Why Do We Sing the Song of Songs on Passover?[1]

Benjamin Edidin Scolnic

That Jewish tradition associates the Song of Songs with Passover is a quaint fact which is often cited but very rarely deeply considered. It would seem that if we read the Song of Songs as an anthology of erotic love poetry, the best that we can do is to mention the references to spring in the biblical book and refer to Passover as the major festival of that season. As Isaac Klein put it,

> . . . on the Sabbath of the festival it is customary to read the Song of Songs with its description of spring. This constitutes our recognition that the forces in the physical environment which make for physical survival and well-being have a divine source.[2]

This is a rather perfunctory and somewhat forced connection between the festival and the biblical book. It is true that the Song of Songs contains a famous and beautiful passage about spring:

> My beloved spoke thus to me:
> Arise, my darling;
> My fair one, come away!
> For now the winter is past,
> The rains are over and gone.
> The blossoms have appeared in the land,
> The time of pruning has come;

[1] This material was originally prepared as Part II of a four-part Teleconference Course on Pesah sponsored by The Rabbinical Assembly, February 29, 1996.

[2] Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: JTS, 1979), p. 104.

The song of the turtledove
Is heard in our land.[3]
(2:10–13)

But it would be easy to find other passages in other biblical books that are either about spring or Passover or the Exodus. We should not be satisfied with such pat answers.

Since it is the midrash that furnishes the missing link between Passover and the Song of Songs, it is necessary to read the greatest rabbinic source and most meaningful commentary on the Song of Songs, *Shir Hashirim Rabbah.* In order to fully appreciate this midrashic work, however, it would seem that we must leave the usual modern, literal reading of the book aside and retrieve the now-discarded notion that the love expressed in the Song of Songs is an allegory for the love between God and Israel.

This would seem to be impossible for the modern reader. As Robert Gordis writes, "The allegorical theory has been generally abandoned by modern scholars in its traditional guise."[4] The problem with the allegorical approach has been summarized well by Father Andrew Greeley:

> While this interpretation was dominant for a thousand years and more, it is not easy to sustain, because the love described in the Song is so obviously and in such rich detail the love between man and woman. Contemporary Scripture scholarship has routed the allegorical interpretation: The Song is secular love poetry, a collection of love songs gathered around a single theme. . . . It was placed in the canon of the Scriptures because it was so well loved by the Israelite people that the Scriptures seemed a good place to preserve it.[5]

I will suggest, however, that even those who are trained in modern, critical methods can feel comfortable with the midrashic model and legitimately construct a modern homiletical mode for discussion of the connection between Passover and the Song of Songs. I will begin by reviewing the insights of some modern scholars whose work will allow us to see the traditional reading of the Song of Songs in a different light and to utilize the riches of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* in this modern age.

The Canonical Legitimacy of the Song of Songs

In one of his finest articles, "The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality,"[6] Gerson Cohen studies the reasons for the inclusion of the Song of Songs in the biblical canon. He begins with the discussion about Song of

[3] The translations of the Song of Songs in this article are from NJV.

[4] Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs* (New York: JTS, 1961), p. 3.

[5] Andrew M. Greeley and Jacob Neusner, *The Bible and Us: A Priest and a Rabbi Read Scripture Together* (New York: Warner, 1990), p. 34.

[6] Originally delivered as a Samuel Friedland lecture at a Seminary convocation in Miami Beach, Florida, 1962; reprinted in Gerson D. Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1991), pp. 3–17.

Songs at Jamnia around the year 100; as is well-known, some of the rabbis at that supreme council had misgivings about the sacredness of this book.[7]

> The Song of Songs and Koheleth defile the hands (are canonical). Rabbi Judah says, the Song of Songs defiles the hands, but Koheleth is in dispute. Rabbi Jose says, Koheleth does not defile the hands and the Song of Songs is in dispute. . . . Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai said, I have a tradition from the seventy-two elders on the day that Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah was appointed president of the Academy that both the Song of Songs and Koheleth defile the hands. Said Rabbi Akiba, Heaven forfend! No one in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs defiles the hands. For all the world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies. If they differed at all, it was only about Koheleth. Rabbi Johanan ben Joshua, the brother-in-law of Rabbi Akiba, said, Both the division of opinion and the final decision accorded with the statement of Ben Azzai, i.e. they differed on both books and finally decided that both were canonical.[8]

Cohen draws a parallel between the opponents of the Song of Songs at Jamnia and the work of modern scholars, who have also dismissed the idea that the book is religious in nature.

Since the rabbis had common sense, how could they have thought that these pieces of erotica constituted, as Rabbi Akiba claimed, "the holy of holies"? How could they have thought that the Song of Songs is an allegory of the love between God and Israel? Why select such a questionable book for the canon while excluding other, less doubtful books? The rabbis were horrified by fertility cults, idolatrous rites, sacred marriage and prostitution. How could those who condemned the representation of God by any image speak about God in such sexual terms? Would it not have been better to stay away from a book that, when allegorized, portrays a love between God and the people which seems so close to the love portrayed by pagan myths and rituals?

A key distinction between the Israelite and pagan portrayals of Divine love is that no pagan culture spoke of a god as a husband or a lover of his *people.* Israelite religion, in its radical monotheism, demanded the people's absolute fidelity to the One God. In human terms, there was only one relationship that reflected that kind of fidelity and that was a woman's vow of loyalty to her husband. From Amos to Ezekiel, the prophets described infidelity to God as adultery, promiscuity, sexual laxity, and prostitution. Israel, in its covenant with God made on Mt. Sinai, was "married" to God. God, as the husband, was explicitly jealous of any infidelity on the part of His wife. Religious fidelity is described in the terms of marital fidelity.

[7] M.L. Margolis, "How the Song of Songs Entered the Canon" in W.H. Schoff, ed., *The Song of Songs: A Symposium* (Philadelphia, 1924), pp. 9–17; E. E. Urbach "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Exposition of Origen on Canticles and the Jewish-Christian Disputations" *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971), pp. 241-275.

[8] Mishnah Eduyot 5:3; Tos. Yad. 2:14 and cf. Tos. Yad. 2:14.

Hosea's angry chastisement of Israel's sins is dramatized by his denunciation of his own wife's infidelities. According to Cohen, Hosea could see the parallels between his situation and that of God

> *because* his Israelite mind had been taught from childhood to think of the relationship between God and Israel in terms of marital fidelity, in terms of love!

Hosea does not speak in daring or original terms. His poetic power comes not only from the personalizing of the message but from his promise of restitution, when he and God promise to reconcile with their adulterous wives.

Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah and Lamentations all use this metaphor; the rabbis merely amplified what they had already found in the Bible. The Song of Songs, to the rabbis, was the completion of the metaphor. The prophets may have denounced infidelity but the Song of Songs spoke of reunion and love, the kind of love that the believing rabbinic Jew felt for God. Even the Psalms do not talk about God as the lover or bridegroom of Israel. The Song of Songs is seen as a *dialogue* between God and Israel, and this provides the book with a unique religious intensity.

This special religious passion is what Rabbi Akiba felt when he said that the Song of Songs is the holy of holies. Again, the Song of Songs was seen by the rabbis as being perfectly in keeping with a metaphorical usage that comes from the Torah and the prophets.

This explains how the Song of Songs could have been canonized but we still have to determine why the work was published and allegorized at the time that it was. While the Song of Songs contains both early and later strata, it was not completed before the rise of Hellenistic culture in the Near East. Both the Song of Songs itself *and* the allegorical interpretation emerged under Hellenistic influence.

Thus, while modern scholars say that the allegorical interpretation was only a means of giving the Song legitimacy, there is no evidence of an earlier, "literal" interpretation of the book. Cohen argues that "the allegorizing activity took place not long after the Song itself was compiled." Greek literature and philosophy were filled with discussions of love. The rabbinic allegory channeled, reformulated, and controlled this enthusiasm for the subject of love.

Judaism denied the sexuality of God and thus affirmed His transcendence. But by proclaiming His masculinity, it affirmed His reality and potency. One cannot control God through magic because He has absolute freedom but one can pray to Him in love from within the covenant.

For our purposes here, Cohen's insights provide two very useful conclusions:

1. The metaphor of human love for the love between God and Israel is an ancient and important part of Israelite religion and literature;

2. The rabbis' understanding of the Song of Songs is not a far-fetched superimposition in order to legitimize the book for inclusion in the canon, but a legitimate understanding of the book in the historical context when it was completed.

To go one small but important step beyond Cohen: the Song of Songs may have been completed with the allegory in mind.

The Allegorical Imperative

I'll now turn to Harold Fisch's "Song of Solomon: The Allegorical Imperative".[9] While it's true that there are parallels between the Song and Greek pastoral poetry, Fisch says, the mood is very different. In Greek poetry, there is a playful and lighthearted tone; in the Song, love is a consuming fire.

Fisch describes love in the Song of Songs as a struggle; longing is more central to the Song than fulfillment. The metaphor used is the *search* for the beloved:

> By night on my bed,
> I sought him whom my soul loves,
> I sought him but I found him not . . .
> (3:1)

The incremental repetition of "I sought him . . . I sought him . . ." portrays dynamic motion and yearning.[10] Says Fisch:

> The Song of Solomon . . . is a long poem of sustained lyric force, unified and powered by this very quality of yearning. . . . the ever-defeated longing and search are the deep core of Israel's history, its phenomonological essence. The greatness of the Song of Solomon is that it expresses this phenomonological essence in its intensest form . . . it is pure signification . . . pure poetry. Perhaps that is why it is called the "song of songs."

Fisch does not only mean that Israel, in the allegory, searches for God, but also that we, as readers, are asked to search for meaning.

The scenes in which this type of intense searching occur are dream episodes. They are parts of a recurring dream (2:9–14, 3:1–5, and 5:2–8). Since there is no *peshat* of a dream, there can be no literal reading of the Song of Songs. If we recognize the dreamlike atmosphere of a dream, the free flow of images and the changing symbols and situations all make sense. There is no plot, as so many commentators have tried to reconstruct.[11] Instead, as Fisch puts it, there is

[9] In *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990), pp. 80–103.

[10] Again, Fisch notes extra-biblical parallels but stresses the uniqueness of the longing here.

[11] Two Greek manuscripts, of the fourth and fifth centuries of this era, not only assume that the Song of Songs is a drama but even supply speakers for the different passages of the book. The "Dramatic Theory," suggested by eighteenth century scholars and adopted by some in the nineteenth and twentieth, usually has two or three main characters, King Solomon, a Shulammite maiden, and sometimes a different male character like a shepherd lover. In the three-character drama, the King, on a visit to the countryside, falls in love with the young woman. But even with all of his power and wealth, her love for her shepherd is true, and she returns to him.

It is fascinating to see such solid scholars as S. R. Driver, in his monument to source-critical orthodoxy, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament,* divide and reconstruct the book according to this theory. It is really a dramatic midrash, finding a plot where none exists.

> the shifting iridescent movement of a dream where stories merge into one another and identities change and combine. . . . There is a kind of imaginative overspill, as the rapture of the lovers overflows into the sphere of geography, transforming the whole land into an object of love.

Fisch believes that when the Midrash allegorizes the Song of Songs, it bases itself on "sound exegesis." Words like "shepherd," "chariots," "prince" and "garden" evoke key passages throughout the Bible. The modern readers of the Song of Songs, like their ancient counterparts, cannot help but make connections with these other passages where there is no doubt about the theological import. Fisch says: We're supposed to make these connections. Therefore, we can conclude, the midrash may have been much more legitimate in its interpretation than modern scholarship would admit.

Other scholars would go farther than Cohen and Fisch and suggest that the Song of Songs is actually a type of post-exilic midrash which was constructed from a mosaic of biblical motifs and was intended to be read as a prophetic allegory of God's love for His people.[12]

Even if this is pushing things too far, it is certainly true that the Song of Songs had an extraordinary hold on its readers. Allegory is a way to explain the devotion, plurality of meanings, and intensity of this book. The power of the images "propels us beyond" the limits of normal songs and poetry.

The Metaphorical Interpretation

I quoted Father Andrew Greeley earlier in his summation of the problems with the allegorical method and I can now return to discuss what he does with the problem. For those who may wonder how a famous Catholic priest and novelist can contribute to this discussion, I ask only that you bear with me for a minute so that you can see what he has to offer.

Greeley makes an important distinction between an allegorical interpretation and a metaphorical one. In the allegory, the love between man and woman symbolize, in a one-to-one relationship, the love between God and Israel. But in the metaphorical interpretation, human love and covenantal love are reflections of each other. A human being's love for another human being is God's flame and is integrated with his/her love for God.

> Thus at the end of the Song the woman describes her love for her man as being like "YHWH's Flame," the love between them will not only be as strong as death; it will be as strong as YHWH's love for His people.
>
> The Song then can be seen as a reverse metaphor or, perhaps better, a double metaphor. Not only is God's love like human love, the author is implying, but granted that, our love, yours and mine, is like

[12] A. Robert, "Le genre littéraire du Cantique des Cantiques" *RB* 52 (1945), pp. 192-213 and A. Feuillet, "Le Cantique des Cantiques et la tradition biblique" *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 74 (1952), pp. 706-733; *Le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris, 1953).

> God's love. Once God had approved of the metaphor, human love must be seen as sanctified because it is like God's love. . . . In her world secular poetry and sacred poetry cannot be sharply divided because the secular is an image of the sacred. The Song then can be interpreted as implicitly religious from beginning to end precisely because of the metaphorical relations between the two loves. But unlike the allegorical interpretation, the metaphorical interpretation does not interpret away human love. Rather, it sacramentalizes it: human love is a hint of divine love, and divine love is a hint of what human love can really be.

For me, this is one of the most beautiful statements ever made about the Song of Songs. Greeley's idea of a metaphorical interpretation allows us to emphasize the human side of the allegory.

The Song of Songs as a Midrash on Exodus

In a penetrating and thoughtful book about midrashic interpretation, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*,[13] Daniel Boyarin has furthered our understanding of Song of Songs Rabbah in an important way. Boyarin distinguishes between allegoresis and midrash. Allegory creates correspondences between texts and their hidden meanings. Midrash is a way to read so that the original revelation is revealed. For the rabbis, Boyarin demonstrates, the Song of Songs is not so much an allegory on the relationship between God and Israel as it is itself a midrash on the Book of Exodus. Solomon wrote the Song of Songs as a passionate, poetic interpretation of the epochal event of the Exodus; the book is read by the rabbis, Boyarin claims, "as a *mashal* written by Solomon to be [a] hermeneutic key to the unlocking of the book of Exodus."[14] The Song of Songs is not allegorized into meaning something it did not originally mean; it is not interpreted. Very differently, "the Song of Songs is a series of readings in figurative language of the text of the Torah." Song of Songs Rabbah explains how the Song of Songs interprets the Torah. Here is a passage from the Song of Songs and a passage from Song of Songs Rabbah that explains what, according to the rabbis, it means:

> My dove in the cleft of the rock
> In the hiding place of the steep
> Show me your visage
> Let me hear your voice
> For your voice is lovely
> And your visage is beautiful.
> (2:14)

> R. Eliezer decoded the verse in the hour that Israel stood at the sea. *My dove in the cleft of the rock in the hiding place of the steep* [Song 2:14], that

[13] Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990).

[14] Boyarin, p. 107.

> they were hidden in the hiding place of the sea—*Show me your visage;* this is what is written, "Stand forth and see the salvation of the Lord" [Exod. 14:13]—*Let me hear your voice;* this is the singing, as it says, "Then Moses sang" [Ex. 15:1]—*For your voice is lovely;* this is the Song—*And your visage is beautiful;* for Israel were pointing with their fingers and saying "This is my God and I will beautify Him" [Ex. 15:2].[15]

The rabbis claim that the verse in Song of Songs refers to the passage through the Red Sea. In the Song of Songs, the beloved calls to his lover to come out of hiding and show her face. This is seen as a parallel of the verse in Exodus (14:13) in which the people are called upon to "stand forth and see." Before Boyarin, Saul Lieberman taught that Song of Songs Rabbah consistently sees Song of Songs as referring to either the crossing of the sea or the revelation at Mt. Sinai.[16]

For Boyarin, the reading method of the rabbis is not allegorical but intertextual. It is true that the theme of midrashic and allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs is the same, the love of God for Israel. But for our purposes here, Boyarin's distinction is crucial. We are trying to understand why and how the Song of Songs could be connected with Pesah. While Boyarin does not, as far as I can see, even mention this connection, his insight into the midrashic interpretation of the Song of Songs allows us to see the relationship between the festival and the book in a very clear light. *The Song of Songs, according to the rabbis, is a text which describes the very events that Pesah celebrates and commemorates.* To read Song of Songs Rabbah, therefore, is to read a kind of Haggadah for Pesah.

To review: Cohen shows that the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs is part and parcel of a Biblical metaphorical tradition. Fisch shows that the poetry of the Song of Songs is so allusive that it cries out for allegorization. Greeley adds richness to the allegory by showing that human love and divine love are metaphors for each other. Boyarin shows that all of these discussions of rabbinic allegory do not fully comprehend how the rabbis see the Song of Songs; they believed that the Song of Songs was itself written as an interpretation of the Exodus event. To explain a verse of the Song of Songs as pertaining to that event is not to allegorize but to explain what that verse really means.

I can now turn to Song of Songs Rabbah as a treasure-trove of material for religious transmission on Pesah, the festival of the Exodus event.

Song of Songs Rabbah

Jacob Neusner has translated Song of Songs Rabbah in a well-structured, comprehensible English.[17] Neusner independently confirms what others have

[15] Boyarin's translation, p. 113. He uses *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* ed. S. Dunansky (Tel Aviv, 1980), p. 5.

[16] "The Teaching of Song of Songs" [Hebrew] in Gershom Scholem *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1965), pp. 118–127, esp. p. 123.

[17] Neusner builds on the translation of Maurice Simon in the familiar series of the Soncino Press, *The Midrash Rabbah: The Song of Songs* (London, 1983).

concluded, that Song of Songs Rabbah is not about the Song of Songs. While he does not mention the connection between Passover and the Biblical book, his translation and commentary are extremely useful, and his unmistakable love for this midrashic commentary is very inspiring.

I will use his translation of the passages which follow, briefly suggesting homiletical ideas in between the citations.

2:8:1 You Must Participate in Your Own Rescue

> Hark! My Beloved!
> There He Comes,
> Leaping Over Mountains,
> Bounding Over Hills.
>
> R. Judah says, "The voice of my beloved . . . this refers to Moses." When he came and said to the Israelites, "In this month you will be redeemed," they said to him, "Our lord Moses, how are we going to be redeemed? And did not the Holy One, blessed be He, say to Abraham, *And they shall work them and torment them for four hundred years.* (Gen. XV 13), and now we have in hand only two hundred and ten years?"[18] He said to them: "Since He wants to redeem you, he is not going to pay attention to these reckonings of yours." But *Leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.* The reference here to mountains and hills in fact alludes to calculations and specific times. "He leaps" over reckonings, calculations, and specific times. "And in this month you are to be redeemed: *This month is the beginning of months* (Ex. 12:1)."

In this section of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah,* different rabbis, starting with R. Judah, tell different versions of this same story. Moses tells the Israelites that they are going to be delivered and the people respond with some concern. In the part of the passage I've cited here, they claim that it is not yet time to be delivered. We are reminded of those who rejected the aspirations of modern Zionism by claiming that it was not yet the proper time to rebuild Israel. They had insufficient hope and faith and Israel was rebuilt without their help. There is a homiletical idea here for our time: sometimes, those who are too literal in their interpretations of traditions make themselves unable to fulfill the goals of those traditions.

Other talmudic rabbis give their own versions of this same story. According to R. Nehemiah, the people say that they cannot be delivered because they don't have enough good deeds to their credit. Moses responds that God has decided to deliver them because of the righteous actions of Amram and his Bet Din. According to R. Judah and R. Hunia, the people said that, according to tradition, they had to be subjected to the oppression of the seventy nations before they could be delivered. Moses responds, very beautifully, I think, that if just one Israelite had been carried off to a foreign nation, it is as if the whole nation had been subjected to that foreign power.

[18] According to tradition, Jochebed was born as Jacob entered Egypt. If she was 130 years old when Moses was born, and Moses was eighty when he came back to Egypt, one gets the total of two hundred and ten years as opposed to the four hundred year figure predicted by God to Abraham in Gen. XV.

If we think about this passage homiletically, we see people who are so down on themselves, so depressed from being oppressed, that they raise objections when someone wants to help them. I'm sure we all know people like this: it is clear to us that they can be helped if they will only participate in their own rescue. If you've ever gone white-water rafting, you know that this is the main rule: If you fall overboard, you must be a participant in your own rescue. But too many people refuse to participate in their own redemption.

"It's not the right time." "I don't deserve to have happiness." "I can't deal with change right now." There are so many reasons not to be redeemed.

And yet God is there, and other people, represented by Moses here, are there, trying to help. God is leaping over the mountains, coming to save us. But even He, in all His power, will not succeed in helping us if we do not participate in our own rescue.

1:6:4 Outside/Inside

"My mother's sons were angry with me":
R. Meir and R. Yose' gave different interpretations:
R. Meir says, "My mother's sons': the sons of my nation [which word uses the same consonants; *immi/ummati*], that is Dathan and Abiram"
"'. . . were angry with me': attacked me, filled with wrath the judge[19] who [ruled] against me."[20]
". . . they made me keeper of the vineyards': while he brought justice among the daughters of Jethro, could he not bring justice between me and my brothers in Egypt?"
"Thus: 'but my own vineyard I have not kept.'"

This can be used as a text about Jewish unity. It begins with a verse from the Song of Songs and makes the verse a text about Moses. The Israelites, as exemplified by the rebellious Dathan and Abiram, are angry at Moses. He could make peace at the well in Midian, saving the daughters of Jethro, but he cannot bring peace among the sons of Israel.

To translate this to contemporary terms: Jewish leadership is often better at outreach than in-reach. We're very good at social action, but what about action within the Jewish community? We're very good at community unity with our Christian brethren, but what about harmony with other Jewish institutions?

We're very good at keeping the vineyards of others. We have to keep our own vineyard first.

[19] I am not sure who the judge is. Some commentators say that it is Pharaoh, others, such as Simon, say that it is God.

[20] If the judge is God, then Dathan and Abiram made God angry at Moses. If the judge is Pharaoh, as Simon points out, we are brought back to the passage in Exodus Rabbah (I:29) in which it is Dathan and Abiram who tell Pharaoh that Moses killed an Egyptian. (You might remember the scene in the movie *The Ten Commandments*, where Edward G. Robinson as a cynical Dathan tells Pharaoh that Moses killed an Egyptian.) Still, "judge" is a strange word to use for Pharaoh and the next part of the passage will use the same word to refer to God.

1:6:7 My Own Vineyard I Did Not Keep (2): The Issue of the Second Day

> R. Abbah in the name of R. Yohanan: "Said the Community of Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Because I did not observe the law of keeping a single day holy as the festival in the proper manner in the land of Israel, lo, I keep the law concerning keeping two successive days holy as the festival applicable to the Exiles, outside of the land.' I was hoping that I might receive the reward for setting aside two, but I receive the reward for only one of them."

This could be a springboard from which to discuss the whole issue of Yom Tov Sheni, of the Second Days of Pesah, Shavuot, and Sukkot. It is a cliché to say that it is easier to be Jewish in Israel than it is in America. But in case we think that we should receive double-credit for our double-holidays, we should be reminded that since we are not in Israel, and do not benefit from the merit of living there and being a daily part of its rebuilding, it takes this double-effort to equal what someone in Israel receives from observing one day. This could lead to a discussion of the merits of living in Israel or of the difficulties of being Jewish in America.

Finding God in the Synagogue

There are many Jewish people who feel separated from God. We often don't recognize their agony. It is to these people that I would bring one or both of these passages from *Shir Hashirim Rabbah:*

> Whither has your beloved gone, O fairest among women? (Song of Songs 6:1) The nations of the world [here] speak to Israel: "Whither has your beloved gone? From Egypt to the Sea, to Sinai. Whither has your beloved turned?" And Israel answers the nations of the world . . . . "Once I had cleaved to Him, can I be apart from Him? Once He had cleaved to me, can He depart from me? Wherever He may be, he comes to me."
>
> (SS Rabbah 6:1:1)

> *My beloved is like a gazelle.* Just as a gazelle leaps from mountain to mountain, from hill to hill, tree to tree, thicket to thicket, fence to fence, so the Holy One, blessed be He, leaps from one synagogue to another synagogue . . . .
>
> (SS Rabbah 2:9:2)

In the first passage, the nations are saying to the Jewish people: "Where is your God? You're downtrodden and He's off somewhere doing miracles. He used to do miracles for you at the Red Sea and Sinai, but what has He done for you lately?" The Jewish response is: He's on His way.

And where is God coming? In very simple fashion, the second passage says that He's going from shul to shul, looking for those who have felt separated from Him.

The picture here is of a Jewish person, sitting in shul, trying to find God again. You don't go wander all over the world to find God; you go to shul. And it doesn't really matter which one. He's going from synagogue to synagogue, looking for us.

That picture, of God leaping like a gazelle, of God as a lover searching for His beloved, is poignant. It is not just, to slightly change Heschel's formulation, human beings in search of God but God in search of human beings who have felt separated from Him.

1:10:3 From Pesah to Shavuot

> Another explanation of the verse, "Your cheeks are comely with ornaments":
> When people publicly recite teachings of the Torah in their proper turn: teachings of the laws of Passover on Passover, the laws of Pentecost on Pentecost, the laws of Tabernacles on Tabernacles, [in line with the meaning of the letters of the word for ornaments, *torim,*[21] as in this verse,] "now when the turn of every maiden had come" (Est. 3:12).
> ". . . your neck with strings of jewels":
> R. Levi in the name of R. Hama b. R. Hanina said, "This refers to the lections of the Torah, which are connected to one another, lead on to one another, or leap from one to the other, or exhibit parallels to one another, or are related to one another."

I am sure that many people who attend shul once in a while would prefer to hear Torah readings on the "important" subjects (the Ten Commandments). The whole idea of reading the Torah section by section, recognizably "important" passages after apparently irrelevant ones, is foreign to many of us, especially those who do not feel the rhythms of the Jewish liturgical cycle. We have to learn that just as each holiday has its own meaning, each Sidrah does as well. The rabbis of the Midrash understood that each passage reverberates off other passages and that everything is connected to everything.

One could go in many directions from here. An example would be to note one part of the cited passage from *Shir Hashirim Rabbah:*

> teachings of the laws of Passover on Passover, the laws of Pentecost on Pentecost, the laws of Tabernacles on Tabernacles,

Here we are on Pesah, and, in general, we're very good at Pesah laws. Most of us have Sedarim. Many of us are trying to do more and more of the Haggadah, to learn the order and the rituals of Pesah, to refrain from eating *hametz.* We're also getting better at Sukkot; more and more of us are building Sukkot and celebrating the holiday correctly. But note our passage: it mentions Shavuot as well. We're not very concerned with Shavuot, are we? I

[21] *Torim* is taken as both "ornaments" and "turns"; Pesah comes in its proper turn in the calendar.

wonder what percentage of American Jews could correctly identify this holiday and its meaning. And yet look how the laws of the three festivals are treated equally in our Midrashic passage; it states that we must strive to do all of the laws in their proper season. So on this Pesah, as we begin counting the Omer, let us start looking forward to Shavuot and try to teach more of its laws and customs than we have in the past.

4:12:1 Sexual Morality

"So too with the nations of the world: since they taunt Israel and say, 'And the Egyptians made the people of Israel work with rigor' (Ex. 1:13), if that is what they could make them do in labor, how much the more so with their bodies and with their wives'!"
"Then said the Holy One, blessed be He, 'A garden locked is my sister, my bride.'"
Said the Holy One, blessed be He, "My garden is locked up, and yet she is maligned!"
Said R. Phineas, "Then the Holy One, blessed be He, summoned the angel in charge of pregnancy and said, 'Go and form them with all the distinctive features of their fathers.'"
"And whom did their fathers resemble? The founders of their families, thus of Reuben, 'The families of the Reubenites'" (Num. 26:7).
Said R. Hoshaiah, "Reuben [produced] the Reubenites, Simeon the Simeonites. . . . "
"Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard" (Song of Songs 4:13).
(Neusner explains that "your shoots" *shelahayikh* is connected to the "sending forth" by Pharaoh. Pharaoh sends the Israelites forth because they had protected the integrity of their "shoots," their offspring.)

While we live in an age in which sexual morality doesn't seem to exist for much of the society, this text reminds us of the centrality of sexual morality to Judaism. Beginning with Sarah, who rejected Pharaoh's advances, and Joseph, the first Hebrew slave in Egypt, who rejected the advances of Potiphar's wife, our ancestors suffered greatly at the hands of their oppressors. The verse from the Song of Songs about the chaste woman becomes a poignant reminder of the terrors of slavery. There is a parallel here to one of the horrors of the Holocaust, the abuse and degradation of many Jews in the concentration camps.

Notice God's words here (I paraphrase): "My people do the best that they can to keep themselves pure and are maligned by others?" God defends the innocence and purity of the people. In a Midrashic text from Leviticus Rabbah (XXXII:V:4) which is also cited here, one of the reasons that God redeems Israel from Egypt is because they "did not go beyond the bounds of sexual decency."

If the Israelites in Egypt, enslaved and oppressed, were able to keep that morality, we, who are free, should certainly be able to resist the temptations

of freedom. That Jewish people have always tried, no matter the circumstances, to preserve their morality, is a badge of honor. It is our prayer that the next generation will be able to say this with pride about us.

4:12:1 "Don't It Always Seem to Go That You Don't Know What You've Got Till It's Gone" or Why Pharaoh Chased the Israelites to the Red Sea

"R. Simeon b. Yohai taught on Tannaite authority,
'[The Egyptians were] in the position of someone who inherited a piece of ground that was a dumping ground. The heir was lazy, so he went and sold it for some trifling sum. The buyer went and worked hard and dug up in the dump heap and found a treasure, and with it he built himself a big palace. The buyer would walk about the marketplace, with servants following in a retinue, all on the strength of that treasure that he had bought with the dump heap.'"

"The seller, when he saw this, he began to choke, saying, 'Woe, what I have lost!'"
"So too, when the Israelites were in Egypt, they were enslaved in mortar and bricks, and they were held in contempt by the Egyptians. But when they saw them with their standards, encamped at the sea, in royal array, the Egyptians began to choke, saying, 'Woe, what have we sent forth from our land!'"

My title for this very simple sermon is borrowed from an old Joni Mitchell song called "Big Yellow Taxi." It's about preserving what we have, such as nature and the personal relationships we treasure. In Song of Songs Rabbah, the verse from the Song of Songs is connected to the emotions of Pharaoh when he realizes what he lost when he sent the Israelites forth. But by the time he changes his mind, it's too late in the story. The sermon is a simple one: As Mitchell says, "It pays to realize." Realize what you have.

1:4:3 "Okay, Rabbi, Where Do I Go from Here?"

"Draw me after you, let us make haste" (Song of Songs 1:4).

R. Berekhiah in the name of R. Judah b. R. Ilai: "It is written, 'And Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea'" (Ex. 15:22):

"He led them on from the . . . sea.
"They said to them, 'Moses, our lord, where are you leading us?'
"He said to them, 'To Elim, from Elim to Alush, from Alush to Marah, from Marah to Rephidim, from Rephidim to Sinai.'
"They said to him, 'Indeed, wherever you go and lead us, we are with you.'
"The matter is comparable to the case of one who went and married a woman from a village. He said to her, 'Arise and come with me.'
"She said to him, 'From here to where?'
"He said to her, 'From here to Tiberias, from Tiberias to the Tannery to the Upper Market, from the Upper Market to the Lower Market.'

"She said to him, 'Wherever you go and take me, I shall go with you. . . .'"
Said R. Yose b. R. Iqa, "And lo, a verse of Scripture itself proclaims the same point: 'Draw me, after you let us make haste.'" (This is the verse from Song of Songs.)
"If it is from one verse of Scripture to another of Scripture, if it is from one passage of the Mishnah to another passage of the Mishnah, if it is from one passage of the Talmud to another passage of the Talmud, if it is from one passage of the Tosefta to another passage of the Tosefta, if it is from one aspect of narrative to another aspect of narrative."

This can be taken as a text about the Jews, who have wandered all over the world. It's about the midrashic process, which connects different classical texts. But it's also about learning, that as educated Jewish people we need to go to Torah and Mishnah, etc.

One of the greatest questions a congregant can ask a rabbi is, "Okay, Rabbi, here's where I am in terms of my Jewishness. Now, what's the next step? Where do I go from here?" Every Jewish person should ask him/herself if they are growing as a Jewish person. I always find it interesting to ask people about their "Jewish biographies," their Jewish background and experiences. What is holding them back? Was it an early, negative experience?

It is the task of rabbis to create opportunities for Jewish growth. It is the task of congregants to follow those leads.

Just as the Jewish people followed Moses from one place in the desert to the next, just as learned Jewish people follow the truths of Judaism from one classical text to another, we must always ask, "OK, this is where I am as a Jewish person. Where do I go from here?"

6:12:1 Surprised by Joy

It was taught on Tannaite authority by R. Hiyyah: The matter may be compared to the case of a princess who went out gathering stray sheaves. "The king turned out to be passing and recognized that she was his daughter. He sent out a friend to take her and seat her with him in the carriage. Now her girlfriends were surprised at her and said: 'Yesterday you were gathering stray sheaves, and today you are seated in a carriage with the king.' She said to them: 'Just as you are surprised at me, so I am surprised at myself, and I recited in my own regard the following verse of Scripture, before I was aware, my fancy set me in a chariot beside my prince.' Thus too when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt in mortar and bricks, they were rejected and despised in the view of the Egyptians. But when they were freed and redeemed and made prefects over everyone in the world, the nations of the world expressed surprise, saying, 'Yesterday you were working in mortar and bricks, and today you have been freed and redeemed and made prefects over everyone in the world.' And the Israelites replied to them: 'Just as you are surprised at us, so we are surprised at ourselves,' and they recited in their own regard, 'Before I was aware, my fancy set me in a chariot beside my prince.'"

This is a wonderful midrash for the connection between Pesah and the Song of Songs. It is a very fine application of the metaphor of God and Israel as lover and beloved to the situation of the Israelites in Egypt. I particularly like the idea of the astonishment felt by the one who is loved, both the individual and the people. Imagine the escaped slaves, realizing that God has indeed remembered them. It is, indeed, a moment of astonishment and joy at the miracle of God's love for His people; those who are truly loved know how powerful and astounding is the realization that one is truly worthy of the devotion of another. Most of us live our lives with the feeling that we are unloved and unappreciated. Pesah should be a time for surprising others by showing them how much we love them.

Some Homiletical Ideas

I'd like to suggest a sermon idea based on Fisch's remarks that the Song of Songs reflects the struggle of love. Love is not always resolved with neat endings, with happily-ever-afters and everybody being with their true love. Love is more scattered, and unrequited love is probably a norm. As another critic puts it:

> Canticles does not end: true love is always a quest of one person for another; it is a constant straining toward the unity of the one who is preeminently the beloved with the companion who is the unique one.[22]

Akiva and the Song of Songs

Dov Peretz Elkins' "Love as a Song of Songs"[23] is the best published sermon in English that I know of concerning Passover and the Song of Songs. Despite the trite title of the book and the "New Age" vocabulary, Elkins has a way of presenting material in a remarkably coherent manner and of making connections that others only vaguely articulate. For instance, while I knew that Rabbi Akiva was instrumental in the decision to canonize the book, that he and his wife Rachel shared a profound love of sacrifice and devotion, and that he died a martyr, I never connected these three facts. Elkins, however, brings these matters together and states:

> Akiva sensed the power of love in his own life, and that these moving lyrical verses expressed something of divine importance. He realized that human love is only a metaphor for the love of God. . . . Akiva's insight was powerful: Love is determinative.

Elkins asks us to see Pesah as a time to

[22] Daniel Lys, *Le Plus Beau Chant de la Création* translated by Michael V. Fox (quoted in Neusner and Greeley, p. 32).

[23] In *Prescription for a Long and Happy Life* (Princeton: Growth, 1993), pp. 45–49.

recognize the healing force of love in our lives . . . and express connectedness in the steadfast love (*Hesed*) of the Covenant with God and the Jewish people.

When the Winds Come

(For this sermon, see Song of Songs Rabbah IV:16:1: "Blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out." R. Huna said in the name of R. Joshua b. R. Benjamin b. Levi: In this world when the south wind blows the north wind does not blow, and when the north wind blows the south wind does not blow. But in the time to come God will bring a strong clearing wind on the world and drive on the two winds together so that both will be in action, as it is written, "I will say to the north: Give up, and to the south: Keep not back" (Isa. 43:6).

Milton Steinberg "Inviting the North Wind."[24]

For a Yizkor sermon on Pesah, Steinberg quotes Song of Songs 2:11–12 ("Lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth") and then 4:16 ("Awake, O North Wind, and come, thou South"). Steinberg focuses on the winds: while the South Wind comes from Egypt and is warm, moist, and fragrant, the North Wind is from Anatolia and Armenia, from the hills of snow and cold. Flowers that only know the South Wind are frail and do not attain full beauty, which is why the poet invokes the North Wind. This is not about nature but about the spirit. On Yizkor, we think about the North Wind and how it has blown our lives apart. While we all want the South Wind, we need the North Wind, adversity and struggle, to teach us strength of character and sympathy for others.

A Song *About* Songs

In David R. Blumenthal's wonderful book on Levi Yitzhak,[25] there is a short meditation on the phrase, "Song of Songs." Does it mean a song *about* songs? Is it the best song ever sung? Is it a song about singing? What songs are meant? Levi Yitzhak cites the Alshech who says that we should praise God for being worthy to praise Him. Levi Yitzhak learns from this that the Song of Songs means

> We sing to Him that we have merited to sing to Him songs of love . . . . It is a "song about songs."

If this sounds familiar to us, it is, as Blumenthal notes, very much like Heschel's ideas about radical amazement and wonder. We sing because we are thrilled that we can sing. We're so busy running around with our intense

[24] In *From the Sermons of Rabbi Milton Steinberg* ed. by Bernard Mandelbaum (New York: Bloch, 1954).

[25] David R. Blumenthal, *God at the Center: Meditations on Jewish Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

schedules that we need to remember that we have the ability to sing, to wonder, to appreciate.

Where does our ability to sing come from? From God. The next question is: Why did God give us the capacity to sing? Does He need to hear our songs? I'm sure that the angelic choirs sing better than we ever will. Apparently, however, our songs are important to God. We should be amazed that we were given this gift. Blumenthal concludes, "the ultimate song is a song about songs, a song about singing."

Jews and Christians on the Song of Songs

In Jewish history, the Passover-Easter season was often a time of Christian persecution of the Jews. The "Blood Libel" and the accusations of the Jews' murder of Jesus made this season a time for hatred of and violence against Jews.

In response, many modern Jews have attempted to turn this memory on its head by making Passover a holiday of brotherhood; non-Jews are often welcome guests at their Seder tables. In this spirit, take a look at a recent Jewish-Christian dialogue on the Song of Songs to see how a famous Catholic priest and a famous rabbi view the book from their different religious perspectives. The dialogue constitutes two chapters in the recent book, *The Bible and Us* by Father Andrew Greeley and Rabbi Jacob Neusner. It offers a concise, pointed, understandable way to see the differences between Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. It could serve as a springboard for an update on Jewish-Christian relations.

Feminist Interpretation[26]

As early as 1857, C. Ginsburg[27] noted that the Song of Songs pays special attention to women. Marvin Pope calls Ginsburg's work "a pioneer manifestation of the emancipation of women."[28] The expression of women's feelings, the sense of equality, and the mutuality of love in this book make it a work that stands out from the other books of the Hebrew Bible. Fifty-six verses are spoken by a female while only thirty-six are clearly from a male. A woman's voice both opens and closes the book. The word "father" never appears in the book but the term appears, quite perfectly, seven times. (Note that the well-known Biblical phrase *bet 'av* is not found here; but *bet 'em* is.) While it may not appear to be very flattering to compare a woman to "a mare of Pharaoh's chariots" (1:9) or to say that her neck is "like the tower of David, built for an arsenal" (4:4), these and other militaristic images are quite

[26] Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1973), 41:30–48; idem, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 144–165; Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1988), pp. 110–111.

[27] *The Song of Songs* translated by S. Blank (New York: Ktav, reprinted in 1970).

[28] *Song of Songs* Anchor Bible 7c (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), p. 140.

striking in that they are used for a female and not a male. Only a woman is said to be like a lion and a leopard (4:8). It's not what you'd expect.

Some scholars have pushed further, wondering if the gender balance in the Song of Songs cannot contribute to an understanding of gender relationships in ancient Israel. As Greeley says:

> For all the patriarchal tone of the Hebrew laws and their deep and nasty chauvinism, the relationship between man and woman in the Hebrew culture could be and sometimes was quite different from the theory.[29]

But this takes me beyond the scope of this survey.

Martin Buber wrote that the Garden of Eden story concludes on the note that the Garden is not destroyed; there is the possibility of returning there someday. Some feminist interpreters think that the Song of Songs marks that return. They see the Song of Songs as a midrash or exposition of the Garden of Eden story. Sexual desire along with a sharing of agricultural tasks is an interesting echo of Genesis 2–3; sexuality and productivity are interrelated in both texts. We have idyllic worlds in both Eden and the Song. It doesn't take great effort or toil or sweat of the brow to tend a beautiful and fertile garden. What Adam and Eve lost is regained in the Song of Songs.

1:10:2 Penetration and Connection

". . . your neck with strings of jewels":
When they make connections among teachings of the Torah, then go on and make connections between teachings of the Torah and teachings of the prophets, teachings of the Prophets and teachings of the Writings, and fire flashes around them, then the words rejoice as when they were given from Mount Sinai.
For the principal point at which they were given was at Mount Sinai with fire: "And the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven" (Dt. 4:11).
Ben Azzai was sitting and expounding, and fire burned all around him.
They went and told R. Aquiba, "My lord, Ben Azzai is sitting and expounding, and fire is burning all around him."
He went to him and said to him, "I have heard that you are expounding, and fire is burning all around you."
He said to him, "True."
He said to him, "Is it possible that you have been occupied with the deepest mysteries of the Chariot?"
He said to him, "Not at all. I was in session and making connections among teachings of the Torah, then going on and making connections between teachings of the Torah and teachings of the prophets, teachings of the Prophets and teachings of the Writings, so fire flashed

[29] Greeley and Neusner, *The Bible and Us*, p. 38.

around them, and the words rejoiced as when they were given from Mount Sinai."
"For is not the principal point at which they were given was at Mount Sinai with fire: 'And the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven' (Dt. 4:11)?"
R. Abbahu was in session and expounding, and fire burned all around him.
He thought, "Is it possible that I am not making connections among teachings of the Torah as is required for them?"
For R. Simeon b. Laqish said, "There are those who know how to make connections among words of Torah, but do not know how to penetrate inside of them, and those who know how to penetrate into the depths of the teachings but do not know how to make connections. But I am expert at both making connections and also getting at the heart of matters."

That's our task, not only on Passover but every week, in our teaching and preaching. Perhaps one of our problems is that we forget our mission. Rabbis give hundreds of sermons and speeches a year. It's difficult to remember that our words can be fire.

We must be the experts in making connections. We must make a string of jewels, as the interpretation of the Song of Songs tells us. We're good at penetrating into the depths of the teachings of Judaism, but do we do enough to lead our people, to make the connections between the passages for them? It is our responsibility to lead them, from Torah to Talmud, from Purim to Passover to Shavuot, to show them, step-by-step, how the Torah is the way to life.

We are commanded to make these connections and to get to the heart of the matters that affect our people. Our task is to interpret the Torah, to lead our people from station to station in the wilderness, until they themselves see that Sinai is always on fire.

Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, Chairman of the Editorial Board for Conservative Judaism, *is Rabbi of Temple Beth Sholom in Hamden, Connecticut.*