

SONGS FOR OUR TIMES

I.

The Rabbis of the Midrash, commenting on the term "Shir Ha-Shirim," the Song of Songs, said: מכל ליה השירים - המשורר, "the Song of Songs means the choicest of all songs, the most excellent of all songs."

There are three lessons that I suggest we may learn from Shir Ha-Shirim, teachings that are particularly appropriate for our own immediate times, and that can make of this book the choicest and most excellent of all for us as well.

II.

The first concerns the nature of shirah, or song, as such. The Talmud (Sanh. 94a) tells us that God had wanted to appoint King Hezekiah as the Messiah, after he had won his astounding victory over Sanherib. However, God's sense of justice prevailed and He prevented God from proclaiming Hezekiah as the Messiah. The reason given is, לכך לא שיר, that the King failed to recite shirah upon his victory.

Does the Talmud really want to tell us that only opera stars or chazzanim can become the Messiah? Does the inability to keep a tune or the ignorance of music disqualify one as a potential Messiah?

What can this mean? The great Kotzker Rebbe (quoted by the "Sefat Emet") answers in a few words that yield us a most significant insight: כי לא היה מודע, Hezekiah was disqualified because he was not excited, overwhelmed, enthused, by the miracle.

What the Kotzker is telling us is that shirah results from a sense of wonder, from an awareness of the unexpected, from a sensitivity to the presence of a miracle and the obligation to respond. And without this one cannot be truly human, let alone a Messiah.

From Aristotle, who declared wonder to be the beginning of knowledge, to Prof. Heschel who calls for "radical amazement," men of sensitivity and intellect have known that without hitpaalut, without wonder or amazement, life is a bore, men are blind and ignorant, and hence are irresponsible. A childlike sense of wonder makes life an adventure instead of a grind, and makes of the world a mystery instead of old hat. With it, one sings; without it, one remains unredeemed.

Shir Ha-Shirim, as the Song of Songs, is one long and joyous exclamation of the sense of wonder at the nissim nistarim, the hidden miracles, that abound all about us. King Solomon, in the Song of Songs, responds with hitpaalut and shirah at the awakening of nature in Spring, a sense of wonder that moves him to rapturous song, for nature is indeed full of miracles. Nachmanides maintains that all of nature is composed of nissim nistarim, of hidden miracles, that await only a perceptive mind in order to reveal them. And Rabbi Shneour Zalman of Ladi declared in his "Tanya" that, paradoxically, teva is itself le-maalah min ha-teva* nature itself is supernatural! Indeed, for a sensitive soul, for a man of spiritual refinement, all of nature is a miracle, it is supernatural.

*For the divine Name Elohim represents teva (numerically, Elohim = ha-teva), and the Tetragrammaton signifies the supernatural; but according to the Zohar, Hashem Ve'Elohim kula Ahad -- they are both One.

And when that is the case, we respond -- with shirah.

Only recently America observed Earth Day, and we announced our common determination to preserve nature in its beauty and in its purity. But why was Earth Day necessary? Why have we, to begin with, polluted our air and poisoned our water? It is not only because of rapacious businessmen who wanted to exploit the resources of nature without caring about consequences. It is the result as well of sheer negligence by all of us, an insensitivity to nature itself -- because we have lost our sense of wonder, because we have failed to develop a shirah attitude to the world about us.

Shir Ha-Shirim, then, ought remind us to go back to our own inner resources, in eclipse since our childhood, and relearn the beautiful sense of wonder which can lead to a life of song.

III

The second theme of Shir Ha-Shirim is that of -- love. "I am for my beloved, and my beloved is for me." "And his standard above me is that of love." The whole of the book of Shir Ha-Shirim breathes the message of love.

Now, that sounds rather trite and pedestrian. To declare oneself in favor of love is like declaring oneself in favor of mother, God, and country. Furthermore, love is today in disrepute. It has been reduced to a slogan on a button worn by young people who have never really known it. It has degenerated into promiscuity, unchastity, and a tolerance of obscenity and pornography.

What then is the importance to us of the theme of ahavah as it emerges from Shir Ha-Shirim?

What Solomon wants from us is not only romantic love in the classical sense, but a profound empathy, a new emphasis on intimacy, in order to overcome the alienation and solitude and isolation which are endemic to the human condition, and which are especially pronounced in the modern age.

The need for depth in our emotional life, the want of intimacy and empathy, and the curse of emotional ^{poverty} and personal superficiality was pointed out in a poignant scene some 25 years ago in one of the first plays (The Bald Soprano) of Eugène Ionesco. In this scene, we find a young man meeting a young woman on Fifth Avenue and engaging her in conversation. They learn, to their surprise, that they had both come in from Connecticut on the same train. Further conversation between them reveals that, coincidentally, both live in Manhattan. Further on, they learn that not only do they live in Manhattan, but they actually live on the same street -- and in the very same apartment building! As the conversation develops, they also become aware of the fact that they live -- on the same floor. Finally, they discover that both of them have a ten year old daughter of the same name. Indeed, she is the same child -- husband and wife have met and introduced themselves to each other!

The kind of love that Shir Ha-Shirim calls us to, is that of personal closeness, of intimacy, of an openness to each other that will overcome the distance that life and society impose upon us. It sum-

mons husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister, teacher and student, and friends to new closeness and understanding, to the kind of love which forsakes superficiality and demands attention, concern, engagement, closeness.

IV

There is a third lesson for us in the Song of Songs. Solomon calls, according to the interpretation of the Rabbis, for an end to the bitterness of exile. The climax of the Song of Songs is the very last verse בְּרַח 3/3 וְצִנֹּר עֵקֶב אֶבְרָתִי וְהָיִיתִי כִּגְזֵלָה
וְכִצְנִיף, "Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young deer upon the mountains of spices." The Midrash interprets this as follows: Make haste or flee, my beloved, -- מִן הַגָּלוּת,
from exile where you are sullied by sin. And become like a gazelle -- which is tahor, pure, kosher, innocent. And קַבֵּל אֶת תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ
כְּזֶה הַדָּבָר, accept our prayers as if they were an offering of the deer upon the altar. May our prayers go up to You and be כְּרִיחַ
כְּצִנֹּר וְכִצְנִיף "May they be as sweet and acceptable to you, O Lord, and as fragrant as spices, in the merit of our ancestors." Solomon, in other words, is praying for redemption, and urging it upon us. It is the theme of liberation.

V

These three teachings -- of wonder and love and liberation -- ought to be focused by us on one event of our days that is of the utmost importance.

One of the great dramas of this generation is the developing story of the 2½-3 million Jews of Russia. Heretofore we referred to them as the "Silent Jews." Now they are no longer silent. Too many of them have concluded that life in the Soviet Union is simply too painful for silence. They have spoken out at the risk of professional advancement, freedom, and even life and limb.

Our reaction must proceed according to the three lessons of the Song of Songs.

We must react with wonder at the courage and the heroism that people are capable of after 50 years under Communism. Apparently, despite three generations of studied de-Judaization, the pintelle Yid, that sacred and ineffable core of Jewishness, remains alive in the hearts and the souls of Russian Jewry. And that little spark has now become a conflagration of love and loyalty for Israel and the State of Israel. This is nothing short of a miracle, and it demands of us the response of shirah, of song -- and that song must come loud and clear.

We must react with love. We must not ignore them. We must not leave the Russian Jewry problem to shtadlanim, to self-appointed Jewish leaders. We must not be naive in our confidence in Jewish leaders, leaving all to them. We have had too much unfortunate experience with such misplaced confidence. Jewish leadership is remarkably weak unless there is a mass outpouring of popular sentiment. We must express our profound closeness with Russian Jewry and we must do it en masse and we must do it often. And out of a sense of identification and love.

Finally, liberation. We must not rest until they have been given the right to go, to leave. We must continue our shirah -- singing and crying, shouting and pleading and protesting -- until they will have fulfilled '313 נחפ, they will have been able to flee and make haste. For these Jews, though they may be חַיִּינִיּוֹת פִּי־טָמֵאִים, sullied with sin as a result of three generations of being denied a Jewish education, will become tahor ka-tzvi, pure as a deer or gazelle, because of their willingness to sacrifice everything for their beliefs. And the חַיִּינִיּוֹת, the merit of the great Russian Jewry of two or three generations ago, will stand in their stead.

We shall have the opportunity of so doing. Tomorrow morning, New York Jewry, as organized by the New York Conference on Soviet Jewry, will hold an Exodus March on behalf of the Jews of the Soviet Union. We shall assemble on Park Avenue between 65th and 70th Street at 11 A.M. After a brief ceremony at the Soviet Mission, we shall march, in the thousands, to an area not far from the Isaiah Wall at the United Nations. A program has been prepared in which distinguished people will address the gathering. But that is only of secondary importance. What is of greatest importance is that each and every one of us be there, to express our wonder, our love, our hope for redemption for our brothers and sisters behind the Iron Curtain. It is important that we come in ever larger numbers, so that the Soviet authorities will be forced to hear what the force of public opinion is trying to tell them.

Let each of us come in person. And let the word go to Russian

authorities, to Russian Jews, to the United States and the United Nations, that we will not forget them; that in wonder, out of love, and with encouragement to exodus, we stand with them.

Thus will our song become -- the Song of Songs, indeed:

"the choicest of all songs, the most excellent of all songs."