

## The Lovers

The heart . . . needs relationship. Our minds might insist that we go directly to the Infinite when we think of God, but the heart doesn't want the Infinite; it wants a You it can confide in and take comfort in. The poetry of Shir Ha-shirim, the Song of Songs, speaks this language.

—ZALMAN  
SCHACHTER-SHALOMI

## The Song of Songs as Allegory

The only book of Tanakh to which Rashi, the classic medieval biblical commentator, wrote an introduction was the Song of Songs. In it, he builds on the rabbinic understanding that the book is an allegory for the relationship of God and Israel. He sees the distance described between the lovers as the effects of Jewish exile, and the dream of reuniting as expressive of the dream of redemption. Throughout the Song, the lovers pine for each other—as Israel and God both yearn to be reunited; both are now in exile and both are to be redeemed.

## The Song of Songs

### CHAPTER I

THE SONG OF SONGS, OF SOLOMON:

May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—  
your love is sweeter than wine.

**Yishakeini mi-n'shikot pihu,  
ki tovim dodekha mi-yayin.**

How sweet the smell, your ointments,  
what a fragrant perfume, your name,  
how maidens so love you!

Pull me toward you; let us run together!  
Let the king bring me to his chambers.

*We shall rejoice and delight in your love,  
we shall savor your love more than wine,  
for your love is true.*

Daughters of Jerusalem,  
I am sunburned, yet beautiful,  
dark like the tents of Kedar,  
beautiful like Solomon's pavilions.

Don't stare at me for being burnt by the sun—  
my brothers were jealous of me,  
they made me guard the vineyards—  
I could not tend my own vines.

**Al tiruni she-ani sh'harḥoret, she-sh'zafatni ha-shamesh,  
b'nei imi niḥaru vi, samuni noteirah et ha-kramim,  
karmi sheli lo natarti.**

Tell me, my beloved:  
Where do you pasture?  
Where does your flock rest at noon?  
Why should I be a wanderer  
following your friends' flocks?

*O, loveliest of women!  
If you have no idea,  
follow the tracks of the herds,  
and graze your goats  
close by the sheds of the shepherds.*

## שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים

פֶּרֶק א

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשִׁלְמֹה:

**יִשְׁקֵנִי מִנְּשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ כִּי־טוֹבִים דְּדִידְךָ מִיַּיִן:**

**לְרִיחַ שְׁמֹנֶיךָ טוֹבִים שְׁמֹן תוֹרֵק שְׁמֶךָ**

**עַל־כֵּן עֲלָמוֹת אֶהְבֹּךָ:**

**מִשְׁכְּבִי אֶחְרִיךָ נְרוֹצָה הִבִּיאֲנִי הַמְּלֶכֶךְ חֲדָרָיו**

**נִגְלָה וְנִשְׁמַחָה בְּךָ נִזְכְּרָה דְּדִידְךָ מִיַּיִן**

**מִיִּשְׂרָיִם אֶהְבֹּךָ:**

**שְׁחוּרָה אָנִי וְנֹאוֹה בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם**

**בְּאֶהְלִי קָדָר כִּירֵעוֹת שְׁלֹמֹה:**

**אֶל־תִּרְאוּנִי שְׂאֲנִי שְׁחַרְחֹרֶת שֶׁשָׁזַפְתָּנִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ**

**בְּנֵי אֲמִי נִחְרוּבֵי שְׁמָנִי נִטְרָה אֶת־הַפְּרָמִים**

**בְּרַמִּי שְׁלִי לֹא נִטְרָתִי:**

**הַגִּידָה לִּי שְׂאֶהְבֶּה נִפְשִׁי**

**אֵיכָה תִרְעָה אֵיכָה תִרְבִּיץ בְּצִהָרִים**

**שְׁלֹמֹה אֶהְיָה כְּעֵטִיָּה עַל עֲדָרֵי חֲבֵרֶיךָ:**

**אִם־לֹא תִדְעֵל לָךְ הֵיפָּה בְּנִשִּׁים צְאִי־לָךְ בְּעַקְבֵי הַצֹּאן**

**וְרָעִי אֶת־גְּדִיתֶיךָ עַל מִשְׁפְּנוֹת הָרָעִים:**

female lover, the male lover (indicated in English by indented stanzas), and a chorus of “the daughters of Jerusalem” (printed here in italics). The chorus sometimes urges love on and sometimes urges restraint.

The Song of Songs can be seen as a series of internal dialogues, voiced as if in a dream. Here, the poet begins by imagining her lover in the third person. Soon, however, the vision becomes more intense, and she addresses him as if he were present. This alternation of mood is characteristic of the Song of Songs. At times, the lovers are close—hugging and kissing one another—but at other times they are hidden from each other. Viewing the Song of Songs as an allegory, one can understand this duality of closeness and distance as characteristic of the divine-human encounter. Since the Song of Songs is composed of a series of poems, we have used bold in Hebrew to set off these individual sections.

**SUNBURNED** שְׁחוּרָה. Sunburned skin is associated with a lower social status, a fair complexion being the mark of those who could afford not to work outdoors. In ancient Egyptian and Greek art, the women are shown as having lighter skin than the men, probably because the women worked indoors. The Shulamite's need to account for her dark skin sounds apologetic; on the other hand, since her dark skin may have contributed to her singularity and attractiveness, she may be boasting, not apologizing. (*Ariel and Chana Bloch*)

**MY BROTHERS** בְּנֵי אֲמִי. The circumstances of life frequently do not allow us to engage in “self care.” We can see the female figure as a personification of how we are prevented from “tending our own vines”; they have gone unattended because of the obligations and the demands of work, of family, or even of friends. Shabbat may be a moment when we can stop to center ourselves.

**THE SONG OF SONGS** שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים. Jewish tradition understood the Song of Songs as an allegory of the love between God and Israel. Since Shabbat is seen as the time when Israel and God once again find each other, it was natural that the Song of Songs—where lovers repeatedly lose each other, search for each other, and find each other again—came to be recited as an introduction to Shabbat. The traditional observance of Shabbat emphasizes physical pleasure (such as eating, resting, and rejoicing in good company) as integral to its spiritual delight, much as the Song of Songs points to a spiritual fulfillment through its portrayal of physical love.

Many scholars believe that the Song of Songs should not be read as a continuous narrative, but rather as a series of individual, but connected, poems. The book is tied together through the figures of its three main characters: the

*For I Am Sick with Love*

What is the appropriate love of God? It is that you should love God so powerfully that your soul is bound up with the love of God and is constantly captured by it, as if one were sick with lovesickness, as when your consciousness is not freed from the love of your beloved but you think of your beloved at all times: when you lie down and when you rise up, when you are eating and when you are drinking. The love of God should be even more than this in the hearts of Godlovers; it should be present constantly, as we are commanded: “you shall love Adonai, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul.” This is what Solomon expressed metaphorically, saying, “For I am sick with love.” The entire Song of Songs is an allegorical description of this love.

—MAIMONIDES

I picture you, my beloved, as a graceful steed in Pharaoh’s cavalry:  
your cheeks gorgeously adorned with bangles,  
your neck with pearls.

*We shall fashion rings of gold with silver inlay for you.*

As the king lies down,  
my perfume spreads its fragrance.  
My lover is like a spray of myrrh,  
lying on my breast.

My beloved is a garland of henna in the vineyards of Ein Gedi.

You are beautiful, my beloved;  
you are beautiful, with eyes like doves.

You are handsome, my beloved, oh so graceful!  
Our couch is a flourishing garden,  
the beams of our house, the cedars,  
the rafters, the cypresses.

CHAPTER 2

I am a rose of Sharon,  
a lily of the valley.

Like a lily among the thorns,  
so is my beloved among the young women.

Like an apple tree in a vast forest,  
so is my beloved among the young men:  
in its shade, desire grew in me and I lingered,  
its fruit sweet on my tongue.

Ani havatzelet ha-sharon, shoshanat ha-amakim.  
K’shoshanah bein ha-hoḥim, ken rayati bein ha-banot.  
K’tapu-ah ba-atzei haya-ar, ken dodī bein ha-banim . . .

He brings me to his wine-press, his banner of love over me.

Hevi-ani el beit ha-yayin, v’diglo alai ahavah.

Prop me up amidst the flowering buds,  
bed me by the apple trees, for I am sick with love.  
His left arm under my head, his right caressing me . . .

I would make you swear, daughters of Jerusalem,  
by the hosts or the hinds of the field,  
lest you rouse and wake love before it is ready.

לְסִסְתִּי בְּרֻכְבֵּי פָרְעֹה דְמִיתִיךָ רַעֲיָתִי:  
נָאוּךְ לְחַיִּיךָ בַתְּרִים צְנָאָרְךָ בַּחֲרוּזִים:  
תּוֹרֵי זָהָב נִעְשָׂה-לְךָ עִם נְקֻדּוֹת הַכֶּסֶף:

עַד-שִׁשְׁהַמָּלֶךְ בְּמִסְבּוֹ נְרָדִי נָתַן רִיחֹו:  
צָרוֹר הַמָּוֶר | דּוֹדִי לִי בֵּין שְׂדֵי יַלְדֵּי:

אֲשַׁבֵּל הַכֶּפֶר | דּוֹדִי לִי בְּכַרְמֵי עֵין גִּדִי:

הַנֶּהָר יָפָה רַעֲיָתִי הַנֶּהָר יָפָה עֵינֶיךָ יוֹנִים:

הַנֶּהָר יָפָה דּוֹדִי אֶף נְעִים אֶף-עֲרֻשָׁנוּ רַעֲנָנָה:  
קָרוֹת בְּתִינוּךְ אֶרְזִים רַהֲיִטְנוּ בְּרוֹתִים:

פֶּרֶק ב

אֲנִי חִבְצֻלַת הַשָּׁרוֹן שׁוֹשַׁנַת הָעֲמָקִים:

כְּשׁוֹשָׁנָה בֵּין הַחוֹמִים כֵּן רַעֲיָתִי בֵּין הַבְּנוֹת:

כְּתַפּוּחַ בְּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר כֵּן דּוֹדִי בֵּין הַבָּנִים:  
בְּצִלוֹ חֲמֻדָּתִי וַיִּשְׁבַּתִּי וּפְרִיֹו מִתּוֹךְ לַחֲפֵי:

הִבִּיאֲנִי אֶל-בֵּית הַיַּיִן וְדִגְלוּ עָלַי אַהֲבָה:  
סִמְכוּנִי בְּאִשִּׁישׁוֹת רִפְדוּנִי בַתַּפּוּחִים

כִּי-חֹולַת אַהֲבָה אָנִי:

שָׁמְאָלוּ תַחַת לְרֵאשֵׁי וַיִּמְיְנוּ תַחֲבַקְנִי:

הַשְּׁבַעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם

בְּצַבָּאוֹת אוֹ בְּאִילוֹת הַשֵּׁדָה

אִם-תַּעֲרִי | וְאִם-תַּעֲוֹרְרוּ אֶת-הָאַהֲבָה

עַד שְׁתַּחֲפֹץ:

were unknown in the ancient Near East, so the allusion is to an unknown fruit. The metaphor evokes the surprise of walking in a forest and stumbling upon edible fruit.

IN ITS SHADE בְּצִלוֹ. Or, “in his shadow.” The image of a shadow introduces another dream sequence.

HOSTS בְּצַבָּאוֹת. The word inevitably evokes the phrase *Adonai Tz’va-ot*, “Lord of hosts,” especially in this context of oath-taking. However, given the surrounding nature imagery, it may equally refer to a host of animals—both the female hinds, mentioned in the next phrase, as well as the male gazelles and stags, mentioned in the following verse.

I PICTURE YOU דְּמִיתִיךָ. Like much of the Song of Songs, this passage is announced as a dream sequence, with the word *dimitikh*, “I imagine you,” here translated as “I picture you.” The dream sequence ends with the lovers meeting in the forest. The fulfillment of love is seen here as coinciding with a return to nature. We might think of it as a return to the Garden of Eden: a fresh beginning untainted by any failures in the relationship.

The voices of the man and woman alternate in this passage. The woman talks of fragrance, and the man responds with a visual image. In Hebrew, the alternation of voices is clear. The man addresses the woman, “Oh, how beautiful” (*hinakh yafah*), and then the woman uses the same Hebrew word with the male suffix, “Oh, how beautiful” (*hinkha yafeh*)—which we have translated here as “handsome,” in order to make the change in speakers obvious.

STEED לְסִסְתִּי. Some translate this word as “mare,” since the image is applied to a woman. The poet, however, may intend to evoke the strength and power of a stallion—as a description of feminine grace.

APPLE TREE כְּתַפּוּחַ. Apples, which is what the word means in modern Hebrew,

### Footprints

Footprints of birds in the sand by the sea, like someone's handwriting in a note, to remember things, names, numbers, and places. Footprints of birds in the sand at nighttime still remain at daytime, but I didn't see the bird who made them. God's like that.

—YEHUDAH AMICHAI  
(translated by David C. Jacobson)

### The World's Song

Every shepherd knows different tunes, appropriate to where the sheep are pasturing and appropriate for the grass growing there, for every kind of grass has a distinctive song. The song the grass sings inspires the shepherd. Would that I might be able to hear the song and the praise that the grasses sing, how each blade sings to the creator without hesitation, without the interference of any foreign thoughts and without any expectation of reward. How beautiful it is to hear their song. How wonderful is their service to God. If I could hear their songs, my heart would be filled and I would sing the most beautiful song to my beloved, my God.

—NAHMAN OF BRATZLAV  
(adapted)

The voice of my beloved! Behold he comes, leaping over mountains, bounding over hills.

**Kol dodi hineih zeh ba, m'daleg al he-harim, m'kapetz al hagva-ot.**

My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.

There he stands outside our walls, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice.

My beloved spoke to me and said:

Rise up my dearest, my beauty, and come away.

For now the winter is past, the rains are over and gone.

**Kumi lakh rayati yafati u-l'khi lakh, ki hineih ha-stav avar, ha-geshem halaf halakh lo.**

Fresh shoots have sprouted from the ground, the time of singing is here, and the voice of the dove is heard in our land. The fig tree has ripened its buds, the blossoming vines are releasing their fragrance—rise, my dearest, my beauty, and come away.

O my dove in the crevice of the rock, in the covert of the cliff—let me see you, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and you are beautiful.

**Yonati b'hagvei ha-sela b'seter ha-madregah, harini et marayikh, hashmi-ini et kolekh, ki kolekh arev u-mareikh naveh.**

*Hold back the foxes for us, the little foxes that steal among the vines, for our vines are blossoming.*

My beloved is mine and I am his, the one who shepherds amidst the lilies.

**Dodi li va-ani lo, haro-eh ba-shoshanim.**

Before the day breathes its last, and the shadows flee, come round, my love—be like a gazelle, or a wild stag—through the cleft in the mountains.

Song of Songs 1:1–2:17

קול דודי הנהיזה בא מדלג על ההרים  
מקפיץ על הגבעות:

דומה דודי לצבי או לעפר האילים  
הנהיזה עומד אחר פתלנו

משגיח מן החלונות מציץ מן החרכים:  
ענה דודי ואמר לי

קומי לי רעיתי יפתי ולכי-לי:

ביהנה הסתיו עבר הגשם חלה חלה לו:

הנצנים נראו בארץ עת הדמיר הגיע  
וקול התור נשמע בארצנו:

התאנה חנטה פגיה והגפנים סמדר נתנו ריח  
קומי לי רעיתי יפתי ולכי-לי:

יונתי בחגי הסלע בסתר המדרגה

הראיני את-מראיך השמיעיני את-קולך  
בי-קולך ערב ומראיך נאוה:

אחזו-לנו שועלים שועלים קטנים  
מחבלים פרמים וכרמינו סמדר:

דודי לי ואני לו הרעה בשושנים:

עד שיפוח היום ונסו הצללים

סב דמה-לך דודי לצבי או לעפר  
האילים על-הרי בתר:

שיר השירים א:א-ב:יז

**THE VOICE OF MY BELOVED** קול דודי. Once again we meet two voices: the man wishing to find and see the woman, and the woman pining for the man. The stanza introduces both a note of danger and a hope that danger will be overcome—when the lovers meet they must be careful, for there are “foxes” that might threaten their love.

**THE CLEFT IN THE MOUNTAINS** על הרי בתר. Benjamin Segal suggests this translation. (Some view the Hebrew *bater* as a place name, while others translate it as “the hills of good tidings.”) In this image the separation between the lovers is great, divided as they are by a mountain range, yet there is one possibility of meeting: the pass that cuts through the mountains. The “cleft in the mountains” also has erotic overtones.

**HOLD BACK** אחזו לנו. Clearly, this passage is voiced by both the male and female lovers.