

Torah: Ex. 33:12-34:26

Haftarah: Ez. 37:1-14

Brit Chadashah: John 5:14-30

Megillah Shir Ha Shirim

During the festival cycle, historical Judaism has established that five books or scrolls (Megillot) are read, with a sixth for good measure. The Book of Esther is read at Purim. The Song of Songs is Read at Passover. The Book of Ruth is read a Shavuot (Pentecost). The Book of Lamentations is read at Tisha B'Av (9th of Av, when both temples were destroyed). The Book of Ecclesiastes is read at Sukkoth/Tabernacles. The sixth is the Book of Jonah, which is usually read on Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement.

Each book either illustrates the theme of the festival, or adds a balancing perspective to help sharpen the focus of the festival. With the Song of Songs, the lyric Idyll or love poem of sexual love is used as an illustration of the love which G-d has for Israel, and of the love which Israel is called to have for the L-rd. Many historical commentators have tried to connect the sexual allusions to the higher, or more exalted message of G-d's redeeming love, and you guessed it, gentile commentators have waded in and have tried to apply its message to the love which our Messiah has for His church.

Today on Shabbat Chol HaMoed Pesach, I want to do three things with the Song. **First** I want to look at how we are to understand the Book. **Secondly**, I want to look at how the Book applies to Israel and to the church. And **thirdly**, I want to examine how we are to apply the Book to our own lives, in response to its very powerful, intimate message.

There are two ways of looking at the Book. It is either *symbolic*, or it is *literal*. If it is symbolic, it could be an allegory, where each character and each event has a second, special meaning, beyond the literal meaning of the text. It could also be typological, where characters and events represent themes, which are given special emphasis in the Book, but which point to future events, and which must be understood in terms of this later meaning, beyond the context of the writing.

How could we tell if the Book were intended to be symbolic? Either the Book would say so, or symbolic images would appear to indicate what was being said could not be taken literally. In the Song of Songs, there are a lot of images – **similes** and **metaphors**, but there is no indication that an allegory, or second story is being told over and above the one which appears through the text. The Book is a song, specifically, the Song, and as such tells a story. *It is a story of intense sexual love.* How this story applies to us at Passover is a different issue, because most commentators feel that the use of sexual love is not an appropriate comparison for G-d's love for us. The Bible feels differently.

Since I believe the Book is literal, then what do these intensely personal sexual encounters between Solomon and the Shulamite mean for us, and what are they doing in the Bible? If this is a Book specifically about sexual love, should we not just use it to help young couples prepare for their sexual life in marriage, and remove it from the cycle of Passover readings? What does sexual love have to do with either our love for G-d, or His love for us? Quite a bit actually.

The answer lies in two of the most common *motifs* (a symbol or image which appears frequently, in so many contexts that its meaning stands out with very little explanation) in Scripture: **marriage**, the intense physical intimacy which is the gift of gender, and **sexual infidelity**, the abuse of that intimacy. Beginning with the prophets of the exile, G-d calls Israel his **bride**, His **wife**, His **betrothed** and even His **lover**. Yeshua talks about the marriage supper of the Lamb, and calls the New Jerusalem both His bride and His wife. *He wants the kind of intense spiritual intimacy with us which is best illustrated by the physical intimacy which exists between a husband and a wife.*

However, we need to look at the other side of the coin. Throughout the prophets, Israel is called to abandon her *spiritual harlotry*, which is another way of saying idolatry, and to return to the L-rd, her true husband. You see, in the ancient Middle East, many of the religions incorporated all kinds of *perverted sexual behaviour* as part of their rituals of worship. There is no place for this kind of nonsense with the Holy G-d of Israel.

He took what His people were actually doing (incorporating perverted sexual practices into their worship rituals), beginning with the incident of the golden calf, and on the plains of Moab, and called His people to abandon their perverted sexual practices and to return to a pure worship of the only true and holy G-d. *Throughout the Scriptures, He always used the physical relationship of passion and faithfulness which He created gender in order for us to experience in marriage, as the kind of spiritual intensity, including passion and faithfulness, which He created us to experience with Him.*

So, both marriage and sexual love are appropriate illustrations, or *motifs* to use when we speak of certain aspects of G-d's great love for us, and for the kind of spiritual intensity we are to have, when we relate to the G-d who redeemed Israel, and whose Son died on the cross for the sins of the world.

How does the Song of Songs apply to us, as believers, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile? In order to answer this question, let me review the story which the Song is telling. There are two main characters: Solomon and someone called the Shulamit, who is a young lady he falls in love with. The song speaks of their intense and sometimes stormy courtship, and introduces us to several minor characters.

In Ancient dramas, there was sometimes a chorus, which would repeat a refrain, or chorus, in between the scenes or verses, and we find this chorus, called the daughters of Jerusalem in the Song of Songs (5:9; 6:1). There are also guards, and soldiers, and family members, but the minor characters which most apply to us are the daughters of Jerusalem, and the little sister, who is only mentioned once at the end of the Book (8:8).

These ladies first sing in between the intense expressions of love which Solomon and the Shulamit exchange, and then they ask the Shulamit what is so great about her lover (5:9). When she answers, they are convinced He is worth their attention and agree to search for Him as well (6:1). At the end of the song, they mention a sister, who is not ready for sexual love, and both they and the Shulamit will watch over her until she is ready to join them in their pursuit of this great lover (8:8-10).

Three disturbing images arise out of this song, and I want to use them as both my conclusion, and as the application I believe we need to make of this sensitive, passionate expression of sexual love. **First of all**, towards the end of the song, the chorus describes the Shulamit with the same kind of sexual intensity which Solomon uses earlier. **Secondly**, towards the end of the song, the Shulamit describes Solomon as her brother, as one who was fed milk at the same breasts as she was (8:1-3). **Lastly**, the daughters of Jerusalem describe a little sister, whom they will protect until she is ready to experience the wonder of Solomon, as they all have apparently have.

When Solomon wrote this, he was a polygamist who was constantly adding to his harem. Also in the ancient Middle East, sometimes brothers and sisters became husband and wife (Abraham and Sarah), because the boundaries of kinship were sometimes violated (Moses' father married his aunt, and Judah married his daughter in law). It was not strange therefore, that members of the same harem would describe the current favourite with the same kind of erotic language as the king – and that they would be willing to introduce one of their sisters in this community.

None of this sexual behaviour occurred outside of marriage, and the song describes the kind of bond which the husband and the wife are called to enjoy as part of what it means to be married. However, in our Messiah, as a community, we are His corporate, generational bride, and the *temporal distinctions of gender and kinship which separate us will one day disappear* (Gal. 3:28).

This does not mean that we should abandon kinship and gender bonds and practice all kinds of sexual behaviour, which the Bible correctly describes as perverted. It means that we need to understand one of the greatest mysteries about G-d and one of the greatest spiritual tensions which we have to come to terms with, as members of His cosmic bride: His eternal love for us and which we are to share with each other.

G-d desires each of us with a passion which only sexual love comes close to describing. He finds us as beautiful and as wonderful as Solomon finds the Shulamit, and as we grow and mature in Him, we will come to find Him just as wonderful, as beautiful and as desirable as the Shulamit finds Him. Finally, and I have said this before, there is no room for jealousy in the body of Messiah. He loves each of us as if we were His only love, and He loves all of us equally, playing no favourites. We have to love each other, and to let His love be the bond which unites us together.

Revelation refers to virgins who have not defiled themselves sexually and the Parables of Yeshua speak of virgins waiting to be called into the marriage supper of the Lamb. *In this life, we are called to practice biblical sexuality, which does not violate the boundaries of gender and of kinship, or species.* In the life to come, we will experience a oneness which transcends all current limitations, and which we are called to experience on at least two levels: With Him and with each other.

We are to love one another as if we were family, even where no physical kinship bond exists. We are to love one another, with the understanding that the bond which unites us in this life, will last through eternity, and so must never be violated. On that glorious day, when all abominations are removed and when all things are made new, all brokenness between us will be removed and our oneness will become an **actual reality**, instead of a **spiritual principle**.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are the two greatest challenges believers face, and the unity we experience and the love we share are our greatest testimony to the world (John 13:34, 35). What happens when the harem fights, and when jealousy and intrigue divide us into factions which want to endlessly bicker and tear each other apart? **First** we need to renew our love for Him, and allow the spiritual passion of the cross to consume all our rage, hatred, disappointment and grief. **Then** we need to let this renewed love for Him renew our love for each other.

However, when this love is not returned, when the bond is broken, we need to mourn, and commit our losses unto Him until our hearts are healed, because we can always love Him, and He will always love us. As part of this, we need to love those who return our love, while we wait for the little sisters of the world to reach the stage of spiritual puberty where they will be ready to join our community, and experience the same incredible intensity of love which the Song of Song uses sexuality to describe. And we need to train our new little sisters: "not to do what your big sister did" (with apologies to Elvis).

We are called to love, even when we encounter opposition (5:7), anything else is a waste of our time and of His. As Pesach draws to a close for another year, let us renew our understanding of His great love for each one of us, and for all of us. Let us renew our understanding of the kind of love we are to exercise among ourselves, after all, we have so much in common - our great love for the L-rd. We need to let this love burn within us, and be the driving force of both our lives in the world and of our lives among ourselves.

Chag Samaech Happy Passover.

Torah Homily: **Our Saviour's Stubborn Love Never Gives Up**

Torah: **Ex. 33:12-34:26**

1). 33:15

"Moshe said to Him: If You yourself do not walk with us, never make us leave this place."

The only safe place in this world is under the shelter of the Almighty, at the foot of His cross, feasting on His love and His word. Have you left this place without Him? Silly sinner, come home.

2). 33:19

"The L-RD answered: I will make all my goodness pass before you and I will proclaim my name. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will be merciful to whom I will be merciful".

What did that look like, how did Moshe feel as He saw into the depths of G-d's love? The same way we feel when we enter in His presence and contemplate His love (2Cor. 3:17, 18).

3) 34:6 (these you need to look up)

Do you know G-d? I mean really, do you understand what He is like? Then what does it mean for us to be like Him? Ouch.

4). 34:7

His love is limitless and He limits the lifespan of sin. We need to learn to limit sin's life span in our own lives and in the midst of the community we are building, 7x70 times a day.

Haftarah: **Ez. 37:1-14**

5) 37:11

6) 37:12

This is an illustration, not a literal event, despite what the Talmudic commentators say. When our hope is dried, destroyed and we are lost, He is capable of resurrecting it and restoring us, both to the Land and to the Messiah. In every synagogue around the world today, when this is read, they are proclaiming what Paul said in Romans – one day Israel will come back into the Gospel and acknowledge her only true King and Messiah – Yeshua of Nazareth. May it be soon, Oh L-rd.

In our lives too, when we are dead, buried and rotting, there is hope. Not for our hopes and plans, but for His. His purposes are indestructible. Cling to them and watch them and your spirituality rise from the dead, again and again, until you get it right. How are your bones doing?

Brit Chadashah: **John 5:14-30**

7) 5:28, 29

His resurrection is a guarantee of our own. Tomorrow the churches celebrate this great event. What does it mean? Our Saviour's stubborn love is indestructible and never gives up. What does it mean to you? Come to Him, return to Him, and let Him renew you, and walk with you through the twists, turns and spills of this life. This is why He delivered our people from Egypt – to walk with Him, and it is the whole point, the only point to life (Eccl. 12:13, 14). As we celebrate Passover for another year, let me ask you a question with brutal honesty – is there any point to your life? I mean really. One day, what is on the inside will come out, forever. Amen.