

SHIR HASHIRIM - A PHYSICAL SONG

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Usually, we read the Megillah of Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, on the Shabbos that occurs during the intermediate days (Chol HaMoed) of Pesach. However, this year there is no Shabbos Chol HaMoed, and outside of Israel we read Shir HaShirim on the 8th day of Pesach, which is a Shabbos.

In the Tractate of Yodayim (3:5) the Mishna states: "...the whole 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." What do we find contained in this holiest of all books? Praises of the human body: Your cheeks are comely (1:10); Your eyes are doves (1:15); Your hair is like a flock of goats (6:5); Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes (4:2); Your lips are like a thread of scarlet (4:3); Your cheeks are like a piece of a pomegranate (4:3); Your neck is like the tower of David (4:4). Our Sages have told us that the praise of each body part is focused on the specific act that these parts perform in the service of G-d.

A prime example of this type of praise is found with the verse "How beautiful are your soles in sandals, O prince's daughter! (7:2)" The Talmud writes (Sukkah 49b): "Raba made the following exposition: What is the implication of what was written, How beautiful are your soles in sandals, O prince's daughter?' How beautiful are the steps of Israel when they go up [to Jerusalem] to celebrate a festival!" The soles are a relatively small body part. However, in the holiest of all Writings, they are focused upon and praised. What is the reason for the praise? Soles play a part in allowing a person to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the three Pilgrimage Festivals, the Shalosh Regalim. Because of this role, soles are praised. If soles, a small body part, are praised, then certainly the major organs and limbs must be praised for the roles they play in the service of G-d. It is because the limbs, and really the entire body, serve G-d, in essence singing His praise, that G-d sings praise of the body. This praise is not just any praise. It is one that is contained in the holiest of all the writings. It is one contained in a book that "the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which it was given to Israel." Why does the body deserve such praise?

The Alter from Slabodka, Rav Nossion Finkel, explained that we know that G-d created man "B'tzelem Elokim," in G-d's image. Each component of the body is a part of this holy image. With each good deed done by or with an organ or limb, we see the splendor of creation, and the holiness of G-d is evident. When we use our bodies for the service of G-d, we are assuring that our bodies, our images of G-d, are acting as the conduits of holiness that they should be. Every person has the innate ability to fill the world with the splendor of G-d by using his or her body properly, in a way

which brings honor to G-d. Because we are all created in G-d's image, we have a tremendous responsibility in assuring that this image does not become sullied or tarnished. When we act properly with every limb, we become a manifestation of G-d's holiness. It is because of this amazing capacity of each limb that Shir HaShirim was chosen to be the receptacle for the praises of the human body.

As we discussed in the last post, Pesach is a holiday on which we celebrate our freedom. We were freed from physical enslavement and from spiritual bondage as well. Perhaps it is because of the dual aspect of our freedom that we read Shir HaShirim on Pesach. Once G-d released the nation of Israel from Egypt, they were free to serve G-d with both body and soul. On Pesach, we focus on using our power of speech, which we said is the prime example of the convergence of physical and spiritual. Shir HaShirim contains many praises of the body, the physical. Why is the body praised? Is it because of the aesthetic value of the human form? No. It is because of the spiritual value of the human form, something very physical, something that we often remove from the realm of spiritual. To focus on the newfound freedom that Pesach celebrates, we read Shir HaShirim. This book, the holiest of all, contains the praise that comes when symbiosis exists within ourselves, when our physical body is used spiritually. The unity of physical and spiritual was only possible when we were free from bondage in both realms, a liberation which Pesach commemorates. Because we can now use our physical for the spiritual, we sing the praise of the physical (which is spiritual as well) on Pesach, as Shir HaShirim.

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