

## WHOM MY SOUL LOVES

Today is the last day of Passover, which is the culmination and the height of the festival. The Baal Shem Tov said that, on this particular day, there is special revelation regarding Messiah. From where did he derive that idea? From our Haftarah portion, the chapter from Isaiah 11 which predicts the coming of the Messiah, the Branch, the one on whom the Spirit of the LORD will rest, the redeemer, who brings deliverance and will lead Israel out of exile, crossing the river and crossing the sea.

This day comes as the culmination of the process that began two weeks ago on Shabbat HaGadol when we read the haftarah portion about the coming of Elijah to herald the Messiah. Then last week we read about Passover in the days of Yehoshua, and we remembered the death and resurrection of Messiah. And today, we have crossed the Red Sea, and we are reading about the coming of the Messiah in the future.

On this day, one should seek to attain the revelation of Messiah. For that reason, we have two distinct traditions here at Beth Immanuel for the eighth day. One is to study prophecies and predictions about the coming of the Messiah. We have often opened up *Tractate Sanhedrin* beginning on folio 97 where the Talmud takes up a discussion of the Messiah. On other occasions, we have taken the time to study our way through this Isaiah 11 haftarah portion. The second custom that we practice here is the *Seudat Mashiach*, the Meal of Messiah, which we conduct as a sort of closing seder meal during the last few hours of the festival. The meal of Messiah lasts into the evening, so that by the time the meal is over, the festival is over, and in this way, we bring the joy and the revelation of Messiah and the holiness of the festival into the ordinary.

Ordinarily, on shabbat Chol HaMoed, we study the haftarah about the valley of the dry bones in connection with the resurrection, and we read the beautiful book of Song of Songs. Since there was no Shabbat Chol HaMoed this year (which happens when the first and last days of Passover fall on Shabbat), we read Song of Songs today.

On a literal level, Song of Songs is supposed to be a breathless, romantic, love poem in the form of a dialogue between a young King Solomon and a young Shulammitte vinedresser who works in Solomon's vineyards. He sees this girl and falls in love with her. The poem follows their adventures, their trysts and private rendezvous, with lots of rich and colorful poetry and vivid imagery which, at points, is probably better left untranslated. But the sages saw this intoxicating poetry on the level of a metaphor and allegory, speaking about the love between God and Israel. From early on, Judaism has read the book symbolically, so the book, Song of Songs, became a source of creative interpretations and reinterpretations.

We read Song of Songs during Passover because, on the Jewish calendar, this is the point at which we are switching over from Winter to Spring Time, and the book contains plenty of Spring Time imagery:

For behold, the winter is past,  
The rain is over and gone.  
The flowers have already appeared in the land;  
The time has arrived for pruning the vines,  
And the voice of the turtledove has been heard in our land.  
(Song of Songs 2:11-12)

From the perspective of the disciples of Yeshua, however, Song of Songs is also a source of rich Messianic imagery. King Solomon is the Son of David, so his character in the poem alludes to Mashiach. The Shullamite girl symbolizes Israel and, more specifically, the Master's community of disciples.

Therefore, when we read Song of Songs, as we just did, we should always be watching for clues about King Messiah. For example, in the first words of the book, it says, "Your love is better than wine. Your oils are fragrant. Your name is Oil Emptied Out." Isn't that a strange thing to say? Your name is "Oil Poured Out"? But what does the word *Mashiach* mean? It means "anointed," or, to put it another way, "oil poured out."

In this way, and along these lines, we may proceed through book of Song of Songs, *Shir HaShirim*, seeking Messiah and hints and clues about the revelation of Messiah and the revelation of the kingdom. "All the Writings are holy," Rabbi Akiva said, "but Song of Songs is holy of holies."

The relationship between Song of Songs and the Messiah reminds me of our relationship to the Messiah and our love for him and his for us. In the Immersion class on Wednesday night, we were speaking about the different ways the relationship between Yeshua and his disciples finds expression in the New Testament. He is a Teacher over a school of students. The disciples are called servants, and Yeshua is called the Master. The disciples are called members of the household, and Yeshua is called the head of the household. The disciples are called children and little ones, and Yeshua is likened to the father over their family, except that he defers that title to HaShem, preferring his role as eldest brother in the family. The disciples are compared a bride, and Yeshua is compared to a bridegroom. These are all intimate relationships, but this last metaphor strikes closest to the imagery invoked by Song of Songs in which the Messiah is the Beloved, Solomon, "Radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand, golden headed, hair black as ravens, eyes like doves, Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?" (Song 6:10) "Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers" (Song 1:4). His banner over me is love.

The metaphor reminds me of how close a Chasid is supposed to be to his Rebbe, and how close and how pure that relationship is supposed to be, a personal relationship of mutual love.

Likewise with our Master. If a person doesn't love Yeshua, it's only because they don't know him. If you don't know him, how can you love him? There's a world of difference between knowing about Messiah and knowing the Messiah. It's a vast difference. If the people who claim to know him actually did know him, the world would be a different place today.

But they don't know him, nor do they understand him. Like any relationship, it takes some effort to get to know him. One of the things that comes through in Song of Songs is that Solomon and the Shulamite are always looking for each other, and they are watching for occasions to meet, to just delight in spending time in one another's presence. If we don't make a similar effort to spend quiet moments in the presence of the Messiah, enjoying the fellowship which we have through him in the Father (as he is in him and the Father is in him and they are in us), if we aren't making that type of effort—well it's no wonder that we aren't swept-off-our-feet in love.

The Shulamite is asking her beloved, "Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon." Because she wants to meet him out there for a secret rendezvous. He says, "If you do not know, O most beautiful among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the shepherds' tents" (Song 1:8). They are making arrangements to meet and to spend time together.

When you first fall in love, it's distracting. Do you remember that. If you've never had the experience, or if it's been a long time, you might not remember. Being in love with someone is distracting. You would rather be with that person. You can't stop thinking about the person. It's almost like you feel as if you aren't a whole human being any longer—not without the person you love. Every chance you get, you are scribbling out a love note, or connecting on the phone, or meeting up for no reason at all. It's distracting. Your looking for opportunities to meet up.

I want to have that kind of relationship with Yeshua where it's not about what I need or want, or even about accomplishing this task or that, and it's not a public moment at all, but the private time in the presence of the Master ... just because. I want to be looking for those opportunities to slip away with him, to follow the tracks of the flock behind the shepherd's tents, to slip away to the green field and sit under the apple tree ... as we read in Song of Songs.

The presence of our Master is a real thing. A supernatural presence that dispels darkness and brings the fragrance of oil poured out. He sends his angel on his behalf; he apportions his Spirit among his disciples; he speaks to us (if we will listen) through the whisperings of the Spirit of God; he directs us (if we will heed him), and he dwells within our being, granting us a spark of his person to strengthen us and quicken us, so that we can do all things through him who strengthens us.

He never makes demands. He only offers his presence and his help. "If a man will follow me." "Which of you would not give?" "If any man will hear my voice."

If you know him, you know that he only points you to his Father, the Almighty, the Source of the Love he has for you, which flows through him like "a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon" (Song 4:15). His love for his disciples is a real and personal love, channeled out from the love that the Father bestows upon him. And he catches his disciples up in the union of that love so that we are in him, and he is in us, just as he is in the Father and the Father in him in order that they may be in us and we in them.

If you know him, it changes the way you treat others. That's where it shows. Anyone who claims to know him, but is cruel and unmerciful to others, proves they don't know him. Not really. Because if you knew the real Yeshua, you wouldn't treat others that way.

If you know him, you are eager to keep the mitzvot, and they aren't a burden to you because they are acts of love, service born out of love rather than service born out of fear. Perfect love drives out fear. John says, "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4). The mitzvah is an occasion to slip away secretly with the Master.

So how do we get to know him? We know Yeshua through the Torah and the Prophets, for they testify about him. We recognize him in the character of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and in Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, in Joshua and Samuel, in David and Solomon, in Elijah and Elisha, in Hezekiah and Josiah. We know him through his words, through his teachings, through his deeds, and through his compassion, and all of this we learn through the Gospels and the writings of his disciples in the rest of the New Testament. His character and his personality imprinted itself on his disciples, and we see that their writings in the epistles of the New Testament overflow with his personality. We come to know him through those words, like my friend, Yonatan HaTzadik, who when a young man studying in law school, would go to the library and pretend to be studying legal texts, but use the time to read the New Testament, over and over again. He was meeting up with the Master, spending a secret encounter in the library.

We also find him in others. In one another. In his disciples. He said, "He who receives one of my disciples receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me." He gives us a new commandment, saying, "Love one another as I have loved you." Time spent in showing kindness to one another, and to his disciples, is time spent with him. It's a get away with the Master to give into the lives of one another.

We find the Master also among his people. Yeshua said, "Whatever you did to one of these, the least of my brothers, you did to me." From this we learn where to find him—within the Jewish people, even in the least of his brothers.

Moreover, we find the Messiah lurking among the hungry, in the needy, with the sick and the frail, in the thirsty, the impoverished and imprisoned, as he says, "I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was sick, I was naked, I was in prison ..." This is where we find him, when we fulfill his commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

Anyone who does not love does not know him. When we make the effort to reach out and touch another life, to get past ourselves and *give* rather than *take*, we release the love of Messiah, and that love enables us to love even those who are not so lovable. When you find yourself loving your brothers and sisters, even when they are not worthy of your esteem or kindness, then you have found a secret rendezvous with the Master. Then your heart is full.

Yeshua has a lot of followers and a lot of worshippers, but he doesn't have a lot friends, I think. He doesn't have a lot of people who are looking out for his interests. As Paul says in the epistle

to the Philippians, when praising Timothy, he says, “Everyone else has their own interests in mind, but who has the interests of Messiah in mind?” Wouldn’t it be something to be not just a follower and a servant but also a friend, as he says to the twelve on the night of his last seder with them, “I no longer call you servants, but friends.”

They knew him. Not just about him. And because they knew him, they knew the Father.

Not everyone who knows about Yeshua knows Yeshua. Critics say, “Look at how many atrocities and hateful crimes have been carried out in the name of Jesus.” But those very acts prove that the perpetrators who committed them did not know the Master, and that the truth was not in them. They knew about him. They prayed in his name. They probably prayed to him and believed in him. But they had no real connection with him.

If you are trying to do religion in your own strength, how far will you get? Not very far I’m afraid. We get tired; we burn out; we get crabby; we get distracted by the world and the business of life. But if we are in the presence of the Master, sneaking away from this world and its busyness to spend time with him, soaking in the light of Hashem which is reflected in his face, then the words of the prophet Isaiah come upon us:

He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.  
Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;  
but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with  
wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.  
(Isaiah 40:29-31)

Today on the Eighth Day of Passover we can receive revelation about the Messiah: light from the kingdom. This is the day to bask in the radiance of the Holy Spirit. And that gives us an opportunity to rethink our relationship with the Master. He’s not just a spiritual mechanism or a bridge to span the chasm between us and heaven. He is also a person, a son of David, still alive, very much so, and I think, in some ways, a little bit lonely, and he could use some friends.

If you are doing a Meal of Messiah tonight, be careful not to let the opportunity slip away. It’s not about reveling or being, as Isaiah puts it, “Heroes at drinking wine.” It’s about finding a place at the table for the Messiah in anticipation of the future kingdom when we will be seated among his disciples, among his friends, at the table of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in his father’s kingdom.

May you walk in the light and the love of our Master.

Chag Sameach, and Hoshanah to the Son of David.