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PESAH – LAST DAYS

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*RABBI YEHUDAH HA-LEVI’S LOVE SONG
ON JEWISH SELF-IDENTIFICATION FOR THE
7TH DAY OF PESAH*

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Few poems of Medieval Hebrew have left as lasting an impact on Jewish law, prayer, and custom as Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi’s “*Yom Le-Yabasha*,” the *geulah* piyyut written for the seventh day of Pesah. In the code of Jewish Law *Levush Malkhut*, Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe discusses the recitation of this piyyut on five different occasions: the seventh day of Pesah, on Shabbat Shirah, on the eighth day of Pesah (either each year, or at least when a circumcision is held), on Yom Kippur which coincides with a circumcision, and on any Shabbat that coincides with a circumcision (490:6-9, 584:3, 621:2, 685:1, 698:4,11; see also Mishnah Berurah to these locations). Though today the recitation of this piyyut has fallen out of favor in many congregations, it remains the most commonly recited of all the mostly forgotten piyyutim, still printed in many *birkonim*, and in many editions of the standard daily siddur.¹

“Yom Le-Yabasha” is a fine example of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi’s poetic genius. The greatest poets can write and operate within conventional and previously established genres, while also breathing new life into those genres by changing expectations and opening new avenues of expression within them. For example, though the Sonnet as a literary form obviously existed before William Shakespeare was born, the greatness of the bard lain in his ability to craft the Shakespearean Sonnet, which conforms to but also adapts the expectations of the Petrarchan Sonnet. This essay considers Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi’s advancement and development of the *geulah* genre of Hebrew poetry. We will consider the expectations of the

form, and the way “Yom Le-Yabasha” transforms and revitalizes the genre by adding a dimension of passionate Jewish self-identification to the preexisting themes of passive longing for return and love.

The Genre of the *Geulah* Piyut

Hebrew liturgical poetry contains many sub-genres based on when specifically in the prayer service the poem was designed to be recited in synagogue. For example, a *selihah* is recited as part of the *selihot* prayers on fast days or the start of the year, a *yotzeir* is recited in the *Shaharit* blessing of “*Yotzer ha-Meorot*,” and a *mussaf* poem is recited at *Mussaf*. The *geulah* genre is a specific type of liturgical poem which conventionally contains four elements: (a) the song is written and designed to be recited on Pesah, (b) the song’s theme is redemption and is intended to be recited as part of the blessing of redemption just before the *Amidah*, (c) the song’s tone is one of intense longing for that redemption, addressing G-d directly, frequently in the vocative, (d) the song quotes extensively from “*Shir Ha-Shirim*,” the original song of the Jewish people’s longing, love and yearning for a renewed, redemptive relationship with our Creator.

Most Mahzorim and some siddurim print three major *geulah piyyutim* for the first three holy days of Pesah (the first day, second day, and Shabbat Chol Ha-mo’eid), written by three major tenth century Rabbis, Rabbi Shlomoh Ha-Bavli of Rome, his student Rabbi Meshulum of Lucca, and Shimon Hagadol of Mainz, respectively. All three quote from *Shir Ha-Shirim*, as is fitting for the holiday of Pesah, and begin with the words “Berah Dodi,” “Run O My Beloved!,” a quote from *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Writing in twelfth century Spain, Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi makes sure to follow all four elements of the *ge’ulah* genre in his poem, but then adapts the genre and thereby maximizes the impact of the poem.

- (a) **The poem is designed to be recited on Pesah.** Ha-Levi deftly begins the poem by connecting it to the seventh day of Pesah with the words “*On the day* on which the depths were turned to dry land, the redeemed ones [the Jews] sang a new song.” The imminence of the phrase “on the day” signals that the intended time for the recitation of the poem is the seventh day of Pesah. Later quotes from *Shir Hashirim* further cement the poem to this holiday.
- (b) **The song’s theme is redemption and is designed to be recited just before the Amidah of Shacharit.** Ha-Levi locates the song within the redemption blessing in two ways. The first is through the refrain of the poem, “*shira hadasha shibehu geulim*,” which is a quote from the blessing of redemption. The second is through the final stanza, which ends with the phrase from the Song of the Sea, “Who is like you Hashem,” a phrase which also appears in that blessing of redemption. The content of the song also focuses on the plea that G-d redeem His people.
- (c) **The song’s tone is one of longing for redemption and uses the second person or the vocative.** The poem directly addresses G-d in the second person, and asks Him to redeem His people.
- (d) **The song quotes from Shir Ha-Shirim.** The penultimate verse of the nine verses ends with poetic image from Shir Ha-Shirim “and the shadows will run away” (2:17 and 4:6), which also operates as a metaphor for redemption, when the shadows of exile flee. Also, the song’s seventh verse begins with the rare phrase from *Shir Ha-Shirim* “Mi Zot” (“Who is she” 3:6 and 8:5), the song refers to the Jewish people as the Shulamit² in the second verse (Shir Hashirim 7:1 [twice in that passuk]), and the song makes allusion to the verse “feet that looked nice in shoes” (7:2).³

The greatness of Ha-Levi lain in his adaptation of the genre to maximize the appeal of the liturgical poem. In typical Spanish style, Ha-Levi adds a meter to the song (five major long syllables per line⁴) and also switches to the complicated double-rhyme system of the *shir ezor*, or belt song, with the first three lines of each stanza rhyming with each other, and the last line rhyming with the refrain (as well as the last two lines of the first stanza). In contrast,

the other examples of the *geulah* genre had a simple rhyme for each stanza, without rhymes interlocking with the refrain. The addition of meter and rhyme are not necessitated by the *geulah* genre; they are additions by the master poet.

Also, rather than continuing the now well-used introduction of the other *geulah* piyuttim, “Berah Dodi,” Ha-Levi begins his poem with “Yom Le-Yabasha,” words that bring to mind the specific focus on his unique topic, the seventh day of Pesah. Rather than focusing merely on the longing of the Jews for their beloved, the song expands the range by also invoking the splitting of the sea. This line also doubles as a pun of Tehilim 66:6, “He turned the ocean (*yam*) to dry land” – with the Hebrew “*yam*” (sea) turning into “*yom*” (day). Thus, the expert poet has begun the poem with a line that is simultaneously (a) a pun and allusion to a Biblical verse, (b) a clear entry into the theme of the past and future redemption, and (c) a clue to the intended liturgical setting for the poem. The initial letter *yud* also forms the acrostic for the name of the poet “Yehudah Ha-Levi.”

The biggest advancement and change to the genre lays in the fact that while other entrees to the genre focus on the current exile and a desire to return to the Temple, this poem focuses on the initial redemption celebrated on Pesah and the desired future redemption that the speaker longs for. Formulated slightly differently, the connection between the past redemption of Pesah and the future redemption that the poet longs for is implicit in the other *geulah piyuttim* but is explicit in Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi’s version.

A Song of Two Redemptions

The content of the song, as well as the quotations and allusions that are part of its form, serve to invoke the theme of two redemptions – the past one of Pesah, and the future one predicted by the prophets. A chiasmic thematic structure for the poem focuses the first stanzas and last stanza on the past redemption, and the fourth and penultimate stanzas on the future redemption. The initial redemption from Egypt celebrated on Pesah becomes an archetype for the redemption we hope for today.

The connection in the song between the hope for the future redemption and the past redemption is magnified through the way the poem would be sung in synagogue, as intended by the author. The song begins with a citation from the blessing of the past redemption: the first line reads, “On the day that to dry land the depths⁵ were turned, the redeemed ones sang a new song.” The words “the redeemed ones sang a new song” is a quote from the

redemption blessing, and thus sets the song with the context of the original prayer. At the end of the song, it returns to citing the redemption blessing, this time using the blessing's immediately preceding phrase: "Beloved ones praised you, in song they greeted you 'who is like you – Hashem – among the powerful!'"⁶ Thus, the person reciting the poem ends with the very same section of the blessing of past-redemption where he or she started. The prayer for a future redemption is not recited in a vacuum, it is recited within the context of the prayer of thanks for the past redemption; it makes the argument: if we were redeemed once, we can surely be redeemed yet again.

It is within the framework of invoking the power and majesty of the past redemption that Ha-Levi makes his appeal for the future redemption, in the fourth and eighth verses:

Raise my Flag
On the Remnant (*nisharim*)
And gather the dispersed ones
As one gleans grain

...

And return a second time (*shenit*) to marry her
And do not continue to divorce her⁷
And raise the light of her sun
And the shadows will flee⁸

For Ha-Levi, the new, longed-for redemption is not *de novo*; it is instead a repeat of the old redemption. The new redemption is like a second marriage, continuing the relationship first cemented in the original time of redemption from the Egyptian exile. The poet deftly works keywords into these stanzas to draw the connection to the Haftarah of the eighth day of Pesah, which is the prophetic paradigm of connecting the two redemptions that he already invoked by using the word "*ne'alim*" in the poem's second verse. Yeshayahu reads:

And on that day, the Lord will a second time (*sheinit*) send His Hand to acquire the Remnant (*she'ar*) of His people ... And He will raise a banner⁹ to the nation¹⁰ and gather¹¹ the banished of Israel, and the dispersed of Judah He will gather from the four far-reaches¹² of the Earth... And G-d will wave his Hand on the Euphrates¹³ with the Strength of His Wind, and He will beat it into seven streams, so that it can be tread upon with shoes (*ne'alim*). And it shall be a highway to the remnant (*she'ar*) of His nation that remains (*yisha'er*) from Assyria, just as it was for Israel, on

the day that he came up from the land of Egypt.
(Yeshayahu 11:11-16)

The prophet Yeshayahu directly compares between the future redemption of the Jewish people dispersed in exile, and the past redemption of the Jews from Egypt, even going so far as to predict that a similar splitting of the waters will take place as part of the future redemption. Similarly, Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi alludes to this prophetic prediction in his own song, building upon the Haftara's message.

Thus, though this song is about redemption, it is not merely a plea for redemption. Instead, it focuses on the past caring relationship and past redemptions between God and Israel, as a launching point for the plea of return to the way things were in the past, and to a reunified "marriage" between G-d and His people.

Jewish Self-Identification

The three verses of the poem which serve as the vertex of the chiasmus and the crux of the song (verses five through seven), are perhaps the most critical to understanding Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi's broader message about the reason the Jew argues he or she deserves to be redeemed. As is expected for a poet of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi's caliber, these three verses climax at a line which is designed to be read simultaneously in three ways: (a) as a metaphor for the ways we self-identify as Jews, (b) as an allusion to the promise of the reconciled marriage, and (c) as a hint to the Messianic era which the song hopes for.

The fifth and sixth verses identify two critical commandments which both involve the Jew proactively identifying as a member of G-d's people: circumcision and *tzitzit*. These commandments are unique to the Jewish people, and they serve as signs that we identify with our Creator and have a relationship with the Divine. The reference to these commandments, which at first glance may seem irrelevant to the poem, serve as an argument for why the nation should be redeemed. Each of these commandments involves the number eight,¹⁴ which serves as yet another connection to the liturgical setting of the poem: the historical events (ie, the splitting of the sea)¹⁵ and Haftarah of the eighth day of Pesah. These two commandments, circumcision and *tzitzit*, are singled out because they both accompany the Jewish male at all times.¹⁶ The rhyme for the fifth verse is the second person suffix ("with You," "Your seal," "Your Name,") in order to further convey and cement the closeness that the nation feels with God. Lastly, the sixth verse begins with the direct imperative addressing the second person "Show their sign¹⁷ to all those that see them!" further reinforcing the connection to G-d.

It is because of this passion and consistency in identifying themselves with the sign and seal of their relationship that G-d should redeem His people. And so, the climactic verse argues:

To she¹⁸ that is so inscribed
Recognize please the word of Truth
To whom is the seal (circumcision)
And to whom¹⁹ are the fringes (tzitzit)?

The rhetorical question asks G-d to recognize the nation through the seal and fringes of their relationship, and thereby redeem them. On the surface level, we see how an expert poet, Ha-Levi, uses a line which conveys the content of the message through a metaphor (Glance, O G-d, at our seal and fringes), which fits neatly into the rhyme of the song (*petilim* rhyming with *geulim*) and which also happens to be a quotation of a Biblical verse (Bereishit 38:25).

It is a major poetic accomplishment to use a Biblical verse which simultaneously perfectly folds into the rhyme scheme and which doubles as a metaphor for the content of the verses, but Ha-Levi intends this Biblical verse to do much more. The selection of a verse from Bereishit 38 is not coincidental. The chapter Ha-Levi quotes discusses an attempt to salvage a broken marriage; the poem is alluding to the relationship of Yehudah and Tamar, who had separated after their first fateful encounter. Tamar uses these exact words to remind Yehudah of their previous relationship, and that she had remained dedicated and truthful throughout (by not pursuing another man, and by not embarrassing him).²⁰ By using these exact words Ha-Levi calls to mind the story of Tamar, and the dedication of the bride to her future husband; the reader knows that the outcome of the story is that the couple reconciles and returns to each other.²¹ Thus, if the *Shir Ha-shirim* model and the discussion of marriage and divorce run throughout the song as a larger parable for exile/divorce and redemption/reconciliation, this line serves as the fitting climax of when a couple does return to each other and continues the relationship. Ha-Levi is audacious, in that the typical Biblical vision of the marriage relationship focuses on the Jewish people abandoning and forsaking G-d. but situating the relationship within the Yehudah and Tamar story instead places G-d in the Yehudah position of having wrongly abandoned His beloved.

One could argue that Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi even adds one final layer of meaning into the story. This reconciled marriage is not just any marriage; it is the relationship that gives birth to Peretz, the progenitor of the Messianic figure. Peretz's great-great-grandson Nahshon was the proto-Messianic figure and Judaic flagbearer who led the

charge into the sea on this very day of Pesah (Sota 37a). Nahshon's ultimate descendent will be the Messiah of the Davidic line, whom Yeshayahu referenced in this holiday's Haftara as the redeemer of the people from this very exile.

A Message for Today

The poem's key line about the fringes and seal should speak to us today as well. For as the Jew glances about while in exile, separated from our Beloved for so long, the Jew asks from whence the merit will come to spark the redemption. Especially today, Jews might look at their own actions, and question whether the nation meets the standard to merit a redemption.

But Ha-Levi gives the firm, confident answer, wrapped with passionate longing. "G-d," we ask, "recognize the truth! Which is the only nation that continues to bear the seal and the fringes?" Who remains connected and continues to wear the mark of our relationship? For that reason, if for no other, we ask G-d to return to His nation and to our relationship, and to redeem the Jewish people, just as He had on this very day so many years ago. It is not merely an empty hope and prayer for the sea to split again; we now argue that we in truth deserve it.

On the very day when we crossed the sea the first time, we read and pray in synagogue about G-d's promise that in a future day we will once again cross the sea. And it is through the continued adoption of the seal and the fringes, recollections and signs of the relationship that should usher forward the redemption, speedily in our days.

¹ For example, it is printed in the standard Artscroll *Kol Yaakov Siddur* (1984) on page 214 and 712. It is also the only *piyyut* given prominence in the Koren Pesah Mahzor (pages 486-497), and included in all three editions of the Rabbinical Council of America siddur. The author has attended congregations where Yom Le-Yabasha is recited on the seventh day of Pesah his entire life, and it is still sung at the Maimonides Kehillah each year on the seventh day of Pesah, [see Mendi Gopin *Davening with the Rav*, (Ketav:2006), 119]. It is a prominently sung song at Yeshivat Har Etzion.

² Rhyming "*shulamit*" – the Jews, "*anamit*" – a new poetic name for the Egyptians to fit the rhyme based on Bereishit 10:13, and "*tarmit*," deceit (see Yirmiyahu 8:5). The nature of the deceit is unclear. Note that for Ha-Levi, the rhyme includes two consonants and the intervening vowel (*mit*), and not just one vowel and one consonant.

³ The use of the word “*ba-nealim*” is pure poetic genius, as the word appears only twice in the entire Tanakh. Once is in Shir Ha-shirim (7:2) as mentioned, and once is in the Haftarah for the 8th day of Pesah (Megillah 31a), describing the splitting of the sea and the Jews crossing the waters on dry land, with shoes. Thus, Ha-Levi has found the one word that links the Shir Ha-shirim element of the song and the seventh day of Pesah element, and uses it prominently in the beginning of the song. The fact that this word also happens to rhyme with “*geulim*,” the last word of the refrain, is icing on the cake.

⁴ Excluding *sheva's*, *hatafs*, or the prefix “u” beginning a word.

⁵ Hebrew *metzulah*, an allusion to the song of the sea, [Shemot 15:5](#); but the female word (*metzulot*) is converted to a male form (*metzulim*) to conform with the rhyme *geulim* and the aforementioned *ne'alim*.

⁶ The same four words as the prayer and the Biblical verse, but with the order of the words inverted to fit the rhyme, “Ba-eilim” with *metzulim* and *geulim*.

⁷ The parable of G-d divorcing His people and eventually reconciling is a common one in the prophets; see Hoshea Chapters 1-2 and Yeshayahu chapters 49-50. Fittingly to the genre of the song, it is also the central parable of Shir Ha-shirim, as well.

⁸ Perhaps the poet has in mind the vision of the new light in Yeshayahu chapter 60.

⁹ The image of the banner matches the image of the raising of the flag in the poem, although the flag (*degel*) of the poem is referred to by the Biblical Hebrew “*neis*” or banner in the prophecy, so it is likely the poet did not intend to connect the two images. The use of the word “*degel*” or flag in the poem may connote the banner of Yeshayahu, but may also hint to the *degel* or flags of each tribe which accompanied the desert Jews just after the redemption from Egypt and the splitting of the sea.

¹⁰ Throughout the Tanakh, the word *goyim* can refer to the Jewish people (see Bereishit 35:11). Indeed, for this reason, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik cautioned that the morning blessing should read “*nochri*” and not “*goy*.”

¹¹ Yeshayahu’s verb is the common “gather” (*lekabeitz*), but Ha-Levi changes it to “*u-telakeit*,” the verb used for

one who carefully gathers stalks of grain (as per the simile in Yeshayahu 17:5). The image of gathering stray pieces of grain conveys a greater care and connection between G-d and the people He gathers than does the verb *lekabeitz*. See also Yeshayahu 27:12 and Rut 2:2.

¹² Translating *kenafot* as “far reaches” not “corners”; see my essay in [Hakirah](#) volume 17.

¹³ At the time of Yeshayahu, most of the exiled Jews lived on the other side of the Euphrates; today obviously the Jews exiled live all over the Earth.

¹⁴ With circumcision taking place on the 8th day, and *tzitzit* involving 8 strings.

¹⁵ It is unclear if Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi was also aware of the Midrashic interpretation that the splitting of the sea took place on the eighth day of Pesach, found in Rashi Bamidbar 15:41.

¹⁶ [Menachot 43b](#); that Gemara also has two other mitzvot in this category: Tefillin - which are not worn on a holiday, and Mezuzah - which remains in the home and not with the Jew. These are also the commandments of Love which Rambam includes in his *Book of Love*, the commandments which help us recall the loving relationship between the Jewish people and the Divine.

¹⁷ In the context of the song, it appears that the *tzitzit* are considered the sign, although in truth the Torah never calls them a sign, only tefillin and circumcision. See [Menachot 36b](#), and Semag positive commandment #3. It is possible that this line refers to the circumcision, although this song tends to keep the theme of each verse separate from the others, and also the *tzitzit* are shown ([Bamidbar 15:39](#)) but circumcision is not. It is not possible to argue that the sign here refers to the tefillin since the critical verse that follows only speaks about *tzitzit* and circumcision. See also [Menachot 35b](#).

¹⁸ Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi converts the Jewish people to the female to be consistent with the marriage relationship, by using the quote from Shir Ha-shirim (“*mi zot*”). It is somewhat ironic that the mitzvot described in the song are performed by Jewish males, while the nation is now referred to in the female.

¹⁹ The second, redundant “to whom” is absent in the Biblical verse but is added for the sake of the meter. As a

result, three of the four lines in this verse have the word “*le-mi*”. The words from the verse in Bereishit that this line reworks are bolded in the translation above.

²⁰ In the Biblical original the seal is Yehudah’s signet ring and the fringes his garment; and so the seal is *literal* and not a *metaphor* for the circumcision.

SONG OF THE SEA: MAKING A SPACE FOR JOY AND SORROW

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Five months into the pregnancy, our twins were diagnosed with a rare disease.¹ Despite our best attempts to intervene and remedy the situation, the condition caused a host of complications. It eventually led to their premature delivery and deaths just a short time later. The weeks and months that followed were extraordinarily difficult. In the aftermath of tragic loss, one quickly discovers that despite attempts to move on, a reservoir of pain remains just underneath the surface. It doesn’t take much to breach the fragile barrier that holds grief at bay. Perhaps it is the sight of a newborn child or a family with young twins playing together. When the pain breaks through, it threatens to overwhelm and drag one beneath its depths. As I approached the first *yizkor* after their passing, my fear was that this too might become one of these moments. I did not want that to be the case. The last day of Pesah is a day of rejoicing and a day in which we dream of redemption. I was fearful it would become another moment when the world drains of its color and the weight of my loss nearly suffocates me.

Rabbinic commentators have long noted the incongruity of reciting *yizkor* on the festivals. If the *mitzvah* of *simhat yom tov* nullifies all public expressions of mourning, how is it possible that we can dedicate time on the festival to remembering our pain and loss? Various answers have been suggested², but I would like to propose the following: We recite *yizkor* on festivals in order to recognize that true joy must always live side by side with our loss. No matter how joyful we may be on the festivals, our pain cannot be erased, and attempting such emotional erasure would be nothing more than self-deception. Rather, experiencing authentic joy requires us to acknowledge our pain. The festivals inevitably force us to confront this reality, for what other time is there on the Jewish calendar that we yearn more to be with our loved ones?

²¹ Although the exact outcome is under dispute (see Rashi to Bereishit 38:26), this reading fits most within the larger poem.

This notion is beautifully expressed in a profound reading of the Song of the Sea offered by Avivah Zornberg³. Her essay, “Songline Through the Wilderness” helped shed light on my own experience and allowed for me to look at the Biblical narrative in a radically different fashion. The standard approach to the Song understands it to be an expression of unambiguous joy. When all hope appeared lost, when the Jewish people faced the dark waters in front of them and Pharaoh’s army at their backs, God miraculously split the sea and created a path for the Jewish people to walk forward. The Egyptians pursued them, only to perish as the ocean waves came crashing down upon them. After hundreds of years of slavery, the Jewish people finally witness the vanquishing of their oppressors. At this climactic moment (Exodus 14:31), “the Jewish people see the great hand that God inflicted upon the Egyptians, they are in awe of God, and they have faith in God and Moshe, His servant.” God has utterly proven Himself. Their tormentors had been punished. All of their pain and suffering had been washed away by the waters of the Red Sea. As slaves, all they could utter were unarticulated cries of misery, but now they are able to find the words to sing with pure faith and joy. That this interpretation is both beautiful and appealing is beyond question; We all yearn for the moments when we can finally let go of our pain and embrace only the good. This desire is at the heart of all our prayers for redemption and it is particularly appropriate for the end of Pesah.

But there is another way to read this story. It is challenging, but better suited to the difficult reality of living in an unredeemed world. In her essay on the narrative, Zornberg cites the striking opinion of Rabbi Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, the nephew of the Netziv, who argues, that in fact, the Jewish people did not sing after

having emerged victorious from the Red Sea. Instead, they sang while still marching through its waters pursued by Pharaoh's army. If this is indeed the case, Avivah Zornberg points out, then the Song of the Sea cannot be understood as a song of pure joy and triumph, but rather as a song fraught with tension. The Jewish people must sing in full view of their oppressors. They must sing while their future is still uncertain, wondering whether they will indeed make it to the other side. The song does not deny their pain. Instead, they must find the strength to sing while still bearing the psychological wounds of slavery. Under these circumstances, the Song of the Sea must embody the complex reality of joy and pain living side by side. Until the final and complete redemption takes place, joy and pain have no choice but to co-exist. If this was true for Jewish people at the Red Sea, how much more so for us. Even on the festivals, days of rejoicing, we carry our losses with us. To deny our pains would be inhuman, and in doing so, we would fail to experience the true joy that we are called to feel on these days.

These themes are also evoked by the contemporary poet Christian Wiman in his startlingly powerful spiritual memoir, *My Bright Abyss*. The book chronicles his cancer diagnosis along with the slow and painful process of treatment. It captures his struggle to bring together the strands of faith that provided a lifeline for Wiman, and in doing so, it offers a meditation on what it means to live life when death stares one in the face. The author is keenly aware that even after recovery, the agony of such an experience leaves an indelible mark on us. He writes, (*My Bright Abyss* p. 19):

Sorrow is so woven through us, so much a part of our souls, or at least any understanding of our souls that we are able to attain, that every experience is dyed with its color. That is why even in moments of joy, part of that joy is the seams of ore that are our sorrow. They burn darkly and beautifully in the midst of joy, and they make joy the complete experience that it is. But they still burn.

When we recite *yizkor*, there is a part of our souls that burn. However, that doesn't prevent us from singing. In fact, if we recognize that the Jewish people sang while still marching through the Red Sea, we come to understand another important truth: There are times when we sing not as a result of our joy but rather to serve as a lifeline that prevents us from drowning. In the same essay on the Song of the Sea, Zornberg quotes a teaching by Rebbe Nahman of Breslav⁴, a religious thinker deeply familiar with the spiritually devastating impact of pain and loss. His

writings are full of references to the presence of sadness and depression within the spiritual life. He understood, Zornberg writes, that

When one enters this wasteland a sense of worthlessness vitiates all capacity to live and to approach God. The objective facts may well be depressing; introspection may lead to a realistic sense of inadequacy and guilt. But this then generates a pathological paralysis, in which desire becomes impossible.

According to Rebbe Nahman, the only way to remove oneself from such a situation

is a kind of spiritual generosity- to oneself as well as to others. One should search in oneself for the one healthy spot, among the guilt and self-recrimination. This one spot, which remains recognizable, must exist. If one reclaims it, one then has a point of leverage for transforming one's whole life.

This teaching is based on a verse from Psalms (37:10) "A little longer (*V-od*) and there will be no wicked man; you will look at where he was and he will be gone." Instead of "a little longer" as in a moment of time, Rebbe Nachman reads this *V-od* as the one place where goodness and joy can still be found within us.

It is the role of song to help us find that one place, and then another. Once we are able to find one note, the power of song connects us to more and more. Zornberg further explains that through

[d]rawing those fragmentary, disjointed moments into connection with one another, one creates a song: a way of drawing a line through the wasteland and recovering more and more places of holiness.

In perhaps the most powerful words of the entire essay she notes that

[m]usic arises from joy, but the power of true singing comes from sadness. In every *niggun* there is the tension of the struggle between life and death, between falling and rising... the thin line of melody selects for goodness and beauty but it is given gravity by melancholy...

She concludes by observing that for Rebbe Nahman, "song opens the heart to prayer." He cites another verse from

Psalms, “I will sing to my God while I exist (*be-odi*)- “with my *od*, with that surviving pure consciousness of being alive.”

Rebbe Nahman’s teaching is an important lessons for Pesah, a holiday of song. During Pesah we sing *Hallel*. We sing at our *seders*. We read the Song of Songs and the Song of the Sea. All these different songs reflect the tremendous joy that is a fundamental part of the holiday. But, we should not forget that they are also songs of complexity through which we can also hear the harmony of pain and loss.

We lost our twins just days before *Shabbat Shirah*, the Sabbath of Song, when the Song of the Sea is read. At the time, I found comfort in a *midrash* that during the Song of the Sea, even the babies still inside their pregnant mothers raised their voices in song with the Jewish people.⁵ It enabled me to realize that even in the short time that our twins were present in our lives, they too were part of the Jewish people. They contributed their voices if only briefly to the Divine symphony that we strive to sing. Rebbe Nahman teaches that even their absence is part of the song. Absence when consciously remembered creates its own unique form of presence, and if we listen closely, we can hear how even the absence of our loved ones adds to the harmony of the Jewish people.

Why is it that we recite *yizkor* on *yom tov*? On the one hand, we do it in order to acknowledge that our pain must have a seat at the table with our joy. But we are also permitted to allow ourselves to dream of a day when we will celebrate our holidays without *yizkor*. We dream of a day when our pain will be washed away and our scars will finally heal. We dream of redemption, a dream deeply appropriate for the last day of Pesah. We dream of the day

(RE)READING SHIR HA-SHIRIM DURING COVID-19

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This year’s confluence of Passover and a pandemic has spurred countless halakhic questions. Among them: given that synagogue services are impermissible, should one praying individually still read Shir ha-Shirim on *Shabbat Hol ha-Moed*?

On one level, this can be analyzed as a strict halakhic matter. The question hinges on whether we view the

when we will gather with all our loved ones, those both present and absent, in order to recite the words from the *seder*. As it says in the *Haggadah*, we will sing in order “to thank, praise, pay tribute, glorify, exalt, honor, bless, extol, and acclaim God who has performed all these miracles for our fathers and for us. He has brought us forth from slavery to freedom, from grief to joy, from mourning to joy, from darkness to great light, and from subjugation to redemption.” On that day we will finally set aside our pain and loss to recite a new song before God, Halleluyah.

¹ This essay was originally delivered as a *yizkor* sermon on the last day of Pesah. It took place just a few months after the loss of our twin boys, who had been born extremely premature and failed to survive.

² For example, according to the Levush (*Orah Hayyim* 490) *yizkor* is recited on the last day of *yom tov* because the torah reading for that day is “*kol ha-bechor*.” This sections includes a call for those making *aliyah l-regel* to bring an offering or gift of some kind, which was later interpreted as an injunction to give *tzedakah*. From this developed the practice to make a pledge for *tzedakah* on the last day of the festival which would often be done in the memory of a loved one.

³ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, “Songline Through the Wilderness,” in *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2001).

⁴ *Likkutei Moharan* 282.

⁵ *Sotah* 30b.

custom of reading the five *Megillot* (except for Megillat Esther on Purim, which we can assume occupies a category unto itself) as incumbent upon the individual or the community. R. Hershel Schachter, for instance, recently ruled on the basis of a comment of the Vilna Gaon, that while the reading of Megillat Esther on Purim is an individual obligation, the reading of the other four *Megillot* (as well as weekly Shabbat Torah readings) devolve upon the community. Accordingly, he rules that an individual

need not read Shir ha-Shirim this year. R. Schachter even discourages such private readings, citing his teacher R. Soloveitchik's opposition to the observance of customs that lack halakhic basis. Following R. Schachter's ruling (although arguably softening R. Schachter's discouragement of private readings), the Rabbinical Council of America publicized a *luah* (calendar) for this year, which instructs that "the custom to read Shir HaShirim on Pesach was clearly instituted only for a tzibur. Nonetheless, there is nothing prohibited about reading Shir HaShirim on Pesach without a tzibur. One should be conscious of the fact that such a reading would not constitute a fulfillment of the original minhag."

On the other hand, one might argue that the initial presentation in *Masekhet Sofrim* (14:18) seems to suggest that Shir ha-Shirim was originally read privately on the last two nights of Pesah, unlike the current Ashkenazic practice to read it in *shul* on *Shabbat Hol ha-Moed*, lending support to the view that it is a private obligation and should apply this year. Further, one might maintain that even if the custom does not formally hold this year, it is best for us to approximate a typical Pesah experience so as to retain the flavor of the holiday - of course, while reading (even from a *kelaf*) without a *berakhah*.

Of course, given the high stakes of the many burning questions confronting us this year, this issue seems relatively minor. Yet the question of the recitation of Shir ha-Shirim must be considered not only on halakhic grounds, but also concerning whether its recitation is congruous with the mood of this Pesah. As one friend put it, referencing Kohelet and Shir ha-Shirim, "This Pesach הבל יסקני מנשיקות פיהו seems more appropriate than הבלים." Setting aside the question of individual versus communal obligation, doesn't the youthful love story of Shir ha-Shirim stand in stark contradistinction to the grim scenes emerging from New York City hospitals and throughout the world?

Two answers come to mind immediately. First, we might insist while Shir ha-Shirim does not match our mood this year, our responsibility as halakhic Jews - or as *Halakhic Men* - is to experience Pesah fully as the holiday of redemption, no matter the circumstances.

Second, we might claim that Shir ha-Shirim, far from being a youthful love song brimming with verdant optimism, is in fact a far more complex story about the intense struggle of the Jewish people (or individual spiritual seeker) and our burning desire for redemption. Indeed, one group of commentators - including Rashi, Rashbam, Metzudat David, Lekah Tov, and Akeidat Yitzhak - see the book as

the Jewish People's retrospective, in which they reflect from exile and aspire to be reunited with their beloved God.¹ On this reading, Shir ha-Shirim is a sober work, one that ultimately offers a glimpse of hope into an otherwise dark and gloomy world. This reading is perhaps best exemplified by the verse, "My beloved is like a gazelle or like a young stag. There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the window, peering through the lattice" (*Shir ha-Shirim* 2:9). It is perhaps in this spirit that we can appropriately read Shir ha-Shirim in the throes of a pandemic.

Yet there is another response, one which opens the path toward a novel understanding of Shir ha-Shirim, as well as its relevance to Pesah, both in general and particularly this year. Ask the average reader, and he would likely say that, at least on the *peshat* level, the central drama of Shir ha-Shirim is the love story between the *dod* and *ra'ayah*. In fact, however, a closer reading of the *sefer* suggests that the real drama takes place *inside* the female protagonist, who undergoes a profound process of self-transformation throughout the course of Shir ha-Shirim.

To explain, let us briefly review Shir ha-Shirim from 10,000 feet. Many read Shir ha-Shirim as a single extended drama involving a *dod* and *ra'ayah*. Others insist that the book is more convincingly read as a series of distinct, loosely-related scenes that are bound together in a single work. In between these two positions, I would contend that there are two narratives that run in parallel throughout the *sefer*, one between the *ra'ayah* and a prince, and the other between the *ra'ayah* and a shepherd. Let us review the contours of each narrative in short.

The first, which is detailed in greatest depth in chapters 2-4 and 7, is blessed with "smooth sailing": the couple does not grapple with any tensions, and consummates their relationship with marriage (chapter 4). The verses detailing this relationship focus on the physical aspects of their mutual attraction, particularly the beauty of the *ra'ayah*, as well as the couple's communion in nature. The *ra'ayah* has no friends that we know of; we hear only of the women who unsuccessfully call upon her to rejoin the dance (7:1). She lacks a clear-cut biography. Finally, this relationship seems to climax in chapter 7 with an intensification of that physical attraction. This relationship is lacking in drama or complexity, and typifies an uncomplicated love story between man and woman.

The second narrative tells a different story, a *bildungsroman* of sorts. The woman's beloved is a shepherd, and their relationship is plagued by drama. We are privy to both the physical and especially the emotional

aspects of their relationship, and we know much more about the woman's biography. Looking especially at the opening chapter of Shir ha-Shirim, we learn that she apparently has no relationship with her father; he has either died or is no longer involved in his children's lives. Her brothers have taken advantage of her, subjecting her to brutal physical conditions by instructing her to guard their vineyards and not tend to her own. Her appearance and self-confidence suffer as a result. She begins the book as a self-conscious young woman, convinced that she is better off dreaming about a romantic relationship than actually attempting to engage in one, and twice adjures her friends, the Daughters of Jerusalem, to precisely this effect: "Do not wake or rouse love until it please" (2:7, 3:5). She wanders the streets searching for her beloved, but is physically harmed by the city's watchmen (5:7).

Yet despite the considerable challenges she confronts, the woman ultimately recognizes that her beloved will disappear from her grasp if she does not act swiftly. After he knocks on her door and she opens it too late, she becomes determined not to allow him to disappear. Instead of satisfying herself with an idealized imaginary relationship, she passionately describes the shepherd's qualities to her friends and begins to overcome her initial reservations.

By the end of the *sefer*, she has transcended her brothers' abusive treatment, asserting her physical and emotional maturity. Setting aside any concern about the public propriety of the relationship, she determines that her love is too valuable to squander over the possibility of social opprobrium. She declares her love to be as intense as death and that she prefers this love (represented by her vineyard) to a royal relationship (represented by Shlomo's vineyard). Most crucially, the *dod* recognizes her internal transformation: "Then I became in his eyes as one who had found peace" (8:10). Having reached a healthy self-understanding, she does not require the status of owning a royal vineyard in order to find internal validation; she is perfectly satisfied with the vineyard of her own (8:12).²

Of course, the woman's ability to find herself emerges not while in solitude, but through a series of interactions with others. But in the end, it is her own inner world, her determination not to permit her childhood traumas to interfere with her self-confidence and capacity to establish healthy relationships, which is the axis around which the true drama of Shir ha-Shirim revolves.

This reading of the *sefer* not only offers an innovative reading of the biblical book, but also opens a path toward a new appreciation of the connection between Shir ha-

Shirim and Passover. The night of 15 Nissan centers on the gratitude with which we shower God for the redemption. This parallels the relatively uncomplicated relationship between the woman and the prince, and focuses on the loving intimacy between God and his beloved people. Indeed, some have the practice to read Shir ha-Shirim following the *Seder* (*Hayyei Adam* 130, *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* 119), accentuating this dimension of the *sefer*.

But as we enter *Hol ha-Moed* and the final days of Pesah, the focus begins to shift from God's miraculous activities to the Jewish people's internal world, which was, to put it gently, a work in progress. From the moment they left Egypt, the Jews were wracked by internal doubts owing to the slave mentality they had imbibed. The very opening verse of *Parshat Beshalah*, which immediately follows the Exodus, explains that "God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer [to Canaan]; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt" (13:17). As Ibn Ezra (*Peirush ha-Katzar* s.v. "ve-ta'am") notes, "They had not previously encountered war, and were enslaved under the hands of others. And when Pharaoh would emerge after them, none of this [people] would lift a hand [in self-defense]. Similarly, Amalek came out against Israel with a small number, and snaked around [Israel], and [Israel] would have been weakened before [Amalek] if not for Moses His chosen one."³

Ibn Ezra (14:13 s.v. "va-Yomeru") reiterates the point a bit later on in the same narrative:

One has to wonder: How can a camp of six hundred thousand people fear from those who chase after them, and why not fight for their lives and their children? The answer: Because the Egyptians were masters of Israel, and this generation that came out of Egypt learned from its youth to suffer the burden of Egypt, and its soul was depressed, and how can he now fight with his masters? And Israel was weak and not skilled at war. You can see this, inasmuch as Amalek came with a small group of people, and if not for Moses' prayer, would have weakened Israel.

This also helps to explain the curious conclusion to the Torah reading on the seventh day of Pesah. Instead of concluding with the end of the Song of the Sea, we read five more verses:

Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of

Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water.

They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah.

And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"

So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test.

He said, "If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the Lord am your healer." (15:22-26)

The seemingly unnecessary inclusion of this section in the *keriat ha-Torah* intimates that even after the Splitting of the Sea, the Jews still struggled to tear themselves away from psychological enslavement, disbelieving in God's ability or desire to provide materially for them. This, of course, is part of the purpose of *Sefirat ha-Omer*, which, as R. Soloveitchik explains, was intended to enable to Jews to gain mastery over time.⁴ For this reason, it is appropriate that the *Omer* count toward Shavuot begins on the night of 16 Nissan, immediately following the day of the Exodus: as soon as we leave Egypt, we begin the internal work of gaining self-mastery. The story of the Jews' march from Egypt is the beginning of their tortured attempts to shake themselves free of the psychological terror inflicted by a 210-year-long trauma.

The parallels between the stories of the *ra'ayah* and the Jews of the Exodus are as unexpected as they are tantalizing: both are coerced to engage in difficult work in the heat of a Middle Eastern day; both are subject to physical violence at the hands of enforcers; both struggle to act upon the obvious good of their beloveds; and, above all, both most struggle to achieve psychological freedom from youthful trauma. While Shir ha-Shirim and the larger arc of the Exodus end with intimacy (in the latter case, *Matan Torah*), both begin with an inner odyssey toward psychological freedom and self-discovery.

Seen from this perspective, we may appreciate a new dimension of the affinity between Shir ha-Shirim and Pesah. Each of these two storylines features not only relationships between caring parties, but an internal struggle in which one party (the woman or the Jewish people) struggles to overcome trauma in order to enter

into a healthy relationship with her beloved. Shir ha-Shirim and the aftermath of the Exodus remind us that the process toward building healthy relationships, with God and any other loved one, begins from a journey within.

The past number of weeks have posed profound difficulties for nearly all of us, and trauma for too many. In seeking to confront the sense of isolation so many of us are experiencing this year, perhaps there is at least something of a silver lining in the custom of reading Shir ha-Shirim on Pesah. We may turn to the model of the *ra'ayah* and the Jewish people, who were forced to turn inward in order to find the spiritual strength to establish full relationships with those around them.

¹ This reading of Shir ha-Shirim is reinforced by the lesser-known opinion in a well-known *midrash* regarding Shlomo's age when he composed Shir ha-Shirim. A classic opinion (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:10) asserts that Shlomo was a youth, but another view maintains that he composed the three books attributed to him in the rabbinic tradition, Shir ha-Shirim, Mishlei, and Kohelet, at the same time. To this *midrash* we may add that the Gemara *Bava Batra* 14b, in listing the *sefarim* in *Tanakh*, enumerates Mishlei, Kohelet, and then Shir ha-Shirim. Rashi (s.v. *shir*), seeking to account for the language of the Gemara, writes that it appears Shlomo composed Shir ha-Shirim close to his old age. This view may lend itself toward a more sober view of the challenges posed throughout Shir ha-Shirim, and toward seeing it as a work written out of a place of pain that desperately anticipates a period of reunion.

² See my discussion, <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-18-understanding-sefer-according-our-reading>.

³ See Alex Israel, <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/beshalach-slave-mentality>.

⁴ *Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat ha-Omer and Shavuot*, 147.

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