Interpreting and Analyzing the Five Megillot: Review of R. Hayyim Angel's New Book

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The Heart of the Five Megillot by Rabbi Hayyim Angel; independently published; (c) 2026; ISBN 9798184-265094; $21.95

This book is a compact yet intellectually generous collection of 15 essays that open the Five Scrolls—Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther—with unusual clarity and depth. At roughly 162 pages, this is Angel's 17th book. Despite its modest size, the work is exceptionally scholarly. The National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and longtime Tanakh instructor at Yeshiva University offers two essays on Esther, two on Shir Ha-Shirim, one on Eikhah, three on Ruth, six on Kohelet, and an appendix.

The result is not a verse-by-verse commentary but a series of focused probes that refuse the false choice between classical rabbinic midrash and modern literary-critical methods. Angel's signature "literary-theological" approach lets the texts speak religiously while remaining attentive to form, historical context, and the best available scholarship.

This stance already distinguishes the volume from many popular English treatments of the Megillot, including the more traditional, midrash-forward productions associated with publishers such as Artscroll. Where those often prioritize edifying readings that smooth tensions, Angel keeps the texts'

complexities alive and productive.

One of the two essays on the Song of Songs—“Blurring the Boundaries Between Divine and Human Love: The Sanctification of the Song of Songs”—is the volume’s centerpiece.

Angel begins from Rabbi Akiva’s declaration in *Mishnah Yadayim* 3:5 that the Song is the Holy of Holies. The organizing question follows: Can a biblical text simultaneously express human erotic love and the love of God, and be sanctified in the process?

Angel surveys the long history of allegorical interpretation. By the second and third centuries the Song was already being read as a symbolic account of the relationship between God and Israel, a reading crystallized in the Targum and developed by Saadiah Gaon, Rashi,
Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra into a coherent historical narrative.

Parallel to this national-historical allegory stands the more individualistic reading championed by Bahya Ibn Pakuda and especially Rambam, in which the Song depicts the
intimate longing between God and the righteous soul.

Against the common modern claim—exemplified by James Kugel—that early sages imposed an allegory upon what they knew to be a secular love poem in order to make it Bible-worthy, Angel marshals counter-arguments from Gabriel Cohn, Gerson Cohen, and others. Why would the sages have needed to “save” a secular poem when they could simply have excluded it? The more plausible conclusion is that they regarded the Song as sacred from the outset. Once that premise is accepted, the interpretive task becomes one of discerning how layers of meaning—literal human love and symbolic divine love—coexist and mutually illuminate one another.

Angel carefully maps several positions on the relationship between the literal and the allegorical. Some (Ibn Ezra, Cohn) argue that an allegorical dimension already inheres in the text itself. Others insist that the primary authorial intent is the celebration of human conjugal love as itself a sacred value; the allegorical readings then belong to tradition or midrash rather than peshat. A middle position treats the literal human love as essential while also functioning as a symbol of divine love.

Classical commentators themselves display a spectrum of attitudes toward the literal sense, ranging from those who see the Song as originally a human love

poem later elevated to those who regard the literal reading as a necessary gateway to the primary allegory. The resulting ambiguity—where original intent ends and interpretive tradition begins—is not a defect but the source of the book's enduring richness.

As a reviewer, I would only add that the sole possible exception to the absence of the divine name in the Song of Songs occurs in 8:6 with the unique term *shalhevetyāh* (??????????????). The majority of modern critical scholars view the final suffix -yāh as a linguistic device expressing the superlative ("a mighty flame"), while a minority interpret it as a shortened form of YHWH; even then, the term functions merely as a metaphor for the intensity of human love.

The heart of the essay is devoted to "building bridges" among these layers through three modern religious thinkers. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik synthesizes Rashi's collective God–Israel reading with Rambam's individual God–soul reading: the lovers' perpetual quest mirrors both humanity's universal longing for God and Israel's unique covenantal relationship. Rabbi Shalom Carmy extends this insight to the ordinary Jew who recites the Song on Friday nights, experiencing it as the soul's intimate search for the divine presence. Finally, Rabbi Yuval Cherlow treats the literal relationship between the king and the vineyard-tending woman as a profound pedagogical model: the lovers must learn each other's languages across an immense gulf, just as Israel must learn the language of Torah while God accommodates human concerns.

For Cherlow, as for Rabbi Akiva, the love of neighbor is not secondary to the love of God; it is the path that leads to it.

Angel's concluding argument is that the Song's refusal to draw sharp boundaries is precisely its strength. Human love is not a secular distraction from religion; it is an essential and sanctifiable dimension of religious life. The Torah does not seek to eradicate bodily drives but to refine and direct them.

The Song, by speaking the language of human passion that ordinary people understand, becomes a "handle" that makes the rest of Torah accessible. Jewish tradition was fully aware of the risks of vulgarization, yet judged those risks worth taking. The Song is the Holy of Holies not despite its evocation of human passion but because of it.

What makes Angel's insights especially valuable is the combination of intellectual honesty, theological generosity, and pastoral sensitivity. He refuses both the reduction of the Song to pure allegory that erases its erotic power and the

opposite reduction that treats the allegory as a later pious fiction. Instead he models a method that holds the layers in creative tension. By drawing equally on Rashi and Rambam, Soloveitchik and Cherlow, classical midrash and careful literary observation, he offers contemporary readers a way to inhabit the book without embarrassment or forced spiritualization.

The single essay on Megillat Eikhah continues the same project of reading with scholarly rigor and religious seriousness. Angel integrates classical sources with careful attention to the book's five interrelated poems, their alphabetic acrostics, the qinah meter of lament, the shifting voices, and the theological tensions that run through the text.

The opening cry "Eikhah"—"How?"—is less a request for information than an expression of bewildered protest. Classical sources read the destruction as a consequence of sin; modern literary readings note that only chapter 3 fully embraces that theodicy. Angel's hallmark is to hold both layers without forcing resolution: the text itself models the struggle rather than offering easy answers.

Chapter 3, the structural and theological center, moves from despair through memory of God's *hesed* to a hard-won affirmation that "the Lord's mercies are not spent." This movement does not erase the surrounding agony but anchors it. Angel neither spiritualizes away the raw horror nor treats the text as merely a historical relic. Instead, he shows how Lamentations legitimates protest, insists on the reality of loss, and still refuses to abandon the covenantal relationship. Its poetry continues to give language to successive generations of Jewish catastrophe while pointing, however tentatively, toward resilience.

The remaining essays on Ruth, Esther, and especially Kohelet display the same disciplined openness. In Ruth, Angel highlights deliberate ambiguities that dignify human complexity. In Kohelet, he refuses the common traditional strategy of neutralizing the book's more unsettling claims about wisdom, mortality, and meaning. The appendix notes that Tanakh's relative silence on the afterlife is not an oversight but a theological choice: the ideal is communal perfection and a just society in this world.

The Heart of the Five Megillot is a model of what responsible, religiously serious Tanakh study can look like in our time. It is compact enough to be read with pleasure yet rich enough to reward repeated return. Readers accustomed to more uniformly traditional treatments will find Angel's willingness to hold tensions—between *peshat* and *derash*, between human passion and divine love, between protest and faith—both challenging and liberating.

For those seeking a guide that honors the classical tradition while remaining fully attentive to the literary and historical dimensions of the text, this volume is an outstanding contribution.

(Review ends here.)

Rabbi Angel's commentary is the first in a new series he is creating, The Heart of Tanakh. It is available at amazon.com here:

https://www.amazon.com/Heart-Five-Megillot-Tradition-Complexity/dp/B0H7VZKZ6M/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2FN80M3NQ0FOY&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.q0arA6lLJRf2-FVhgLvbTv6ImCntYCti5oOa3VxRugKfvJUs1twSotbLrns8pQe68iMsri-3efqJIiauj8SWWb6bhIBkkrgif_QcIMSOB4Z42Fkf-mF4K5QS5uZ1PTR5i1mTx94Y9w9XCuvUoAWszpfsBuTCjJfM-5nSSIC9u8DmTjYH7u291qD6DBXcmvqtwgEuaBtrJgv4.RUNlsGLDLTQzF07x4pKaND__RNiy391

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