

# Between Times of Distress and Places of Sorrow: A Song

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Having dealt with the Megillah for Purim extensively in the last two editions of the magazine, I thought it is now TIME to move on, and this would be a good PLACE to offer something new. Purim provided the model to add further megillah readings at other times as well. Usually, these “new” megillot are read not from scrolls (*megillot*) but from books, but they are still called “megillot” to link them with the original megillah. A megillah reading in a service bestows upon it aspects of Purim—i.e., it indicates an occasion in which after a time of distress Israel finds itself in a place of freedom.

The oldest “new” megillah was Eicha (Lamentations). In Talmudic times it was forbidden to study Torah on Tisha beAv, but only to read Eicha privately (Ta’an. 30a). Later it was read publicly. Soferim 14:3 (an extracanonical tractate from the 9<sup>th</sup> cent.) mentions public liturgical readings of Shir haShirim, Ruth, and Eicha as well as Esther. Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) was in medieval times still only called a *sefer* (“book”), but its reading seems to have been known by then (as shown by the Mahzor Vitri, a 12<sup>th</sup> century siddur from Germany).

Pesach is the time for the reading of Megillat Shir haShirim (Song of Songs). We read Shir haShirim after the Amida on Shabbat during the week of Pesach. The reason for the choice of this text is Songs 1:9, where “Pharaoh’s chariots” are mentioned (Machzor Vitri).

This all seems pretty logical so far, but if you open your Tanakh to read verse 9 you may be surprised: “I have likened you, my darling, to a mare in Pharaoh’s chariots: your cheeks are comely with plaited wreaths, your neck with strings of jewels ....” This is a boy singing about his girlfriend. Shir haShirim is nothing but an ancient oriental love song, full of rich erotic imagery and pictorial sexual allusions. The word “pharaoh” seems to be the only link to Pesach.

Often one reads that Pesach falls in the spring and that the Exodus from Egypt is all about the renewal of life. It therefore seems appropriate to sing a love song at Pesach. But this is a secondary interpretation that tries to create some logical link between this megilla and Pesach. (Why shouldn’t winter be a good time for love, too?) The spring connection is medieval and results from a mystical approach to the three festivals, according to which Pesach is the time of betrothal between God and his “girlfriend” Israel, Shavuot is the marriage between the two with the Torah as ketubah, and Sukkot is the building of a home (the Temple). Similar love and marriage imagery can be found in the Kabbalat Shabbat service—in the six psalms culminating in the love song *Lecha Dodi*, which were added to the liturgy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The original link between Pesach and Shir haShirim becomes clear when reading Shir haShirim *not* in its Hebrew version but in the Targum, the medieval translation based on the old custom of translating liturgical readings into the vernacular—at the time, Aramaic. The Targum to Shir haShirim stems from the 8<sup>th</sup> century—that is, just before the time when this megillah is first mentioned as being read on Pesach (Soferim, 9<sup>th</sup> cent.).

The Aramaic “translation” of Shir haShirim is an allegorical history of the people of Israel, simplified to three basic, recurring key events: exile, exodus, return to the land of Israel. The Targum finds in Shir haShirim three such phases of Jewish history. The three exiles all happened as consequences of failures in Israel’s relationship with God; the three exoduses are God’s loving reaction.

The composer and singer of Shir haShirim according to the Targum is God himself. The word “*Shlomo*” is understood as *she-shalom shelo*, “he to whom peace belongs”—i.e., God. Shulamit, the girl in this song (7:1), whose name echoes the word *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem), is us,

the Jewish people. The song is composed as a dialogue: sometimes Shulamit speaks, sometimes God (as the original Hebrew Song of Songs is a dialogue between a boy and a girl). This is God’s song about us.

The first phase in the history of the relationship between us and God describes the time in Egypt, the Exodus out of Egypt, the wandering in the wilderness and Sinai, the conquest of the land and the glories of the time of Solomon (Targum to Songs 1:3 – 5:1). To give you a taste of how this sounds:

Tanakh Songs 1:3: “*As to smell, your ointments were good; like ointment your name was poured forth; therefore the maidens (עלמות) loved you.*” In the Aramaic “translation” this becomes: “At the news of Your miracles and mighty acts which You performed for Your people, the house of Israel, all the peoples trembled, when they heard the report of Your mighty acts and good signs [that is, the plagues and the Exodus]. And Your holy name, which is more choice than the anointing oil poured on the heads of kings and high priests, was heard in all the world. Therefore the righteous loved to walk in the way of Your goodness, so that they might inherit this world and the world to come.”

Tanakh Songs 1:4: “*Draw me after you, we will run; may the king bring us into his chambers; we will be glad and rejoice in You (בך), we will recall our love for you more than for wine (יין)! Rightly do they love you.*” In the Aramaic “translation”, this reads: “When the people of the house of Israel went out from Egypt, the Shekhinah of the Master of the World travelled before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night [the Targum here adds a description of the quotation’s setting]. The righteous of that generation said before the Lord of the World: ‘Draw us after You, and we will run in the way of Your goodness. Bring us near to the foot of Mount Sinai and

give us Your Torah from out of Your heavenly treasury, and we will be glad and rejoice in the twenty-two letters [the Hebrew for “in you”, **יב**, forms the sum 22] in which it is written. We will remember them and love Your divinity and shun the idols of the nations [the letters of the Hebrew word for “wine” form the sum of 70, as there are 70 nations]. And all the righteous who do what is right before You will fear You and love Your commandments.”

This “translation” is not as free as it may sound to you. It strictly follows a symbolic lexicon and rules for deriving meaning. Some words, for example, are vocalized differently: Hebrew *alamat* (“maidens”) is read as *olamot* “nations”, *immo* (“his mother”) is read as *ammo* “his people”, *shoshanim* (“roses”) is read as *she-shonim* “those who learn”, *kofer* (“henna”) is read as “*kippur*” atonement, and so on. Meaning can be derived from the sum of the letters of a word (*yayin* makes 70, therefore it means the 70 nations of the world). Other meanings are derived from the etymology of words: for example, myrrh (Hebr.: *mor*) means the place of the temple (*Moriah*). And so on. Just believe me: this is all very logical.

The first phase of our relationship with God is then—due to the idolatry in the land—succeeded by a second phase: the time of the Babylonian Exile, the exodus from Babylonia under Ezra, and the period back in the land under the Maccabees and Hasmoneans (Targ. to Songs 5:2 – 7:11). The third phase of Israel’s relationship with God is the time of the Targumist, the medieval exile. The song is therefore about the hope that the present time of Exile, too, may lead to a new gathering of the exiles to the one

place: the land of Israel, and the restoration of the Solomonic kingship under the Messiah (Targ. to Songs 7:12 – 8:12). Shir haShirim is, according to the Targum, a great song of hope: hope based on God’s redeeming love for Israel, which became manifest repeatedly in the course of history and the repeated transitions from times of distress to places of freedom.

Song of Songs, according to the Targum, is the loftiest song that can be chanted in this world. Therefore it is called the “Song of Songs”, *Shir haShirim*. “Ten songs were recited in this world, but this song is the most excellent of them all” (Targ. to Song of Songs opening.) These 10 songs are:

1. **Psalm 92** *Mizmor Shir le Yom haShabbat*: The song Adam sang in a duet with queen Shabbat on the 6<sup>th</sup> day in Gan Eden, when Shabbat stopped God from punishing Adam with death for his sin of eating the fruit—see MidrTehillim 92:3 and Kimchi on Ps 91:1.
2. **Exodus 15** *Shirat haYam*: Moses’ Song after the Exodus out of Egypt and the crossing of the sea [and Miriam’s, too; AMB].
3. **Numbers 21:17** The song about the well in the desert in Parashat Chukkat.
4. **Deuteronomy 32** *Ha’azinu*, Moses’ song at the end of the time in the desert.
5. **Joshua 10:12** Joshua’s song when the sun stood still and the battle against the Amorites was won miraculously.
6. **Judges 5** Deborah’s victory song.
7. **1 Samuel 2** Hanna’s song after she is given a child.
8. **2 Samuel 22** David’s song after God saved him from all his ene-

mies; its last phrase is quoted in Birkat haMazon: *Migdol yeshuot malko ...*

9. The 9<sup>th</sup> song is **Shir haShirim**, sung by God himself (*shelomo* is “the one to whom peace belongs”).
10. The 10<sup>th</sup> song will be recited by the children of Israel when they conclude their exiles and the **messianic time** begins (Isa 30:29).

All these songs mark transitions from times of distress to places of freedom and life renewed. *Mizmor Shir leYom haShabbat* and *Shir haShirim*, the megillah for Pesach, frame all these transitions in the history of the Jewish people in this world. It is interesting that between times of distress and places of freedom in the Bible—as the Targum observed—there is always a song: music and prayer (all these “songs” are prayers) are both therapeutic, opening doors in distressful times, but also expressions of gratitude in places of freedom. It is remarkable that Shir haShirim, the loftiest song in the world about the final transition from distress to freedom, is about a relationship. Whatever you may think about the allegorical translation of Targum Shir haShirim, we owe to it that we got Shir haShirim as our Pesach Song, and that we can sing on Pesach about love and relationships—and what we can do between times of distress and places of freedom. ■

For a good introduction to and translation of Targum Shir haShirim, see Philip S. Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles, translated, with a critical introduction, textual notes, and commentary (The Aramaic Bible 17A)*, Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press (2003).

The Artscroll prayer books and editions of Shir haShirim offer a translation that expresses the liturgical allegorical meaning.

