

## WOMAN AS LOVER IN THE SONG OF SONGS - EROS UNABASHED

### Background

Traditionally attributed to King Solomon during his prurient youth, the Song of Songs is the most sensuous biblical text. The text oozes with the lushness and fruitfulness of the land of Israel as a setting for lovers and their amorous passion. Traditional readings tend to interpret the text as an allegory for the love between God and the Jewish People. Nonetheless, the sages debate the inclusion of the Songs in the canonized biblical corpus, for the material is provocative and arousing. One of the most astounding characteristics of the poetry is its depiction of uninhibited female sexuality, desire, and eros.

### Biblical Sources

ישקני מנשיקות פיהו, כי טובים דדירך מיין.  
לריח שמך טובים, שמן תורק שמך (א:א-ב)

Let him give me the kisses of his mouth, for your love is more delightful than wine.

The aroma of your fragrant oils is excellent, like fine oil is your name. (Song of Songs 1:2-3)

ו אל-תראוני שאני שחרחרת ששזפתי השמש; בניי אמי נחרו-בי שמני נטרה את-  
הכרמים--כרמי שלי לא נטרתני.

6 Look not upon me, that I am swarthy, that the sun hath tanned me; my mother's sons were incensed against me, they made me keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept. (Song of Songs 1)

צור המר דודי לי בין שדי ילין. (א:יג)

My beloved is to me like a pouch of myrrh, between my breasts he lodges.  
(Song of Songs 1:13.)

עורי צפון ובואי תימן הפיחי גני יזלו בשמי; יבא דודי לגנו ויאכל פרי מגדיו. (ד:טז)

16 Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his precious fruits. (Song of Songs 4)

י דודי צח ואדום דגול מרובה.  
 יא ראשו כתרם פז; קנצותיו תלתלים שחרות כעורב.  
 יב עיניו כיונים על-אפיקי מים; רחצות בחלב--יטבות על-מלאת.  
 יג לחיו כערוגת הבשם מגדלות מרקחים; שפתותיו שושנים--נטפות מור עבר.  
 יד ידיו גלילי זהב ממלאים בתרשיש; מעיו עשת שן מעלפת ספירים.  
 טו שוקיו עמודי שש מיסדים על-אדני-פז; מראהו כלבנון--בחור כארזים.  
 טז חפו ממתקים וכלו מחמדים; זה דודי וזה רעי בנות ירושלים.

10 'My beloved is white and ruddy, pre-eminent above ten thousand.11 His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are curled, and black as a raven.  
 12 His eyes are like doves beside the water-brooks; washed with milk, and fitly set.  
 13 His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as banks of sweet herbs; his lips are as lilies, dropping with flowing myrrh.  
 14 His hands are as rods of gold set with beryl; his body is as polished ivory overlaid with sapphires.  
 15 His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold; his aspect is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars.  
 16 His mouth is most sweet; yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.'

בקשתיהו ולא מצאתיהו קראתיו ולא ענני. מצאני השמרים הסבבים בעיר  
 הכוני פצעוני; נשאו את-רדידי מעלי שמרי החמות. (ה:ו-ז)

I sought him, but I could not find him. I called out to him, but he did not answer.  
 The guards who patrol the city found me; they struck me, they injured me.  
 (Song of Songs 5:6-7)

#### Talmudic Debate

רבי יהודה אומר, שיר השירים, מטמא את הידיים; וקוהלת, מחלוקת. רבי יוסי אומר, קוהלת, אינה מטמא את הידיים; ושיר השירים, מחלוקת. רבי שמעון אומר, קוהלת--מקולי בית שמאי, ומחומרי בית הלל. אמר רבי שמעון בן עזאי, מקובל אני מפי שבעים ושניים זקנים, ביום שהושיבו את רבי אלעזר בן עזריה בישיבה, ששיר השירים וקוהלת מטמאין את הידיים. אמר רבי עקיבה, חס ושלום: לא נחלק אדם מישראל בשיר השירים שלא תטמא את הידיים, שאין העולם כולו כדאי ביום שניתנה בו שיר השירים לישראל--שכל הכתובים קודש, ושיר השירים קודש קודשים; ואם נחלקו, לא נחלקו אלא על קוהלת. אמר רבי יוחנן בן ישוע בן חמיו של רבי עקיבה, כדברי בן עזאי, כן נחלקו וכן גמרו. (ידיים ג:ו)

Rabi Yehuda says, "The Song of Songs transmits *impurity* to the hands; about Ecclesiastes, there is controversy. Rabbi Yossi says, "Ecclesiastes does not transmit impurity to the hands; about the Song of Songs, there is controversy." ... Rabbi Akiva said, "Heaven forbid! Not a single person among Israel disputes about the Song of Songs that it conveys impurity to the hands, because the entire world is not worthy of the day that the Song of Songs was given to Israel. All the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies. If they argued, it was about Ecclesiastes."... And so they resolved.

### Questions for Discussion

In the first chapter, the lover declares her low class status. She is of the land, she works outdoors in the hot sun; she is also wild and free - she does not tend her own vineyard. What is the relationship, perhaps tension, between passion and social order?

Most often interpreted as an allegory about the relationship between God and the Jewish People, what does the particular eroticism of this text express about that relationship and about spiritual longing altogether?

Replete with sensual descriptions, olfactory stimuli are particularly emphasized in the Songs. The aromas of the garden and exotic spices exude from the text. According to neuro-psychology, intense and emotional memory is aroused by our sense of smell. When Eve is tempted by the fruit in the Garden of Eden, visual beauty and taste are mentioned; aroma is not. Why is this sense so prominent in the Songs?

The analogy between woman and garden, her lushness, beauty, and fruitfulness, is a dominant trope in the Songs. What are the implications of this analogy for women, women's bodies and identities?

The depiction of the male lover from the woman's perspective is unique. Consider the body image, metaphors, and associations. How do they compare with contemporary imaging of men?

The city, according to the passage concerning the betrothed young woman, is meant to be safe, yet the open fields and gardens are the secure, free spaces for the woman lover of the Song of Songs. Though the woman is strident seeking her lover in the city, she suffers the abuse of the guards. In the midst of the love poetry, what is the significance of this terrifying passage in the fifth chapter of the Song of Songs?

The purity codes propose inversions such as the one described in the Talmudic debate about the Songs in the Hebrew Bible - a sacred book conveys *impurity*. This is a criterion for inclusion or exclusion in the sacred canon of the Jewish People. What might Rabbi Akiva's justifications have been for his emphatic assertion that the Song of Songs belongs inside due to its holiness?

### Links for Inquiry

Listen to a number of versions of the cantillation of the Songs, and find other resources, <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~jtreat/song/>

Discussion of some of the soul-body issues raised by the midrash on the Song of Songs,  
<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume3/number2/ssr03-02-r05.html>

For a traditional and contemporary view of the Songs as allegory,  
<http://www.yhol.org.il/features/aggadot/aggadot22.htm>

Audre Lorde is the pioneer of a feminist perspective on the power of the erotic. For a brief account,  
[http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/lorde/erotic.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/lorde/erotic.htm)

### **Summary of Issues**

The extroverted, unbridled passion of the female lover(s) in the garden of the text is sensational. Rich sensory elements are vibrant in the poems, particularly olfactory ones. The reader enters the inner perspective of women who defy many gender norms and social conventions. In spite of or because of its radical sensuousness, the sages decided to include the Songs in the biblical canon.

### **Methodological Matters**

Apologizing for and ignoring its explicit sexuality, many view the poetry strictly as allegory and theology. Attentive reading, however, indicates a provocative perspective on women's embodied erotic lives and power and the connection of these vibrant life experiences with spiritual, even mystical desire. To what aspect of the text do we choose to direct our attention?

### **Contact**

Please address queries and comments to  
Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman - [haberman@brandeis.edu](mailto:haberman@brandeis.edu)