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Shabbat Pesach: Shir HaShirim

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Pesach III, Shabbat Pesach (Yizkor)**Torah:** Ex. 33:12-34:26; Num. 28:19-21**Haftarah:** Ezek. 37:1-14**Brit Chadashah:** John 1:29-31**Festival Reading:** Song of Songs; Is. 10:32-12:6 (Glory of Messiah)**Yizkor:**

Song of Songs: Sort of a Play/Musical/Drama/Pageant, presented in a style which predates Greek Drama, but which was not uncommon to the Ancient Middle East. It is not an allegory, where each of the symbols has a secondary meaning and the real story is hidden in the secondary meaning and not in the face value meaning. It is an Ode to Sexual Love, in six sections which centres around a young girl, called the Shulamite and her lover, King Solomon.

It is probably one of the most controversial books in the Bible and historically many rabbis have found it vulgar, devoid of any spiritual value. The French Talmudic commentator, Rashi, is of the school of interpretation which sees this Song as an allegory which recounts the history of Israel from the time of the Exodus, until, presumably, the Kingdom comes.

Many people are offended at the books overt references to sexual behaviour and are disturbed by its lavish sensual descriptions. The story is a description of polygamous love, where the King leaves His palace/Harem and falls in love with a young girl who laments that she has no physical beauty. He counters with a poignant sevenfold description of her beauty (4:1-5). In her turn, when she is asked what is so special about her beloved, the Shulamite gives her own poignant sevenfold description of his beauty (5:10-16).

Throughout the Song, there are references to strong sensual desires and sexual longings which are both quite beautiful and also sometimes confusing. The man, Solomon already has a harem full of beauties, and yet he leaves his other wives and concubines to pursue a young lady, whom he apparently has relations with before any formal marriage is contracted.

As well, at the end of the Song, the court ladies speak of yet another young lady who is still a girl who has not yet reached puberty, but who will be kept in reserve for the King, until she is ready to also engage in sexual love with the King.

Three main issues trouble me as I read this song, and I will even add a fourth. First it is a polygamous love song. Second it describes sexual behaviour outside of marriage and third it describes a pre-adolescent as a future sexual partner. The fourth issue has to deal with both the lost historical context and with our subsequent need not to evaluate either the style or the content from our modern cultural context.

How do we reconcile these difficulties and derive spiritual benefit from this Sexual Love Song? The Bible never describes sex as dirty in and of itself, and so when we look at this Song, we are not looking at either forbidden or dirty sex. We encounter a passion which will not be satisfied until it finds it in the arms of her lover. We see a young girl who discovers her beauty in the eyes of her lover and who sings about her lovers beauty to those who ask her what she sees in him.

In a sense the use of polygamous love helps us to understand parables such as the ten virgins, and the image of the body of Messiah as the bride of the Lamb. In a very real sense, as believers we become part of the Heavenly Harem of Messiah, where He loves each of us as passionately as He loves the Shulamite. He finds each of us as beautiful as He finds the Shulamite and He pursues us with as much desire as He pursues the Shulamite and He brings us to the place where we find Him as beautiful as the Shulamite does.

In historical Judaism, polygamy was an acceptable practice and a man who had a sexual encounter with a girl with a view to marriage was neither committing fornication, nor adultery. Very few of the major personalities of the Tanach were monogamous and the House of Jacob was built with the help of two wives and two concubines. We no longer find this kind of sexual behaviour acceptable, but we need to place ourselves back into the historical/cultural headset of Solomon's times to get a proper appreciation of the message of the Song.

His passion for the Shulamite and her passion for him, can be seen as parallels between the mutual spiritual passion which should exist between each of us and our Heavenly Saviour and we should be so much in love with Him, that we want to "recruit" other lovers for the One whose love is sweeter than honey and whom we find beautiful beyond description – and, funnily enough who also find each of us beautiful beyond description.

The issue of the young girl could be seen as someone who has not yet reached a "spiritual puberty" and who must wait until her passions ignite before she can seek the L-rd and experience all of our passion and all of our longing and even all of our joy. We are never to be jealous of each other, nor are we to try and recruit those whose spirituality has not passed the necessary puberty of desire.

This is hard slog for 21st century believers because it was not originally addressed to us and it found its way into the Canon of Scripture because it presents us with a terrifyingly beautiful picture of the love and passion which develops between believers and their L-rd. Sexuality is a powerful force and this may be the only reference to acceptable sexuality in the Bible which does not deal with procreation. The Song simply extols the wonder and power of sexual love and uses it to describe the depth and power of spiritual passion which exists between believers who are truly in love with their L-rd.

This book cannot be used to teach appropriate sexual conduct outside of its original context, because that was never its intent. It is a love song, full of Hebrew poetry and we read it at Pesach to remind ourselves how much our L-rd loves each of us and all of us and how each of us and all of us need to be passionate for our L-rd who is the lover of our souls.

The Torah Portion, Ex. 33:12-34:26, deals with the incident of the golden calf (eigel) and how Moses both disciplined the people (they had to eat their idol) and how he interceded with G-d to re-establish His generational covenant with His stiff-necked and rebellious people. It contains the thirteen attributes of G-d's love (Ex. 34:5-7) and makes reference to a new set of stone tablets, with which a new covenant is established with those who broke the first one.

This is not a reference to the old covenant and the new covenant, but is a lesson in both the enduring love which G-d has for His people and His refusal to bend on any of His covenant conditions, when He establishes a relationship with His people, as (specific) individuals and as a (generational) community. He will never accept a partial covenant, which does not give Him primacy in every area of our lives and which does not obligate us to become active participants in a redeemed coming of believers.

The two Haftarah Portions: (Ezek. 37:1-14; Is. 10:32-12:6), deal with the restoration of Israel, in the Parable of the Valley of Dry Bones and with the future glory of Messiah's ministry, of which we are a part of. In this Parable, Israel has been cut down, and from the trunk of Jesse, a root will spring up and Isaiah speaks of this with three, sevenfold descriptions (11:1, 2; 11:6, 7; and 11:7, 8). He goes on to describe the Root of Jesse as a banner for all nations where all the exiled of Israel will come home and where His glory will once again, and this time, forever dwell among His people. They will drink from the well of salvation and His name shall be published among the nations.

The Brit Chadashah Portion: (John 1:39-31) deals with John, the last prophet of the Tanach and the Elijah of promise, recognizing both who the Messiah is and what He has come to do, because the one (Who He is) and the other (what He came to do), cannot be separated, only recognized. Do you recognize Him and have you accepted what He has done?

So at Pesach, no matter what social or political condition or generational/cultural context we find ourselves in, we can draw strength and hope for all three aspects of time. From the Past, we can celebrate His deliverance from Egypt, and for us, His deliverance on Calvary. From the Present, His love and His provision for us in all of the circumstances of our lives, whether we dwell in a golden palace or are being fed into the ovens of Auschwitz. From the Future where we will be resurrected and see His Kingdom grow from whatever trunk and root it is cut back to, unto it is forever established over all the nations and generations of mankind. At this season, may you be filled with the wonder of Passover, both in our freedom from Egypt and in our freedom in the cross and especially in the Resurrection. **Chag Samaech.**