

# INTIMACY ON A HIGHER SCALE

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

*"The song that excels all songs dedicated to G-d, Him to Whom peace belongs"(1:1)*

A perusal of the verses of Shir Hashirim reveals that the narrative is not written from one clear perspective. The verses switch back and forth intermittently from Hashem's perspective to Bnei Yisroel's perspective. The Midrash, sensitive to this apparent inconsistency, makes the following observation: There are three instances in the Torah where relationships are expressed using the mode of "shir" - "song". "Az Yashir Moshe" - "Then Moshe Sang", the shira that Moshe and Bnei Yisroel sang when emerging from the Red Sea offers Bnei Yisroel's perspective of their relationship with Hashem. "Ha'azinu Hashamayim" - "Listen O Heavens", the song which delineates Bnei Yisroel's relationship with Hashem throughout history is written from Hashem's perspective. Shir Hashirim, continues the Midrash, is a combination of three songs, for "shir" means "one song" and "shirim" means "two songs", making a total of three. The Midrash identifies the three songs contained within Shir Hashirim as Hashem expressing His "feelings" towards Bnei Yisroel, Bnei Yisroel expressing their feelings for Hashem and the song which expresses the combined feelings of both Bnei Yisroel and Hashem.<sup>1</sup> What insight are Chazal offering us concerning the unique nature of Shir Hashirim?

The Yom Tov Shemoneh Esray is the same for Ma'ariv, Shacharis and Mincha. On Shabbos, however, there is a different format for each of the three Tefilos. Ma'ariv contains "Atoh kidashta" - "You have sanctified us", in Shacharis we find "yismach Moshe" - "Moshe rejoiced" and Mincha contains "Atoh echad" - "You are One". In all three Tefilos of Shemoneh Esray, we recite a prayer which describes the essence of the Shabbos. In Ma'ariv we recite "veyanuchu vah" - "and we will rest on her" using the feminine form, during Shacharis we say "veyanuchu vo" - "and we will rest on him" using the masculine form and in Mincha we state "veyanuchu vam" - "and we will rest on them" in the plural form. Why did Chazal change the format?

Hashem relates to Bnei Yisroel in various ways, such as Father-to-son, King-to-subject and Master-to-slave. Shir Hashirim, more than any section of Tanach, focuses on an additional relationship, the intimate relationship of husband and wife. According to Jewish law the marriage process is comprised of three stages.<sup>2</sup> The first stage is referred to as "kiddushin" or "eirusin" - "betrothal". Kiddushin is performed by giving the woman an item of value such as a ring, which upon her acceptance, prohibits the woman from entering into a relationship with another man. However, the husband is not yet financially responsible for the wife's well-being and although halachically they

are husband and wife, they are not permitted to be intimate. The second stage is known as "nissu'in". In Talmudic times the bride would remain in her parent's home for a twelve month period between kiddushin and nissu'in, during which time all of the necessary preparations for the upcoming marriage would be made. (continued on page two)

At the nissu'in the husband assumes full financial responsibility for the well-being of his wife. This event is traditionally celebrated by the entire community, who lead the bride and groom to their new home with song and dance. As the final phase of the marriage process, the bride and groom repair to a secluded area which is guarded by two witnesses to assure their complete privacy. Today, all of these events are combined and performed as one ceremony, the kiddushin, nissu'in and yichud.

Shir Hashirim verbally expresses the intimacy of the relationship between Bnei Yisroel and Hashem. Shabbos is the setting which fosters this relationship. The three meals and Tefilos of Shabbos correspond to the three stages of marriage. During Ma'ariv we proclaim "Atoh kidashtah" - "You have sanctified us" reflecting the kiddushin stage of the marriage. The Torah-ordained obligation of kiddush is also recited at this juncture. The Shabbos morning Tefilah "yismach Moshe" - "Moshe rejoiced" reflects the celebratory nature of the nissu'in, and is punctuated with the festive meal of the day. Mincha is the time period corresponding to the yichud as is reflected in the prayer "Atoh echod veshimcho echod umi ke'amcho Yisroel goy echod ba'arets" - "You are One and Your name is One, who can be compared to Your unique nation Israel". This prayer describes Hashem's unity and His unique relationship with Bnei Yisroel who are eternally bound to Him.<sup>3</sup>

The Shabbos zemiros also reflect the stages of the relationship. The zemiros sung during the day have a livelier beat than those of the night before, reflecting the celebratory nature of the festive meal, while Shalosh Seudos, the third meal of the day, projects a more sublime ambiance. The nusach of the tefilah for mincha is sung in a minor key reflecting the same notion.

Kiddushin effectuates a greater change in the woman than in the man, for it becomes prohibited for her to marry other men. Therefore, in the first stage of the Shabbos we recite in the Tefilah "veyanuchu vah" referring to the Shabbos in the feminine form, for the Shabbos reflects the transformation which is occurring within the relationship. Shacharis is the nissu'in, which affects the man to a greater degree for he becomes financially responsible for his wife. This transformation is reflected in the Tefilah by reciting "veyanuchu vo"; the Shabbos is referred to in the masculine form. Shabbos afternoon is the yichud, the union of husband and wife. We recite "veyanuchu vam" referring to the Shabbos in the plural form for the relationship has entered the stage whereby both parties are affected equally for they have become one.

The three songs reflect the three stages of marriage. "Az Yashir" is the kiddushin, for it was composed at the splitting of the Red Sea, the onset of our journey through the desert which is described by the Navi Yimiyahu as the beginning of the marriage: "zacharti ahavas kelulosaiyich lechteich acharai bamidbar" - "I remember the love of your bridal days; how you followed Me

through the desert"<sup>4</sup>. Ha'azinu is recited prior to the imminent entrance into Eretz Yisroel. The Midrash compares the lamentation of Moshe that he was not able to lead Bnei Yisroel into Eretz Yisroel to the distress of a father unable to see his daughter entering the Chupah (otherwise known as nissu'in)<sup>5</sup>. Shir Hashirim contains both of the previous aspects, i.e. kiddushin and nissu'in, but it also contains the song sung by both parties, Bnei Yisroel and Hashem in unison. It is this third level of song that describes the intimacy of the relationship which prompts Chazal to make the statement that while all the songs are Holy, Shir Hashirim is the Holy of Holies.<sup>6</sup>

*1. Shir Hashirim Rabbah Parsha 1 2. This follows the opinions that Chupah is hachnasah lereshus 3. See Berachos 6a 4. Yirmiyahu 2:2 5. Shemos Rabbah Parshas Beshalach 6. Shir Hashirim Rabbah Parsha 1*