

A Symbolic Reading of the Song of Songs

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The *Song of Songs* is aptly named: it is a song of songs, a canticle composed of many voices, refracting into manifold associations and lofty sublimations. It is sung on Sabbath eves and during the festival of Passover – a feast that recalls a redemption past and proclaims the hope of redemption yet to come. Its lyricism beckons the ear to music and the eye to image; it has inspired liturgical poems, sung or recited, and many a work of sacred art.

From of old, an allegorical reading has been the key through which the *Song of Songs* has been understood. For over two thousand years, it has drawn forth interpretations: literal and symbolic, allegorical and mystical. It was included in the canon of sacred Scripture through the voice of Rabbi Akiva, who proclaimed: *“All the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”*

The medieval commentator Rashi, reflecting on the verse, *“God has spoken once, twice have I heard it”* (Psalm 62:12), taught that beyond the plain sense, each verse may bear a multitude of meanings.

On the level of the letter, the poet Charles Bacouche captured the essence of the work: *“This matchless poem speaks of the ceaseless search of two lovers for reunion – of tender and impassioned embraces, of sudden partings, missed returns, of hopes raised and hopes dashed. These eternal lovers hold fast to the fragile thread of their love.”*

In the realm of biblical correspondence, Israel is the maiden – radiant and beloved – and the Beloved is the Eternal One. Israel calls twice to the one her soul loves (3:1; 5:6), she knows He has withdrawn (5:6), and she seeks Him through the night of exile (3:1). Yet in the days to come, the Lord shall call her His beloved, His dove, His friend, His perfect one, His bride.

On the level of allegory, the yearning and the hesitation of the maiden mirror the stirrings of the soul: a soul that questions, that trembles, that seeks its own ascent. Both the maiden and the Beloved are elusive - veiled in mystery. She is likened to a tower upon which quivers hang, to an army terrible in

array (4:4; 6:4); she hides in the clefts of the rock (2:14), returns from dens of lions and leopards (4:8), or evokes distant and unknown lands (4:8; 2:15; 7:4). The Beloved is not found in the fields (1:8) nor in the city streets (3:2); he is at the door (5:6), behind the lattice (2:9), or leaping like a gazelle upon the mountains (2:17; 8:14). When he knocks, she delays; when she opens, he is gone.

The breath of day, the flight of shadows, the empty alleys - all these enhance the sense of absence and stir the longing of love. Desire itself must not be awakened before its time (2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4). Yet both long for closeness. They live in the realm of dream, captivated by each other's gaze. They are drunk with love, wounded by love—love like a flame of fire that many waters cannot quench.

The images they invoke often speak of distance, yet the vision they hold is one of burning, consuming love. So it is with the human soul and the Divine: the soul yearns to draw near, to touch the Infinite, which ever draws near yet remains beyond reach. The Divine dwells in the soul by faith yet is hidden; even in the Holy of Holies, the Shekhinah speaks in silence.

Through the lens of mysticism, union is attained when Providence and awakened soul meet—when both are ready to know and to be known. For throughout the poem, the lovers seek each other, yet they are not in accord. Only when the maiden says, “Let us go forth into the field” (7:12), does she offer her love in fullness.

Yet the final verse whispers that this longing, this seeking, this sacred desire—is never stilled.

The *Song of Songs* stands at the threshold between earthly and heavenly ecstasy.