the problem of this encounter of the material with the immaterial, the *midrash* closes with a reference to the moment when Moses completed (כלה) the work of the Tabernacle. In other *midrashim* the pun that is implicit here is made explicit: the word completed כלה also means “bride.” This pun is placed here in connection with the phrase that is being expounded, *Inlaid with love from the young women of Jerusalem*. The *midrash* thus suggests that in spite of the apparent impossibility of humanity and God meeting in an enclosed space, God and Israel are nonetheless united – symbolically through matrimony – in the space of the Tabernacle and Temple.

The midrashist plays off the possibility of seeing the Tabernacle as a *chuppah*, a place where groom and bride come together to offer their commitments to one another. In completing the Tabernacle, Moses demonstrated Israel’s commitment to the *mitzvot* and therefore its readiness to be united with God. It is that very commitment and readiness that make possible the marriage of God and Israel under the *chuppah* symbolized by the structure of the Tabernacle. Song of Songs Rabbah 19 and 23 (on Song 3:9) similarly play on this idea that the Tabernacle is the site of the marital union of God and Israel.

Song of Songs 3:11

צֵאנָה וּרְאִינָה בָּנוֹת צִיּוֹן בַּמֶּלֶךְ שְׁלֹמֹה בְּעֶטְרָה שְׁעֶטְרָה לֹא אָמוּ בְיוֹם חֲתֻנָּתוֹ
וּבְיוֹם שְׂמִיחַת לְבוֹ

*Go out and see, daughters of Zion, King Solomon in the crown
with which his mother crowned him, on the day of his wedding, on
the day of his heart's joy.*



Texts

Exodus Rabbah 52:5

And they brought the tabernacle. (Exodus 39:33) Thus it is written, *Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon, even upon the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the gladness of his heart* (Song of Songs 3:1). This verse was recited on the day when the Tabernacle was set up, when Israel rejoiced greatly because God now dwelt in their midst.

O ye daughters of Zion - namely, the children who are distinguished (*tziyein*) as Mine from among the heathen. Just as a monument (*tziyun*) can be pointed out, so may Israel be pointed out. This is the meaning of *Daughters of Zion*, namely, who are distinguished as Mine.

And gaze upon King Solomon - means 'gaze upon a king to whom all peace belongs' - that is upon the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. *Even upon the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him*;-- this refers to the Tabernacle. And why was it called a crown? Because just as a crown has beautiful designs, so was the Tabernacle beautifully designed, as it says, *And of the weaver in colours, in blue, and in purple, in scarlet, and in fine linen, and of the weaver, even of them that do any workmanship, and of those that devise skillful works* (Exodus

35:35). That explains, *Even upon the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him.*

R. Isaac said: I have searched through the whole Bible but have not been able to find anywhere the statement that Bathsheba made a crown for Solomon. R. Simeon b. Yohai asked R. Eleazar, the son of R. Jose: 'Perhaps thou hast heard an explanation from thy father of *Upon the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him?*' He replied: 'Yes; it can be compared to a king who possessed an only child-a daughter. He loved her so dearly, that he called her "my daughter", and when his love increased he called her "my sister", and finally "my mother." Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, first addressed Israel as *daughter* as it says, *Hearken, O daughter, and consider and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy father's house* (Psalm 45:11). When He loved Israel more, He called them *My sister*, as it says, *Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled; for my head is filled with dew, my locks with the drops of the night* (Song of Songs 5:2); and when He loved them even still more, He called them *mother*, for it says, *Attend unto Me, O My people, and give ear unto Me, O My mother (l'umi) for instruction shall go forth from Me, and My right on a sudden for a light of the peoples* (Isaiah 51:4) Thereupon R. Simeon b. Yohai arose and kissed him on his forehead.¹⁰

In the day of his espousals' -that refers to Sinai.¹¹ *And in the day of the gladness of his heart* refers to Jerusalem. Another explanation of *In the day of his espousals* is the day when [God was with Israel] at the Red Sea, *And in the day of the gladness of his heart*, when [His presence dwelt] in the Tent of Meeting. Another explanation of *In the day of his espousals* is in the Tabernacle, *And in the day of the gladness of his heart*, in the Temple.

¹⁰ This interpretation also appears in Song of Songs Rabbah 3:25 and Tanhuma (Buber) Exodus 11.8, *Pekude*. There is also a parallel in Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 1:4.

¹¹ This interpretation also appears in Numbers Rabbah 2:25, Song of Songs Rabbah 3:25, Tanhuma (Buber) Leviticus 6.8, *Acharei Mot*.

Analysis

While many *midrashim* link the Song to the Tabernacle as we have seen above, this passage is unique in claiming that the verse itself was recited at the consecration of the Tabernacle. This is more an historical than an exegetical argument and is further demonstration of the importance that both the memory of the Tabernacle (and so the Temple) and the Song had for the rabbis.

Exodus Rabbah 52:5 also celebrates the distinctiveness of Israel and its relationship with God, playing on יִיזָר and its connection to the word “distinguished.” The *midrash* reflects the relationship between the Tabernacle and Israel’s unique status among the “heathens.” The Tabernacle is seen not simply as the locus of the mandated offerings but also as the locus of the divine presence. Israel’s distinctiveness is due to its having constructed a structure within which God’s presence can dwell. God’s presence there sets Israel apart as the chosen nation, and the Temple stands as a monument to Israel’s distinctive practices in meriting that chosenness.

Here the full range of relationships that might serve as an analogy for that between God and Israel is introduced. Israel is described as the daughter, sister, and even the mother of God. This passage inverts the father-son imagery from Hosea (see *Pesikta d’Rav Kahana* 1:2 on Song of Songs 3:9, above). The author rereads אֶמֶת, “my nation,” in Isaiah 51:4 as אִמִּי, “my mother” to reach the conclusion that אִמִּי, “his mother,” in Song 3:11 refers to Israel. In interpreting the reference to the king’s mother in the verse, the rabbis propose that Israel be understood to be God’s mother. This radical image inverts the assumptions at the foundation of the entire Torah and all of Jewish theology: that God preceded the universe and chose Israel, and determines the rules by which Israel

should live. Positing Israel as mother would suggest that Israel preceded and has authority over God. The midrashist suggests that Israel can be viewed as God's mother within the world. By keeping the covenant, Israel enables God to come into the world, figuratively giving birth to God. In addition, by keeping the covenant Israel fulfills the maternal role of protecting God in the world.

The *midrash* also describes Israel as the people who have the authority to crown the Divine King. The crowning of Solomon by his mother is compared with Israel's construction of the Tabernacle for God (*King Solomon in the crown with which his mother crowned him*). Here God is presented as subordinate to Israel, who is in the position of granting kingship to the Divine. This has striking theological implications, certainly intended by the author, as evidenced by the reading of מֶלֶךְ שְׁלָמָה as the "king to whom all peace belongs" - that is...the King of kings." The reading suggests that God's sovereignty is dependent on Israel's observance of the commandments - in particular the commandments pertaining to the Tabernacle. God's authority in the world can only be complete when God is crowned with the Temple. By making the divine kingship dependent on the Tabernacle in this way, the author heightens the importance of the Tabernacle, painting it as the culmination of divine authority in the world. In addition, the author confers new importance on Israel both in relation to other peoples and to God. Israel is the only nation powerful enough to grant authority to the King of the Universe. So powerful, in fact, that Israel stands in a position of authority in relation to God.

Yet another relationship is used as an analogy as the *midrash* turns to the phrase *the day of his wedding* - that of bride and groom, which we have seen elsewhere. Exodus Rabbah introduces the marriage of God and Israel more fully than before (it is alluded to

in *midrashim* dealing with 3:10). While the Song verse equates *יום חתונתו*, *the day of his wedding*, with *יום שמחת לבו*, *the day of his heart's joy*, the midrashist takes the opportunity to imagine them as separate events. What the relationship between them is not clear, though it suggests that the marriage between God and Israel did not culminate until after *יום חתונתו*. This would render *שמחת לבו* as a point of greater contentment or understanding that followed from the marriage of God and Israel.

The three pairings of *יום חתונתו* and *שמחת לבו* as Sinai/Jerusalem, Red Sea/Tabernacle and then as Tabernacle/Temple present the rituals of sacrifice as central to the relationship of Israel and God. The first two differ slightly from the third. Describing revelation and the liberation at the sea as *יום חתונתו* posits a particular moment in history as that which brought together Israel and God in marriage. Though the *midrash* does not explain what about these two events constituted a marriage, the commitment of God and Israel to one another at each is probably the basis for the claim. At Sinai God gave Israel the commandments and promised to take them to the land of Canaan; Israel accepted the relationship with the exclamation *נעשה ונשמע*, *we will do and heed*. At the Red Sea God liberated the Israelites; Israel proclaimed God to be their God and affirmed God's sovereignty in the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15). This historical moment serves as the wedding because it suggests a commitment to an ongoing relationship. This is prelude to *שמחת לבו*, which perhaps is seen to celebrate or even consummate the marriage.

The third pairing of *יום חתונתו* and *שמחת לבו* imagines the meeting at the Tabernacle as the marriage, and the creation of the more permanent Temple as its

culmination. This *midrash* joins together the creation of Tabernacle and Temple by seeing Israel's construction of the Temple in Jerusalem as the fulfillment of the relationship between God and Israel. The rites of the Tabernacle as described in the Pentateuch are from a period of Israelite history before the establishment of Jerusalem. By reading into Song 3:11 reference to both Tabernacle and Temple, the author of the *midrash* effectively has the text foretell the Temple's construction. In this rabbinic retelling, the Temple is not merely a more permanent reconstruction of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, but a culmination of the relationship between God and Israel. The wedding of God and Israel, which took place at the Temple, was only the beginning of the relationship. The marriage could not be celebrated – Israel and God could not be truly happy – until the Temple was constructed.

Chapter Four:
*Midrashim on Book Four of the
Song of Songs*

Song of Songs 4:1

הַנָּךְ יָפָה כַּעֲיֹתַי הַנָּךְ יָפָה עֵינֶיךָ יוֹנִים מִבְּעַד לְצִמְתְּךָ שְׁעָרְךָ כְּעֹדֵר הָעֲזִים שֶׁגָּלְשׁוּ
מֵהָר גִּלְעָד :

Behold, You are beautiful my love – your eyes are beautiful, doves behind your veil; your hair is like a flock of goats streaming down from mount Gil'ad.



Texts

Tanhuma (Buber) Exodus 8.1, Tetzaveh

Behind your veil. In the case of a woman, when the hair of her head grown, she puts the hair behind [the veil]. And it is becoming to her. So in the case of Israel, when their Sanhedrin sit in the chamber of hewn stones, it was confined *behind your veil*.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:1

Behold thou art fair, my love, behold thou art fair. Behold thou art fair with precepts, behold thou art fair with deeds of kindness; behold thou art fair in positive precepts, behold thou art fair in negative precepts; behold thou art fair in the religious duties of the house, with the *hallah*, *terumah*, and tithes, behold thou art fair in religious duties of the field, with the gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, the corner, the second tithe, and the renunciation of ownership; behold thou art fair in the [avoidance of] mixed kinds, behold thou art fair in a [linen] robe with [woollen] fringes; behold thou art fair with plantation; behold thou art fair with *orlah*; behold thou art fair with the plant of the fourth year; behold thou art fair with circumcision, behold thou art fair with *peri'ah*; behold thou art fair with Prayer; behold thou art fair with the recital of the *shema*, behold thou art fair with the mezuzah, behold thou art fair with the phylacteries; behold thou art fair with the *sukkah*, behold thou art fair with the *lulav* and citron; behold thou art fair with

repentance, behold thou art fair with good deeds; behold thou art fair in this world, behold thou art fair in the world to come.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:2

Thine eyes are as doves. *Thine eyes* refers to the Sanhedrin, who are the eyes of the community, as it says, *If it be done in error by the congregation, it being hid from their eyes* (Numbers 15:24). There are two hundred and forty-eight limbs in the human body, and they move only by the direction of the eyes. So Israel can do nothing without their Sanhedrin...

Doves: just as the dove is innocent, so Israel are graceful in their step when they go up to celebrate the festivals. Just as the dove is distinguished [by its colouring], so Israel are distinguished through [abstention from] shaving, through circumcision, and through fringes. Just as the dove is chaste, so Israel are chaste. Just as the dove puts forth its neck for slaughter, so Israel, as it says, *For Thy sake are we killed all the day* (Psalm 44:23). Just as the dove makes atonement for the pilgrims, so Israel makes atonement for the other nations, since the seventy bullocks that they offer on Tabernacles correspond to the seventy nations, and are brought in order that the earth may not be left desolate of them; and so it is written, *In return for my love they are my adversaries; but I am all prayer* (ibid. 109:4).

Just as the dove, from the time that she recognises her mate, never changes him for another, so Israel, once they had learnt to know the Holy One, blessed be He, have never changed Him for another.

Just as the dove when it enters its cote recognizes its nest, its cote, its young, its fledgelings, and its apertures, so when the three rows of disciples sit before the Sanhedrin, each one knows his place. Just as a dove, even if its young are taken from it, never abandons its cote, so Israel, although the Temple has been destroyed, have not ceased to celebrate three festivals a year. Just as a dove produces a fresh brood every month, so Israel every month renew their study of the Torah, their performance of precepts and of good deeds. Just as the dove

travels far afield, and yet comes back to her cote, so Israel, as it says, *They shall come trembling as a bird out of Egypt*--this refers to the generation of the wilderness--and *As a dove out of the land of Assyria* (Hosea 11:11)--this refers to the ten tribes; and of both of them it says' *And I will make them to dwell in their houses, saith the Lord* (ibid.). Rabbi says: When a certain kind of dove is given food, the other doves smell it and flock to her cote. So when the elder sits and discourses, many strangers become proselytes at such a time; so, for instance, Jethro heard the news and came, Rahab heard and came. So through Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, many strangers became proselytes at that time. What is the reason? Because, *when he seeth his children sanctify My name, then, as it goes on, they also that err in spirit shall come to understanding* (Isaiah 29:23, 24).

Thine eyes are [as] doves: like doves; that is, thy quality is like that of the dove. Just as the dove brought light into the world, so Israel bring light into the world, as it says, *And nations shall walk at thy light* (Isaiah 60:3).

When did the dove bring light to the world? In the days of Noah, as it says, *And the dove came in to him at eventide; and lo in her mouth an olive-leaf freshly plucked* (Genesis 8:11). What is meant by 'in her mouth... freshly plucked'? Killed, as it says, *Joseph is without doubt torn in pieces-toraf* (Genesis 37:33). R. Berekiah said: Had the dove not killed it, the leaf would have become a great tree. Whence did she bring it? R. Levi said: From the young shoots of the Land of Israel. This accords with the popular saying: 'The Land of Israel was not smitten by the waters of the Flood'; and so it was stated by Ezekiel: Son of man, say unto her: *Thou art a land that is not cleansed, nor rained upon in the day of indignation* (Ezekiel. 22:24). R. Johanan said: Even mill-stones were dissolved by the water [of the Flood]. R. Tarye said: The gates of the Garden of Eden were opened to her, and from there she brought it. Said R. Aibu to him: Had she brought it from the Garden of Eden, she should have brought something fine, like cinnamon or balsam. But in truth she gave a hint to Noah, as if to say, 'Good sir Noah, let me have something as bitter as this from the hand of God rather than something sweet from your hand.'

Analysis

The secluded gathering of the Sanhedrin is understood to make Israel more "becoming." This key exercise of authority - gathering in seclusion to render judgment - makes the community as a whole more attractive. The beautification of Israel by the gathering of the Sanhedrin - like a woman putting her hair back - may be an attempt by the midrashist to bring together the sexual suggestiveness of the Song and the imagery of the marriage of God and Israel that is such a prominent theme in this exegetical literature. Perhaps by its persistence and its use of *halachah* to govern the community the Sanhedrin attracts God, as it were, and makes possible the eventual consummation of the relationship. The image might also suggest that in convening secretly the Sanhedrin beautifies Israel by drawing God in to deliver the inspiration or insight necessary to guide the community. In either case, though, the conference of the Sanhedrin is seen as an asset to Israel.

Tanhuma (Buber) focuses on the invisibility of the Sanhedrin, whose private meetings conceal it from the public. The beginning of Song of Songs Rabbah 4:2 (the second part is explored below) celebrates the extension of the Sanhedrin's authority in the opposite direction - the capacity of the rabbinic court to see everything Israel tries to conceal from it. These two views of the Sanhedrin together paint a picture of the vast power of that body: it is both hidden and all-seeing, convening "behind a veil" but capable of surveying what Israel conceals like a "dove," whose heavenly perspective allows it to survey the breadth below. Entrusted to interpret texts and rule on crucial matters (by way of methods obscure to the non-initiated) the Sanhedrin establishes the

norms for the entire community. The power is absolute because Israel "can do nothing" without their judgments.

These passages can be read as a tribute to the governing body of Jewish life in late antiquity, but also to the rabbinic establishment as a whole. In celebrating the Sanhedrin, whose task was to interpret law and render judgments for the entire community of Israel, the author celebrates and justifies the power of all rabbis, those who interpret law and render judgments for their communities. The *midrash* confers legitimacy on an institution which, now taken as essential to Jewish life, was at one time challenged from both inside and outside of the Jewish community.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:1 draws our attention to Israel's observance of *mitzvot*. This ode to Israel celebrates the particulars of Jewish religious observance. Apparently these observances make Israel more "fair" although, as with the passage from Tanhuma (Buber) regarding the Sanhedrin, we are not told to whom. Given that so much of the Song is read in light of the relationship between God and Israel, it seems reasonable that these observances do not just make Israel more fair to those who look upon the Jews in this world, but to the God who looks on from above.

The particular *mitzvot* chosen for this passage cover a broad range of life – sexuality, economics, pilgrimage, prayer. It is not the particular commandments chosen for the passage that give this passage meaning but rather the entirety of their scope. The first sentence of the passage, "Behold thou art fair with precepts, behold thou art fair with deeds of kindness," spans from commandments articulated at Sinai to those acts which are necessary but not specifically commanded. This range covers the entirety of desirable

human conduct. The next phrase, "behold thou art fair in positive precepts, behold thou art fair in negative precepts" includes every act commanded by God. The passage closes with yet another all-encompassing range, "behold thou art fair in this world, behold thou art fair in the world to come," spanning all time. The commandments listed between these bookends give a sense of the range of observance, but the purpose of the passage as a whole is to describe the entire system of *mitzvot* that is the basis of the Jewish community's life and its all encompassing nature. The midrash culminates in reference to the messianic era, suggesting that in observing all these *mitzvot*, Israel will bring about the messianic age.

The passage in Song of Songs Rabbah 4:2 likening Israel to a dove connects Israel's observance of *mitzvot* to its relationship with the nations. Those commandments which set Israel apart from the nations by physical appearance – [abstention from] shaving, circumcision, and *tzitzit* – immediately precede the reference to martyrdom in Psalm 44. Martyrdom is celebrated as a sign of Israel's commitment to those commandments in the face of the brutal treatment by Israel's oppressors. Just after this the midrashist claims that Israel atones for the nations (possibly for the sin of oppressing Israel). Israel's status as the subjugated nation is inverted through the very means of her subjugation. God's people are persecuted because of their observance of the *mitzvot*, which sets it apart; yet it is that observance that allows Israel to atone for its persecutors: *In return for my love they are my adversaries; but I am all prayer* (Psalm 109).¹ In this

¹ The "enemies" described in this Psalm are not enemy nations, but more likely personal or political adversaries. This conclusion can be drawn by the nature of the wishes of the "enemy" beginning in verse six: "...Let his prayer be turned into sin/ let his days be few; let another take his charge" (JPS). These suggest personal rather than national concerns, which would more likely be concerned with military

way Israel's political subjugation becomes the sign of its religious authority and a prelude to its ultimate triumph. The *midrash* is at once universalistic and particularistic. The nations, who do not know how to worship and have no mechanism to make up for their transgressions, are cared for lovingly by Israel at the altar. Through the act of exegesis the oppressors who stand outside Israel's religious worldview are brought within its domain.

Particularly interesting is the idea that follows immediately after this that Israel has not abandoned God for "another." Israel is compared to a dove who "recognizes her mate" and remains loyal to him. This image plays on the love imagery within the Song itself but adds a new dimension to it by alluding to the temptation to be with "another." The author recognizes Israel's steadfastness not only in the face of political oppression but also of religious diversity. In both cases this passage clearly reflects the challenge of negotiating the boundaries between communities and competing ideologies. The author draws attention to the fact that Israel faces – presumably in the author's contemporary context – a diversity of religions and the temptation to break the covenant.

The dove imagery calls to mind the dove of the Noah story, which brought news of the end of the flood and thus was the herald of a new ordering of creation and relationship with God. The author may have this image in mind, portraying Israel as a messenger of a new age, signaling the end of suffering and foretelling salvation. The dove is used also as a symbol of purity in the *Tanakh*, and the image may be intended to draw attention to Israel's ritual purity. In light of the recurring theme of Israel's

victory. The author of the *midrash*, though, transforms this expression of personal concern into one of national concern.

dedication to God and the commandments, and to Israel's loyalty to God, this seems likely to have been an intention of the author.

The "dove" section closes with a reference to proselytes. If earlier Israel was said to atone for the nations through sacrifices, thus giving them a place within the Jewish theology, here their own acceptance of that belief is predicted through the use of the Isaiah verse. This resolution of the tension with Israel's neighbors is a powerful marker of the ideologically contentious environment of late antiquity. Israel's enemies are here described not simply as competitors or oppressors but, in Isaiah's words, those "who err in spirit."

The structure of this *midrash* suggests a religio-historical claim about Israel's role in the world. In the opening of the "dove" section Israel is a victim of oppressive brutality and by the end, the possessor of salvific wisdom that will draw those oppressors into the fold. The beginning of the passage describes Israel's oppression and her willingness to die for God. Here Israel is seen to possess truth but is oppressed by those who seek to crush her. Israel's response to this victimization is to act with spiritual power by including the nations in her domain by atoning for their sins. Finally, the range of Israel's authority is extended fully as the nations' conversion to Judaism is predicted.

Song of Songs 4:2

שִׁנֵּיךְ כְּעֵדֶר הַקְּצוּבוֹת שָׁעְלוּ מִן הַרְחֵצָה שְׁפָלָם מִתְאַיְמוֹת וְשִׁפְלָה אֵין בָּהֶם :

Your teeth are like a flock of ewes coming up from the bathing pool, all are twins, and none has lost a young one.



Texts

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:5

Whereof all are paired. R. Johanan said: On that day that the Lord came down on Mount Sinai to give the Torah to Israel, there came down with Him sixty myriads of ministering angels, each one having in his hand a crown wherewith to crown each of Israel. R. Abba b. Kahana said in the name of R. Johanan: A hundred and twenty myriads of ministering angels came down with the Holy One, blessed be He, to Sinai, one to invest each one of Israel with a crown and the other to put on him a *zonei*. What is *zonei*? R. Huna the great of Sepphoris said: A girdle, as we read, *He looseth the bond of kings, and bindeth their loins with a girdle* (Job 12:18). *And none faileth among them:* since not one of them suffered harm.

Analysis

This passage addresses the nature of the revelation and suggests that all of Israel was present at Sinai. In this view of the meeting at Sinai, no human intermediary stood between God and Israel. Moses, who is traditionally credited with accepting the revelation and passing it on to Israel, is absent in this retelling of the moment of revelation. The text emphasizes that each individual in Israel experienced the revelation and accepted the crown of Torah.

Israel's crowning by the angels emphasizes Israel's unique status as preeminent among nations. Every individual became royalty in this moment of accepting the Torah, receiving a crown that signaled the people's new status. In addition to celebrating Israel's assumption of its place as the King of Nations, the *midrash* also suggests that Israel shared to some extent in God's sovereignty. By subjecting itself to God's sovereignty and subjecting itself to the authority of the Torah, Israel in fact gained sovereignty and authority. Finally, in elevating everyone to the status of monarch the *midrash* eliminates distinctions within Israel, promising each Israelite, rather than one leader alone, can help bring redemption.

Song of Songs 4:3

כחוט השני שפתתך ומדברך נאה כפלח הרמון רקתך מבצבצ לצמתך

Your lips are like a thread of scarlet, your mouth is lovely. Your temple is like a split pomegranate behind your veil.



Texts

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:5

Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet: this refers to their exclamation before the Ten Commandments, as it says, *And all the people answered with one voice* (Exodus 24:3). *And thy speech is comely:* this refers to their exclamation after the Ten Commandments, as it says, *And the Lord heard the voice of your words... and the Lord said unto me: I have heard the voice of the words of this people... they have well said all that they have spoken* (Deuteronomy 5:25). What is the precise meaning of *They have well said all that they have spoken*? R. Hiyya b. Adda and Bar Kappara gave different explanations. One compared it to the trimming (*hatavah*) of the lamps, and the other to the clearing up (*hatavah*) of the incense. At that moment Moses began to extol them saying, *Thy temples (rakateich) are like a pomegranate split open:* the emptiest (*reik*) among you is as packed with knowledge of the Torah as a pomegranate with seeds; how much more then those who are *behind thy veil*, the modest among you, the self controlled among you!

...And through whom was the Torah given? Through *thy two breasts*, namely, Moses and Aaron.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:8

And thy speech is comely: this refers to the plate. R. Jonathan was once going up to pray in Jerusalem. When he reached a certain Palatinus he was met by a Samaritan who asked him where he was going. He replied: 'To pray in

Jerusalem.' He said to him, 'Would it not be better for you to go up and pray on this holy mountain and not pray in that vile ruin?' [R. Jonathan] said to him, 'Wherein is this mountain blessed?' He replied: 'Because it was not covered by the waters of the Flood.' (And so people say: The land of Israel was not covered by the waters of the Flood.) For the moment R. Jonathan was at a loss, and could find no reply. His ass-driver said to him: 'Rabbi, will you allow me to answer him?' He said, 'You answer him.' He thereupon said to the Samaritan: 'Where do you class this mountain? If it is among the high mountains, then it is written, *And all the high mountains... were covered* (Genesis 7:19). If it belongs to the low mountains (it is written, *Fifteen cubits upward did the waters prevail; and the mountains were covered* (ibid. 20). And) the text took no notice of it [among the low hills]. Since of the mountains which tower above it is written, *And all the mountains were covered*, how much more so the low ones! With that reply the Samaritan was silenced and he could not find an answer. At the reply, too, R. Jonathan descended and made the driver ride on the ass for three miles, and he applied to him three verses: *Thou shalt be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle* (Deuteronomy 7:14); as much as to say, even among your cattle- drivers. Also the following: *No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper* (Isaiah 54:17).

Analysis

This section describes Israel's willingness to receive revelation. The use of Exodus 24:3 emphasizes the total agreement among the Jewish people to accept the covenant, essentially rendering them blameless in the eyes of God and earning them merit in Moses' eyes. The most important part of the Exodus verse is not quoted in the *midrash*: וַיֹּאמְרוּ, כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה, *all that God has spoken we will do*. The central idea here is נַעֲשֶׂה, *we will do*, which in the rabbinic imagination is shorthand for performance of *mitzvot*. The *midrash* frames the people's affirmation of the covenant in

Exodus and God's response in Deuteronomy as a conversation. Moses' compliment of the "emptiest" of the Israelites reveals the elitism that divided Jewish society into those who were knowledgeable and those who were considered "empty" of knowledge. At the same time it affirms that even the least-educated among Israel receive revelation and is therefore rich with knowledge. The *midrash* claims that knowledge of Torah is innate within every Jewish person.

Also significant is the end of the passage (referring to 4:5) in which Moses and Aaron are portrayed as the two breasts.² Moses represents revelation - the קל-הדברים from Exodus 24 alluded to at the beginning of the *midrash* - for it was he who accepted the revelation that led the people to be "filled with knowledge." Aaron represents the priesthood and their pairing here in the breast image suggests that the two are to be seen as equally important aspects of Jewish worship. In the rabbinic world the priesthood was still very much relevant. In the wake of the Temple's destruction, the rituals of the priesthood were seen not as irrelevant commandments, but rather as part of the covenant that could not yet be observed. Aaron represents, then, the נַעֲשֶׂה of the Exodus verse. The breast image appears at the end of a long passage not excerpted here, but it is best understood in connection with the Sinaitic revelation and the Exodus passage in the first part of the passage. Moses and Aaron's appearance together as the "breasts" of the Song of Songs verse represents the entirety of Jewish religious belief and practice - the two sources of nourishment for the community. The breast imagery is also suggestive of

² For a detailed treatment of the breast imagery in Song of Songs 1:2 and its polemical import in the *midrash*, see Kimelman, Reuven, "Rabbi Yohanan and Origenes on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation" in *Harvard Theological Review* 73.3-4 (1980) 567-595

parenting and child-rearing. If Moses and Aaron are the breasts through which the child is fed, then God is the mother whose body is the source of the nourishing wisdom.

The story of the Samaritan and the donkey-driver in Song of Songs Rabbah 4:8 offers a rare glimpse into an explicitly polemical text in which the target of the polemic is identified. The Samaritan's claim that Mt. Girizim is holy offers an opportunity for the donkey-driver to assert the holiness of Mt. Moriah, significant in Jewish polemics with Samaritans and Christians alike. The debate about the height of the mountains is in essence a debate about the holiness of Mt. Moriah and its legitimacy as a place of worship. The conflict with the Samaritan reveals a very real feature of rabbinic life in late-antiquity: the ongoing competition with Christians and Samaritans over the meaning of texts shared by all three communities. Theological fights were fought in the arena of exegesis, as this *midrash* demonstrates.

This tale of the wise common person may constitute a response to Song of Songs Rabbah 4:5 (above) in which Moses exclaims "the emptiest among you is as packed with knowledge of the Torah as a pomegranate with seeds."

Song of Songs 4:6

עד שיפוח היום ונסו הצללים אלך לי אל הר המור ואל גבעת הלבונה

While the day blows and the shadows recede I will walk myself to the mountain of Myrrh, to the hill of frankincense.



Texts

Tanhuma (Buber) Genesis 4.4, Vayeira

The mountain of myrrh. This is the Holy Temple where they would burn the offering of myrrh. Another interpretation: *While the day becomes cool.* Until the kingdom of the Holy One appears in this world *And the shadows flee* i.e. the shadows of the kingdom. *I will go to the mountain of myrrh*, i.e. Jerusalem.

Numbers Rabbah 14:12

Full of incense (Numbers 7:14). Scripture speaks in allusion to circumcision. For when Israel were circumcised in Egypt--as is inferred from the text, *And saw thee wallowing in thy blood, I said unto thee: In thy blood, live; yea, I said unto thee: In thy blood, live* (Ezekiel 16:6) --the scent of the blood was as sweet to the Holy One, blessed be He, as spices. Similarly when Joshua circumcised them it was also sweet to the Holy One, blessed be He. It is in allusion to this that the text says, *I will get me to the mountain of myrrh* which alludes to the circumcision in Egypt, where they made a mountain of the foreskins, for they all had to be circumcised, and it was as sweet to the Holy One, blessed be He, as the scent of flowing myrrh which is the chief of the spices. And to the *Hill of frankincense* alludes to the circumcision on their entry into Canaan when they made a hill of the foreskins; as you read, *And Joshua circumcised the children of Israel at the hill of the foreskins* (Joshua 5:3)--and the scent was as sweet to the Holy One, blessed be He, as the scent of frankincense. This explains the expression, *Full of*

incense. Myrrh which is the first of the ingredients of the incense, and frankincense which is the last of the ingredients of the incense were both mentioned in the text.

Pesikta Rabbati 40:6

What is meant by *Moriah* (Genesis 22:2)? It is the land within which the incense of spices is offered up: *I will go to the mountain of myrrh*. The tradition that Moriah was *the mountain of myrrh* stems from your revered masters.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:15

Until the day breathe. R. Abbahu and R. Levi made different comments on this. One said: When Abraham our ancestor circumcised himself and his sons and the members of his household, he made their foreskins into a heap, and the sun shone on them and they bred worms, and the odour of them ascended to the Holy One, blessed be He, like the odour of the incense and the perfume of the handful of frankincense which was cast on the fire-offerings. And the Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'When the descendants of this man commit transgressions and evil deeds, I will remember this odour in their favour and will be filled with compassion for them and convert the Attribute of Justice for them into the Attribute of Mercy., How do we know? From the verse, *i will get me to the mountain of myrrh*.

R. Levi said: When Joshua circumcised the children of Israel, he made a heap of their foreskins, and the sun shone on them and they bred worms, and the odour of them ascended before the Holy One, blessed be He, like the odour of the incense and the smell of the frankincense on the fire offerings. Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said: ' When the descendants of these commit transgressions and evil deeds, I will remember for them this smell and will be filled with compassion for them and will convert the Attribute of Justice for them into the Attribute of Mercy.' Whence do we know? From the verse, *i will get me to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense*.

It is written, *In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised himself* (Genesis 17:26). R. Berekiah said: Had Abraham circumcised himself by night, the men of that time would have said, 'Had we seen him we would not have permitted him.' Hence, 'In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised': [as if to say], If anyone feels hurt, let him speak. R. Abbahu b. Kahana and R. Levi [explained the word 'was circumcised' differently]. R. Abbahu said: It means that he really suffered pain from the operation, so that God might increase his reward. It is written, *He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised* (lit. 'circumcising he shall be circumcised', Genesis 17:13). God said: 'Shall an unclean person come and operate on a clean? Would that be right? No;'' Circumcising he shall be circumcised.' I am clean and Abraham is clean; it befits the clean to attend to the clean.' R. Abin said in R. Simeon's name: God assisted Abraham with His right hand to circumcise him, as it says, *Thou madest the circumcision with [i.e. assisting] him* (Nehemiah 9:8).

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:16

Another explanation: *I will get me to the mountain of myrrh*: this refers to Abraham, who was the foremost of all the righteous. *And to the hill of frankincense*: this refers to Isaac, who was brought as an offering like a handful of frankincense on the altar

Analysis

Tanhuma (Buber) Genesis 4.4, *Vayeira* and Pesikta Rabbati 40:6 make use of *myrrh* by connecting it to the incense offerings in the Temple in a fairly straightforward way. As with passages in the Song describing Solomon's *palanquin* which are connected midrashically to the Temple, this verse lends itself to discussion of the Temple and its rites. Such *midrashim* emphasize the importance of the Temple for the rabbis, who continually read into the Song references to the sacrifices.

More surprising is the connection made between circumcision and the incense offerings in Numbers Rabbah 14:12 and Song of Songs Rabbah 4:15. Both *midrashim* claim, Song of Songs Rabbah 4:15 more graphically, that there is a connection between the act of circumcision and the Temple offerings. What about circumcision led the rabbis to connect it in this way to the Temple, so often described in these *midrashim* as the point of greatest intimacy between God and Israel? Circumcision might be seen as the Jewish ritual observance par excellence. It calls to mind the initial covenant established with Abraham, the physical mark of the consent of the Jewish people to adherence to the covenant. Its connection to the generative organ and the fact that it is performed on children before they can consent suggests the importance of the act in the transmission of belief. Circumcision is an act of self-sacrifice, a mini act of martyrdom, so to speak, in an era in which that act was idealized. The "offering" of the foreskin itself is also analogous to the Temple offerings - something given up by the community (in both cases via a sharp instrument), which involves bringing forth blood. Circumcision is linked to the Temple also because both are connected to the redemption of Israel. The reconstructed Temple was for the rabbis the symbol of the arrival of the messianic era. As many *midrashim* which deal with Exodus 12 point out, circumcision was required of all those who would partake of the Passover sacrifice. Sacrifice, circumcision and redemption are linked together in the rabbinic imagination.

The prooftexts demonstrating that the act was performed both within Egypt and within Canaan may simply be a device to remind the reader of the continual presence of the observance within the community. Beyond this, though, Numbers Rabbah links Temple observance and circumcision not only by interpreting the ritual described in

Numbers 7 in light of circumcision but also by drawing a parallel between the scent of each going up to God. Two fundamentally important religious observances – circumcision and sacrifice – are thus brought together in this reading of the Song.

The fusion of circumcision with the images of sacrifice project the rabbinic desire to replace the Temple rites with the *mitzvot*. With the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, the rabbis faced the theological problem that the Jewish people's means to repentance and redemption was now gone. Throughout the *midrashim* connected with the Song of Songs is expressed the hope that the Temple will be rebuilt. Yet the rabbis sought a theology that would allow them to continue their relationship with God without the Temple. By bringing together circumcision, which harkened back to the redemption from Egypt, with the sacrifices, which represented both the recent past and the hoped-for future, the author is able to make sense of Israel's present in light of its past. Circumcision – and perhaps, the reader is to understand, all the *mitzvot* – is the new sacrificial system that will enable Israel to maintain its relationship with God.

Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac (often understood as Isaac's willing self-sacrifice) in Genesis is linked to the sacrifices of the Temple in Song of Songs Rabbah 4:16. This connection was long-standing, as Jerusalem's Mt. Moriah was understood to be the site of the binding of Isaac and the site of the Temple. The appearance of this *midrash* just after the allusion in Song of Songs Rabbah 4:15 to Abraham's circumcision of his household draws together Temple sacrifice, circumcision, and the binding of Isaac. All three were acts that followed from a command of God and, perhaps most important, that were seen as essential to God's redemption of Israel. The binding of Isaac leads God to establish a covenant with Abraham, assuring the continuation of his line and his

descendants' triumph over their enemies. The rituals of the Temple was seen by the rabbis after the destruction as a signal of redemption because the offerings could be made only once the Temple was rebuilt.

Song of Songs 4:8

אתי מלבנון בלה אתי מלבנון תבואי תשורי מראש אמנה מראש שניר
וחרמון ממענות אריות מהררי גמרים :

*Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, with me from Lebanon.
Look from the top of Amana, from the top of Sanir and Hermon,
from the lions dens, from the mountains of leopards.*



Texts

Exodus Rabbah 23:5

Another explanation of *Then sang moses*. It is written, *Come with me from Lebanon, my bride*. R. Levi said: People usually adorn the bride and perfume her before leading her under the bridal canopy; the Holy One, blessed be He, however, acted differently. He said to the assembly of Israel: *Come with me from Lebanon, my bride*; I took thee from clay and bricks (*leveinim*) and made thee a bride.' Why does it say twice, *With me from Lebanon*? Because God said: 'With Me have you been exiled from the Temple, which is called Lebanon,' as it says, *And I come up to the height of the mountains, to the innermost parts of Lebanon* (Isaiah 37:24).

Whence do we know that the *Shechinah* accompanied Israel in exile? Because it says, *For your sake I was sent to Babylon* (ibid. 43:14), and also *The word of the Lord came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans* (Ezekiel 1:3). This is also what Daniel said: *As I was by the side of the great river, which is Tigris, etc.* (Daniel 10:4); and Moses said: *And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them* (Leviticus 26:44): *I cannot abandon them, For I am the Lord their God* (ibid.). I have done this because of the holiness of My name, and with Me you will return. This is the meaning of: *Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, with me from Lebanon,*

namely, from the kingdoms that are termed Lebanon, as it says, *Behold, the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon* (Ezek. 31:3), and also, *The breaker is gone up before them... and their king is passed on before them, and the Lord at the head of them* (Micah 2:13).

Another explanation of '*Tashuri from the top of Amana*'. In the Messianic age, Israel will utter Song, for it says, *O sing unto the Lord a new song; for He hath done marvellous things* (Psalm 98:1). Through whose merit do Israel recite Song? Through the merit of Abraham, because he believed in the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, *And he believed in the Lord* (Genesis 15:6). This was the faith which Israel had inherited and concerning which it is written, *But the righteous shall live by his faith* (Habakuk 2:4); hence does it say, *Tashuri from the top of Amana*. From the top of Senir (ibid.) on account of the merit of Isaac, And from Hermon, on account of Jacob. *From the lions' dens* (ibid.)--that is the captivity of Babylon and Persia. *From the mountains of the leopards* (ibid.)--that is Edom.

Analysis

Exodus Rabbah 23:5 opens by drawing attention to the gap between God's glory and Israel's state of subjugation in Egypt. The basis for the connection is the appearance of לִבְנוֹן in this verse of Songs and the לִבְנִים – the bricks made by the Israelites - in Exodus 5. Israel was not required to elevate itself – to use the language of the *midrash*, to “adorn” itself – in preparation for marriage to the Holy One. Even sullied by enslavement and the labor of brickmaking, Israel remained the object of God's affection and desire.

The *midrash* draws attention to the gulf between Israel's despised state in the world and its elevated religious position as God's bride. In addition it recognizes God's grace in taking Israel as bride when the nation was subjugated. The second appearance

of the phrase *אַתִּי מִלְבָּנוֹן*, *With me from Lebanon*, is explained as a reference to Israel's exile from the Temple. Israel's subjugation to the nations is also the focus of this second interpretation. Israel's suffering both precedes and follows the marriage to God: initially the nation suffered under Egypt and then again after the marriage, in Babylon. The connection that is thus drawn between Israel's states of exile may be intended to draw attention to the act of divine grace in the Exodus, suggesting that just as, long ago, God redeemed Israel, so, too, can we expect that God will once again do so.

At the end of the passage excerpted here, the *midrash* turns to messianic expectations and looks forward to the day when Israel will rejoice in song. The midrashist draws on the connection between *תְּשׁוּרִי* and the verb *שָׁיר*, "sing," in affirming that Israel will *Sing unto the Lord a new song*. This passage, interpreting *Look from the top of Amana*, links each of the mountain peaks in the Songs verse to one of the three patriarchs. Their righteousness will enable Israel to sing once again in the future. They demonstrate their *אמונה*, "faith," by singing of redemption from the top of *אֶמְנָה*.

In a fitting end to this messianic *midrash* the author sees in the *lions dens* and the *mountain of leopards* references to the nations that have ruled over Israel. Each patriarchal "mountaintop" corresponds to one of the three governing "dens." Abraham's and Isaac's acts of righteousness, the *midrash* implies, explain the disappearance of the two powers which no longer exist. The messianic hope is that Jacob's merit will lead to the collapse of the third of these powers, Edom – Rome. Alternatively, the *midrash* might suggest that the merit of the three patriarchs brought Israel to its current point – out of the hands of the earthly powers that no longer exist, returned from exile, and living under the power of Rome. Only additional acts of righteousness, the *midrash* would then

imply, will end the reign of this last persecutor of Israel. The image of Israel standing on a mountaintop looking out with messianic expectation is strengthened by the play on the verb שׁוּר, "look to the future."

Song of Songs 4:9

לִבִּי אָחֳתִי כָלָה לִבִּי בָּאֶחָת מְעִינִיךְ בְּאֶחָד עֵינֶיךָ מִצִּוְרֶיךָ

You have taken my heart my sister, O bride - taken my heart with one of your eyes, with one bead of your necklace.

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### Texts

#### **B. Shabbat 88b**

R. Samuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: What is [the meaning of] that which is written *You have captured my heart, my sister, my bride; you have captured My heart with one of your eyes?* At first [you attracted me] with one of your eyes. But when you perform [deeds of the Torah, you attract me] with both of your eyes.

#### **Song of Songs Rabbah 4:21**

*Thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes*; with the blood of the Passover and the blood of the circumcision. *With one bead of thy necklace*: this refers to Moses, the most distinguished and the mightiest in thy tribes. Another explanation: *Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my bride*: Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Ye had one heart by the Red Sea and ye gave Me two hearts.' *Thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes*: when ye stood before Me at Mount Sinai and said, *All that the Lord hath said will we do, and obey* (Exodus 24:7). *With one bead of thy necklace*: this is Moses, the most distinguished and the mightiest in thy tribes. Another explanation: *Thou hast ravished my heart, o my sister, my bride*. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Ye had one heart in the wilderness and ye gave Me two hearts.' *Thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes*: at the setting up of the Tabernacle, as it says, *And on the day that the tabernacle was reared up, etc.* (Numbers 9:15).

## Analysis

The passage from B. *Shabbat* is somewhat obscure because the text does not explain to what בתחילה, “at the outset,” refers. Rashi, in his commentary to B. *Shabbat* 88b, explains *While the King was still at His banquet, my nard gave out its fragrance* (Song of Songs 1:12) as a reference to Israel’s worship of the Golden Calf. This makes sense in view of the discussion that follows this on 88b regarding Israel’s sin with the Calf and the need for atonement. On this reading, בתחילה would refer to the period of Israel’s acceptance of the Torah and its refusal to observe the *mitzvot* within the Torah. This would indicate that the Babylonian Talmud takes one of the “eyes” to refer to the acceptance of Torah and the other “eye” to refer to the observance of *mitzvot*. It thus paints a scenario in which the groom (God) and the bride (Israel) gaze at one another. The union of the couple cannot be completed until the bride captures the groom with both eyes – until Israel has accepted the revelation and performed the *mitzvot*.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:21’s explanation of *with one of your eyes* is also obscure. The text does not explain why *one of your eyes* should refer to two separate ideas – “the blood of the Passover and the blood of the circumcision.” This does not appear to be an error in transmission since the pattern is repeated throughout the passage. The repetition of the verb לִבְבָּתֶּנִּי, or the doubling of the letter ב, leads the midrashist to look for two separate “hearts.” Alternatively, the *midrash* can be seen to complete, so to speak, the verse from Songs – pairing a ‘second eye’ with the one appearing in the Song verse. This emphasis on the two ‘blood rites’ of circumcision and Passover parallels a passage in Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishma’el playing off Ezekiel’s בְּדָמֶיךָ דָּם, “by your blood



you shall live.”<sup>3</sup> These *midrashim* illustrate the importance the rabbis placed on Passover and circumcision, two commandments connecting blood and redemption.

Song of Songs Rabbah moves through Jewish history as it offers various interpretations of the phrase *Taken my heart with one of your eyes*. It begins with Passover and ends with Sinai, although the interpretation following “Another comment” links the phrase to the construction of the Tabernacle. It seems likely that this additional thought was added later to adhere to the chronology of the multiple interpretations. It also frames Jewish history between the Exodus and the construction of the Tabernacle, yet another midrashic passage elevating the importance of the Tabernacle, and so the Temple, rituals.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:21’s use of *וְאַתָּה הָיָה* from Exodus 24:7 echoes the interpretation of B. *Shabbat* 88b. Though the *midrash* is distinct and *Shabbat* 88b does not make use of Exodus 24:7, both texts distinguish between acceptance and observance of *mitzvot*. Song of Songs Rabbah 4:21 is not explicit about how Exodus 24:7 is to be understood, but the pattern of explaining “one of your eyes” in relation to two distinct ideas (such as circumcision and Passover) throughout Song of Songs Rabbah 4:21 suggests that *וְאַתָּה* and *הָיָה* are to be understood as representing distinct concepts. *Shabbat* 88a (in a passage not quoted here) understands the pair of words to refer to the separate acts of receiving revelation and observing *mitzvot*. The passage suggests that understanding revelation alone is insufficient and that the covenant requires the

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<sup>3</sup> *Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael*, *Massekta d’Pischa*, Parshah 5 & 16.

performance of the commandments. In both Shabbat 88b and Song of Songs Rabbah 4:21, then, Song 4:9 is used to emphasize the actual performance of *mitzvot*.

## Song of Songs 4:11

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נֶפֶת תִּטְפֶּנָּה שְׁפָתוֹתֶיךָ כֶּלֶה דְּבַשׁ וְחֶלֶב תַּחַת לְשׁוֹנְךָ וְרֵיחַ שְׁלֹמֹתֶיךָ כְּרֵיחַ לְבָנוֹן

*Nectar drips from your lips, bride, honey and milk under your tongue, and the scent of your garment is like the scent of Lebanon.*



### Texts

#### *Song of Songs Rabbah 4:23*

*Thy lips, O my bride, drop honey.* R. Huna and R. Halafta of Caesarea said in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: Just as a bride is adorned with twenty-four ornaments, and if one is missing she cannot pass muster, so a Rabbinical scholar should be conversant with the twenty-four books of the Scriptures, and if he is not conversant with one of them he cannot pass muster. R. Huna said in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: Just as a bride must be modest, so a Rabbinical scholar should be modest. R. Halafta said in the name of Resh Lakish: Just as the bride sits on the couch and says, 'See for yourselves that I am pure, and here is my proof that testifies for me,' so a Rabbinical student should be liable to no reproach.

R. Eleazar (b. R. Simeon) and R. Jose b. R. Hanina and the Rabbis [gave different expositions of the word *nofet*]. R. Eleazar said: If one discourses on the Torah in public and his words are not so tasteful to his hearers as the fine flour which sticks to the sieve (*nafah*), it were better that he had not spoken. R. Jose said: If one discourses on the Torah and his words are not so tasteful to his hearers as honey from the comb, it were better that he had not spoken. The Rabbis said: If one discourses on the Torah and his words are not so tasteful to his hearers as honey with milk, it were better that he had not spoken. R. Johanan and Resh Lakish also gave different expositions. R. Johanan said: If one discourses on the Torah in public and his words do not give as much pleasure to his hearers as a bride gives

pleasure to the beholders when sitting in her bridal chamber, it were better that he had not delivered them. Resh Lakish said: If one discourses on the Torah and his words do not give as much pleasure to his hearers as a bride to her husband when she enters the bridal chamber, it were better that he had not delivered them.

### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 4:24***

*Honey and milk are under thy tongue.* R. Berekiah said: No drink is more repulsive than that which has been under a person's tongue, and you say *Honey and milk are under thy tongue*! What it means, however, is: If *halachot* which are but feeble under thy tongue are like milk and honey, how much more so those of which thou hast a firm grasp! R. Levi said: Even if one only reads the Scripture with proper modulation and intonation, it may be said of him *Honey and milk are under thy tongue*.

*And the smell of thy garments is like the smell of lebanon.* It is written, And he came near, and kissed him. *And he smelled the smell of his raiment* (Genesis 27:27). R. Johanan said: There is nothing more evil-smelling than washed goatskins, and you say '*He smelled the smell of his raiment, [and blessed him]*,! The truth, however, is that when Jacob our father entered, Paradise entered with him; and so it says, *See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed* (ibid.). When the wicked Esau, however, came in to his father, Gehinnom entered with him, because *When pride cometh, then cometh shame* (Proverbs 11:2). Therefore he said to him, Who then (*efo*), as if to say, 'Who is baked (*ne'efeh*) in this oven?' and the Holy Spirit gave answer, *He that hath taken venison* (Genesis 27:33).

### **Analysis**

The assertion that a bride wears twenty-four ornaments comes from a passage in Isaiah 3:18-24 in which the various articles worn by the daughters of Jerusalem are

stripped away.<sup>4</sup> The reason for the apparently arbitrary inclusion of this idea in connection with this verse may be the appearance of *הַטָּפוֹת*, “pendant” in Isaiah 3:19 and the verb of the same root, *הִטָּף*, in Song of Songs 4:11. R. Levi’s remark that one who reads Torah “with proper modulation and intonation” has milk and honey under the tongue may be understood as encouraging of proper reading, or perhaps as an assertion that the text is properly read only when articulated in line with Jewish tradition. In this case the *midrash* could be understood in tandem with the previous passage; if Song of Songs Rabbah 4:23 claimed that a rabbi must master those texts deemed canonical by tradition, Song of Songs Rabbah 4:24 asserts that those canonical books must be chanted following the tradition. The point made by these *midrashim* is related to that made elsewhere in Song of Songs Rabbah regarding the Oral Tradition – that only an approach to texts which is within the domain of the Jewish tradition can be considered legitimate.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:23 describes several desirable characteristics of the ideal teacher. Other *midrashim* we have seen highlight the moment of revelation, when the Jewish people received the Torah at Sinai. This *midrash* draws our attention to those who investigate the meaning of that revelation. The exegetical process itself is the subject of this particular piece of exegesis. It is strange that a *midrash* would state what would appear to be so obvious: that a student of Torah must be conversant with the books of the Torah. Perhaps the passage should be understood against the background of a multi-religious society in which the number of books included in the canon was an issue of utmost importance.

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<sup>4</sup> Jewish Encyclopedia, “Amulet,” p. 546.

A rabbinic ideal emerges from the remainder of the first section of Song of Songs Rabbah 4:23. Among the *midrashim* associated with the Song this passage is unusual, though not unique in taking the character of the rabbi as its subject. Elsewhere the virtues of individual rabbis are described and idealized, but here the personality of the rabbi as a virtuous leader of the community is appended to this slight midrashic reflection on the boundaries of the canon. They must be knowledgeable, modest, and "liable to no reproach." Just as other passages laud Moses and Aaron for accepting and enacting revelation, this passage lauds the rabbis for interpreting the revelation and giving it meaning in the present.

It is noteworthy that Sinai, the construction of the Tabernacle, or other key moments in Jewish history that so often symbolize the divine-human marriage are absent here. In their place is the rabbinical encounter with the text, the exegetical moment elevated and idealized. It is not surprising that rabbis drawn to exegesis would focus on the importance of the qualities and virtues of the exegete. In the very process of exegesis the rabbis drew attention to the importance of proper understanding of canonical texts and simultaneously to their own role in revealing that understanding for the community.

Bridal imagery is used throughout *midrashim* on the Song of Songs to represent Israel in its relationship with the divine groom. The image in Song of Songs Rabbah 4:23 is obscure. The rabbinic bride adorns herself with the ornament of Torah, but is her groom God or the Jewish people? Wedding metaphors elsewhere in Song of Songs Rabbah would lead us to understand that the rabbis are beautifying themselves in anticipation of their union with God (see, for example Song of Songs Rabbah 4:1 on Song of Songs 4:1). The passage does not pursue this metaphor, yet R. Yohanan and

Reish Lakish use this imagery in the second part of 4:23 to describe the relationship between God and Israel. Here the idea is used not to characterize the relationship between the people and God but rather between the rabbinical class and the people Israel. Here the rabbis seem to have elevated exegesis to the level of Sinaitic revelation or Temple offerings, both of which are described with bridal imagery in other *midrashim*.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:24's meditation on Jacob and Esau draws on the connection between *רִיחַ שְׁלֹמֹתֶיךָ*, *the scent of your garment* and the *רִיחַ בְּגָדָיו*, the scent of the animal skin disguise worn by Jacob in Genesis 27:27. Isaac's outraged question in verse 33 upon becoming aware that he has been deceived, *מִי-אָפוֹא הוּא הָצֵד* - *צִיד*, "who was it who hunted game [and brought it to me]?" refers to Jacob, who has just come disguised as Esau with a plate of game for his father. Turning the verse on its head, the midrashist uses it as an indictment of Esau, who is known as *יָדַע צִיד*, "skillful in hunting," or "knowledgeable about hunting" (Genesis 25:27). *אָפוֹא*, "who" (Genesis 27:33) is interpreted as meaning *נֶאֱפֶה*, "baked" and suggests that Esau will be punished.

In rabbinic literature these two brothers are representative of entire nations – Jacob, of course, is Israel and Esau is Rome. Thus the blessing conferred upon Jacob by his father is understood to be a blessing for the people Israel and not for the patriarch alone. Esau's lament and bitterness toward him is used to explain the historical animosity between the Jews and their Roman persecutors. The *midrash* reminds the reader, then, of Israel's favored status and Rome's assured destruction. The play on *אָפוֹא* may be intended as an ironic inversion of Roman (Esau) execution of

Jews (Jacob) by fire – a rabbinic hope that Esau will be paid back appropriately for his cruelty.



## Song of Songs 4:13

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שְׁלַחֶיךָ פְּרָדִים רְמוּנִים עִם פְּרֵי מִגְדִּים כְּפָרִים עִם נָרְדִּים

*Your stalks are an orchard of pomegranates with the best fruits,  
henna with nard.*



### Texts

#### *Exodus Rabbah 20:2*

Another explanation of: *And it came to pass. When Pharaoh had let the people go.* It is written: Thus saith the Lord of hosts: The children of Israel and the children of Judah are oppressed together... their Redeemer is strong, the Lord of hosts is His name (Jeremiah 50:33 f.) To what can this be compared? To a man who had an orchard and to whom his friend said: 'Sell me this orchard.' He sold it to him for a hundred dinars, without knowing what it contained. When he was asked at what price he had sold it and had replied: 'For a hundred dinars,' they said to him: 'Why, it contained olives worth a hundred dinars, pomegranates worth a hundred dinars, various kinds of spices worth a hundred dinars, and all kinds of other things worth a hundred dinars each. Did you not know what you were selling and what the orchard contained-*Spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon* (Song of Songs 4:14). If the purchaser had only received the fountains therein, he would have had value, as it says: *[Thou] art a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and flowing streams from Lebanon* (ibid. 15). At this, the vendor regretted his bargain. Similarly, when Pharaoh let Israel go, they were accounted of little worth in his eyes; but his regal advisers said to him: 'What hast thou done? Why, if they had only departed with the plunder, it would have been enough [to mourn their loss], for it says: *And a mixed multitude went up also with them, etc.* (Exodus 12:38). Add to this the number of rich people among them, the many wise people and skilled craftsmen that they possess, as it says: *Thy shoots*

*are a park of pomegranates.* Consider the number of men, women, and children they include, as it says: And all that took them captives hold them fast (Jeremiah 50:33) What does it say after this? *Their Redeemer is strong, the Lord of hosts is His name* (ibid.). Then it was that Pharaoh began to wail: *Ay, Ay* (alas!). Hence *vay'hi beshalach* (there was woe when he let the people go).

***Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Massekta B'shalach, Parshah 2.***

*And the heart of Pharaoh and his servants was turned* (Exodus 14:5). They said,<sup>5</sup> "Has not much good come to us on their account?" R. Jose the Galilean, giving a parable, says,: To what can this be compared? To a man to whom there has fallen as an inheritance a *beit-kor* of land which he sold for a trifle. The buyer, however, went and opened up wells in it, and planted gardens, trees, and orchards in it. The seller, seeing this, began to choke with grief. So it happened to the Egyptians who let go without realizing what they let go. Of them it is stated in the traditional sacred writings: *Your shoots are a park of pomegranates.*

***Song of Songs Rabbah 4:27***

*Thy shoots (sh'lachayich) are a park of pomegranates.* [Read] *sh'luchayich*: Thy God will one day make thee like a *park of pomegranates* in the Messianic era. What is that? [By what means?] The well [of Miriam]. Whence did the Israelites procure wine for drink-offerings all the forty years that they spent in the wilderness? R. Johanan said: From the well. From it came most of their enjoyments; for R. Johanan said: The well used to produce for them various kinds of herbs, of vegetables, of trees. The proof of this is that when Miriam died and the well ceased to give its waters to them they said, *It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines* (Numbers 20:5).

***Song of Songs Rabbah 4:29***

Another explanation: *Thy shoots (sh'lachayich) are a park of pomegranates.* Read *sh'luchayich*. The Holy One, blessed be He, will make thee like *A garden of*

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<sup>5</sup> This *midrash* appears also in Song of Songs Rabbah 4:25

*pomegranates* in the time to come. Through what? Through Elijah, of blessed memory, as we have learnt elsewhere: 'The family of Beth Zerefah was on the other side of the Jordan, and the people of Zion admitted it by force; whereas there was another near by and the people of Zion forcibly rejected it.' For cases like this Elijah will come to declare clean or unclean, to accept or reject. R. Judah says: He will come to admit, but not to reject.' R. Simeon says: He will come to reconcile disputes. The Sages, however, say: He will come neither to accept nor to reject, but to make peace in the world, as it says, *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet... and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, etc.* (Malachi 3:23 f).

## Analysis

Exodus Rabbah 20:2 and Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael connect the phrase, *וְהִנֵּחְךָ*, "your stalks/shoots" to the verb *הִנֵּחַ*, "to send" and thus the phrase is understood "those you sent" from Egypt. Exodus Rabbah draws on Jeremiah, in which Israel's captors *וְהִנֵּחְךָ*, "refuse to release them," thus connecting the Babylonian exile to the experience of Egypt. Egypt is the lens through which the rabbis understood all phases of Jewish persecution, whether the historical narrative described in Exodus, the Babylonian exile or in their own time.

The central conceit the Exodus Rabbah and Tanhuma (Buber) passages is the same. Pharaoh agrees to send Israel out of Egypt apparently unaware of their value. The *midrash* turns on a combination of Israel's spiritual and material value. The Exodus Rabbah passage is framed by the verse in Jeremiah, *Their Redeemer is strong, the Lord of hosts is His name*, indicating that Israel's political predicament – subjection to Egypt – has a redemptive religious solution. Though our focus is on the word *וְהִנֵּחְךָ* in connection

with Song of Songs 4:13, the author of the *midrash* uses 4:15 in a kind of double entendre. Israel's potential for creating abundance may be the focus of the Pharaoh's courtiers, but its *living waters* calls to mind Israel's spiritual possession and future promise. The Egyptians do not grasp the religious dimension of Israel's departure but see the redemption only in terms of financial loss.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:27 and 29 further explore the redemptive theme of Exodus Rabbah. In 4:27 גִּזְלוּ is connected to the passive form of the verb גָּזַל, which could mean "those sent away," or "the despised." Like the Exodus Rabbah and Tanhuma (Buber) passages, the *midrash* draws on Israel's lowly and underappreciated status as a "despised" nation that will one day be redeemed and vindicated. In Israel's contemporary and historical situation the nation is considered as nothing, but in the time to come, the *midrash* promises, they will be as rich as *an orchard of pomegranates*. The passive form of גָּזַל may also refer to the "the one who is sent," so in connection with Songs 4:13 it becomes "the one sent for you." Regardless of which wordplay is used here, Israel's past and present state is contrasted with the redemption that awaits it in the future.

Interestingly, this *midrash* also draws on a water metaphor to discuss Israel's spiritual potential. Exodus Rabbah looked to Song of Songs 4:15's *living waters* but here the image used is the well of Miriam. The *midrash* plays on the juxtaposition in Numbers 20 of Miriam's death (Exodus 20:1) and the absence of water for the community (ibid. 20:2). Recognizing the difficulty imposed by the lack of sustenance, the Israelites question their departure from Egypt. As did Pharaoh's courtiers in Exodus Rabbah, they focus on the material problem of the Exodus, and the midrashist exploits

this to make a larger point about redemption. Israel's true abundance will be shown in the messianic era when they blossom like *an orchard of pomegranates*.

Song of Songs Rabbah 4:29 has an additional wordplay connecting the Songs verse to the Messiah more directly. The beginning of the *midrash* plays on the passive form of שָׁלַח, as does 4:27. But the allusion at the end of the *midrash* to Malachi 3:23, אֶנְכִּי שֹׁלֵחַ לָכֶם, אֶת אֵלִיָּה הַנָּבִיא, *I am sending to you Elijah the prophet* connects שֹׁלֵחַיךְ to the sending of Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah.

## Song of Songs 4:16 & 5:1<sup>6</sup>

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עורי צפון ובואי תימן הפיחי גני יזלו בשמיזי זבא דודי לגנו ויאכל פרי מגדיו :

*Awake, North [wind], and come South [wind], blow into my garden – let its spices flow out. Come, My love, into his garden, and eat its choice fruits.*



### Texts

#### *Numbers Rabbah 13:2*

*And he that presented his offering* (Numbers 7:12). Of [the day of the consecration of the altar] it says, *Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south wind,* etc. *Awake, O north wind* alludes to the burnt-offering which was slaughtered in the north [side of the altar]. *And come, thou south wind* alludes to the peace-offerings, which were slaughtered in the south. *Blow upon my garden* (ibid.) alludes to the Tent of Meeting. *That the spices thereof may flow out* (ibid.) alludes to the sweet incense. *Let my beloved come into his garden* (ibid.) is an invitation to the *Shechinah*. *And eat his precious fruit* (ibid.) refers to the sacrifices. *I am come into my garden, my sister, my bride* (ibid. 5:1) alludes to the eighth day of consecration. *I have gathered my myrrh with my spice* (ibid.); that is the frankincense of the incense and that of the meal-offering. *I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey* (ibid.) alludes to the limbs of the burnt-offering and the portions of the more holy sacrifices burnt upon the altar. *I have drunk my wine with my milk* (ibid.) alludes to the drink-offerings and the portions of the less holy sacrifices burnt on the altar. *Eat, O friends* (ibid.) alludes to Moses and Aaron. *Drink, Yea, drink abundantly, O beloved* (ibid.) alludes to the community of Israel.

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<sup>6</sup> These verses are presented together because the *midrashim* weave them together.

R. Eleazar and R. Jose b. R. Hanina held differing opinions. R. Eleazar said that the Noahides offered peace-offerings, while R. Jose son of R. Hanina said that the Noahides offered burnt-offerings alone....The following exposition supports the view of R. Jose b. Hanina: *Awake, O north wind* is an allusion to the burnt-offering which is slaughtered in the north. What is the force of *awake*? It applies to a thing that had been asleep and was then aroused. *And come, thou south wind* alludes to the peace-offerings which were slaughtered in the south. What is the force of *And come*? It points to an innovation...

How does R. Eleazar apply the verse cited by R. Jose b. Hanina, *Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south wind*? He expounds it as referring to the exiles. *Awake, O north wind*: When the exiles who are deposited in the north awake, they will come and camp in the south. When Gog who abides in the north will awaken he will come and fall in the south; as it says, *And will turn thee about, and lead thee on, and will cause thee to come from the uttermost parts of the north, etc.* (Ezekiel.39:2). When the King Messiah who abides in the north will awaken he will come and build the Temple which is situated in the south. This accords with the text, *I have roused up one from the north, and he is come, etc.* (Isaiah 41:25).

***Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 37:1***

The Holy One will...say to the righteous: O righteous of the world, Ephraim, My true Messiah, has not yet been repaid for half his anguish. I have one more measure of reward which I will give him, one which no eye in the world has seen as is said, *Neither has the eye seen a God beside You, who works for him that waits for Him* (Isaiah 64:3). Then the Holy One, blessed be He, will summon the north wind and the south wind – summon them both and say to them: Come, sweep and sprinkle all kinds of spices from the Garden of Eden before Ephraim, my true Messiah, as is said, *Awake O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon My garden that the spices thereof may flow out. Let me beloved come into his garden and eat his pleasant fruits.*

## Analysis

In the first section from Numbers Rabbah, Song 4:16 and 5:1 are seen to allude to every dimension of the Tabernacle: the burnt offering, the peace offering, the sacrifices themselves, the incense, those who performed the offerings, Moses and Aaron, as well as the entire community of Israel. Placed within the Song of Songs' discussion amongst two lovers, this interpretation reveals the Temple to be their place of union.

The extended discussion of the Noahides (which has been abbreviated here) appears to address those Israelites who lived before Sinai. It also calls to mind the other Noahides – that is non-Jews who are understood to be bound by the seven Noahide laws. The *midrash* connects עֹרֵי in 4:16 to the fact that before their governance by the covenantal laws revealed at Sinai, offerings could be made spontaneously. Following the construction of the Temple new rules were put in place governing the sacrifices – this is the “innovation” referred to at the end of the section. It may be included simply because the close connection between the Song and the rituals of the Temple – expressed exegetically in the first section and in many other *midrashim* in this thesis – inclined the author to include a technical discussion in the *midrash*. More likely, the inclusion of this obscure debate about the status of peace-offerings reflects the ongoing concern with the boundaries between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities in the period of the *midrashist*.

The last part of the Numbers Rabbah passage and the Pesikta Rabbati passage use *north [wind]* and *south [wind]* in Songs 4:13 to discuss the future ingathering of exiles from these regions. Numbers Rabbah sees in Song 4:13's *north [wind]* and *south [wind]* an allusion to the ingathering of the exiles. The verse is therefore understood to be



messianic, heralding the coming of the "King Messiah" that the *midrashist* suggests is described in Isaiah (because of the connection between Isaiah's "rise up" and Song 4:13's עֲרִי). Thus the preceding discussion of the Noahides and the Temple is not to be understood as looking back to the earliest sacrificial practice and the construction of the Temple but rather forward to the reinstitution of those practices.

In Pesikta Rabbati the Garden of Eden is used as a signal of the messianic era. The verse from Isaiah (which is preceded in Isaiah 64:1-2 by a plea for God's return) casts an eye to the future when God will redeem Israel. The combination of the messianic future of the Isaiah verse with the garden imagery in the Songs verse paints a portrait of a return to Edenic perfection. The winds that blow from the north and south might represent the returning exiles, the redemptive forces bringing them back to Israel, or the unification of the northern and southern kingdoms. The suggestive *blow upon My garden that the spices thereof may flow out. Let me beloved come into his garden and eat his pleasant fruits* from the Songs verse here appears as a prediction that God and human beings will mingle together in the coming together of the winds in the time to come.

Chapter Five:  
*Midrashim on Book Five of the  
Song of Songs*

## Song of Songs 5:1<sup>1</sup>

בְּאֵתִי לָגַנִּי אַחֲתִי כָּלָה אֶרִיתִי מִזֵּי עֵם בְּשִׁמִּי אֶכְלֹתִי יַעְרִי עִם דְּבַשִּׁי שְׁתִּיתִי  
יֵינִי עִם חֲלָבִי אֶכְלוּ רָעִים שְׁתוּ וְשָׁכְרוּ דֹּדִים

*I have come into my garden, my sister, O bride; I have mixed my myrrh with my spices, eaten my honeycomb with my honey, drunk my wine with my milk – eat, friends; drink and be drunk, lovers.*



### Texts

#### *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 1:1*

R. Azariah, citing R. Judah bar R. Simon, told the parable of a king who became so angry at his wife that he deposed her and cast her out of his palace. After a time when he was willing to bring her back and restore her to her place, she said: Let him first renew for my sake his former practice [of accepting from my hand whatever I offered him], then let him bring me back and restore me to my place. Thus in the past [when the Holy One had withdrawn far from men into heaven], yet from above He would still accept their offerings, as it is said of Noah's offering [*from above*] *the Lord smelled the sweet odor* (Genesis 8:21). Now, however, He will renew His ancient practice of accepting their offerings while close to them here on the earth below: *I am come [below] into my garden, My sister, My bride...*

[With regard to God's presence on earth at the beginning go time] R. Tanhum, the son-in-law of R. Eleazar ben Abina, citing R. Simeon ben Yosne, noted that Song does not say, "I am come into a garden" but *I am come into My garden*. Read *ginuni*, "My bride's bower," My and man's dwelling place where at the beginning

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<sup>1</sup> The use of Song of Songs 5:1 in Numbers Rabbah 13:2 is discussed above in Chapter Four, on Song of Songs 4:15.

of time the Divine Root was implanted – yes, originally the root of the Presence was fixed in the regions of the earth below...

At the beginning of time...the root of the Presence was fixed in the regions of the earth below. After Adam sinned, the Presence withdrew to the first heaven. The generation of Enosh arose: they sinned; the Presence withdrew from the first heaven to the second<sup>2</sup>....

Against these wicked men, seven righteous men arose and brought it about that the Presence came back to the earth. Our father Abraham arose: the merit he earned brought it about that the Presence came back from the seventh heaven to the sixth...

Moses arose: the merit he earned brought it about that the Presence came back to earth. Hence [the reference to Moses] in the verse *It was on Israel's bridal day that Moses brought to a conclusion.... (Numbers 7:1)*.

## Analysis

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana understands בָּאתִי לְגַנִּי, "*I have come into my garden,*" to mean "*I have come back into my garden*" as the parable illustrates. The bridal analogy plays off the appearance of a *dagesh* in the word גַּנִּי and the subsequent doubling of the letter ג. This allows the word גַּן, or "garden" to be read גַּנּוֹן, or "bridal canopy." Israel (the bride) looks back to the time before God's departure from Earth when she could give gifts (offerings) to God in the presence of the Divine. The analogy is somewhat confusing because the bride's being "kicked out of the palace" is explained in reference to God's departure and not, as we would expect from the parable, the bride's. Still, the basic meaning is clear: God departed from earth in the past and then returned.

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<sup>2</sup> I have excerpted only enough of the seven stages of God's departure and the seven stages of God's return to give a sense of the structure of the *midrash*.

The reason for the king's rejection of his bride is not addressed in the parable, but the remainder of the *midrash* explains that successive human transgressions forced God to leave. God's return to earth is complete with Moses' establishment of the Tabernacle. כלה, *Bride*, in the Song of Songs is connected to the verb כלות, "to complete" in the verse from Numbers 7:1 that is being expounded. Thus Numbers 7:1 וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם בְּלוּת מִשָּׁח לְהִקְיָם is interpreted as "On the wedding day [of God and Israel] Moses completed erecting the Tabernacle." The construction of the Tabernacle, then, not only enables Israel and God to be joined once again, but allows God – portrayed in the *midrash* as being in a kind of exile – to return home.<sup>3</sup>

The *midrash* is both a history of the marriage of God and Israel and also an explanation of their current separation. With the Temple destroyed, God must again have withdrawn from his bride. Just as the *midrash* posits that human sin drove away the divine presence initially, so too must it be understood to mean that human sin drove away the divine presence most recently (at the destruction of the Temple). This recognition of Israel's responsibility in driving God away is likely a rabbinic response to Christian charges that Jewish sin had led God to abandon the Jews permanently. The author views the separation from God as temporary and hints that Israel will be restored in the future. Just as acts of righteousness and the construction of the Tabernacle allowed God and Israel to be reunited in the past, so too will acts of righteousness and the reconstruction of the Temple bring them together in the future.

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<sup>3</sup> In some parallel versions of this *midrash*, the Golden Calf is included among the sins and the Tabernacle is seen as an antidote to it. The Tabernacle thus corresponds to a moment in Israelite history that separated God and Israel and allows that separation to be closed.

## Song of Songs 5:2

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אָני יִשְׁנָה וְלִבִּי עָר קוֹל דּוֹדִי דּוֹפֵק פֶּתַחִי לִי אֲחֹתִי רַעֲיָתִי יוֹנְתִי תַמָּתִי שְׂרָאֲשִׁי  
נִמְלֵא טָל קִנְאוֹתַי רְסִיסֵי לַיְלָה

*I am sleeping but my heart is awake, the voice of my beloved  
knocks – open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my pure one, for  
my head is drenched with dew, my locks with the drops of night.*



### Texts

#### ***Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, Piska 5:6***

The congregation of Israel spoke up to the Holy One: Master of worlds, *I sleep* – in lack of the Temple I am numb [as though asleep]; *Nevertheless my heart waketh* in houses of prayer and in houses of study. *I sleep* – in lack of Temple sacrifices; *Nevertheless my heart waketh* through acts of mercy and charity. *I sleep* – in lack of God's commandments; *Nevertheless my heart waketh* – to obey them. *I sleep* in lack of redemption; *nevertheless the heart [of the Holy One] waketh* to redeem me....

*Hark! My beloved knocketh:* That is, Moses knocks, declaring, 'Thus saith the LORD: About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt (Exodus 11:4). By *Open to me*, according to R. Asi, the Holy One was saying: Make an opening for Me in you, an opening as narrow as the eye of a needle, and I shall make the opening so wide that camps full of soldiers and siege engines could enter it. By *My sister* God was saying: Israel, My own, My kin – you who bound yourselves irrevocably to Me in Egypt by two covenants of blood, the blood of Passover and the blood of circumcision. By *My love* He was referring to Israel at the Red Sea – at the Red Sea where Israel showed their love of Him, saying "The Lord shall reign for ever and ever" (Exodus 15:18). By *My dove* He was referring to Israel at

Marah<sup>4</sup> where Israel through receiving commandments came to have the iridescence of a docile dove. By *My undefiled* He was referring to Israel at Sinai – at Sinai where they became pure in My sight, when they said to me 'All that the LORD hath spoken will we do, and obey' (Exodus 24:7).

[After the revelation at Sinai, Israel said]: *Yea my head is filled with dew* that is [morning's] heavenly dew, the written Torah, of whose revelation to Israel] scripture says, *The heavens dropped [dew upon me]* (Judges 5:4). The remainder of the verse in Song of Songs speaks of *My locks with the drops of the night*, [the heavenly drops of Oral Law, that is, of whose revelation to Israel], Scripture says, *Yea, [in the night] the clouds dropped water* (Judges 5:4).

At what point in Scripture [does the sequence of themes, commencing with Israel's kinship with God (*My sister*) and ending with the revelation at Sinai (*My head is filled with dew*) begin]? With the words *This month- this month shall be to unto you the beginning of months* (Exodus 12:2).

## Analysis

This *midrash* weaves several disparate themes together in its interpretation of Song of Songs 5:2. The more prominent will be treated here. The first section interprets *I am sleeping but my heart is awake* in several paired statements as a reference to Israel's continual desire for salvation and its fidelity to God in spite of God's absence. Various contemporary practices are correlated to the Temple so that even in the period of the Temple's destruction the rabbis can portray Israel as continuing to fulfill the commandments related to it. Israel is "numb" with disappointment at the Temples

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<sup>4</sup> Song of Songs Rabbah 5:3 adds here "at Marah, where they received commandments and became distinguished by all manner of precepts and virtues and good deeds like a dove which is distinguished from other birds, as it is written, *There He made for them a statute and an ordinance* (Exodus 15:25)." This variation emphasizes the unique role of religious observances that distinguish Israel from its neighbors in bringing Israel close to God.

destruction and, fulfilling the obligations of study, prayer, and charity, looks forward to redemption (and the subsequent reconstruction of the Temple).

The section that follows interprets the Song verse as a description of the liberation from Egypt. *The voice of beloved knocks* is imagined to be God's declaration to Israel that He will move through Egypt to slay the first-born.<sup>5</sup> It is not clear how exactly the Song verse is being used here, but it may be that God's declaration that God will kill the Egyptians is the beckoning call of the lover initiating the romantic dialogue that will lead to the lovers' union – the coming together of God and Israel in Israel's redemption.

The "camps full of soldiers and siege engines" that are promised if Israel will only *Open to me* suggests that Israel's acceptance of God will be rewarded with military might in order to defeat the Egyptians. The midrashist interjects episodes from Israel's story of redemption to reframe the series of monikers (*my sister, my love, my dove, my pure one*) as an increasingly close bond between Israel and God. The relationship began with God's slaying of the first born, and progressed as Israel performed circumcision and Passover, declared God's eternity at the Sea, accepted a few commandments at Marah, and then the entire Covenant at Sinai. With each new act of commitment God acknowledges Israel's love (or draws Israel closer) with intimate names until they become *pure* with the commitment to "do and obey." The image also suggests that Israel's commitment will be repaid disproportionately – for just a bit of observance, Israel will be richly rewarded. The acceptance of the covenant and the promise to perform the *mitzvot* is seen as the culmination of the relationship with God. While this verse from

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<sup>5</sup> Knocking might instead refer to the verb *נָחַם*, "strike" or "hit," which describes God's slaying of the first-born in Exodus 12:29.



Exodus appears in many of the *midrashim* related to the Song, this *midrash* is unusual in presenting this moment as one in which Israel becomes pure - תְּמִיתִי, *My pure one*. The *midrash* does not dwell on the idea so it is not clear whether תְּמִיתִי is to be understood in a general way as a testament to Israel's goodness, or whether it suggests a state of ritual purity. Perhaps the author suggests that after Israel's acceptance of the *mitzvot*, but before any defiling sins, the people were indeed in a state of ritual purity. The *midrash* then explores in greater detail this moment of revelation, finding in the Song's verse reference to both the Written and Oral Law.

The passage concludes with Exodus 12:2, which is seen as the verse initiating the kinship between God and Israel. This verse is significant because it commences the Passover, clearly one of the central themes of this *midrash*. Yet the *midrash* already addressed the Passover above, in explaining the moment at which Israel became *My sister* to God. Indeed, that is the plain meaning of the question asked by the *midrash*, "At what point in Scripture [does the sequence of themes, commencing with Israel's kinship with God (*My sister*) and ending with the revelation at Sinai (*My head is filled with dew*) begin]?" The repetition of the idea here can only be explained by the fact that Exodus 12:2 is the first commandment given to all Israel. Israel's acceptance of this observance, then, signals its willingness to enter into a relationship with God based on command and observance and indicates its readiness to accept the Torah. The *dew* in Song of Songs 5:2 represents Torah, which is often symbolized by water imagery. In claiming that the human-divine relationship was initiated by this moment, and then in asserting that it came to fruition in Israel's acceptance of the entire covenant (when Israel becomes *My dove* at

Sinai), the *midrash* suggests that the relationship with God depends entirely upon Israel's continued performance of *mitzvot*.

# Song of Songs 5:11

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רִאשׁוֹ כֶּתֶם פִּז קִנְצוֹתָיו תִּלְתָּלִים שְׁחָרוֹת כְּעוֹרֵב :

*His head is finest gold, his locks curled, black like a raven.*



## Texts

### **Leviticus Rabbah 19:2**

R. Ze'era said: '[His locks (*kevutzah*) are in curls' (*taltalim*) means]: Even those things in the Torah which appear [useless], for instance the thin strokes [of letters] (*kotzin*), are *talt'lei taltalim*, [i.e. mounds upon mounds], meaning they have it in their power to bring about the destruction of the world and make it into a mound (*tel*), as it is said, And it shall be a heap (*tel*) forever; it shall not be built again (Deuteronomy 13:17).

It is written, *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One- echad* (Deuteronomy 6: 4); if you make [the letter] *dalet* into [the letter] *reish* you cause the destruction of the whole of the Universe. It is written, *For thou shalt bow down to no other god* (Exodus 34:14). If you change the *reish* into a *dalet*, you bring as a result destruction upon the world. It is written, *And ye shall not profane (tahal'lu) My holy name* (Leviticus 23:32); if you make the letter *chet* into the letter *hey* you bring as a result destruction upon the world.

It is written, *Let everything that hath breath praise (tehallel) the Lord*, Hallelujah (Psalm 150:6). If you make the letter *hey* into the letter *chet* you bring as a result destruction upon the world. It is written, *They have acted deceptively against the Lord* (Jeremiah 5:12). If you make the letter *beit* into a *kaf* you bring as a result destruction upon the world. It is written, *They have dealt treacherously against the Lord* (Hosea 5:7). If you make the letter *bet* into a *kaf*, you bring, as a result, destruction upon the world. It is written, *There is none holy as the Lord* (I

Samuel 2:2). If you make the letter *kaf* into a *bet*, you bring as a result destruction upon the world. It is written, *There is none beside Thee - ein biltechah* (ibid.). R. Abba b. Kahana said: This means, Everything becomes worn out but Thou dost not become worn out, for *ein biltechah* [should be understood as if read] *ein [l'] ballotechah*, 'there is none to outlive Thee.'

## Analysis

This passage describes how even the slightest change in interpretation can utterly transform meaning. In taking the process of exegesis itself as the subject of the *midrash*, it is similar to just a few other *midrashim* presented in this thesis. It is exegesis celebrating the fine art of exegesis and drawing attention to its import. Reading Songs' קְנֻצוֹתַי as "strokes of the scribe's pen" and תִּלְתָּלִים as "mounds upon mounds" (of traditions) the *midrash* reads the verse "his marks in the Torah [give] mounds upon mounds of meaning." This story parallels and likely plays off of B. *Menachot* 29b. There, God tells Moses that in the future Akiva will draw out from קוֹץ וְקוֹץ, *each and every mark*, תִּלְכִּין תִּלְכִּין שֶׁל הַלְכוֹת, *heaps and heaps of halachot*. The central point of this Talmudic *midrash* is that the revelation received by Moses at Sinai was not complete but would grow through the generations. With passages such as this one the rabbis highlighted their own vital role – for only they could prevent the world from being destroyed by improper interpretation. As guardians of the tradition in this way they were mediators between God and Israel, taking over the role once played by Moses. These passages from Leviticus Rabbah and B. *Menachot* both point to the significance of the Oral Tradition in rabbinic culture. The Written Torah of Moses was only part of the foundation of Jewish life – the one shared by the Jews' Christian neighbors. The

emphasis in these *midrashim* is on the other part of the foundation exclusive to the Jewish people, the Oral Tradition.

Yet the passage is not simply a playful argument for the rabbis' indispensability. Each of the verses used to demonstrate how a slight error in reading can lead to heresy is itself a warning against heresy and an affirmation of essential rabbinic belief. The verses that are cited address: the unity of God; the prohibition against worshipping other gods; the prohibition against profaning God; the imperative to praise God; the Jewish people's past betrayal of God; and God's uniqueness and the rejection of other divinities. It seems unlikely that these verses, which together represent a statement of essential Jewish belief, were brought together incidentally. It is more likely that the author of the *midrash*, in talking about the dangers of misinterpreting the holy texts, sought to warn against competing claims to religious truth or belief and to reassert the principles of the tradition.

## Song of Songs 5:13

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לחיו כצרוגת הבשם מגדלות מרקחים שפתותיו שושנים נטפות מור עבר

*His cheeks are like beds of spice, towers from afar; his lips are lilies, dripping myrrh passing over [them].*



### Texts

#### ***B. Pesachim 117a***

Is it so [that joviality is an appropriate frame of mind for studying Torah]? But Rav Gidal has said in the name of Rav – any Torah scholar who sits before his teacher and his lips do not drip with bitter dread [is destined to] be singed. For it is stated *his lips are like roses, dripping flowing myrrh*. Do not read *shoshanim* [roses] rather [read it as though it were written] *sheshonim* [that are studying]. Do not read *mor oveir* [dripping flowing myrrh] Rather *mar avar* [passing bitterness].

#### ***Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 20:1***

The Holy Spirit spoke through Solomon, king of Israel, saying: His tablets of ten lines resemble rows in a terrace garden of spices; they have as many subtle points and matters as a garden has fragrances; the lips of the Sages who occupy themselves with Torah disseminate subtle interpretations on every aspect thereof, and the words of their mouths are as choice myrrh.<sup>6</sup>

#### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 5:18***

*His cheeks are as a bed of spices.* R. Jannai said: In my [early] days there were two companies of us, and we used to go out and discuss the Torah in the street, and one did not take the same view as the other. *As banks (migdaloth) of sweet herbs.* R. Tanhuma said: Just as the spice-maker's chest (*migdalot*) is full of all

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<sup>6</sup> This is the Targum Yonatan translation of the verse.

manner of spices, so a scholar should be full of Scripture, *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, *halachot* and *haggadot* (Priesthood and Levites from Jacob). *His lips are as lilies*: this is a scholar who is fluent in his *Mishnah*. Dropping with flowing myrrh (*mor oveir*): this is a scholar who is not fluent in his *Mishnah* so that his lips drop myrrh; all the same he revises (*oveir*) and repeats what he has learnt and masters it.

## Analysis

Song of Songs 5:13's spices and herbs and in particular the myrrh are each words that could be easily tied to the sacrifices. In many *midrashim*, Song verses that lend themselves so easily to sacrificial imagery are interpreted in connection with the Temple (See for example, Tanhuma (Buber) Genesis 4.4, *Vayeira*, on Song of Songs 4:6, which interprets myrrh as a reference to the incense offering; or Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, *Piska* 1:2 on Song of Songs 3:9, which understands *palanquin* as a symbol of the Tabernacle). Yet none of the *midrashim* associated with this verse connect it to the sacrifices. Instead they each read in the verse a reference to specialized rabbinic knowledge and exegesis. B. *Pesachim* 117a sees in the Song verse a warning against a lack of awe toward teachers of Torah – one must feel a sense of bitter dread in the face of one's teacher. Both Pesikta Rabbati and Song of Songs Rabbah 5:18 use the verse to celebrate the entirety of the Jewish canon and the breadth of knowledge of the rabbinic minds who master it. Both imagine the Song to be describing a rabbinic scholar, whose beauty derives from his knowledge.

Such passages are noteworthy because they are rabbinic self-reflections in which the author reads rabbinic culture back into ancient Jewish texts. The *midrash* paints a picture of the rabbinic ideal of knowledge and culture. The passages focus on the

specialized knowledge of the rabbinic world – those texts and traditions that could be well-studied only by a member of the rabbinic class. The interpretive creativity of *Pesikta Rabatti*, *Piska* 20 and the Mishnaic fluency of *Song of Songs Rabbah* 5:18 both speak to the high value placed on knowledge that requires particular training. Reading these beautifying practices back into the Song verse, we are to understand that the rabbis beautify themselves – perhaps for union with God – by studying and transmitting Jewish sacred wisdom.



## Song of Songs 5:16

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חכו ממתקים וכלו מחמדים זה דודי וזה רעי בנות ירושלים

*His mouth is sweet, and all of him endearing – this is my beloved, my love, daughters of Jerusalem.*



### Texts

#### **Tanhuma (Buber) Genesis 7.22, Vayeitzei**

It is written *his palate is most sweet*. R. Tanhuma b R. Jose said: Come and see what the Holy One is saying to Israel (in Leviticus 19:28): *You shall not make a gash in your flesh for the dead*. - Why? - *I am the Lord*. (ibid.) He is sure to pay you a reward. Is there a *palate* sweeter than this! Someone may say to his friend: If you deform yourself, I will give you a reward: but the Holy One has said : “If you do not degrade yourselves...I will give you a reward.” Ergo, *His palate is most sweet*.

Another interpretation: *His palate is most sweet*. R Abbahu said: See what is written (in Leviticus 20:26): So I have set you apart from the peoples. See the attributes of the Holy One. If it had been written, “So I have set the peoples apart from you” there would have been no hope for a star-worshipping gentile, and no proselyte would have become a Jew. How so? [Consider the case of] someone who has figs. If he picks out the bad from the good, in the end he will not return to the bad ones; but, if he picks out the good ones, if he wants to pick out some of the bad, he picks them out. Therefore the Holy One has said *So I have set you apart from the peoples*. He has given a hint to those gentiles who wish to become Jews. Is there a *palate* more beautiful than this? Ergo *His palate is most sweet*.

### *Song of Songs Rabbah 6:1*<sup>7</sup>

R. Samuel b. Nahman said: On three occasions God remonstrated with Israel and the other nations rejoiced greatly, but in the end they were covered with shame. When the prophet said to them, *Come now, and let us reason together*, saith the Lord (Isaiah 1:18), the nations rejoiced saying, 'How can they argue with their Creator? Who can argue with his Creator? Now He will destroy them from the world.' But when God saw the nations rejoicing, He gave it a good turn for them, as it says, *Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool* (ibid.). The nations were discomfited and said, 'Is this an answer, or is this a rebuke? He has only come to amuse Himself with His sons.' When God said, *Hear, O ye mountains, the Lord's controversy, and ye enduring rocks, the foundations of the earth... and He will plead with Israel* (Micah 6:2), the nations rejoiced saying, 'How can these hold a plea with their Creator? Who can argue with his Creator? Now He will destroy them from the world.' When the Holy One, blessed be He, saw them rejoicing, He gave it a good turn for them, as it says, *O My people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against Me... O My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab devised, etc.* (ibid. 3 ff). The nations were discomfited and said: 'What is the meaning of this? He has only come to amuse Himself with His sons.' When the prophet said, *The Lord hath also a controversy with Judah, and will punish Jacob, etc.* (Hosea 12:3), the nations rejoiced saying, 'How can they stand before their Creator? Who can argue with his Creator? Now He will destroy them from the world.' When God saw the rejoicing of the nations, He gave it a good turn for them, as it says, *In the womb he took his brother by the heel, etc.* (ibid. 4).

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<sup>7</sup> This passage appears in Chapter Six of Song of Songs Rabbah. In most cases, the chapter numbers of Song of Songs Rabbah correspond to the book of the Song with which they deal. This passage does not refer to any verse in the Song, but it is placed between two other passages dealing with 5:16.

## Analysis

In Tanhuma, the Song phrase *פִּי מִתְקָהּ*, *His mouth is sweet*, is imagined to be God's speech, the various utterances or commands that assure goodness and sweet reward to people. In the first part of the Tanhuma excerpt, God's speech, or that which comes from God's *palate* or *mouth* (פִּי) – are said to be sweet (מִתְקָהּ) because they reward human beings for acts that are in their self-interest. Many *midrashim* encourage observance of *mitzvot* by arguing that the high cost of their observance (because of persecution) is richly rewarded. Tanhuma suggests that the observance is beneficial *and* is richly rewarded. The second part of the Tanhuma passage is unusual in imagining a verse in Torah directed to a gentile audience. God has "given a hint" to non-Jews that their conversion will be welcome. The *midrash* stands Jewish particularism on its head, suggesting that it is precisely because the Jews were "set apart" that other nations will be likely to seek out God.

Song of Songs Rabbah 6:1 is not connected to any verse of the Song of Songs. It addresses, however, Israel's relationship with the nations, a theme that is prominent elsewhere in Song of Songs Rabbah. Three prophetic verses in the passage encourage the nations, who wish to see Israel's downfall. Each begins with a divine rebuke of Israel that elicits the nations' hope; each concludes with words of comfort to Israel.

The nations are privy to the Torah verses, yet their superficial knowledge leads them to misconstrue their meaning. This dynamic in which Israel's holy texts are used against them by those who misinterpret the texts may be a midrashic reflection on the emerging Christian Church, or perhaps the Samaritan community.

Israel's sin and God's forgiveness are the major themes of this *midrash*. It is interesting that the claims of the nations are not rejected outright, or that the nations do not make false accusations against Israel. Each verse is indeed an indictment of Israel – this much the nations have right – and points to divine disappointment with Israel's sin. Through the eyes of the nation the midrashic author draws attention to repentance and divine mercy. In each case, the reader is reminded first of a serious breach by Israel and then of God's desire for Israel's repentance. Each of Israel's failures is a chance to demonstrate God's great patience and love for Israel. By focusing on these passages and then presenting them in dramatic form with God responding to the nations' taunts, the *midrash* presents Israel's continual sin not as a threat to the covenant, but as evidence of its strength.

At the end of the *midrash* the two central themes – Israel's relationship with God and Israel's relationship with the nations – come together in an ironic twist. The nations' glee at the claim of Hosea 12:3 that God *will punish Jacob* is met with the reference to Jacob grasping Esau's heel. Esau is used in midrashic literature as a symbol of Israel's enemies and his appearance here draws attention to the struggle between Israel and its persecutors. Israel will "grasp the heel" of the nations by pulling them down. Esau was the stronger, but Jacob's righteousness (in the rabbinic understanding of the story) earned him his father's blessing. So too, the *midrash* suggests, will Israel's righteousness allow it to overcome the strength of its enemies with divine blessing.

Chapter Six:  
*Midrashim on Book Six of the  
Song of Songs*

## Song of Songs 6:4

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יפה את רעיתי בתרצה נאה פירושלים אימה פנדגלות

*You are beautiful, my lover, like Tirzah, lovely like Jerusalem,  
inspiring as bannered hosts*



### Texts

#### ***Song of Songs Rabbah 6:14***

*Thou art beautiful, o my beloved, as Tirtzah.* R. Judah b. Simon explained the verse as referring to the sacrifices. *Thou art beautiful, o my beloved, as Tirtzah:* these are the sacrifices, since through the sacrifices you become acceptable (*mit'ratzim*) to God, as it says, *It shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him* (Leviticus 1:4). *Comely as Jerusalem:* this refers to the holy things [sacrifices] in Jerusalem, as it says, *As the flock for sacrifice, as the flock of Jerusalem* (Ezekiel 36:38)...<sup>1</sup>

#### ***Sifrei Devarim, Piska 36***

Precious are Israel for Scripture has surrounded them with commandments: phylacteries on their heads, phylacteries on their arms, mezuzahs on their doors, ritual fringes on their garments. Concerning them David said *Seven times a day do I Praise Thee because of Thy righteous ordinances* (Psalm 119:164). When he went into the bathhouse and saw himself naked, he said, "Woe is me, I am naked of commandments." But then he saw his mark of circumcision and began to praise it, saying *For the Leader: on the eighth, a psalm of David* (Psalm 12:1). A parable: A king of flesh and blood said to his wife, Deck yourself out with all your jewelry, so that you would look desirable to me." Thus also the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, "My children, be marked by the commandments, so

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<sup>1</sup> This *midrash* is also found in Tanhuma (Buber) Numbers 13, *Bemidbar* and Numbers Rabbah 3:5

that you would look desirable to Me.” Hence scripture says, *Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirtzah* - you are beautiful when you seem desirable to me.

## Analysis

These *midrashim* work off of the same wordplay – the connection of תִּרְצָה with the passive form of the verb רָצָה, “to be favorable or desirable.” The first highlights the importance of the Temple and sacrifices. The sacrifice that is found to be נִרְצָה is an atonement offering. Rather than the emphasis on Israel’s fealty to God in observing the commandments, or Israel’s willingness to suffer for observance of *mitzvot* that we find elsewhere, this Song of Songs Rabbah passage draws attention instead to the beautifying effects the observance has upon Israel. Through Israel’s atonement offerings and God’s accepting the offering, Israel becomes beautiful to her *lover*. The reference to Jerusalem in the Ezekiel verse is not merely incidental. יְרוּשָׁלַם in the Songs verse leads the midrashist to tie in the offerings of Leviticus (at the Tabernacle) to those in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Song verse then draws together the atonement offerings of Leviticus to those of the Temple, destroyed in the period of the midrashic author, but perhaps to be rebuilt.

Between the lines of the passage, of course, is the notion that Israel’s sin led to the destruction of the Temple and that only Israel’s atonement will render the people “favorable” enough to allow its reconstruction. The Ezekiel passage underscores this idea by looking forward to Israel’s forgiveness in verse 33:

בַּיּוֹם טָהַרְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם וְהוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת-הָעֵרִים וְנָבְנוּ הַחֲרָבוֹת

*On the day I cleanse you of all your sins I will cause the cities to be inhabited and the destroyed places to be rebuilt.*

The Ezekiel verse quoted in the passage continues, "like the holy (sacrificial) flocks, like the flocks of Jerusalem in their appointed season, so will be the destroyed cities filled with the flocks of people and they will know that I am God." Jerusalem's reconstruction and the rebuilding of the Temple are not the focus of this Ezekiel verse, but the author makes it the central concern of the *midrash*, placing the verse alongside this discussion of Tabernacle, atonement, and Jerusalem.

Sifrei Devarim also uses תְּרַצָּה to express the idea that Israel can become acceptable to God. Here, however, the focus is not on the offerings of atonement but rather on the beautifying effects of Jewish observance. The *mitzvot* are not merely commandments to be followed, but beautiful adornments that make Israel more attractive to God. This idea plays off of the lover's dialogue throughout the Song of Songs and the suggestiveness of the verse at hand. Psalm 12:1's prelude, לְמִנְצָה עַל-הַשְּׂמִינִית is understood as *For God on the eighth [day after birth, on which circumcision is performed]*. Circumcision is placed alongside other signs of Israel's commitment to God, other adornments with which a bride beautifies herself. Even in the absence of these other outward signs such as phylacteries and *tzitzit*, then, the mark of circumcision is a permanent adornment on the body.



## Song of Songs 6:5

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הַסִּבִּי עֵינֶיךָ מִנִּגְדִּי שֶׁהֵם הִרְהִיבֵנִי שְׁעָרְךָ כְּעֹדֶר הָעֲזִים שֶׁנָּלְשׁוּ מִן הַגִּלְעָד

*Turn your eyes away from me, for they unsettle me. Your hair is like a flock of goats streaming down from Gilead.*



### Texts

#### *Song of Songs Rabbah 6:16*

*Turn away thine eyes.* R. Azariah in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon said: [God here is] like a king who was angry with his queen and expelled her from his palace. What did she do? She went and pressed her face against a pillar outside the palace. When the king passed by, he said: 'Remove her from my sight, because I cannot bear to see her [thus]. So when the Beth Din proclaim a fast and a few individuals fast, God says, 'I cannot bear it, *For they have overcome me*; they it was who caused Me to stretch forth My hand against My world.' When the Beth Din proclaim a fast and the children fast, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, 'I cannot bear it, *For they have overcome me*; they declared Me King over them and said, *The Lord shall reign for ever and ever*, (Exodus 15:18). When a fast is proclaimed and the old men fast, God says, 'I cannot bear it, *For they have overcome me (hir'hivuni)*; they accepted My kingship at Sinai and said, *All that the Lord hath said will we do, and obey* (Exodus 24:7); and it is written, *I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon as among them that know Me* (Psalm 87:4).

R. Phinehas said in the name of R. Hama b. Hanina b. Papa: It is written, *Among the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell there* (Psalm 65:19): even though they are rebellious, God makes His Divine Presence abide among them. For what merit? For having said, *All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and obey* (Exodus 24:7).

## Analysis

Israel's transgression, repentance, and observance of the *mitzvot* are the focus of this *midrash*. God's anger at Israel's transgression leads to its punishment. Israel is banished from the "palace." This is most likely an allusion to the destruction of the Temple, though it may also refer to Israel's tribulations and exiled wanderings. The king/queen analogy is used not only to describe the exile from the palace but also the deep love between the couple, the main idea on which the *midrash* turns. God appears vulnerable, moved to emotion by His spouse Israel, whose fasts show her regret and hope of restoration. These fasts – at first observed by just a few people and then even by children – cause God to look back on Israel's past. Each moment reminds God of Israel's righteousness and its role in affirming God's power. Israel drew God into the world to demonstrate divine power, acclaimed God king and, ultimately, affirmed the covenant in Exodus 24:7. The fasts of repentance do not merely signal Israel's regret. They also cause God to look back on Israel's past commitments, which are enough to "overcome" the king. R. Phinehas' comment at the end of the passage affirms that past merit of the "rebellious" can close the rift with God so that "he will make his divine presence abide among them." In spite of her rebellion, the bride will once again be brought into the palace; in spite of its sins, Israel, through repentance, will once again encounter God's presence in the palace of the Temple when it is rebuilt.

Israel's past merit, earned by the cumulative deeds of successive generations in the Torah, is acquired by Israel in the present. Clearly, though, the *midrash* is not claiming that Israel's past will atone for its sinful present. Rather, the merit of the past presents to the current generation – that of the rabbis and reader – a persuasive model to

guide their conduct. The affirmation at Sinai *We will do and heed* (Exodus 24:7) can be reiterated by Jews who bring themselves close to God by following the guide of their ancestors and clinging to the *mitzvot*.

## Song of Songs 6:8

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ששים המה מלכות ושמנים פילגשים ועלמות אין מספר

*There are sixty queens, eighty concubines, maidens without number*



### Texts

#### ***Tanhuma (Buber) Leviticus 7.12, Kedoshim***

When you come into the land (Leviticus 19:23). This text is related to (Jeremiah 3:19) How would I put thee among the sons, and give thee a pleasant land, the goodliest heritage of the nations This is comparable to a king who had concubines and had a lot of children. But he had only one child by a certain matron, and he loved [the child] to excess. The king gave fields and vineyards to all the children of the concubines and after that he gave his <beloved> son one garden [pardes] from which all his food came. The son sent and said to his father: To the children of the concubines you have given fields and vineyards, but to me you have given one garden. The king said to him: By your life, all my food comes to me from this garden; and because I love you more than your brothers, I have given it to you. Similarly the Holy One created the peoples of the world, just as it is stated, There are sixty queens These are the peoples – only one is my dove – This is the congregation of Israel.

Now the Holy One has distributed fields and vineyards to the peoples of the world, as stated in Deuteronomy 32:8 When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when He separated the children of men, He set the borders of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel - but to Israel He has given the land of Israel, the larder of the Holy One. The offerings come from it; the showbread comes from it; the first fruits come from it, the omer comes from it; all the good things in the world come from it. Why all this? In order to make a

distinction between the son of the matron and the children of the concubines, as is stated in Jeremiah 3:19 How would I put thee among the sons, and give thee a pleasant land, the goodliest heritage of the nations

### ***Numbers Rabbah 4:2***

*Number all the firstborn males* (Numbers 3:40). This bears out what Scripture says: *There are threescore queens and fourscore concubines... my dove, my undefiled, is but one.* This may be illustrated by a parable. A man possessed stocks of glass beads which he was wont to take out to the market without examining the numbers, since he did not count them before taking them out. When he came in to put them in their place he did not take their number, since he was not particular about them, they being of glass. He had, however, a stock of fine pearls which he used to take up and count before taking out and putting back in its place. So, as it were, said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'I stated not the number of the other nations of the world. Why? Because they are not of any value whatever in My sight'; as it says: *All the nations are as nothing before Him* (Isaiah 40:17). You, however, are My children; as it says: *O house of Jacob... that are borne [by Me] from the birth* (Isaiah 46:3). Therefore, I number you at frequent intervals. For this reason it says: *Number all the firstborn males ....*

### **Analysis**

These *midrashim* compare Song 6:8's reference to *Concubines without number* to Song 6:9's *One is my dove, my pure one*. The contrast is used as a lens through which to understand Israel's relationship to the nations. Tanhuma Leviticus 7.12 explores Song's *concubines without number* with a parable, likening Israel to the most treasured of all the king's children. God's universality – the divine sovereignty over all people – is cast against Jewish particularity – the notion that God has a unique relationship with the Jewish people. The "fields and vineyards" of the other children represents the wealth and

material power of the nations. The midrashic author is addressing what was a pressing problem of Jewish theology: how could Israel reconcile its status in the world – without great wealth, power, or sovereignty – with its status as God's chosen people?

The true inheritance of the favored child, though, is the *pardes*, the “orchard” or “garden.” The second paragraph of the passage excerpted here indicates that the *pardes* is the land of Israel, from which God's sustenance is drawn: the showbread, the first fruits, the *omer*. In short, all of the offerings made to God come from the land. Israel learns how to cultivate the garden with instruction from God, who tells them in the Torah which offerings to bring. The land of Israel is here the spiritual home of the Jewish people. The offerings in the passage also turn our attention to the center of all the offerings, the Temple. Thus the *pardes* is both the land of Israel and also a paradisaical ideal in which Israel can live in perfect communion with God.

Most surprising in this Tanhuma passage is the suggestion that all of these offerings of the land are for the purpose of distinguishing Israel and setting it apart from the other nations. This inverts the idea in the first part of the *midrash* that Israel is distinguished by birth because it has received the *pardes*: now the *pardes* is used in order to distinguish Israel from the nations. Israel's religious destiny – cultivating the *pardes* of the land of Israel in order to worship God – is inseparable from its destiny to be set apart from the nations. The commandments they are obligated to observe draw Israel closer to God and separate Israel from her neighbors.

*Pardes* may also be intended to refer to Torah. The rich metaphor would then emphasize that Israel's cultivation of Torah – the *pardes* – sustains God. Thus the

*midrash* combines discussion of material and spiritual wealth. It is Israel's spiritual inheritance that reminds Israel of its favored status above the wealthy nations.

In Numbers Rabbah, the other nations are not merely less favored, but actually indistinct, likened to "glass beads" which are of so little value that their owner does not bother to count them. Isaiah 40:17, a statement of God's reign over all humanly powers, is transformed by the author of the *midrash* into a claim of Jewish particularism. The verse's כָּל-הָעוֹלָם, *all the nations* is interpreted as a reference to non-Jews. Six chapters later in Isaiah God calls Israel *My son* and this passage is used to reframe the census in Numbers 3:40. What was before merely an accounting of the people of Israel is now framed as God taking stock of the divine possession. The parable casts this as God counting the "pearls," but the Isaiah verse takes the idea of God's possession one step further so that *number all the firstborn males* now appears as God referring to God's own sons.

## Song of Songs 6:9

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אחת היא יונתי תמתי אחת היא לאמה ברה היא לילדתה ראיה בנות  
ויאשריה מלכות ופילגשים ויהללוה

*One is my dove, my pure one, the only one of her mother, flawless to the one who gave birth to her. Women see her and call her happy, queens and concubines, too – and they praise her.*

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Texts

Tanhuma (Buber) Numbers 6.28, Hukat

A red heifer without blemish (Numbers 19: 2) –This is Israel, since it is written (Hosea 4:16) *Israel is stubborn like a stubborn heifer - Red* (Numbers 19: 2). This is Israel of whom it is written (Lamentations 4:7) *Her princes were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk, they were more ruddy in body than rubies. - Without blemish* (Numbers 19:2). This is Israel, of whom it is written *my dove, my perfect one. – In which there is no defect* (Numbers 19:2). This is Israel, of whom it is written (Song 4:7) *And there is no blemish in you.*²

Analysis

The lover's affectionate reference to the sole beloved as תמימה, "pure one," is linked to the use of the word in Numbers as a reference to sacrificial offerings *without blemish*. The Song verse is thus transformed into a meditation on Israel's ritual perfection.

² This *midrash* also appears in Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 14 and Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 4:10

The verses in the passage are used to liken Israel to the Red Heifer. The *midrash* claims that Israel is the purification offering itself. The description of Israel as the Red Heifer, whose ashes can purify the encampment, leads the reader to contemplate the 'sacrifice' of Israel. Perhaps the *midrash* claims that Israel's suffering in the present both constitutes an offering to God and purifies Israel's surroundings. It is difficult to extend the analogy because the *midrash* does not continue. The "camp" within which the ashes are placed for purification (Numbers 19) may represent the community of Israel. In this case Israel's self-sacrifice atones and purifies the community. Alternatively, the encampment could represent the entire world, the "encampment" within which Israel is put upon the altar. This would suggest that Israel's self-sacrifice – its commitment to God in the face of brutal oppression – is the purification offering for the entire world. In either interpretation, Israel's suffering is given new meaning as a sign of hope: that with its commitment to God the world will be moved closer to purification and redemption.³

³ For another example of Israel offering itself as a ritual sacrifice, see Tanhuma (Buber) Numbers 2.1, *Bemidbar* on Song of Songs 3:6. See also Song of Songs Rabbah 4:2 on Song of Songs 4:1, where Israel makes offerings for the sins of the nations (though Israel is not portrayed as the purifying offering itself).

Chapter Seven:

Analysis of Four Major Themes in the Midrashim on the Song of Songs

Midrash in its Contemporary Context: Some Important Themes

The meaning of Jewish people's covenant with God was a primary source of contention between the Jewish and Christian communities of late antiquity. Jews had longed lived alongside or under the sovereignty of nations who rejected their claim to be chosen by God or the value of Jewish religious observance. With the emergence of the Church the Jews faced a new kind of challenge. The Church used Jewish texts to argue that the God of the Jews has rejected this Chosen People and accepted a "New Israel" – the Christian community represented by the Church – in its place. The use of the bible against the Jews is apparent throughout the Gospels themselves. The author of John has Jesus saying to the Jewish community,

Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.¹

Following on such ideas in the Gospels, Patristic writing in the early centuries used the Jews' own texts against them. Rosemary Reuther writes in this regard,

The earliest Christian scripture before the written New Testament was the Jewish Bible, or "Old Testament," Christotologically interpreted. Along with this Christotological interpretation of the "Old Testament" there developed from the beginning an anti-Judaic "left hand." This anti-Judaic "left hand" of Christotological interpretation was designed to show why the Jewish religious community, from which Christianity got both its scripture and its messianic hope

¹ John 5:45-46 (New Revised Standard Version).

(which believed to be fulfilled in Jesus), did not accept his "fulfillment" of its own tradition.²

The Church's appropriation of Jewish theology and its simultaneous exclusion of the Jews from the chosen community of faith created theological conflicts which are recorded in the literature of both communities. The midrashic literature examined in this thesis shows part of this record. This essay will explore four of the major points of contention between the communities as they are expressed in the *midrashim* which we analyzed: Exegesis and the Oral Tradition, *mitzvot*, Tabernacle and Temple, and circumcision.

Exegesis and the Oral Tradition

Exegesis was the field on which the battles between the Jewish and Christian communities were fought. Because Church fathers sought to use Jewish texts against the Jews – to show, for example, that Jesus' coming was foretold by the Jewish prophets – the interpretation of these Hebrew texts took on added importance. The Jewish community had a significant advantage here because of its familiarity with the Hebrew language in which these texts were composed. Origen acknowledged the superior scholarship of the rabbis and indicated that it was a problem to be faced by those who would defend Christianity. He alludes to publicly embarrassing moments in which

² Rosemary Reuther, "The Adversus Judaeos Tradition in the Church Fathers: The Exegesis of Christian Anti-Judaism," in *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict: From Late Antiquity to the Reformation*, edited by Jeremy Cohen (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 174.

Jewish scholars outshine their Christian counterparts, addressing questions of the Hebrew language to which Origen and his contemporaries cannot respond.³

Leviticus Rabbah 19:2 on Song of Songs 5:11 appears to play on the care required in understanding Jewish texts. The midrashist's rendering of Song 5:11 as "his marks in the Torah [give] mounds upon mounds of meaning" play off a familiar idea that the careful exegete can derive interpretations from even the subtle physical characteristics of the letters in the Torah. Certainly this passage needn't be read as an implicit charge against those for whom Hebrew was not familiar, or as a warning against those "outsiders" approaching Jewish texts. It could be simply a playful reflection on the midrashist's own art. Yet, the verses chosen by the author to illustrate the point suggest that there is something more substantial than this at work in the *midrash*.

This *midrash* also points to the importance of the Oral Torah. As noted in Chapter 5 on Songs 5:11, the midrashic play is based upon words appearing in a well-known story in B. Menachot 29b: קוץ, "coronets," (literally scribal marks on the letters of the Torah) and תילין, "heaps." That story celebrates the Oral Tradition of interpretation and Law about which Moses could not know (since it developed after his death):

When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters. Said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, Who stays Thy hand? [why are such marks necessary?]' He answered, 'There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiva b.

³ Nicholas Robert M De Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1977.

Joseph by name, who will expound upon each [mark] heaps and heaps of laws.⁴

Leviticus Rabbah 19:2, then, is certainly celebrating rabbinic ingenuity and the methods of interpretation known only to Jews. Perhaps more importantly, though, the *midrash* highlights an issue that was a critical dividing-line between Judaism and Christianity: the centrality of the Oral Tradition to revelation. Jews rejected the idea that God's will could be known from the Written Law alone and insisted that it had to be understood alongside and with the aid of the Oral Tradition. Christians insisted that only the Written Law was valid as revelation (while rejecting the literal interpretation of its laws, as noted below). This *midrash* appears to be a rabbinic response to Christian accusations that the Oral Law, as a humanly-created set of rules and ideas, represented a rejection of divine Revelation.

As described above in the Chapter 5 on Song of Songs 5:11, the carefully-chosen verses used to demonstrate the dangers of careless reading of scripture amount to a defense of the principles of Jewish faith and a warning against heresy. Against the backdrop of Jewish confrontation with the idea of the trinity, the passage might reflect the rabbis rejection of Jesus' divinity. Exodus 34:14 (*For thou shalt bow down to no other God*), a warning in the Torah against idolatry, appears in this context to be a polemic against other religious traditions.

The reflection of R. Abba b. Kahana on *there is none besides thee* are incongruous if not read in light of the polemical intent of the rest of the passage. The

⁴ *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: The Soncino Press, 1948).

first part of I Samuel 2:2, *There is none holy as the Lord*, is a statement against belief in other Gods; the word בָּלָא, "other than you," is powerful in both its original and reinterpreted meaning. On its face, it is an amplification of the previous thought, a claim that any others who are presented as "Gods" are not. Reinterpreted by R. Abba bar Kahana, the word becomes perhaps an argument against claims of supersession. The play hangs on the verb בָּלָא as the root of בָּלָא. R. Anna bar Kahana's rereading of I Samuel, then, becomes "none outlasts/outlives you" or "you do not decay/fade away." This wordplay can be read as a direct rejection of supersession, a declaration of God's eternity. As such the *midrash* is not a response to Christian arguments *per se* – for Christians argued not that the God of the Jews had changed but rather that the Jews had failed their God. Instead, it is a presentation of the rabbinic interpretation of Christianity: that it was not an extension of Judaism, that Christians were not the "New Israel" but instead were idolaters worshipping a false god.

Mitzvot

Central to the conflict between Jews and their Christian neighbors was the interpretation of the significance of Jewish Law. The Gospels record this as a point of tension not only between the burgeoning Church and the Jews, but also within the Church itself.⁵ Within the Talmud, of course, are recorded innumerable debates about how particular laws of the Torah should be interpreted. This new community, however, challenged the Law itself, a debate that was not only relevant for adherents, but for converts as well. Once the debate within the Church was resolved, Jewish adherence to the *mitzvot* in the Torah and the developing "Oral Torah" became a flashpoint for anti-

⁵ Compare, for example, Acts 10:9-11:18; 15:1-29; and 21:15-26.

Judaic polemics.⁶ The unidentified author of the second century *Epistle to Diognetus* wrote of the Jews,

Their sacrifices are absurd... their scruples about the Sabbath ridiculous,
their vaunting of circumcision nonsense, and their festivals folly.⁷

Yet, the most damaging attacks did not merely accuse the Jews of practicing "folly." Jewish ritual observance represented to the Church fathers Jewish sinfulness, rejection of God, and thus their subsequent condemnation. These transgressions were deeply tied to Jewish misinterpretation of texts; indeed, in Origen's opinion, to the entire Jewish approach to reading texts. This third century Church father argued in his *First Principles*, that Jewish commitment to the literal reading of the Torah led inevitably to their rejection of the Messiah and their obstinate observance of law. The failure of the Jews

to read their scriptures at their true spiritual level explains their refusal to believe in Jesus... When read properly, that is, spiritually, the Jewish Bible itself prophesies its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus and Christianity, and that fulfillment puts an end to the ritual law... They have now been replaced as God's people by the Gentiles.⁸

⁶ The hostility went in both directions. Writing of the Jewish attitude toward the Church's rejection of the Law, Leon Poliakov writes, "The decision suddenly transformed the Christians from harmless followers of Judaism into grave heretics against whom we may see a reaction in the solemn malediction of apostates." He refers to the blessing against *minim*, "heretics," whose inclusion in Jewish liturgy was contemporaneous with the growth of Christianity. Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism: From the Time of Christ to the Court Jews*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 19.

⁷ Quoted in James W. Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (London: Soncino Press, 1934), 100.

⁸ John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 165. See also David Efroymson, who argues that Origen originates this notion of spiritual versus literal reading: David Efroymson, "The Patristic Connection," In *Anti-Semitism and the Foundation of Christianity*, ed. Alan Davies (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 98-117.

Such dismissive and harsh exchanges called for a response from the Jewish community.

One method of response was to continually emphasize the significance of the observance of commandments through exegesis. Many of the *midrashim* on the Song of Songs take up the theme of the Jewish community's observance of the *mitzvot*. In expounding the meaning of Song of Songs 2:2, Rabbi Eliezer in Song of Songs Rabbah 2:5 likens Israel's situation among the nations to *a lily among the briars* by reference to phrase in Deuteronomy 4:34, *A nation from the midst of another nation* (Deuteronomy 4:34). R. Joshua comments,

It does not say here, 'A nation from the midst of a people,' or 'a people from the midst of a nation, but *a nation from the midst of a nation*, since both were equally uncircumcised, both equally wore front curls, both equally wore garments of mixed kinds. That being so, the Attribute of Justice did not allow that Israel should ever be delivered.

The door to Israel's very salvation hinges on its distinguishing itself through observance of the commandments given to Israel by God. The *midrash* concludes, "R. Samuel b. Nahman said: Had not God bound Himself with an oath, Israel would never have been redeemed. While the "deliverance" that Joshua refers to is the redemption from Egypt the importance of the *mitzvot* in distinguishing Israel from its neighbors – in terms of its appearance and hope for redemption – clearly speaks to the situation of Jews among Christian neighbors. Egypt appears to be used here and in many other places as a backdrop against which the rabbis could project their ideas about the redemptive promise of ritual observance. Against Christian claims that Jewish observance of the Law set them apart as a people ignorant of God and condemned to punishment, the authors of

midrashic literature countered that observance of *mitzvot* set them apart for God's favor and ultimately, redemption.

Revelation is one of the major midrashic themes of the material gathered here. Significantly, when addressing revelation at Sinai, the midrashists often choose to focus not on the theophany itself and the giving of the instruction in Exodus Chapters 19 and 20, but rather on Israel's acceptance of the *mitzvot*. One of the most commonly cited verses in the *midrashim* included in this thesis is the proclamation in Exodus 24:7, כל אשר דבר יהוה נעשה ונשמע, *all that God has spoken we will do and obey*. Verse 24:3, כל הדברים אשר דבר יהוה נעשה, *all that God has spoken we will do*, also appears frequently. The midrashists repeatedly use these passages as a way to highlight the importance of the moment at which Israel consented not only to accept the revelation, but to commit to the observance of the commandments. B. Shabbat 88b explains Song of Songs 2:2 this way:

What is the meaning of that which is written, *like an apple tree among the trees of the forest*? Why are the Jewish people compared to an apple tree? To tell you that just as in the case of an apple tree its fruit precedes its leaves, so, too, Israel put *we will do* before *we will hear*.⁹

In distinguishing between (mere) revelation and the commitment to observe the ritual commandments, the rabbis also distinguished Israel from its neighbors. Passages such as these may be artifacts of a debate with those who accepted revelation but rejected the commandments.

⁹ *Babylonian Talmud*, Schottenstein Edition (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications), 1992.

Tabernacle and Temple

The Temple in Jerusalem and the meaning of its destruction by the Romans in the year 70 CE was another major point of contention between Jews and Christians. For Jews, the Temple was both a reminder of an era of greatness in the Jewish past and also a sign of the redemptive possibilities of the future. Christians viewed the destruction of the Temple as evidence of God's rejection by the Jews and their emphasis on the observance of the Law. Perhaps even more than their adherence to the commandments, Jewish embrace of the Temple implied rejection of Jesus. The Gospels indicate that Jesus' own body replaces the Temple. Upon the 'cleansing of the Temple' in the Gospel of John, Jesus says to the gathered Jews:

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "this temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body.¹⁰

This brief passage is consistent with the Christian notion that Jesus made the observance of the law irrelevant. But passages comparing Jesus to the Temple are of particular importance because of the significance of the Temple as the locus of the priestly cult and the Jewish people's engagement with the Divine. Just as the Temple would be for Jews the point of gathering in the time of future redemption, so, too, do the Gospels portray Jesus as the center of future redemption. John describes Jesus' journey to Jerusalem on *sukkot*. While standing in the temple, Jesus proclaims, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believers heart shall flow rivers of living waters,'" an apparent reference to passages such

¹⁰ John 2:20 (New Revised Standard Version).

as Ezekiel 47:1 and Zecharia 14:8, which foretell of the flowing of "living waters" from Jerusalem.¹¹

Patristic writers celebrated the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem as a vindication of Christian theology and as retribution for Jewish betrayal of the one who 'replaced' the Temple and Jewish betrayal of God through worship of the Golden Calf. Jerome, writing in the fourth century, interpreted Zephaniah as referring to the forlorn state of the Jews following the destruction of the Jerusalem and the Temple, events which befell them "because they had sinned against the Lord."¹² Rosemary Reuther summarizes Patristic interpretations of the Temple's destruction:

As evidence of [the Jews'] rejection, the Jewish Law has been revoked by God, and they are perverse for continuing to observe it. Their cultic center is destroyed, Temple, priesthood, and sacrificial system have all been terminated. The Jews, therefore, celebrate the festivals illegitimately in the Diaspora. The destruction of the temple *cultus* signifies the end of the only legitimate vehicle of worship which God gave to the Jews, indicating that all access to God for them is now cut off.¹³

Rabbinic writing, of course, depicts a different view of the Temple and its destruction. Often writing about the Tabernacle, the precursor to the Temple, instead of the Temple itself, the rabbis elevated the sacrificial practices outlined in Torah as worship in its highest form. Pesikta d'Rav Cahana 1:1 depicts Moses' construction of the Tabernacle

¹¹ John 7:37-38 (New Revised Standard Version).

¹² Judith Lieu, John North and Tessa Rajak, "Introduction," ed. Judith Lieu, John North and Tessa Rajak, *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1992), 83-85.

¹³ Reuther, 182.

as the culmination of God's relationship with Israel, when God came into 'His bridal bower.'¹⁴

The Temple was a loaded symbol for Jews living in late antiquity. The rituals of sacrifice themselves, and their celebration long after they were ever practiced, were symbolic of a covenant that had been superseded in the eyes of the Church. The celebration of Moses' preparation to perform the sacrificial rites signifies opposition to the Christian notion that Jesus somehow replaced the Temple. In addition it suggests refusal to accept the Christian assertion that Jewish political impotence evidenced their spiritual impoverishment. Christians sought to portray the destruction of the Temple – and thus the impossibility of the performance of the rituals associated it – as proof of the status as the New Israel. Celebration of the Tabernacle in this context represented a rejection of this theological assertion. Finally, Jewish persistence in looking to the Temple sacrifices as an ultimate expression of adherence to God implied a rejection of the popular notion that Jesus himself represented a sacrifice that would make all others unnecessary.

In addition this *midrash* emphasizes that the sacrificial system in the Temple and the Tabernacle is the only mode of communion with the divine. Its bridal imagery is intended not only as a sign of Israel's union with God, but also of its exclusive relationship with God. Israel alone, through the means of the sacrifices alone, can encounter God on earth.

¹⁴ See Chapter 5 on Songs 5:1.

For the rabbis, revelation was inevitably tied to the rituals of the Temple. Revelation implied sacrifice and could only be meaningful in the context of sacrifice. The claim of R. Eleazar in Leviticus Rabbah 1:10 that, "Even though the Torah was given as a fence at Sinai, they were not punishable in respect thereof until it was repeated in the Tent of Meeting," expresses this idea perfectly. The erection of the Tabernacle and the observance of the sacrifices were not merely a fulfillment of the verses pertaining to it – these were key to the validity of the other *mitzvot*. Why Eleazar's apparently radical claim? Because only through the Tabernacle or Temple can the Jewish people find forgiveness and be purified of sin. Christians claimed precisely the opposite – that only in the absence of the Temple and the acceptance of Jesus in its place can one find forgiveness and purification. This view is precluded by the rabbis repeated emphasis on the centrality of the Temple. For the rabbis, then, the Christian acceptance of revelation without the acceptance of Tabernacle and Temple was a contradiction in terms.

Circumcision

Circumcision, like the Temple, was another particularly important point of disagreement between the Jewish community and the Church. In both Christian and Jewish writing extraordinary emphasis was put on the significance of this practice. It is noteworthy that, among the dozens of Jewish ritual observances embraced by the Jews and rejected by the Church, this one in particular should inspire such passion.¹⁵

In Galatians, Paul clearly views the practice of circumcision as a threat.

¹⁵ As noted above, the rites of the Tabernacle and Temple were also a concern of both communities. This is not surprising, however, given on the one hand that the Temple had been the vital center of Jewish life in the distant past up until its destruction and on the other that the earliest Christian writing speaks of Jesus as a replacement for the Temple.

Listen, I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.¹⁶

This passage reflects the growing Church's insistence that no distinction be made between those within the Jewish and non-Jewish world.¹⁷ Also interesting is Paul's assertion that one who becomes circumcised is "obliged to obey the entire law." This claim can be understood in two ways. First, it is simply a statement of fact: circumcision signified the initial step in acceptance of the covenant, which was intended to be observed completely. Second, though, Paul's claim echoes rabbinic ideas (see below) that saw circumcision as representing something more than the act in particular. For the rabbis and Paul alike, circumcision signifies a commitment to the Law in general.

So, too, for the later Church Fathers. Origen uses the practice of circumcision to signify the essentially errant nature of Jewish belief, referring to Jews as the "hard hearted and ignorant members of the circumcision."¹⁸ Similarly, Ignatius sees circumcision, along with the observance of the Sabbath, as symbolic of what has been

¹⁶ Galatians 5:2-6 (New Revised Standards Version).

¹⁷ Clearly there are multiple views expressed about circumcision in the Gospels and they are often contradictory. Paul himself expresses views on circumcision elsewhere that contradict his Galatians position. The point is, though, that it is these clear declarations against circumcision that become the dominant voice in the Church. The Patristic writers amplify this anti-circumcision orthodox position and it becomes a major theme in anti-Jewish writing of the early centuries of Christianity.

¹⁸ Efroymson, 107.

referred to as the "'phenomenological' characteristics" of Judaism, distinguishing it from an entirely separate set of Christian characteristics: "The only relationship between the two is a one-way passage which virtually renders Judaism obsolete."¹⁹ There were two fundamental problems with circumcision from the perspective of the Patristic writers. First, the continuation of the practice signified allegiance to the letter of the law and thus to ongoing misinterpretation of holy texts and their ultimate purpose. Second, circumcision undercut the universal salvific message of the scriptures by making a physical distinction between groups of people who should be united in God. For the Church fathers, though, Jewish insistence on distinguishing themselves through the covenant would only come back to haunt them. "Several Church Fathers," Rosemary Reuther writes,

connect circumcision with [the] state of reprobation and divine exclusion from return from exile. Circumcision was not given as a mark of divine favor, but with a view to this future status of exile so that the Jews might be recognized and excluded from Jerusalem.²⁰

To the rabbis, who took quite the opposite view, circumcision was a sign of inclusion in the community of those to be redeemed by God. Song of Songs Rabbah 2:33 offers a striking expression of rabbinic attitudes toward the importance of circumcision. In connection with Song of Songs 2:12, the midrashic author reads *עַתָּה הַזְמִיר הַגִּיעַ*, usually understood as "the time of singing has arrived," as "the time of pruning has arrived":

¹⁹ Lieu, *et al*, 89.

²⁰ Reuther, 184.

The time has come for Israel to be delivered; the time has come for uncircumcision to be cut off; the time has come for the kingdom of the Cutheans to expire; 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 (Zechariah 14:9).*

Thus, circumcision has a double significance for this midrashist. On the literal level, it refers to the commandment to circumcise a boy on the eighth day. Here it also means the pruning or removal of the foreskin of the entire world – the elimination of those who must be done away with at the time of redemption. Then, those who have faithfully practiced circumcision will observe the terrible circumcision of those who have not. Circumcision is not merely an essential Jewish practice, but a metaphor for the rabbinic eschatological view of the future.

As described in Chapter Two, “Cutheans” likely refers to the Christians. Just before this passage from Song of Songs 2:12 Cutheans are connected to *The son of your mother* (Deuteronomy 13:7), who “seduces.” This may be a subtle recognition of the shared Scriptural heritage – the mother – of both peoples and Christian attempts to “seduce” Jews away from the covenant. Moreover, the reference to the “Kingdom of the Cutheans” in the *midrash* would seem to preclude identity with the Samaritans, who had no kingdom that ruled over the Jewish people. Interpreting the word *הַחֶמֶן*, “the winter” in Song of Songs 2:11, Song of Songs Rabbah ties it to the verb *סָתָה*, “to lead astray”, or “to seduce.” This verb, connected as it is to the “law of the unfaithful wife” in Leviticus 5 and the Mishnaic and Talmudic treatment of that same theme, draws attention to the marriage metaphor used to describe Israel’s relationship with God. The active form of the verb that is used in the *midrash*, *מסיתה* can be understood as “seducer.” Either way, this

community of Cutheans seeks to upset the monogamous marriage relationship between God and Israel. While the *midrash* does not explore the details of the seductive suggestions of the Cutheans, the juxtaposition of the passage about the *מסית* with the that predicting that “the uncircumcision will be cut off” raises the possibility that the issue between them was circumcision. Thus, the *midrash* may predict that the seducer will be undone by the very practice it seeks to halt: circumcision. Circumcision, then, was seen as both a practice signifying the exclusive relationship between God and Israel, and also a promise of messianic redemption.

The rabbis also drew a connection between circumcision and sacrifice. Song of Songs 4:6 refers to the *mountain of myrrh*. Several of the *midrashim* connect the verse to the sacrifices, seeing in *myrrh* a direct allusion to the Temple. Numbers Rabbah 14:12 unites circumcision and sacrifice less directly and more potently. The blood from the circumcision of Israel in Egypt and then again in the book of Joshua upon entry into Canaan, rose to heaven and “was as sweet to the Holy One as spices.” Circumcision’s function as the symbolic representation of all *mitzvot*, described above, here takes on added importance. In the absence of the Temple, when Israel is not able to communicate with God via the priestly offerings, circumcision can substitute for sacrifice. The *midrash* implicitly likens the blood of sacrifice to the blood of circumcision, seeing in the latter act a way that Israel can make an offering of its own flesh. In circumcision, as in a sacrifice, the commandment is fulfilled – and the relationship with God affirmed – when a piece of flesh is cut and blood is drawn. The *midrash* draws out this connection by imagining the scent of the offering – what is described in connection with the offerings as the *ריח ניחח*, *pleasing scent*, rising up to God (Leviticus 1:9).

This *midrash* draws a further connection between salvific potential of circumcision and sacrifice. The author alludes to the circumcision of Egypt by way of Ezekiel 16:6:

when Israel were circumcised in Egypt – as is inferred from the text, *I...saw you wallowing in your blood and I said to you, live through your blood, live through your blood*²¹. – the scent of the blood was as sweet to the Holy One... as spices.”

Thus the *midrash* brings together the blood rites of the Passover in Exodus 12 – the sacrifice of the animal (and the painting of the lintels with its blood) and the circumcision – with Ezekiel’s strange proclamation. By reframing Ezekiel so he claims that Israel will *live* through the Passover and circumcision and by connecting these two through their appearance just before Israel’s redemption from Egypt, the author of the *midrash* suggests that both practices are tied to the redemption of Israel.

This and other passages that link circumcision to sacrifice and redemption may be read against the background of Christian-Jewish tension in late antiquity. Jesus’ death represented the ultimate sacrifice in that his death was not only (in the Christian retelling) at the hands of the Jews, but also made irrelevant the Temple sacrifices which his death could be seen to now supplant. No longer were the actual offerings on Mount Moriah necessary for atonement, but rather the belief that Jesus had given his life for the sins of humanity. In light of this, circumcision took on added importance for Jews as an act of self-sacrifice in the early Christian era. If Jesus gave his blood and his body so, too,

²¹ The preposition *בְּ* in Ezekiel 16:6’s *בְּמִינְךָ דָּם* can be translated variously. Most literally it would be “in.” The Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (1985) has “in spite of.” I have translated “through” to help highlight how the verse is used by the midrashist.

could every (male) Jew be seen to have this same level of dedication. The implication that circumcision can substitute for sacrifice (a particularly rich suggestion following the destruction of the Temple) can be read as a powerful Jewish response to the myth of Christ. Circumcision, and not faith in Jesus, these texts might be understood to argue, is the appropriate response to the end of the sacrificial system.

Abraham's binding of Isaac is commonly used by the Rabbis in these *midrashim* to emphasize either the merit of the patriarchs or as a measure of their devotion. The *midrash* commonly diverges from the Torah narrative in order to highlight the adult Isaac's willing participation in the near-sacrifice. He is understood to have bound himself upon the altar. Isaac becomes the literal embodiment of the idea of a sacrifice that can function in the post-Temple era. In connection with Song of Songs 3:6, Song of Songs Rabbah 3:8 imagines Isaac as the myrrh of the incense offerings. The *midrash* also makes reference to a midrashic story imagining the near martyrdom of Abraham, yet its use of Isaac is striking. The Torah story of the Akedah has been radically transformed with the act now culminating in the carrying through of the offering of Isaac. A similar image appears in Song of Songs Rabbah 2:27, which explores Song of Songs 2:10. There God recalls that Isaac "drew close to Me and glorified Me on the altar." Tanhuma (Buber) Leviticus 2.2 connects Abraham's near sacrifice of his son with the offerings of Leviticus. A conversation in which Balak pleads with God to accept his sacrifice is initiated by his observation that God accepted Isaac as a sacrifice. At the end of the *midrash*, as described in Chapter 3 (on Song of Songs 3:6), the columns of Israelites coming out of the desert is likened to *columns of smoke perfumed with myrrh and frankincense*. Israel itself is in this *midrash* the offering whose smoke rises up to God.

The *midrash* thus ties together Isaac, the levitical sacrifices, and Israel's ascent from Egypt through the idea of sacrifice. Balak is used as a foil to express Jewish particularism, as God rejects his willingness to make offerings, God tells him that the oath of Leviticus 24:8 is "An everlasting covenant on the part of the children of Israel...so that I only accept offering from Israel." Thus sacrifice is understood to have originated in the relationship between God and Israel, which was brought to its ultimate point through the offering of Isaac. This is used as the paradigm of the levitical offerings to God, which is then used to describe Israel's ascent and, it is implied, its salvation from which other nations are excluded.

In transforming the story of Isaac these *midrashim* give us a way to comprehend the meaning of sacrifice in the absence of the Temple. Isaac becomes the link between the actual sacrifices of the past and the idea of sacrifice of the present. In Tanhuma (Buber) Leviticus 2.2 we find both of these ideas most clearly. Tanhuma (Buber) makes explicit what is perhaps only implied in the other *midrashim* from Song of Songs Rabbah: Israel's suffering in the present, their willingness to suffer due to their absolute commitment to God, makes them as meritorious as Isaac. Specifically, their act of self-sacrifice is equated with his own. Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac was an important device in Jewish-Christian polemics. Jews could point to Isaac's self-sacrifice (as it was now understood by the tradition) as a heroic and meritorious counterpoint to the story of Jesus' crucifixion. The belief that the *Akedah* took place on Mt. Moriah, the site of the Temple had already linked him in the Jewish imagination with the rituals of the Temple. This *midrash* strengthens that association by likening him to the incense offering or other aspects of the levitical sacrifices, thus completing midrashically the sacrifice begun by

Abraham in the Genesis story. Isaac becomes the offering and Abraham the High Priest. These *midrashim* thus elevate Isaac to the level of full sacrifice and establish the patriarch as a response to the Christian elevation of Jesus.

Conclusion

The four themes examined in this analysis do not exhaust the topics of primary interest to the rabbis in their relationship with the growing Christian world. As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, the *midrashim* also reflect rabbinic interest in redemption and the Messiah, rabbinic authority, and Israel's relationship with the nations. There are certainly others that further research may bring to light. In the rabbinic treatment of exegesis and the Oral Tradition, *mitzvot*, circumcision and Tabernacle and Temple, however, we see some of the most important religious issues that helped define the boundary between the Jewish and Christian worlds. The division of these themes within the *midrash* is artificial: in truth many of the *midrashim* reflect the extent to which all of these ideas were inseparable. In discussion each of these four major ideas, the rabbis defined themselves in relation to the nations, articulated their understanding of their own authority, and, either implicitly or explicitly, expressed their conviction that each of the four had a role to play in the redemption of the Jewish people.

Chapter Eight:

Conclusion

Exegesis of the Song of Songs was a means through which the rabbis of late antiquity could address the pressing concerns of their day. This thesis finds that they used *midrash* to address tensions in their religious and political environment. The *midrashim* gathered here indicate that the rabbis were responding to the challenges of the Church, which rejected basic Jewish practices and the Jewish people's claim to be in Covenant with God. They affirm the relevance of those practices in light of the Jewish past and affirm that the Covenant is still in effect. In particular the *midrashim* point to a rabbinic response to their changed political and religious situation. Many of the passages in this thesis address the political powerlessness of Jews and seem to respond to the argument that this new circumstance proved they had been abandoned by God. The rabbis conclude that this powerlessness is a prelude to an affirmation of the Covenant that will become manifest in the messianic era and the reversal of Jewish fortunes. The destruction of the Temple is another central concern of these *midrashim*. The material shows that the rabbis responded to the theological challenge of the Temple's absence by rejecting the notion that its destruction signaled a break in the Jewish relationship with God. The meaning of the Temple was reinterpreted to allow for a hopeful future based on adaptation to the new situation. All of this suggests that these *midrashim* form part of the rabbinic response to the challenge of Christianity.

The next step in this research would require the analysis of the material on the remaining Books of the Song. Some midrashic material that did not make it into this volume would need to be analyzed. Then Christian sources on the Song would have to be studied and placed alongside these rabbinic readings. Among the early (pre-Nicene) Patristic authors who wrote about the Song either briefly or in extended works were

Gregory of Nyssa, Irenaeus, Melito, Tertullian, Hippolytus and Origen. Though only part of his work survives Origen's influence on future Church interpretation of the Song was enormous. After Origen, Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine each contributed to the understanding of the Song within the Church. Additional polemical material that does not necessarily address the Song of Songs would need to be investigated to further understand the theological environment in which the Song was interpreted by both communities.

In reinterpreting the meaning of Jewish ritual and of the Jewish past in a way that would enable them to respond to the present, the rabbis articulated their vision of a dynamic Judaism. They reread the Song of Songs so that this document described the enduring presence of God within the destroyed Temple; they reinterpreted circumcision as an act that was essentially similar to sacrifice so that, in the absence of the Temple, Jews could continue to perform the rites associated with it; they projected onto the story of the ancient Exodus from Egypt an image of their own immanent salvation from the hands of their own oppressors. In these and so many other ways the rabbis demonstrated that the Torah they inherited was only the beginning, but not the end, of revelation. They placed themselves at Sinai by refusing to see Torah as simply a record of the past; they saw it instead as a lens through which Jews must view the present. In so doing they allowed revelation to continue in their own day.

Their model of rereading holy texts to give meaning to the present imposes upon us an obligation. Anxiety about the Jewish future has many contemporary Jews from all branches striving to recover our collective past. To the extent that this leads us to deepen our connection to the tradition, provides greater awareness of Torah, and generally adds

to the richness and possibilities of Jewish life, this is a fruitful exercise. Too often, though, we seek to prevent the present from impinging on the past. Such an attitude represents a misreading of the approach taken by our forebears. The authors of these beautiful *midrashim* unapologetically transformed Jewish texts and the meaning of Jewish practices in line with their contemporary needs. If they had failed to do so, they would not have been preserving Torah, but rather wasting it. We do a disservice to these creative geniuses of our tradition when we refuse to follow in their footsteps. To do so of course requires an extraordinary recovery of tradition and study of our holy texts. It also requires an engagement with history to understand exactly how they used the words of Torah to understand their world; then we will be better able to use Torah to understand our world. Finally, though, it requires us to take the first steps down the path they set before us by viewing Torah as a light to help illuminate our present.

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