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**Like a Rose Among Thorns:
An Artist's Guide to the Song of Songs**

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Like a Rose Among Thorns

Statement of Purpose

This thesis, Like a Rose Among Thorns¹, explores the Song of Songs through visual art. It brings a fresh perspective to an age-old text. The project explores the biblical text in combination with medieval commentary on the material. The final form of the thesis is a sixteen-drawing series of visual exegesis, explained in this text. The methodology employed identified eight verses, one per chapter, and one piece of commentary on each of those verses, paired together. As the artist creating this work, I visually interpreted the biblical verse as well as the commentary on the verse, seeking to explore each text in combination with my own resultant exegesis. The materials used for these works are colored pencil and ink on paper. The works measure 11"x14" and are intended to be encountered as diptychs. This written component of the thesis includes a statement of purpose, introduction to the text and an eight-part exploration of the verses, commentary and artistic exegesis that comprise the project.

Introduction

The Song of Songs may be the Hebrew Bible's most famous, and infamous, love poem. Filled with rich, erotic, and sensual imagery, the Song is beautiful and seemingly totally secular. Nevertheless, it was beloved in the ancient world, raising the question of whether it should be considered sacred literature. Ultimately included in the Ketuvim section of the Hebrew

¹ שושנה can mean either rose or lily

Bible around the second century c.e, the Song of Songs has retained a place in sacred literature for centuries.²

It is thought that the Song was widely known in the ancient world, perhaps due to its similarities to Sumerian love poetry. These epic, erotic poems typically focused on Sumerian Gods Inanna and Dumuzi but were well studied throughout the ancient near east. The Song of Songs, likely modeled upon or in conversation with this Sumerian and other ancient near eastern poetry would have been known to scholars and lay people. This leads to an understanding of the Song of Songs as too well known and loved, either as a text or oral tradition, to not include it in or remove it from the canon.³

The text begins with the verse *שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשִׁלְמֹה*, The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.⁴ Although contemporary biblical scholarship does not support Solomonic authorship of the text, Jewish tradition recognizes the importance of Solomon as a character in relation to the text, as well as a mechanism for placing the Song within the biblical canon. In Mishnah Yadayim 3:5, Rabbi Aqiba defines the Song of Songs as “the holy of holies” (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים קֹדֶשׁ קִדְשִׁים)⁵. With this assertion, Rabbi Aqiba categorizes that the Song of Songs is not only sacred literature, but the most sacred literature that there is! As an authority whose opinion is often followed, Rabbi Aqiba's claim firmly plants the Song into canonical, Jewish,

² Bloch, Ariel A., and Chana Bloch. *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*. University of California Press, 1998. 1-43.

³ Kramer, Samuel Noah. "The Biblical 'Song of Songs' and the Sumerian Love Songs." *Expedition Magazine* 5, no. 1 (September 1962): n. pag. Accessed February 27, 2024. URL: <https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/the-biblical-song-of-songs-and-the-sumerian-love-songs/>

⁴ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 45.

⁵ Mishnah Yadayim 3:5

literary tradition. Regarding the connection with Solomon, Solomon is recognized as a sign of wisdom and the builder of the holy of holies.

In addition to Solomonic authorship, the Song is interpreted in two primary ways. First, as a love story between God and the Jewish people. Second, as a love story between two human people; the Shulamite and her beloved. In this first interpretation, the male beloved is a stand in for God and the Shulamite for the Jewish people. This metaphor describes the intense love between God and the Jewish people, alluded to in other texts but rarely, if ever, in such graphic sensual terms as in the Song of Songs. The Song is also part of the Jewish, liturgical canon. In some families and communities, it is read or chanted on Friday night as part of Shabbat ritual. In most (or all) Jewish communities it is chanted on Passover as a commemoration of the exodus from enslavement in Egypt and the resultant re-emergent love between God and the Israelites.

The text of the Song of Songs consists of eight chapters, which can be broken down into ten parts. As noted in Kugler and Hartin's *An Introduction to the Bible*, the breakdown is as follows:

- Introduction (1:1–6)
- Dialogue between the lovers (1:7–2:7)
- The woman recalls a visit from her lover (2:8–17)
- The woman addresses the daughters of Jerusalem (3:1–5)
- Sighting a royal wedding procession (3:6–11)
- The man describes his lover's beauty (4:1–5:1)

- The woman addresses the daughters of Jerusalem (5:2–6:4)
- The man describes his lover, who visits him (6:5–12)
- Observers describe the woman's beauty (6:13–8:4)
- Appendix (8:5–14) ⁶

This breakdown of the text as noted reveals the several foci found within the Song of Songs. The combination of dialogue between the lovers, memories, descriptions of the lovers, conversation between the Shulamite and the daughters of Jerusalem, a royal wedding procession and seemingly miscellaneous content sewn throughout the text and found in the introduction and appendix sections of this schema expresses the varied nature of the text.

Nature motifs are found throughout the Song and characterize its style. Significant use of animal, floral, plant, gem, and landscape imagery are found throughout the text. They are used to describe the Shulamite and her beloved, as well as their surroundings and the other characters and creatures they encounter. These motifs lend the Song of Songs an Eden-like quality, furthering connecting it to other biblical material and associations for the reader.

The Song has several characters. Notably, God is not among them. The protagonist, referred to as the Shulamite, does most of the storytelling. Her beloved, an unnamed male character, is the second most significant character. Other characters include the daughters of Jerusalem, the watchmen, King Solomon, the Shulamite's (half) brothers, the Shulamite's mother,

⁶ Kugler, Robert, and Patrick Hartin. *An Introduction to The Bible*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009.

and the beloved's mother. Last, there is also an anonymous narrator that also appears throughout the text.

The Shulamite functions as narrator, main character, and subject of most of the Song. She is a young woman of undefined age, who still lives in her mother's house. As the primary voice of the text, the Shulamite's perspective defines the Song as a whole. The Shulamite shifts between self-descriptions of her beauty, descriptions of her beloved, tender recounting of their intimate relationship and encounters of a variety of tones with her mother's sons, the watchmen of the city and the daughters of Jerusalem. The Shulamite is frequently outside, frolicking in nature with her beloved. At other times, she seems to fantasize about him from her home and family vineyard. At other times, she goes out to seek him in the city. The traits which define the Shulamite are her beauty, her sense of curiosity and adventure, the intensity with which she loves her beloved and her embrace of sensuality.

The Shulamite's beloved, the unnamed male object of her affection, is the second most prominent character in the Song. Like the Shulamite, he is young, not yet clearly out of his parental home. Frequently switching off with the Shulamite narratively, sometimes paragraph by paragraph, the beloved is both an active character and object of affection. The beloved is handsome, compared to spices, flora, animals, and jewels. He is valuable, the things he is described with are often rare or expensive. The beloved is frequently found outdoors, as a shepherd or animal out in nature.

The Daughters of Jerusalem function like a Greek chorus, commenting as a singular, collective voice throughout the Song, sometimes in conversation with the Shulamite. As an entity,

the Daughters of Jerusalem enforce social norms, function as an instigator for the Shulamite to describe her beloved and his uniqueness. They also serve as an audience for the Shulamite to express varying feelings about awakening love.

The watchmen appear in chapter 5. Perhaps guardians of the city walls, these watchmen appear to monitor the Shulamite's behavior. When she goes out to seek her beloved, she breaks what seems to be an established social norm regarding women out and about alone at night and the watchmen beat and assault her. Although these watchmen do not play a major role in the broader text, their presence reverberates throughout chapter five. Their interaction with the Shulamite remains as a specter in the remaining chapters, leaving a lingering sense of the world outside of the bubble of love encompassing most of the Song.

King Solomon appears in the first verse of the Song and throughout chapter 1. He is cast as the author of the text. Mythology knows King Solomon as a great writer as well as a wise and wealthy king. Of important pedigree, son of David at Batsheva, attribution of the text to King Solomon adds royalty and prestige to the work. In addition, attribution to King Solomon also adds another alternative interpretation of the text, in which King Solomon can be interpreted as one of the lovers. For many, this elevates the text. In chapter one, King Solomon appears again, in the Shulamite's description of herself. She describes herself as *שְׁחֹרָה אֲנִי וְנֹאֵה*, *dark but comely*, drawing connections between her beauty and *בִּירְיָעוֹת שְׁלֹמֹה*, *Solomon's pavilions*.⁷ Here, King Solomon appears as something to be compared to, representative of wealth, artistry, and power. Chapter 3 is another text entirely. There, the setting is King Solomon's bedroom and wedding day.

⁷ Song of Songs 1:5

Appearing in verses seven, nine and eleven, King Solomon is invoked but does not appear as an active character. Here, King Solomon is an expression of might and majesty.

The Shulamite's brothers, whom she refers to as בָּנֵי אִמִּי, *my mother's sons*, do not speak. They appear only in chapter one and their function is to make the Shulamite guard the vineyards, representative of the family wealth. She notes that although she did guard those vineyards, she did not guard her own, referring to her own sexuality or chastity. Interestingly, the Shulamite distances herself from these mother's sons, although one can assume they are at least her half-brothers if not her full brothers. The tenseness revealed in the dynamic over the vineyards gives the Shulamite an opportunity to express her own sense of self and pride in her sexual or romantic conquests.

The text also features both the Shulamite and her beloved's mothers, although they appear as references rather than active characters. These references appear in chapter 1,3, and 6, and are noted in relation to the Shulamite's mother's sons as well as associated with sites of intimate romantic and sexual connection between the Shulamite and beloved.

Roadmap of Project by Chapter

Chapter 1 of my project focuses on chapter 1 of the Song. In it, I selected verse 1:7 to focus on along with Shir HaShirim Rabbah on 1:7. Verse 1:7 in the biblical text features the Shulamite as speaker, appealing to her beloved to discover his daytime whereabouts. The choice of this verse is significant because it showcases the Shulamite as an assertive protagonist and an active character in the story. The choice of Shir HaShirim Rabbah on 1:7 introduces an allegorical approach to the text. In this chapter, this consists of identifying the

characters in the Song with important, external characters. Here, that manifests through Shir HaShirim Rabbah reading 1:7 in relation to God, Moses, and the Israelites.

Chapter 2 of my project focuses on chapter 2 of the Song. In it, I selected verse 2:9 to focus on along with Ezra ben Solomon on the same verse, with a focus on the first portion of the verse. Verse 2:9 in the biblical text features the Shulamite again, this time she describes her beloved (as a wild stag) and alludes to a dynamic within their relationship-playfulness and longing. Ezra's commentary continues the trend noted above, in which the secondary source connects the characters within the Song with external characters. Here, Ezra interprets the beloved as wild stag as God. This raises one of the interpretations of the song which places God as a main character.

Chapter 3 of my project focuses on chapter 3 of the Song. In it, I selected verse 3:7 to focus on along with the Aramaic Targum on the Song of Songs, on 3:7. Verse 3:7 in the biblical text features a description of King Solomon's bed, surrounded by warriors. This reads as a deviation from the prior part of the chapter and introduces a new section of the text which is concerned with royalty, wealth and power. The Targum on 3:7 places God as narrator, interpreting King Solomon's chamber as the temple built by the Israelites for God to dwell in. This is expressed as a communal effort, with contributions from the priests and reception of blessing and strength by the Israelites.

Chapter 4 of my project focuses on chapter 4 of the Song. In it I selected verse 4:4 along with 11th century biblical exegete, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi), on 4:5 part one.

Verse 4:4 in the biblical text features a description of the Shulamite, by her beloved. In it, she is described as beautiful and strong, like the tower of David. Here, the Shulamite is not only sexually attractive, beautiful, but also someone strong with the ability to defend herself, or even be dangerous. Rashi focuses on 4:5:1. In this biblical text, this features a description of the Shulamite's breasts. Rashi, following an ongoing approach to the Song, decenters the Shulamite from this description. Instead, he recasts her breasts as Moses and Aaron, shifting the text from something bodily and sensual to something religiously central to the Jewish people in the mode of two important biblical progenitors.

Chapter 5 of my project focuses on chapter 5 of the Song. In it I selected verse 5:13 along with the work of biblical exegete and philosopher Levi ben Gershom (the Ralbag) on 5:12. Verse 5:13 in the biblical text features the Shulamite as speaker, this time describing her beloved's face and physicality. She describes his cheeks and lips, noting that they drip with myrrh. Here, the beloved is alluring, sexually enticing, himself beautiful. The Ralbag focuses on the beautifying abilities of water, with a particular focus on the mind's eye, which can work towards attaining perfection. The Ralbag expands a physical description of beauty to a more introspective, metaphysical approach to seeking betterment and perfection.

Chapter 6 of my project focuses on chapter 6 of the Song. In it I selected verse 6:3 along with 13th century Kabbalist Ezra ben Solomon's commentary on 6:5. Verse 6:3 in the biblical text features the Shulamite as speaker, discussing the relationship between herself and her beloved. She notes their mutual love and expresses it in equal terms. Ezra focuses on

6:5, which features the beloved describing the Shulamite, not their relationship. Here, he describes her hair. Ezra interprets the Shulamite as a representation of the Shekhinah.

Chapter 7 of my project focuses on chapter 7 of the Song. In it I selected verse 7:3 along with Rashi's interpretation of 7:6. Verse 7:3 in the biblical text describes the Shulamite, although it is unclear who is speaking. Her belly as a goblet is the focus of the verse, seemingly a representation for fertility and joyful indulgence in life. Rashi's focus on 7:6 also focuses on the Shulamite, in which her head is described as being like Mount Carmel. Rashi takes a different approach, interpreting the description as reference to Nazirite practice and the Shulamite's hair as tefillin. Here, Rashi draws God into the text via sacred vow practices ritual objects.

Chapter 8 of my project focuses on chapter 8 of the Song. In it I selected verse 8:4 along with an emergent theory also on 8:4 I encountered in a PhD seminar on the Megillot at New York University. Verse 8:4 in the biblical text features the Shulamite addressing the daughters of Jerusalem. She asks them to not awaken love at an inappropriate time. Here, it seems the Shulamite may be warning others not to do as she has done. Alternatively, she may be asserting the correctness of her actions and encouraging others to find the right time for love and then act on it. The emergent theory I focused on, offered by Dr. Daniel Fleming, connects the daughters of Jerusalem with the women of the city of Emar in present day Northern Syria. In Fleming's interpretation, the daughters of Jerusalem mimic a legal entity at Emar; groups of women with an official role to rule on the start of marriage rituals.

According to this interpretation, the Shulamite's appeal to the daughters of Jerusalem asks them not to kick-start marriage rites, although she has engaged in acts of love.

Artist Statement on Verses Selected from Chapters 1-8

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of the Song of Songs is filled with lush nature and animal imagery, sensual descriptions of the body and assertions about sexuality and sexual behavior. For chapter 1, I focused on verse 1:7:

הַגִּידָה לִּי שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי
אֵיכָה תִרְעָה
אֵיכָה תִרְבִּיץ בְּצִהָרִים
שְׁלֵמָה אֶהְיֶה כְּעֹטֶינָה
עַל עֲדָרֵי חֲבֵרֶיהָ.⁸

*Tell me,
my only love,
where do you pasture your sheep,
where will you let them rest
in the heat of noon?
Why should I lose my way among the flocks
Of your companions?*⁹

⁸ Song of Songs 1:7

⁹ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 43-55.

The simple interpretation of this verse is one person asking another where they habitually bring their sheep at high noon. The verse ends with the speaker asking why they should get lost amidst the subject's peer's herds. This verse appears simple, with one person speaking to someone they love asking about their herding practices and expressing concern about their animals at a hot time of day. The speaker seems to want clear directions to find where their love brings their sheep in order to find them without the complication of possibly getting lost or confused by other herds.

Closer inspection of the verse leads a reader to identify the person being spoken to as male, due to the presence of four masculine words found in the Hebrew; תַּרְעִי, תַּרְבִּיץ, הַבְּרִיד, הַגִּידָה. A reader with cumulative knowledge of the chapter or text will likely identify the speaker as female, presumably the Shulamite. In this verse, the Shulamite identifies her subject, as אִשְׁתִּי, *my only love*, signaling a romantic, intimate relationship.

My exegesis of this verse, expressed in the image 1, is titled *To Rest Like Sheep*. The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. The drawing focuses on the speaker and her lover's flock of sheep. The sheep are depicted from the side, with their faces turned to look directly at the viewer. In the lower right hand corner of the image, the Shulamite is drawn in the same consistent tones of blues and purples used throughout the rest of the image. The Shulamite is depicted as a floating head with long, curly hair, similar in texture and color to that of the sheepskin. In this image, the Shulamite is one of her lover's flocks, beloved, watched over and cared for. Although she is one of many, her human face and expression reveal that she is unique, a human individual seen as herself amidst the many.

The use of blues and purples in this image express a sedate feeling, connecting with the theme of rest and respite from the high noon sun noted in the verse. Blues and purples are colors of shade. Like the Shulamite seeking her love while he rests his herd away from the sun, they rest in their love and intimacy finding joy and respite.

Chapter 1 Commentary

The piece of commentary I have explored for chapter 1 is Shir HaShirim Rabbah on 1:7. Shir HaShirim Rabbah dates to between the 6th and 8th century and was likely compiled in the land of Israel. The text approaches the Song of Songs as allegory, interpreting the relationship between the Shulamite and her beloved as the relationship between God and Israel.¹⁰

Song of Songs Rabbah interprets verse 1:7, focusing on the phrase *וְשֶׁאֶהְבֶּה נַפְשִׁי*, he whom my soul loves. Rabbi Yehudah bar Rabbi Simon interprets the “he” referred to as Moses when God asks Moses in Exodus (3:10) to lead the Israelites out from enslavement in Egypt. The midrash expresses Moses’ concern and anxiety about this task before him, particularly his worry about not having enough food for the vulnerable (pregnant people, young children etc.) with such a journey and task ahead. The latter part of the midrash identifies “he whom my soul loves” as the Israelites, God’s beloved nation. The last piece of the midrash conflates the Israelites with a flock and expresses concern that the flock be cared for.¹¹

¹⁰ “Song of Songs Rabbah.” *Jewish Virtual Library*, www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/song-of-songs-rabbah. Accessed 28 Feb. 2024.

¹¹ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:7

The simple meaning of this midrash paints a picture of gentle love between God and Moses and Moses and the Israelites and God and the Israelites. Here, God expresses God's love through taking the Israelites out from enslavement in Egypt. Moses expresses his love through questioning God to try to ensure that those same Israelites will be taken care of during their journey. Like a shepherd with sheep, a metaphor employed in biblical verse 1:7 for the Shulamite and her beloved, God and Moses try to provide comfort, protection and a future for the Israelites.

My exegesis of this piece of commentary, expressed in image 2, is titled *A Snack for the Weary*. The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. The drawing focuses on the theme of sustenance noted in the midrash. Although not explicitly named, I chose to represent the food categories Moses notes via half opened pistachios, with the greenish brown nutmeat visible between the two halves of the shells. In the image, Moses is depicted kneeling, facing upwards towards the divine who is not representationally depicted. Moses' lips are parted, as if he is speaking. His eyes are wide open, as if he is staring.

I chose to create this image based on segment one of the midrash in order to express the concern with care and nourishment referenced in both the biblical verse and this piece of commentary. Whether or not the Israelites are presented as vulnerable groups being led by Moses out of Egypt, or the Shulamite is identifying herself as a special, unique member of her lovers' flock, where the Israelites/Shulamite are being taken care of in material ways. This midrash expresses love being shown in material ways-food. In the biblical verse the form of love is ensuring that the flock is somewhere comfortable and safe at high noon when it is hot and uncomfortable to be walking around outside. The intimacy of conversation between Moses and God in this midrash

provides an additional example of love and care in the relationships present in this allegorical read of the Song.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of the Song of Songs is filled with floral, tree and animal imagery. Featuring both the male and female speakers, this chapter dives into a love scene in a garden including description of an embrace. The chapter also includes the chorus, the daughters of Jerusalem, whom the Shulamite addresses, warning them of the dangers of love at an inopportune, or too early, time. The chapter concludes with a game of hide and seek, the male lover summoning the Shulamite away from home or across a wall, beckoning her now that spring has arrived.

For chapter 2, I have focused on verse 2:9.

דֹּמָה דֹּדִי לְצִבִּי אוֹ לְעֶפֶר הָאֵילִים הַנִּהְיָה עֹמֵד אֶסֶר כְּתִלְנִי מִשָּׁגִים מִן־הַסִּלְנוֹת מִצִּיץ מִן־הַחֲרָכִים

My love is a gazelle, a wild stag.

There he stands on the other side

of our wall, gazing

*between the stones.*¹²

Here, the Shulamite addresses her beloved. She likens him to both a gazelle and a stag, two majestic, four legged mammals who can be associated with wildness, the forest, freedom, and virility. Interestingly, the Shulamite does not liken herself to a similar animal. Rather, she remains the observer, describing her lover's approach and behavior. In the verse, she describes a wall

¹²Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 59.

between them, either a physical or metaphoric/emotional wall. Yet this wall has gaps between its stones, enabling the lovers to peek through and gaze at one another. The emotional veilance of the verse is one of observation or longing. Just out of reach, the male lover is wild and free. He looks between the stones in the wall, seemingly at the Shulamite, on its other side.

My exegesis of the verse, expressed in image 3, is titled *A Peek Beyond the Wall*. The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. The drawing focuses on the playfulness of the act of peeking through the stones of the wall mentioned at the start of the verse. Depicting the male lover as an animal referencing both stag and gazelle, he perches on hind legs standing upright upon one of the stones making up the wall. His feet and face are human, his facial expression is mischievous. He gazes towards the Shulamite but also at the viewer, drawing both into his domain. The Shulamite, depicted as a human woman, lingers on the other side of the wall, her body mostly hidden by its lumpy stones. Her head, neck and right shoulder are naked and visible, her left hand reaches through the stones towards her lover, nearly grazing his long, animal neck. The male lover has no arms with which to reach, yet both stand. His perch makes him slightly taller than the Shulamite, as he presents his long neck towards her outstretched hand.

The Shulamite's hair is long, wavy, and merges with the stones. This suggests that she may be part of the wall, perhaps she herself both draws near to her love but creates barrier(s) between them. Both characters are colorless, aside from their pink lips. The use of this pink is intended to add life and a sense of sexuality to both. The use of the same hue of pink for both links them, visually connecting the characters via this body part. The stonewall is also colorless, the same unfilled in paper as the two character's bodies. The wall becomes a third character, part of their

story. The background is a dusky blue, with no horizon in sight. The characters float in space and time together, with only each other.

Chapter 2 Commentary

The piece of commentary I have explored for chapter 2 is 13th century Kabbalist Ezra Ben Solomon's approach to verse 2:9 part 1. One of the first Kabbalistic commentators on the Song, Ezra's work was influential for his contemporaries and later commentators.¹³ In this portion of the text, Ezra focuses on God and place.

וזהו שאמר דומה דודי לצבי או לעופר האילים אין דעתי נוחה בכל המקומות אשר מתהלך שם בסנה בסיני באהל מועד
עד שיהיה שוכן בבית המקדש בכותל מערבי כמו שאמרו רז"ל לא וזה השכינה מכותל מערבי שנאמר הנה זה עומד אחר
כתלנו משגיח משם ומשקיף על בני אדם:

*Thus it says: **My beloved is like a gazelle** ... I found no rest from all of the places to which he journeyed: the burning bush, Sinai, the tent of meeting, until he dwelt in the Temple in Jerusalem, by the western wall. As our sages say: "The Shechinah has never departed the western wall. As it says: 'There he stands behind our wall, gazing ...' [Cant. 2:9] from there watching over and observing humanity." (Song of Songs Rabbah 2:2)¹⁴*

When interpreting Song of Songs 2:9, Ezra ben Solomon focuses on the start of verse 2:9:1,

¹³"Ezra ben Solomon." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Encyclopedia.com. 22 Feb. 2024.
<https://www.encyclopedia.com>.

¹⁴"Ezra Ben Solomon on Song of Songs 2:9:1." *Sefaria*,
www.sefaria.org/Ezra_ben_Solomon_on_Song_of_Songs.2.9.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en. Accessed 29 Feb.2024.

דוֹמָה דּוֹדִי לַצִּבִּי אִוּ לַעֲפֹר הָאֵילִים, *My Beloved is like a gazelle, or like a young stag*.¹⁵ Ezra interprets this piece of the verse as about God and God's journeys from holy place to holy place with the Israelites. For ben Solomon, God is agile and like a gazelle, moves with ease. The speaker, the Israelite/Jewish people, follow God without respite, finding no rest as their God moved from place to place. The text begins after enslavement in Egypt, first identifying God as present at the burning bush. God's place of being goes from most intimate, one on one with Moses and the burning bush, moving to Sinai with the full nation of Israelites, then moving into the tent of meeting the people build in the desert and finding a more consistent place amongst the Israelites until finally God settle in the temple in Jerusalem, next to the western wall. Despite Ezra writing centuries after the destruction of the second temple, he still locates God near the site of the temple, at the Western Wall. Like the lover in the biblical verse, God gazes through the wall's stones, watching and observing humanity instead of the Shulamite.

In both the original text and Ezra's commentary, the wall plays an active role in 2:9. Acting as a separation or barrier between the Shulamite and her lover or God and humanity/the Israelites, the wall is both physical and made of stone and symbolic. Although the Shulamite and her lover might only meet in fantasy there is a separation between, nevertheless. Although God need not be separated by physical means from God's people, God's residence in the Western Wall after the destruction of the second temple separates God from the people. And yet, the wall acts as a playful barrier, particularly between the Shulamite and her lover. In both texts, the wall is porous, enabling lovers to peek through at one another and enabling God to watch over God's people, through the

¹⁵ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 59.

wall itself or through the wall of history and suffering. In both cases, peeking through the wall is an act of care, although the biblical texts' case may be lusty as well.

My exegesis of the commentary, expressed in image 4, is titled *To Never Depart/The Journey*. The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. The drawing features a wall, made up of rough Jerusalem stones. Represented in varying shades of beige and brown hues, the wall is more of a simple construction than a fortress or barrier. The image is surrounded by negative space, placing it outside of a particular place and time. God is depicted behind the wall, shown from the torso up above the wall. No matter how large or small the wall is, God is bigger. God's body partially references the human body, while also containing other holy places God has resided aside from the wall, the burning bush, the tent of meeting. These places have become a part of God's body. God is the places God has been. In addition to Ezra's interpretation, the drawing may also be a metaphor for the Jewish people and for human experience-each person and group carries their stories with them, becoming part of the physical and spiritual self.

Chapter 3

Chapter three of the Song of Songs focuses on the Shulamite's longing for her lover, her desire to seek him throughout the city. The chapter covers her quest to find him until she brings him home to her mother's house. The chapter repeats the Shulamite's refrain directed to the daughters of Jerusalem, telling them to make sure not to awaken love until the time is right. The Shulamite also describes a figure rising from the desert perfumed in spices and oils, typically interpreted to refer to the male lover. The text abruptly shifts to descriptions of King Solomon and Solomonic wealth, power, and rule. The end of the chapter celebrates Solomon's

accomplishments, the splendor with which he built his palace and the love the daughters of Jerusalem provided for him.

Within chapter three, I focused on verse 3:7. This verse, at the heart of the King Solomon descriptions, הִנֵּה מִטָּתוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁלֹמָה שְׁעִים גִּבּוֹרִים סָבִיב לָהּ מִגִּבּוֹרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, *Oh the splendors of King Solomon! The bravest of Israel surround his bed, threescore warriors.*¹⁶ The simple meaning of this verse, situated towards the end of the chapter, relays King Solomon's wealth and grandeur, highlighting this through how he sleeps. In addition to the material wealth described in prior and following verses, King Solomon even sleeps with ornate, human decoration! King Solomon's bed is not only surrounded by sixty warriors, these are the bravest warriors of Israel! In addition, this might suggest that King Solomon is so successful that he needs the highest form of protection, especially when he is in bed and vulnerable.

My exegesis of verse 3:7, expressed in image 5, is titled *Sixty Warriors/Solomon's Bed?* The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. The drawing is colorless, simply black ink on paper. King Solomon is depicted lying down, asleep, with one arm visible above a blanket and his head, neck, and shoulders slightly exposed. The rest of his body is hidden beneath the blanket, with toes peeping out at the bottom. Solomon's crown lies on the pillow next to his, as if it is another person. His arm stretches out below it. The bed itself is simple, unadorned, the King and his crown the jewel upon it. The perimeter of the drawing shows the feet and legs of the warriors who guard King Solomon while he sleeps. They are all barefoot, their varied feet revealing the many sizes, shapes, and types of warriors present. The bravest warriors of Israel do not belong to

¹⁶ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 71.

a specific subtype, they are not even all represented as specifically male. This image expresses King Solomon's utter trust in his guards and their proximity to one another, lined up side by side around the entire image.

Chapter 3 Commentary

The Targum, Aramaic for translation, is a text that translates the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic for a popular audience. Initially an oral tradition, the finalized written versions of the Targumim were completed around the 5th century c.e. The Targum on the Song of Songs, like the other Targumim, is not a literal, word by word translation. Rather, it combines the biblical text, legend, allegory, and sayings.¹⁷

The Targum on Song of Songs 3:7 recounts the building of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. The protagonist of this piece of commentary is God, who describes the beauty of the temple built by King Solomon. As God recounts the temple's beauty, God notes King Solomon's lineage as son of King David. Additionally, God expands God's description of beauty from the temple to the priests when they spread their hands and bless the Israelites. God notes that the priests use the sixty letters transmitted to Moses in these prayers. These sixty letters likely represent all of Torah. God describes the power of that blessing, saying the blessing surrounds the priests and Israelites like a wall that is high and strong, which helps the Israelite heroes be strengthened and find prosperity.¹⁸

This text takes the idea of a wall, an architectural element of the temple in Jerusalem, and expands it into an abstract, metaphysical form of protection. Although the temple in Jerusalem has not stood

¹⁷ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Targum." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 28 Apr. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Targum>. Accessed 29 February 2024.

¹⁸ Aramaic Targum on Song of Songs 3:7

for centuries, this text suggests that blessing, protection and strength are derived from Torah, which enwraps the Israelites with words.

My exegesis of this piece of commentary, expressed in drawing 6, is titled *By the Hands of Solomon* and is pencil on paper, measuring 11”x14”. The drawing features four sets of hands. One belongs to God or King Solomon, the other three represent the priests. This representation is signaled by the fingers on these hands, which are splayed open in the gesture of the priestly blessing. In the large, singular set of hands belonging to God and or King Solomon, the palms face up, the fingers gently meet and the interior edges of the palms touch. In the image, these two hands meld into one another, sharing one arm or wrist. Cupped in the palm of this merged hand is a pile of print, rainbow colored, Hebrew letters. They spill out onto the rest of the page, tumbling between the pinky fingers in a singular line towards the priestly hands at the opposite edge of the page. Matching letters pour out from the priestly hands, depicted from the top, without palms showing. Clustered around their open fingers, these letters dance out into the negative space on the page.

Filling the rest of the negative space are black, script, Hebrew letters. The colorful letters represent the sixty letters noted in the Targum, expressing the blessings of the priests. The black letters represent the swirl of other forms of blessing that the Israelites have and will encounter. Using the same alphabet, these letters and blessings are connected to the Torah and priestly letters and blessings but use of a different script and color scheme signals that they are not identical. This expresses the ongoing nature of Israelite connection to the priests, temple, and God, but the changing nature of that relationship over time.

Chapter 4

For Chapter 4, I focused on 4:4. In this verse, one of several in which the beloved describes the Shulamite's face, neck and breasts, the beloved focuses on the Shulamite's neck specifically:

כְּמִגְדַּל דָּוִד צִנְאָרָהּ בְּנוֹי לְתַלְפִּיזוֹת אֶלֶף הַמָּגֶן תִּלְוִי עָלֶיהָ כָּל שְׁלֵטֵי הַגִּבּוֹרִים

Your neck is a Tower of David,

raised in splendor

a thousand bucklers hang upon it

*all the shields of warriors.*¹⁹

The simple interpretation of this description is that the Shulamite is not only beautiful but also strong. The Tower of David, a fifth century c.e, second temple period construction in Jerusalem is a piece of architecture representing power, monarchic rule, and physical strength.²⁰ The additional description of the Shulamite's neck as built to hold weapons, hung with shields and quivers of warriors, may be understood as the beloved viewing the Shulamite not only as powerful and strong but potentially dangerous. These weapons she is decorated with may also be her possessions, granting her the ability to use them or deploy others to use them. By describing the Shulamite in this way, the beloved reveals that he recognizes that the Shulamite has the ability to hurt him greatly, maybe even mortally wound him. If the Shulamite is read as a representation of the Israelites in context of a divine/Israelite relationship, this verse grants the Israelites power in their relationship with the divine.

¹⁹ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 73.

²⁰ Dan Bahat, "Jerusalem Between the Hasmoneans and Herod the Great," in *Cities Through the Looking Glass: Essays on the History and Archaeology of Biblical Urbanism*, ed. Rami Arav (Eisenbraun's, 2007), 122–124.

My exegesis of the verse, expressed in image 7, is titled *A Neck like the Tower of David*. It measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. This drawing features the Shulamite, her face in profile. She is outlined in black, with a dark pink iris and bright pink lips. Her eye is open, gazing into the distance off of the page. Her lips are slightly parted, comfortably at rest. Her nose is prominent, reminiscent of ancient near eastern statuary. Her hair is loosely gathered up into a bun, out of her way and non-distracting in the image. Her hair is colorless, the white of the page. Her eyebrow is bold and black, a strong, powerful line across her face. The Shulamite holds her head erect, her shoulders back, her chin tilts ever so slightly upwards.

The Shulamite's neck is slender and long. At the base of her throat there is a window or cutout, a long, ovular, almost diamond shape. The shape itself is vulvar, its placement on the throat delicate but perhaps with an air of violence. Within the shape are pomegranate seeds, references to the many ways the Shulamite is described like a pomegranate throughout the Song. The seeds are shades of pink and red hues, with the tones of the Shulamite's lips and iris well represented. This piece of the image reveals the layers that are part of this character. At once strong, resolute, sure of herself and at the same time, delicate, beautiful, associated with spring and fertility.

Around the Shulamite's neck hangs a necklace made up of weapons, depicted in glittering, metallic tones. Although these are clearly objects that relate to violence (war, slaughter, cutting), they are not of usable size. Rather, they are drawn as usable miniatures. From the image, it is unclear how or from where the Shulamite acquired such a necklace. Did she gather and magically shrink these weapons? Did she commission this necklace from a metal

worker? Was it gifted to her? No matter the origin story of the necklace, it provides a striking balance to the rest of the image.

Chapter 4 Commentary

When selecting commentary to focus on for chapter 4, I chose 11th century, medieval French rabbi and scholar Rashi's commentary on 4:5:1, which is striking.²¹ In the midst of lush bodily descriptions of the Shulamite, Rashi connects with the ancient practice of interpreting the body imagery in the text as expressions of Jewish mythology, history and textual tradition. The biblical text describes the Shulamite's breasts, *שְׁנֵי שָׁדָיֶיךָ כְּשֹׁנֵי עֵפְרַיִם תְּאוֹמֵי צִבְיָה הָרוּעִים בְּשׂוֹשַׁנִּים*, *Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, browsing among the lilies*.²² Interpreting the first portion of this verse, Rashi focuses on *שְׁנֵי שָׁדָיֶיךָ*, *your two breasts*. He asserts that they nourished you, the you referring to the Jewish people. For Rashi, the breasts are not simply breasts, they are Moses and Aaron, whose lives and deeds nourished the Israelites like breast milk nourishes a baby as it grows. This interpretation contrasts with the simple meaning of the verse, which describes youthful, curious, beautiful beings as the Shulamite's breasts, substituting two of the most important, male, biblical characters instead. While it is possible to read this interpretation as a negation of the Shulamite as an embodied, sexual character (a worthy read), it is also useful to read this interpretation as an effective attempt at connecting these lengthy bodily descriptions with broader Jewish literary themes and tradition.

²¹ Isadore Twersky. "Rashi." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1 Jan. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rashi>. Accessed 29 February 2024.

²² Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 75.

My exegesis of the commentary, expressed in image 8, is titled *Your Two Breasts, Moses, and Aaron*. The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. I focused on depicting both the embodied Shulamite and Rashi's envisioning of Moses and Aaron together in one image. In the drawing, the Shulamite is depicted kneeling on her left knee, the toes of her left foot are bent as if she might take off into a sprint. Her right leg is also bent with her knee in the air upright, her right foot flat on the ground. Although no horizon line is present, the Shulamite is centered, filling most of the page. She appears grounded, not floating despite the negative space around her. The Shulamite is drawn with simple black lines, her lips and nipples filled in with bright pink. This singular use of color in the image draws attention to the lips and nipples, reminding the viewer that the figure depicted is human, with a mouth that speaks (despite closed lips) and nipples with which to feed. Her hair is long, black, curly, wrapping behind her left shoulder and curling over her left hip and thigh, covering her genital area. This is not to hide the Shulamite's body or sexuality, rather it directs the viewer's focus above.

The Shulamite gazes towards the viewer, but her gaze is focused towards the lower left of the image, non-confrontational yet not overly shy. Her back is straight, her shoulders back, she lovingly supports her breasts with her hands. The Shulamite's right breast is drawn as both breast and Moses, with pink nipple at the bottom, the tablets of the commandments and Moses' head and face at the top. This merger between breast and Moses furthers Rashi's description of her breasts as Moses and Aaron, nourishing. Moses himself is ambiguous, hairless, his face a simple, neutral expression. He seems to grow out of the tablets, presenting a merger between character and content. Moses looks directly at the viewer.

In her left hand, the Shulamite cups her left breast, which is drawn as both breast and Aaron. Like her right breast, there is a pink nipple at the bottom, the *hoshen mishpat* (priestly breastplate) and Aaron's head and face at the top. Like Moses, Aaron is ambiguous, hairless, his face, although full lipped and looking towards the viewer, is neutral. Aaron also grows out of the symbol that represents him, the *hoshen mishpat*, his shoulders becoming the outline of the Shulamite's breast.

The faces of Moses, Aaron and the Shulamite are drawn with similar lines, although in varied thickness. They resemble one another, with prominent noses, lips, and high brows. This draws a visual connection between the three characters, suggesting not only aesthetic but possibly literary, mythological, or even biological connections between them. Whether or not these characters existed in literal historical reality, this artistic treatment of them connects them across space and time. Perhaps, as the Shulamite's breasts might nourish a child and Moses and Aaron may nourish the Jewish people, these forms of nourishment are interwoven. As the larger character in the image, the Shulamite takes precedence, Moses and Aaron are her appendages, she presents them and their contributions to the viewer through her body and posture.

Chapter 5

For chapter 5, I selected verse 5:13. The verse states:

לְחֵי כַעֲרוֹגַת הַבָּשָׂם מִגְדָּלוֹת מְרֻקָּחִים שִׁפְתוֹתָיו שְׁוֹשְׁנִים נִטְפֹּת מִזֶּר עֵבֶר

His cheeks are like beds of spices,

Banks of perfume

His lips are like lilies;

*They drip flowing myrrh.*²³

Here, the Shulamite describes her beloved. She is providing an answer to the daughters of Jerusalem, who ask what makes the Shulamite's lover better than another. The simple meaning of this verse focuses on the beloved's face. *His cheeks are like beds of spices, banks of perfume*-he is expensive, valuable, and integral to life. Spices are used in cooking, in cleansing and decoration of the body as well as in ritual. The Shulamite describes her beloved's lips as lilies/roses. The focal point of many a face, lips are central for speaking, eating and sexual encounters. Describing the beloved's lips like roses simply means they are beautiful and sensual to behold or encounter. The lily/rose appears and reappears throughout the Song and is a central image that describes both Shulamite and beloved. Additionally, she describes his lips as dripping flowing myrrh. Perhaps this is a reference to the Shulamite's bodily fluids, underscoring their sexual relationship. Alternatively, this may refer to the sweetness of his words.

My exegesis of verse 5:13, expressed in image 9, is titled *Eyes like Doves, Lily Lips*. The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. This image explores the body of the Shulamite's beloved, described in the verse. Centered on the page, he is drawn as part human, part animal, part water. His face, which is drawn in metallic gold, is the focal point of the image. His eyes are two black doves. These match his hair, which is long, black, and flowing into the shape of a dove, with small orange claws, beak and bright blue eye. His lips are not shown at all in lip form. Rather, they are a lily drawn in pinks and oranges, with green stamen. The beloved's body is represented facing the viewer, with neck and shoulders referencing the human bodily shape. This flows down into a

²³ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 87.

watery river where the torso and legs would be, flowing off the page. The beloved's body is presented in shades of blues and greens, reminiscent of water in a stream. The blue of his hair dove's eye appears here as well.

In this image, the beloved is a representation of nature, with fluidity and fertility at the core. His body made up of water, flowers, birds, and valuable metals expresses how he relates to the earth as well as human emotion. His body, represented by water, surfaces associations with sorrow, passing time and the waters of birth.

Chapter 5 Commentary

For commentary on Chapter 5, I have focused on Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, the 14th century Provençal commentator, also known as the Ralbag. Known for his work to integrate Aristotle's teachings into Judaism, via Maimonides and Averroes.²⁴ I selected the Ralbag's commentary on biblical verse 5:12:

עֵינָיו כִּיּוֹנִים עַל־אֶפְקֵי מַיִם רְחֻצוֹת בְּחֶלֶב יִשְׁבּוֹת עַל־מְלֶאֶת

His eyes are like doves beside the water-brooks

Washed with milk

And fitly set.²⁵

The simple meaning of this verse is a beauty-based description of the Shulamite's beloved. His eyes are described with an image of birds, next to a water source. The image is gentle and peaceful. And yet, these same bird-like eyes are washed with milk, perhaps an example of

²⁴Tamar Rudavsky. "Gersonides." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2020 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/gersonides/>.

²⁵ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 87.

nourishment and fertility like the milk a mother feeds to a baby. The beloved's eyes are fitly set, even and balanced. Overall, this verse creates an image of a beautiful, gentle, peaceful man who nourishes those around him.

The Ralbag interprets this verse according to allegory. He focuses on the specificity of doves, birds that represent peace and new beginnings. For the Ralbag, these doves are found by the water because water enhances beauty and vision, and vision occurs through water. For him, washing one's eyes with milk signals an enhancement and improvement of beauty and vision. Perhaps this is some form of ancient or medieval beauty ritual? Finally, the Ralbag interprets the last section of the verse, fitly set, as meaning the beloved's eyes are perfectly placed. Here, the beloved's literal and metaphorical vision is clear. For the Ralbag, the important allegory that relates to this verse is interpretation of the beloved's eyes as not literal eyes, rather eyes of his intellect. This means that if these eyes are perfect, then their intellectual understanding is also perfect. ²⁶

This commentary is confusing, somewhat vague, and lengthy. Overall, it is another example of allegorizing the bodies found in the Song, this time focusing on the beloved instead of the Shulamite. The Ralbag is concerned with sight in a non-literal sense. Rather, he considers what it means to "see" with one's intellect and mind.

²⁶ Kellner, Menachem Marc. *Commentary on Song of Songs: Levi Ben Gershom (Gersonides)*. Yale University Press, 1998.

My exegesis of the Ralbag on 5:12, expressed in image 10, is titled *His Eyes Become Water*. The image measures 11”x14” and is pencil on paper. In this image, the water from the biblical verse is present, flowing out from the beloved in shapes that reference streams and the waves of a scroll unfurled. Like the Ralbag’s commentary, this character cannot literally see, his eyes have literally become water. Instead of being cleansed by the liquids depicted, his eyes and vision have merged with them, leaving only his intellect to see. In a text as earthy, physical, and tangible as the Song, eliminating some sensory experience through drawing or allegory places greater focus on other elements of the text and its many meanings. Here, the beloved is beautiful yet made vulnerable, in contrast to other strength and power-based descriptions that he is characterized by elsewhere in the text. To imagine the beloved as seeing with his mind’s eye versus his physical eyes may also shift understanding of his love with the Shulamite. Without vision, that love becomes even more sensory but perhaps also less preoccupied with physical beauty. Expanding out from this drawing, the love depicted in it is a love of the body, mind, and spirit.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of the Song of Songs takes place in a garden. Much of the chapter consists of the Shulamite and male lover describing one another. The daughters of Jerusalem also make an appearance, asking the Shulamite where her lover is. They ask to help the Shulamite seek him, but she already seems to know his whereabouts-the garden. In full, verse 6:3 states:

אָגִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי הָרֶעָה בְּשׁוֹשַׁנִּים.

I am my beloved's

And my beloved is mine;

*He browses among the lilies.*²⁷

At the beginning of chapter 6, the Shulamite describes her male lover, focusing on their mutual, loved based ownership of one another in 6:3, אָגִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי, *I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.*²⁸ Verse 6:3 concludes with the Shulamite calling her beloved הָרֶעָה בְּשׁוֹשַׁנִּים, the shepherd amidst the lilies. The simple meaning of this verse makes an assertion about the relationship between the Shulamite and her lover, even if that relationship is only defined in the Shulamite's fantasy. The Shulamite places her own status first, envisioning herself as belonging to her beloved. She places her beloved's status second, naming him as belonging to her. Perhaps this defines the lovers' status in relation to the Shulamite's view of her own status. Through her use of the term דוֹדִי, beloved, the Shulamite casts the dynamic between the beloveds as desirable, at least in her own view.

The latter portion of the verse, הָרֶעָה בְּשׁוֹשַׁנִּים, is curious. The simple meaning seems to define the רֶעָה as the male lover, as the phrase directly follows the Shulamite's description of her beloved and uses the male form רֶעָה. It is unclear if the simple meaning of the שׁוֹשַׁנִּים refers to the floral, Edenic setting that most of the Song takes place within or if it is a metaphor for the Shulamite's vulva or the sexual relationship between the Shulamite and male beloved. In either case, this part of the verse is intimate and expressive.

²⁷ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 91.

²⁸ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 91.

My exegesis of verse 6:3, expressed in image 11, is titled *To Feast Upon Lilies*. The image measures 11”x14” and is pencil on paper. The drawing features the male lover, although he appears rather gender ambiguous. He kneels gently, situated in the lower right-hand corner of the page. This placement of a focal point is known to draw the eye easily for viewers and suggests peace and comfort. The lover is featured in profile, with his eyes closed and full lips pursed. His head is bent, as if reaching towards the lilies he holds in his hands. The lover’s body is slender, even shapely, with long limbs and a curved back. He kneels on his left leg, with his knee and calf tucked beneath him. He is drawn with simple black lines, with little extraneous detail except for the bright pink of his lips. This color draws attention to their sensual form and the color corresponds to the bright, warm tones of the lilies. This visual match creates a connection between the flowers and lips, from which the viewer can infer as they please. The lover’s hair is made up of wild, black curls, adding movement and vitality to his form and to the image overall. The focal point of the drawing is his gentle grasp of the lilies as he draws them towards his face. It seems that he may have just picked them up in the garden, they rest naturally in his hands.

Chapter 6 Commentary

For commentary on chapter 6, I revisited commentator Ezra ben Solomon, focusing on his interpretation of 6:5.²⁹ It is important to re-note that Ezra ben Solomon was a prominent Kabbalist in 13th century Gerona, Spain.³⁰ Kabbalah views the Song of Songs as a sacred marriage between the male and female parts of God, represented through marriage between God and the Shekhinah. In this approach, the Jewish people are the offspring of that union.

²⁹ Ezra ben Solomon on Song of Songs 6:5

³⁰ "Ezra ben Solomon." Encyclopaedia Judaica. Encyclopedia.com, 22 Feb. 2024.
<https://www.encyclopedia.com>.

There is debate about the origins of the Shekhinah as an entity separate from God, with Gershom Scholem offering the 12th century and more recent scholars claiming ancient origins. For some, Shekhinah is God's divine consort. For others, Shekhinah is part of God. For still others, Shekhinah is the embodiment of the Jewish people. In some sources the Shekhinah is defined as female, in others it is ambiguous. For the Kabbalists, Knesset Yisrael (the collective Jewish people) and the Shekhinah (God's presence) are one, united in their status as God's consort.³¹ On the lowest rung of the Sefirotic realm, the ten-part divine realm, the Shekhinah serves as the portal to divine mysteries. For the Kabbalists, the Shekhinah is also the source of all realms outside of the divine realm. For the Song and its interpretations, texts about love, sex and unity, these Kabbalistic ideas are significant because Kabbalah understands the midrashic tradition as being about the relationship between God and the Jewish people, with an understanding of that love being the uniting of male and female forces within God. With God, the Kabbalists embark on re-establishing cosmic unity or oneness through uniting male and female.³²

My exegesis of verse 6:5, expressed in image 12, is titled *Shekhinah*, it is pencil on paper and measures 11" x14". In the biblical verse 6:5, the Shulamite's beloved describes her hair as ,שְׁעָרָהּ כְּעֶדֶר הָעִזִּים שֹׁגְלִישׁוּ מִן־הַגִּלְעָד, *Your hair is like a flock of goats, streaming down from Gilead.* The simple meaning of this verse is that the Shulamite's hair is long and full of movement.³³ In contrast, Ezra takes this description in another direction.

³¹ Green, Arthur. "Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Christian Context." *AJS Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, April 2002, pp. 1-52.

³² Green, Arthur. "Intradivine Romance: The Song of Songs in the Zohar." *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, edited by Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, Fordham University Press, 2006, pp. 214-227.

³³ Song of Songs 6:5

In his piece of commentary, Ezra interprets the Shulamite as the Shekhinah and views this verse as beginning to relay praise of the Shekhinah.

שערך כעדר.

התחיל לסדר שבחי השכינה בשערה בעיניה בדקתה (נ"ל וברקתה) כפלה הרמון רקתך. מבעד לצאתה (נ"ל לצמתך).
סוגה בשושנים כלולה מו' קצוות וחתומה בכל ולכך אמר ששים המה מלכות

Your hair is like a flock of goats. The text begins to relate the praises of the shekhinah, her hair, eyes, and brow: “Your brow behind your veil [gleams] like a pomegranate split open” [6:6]. “Hedged around with lilies” [7:3]: She encompasses the six cosmic boundaries and is sealed by them all. Thus the verse states “There are sixty queens... [6:8]³⁴

Ezra focuses on the description of the Shulamite’s hair, eyes, and forehead, taking physical descriptions found in the biblical text, interpreting them into Kabbalistic terms. He invokes six cosmic boundaries, claiming that the Shulamite-as-Shekhinah encompasses them all. In this context, Ezra claims that the physical claims the biblical text makes about the Shulamite-as-Shekhinah mean that she is all the realms of the universe.

The drawing focuses on combining the descriptive elements found in the biblical text and the ideological orientation of the commentary. This drawing features a female character with a large head, small body and billowing hair. Scattered throughout her hair are goats of slightly varied sizes. The character’s hair is black, her body white (the color of the paper), her eyelids a greenish blue and her lips fuchsia. The goats are the same tone as her body, the white background of the

³⁴ Ezra ben Solomon on Song of Songs 6:5

paper, and their noses and ears share the same hue of light pink. Surrounded by negative space, the characters are all enveloped by the hair, connecting them to one another visually and conceptually.

The female character here is meant to evoke both Shulamite and Shekhinah, merging the characters noted in the biblical text and in Ezra's commentary. The figure of the Shulamite-as-Shekhinah is majestic, her body is willowy, nearly surrealist in its depiction. The proportions between head and body suggest a non-human character, one which references the human, female body but is not actually a human female. Imagining the Shulamite as otherworldly and the Shekhinah as embodied inverts the viewer or readers initial assumptions about both characters. Ezra's choice to interpret the discussion of the Shulamite's hair as a jumping off point to imagine the Shekhinah reveals the power of imagery and ability of many elements of human life to be gateways to the divine. While imagining these descriptions as related to the Shekhinah and not to a human, physical woman certainly implies a resistance to placing value on female representation in text, it also serves as a mode of bringing the mystical into a text that is placed very clearly in the human, physical realm.

The goats scattered throughout the Shulamite-as-Shekhinah's hair also merge descriptions found in the biblical text and in Ezra's commentary. While the biblical text uses the goats as a way of describing playfulness, aliveness, and movement in the Shulamite's physical body (hair), the commentary uses these descriptions as a point of origin for descriptions of the Shekhinah's majesty. In many contexts, a woman's hair is considered indecent when exposed, even licentious. Here, the goats tumbling through the Shulamite's hair signal physical and mystical joy, curiosity

and through their placement in the hair but also breaking free of the hair's border at several points, the intersections between the known, physical world and the unknown, mystical world.

Chapter 7

For chapter 7, I focused on verse 7:3. The chapter begins with the daughters of Jerusalem, urging the Shulamite to turn and be gazed upon. They say:

שָׁרְרֵךְ אֵגֶן הַסֵּהר אֶל־יָחֶסֶר הַמָּזֶג בְּטֶגֶל עֲרֻמַּת חָטִים סוּגָה בַּשּׁוֹשָׁנִים.

Your navel is the moon's

bright drinking cup.

May it brim with wine!

Surrounded by lilies.³⁵

This verse describes the Shulamite's body. The simple interpretation of the verse notes a focus on fertility. The description of her navel as round like the moon, brimming with wine and surrounded by lilies, is an image of spring, abundance, and oozing sexuality. The presence of the moon as a reference draws in associations of pregnancy and birth. The image of a rounded, full belly with a blood-colored substance (wine) evokes the menstrual cycle and bloods associated with labor and delivery. Like other verses noted in this paper, there are strong connections to nature present.

My exegesis of 7:3, expressed in drawing 13, is titled *As (the) Moon Sips*. The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. The drawing hinges on interpretation of הַסֵּהר as the moon. Like a goblet filled with wine, she is round, intoxicating and brimming with nourishment.

³⁵ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 99.

Additionally, the verse suggests that the Shulamite is an instrument of pleasure, which she herself celebrates.

This drawing features the Shulamite suspended in the air, her belly part wine goblet. She embraces the moon, shown in profile/half crescent and anthropomorphized. The Shulamite is drawn with simple, black lines, her face shown in profile parallel to the moon's. Her hair merges with the moon, connecting them like an umbilical cord. Like the night sky, the Shulamite and moon's shared hair, which cradles the moon gently, is dark, devoid of light. The Shulamite's visible eye is closed, her expression peaceful. Her closed eye, gently closed lips and downward direction of her head show this to be a tender moment between the Shulamite and moon, which presents the divine feminine, night, nature and time. The Shulamite's belly flows into the shape of a silver goblet, also referencing an umbilical cord, from which the moon gently sips wine, also the color of blood. The Shulamite's left arm embraces the moon, reminiscent of a nursing position. In this image, the Shulamite and moon are in an intimate relationship, with the Shulamite as a source of nourishment and comfort and the moon as a gentle participant.

Chapter 7 Commentary

Regarding commentary on chapter 7, I again selected Rashi, focusing on his interpretation of 7:6. Rashi is curious about the phrase *רֹאשׁוֹךְ עָלֶיךָ כַּכֶּרְמֶל*, *the head upon you is like (Mount) Carmel*, which is used to describe the Shulamite.³⁶ The simple meaning of this phrase is that the Shulamite's head (a representation of the Shulamite as a whole) is important, recognizable and significant to the Jewish people. Her head, atop her body, is an integral adornment.

³⁶ Translation my own

Jewish tradition contains a large literature about the Jewish people crowning God and imagery of the keter (crown). In many cases, content focusing on crowns as religious symbols in Judaism signal humans trying to bestow their blessings upon God. Through crowning God, the people involved gift God love and majesty.³⁷ In addition, there are myriad sources from Jewish sacred literature that discuss God's tefillin or God wearing tefillin. Such discussions found in the Talmud in Berakhot, the Hebrew bible in Isaiah, I Chronicles, Deuteronomy and Hosea are just a few.³⁸

Within this tradition, Rashi interprets the first segment of 7:6 as tefillin.

ראשך עליך ככרמל.

אלו תפלין שבראש שנאמר בהן "וראו כל עמי הארץ כי שם ה' נקרא עליה ויראו ממה". הרי היא חזקן ומוראן כסלע הרים, וכרמל הוא ראש ההרים.

*That which is upon your head is like Mount Carmel. These are the tefillin of the head, as it's said, "And all the peoples of the land will see the Name of God proclaimed over you, and they will regard you with awe." Thus this is their strength, and they are as awe inspiring as mountain cliffs, and Mount Carmel is the most prominent mountain.*³⁹

In this piece of commentary, Rashi interprets the biblical description of the Shulamite's head as tefillin. Tefillin, one of the most recognizable Jewish ritual objects, are a significant adornment. The simple meaning of Rashi's commentary here is that the Shulamite, a representation

³⁷ Green, Arthur. Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

³⁸ Adler, Tali. "Does God Wear Tefillin?" Sefaria, 3 Mar. 2014.

³⁹ Translation my own

of the Jewish people, have been adorned by God. Here, the marker of that adornment is tefillin. Mount Carmel is understood to be the most recognizable and important mountain. With these associations, the commentary establishes the Jewish people, via the tefillin adorned Shulamite, as positively marked by God.

My exegesis of Rashi's commentary on 7:6 is expressed in image 14 and is titled *Caught in the Thicket*. The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. This image shows the face of the Shulamite, staring the viewer head on. She is floating in space, her neck and shoulders a reference to the rest of her being. She is placed at the center of the page, taking up a majority of the space with limited negative space surrounding her. Her gaze is cast downwards, looking towards the lower left of the page. Her lips curl slightly at the corners, giving her a peaceful expression. The Shulamite is colorless, aside from her purple, braided hair.

Resting on the Shulamite's forehead are tefillin, with the straps colored in a dark, stark black. This use of filled in, black color draws attention to the tefillin, without crowding the top of the image. The straps themselves suggest boundness and attentiveness to tradition and observance, while the manner in which they sway upon the Shulamite's chest introduces an element of playfulness and sensuality, referencing the broader Song of Songs text. The image of the Shulamite, a woman, wearing tefillin is almost certainly not what Rashi imagined as he wrote his interpretation. Nevertheless, the integration of Rashi and the character from the Song work together to weave the biblical text, commentary, and artistic exegesis together.

The Shulamite's four, purple braids are studded with crowns. Her hair is purple both for purple as the color of royalty as well as Rashi's connection between Nazirite hair being beautified with commandments like braided purple wool. The Shulamite's hair is meant to reference both pieces of the interpretation, it is both purple like a Nazirite and beautiful and commandment laden too. Her braids are studded with crowns, depicted in metallic silvers and golds. This element of the drawing refers to the latter part of the verse, מֶלֶךְ אָסוּר בְּרֶהֱטִים, *a King is held captive in the tresses*. Rashi interprets this as the divine, caught in the Nazirite's hair. This is meant to be an expression of a Nazir's piety.

By investigating Rashi's interpretation of Nazirites and piety in *Caught in the Thicket*, I sought to approach the Shulamite as an explicitly pious yet boundary pushing character. Through drawing her in tefillin and in reference to Nazirite practices, the Shulamite is placed inside of recognized Jewish practice, even if those practices are not supposedly intended for her. Sprinkling crowns throughout her hair further supports this approach to not simply seeing the Shulamite as a stand-in for or representation of the divine but as an expression of the divine herself.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of the Song of Songs is the final chapter of the text, with the story stopping rather abruptly. I focused on verse 8:4:

הַשְׁבַּעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם מִה־תַּעֲזְרוּ | וּמִה־תַּעֲרְרוּ אֶת־הָאֵהָבָה עַד שֶׁתִּחַפֵּץ

I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem:

Do not wake or rouse

Love until it please!

The simple meaning of this verse is an appeal to the daughters of Jerusalem, who function like a Greek chorus throughout the text of the Song. Although the daughters are referred to and even speak throughout the Song, it is not clear exactly who the characters are. At times they function almost like a narrator. At others, an anonymous group the Shulamite appeals to. At still other times, the daughters of Jerusalem interact with the Shulamite, questioning her perhaps playfully, perhaps in a taunting tone. In this verse, the Shulamite makes a final plea to the daughters of Jerusalem, asking them to refrain from becoming involved with love at the wrong time. While it is unclear from the text if she is referring to love in general, love in her perception of their lives or their role in love in her life. It is also possible that a simple read of this verse can interpret love as sex. With this read of the verse, the Shulamite warns the daughters of Jerusalem to be careful about when they have sexual encounters.

My exegesis of 8:4 is expressed in image 15 and is titled *Daughters of Jerusalem*. The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. The image focuses on depicting the daughters, representing them via intricate, different faces of various sizes, tucked into vegetation. Although it might seem obvious to use an evocation of a Jerusalem skyline, the use of vegetation is intended to tie the image into the rest of the setting of the Song, which features lush, floral and greenery in a garden-like setting.

The green leaves or stalks represent the context of the Song as well as the symbolism typically associated with blooming nature, fertility, earthiness, the passing of time. Faces sprinkled amidst this foliage presents an image of the Shulamite, the daughters of Jerusalem and the text as something which is a part of nature, not standing in opposition to it. This suggests that the love the

Shulamite asks the daughters not to awaken/rouse is not itself problematic. Rather, it is important to pay attention to the connection between love and the cycles of nature.

Chapter 8 Commentary

Regarding commentary for chapter 8, I deviated into territory that was key for understanding how to approach the Daughters of Jerusalem and their role within the larger narrative. Also focusing on 8:4, I chose to explore a nascent theory discovered in a recent course in a recent doctoral class on the Megillot at New York University, taught by Dan Fleming. In *The City of Emar and Its Women*, Dan Fleming posits that the Daughters of Jerusalem may be an edition of a legal entity that existed at Emar, in which women could have status as legal deciders over certain rites, particularly the creation and dissolution of marriages. Referred to as a group, this entity predates but is oddly similar to the Daughters of Jerusalem.⁴⁰

In exploring this concept, I found that it filled a hole in the story and interpretation of the Song of Songs. While defining the Daughters of Jerusalem as like a Greek chorus, my initial analysis works much of the time, it does not quite explain the content of the Shulamite's appeals to them. Noted earlier, the Shulamite appeals to the Daughters of Jerusalem throughout the Song not to awaken love until it is time. This can easily be interpreted as an admonishment, warning or assertion that her own time is right for love. In contrast, Fleming suggests that the Shulamite, while taking pleasure in her encounters with her beloved, does not want these experiences to kick start marriage proceedings. If the Daughters of Jerusalem are like the Daughters or Maidens of Emar, her appeal has more weight. If both sets of daughters fulfill similar roles, the Shulamite is asking

⁴⁰ Fleming, Daniel. "The City of Emar and Its Women." *The Biblical Colloquium*, 2021.

the entity that legally controls marriage to not categorize her acts or feelings of love with the start of marriage rituals. While this interpretation does not supply a clear reason why the Shulamite would be asking for such a thing, that leaves space for additional layers of new commentary.

My exegesis of this interpretative commentary is expressed in drawing 16, titled *The Judge*. The image measures 11"x14" and is pencil on paper. The image shows two women of indeterminate age in a pastoral, nature setting with a nearly human sized scale. Each woman is depicted somewhat ambiguous, without clear signs of wealth or status. They are outlined in black, and they are the colorless, white of the naked page. Soft, green hills unfurl below their feet and off into the distance, with a gentle blue sky overhead, enveloping them. Each woman has her foot on one side of the scale, balancing it so that it does not decisively tilt in either direction. This scale is meant to represent the weight of decision making that lies upon the Daughters of Jerusalem as interpreted through the status of the Daughters of Emar. In the image, these two women represent the larger group. They are responding to the Shulamite's appeal not to start marriage proceedings but appear to be in disagreement. One side of the scale and the woman stepping on it presumably supports the Shulamite's ask. The other side presumably does not. It is left to the viewer to decide if an ultimate decision is made.

Ending with this piece of interpretation, not *quite* commentary, speaks to the cumulative goal of my project. While an important element was and remains understanding the Song through medieval commentators and visual art, a goal that emerged over time was to explore and imagine new ways to interpret the Song today considering contemporary biblical scholarship, creative exegesis and viewpoints that have not been centered throughout history. As much remains to learn

and infinite art remains to be made, I consider this thesis the formal starting point of my work on the Song of Songs. I hope continued seeking will result in a full visual exploration of the entire text accounting for medieval commentary and more. This thesis has also resulted in the exhibition *Like a Rose Among Thorns*, which will be installed at Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City on March 4th, 2024.

Numbered Image Gallery

Image 1



Image 2

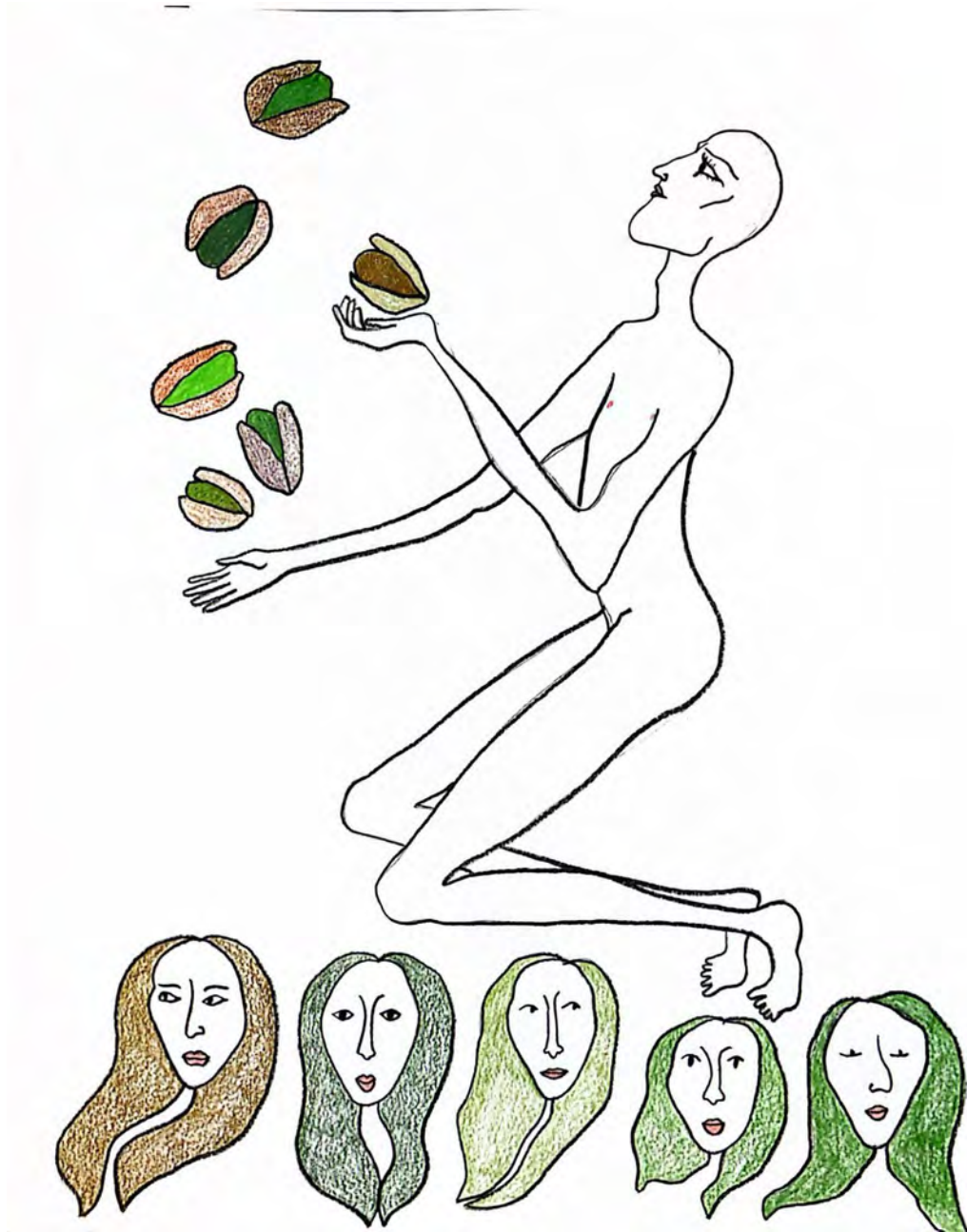


Image 3

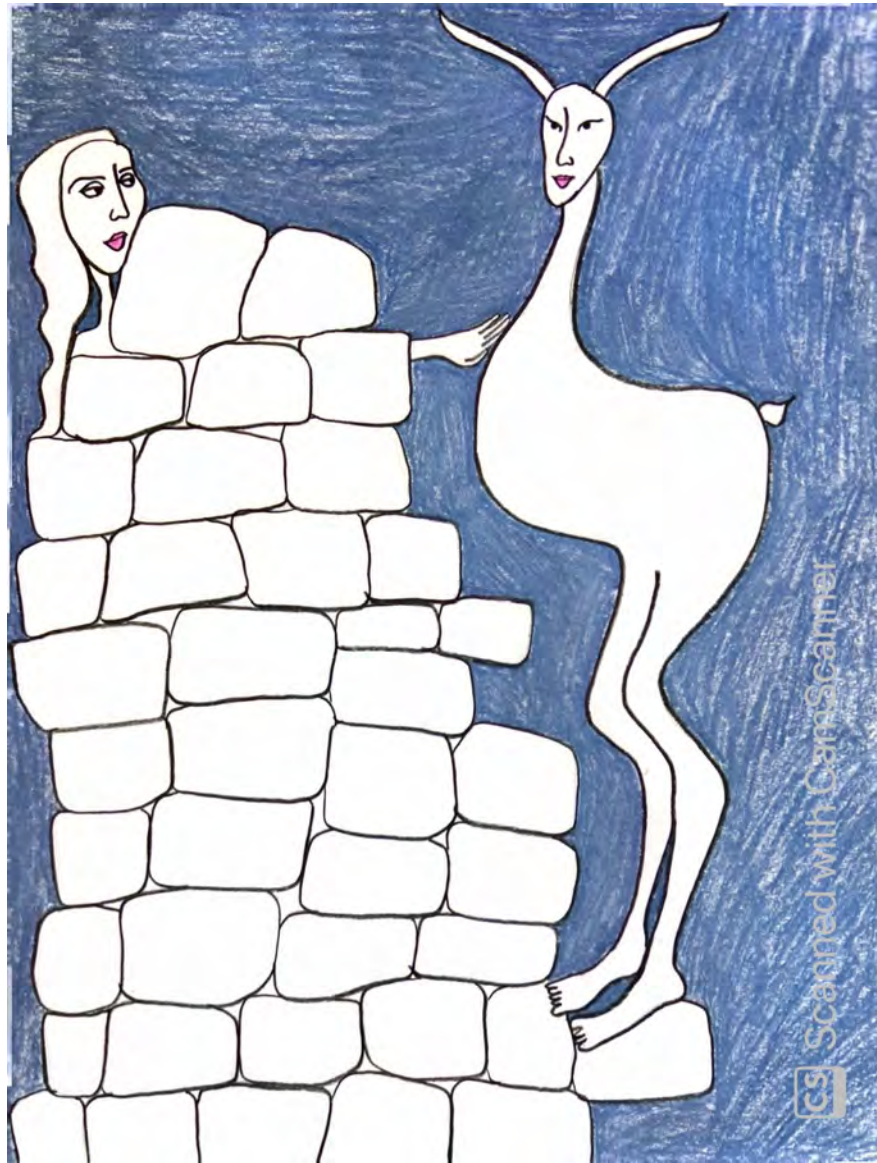


Image 4



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Image 5

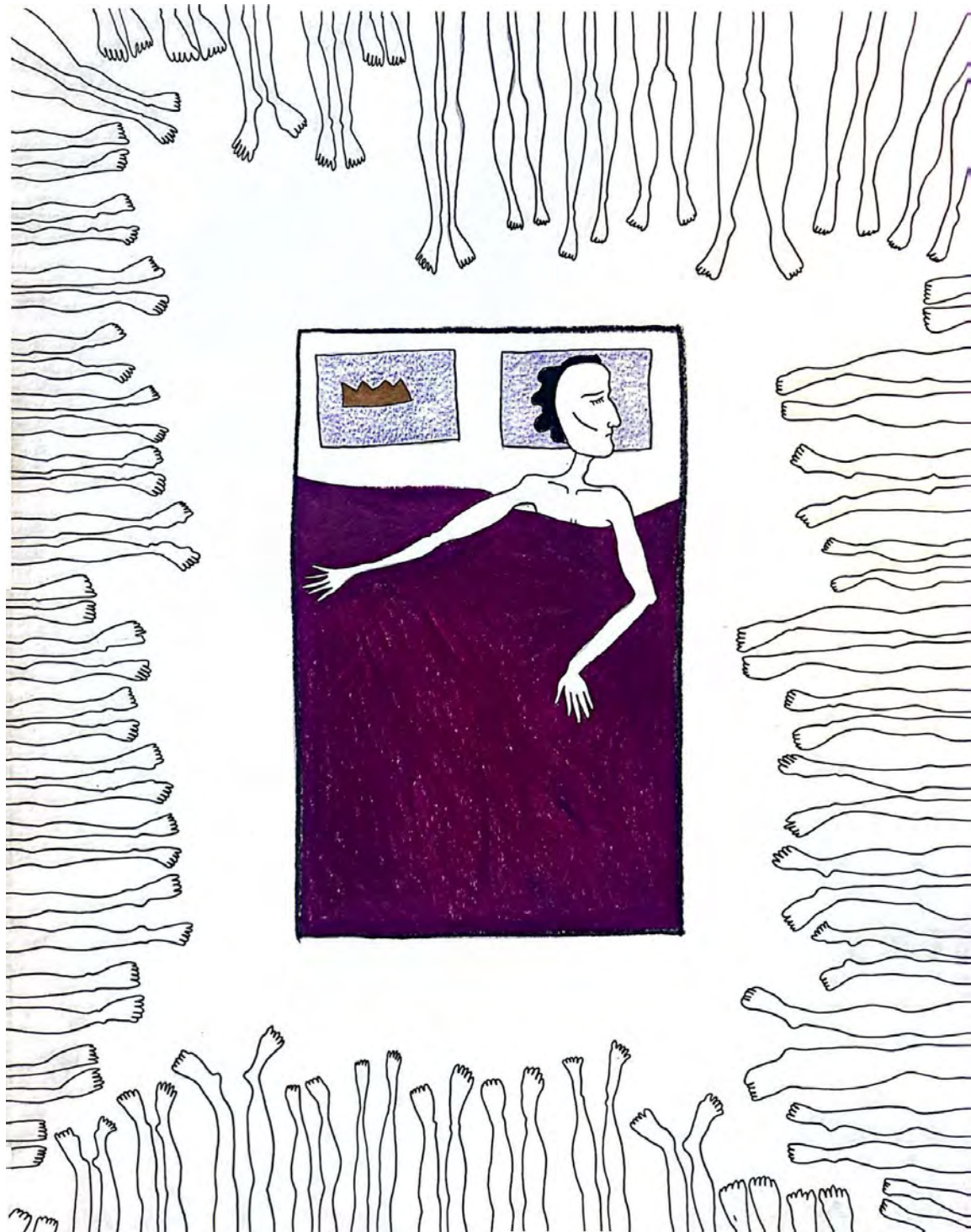


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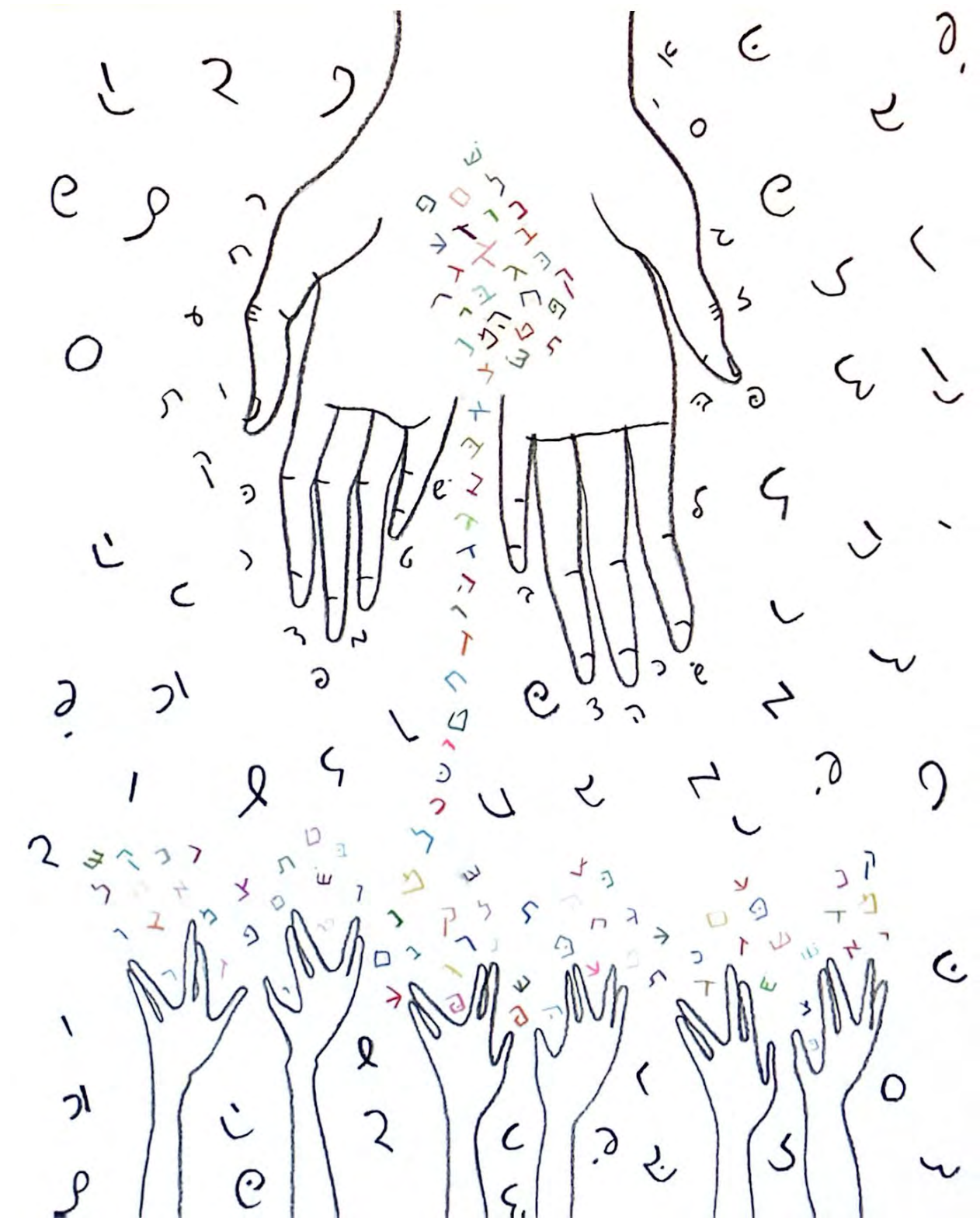


Image 7

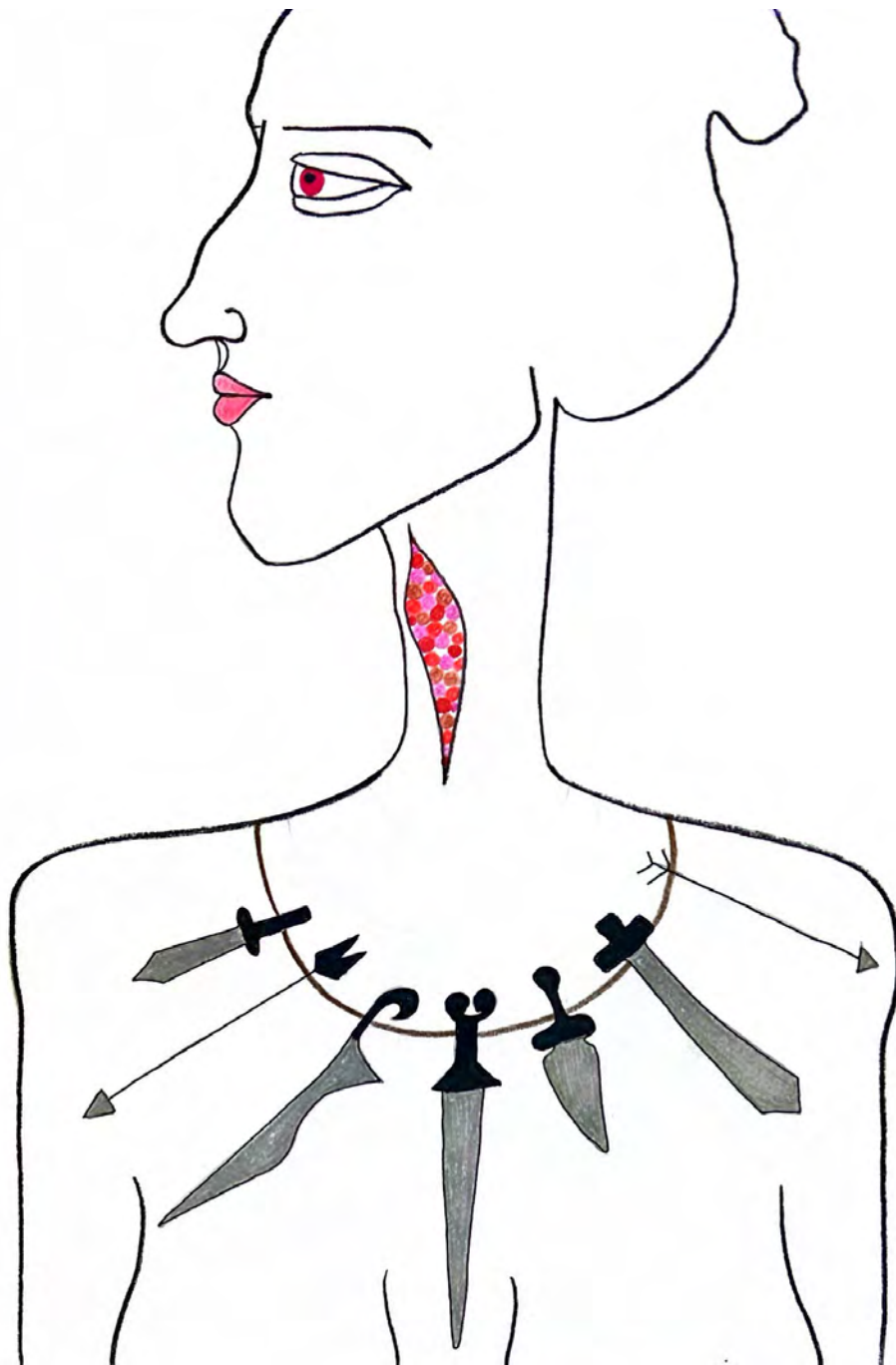


Image 8



Image 9



Image 10

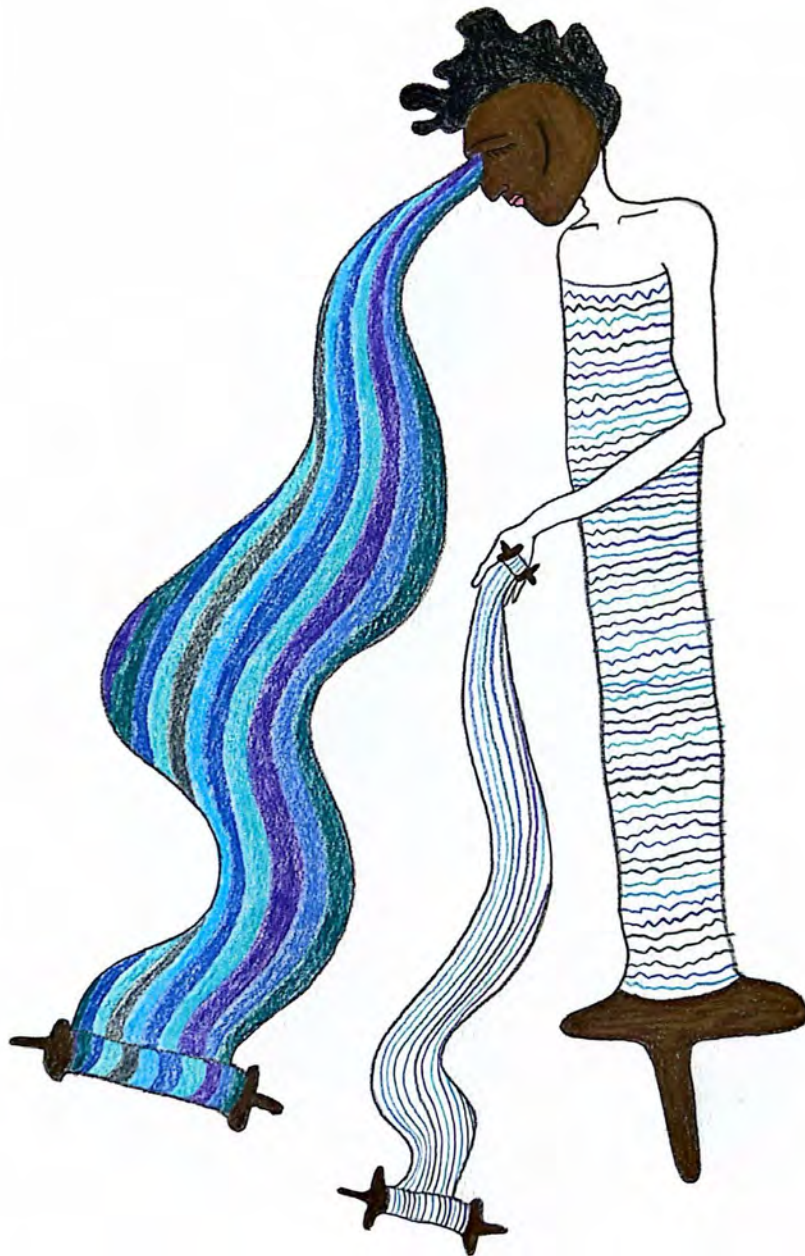


Image 11



Image 12



Image 13

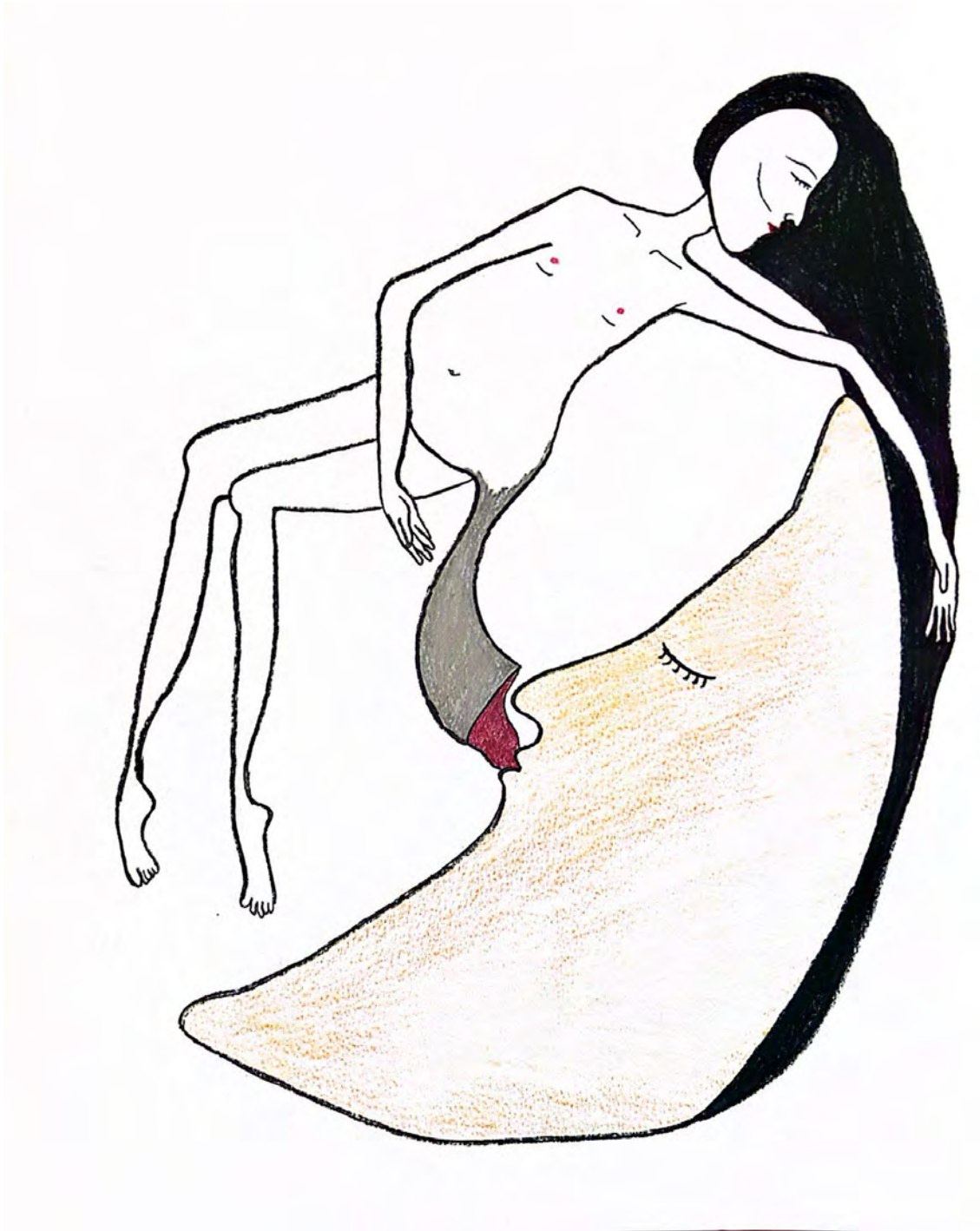


Image 14



Image 15



Image 16



Image List

Chapter 1

1. To Rest Like Sheep, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2024
2. A Snack for the Weary, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2024

Chapter 2

3. A Peek Beyond the Wall, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2023
4. To Never Depart/The Journey, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2023

Chapter 3

5. Sixty Warriors and Solomon's Bed, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2023
6. By the Hands of Solomon, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2024

Chapter 4

7. A Neck like the Tower of David, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2023
8. Your Two Breasts, Moses and Aaron, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2023

Chapter 5

9. Eyes like Doves, Lily Lips, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2024
10. His Eyes Become Water, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2024

Chapter 6

11. To Feast Upon Lilies, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2024
12. Shekhinah, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2024

Chapter 7

13. As the Moon Sips, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2024
14. Caught in the Thicket, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2024

Chapter 8

15. Daughters of Jerusalem, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2023
16. The Judges, Emar, 11"x14", Pencil on Paper, 2024

Exhibition Details

Title: Like a Rose Among Thorns

Installation Date: March 4th, 2024

Exhibition Opening Date: April 2nd, 2024

Show description:

Like a Rose Among Thorns

What can contemporary readers learn from the Song of Songs? Encounter this rich, sensual text through sixteen drawings created by rabbinical student and artist Arielle Stein. Mixing visual interpretation of the original biblical text with medieval

commentary and Biblical criticism, Arielle explores the Bible's most famous (or infamous) love story.

Panel text:

What does the Torah teach us about love? The Song of Songs has a few suggestions. While readers might not typically look to the Bible for a primer on human to human or human to divine sensuality, the song does not mince words (or imagery).

Integrating biblical text, commentary and visual exegesis, *Like a Rose Among Thorns* describes the exuberant, curious and lush world in which the song takes place. *Like a Rose Among Thorns* traces the song chapter by chapter, evoking key moments in the love story the text presents, offering viewers the opportunity to encounter expressions of the original text and related commentary while getting lost in the language of artist and rabbinical student Arielle Stein.

Stein's 16 drawings, arranged in diptychs, employ a combination of delicate, dark line and subtle use of color, focusing on simple drawing techniques. Stein's images are neither illustrations nor literal depictions. Rather, they reveal the narrative through a surreal lens; men become stags, Moses drips from the Shulamite's breast, the Moon drinks from a belly goblet, Torah scrolls flow like grief-laden water from a beloved's eyes and mouth. Merging animals and humans, nature and the built world, Stein's imagery is nearly that of a fairytale gone wrong. And yet, the sinister is kept at bay.

Like a Rose Among Thorns provides an opportunity to encounter the song through fresh eyes. For Stein, the series offers a chance to express the centrality of intimate relationships within sacred text. Taking 18 months to complete during 2023-2024, the drawings are part of a larger project in which Stein will produce a full visual guide (graphic novel) of the Song of Songs. These drawings represent a significant moment in Stein's artistic exploration, leading to ongoing integrations of Jewish sacred literature and her own artistic practice.