The Sanctification of the Song of Songs

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Rabbi Akiva said, “…No one in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs renders the

hands impure, since nothing in the entire world is worthy but for that day on which the

Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs

is the Holy of Holies! (Mishnah Yadayim 3:5)

Introduction

One of the ways we seek holiness is through communion with God through the

study of Holy Writ, but that that idea is easier to toss around glibly than actually to define.

The Song of Songs is the context in which our greatest commentators and thinkers expressed

themselves the most directly in that regard. The question at the heart of our discussion is:

Can a biblical text be physical and spiritual, openly erotic and about the love of God, all at

the same time? In this essay, we explore the wide range of opinions found in classical

rabbinic commentary, modern Jewish Thought, and contemporary academic scholarship.

These scholars provide critical means of building bridges between the realms of the loving

relationships between God and humankind, and the loving relationships between people.

The Song of Songs contains some of the most tender expressions of love and

intimacy in the Bible. On its literal level, the Song expresses the mutual love of a man and a

woman. From ancient times, traditional interpreters have almost universally agreed that there

is an allegorical or symbolic layer of meaning as well. In both traditional rabbinic circles and

contemporary academic circles, some scholars attempt to deny one level of meaning or the

other by insisting that the author cannot possibly have meant both. However, others allow for

the possibility of attributing both layers of meaning to the author. In this essay, we argue that

the dismissal of either layer of meaning does a disservice to the Song and its interpretation.

The blurring in interpretation unlocks the full sacred potential of the Song, which bridges the

love of people and the love of God into its exalted poetry.

From Literal to Allegorical

The allegorical mode of interpretation can be traced as least as far back as the

second and third centuries C.E., and possibly even to the first century C.E. 1 It also is plausible

that the written evidence is long preceded by an oral tradition, possibly going back all the

way to the original composition of the Song. The most prevalent allegorical interpretation in

Jewish tradition (as exemplified by the Targum, and the commentaries by Rabbi Saadiah

Gaon [882–942], Rashi [1040–1105], Rashbam [Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, 1080–1160], and

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra [1089–1164]) understands the Song as symbolizing the historical

relationship between God and Israel. 2 The ancient Aramaic translation called the Targum was

the first to present a coherent historical narrative based on earlier midrashim. 3 Following

Rabbeinu Baḥya Ibn Pakuda (first half of the eleventh century), Maimonides (1138–1204)

maintained that the Song is an allegory representing the love between God and the righteous

individual. 4 Many allegorical, poetic, philosophical, mystical, and other interpretations of the

Song also have been part of the Jewish landscape over the past two millennia. 5

How did this allegorical interpretation come to be? Many contemporary scholars

maintain that it is superimposed onto what was originally a secular love poem. Representing

this widespread position, James Kugel imagines that the first generation of allegorical

interpreters knew full well that the Song is nothing more than a secular love poem between a

man and a woman. These original Sages fancifully interpreted the Song to reflect the love

between God and Israel, all the time winking at one another. Subsequent generations lost

those winks in translation, and erroneously concluded that this interpretation reflected the

true meaning of the Song. In Kugel's view, Sages such as Rabbi Akiva simply were "misled"

by the allegorical interpretation. However, contemporary scholars "know" that the Song is

part of a "great ancient Near Eastern tradition of love poetry, with its conventional

descriptions of the lovers' physical beauty and its frank exaltation of eroticism." 6 The

religious allegorical interpretation made the book Bible-worthy. However, the original

meaning of the Song is indeed irrelevant for inclusion in the Bible. 7

Gabriel Cohn flatly rejects this explanation: Why would the Sages take a secular

love poem and completely reinterpret it to refer to the love between God and Israel? They did

not need to include the Song in the Bible at all! Evidently, they believed the Song was sacred

from its inception. 8 Gerson Cohen expresses the matter more bluntly:

The rabbis of the first and second century, like the intelligent ancients generally, were as

sensitive to words and the meaning of poetry as we are. How, then, could they have been

duped—or better yet, have deluded themselves and others—into regarding a piece of

erotica as genuine religious literature, as the holy of holies! Should not the requirements

of elementary common sense give us reason for pause and doubt? 9

The assumption that the Song was a secular love poem that early Sages reworked into a

religious allegory to make it Bible-worthy does a disservice both to the Song and to the

Sages. Once we can accept that the Sages always understood the Song as sacred, we can find

layers of sanctification of divine and human love within the Song.

The Allegorical Meaning Inheres in the Text

Some scholars maintain that an allegorical meaning of divine love can be

demonstrated from a careful text analysis. In his introduction to the Song, Ibn Ezra observes

that the prophets frequently apply the metaphor of a marriage to the relationship between

God and Israel. Therefore, the allegorical interpretation of the Song as a metaphor of the love

between God and Israel is reasonable within its biblical setting. 10

Gabriel Cohn adds that the emphasis on the Land of Israel seems to have greater

meaning than simply the natural setting of the relationship. Israel seems to be a vehicle for

promoting the relationship. The Song mentions several cities in Israel (1:14; 2:1; 4:1; 6:4;

7:5–6). The lovers also liken one another to places in Israel (4:1 [6:4]; 4:4; 7:6. 4:11). In 5:1,

milk and honey appear together. Cohn lists additional features of the Song that also have no

parallels in other Near Eastern love poetry. 11

Of course, these points hardly create a compelling case for an intended allegorical

reading. After all, the book never reveals an allegorical meaning. This is unlike the prophetic

metaphors of a God-Israel marriage, where the meaning always is made explicit. However,

the above evidence makes allegory a comfortable possibility as part of the author’s original

intent.

The Literal Meaning Is the Intended Meaning and Is Sacred, and the Allegorical Meaning Is Ascribed to It by Tradition

Another approach is to understand the literal reading of human love as the primary intent of the book. The symbolic interpretive approach that takes the Song as being about God and Israel or about God and the religious individual would then belong to the category of “tradition,” or “midrash” rather than the peshat.

Alon Goshen-Gottstein summarizes the view of those contemporary scholars who accept the literal reading as the primary intent of the Song. In their reading, the Song speaks of the sanctity of human love:

> The Song celebrates human love for what it is. Scripture would be incomplete if it did not have in it an expression of an aspect of life so germane to humanity, its pursuits and its happiness. What could be more natural, beautiful, and even spiritual, than the inclusion of human conjugal love as a value to be admired, praised and celebrated? 12

Within this reading, the inclusion of this remarkable book into the Bible is the strongest vote for the supreme religious value of interpersonal love—especially the love between a man and a woman—in Jewish tradition. Scholars who would distinguish between a “secular” human love interpretation and a “religious” God-Israel interpretation fail to recognize that love and human relationships themselves are essential aspects of

biblical religion. Precisely because both are sacred, tradition could express itself

regarding the nature of the relationship between God and Israel, or between God and the

religious individual, within the descriptions of human love and intimacy.

From this vantage point, the rabbinic concern with the literal reading of the Song

does not stem primarily from its biblically unparalled expressions of physical human love

and sexuality, but rather from the potential to treat those physical expressions as secular

or vulgar:

Our Rabbis taught: One who recites a verse of the Song of Songs and treats it as a

mere ditty and one who recites a verse at the banqueting table unseasonably [that

is, in an inappropriate or secular manner, HA], brings evil upon the world.

Because the Torah girds itself in sackcloth, and stands before the blessed Holy

One and laments in God's presence, "Sovereign of the Universe! Your children

have made me as a harp upon which they frivolously play." (Sanhedrin 101a)

Rabbi Akiva says: One who sings the Song of Songs with a tremulous voice at

banquets and treats it as a mere song has no share in the World to Come. (Tosefta

Sanhedrin 12:10)

Of course, there is no way to disprove that there also is an allegorical dimension intended

by the author of the Song.

Human Love Is a Symbol of the Love between God and Israel

A middle approach based on the above evidence is to view the literal element of

human love as essential to the author’s intent, and that the author also intended that

human love serve as a symbol of divine love. Gabriel Cohn maintains that for an

allegory, an interpreter must set each detail into a larger allegorical framework. In

contrast, if the Song is a symbol, then one must interpret every detail of the literal love

poem, and then more generally understand this human love as a symbol of divine love. 13

In this approach, the literal human love is part of the original intent of the Song, as is the

symbolic meaning of the God-Israel relationship.

To summarize: Either the Song is sacred because it was always intended as an

allegory describing divine love; or it is sacred because it celebrates the sanctity of human

love and tradition sees in that human love a symbol of the love of the divine. Or perhaps

it is a human love poem with built-in symbolism intended by the author to point to the

mutual love between God and Israel or between God and the religious individual.

The Literal Reading as an Essential Aspect of Tradition

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik asserts that unlike the case with respect to any other

biblical book, the midrashic-allegorical reading has come totally to supplant the literal

meaning of the Song. Not only does the Song contain a layer of divine love, but it is

exclusively about divine love. He maintains that one who adopts the literal reading of the

Song denies the sanctity of the Oral Law, since there is rabbinic consensus that the

symbolic meaning is the sole acceptable one. To bolster his point, he notes that the

halakha codifies that the name Shelomo (the Hebrew version of Solomon) that appears

seven times in the Song is mostly to be taken as a sacred name of God, reading Shelomo

to mean, “The Song to Him whose is the peace (le-Mi sheha-Shalom shelo).” That word

must not be erased in the Song, since it does not refer to the earthly King Solomon, but

rather to God. Thus, halakha itself shows that the literal meaning (King Solomon) is

supplanted by the symbolic meaning (God): 14

Every “Solomon” mentioned in the Song of Songs is sacred… except for this one

verse: My vineyard, which is mine, is before me; you, O Solomon, shalt have the

thousand (Song 8:12)—Solomon for himself [shall have a thousand]…And there

are some who say this also is secular: Behold it is the bed of Solomon (Song 3:7).

(B. Shevuot 35b)

Although Rabbi Soloveitchik is correct that there is near-universal acceptance of an

allegorical meaning within tradition, there is a range of opinion pertaining to the value of

the literal reading of human love. In the introduction to his commentary, Malbim (Meir

Leibush ben Yehiel Michel, 1809–1879) criticizes rabbinic commentaries on the Song

who altogether ignore its literal meaning. While he maintains that there is a symbolic

meaning as well, one first must understand the literal meaning to attain other layers of

meaning:

Most interpretations [of Song of Songs]… are in the realm of allusion and

homiletical interpretation distant from the establishment of the peshat.… Of

course we affirm that divine words have seventy facets and one thousand

dimensions. Nonetheless, the peshat interpretation is the beginning of knowledge;

it is the key to open the gates, before we can enter the sacred inner chambers of

the King.

Most earlier rabbinic commentators find value in the literal reading, while they

simultaneously insist that the Song contains an allegorical level of meaning as well. Elie

Assis surveys classical commentators and determines that their opinions fall into several

larger categories.

1. The Song was initially composed as a human love poem and it was elevated to

the sacred when being edited into a biblical book (Rabbi Joseph Kara

[1050–1125], Rabbi Isaac Arama [1420–1494]).

2. The Song is an allegory in a general sense, but the interpreter must focus on

the details of the human love song (Rashbam, Rabbi Joseph Kara, Rabbi

Isaiah of Trani [c. 1180–c. 1250]).

3. The literal reading is necessary to understand the allegory, and the allegory is primary (Rashi, Ibn Ezra).

4. Despite what we suppose the simple meaning to be, we must interpret only the allegory (Rabbi Obadiah Sforno [1470–1550]). 15

Tzvi Yehudah further observes that only in the nineteenth century do we begin to find rabbis who deny the value of the literal reading of the Song. Prior to that, the Sages and commentators generally embraced the literal and symbolic meanings of the Song. 16

It should be noted further that although the halakha rules that most references to the name Shelomo in the Song are sacred because they refer to God, the classical sages and the later commentators never allowed that ruling to supplant the literal meaning in their minds. Shelomo also could refer to King Solomon. They still maintained, for example, that when the opening verse states, “The Song of Songs of Solomon,” this means that King Solomon authored or played a significant role in the composition of the book. Despite the halakhic ruling of the Talmud that this reference to “Shelomo” is a sacred name of God, the word continues to refer to the human king as well. It is difficult to conclude that the halakhic-symbolic-allegorical meanings of the Song altogether supplant the literal meaning within tradition.

In the final analysis, it is impossible to ascertain where original authorial intent

ends and where added meaning begins. As Rabbi Saadiah Gaon says in the introduction

to his commentary, “Know, my brother, that you will find great differences in

interpretation of the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs is likened to locks whose keys

have been lost.” However, it is precisely this uncertainty that unlocks the potential of

connecting human love and divine love.

Building Bridges

The blurring of the boundaries in the layers of interpretation of the Song is

singularly valuable. Without knowing the precise primary intent of the author of the

Song, several contemporary religious thinkers exploit the potential literal and allegorical

layers of interpretation to speak about the Song’s contribution to religious experience.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and his student Rabbi Shalom Carmy bridge the two

allegorical readings of God-Israel and God-religious individual. Rabbi Yuval Cherlow

bridges the literal and allegorical readings.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

As discussed above, Rashi champions the position that the Song should be read

allegorically as a continuous narrative of the historical relationship between God and Israel.

Maimonides espouses a different reading, that the Song should be read allegorically as reflecting

the intimate relationship between God and the religious individual. Rashi's reading pertains to

the collective, particularistic relationship between God and Israel. Maimonides' reading, in

contrast, pertains to every religious individual, a universalistic perspective.

Despite these significant differences, Rabbi Soloveitchik considers the approaches of

Rashi and Maimonides to be compatible. The lovers' quest for one another in the Song

symbolizes the human quest for God and for God's revelation to humans. All people long to

transcend their natural state and find God and meaning. Additionally, Israel uniquely receives

divine revelation through the Torah. God longs for a relationship with each individual, and also

for a relationship with a unique nation. At the same time, the lovers in the Song constantly

pursue and long for one another, but never consummate the sexual relationship in the Song itself.

Similarly, God never is revealed fully to people, and people retreat from God at the moment of a

potential encounter. The two readings of Rashi and Maimonides thus are two aspects of this

relationship. The Song speaks to the entire world, and simultaneously in a unique manner also to

Israel. 17

Rabbi Shalom Carmy 18

Many Jews customarily recite the Song on Friday night prior to the evening prayers. The

ordinary Jew’s reading of the Song has little to do with the elitist reading of Rashi. Most people

reciting the Song are not likely to attempt a systematic allegorical reading of the historical

relationship between God and Israel.

Rabbi Carmy notes that an adequate reading of the Song cannot ignore ordinary readers

even as it also addresses erudite theologians. The ordinary worshipper can relate more to

Maimonides’ concept of the man in the Song as God, and the woman as the religious individual

who senses God’s closeness. The Song gives far more expression to the woman than to the man,

so that one can find therein one’s religious voice seeking God. 19

Rabbi Carmy explains that people never can fully connect to God, just as the desired

rendezvous of the lovers in the Song never explicitly occurs. The God we seek is the God who

corresponds to our needs and desires, our loves and our fears. Yet God also is wholly other,

expressed most poignantly through revelation to humanity, and makes demands that do not

correspond to our perceived needs. In the context of revelation, people must obey; but obedience

necessarily leads to estrangement, since it is not a freedom-seeking person’s natural way. God

therefore is both approachable and completely apart. Rabbi Soloveitchik’s reading that combines

the approaches of Rashi and Maimonides thereby bridges the gap between the ordinary Friday

evening worshipper, engaged in an intimate personal spiritual encounter with God, and the elite

theologian and philosopher, who encounters God through revelation.

Rabbi Yuval Cherlow 20

Rabbi Yuval Cherlow builds important bridges between the literal and allegorical

layers of meaning in the Song. In Rabbi Cherlow's interpretation of the Song's literal

layer, the man—whom he identifies as a king—and the woman—whom who he identifies

as a peasant who tends vineyards—must learn each other's language and overcome the

staggering gulf between them. Similarly, there is an infinite gulf between God and

people, leading to inherent religious challenges.

Over the course of the Song, the woman must learn the world of the king and its

language rather than attempting to impose her world onto her lover. So too Israel must

learn God's language in the Torah to develop a proper religious relationship with God.

The king also must learn the language and concerns of his beloved, and by addressing

them he gives her the opportunity to develop the relationship further.

Rabbi Cherlow maintains that the Song teaches that the key to developing one's

love of God is through an understanding of human love. As cited in the Mishnah, Rabbi

Akiva declares that the Song is the most sacred of all biblical works, calling it the Holy

of Holies, which was in its day the most sacred inner sanctum of the Temple in Jerusalem

(M. Yadayim 3:5). He considers “love your neighbor as yourself” to be the central axiom

of the Torah (Sifra Kedoshim 4:12). Rabbi Akiva teaches that the love of God is not what

leads to the love of people; rather, the love of people ultimately leads to the love of God.

The planes of interpersonal love and the love that may exist between God and Israel or

the religious individual intersect in the most sacred of dialogic spaces, the relational

equivalent of the ancient Holy of Holies. 21

Conclusion

Our inability to define the boundaries between the author’s intended meaning and later

layers of interpretation is one of the Song’s most exciting features. The dynamic possibilities,

coupled with the efforts of ancient and contemporary thinkers, offer fertile ground to explore the

love of people and the love of God. There are three commandments to love in the Torah: One’s

neighbor (Lev. 19:18), the stranger (Lev. 19:34), and God (Deut. 6:5). The Song and its

interpretations develop and invigorate these three loves. Both forms of love require a leap of

faith from the uncertain, and that leap and endless pursuit creates the dynamic and ever-burning

love depicted by the Song.

In his essay on the Song of Songs, “U-vikkashtem Mi-sham,” Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

discusses a central pillar of the Torah, which elevates the physical aspects of humanity to a life

of holiness. In the summary words of Rabbi Reuven Ziegler:

Judaism does not view the natural, biological aspect of the human being with disdain or

despair. Therefore, the revelatory commands do not come to deny and repress man’s

physical existence. Judaism instead declares that the body’s instinctual biological drives

must be refined, redeemed, and sanctified, but not extirpated. Through the imposition of

the mitzvot that make demands of the body, those drives are stamped with “direction and

purposefulness.” The Torah thus allows man to experience pleasure, even as it prevents

him from being enslaved to desire and from indulging in pleasure to excess. 22

This approach appears apt to explain the dynamism in the literal-metaphorical relationship of the

Song. The Song speaks to the sanctity of human love, and intimates the love of the divine. Like

the Torah, what sanctifies the Song is not “only” its divine aspect, but also the elevation of

human love to the realm of the sacred.

The strands of rabbinic analysis warn that the literal reading of the Song is susceptible to

secularization and vulgarization, just like human love and intimacy today. And also just like

today the connection between love and religion can be viewed with excessive cynicism. Some

would separate between human love which is “secular,” and a relationship with God which is

“religious”; but biblical tradition repudiates this view and considers human love and

interpersonal relationships to be essential and sacred aspects of the service of God.

The language of love in the Song of Songs has a unique potential to speak to the heart of

many contemporary Jews. One midrash suggests that King Solomon made the Torah accessible in a

manner that nobody had done since the Torah was revealed:

He listened and tested the soundness (izzein v’ḥikkeir) of many maxims (Kohelet

12:9)—[this means that] he made handles (oznayim, a word similar to izzein) to the

Torah.... Rabbi Yosei said: Imagine a big basket full of produce without any handle, so

that it could not be lifted, until one clever man came and made handles to it, and then it

began to be carried by the handles. So until Solomon arose, no one could properly

understand the words of the Torah, but when Solomon arose, all began to comprehend the

Torah. (Shir Ha-shirim Rabbah 1:8)

Precisely through the language of human love that most people can understand, the Song enables

people to approach God and revelation.

The Song sanctifies and exalts human love, and it infuses with intense passion the love

between God and Israel and the love between God and every religious individual. Jewish

tradition understood the potential religious pitfalls that could result from the inclusion of the

Song into the Bible, but concluded that it was well worth those risks to promote a singular level

of sanctification through the fusion of human and divine love. It remains to the readers of the

Song to take that leap of faith.

At the outset of this essay, we asked: Can a biblical text be physical and spiritual, openly

erotic and about the love of God, all at the same time? By blurring the boundaries between

human and divine love, the Song and its interpretations provide a strikingly positive, and sacred,

answer.

Notes

1 Based on intertextual references between the Song of Songs, 4 Ezra, and Revelation, Jonathan

Kaplan argues that the first allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs can be traced to the

close of the first century CE. See his “The Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah,”

Hebrew Union College Annual 81 (2010), pp. 43–66.

2 This was not the only midrashic understanding, however. In the summary words of David M.

Carr (with minor transliteration changes): “While we see the male fairly consistently linked to

God, we find the female of the Song of Songs related to the house of study (B. Eruvin 21b, Bava

Batra 7b), an individual sage (T. Ḥagigah 2:3), Moses (Mekhilta, Beshallaḥ, Shirah §9), Joshua

the son of Nun (Sifrei D’varim §305 and parallels), local court (B. Sanhedrin 36b, Yevamot

101a, Kiddushin 49b and Sanhedrin 24a; cf. also B. Pesaḥim 87a), or the community of Israel as

a whole (M Taanit 4:8; T. Sotah 9:8; B. Shabbat 88, Yoma 75a, Sukkot 49b, Eruvin 21b, Taanit

4a; Mekhilta Beshallaḥ Shirah §3).” See his “The Song of Songs as a Microcosm of the

Canonization and Decanonization Process,” in Canonization and Decanonization, eds. A. van

der Kooij and K. van der Toorn (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 175–176.

3 See Philip S. Alexander, “Tradition and Originality in the Targum of the Song of Songs,” in

The Aramaic Bible: Targums in Their Historical Context, ed. D. R. G. Beattie and M. J.

McNamara (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp. 318–339; Isaac B. Gottlieb, “The Jewish Allegory

of Love: Change and Constancy,” Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 2 (1992), pp. 1–17.

For a more detailed analysis of Targum’s reading, see Esther M. Menn, “Targum of the Song of

Songs and the Dynamics of Historical Allegory,” in The Interpretation of Scripture in Early

Judaism and Christianity: Studies in Language and Tradition, ed. Craig A. Evans (Sheffield:

Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 423–445.

4 See M.T. Hilkhot Teshuvah 10:3; Guide of the Perplexed 3:51. And see also Yosef Murciano,

“Maimonides and the Interpretation of the Song of Songs” (Hebrew), in Teshurah L’Amos: A

Collection of Studies in Biblical Interpretation Presented in Honor of Amos Hakham, eds. Moshe

BarAsher et al. (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2007), pp. 85–108; James A. Diamond, Maimonides and

the Shaping of the Jewish Canon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 26–68).

For an analysis of medieval philosophical readings of the Song of Songs, and how Malbim (Meir

Leibush ben Yehiel Michel, 1809–1879) and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (in U-vikkashtem Mi-

sham) adopted variations of that approach, see Shalom Rosenberg, “Philosophical Interpretations

of the Song of Songs: Preliminary Observations” (Hebrew), Tarbiz 59 (1990), pp. 133–151.

5 For a survey, see Michael Fishbane, Song of Songs (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society,

2015), pp. 245–310.

6 For critique of this widely-held scholarly position, see Hector Patmore, “‘The Plain and Literal

Sense’: On Contemporary Assumptions about the Song of Songs,” Vetus Testamentum 56

(2006), pp. 239–250.

7 James L. Kugel, How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now (New York: Free

Press, 2007), pp. 514–518. For criticism of the cynical excesses of Kugel's book, see Yitzchak

Blau, "Reading Morality Out of the Bible," Bekhol Derakhakha Daehu 29 (2014), pp. 7–13.

8 Gabriel H. Cohn, Textual Tapestries: Explorations of the Five Megillot (Jerusalem: Maggid,

2016), p. 7.

9 Gerson D. Cohen, "The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality," in The Canon and

Masorah of the Hebrew Bible: An Introductory Reader, ed. Sid Z. Leiman (New York: Ktav,

1974), p. 263. See also Mark Giszczak, "The Canonical Status of Song of Songs in m. Yadayim

3:5," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 41:2 (2016), pp. 205–220.

10 These include: Isaiah 50:1; 54:4–7; 62:4–5; Jeremiah 2:1–2; 3:1; Ezekiel 16:7–8; Hosea 1–3.

11 Gabriel H. Cohn, Textual Tapestries, pp. 11–12.

12 Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "Thinking of/With Scripture: Struggling for the Religious Significance

of the Song of Songs," Journal of Scriptural Reasoning 3:2 (2003), at

http://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/back-issues/vol-3-no-2-august-2003-healing-words-the-song-of-

songs-and-the-path-of-love/thinking-ofwith-scripture-struggling-for-the-religious-significance-

of-the-song-of-songs/. Accessed July 11, 2017.

13 Gabriel H. Cohn, Textual Tapestries, pp. 22–23.

14 Joseph Soloveitchik, “U-vikkashtem Mi-sham,” in Ish Ha-halakhah: Galui V’nistar,

(Jerusalem: Histadrut, 1992), pp. 119–120.

15 Elie Assis, Ahavat Olam Ahavtikh: Keriah Hadashah BeShir HaShirim (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv:

Yediot Aharonot-Hemed, 2009), pp. 211–231.

16 Tzvi Yehudah, “The Song of Songs: The Sanctity of the Megillah and Its Exegesis”

(Hebrew), in Sinai: Jubilee Volume, ed. Yitzhak Rafael (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav

Kook, 1987), pp. 471–486.

17 “U-vikkashtem Mi-sham,” pp. 119–120. For discussions of this essay by Rabbi Soloveitchik,

see especially Shalom Carmy, “On Cleaving as Identification: Rabbi Soloveitchik’s Account of

Devekut in U-Vikkashtem Mi-Sham,” Tradition 41:2 (Summer 2008), pp. 100–112; and see also

Reuven Ziegler, Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Jerusalem-

New York: Urim-OU Press, 2012), pp. 344–389.

18 The section on Rabbi Carmy is adapted from my article, “The Literary-Theological Study of

Tanakh,” published as an afterword to Moshe Sokolow’s Tanakh: An Owner’s Manual:

Authorship, Canonization, Masoretic Text, Exegesis, Modern Scholarship and Pedagogy

(Brooklyn, NY: Ktav, 2015), pp. 192–207. My essay draws from Rabbi Carmy’s article, “Perfect

Harmony," First Things (December, 2010), at

https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/12/perfect-harmony. Accessed July 11, 2017.

19 Of the 117 verses in the Song of Songs, some 61 are spoken by the woman, and only 33 by the

man. She initiates their encounters more frequently than he, and she gets the last word in all but

two dialogues. The woman takes to the streets alone at night to search for her beloved (3:1–4;

5:6–7), and even the secondary characters marvel at her unusual behavior (cf. Yair Zakovitch,

Mikra LeYisrael: Song of Songs [Hebrew] [Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992], pp. 11–14).

20 Yuval Cherlow, Aharekha Narutzah: Peirush al Shir Ha-Shirim Be-Tosefet Mavo U-Perek

Siyyum al Mashmaut Shir Ha-Shirim Le-Yameinu (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Miskal-Yediot Aharonot

and Hemed Books, 2003).

21 For further discussion of his work, see my review essay, "Rabbi Yuval Cherlow's

Interpretation of the Song of Songs: Its Critical Role in Contemporary Religious Experience," in

my Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim

(New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 258–271.

22 Reuven Ziegler, Majesty and Humility, p. 377. See further discussion of this theme in Rabbi

Soloveitchik's thought in Ziegler, pp. 72-78.