

"SOLOMON'S SONG OF THE ABSURD"

Critics of contemporary culture have observed that our society has been tending more and more towards absurdity. It is riddled by remarkable self-contradictions, and perplexed by painful paradoxes.

In art, for instance, there has been a failure of communication; a good deal of modern art is non-representational, and the artist is often so subjective that his audience hardly knows what he means or wants. In recent months we have seen the rise of what has been called "non-fiction novels," almost a contradiction in terms. In poetry, there is a movement afoot that goes by the name of anti-poetry poetry. Music no longer necessarily aims at being esthetically pleasing. We have an upsurge of what is known as "the theatre of the absurd," or perhaps: absurd theatre. Philosophers, whose business it should be to describe or formulate for us the contents of life, are now preoccupied in what is known as "linguistic analysis," in which they have all but abandoned hope for knowing the contents of any statement that is ever made, and concentrate instead on quibbling about definitions of terms. Modern science

pictures for us a world that, indeed, cannot be pictured at all; it is nothing but equations, and besides the mathematics of it we have no right to form any mental picture of what the world is "really" like. Humor was always thought of as something that is pleasant and makes us laugh; today we have "sick humor" which inspires us to cry rather than smile. And the shock troops of all these movements to absurdity are largely non-teaching professors in universities around the country.

Of course, all this emphasis on the irrational and absurd can be good, and to a large extent it is. It confronts us with the essential dilemmas of the human condition, and it reminds that life is not nearly as neat or as orderly as liberals once thought during the 19th and early 20th century, when everything had its place and all history was thought to be progressing towards ever higher levels. Furthermore, many of these contemporary movements represent true creativity on the frontiers of art and the horizons of the intellect.

However, these tendencies have moved far beyond this point. Consider the fact that we now have atheistic theologians and agnostic "rabbis," and you have clear evidence that the condition of this kind of culture is

sick; it leads to nihilism and meaninglessness. It wants to tell us ^{not} that the world cannot be understood, but that there is nothing to understand. It teaches a doctrine which implies, if it does not state so explicitly, that life is nothing, that existence is a zero, that man is a nullity. ^AThese thoughts come to mind this morning because of that beautiful biblical book that we read, the Shir ha-Shirim, Solomon's "Song of Songs." If we read it carefully, more than just for casual impressions, we will find that in many ways it exemplifies this contemporary notion of absurdity, but-- with a difference. It is a little book full of riddles and paradoxes and apparent contradictions. Yet, ultimately, it points to a world overabundant with meaning and pregnant with purpose. It is worth examining some of these near-absurdities and see where they lead us.

The first striking fact about the Song of Songs is the way it is understood in the Jewish tradition: it does not at all mean what the words say. Outwardly, it is a love song between a shepherd and shepherdess. But Judaism has maintained that Shir ha-Shirim must not be regarded as a pastoral love song, but rather as a song of intense devotion between Israel and God, and that therefore it is filled with the most divine mysteries and the most sublime secrets.

The Rabbis said that if kol ha-shirim kodesh, shir ha-shirim kodesh kodoshim:if all the songs of the Bible are sacred, then the Song of Songs is the most sacred of all, the sublimest of the sublime. R. Boruch Halevi Epztejn, the author of "Torah Temimah" explains: other passages of the Bible which are interpreted as having a deeper meaning are read on two levels -- both the outer meaning and the inner, deeper one. But the Song of Songs is the one parable in which the Jewish tradition most insistently abjures any acceptance of the plain meaning of the text, and insists only upon its esoteric meaning, its inner content. Shir ha-Shirim, according to Jewish tradition, is only a love song between God and Israel, and not at all a romantic song filled with erotic images. Remarkably, therefore, the Song of Songs has a meaning radically different from what it outwardly purports to be.

This sense of contradiction affects many of the individual components of the song. For instance, the question of the beauty of the shepherdess, i.e. Israel. Beauty, in this song, is not at all a uniform standard. The shepherdess sings: shehorah ani ve'naavah, "I am black and comely." I am ugly yet beautiful, unattractive

yet appealing. Al tiruni she'ani sheharhoret: Take no notice of the fact that I am black, burnt by the sun under which I am forced to labor from dawn to dusk, and then banished by my brothers from the society of respectable people because my appearance is so marred. Yet the shepherd answers her: kulekh yafah rayati u-mum en bakh, "you are altogether beautiful, my beloved friend, and there is not a single defect, not one blemish in you." Beauty is not always a matter of outer appearance.

Is this not true of the one who is symbolized by the shepherdess? In our heart of hearts, when we consider some of the characteristics of our fellow Jews, in moments of honesty, we are sometimes overwhelmingly oppressed by the fact of ugliness; we can begin to understand why Jews themselves sometimes are the cause of anti-Semitism! Shehorah ani -- sometimes a Jewish community betrays unattractive features, repulsive character, and obnoxious appearance. And yet....ve'naavah, despite all this outward repugnance, inwardly our Jews are comely, beautiful beyond description. After all is said and done, we are comparatively blemishless. Throughout history, we have lived amongst people who have descended to the level of the brute, and often far lower. Despite outward assimilation to such odious mores, we have remained, by and large, a pure and ethical people. Hence: ugly yet beautiful,

unnattractive yet comely!

Throughout the Song of Songs³ there are hints of disturbing disharmony. We read of "little foxes" who plunder the beautiful vines; of "the daughters of Jerusalem" who attempt to frustrate the love⁴ between the lover and the beloved; of "guards of the city" who will not help the shepherdess locate her lover. Yet, despite all these threats to peace and harmony, the prevailing sentiment throughout is: shalom. Thus the Midrash taught that wherever in this book you find mention of Shelomoh, Solomon, it refers to melekh she'ha shalom shelo, the King Who is the possessor of peace. The name really refers to God, Who seeks to establish peace in the universe. Indeed so! ⁺Throughout the long stretch of human history when, before the ⁺modern age, war was not considered unthinkable, we held forth our great prophetic vision of universal peace. Even in the modern day, when some people preach "peace at any price," we maintain that there are times when war is justified, when in order to preserve human dignity we must take up arms; and nevertheless we continue to teach: never, never must we relinquish our fervent hopes and striving for peace throughout the world.

Love is the dominant theme of the Song of Songs. It breathes out of every line. It is a mighty love, a powerful love, as strong -- as death itself! Solomon sings: azah ka-mavet ahavah, love is as mighty as death. It is something we all desire and yet -- we fear it. We are afraid to love, because we fear that death will rob us of our loved ones, and leave us in disconsolate grief. We fear it because love that is so very mighty can, at the moment of its culmination,

be so overwhelming as to snuff out life itself...At every climactic step, in every chapter of this book, we meet with frustration. Just at the moment that the lover and beloved are about to meet -- "my beloved slipped away and passed from me." How tantalizing and troubling and even terrifying is this tense moment when the triumph of love is denied to the lovers! Yet remarkably, all through these experiences of frustration, love increases rather than decreases. Not once is their love for each other diminished by these disappointments.

That eminent Italian-Jewish physician and Bible commentator, Seforno, maintains that this is probably the greatest characteristic of the Song of Solomon. Normally one feels love for a person who is very kind and gentle and generous to others. So Israel feels only deep love and affection to God who is so good. All this, despite the fact Israel notices God's goodness showered upon all other nations except -- itself. Out of our deep and dark exile, we observe how others are the beneficiaries of God's bounty while we remain, as it were, ignored by Him. Despite all this, however, our love grows greater for God, Who, in His goodness, gives the gift of life to all men, even if He occasionally ignores us. For so many centuries, pillaged and plundered and persecuted by people who professed a "religion" of love," we strived more and more to approach, and in every step we were denied, the joy of His presence. Yet almost absurdly, the result of all this frustration and unrequited love was not bitterness but sweetness.

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Above all: all this paradox, this disparity of content and form, this homely comeliness or comely homeliness, this discordant harmony, this love that is as mighty as death and that intensifies with every disappointment -- all this leads not to a world that is nonsensical in its absurdity, but, on the contrary, to a resounding and joyous affirmation of the dignity of life and the worth of the world. Rabbi Akiva taught: en kol ha-olam ke'dai ke'yom she'nitan bo shir ha-shirim, never was the world as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to it. Despite disparity, despite disappointment, despite disharmony, despite death -- we delight in the dignity and the worth of the world. It is absurd, but it is certainly not meaningless and worthless. Irrational and perplexing as it may seem, there is beauty and love and peace and hope.

This indeed is the story of Judaism: a faith that conquers doubt, a beauty that lives within, a love that overcomes rejection. Despite the jeers and the leers and the ridicule, we continue to hope and believe.

This message of Shir ha-Shirim is epitomized in its last verse, one which emphasizes the paradox of Jewish hope and faith. The beloved sings to her lover: berah dodi u-demeh lekha li'tzevi o le'ofar ha-ayalim al harei besamin: flee my beloved and become like a deer or young fawn on the mountains of spices. The Rabbis of the Midrash and the Targum understood that verse to mean: Israel turns to her beloved God and says to Him -- Almighty, beloved Creator, You must leave this impure world, this world of falsehood and deceit and ugliness; it is no place for you. Flee, return instead to the

uppermost pure Heavens which are Your abode. But though You leave us and flee, and though we seem to be abandoned by You, yet we will know all during this agony of separation that You have not forgotten us. For, O God, be like the deer, which even when it sleeps keeps one eye open. Let the sophisticated heathen cry out that "God is dead," but we know full well that "Guardian of Israel doth not sleep nor slumber," that although it sometimes seems as if God, as it were, has packed His suitcase and left the world in a hurry without leaving a trace of His presence, still "the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him." Like the deer, our dear and beloved God, continues to keep an eye on Your beloved people. And become, Almighty God, like the young fawn, who even when it runs always keeps his head turned, looking backwards. ⁺ Though ⁺ it may seem that You have abandoned us to the misery of this cruel and brutal world, that You flee from us, yet we will know that You keep us in mind, that Your providence never leaves us. Though You fly from us, nevertheless we are of concern to You, and You look back longingly to us, even as we yearn longingly for You.

Flee, then, beloved God, but do not forget or ignore us during your flight. And then, at the appointed time, we know that You will return to us once again in love. For then, at the time of the complete redemption, on the holy mountain in Jerusalem, there will rise again the Temple where the priests will minister in sanctity and awe to the songs of the Levites, and on the Altar of God will again be offered the incense, the perfume expressing our love for God -- and this sweet odor will be the harei besamim, the mountains of spices, where God and Israel will finally meet in a union of love, never to be separated

or frustrated.

Then, at this time of the redemption, will our absurd faith be vindicated and our irrational hope be justified before all mankind and for all history.