

# Shir Hashirim

## The Song of Songs

### Introduction

King Solomon wrote *The Song of Songs* in the form of a love song between a king and his wife who have become estranged. This was, of course, not his primary intent. He is describing the troubled relationship between the king and his wife as a metaphor for the relationship between the Almighty and the Jewish people.

In his introduction to *The Song of Songs*, Rashi quotes the Midrash (Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 1), “Rabbi Akiva said, ‘All of Scripture is holy, but The Song of Songs is holy of holies.’” Then he quotes the verse in Tehillim (62:12), “The Lord spoke one thing, I heard it as two,” and the Talmud’s explanation (Sanhedrin 34a) that a single verse encompasses many meanings. King Solomon foresaw that, in the future, Jewish people would suffer exile and persecution, and he sought to give them guidance along the path of return. He sought to help them remove their impurities, like a baker who sifts his flour when he bakes fine bread.

Nonetheless, says Rashi, *ein hamikra yotzei midei pshuto*, a verse must always be understood by its simple meaning as well. Therefore, Rashi explains the verses of this supremely holy song both in their simple meaning as a description of a man and a woman struggling to repair their relationship and in their deeper meaning as the struggle of the Jewish people to return to their former closeness to the Almighty.

Why did King Solomon consider it important to study the

simple meaning of these verses that speak of a lovelorn woman separated from her husband? Since his main concern was to help the Jewish people return to the Almighty, why didn't he write his songs in that form? Furthermore, why is *The Song of Songs* so supremely holy?

The relationship between the Almighty and the Jewish people is marital. We are, so to speak, married to him in a bond resembling wedlock, a bond of mutual love and commitment. In the words of the Prophet (Hoshea 2:21), "I will betroth you forever," said the Almighty." It is fundamentally difficult to imagine ourselves in a marital relationship with the Almighty, but we can well imagine the plight of a wife who is torn away from the husbands she loves and who loves her.

As we follow the dialogue between the king and his estranged wife, our hearts go out to the wife who yearns to be with her husband, who has lost her way, who feels abandoned and alone without him, who cannot find the way home. At the same time, we think into the deeper meaning of the verses, and we realize that indeed we, the Jewish people, are the wife.

We are lost and afraid, and we realize that our separation from the Almighty is the cause of our suffering. Deep in our hearts the Jewish people long for an emotional bond with the Almighty, even if not all of us are in touch with it. We echo the feelings of the lost wife and absorb them into our own hearts. We listen to the king's loving encouragement to his wife, and we know the Almighty's love for us has never waned. There is hope.



# Chapter 1

1. A song of songs  
composed by Solomon.<sup>1</sup>

*[The wife speaks:]*

2. Let him kiss me with kisses of his lips,  
for your love is more pleasing than wine.<sup>2</sup>
3. By the fragrance of your fine oils  
you became known as flowing oil,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The authorship of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs is also ascribed to King Solomon with his patronymic ben David, the son of David, whereas here there is no patronymic. This is because the name Solomon appears a number of times in these verses as a reference to the Almighty, who is known as Shalom, the King of Peace, one of the divine Names. Therefore, the patronymic is omitted.

<sup>2</sup> **THE MEANING:** Let King Solomon kiss me on the lips, as a husband kisses his wife, because his love is more pleasing than festive parties.

[Apparently, according to Rashi, King Solomon is the husband in this allegorical story of an estranged couple. Later in 3:7, the wife speaks about Solomon's sedan chair. Metzudas Dovid explains that the wife considers her husband in such high esteem that she compares him to Solomon. Rashi, however, makes no comment, because the verse is self-explanatory. The husband is Solomon.]

**THE METAPHOR:** We recall when the Almighty gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai, and we stood together face to face, like husband and wife. The sweet intimacy of that moment still lingers with us. We look forward to the day when we will experience it again and He will reveal its secrets to us.

<sup>3</sup> **THE MEANING:** She praises reputation of her husband, which she compared to fine oils, earning him the love of maidens.

**THE METAPHOR:** The accounts of the wonders the Almighty visited on the Egyptians spread among the nations, as Rachav heard in distant Jericho (Yehoshua 2:10), as Jethro heard in distant Midian and came to join the beloved nation.

that is why young maidens love you.

4. Just draw me to you, and I will run,  
the king brought me to his chambers,  
I rejoice and exult over you,  
I still recall your love, better than wine,  
I loved you strong and true.<sup>4</sup>

5. I am blackened but lovely,  
O daughters of Jerusalem,<sup>5</sup>  
I am like the tents of Kedar  
transformed to Solomon's sheets.

6. Do not stare at me in my blackened state,  
it is from the sun that glared at me,

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<sup>4</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife hears that the king, her husband, wants her to come, and she is ready to run and be his wife once again. She recalls the days when he brought her to his chambers, and her heart still throbs with the joy of those times. Even now that she is alone, the memory of that love pleases her more than any other pleasure. Her love is as strong as ever.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people reminisce to the Almighty of our faithful love when we followed Him into the barren wilderness. We didn't even bring food, for we trusted that He would provide for us. He surrounded us with clouds of glory and took care of our needs. Even now, as we are persecuted, the memory of that joyous time still lives in our hearts. We revel in the Torah, for it is there that our memories live.

<sup>5</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife admits to her friends that she is burned by the sun and no longer attractive, but she insists that the sunburn can fade. Her loveliness can return, just as the filthy tents of desert nomads can be washed and made clean as royal sheets.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people admit to the gentile nations, who sit in Jerusalem as conquerors, that we have sinned with the golden calf. We have become blackened by our iniquity. But we also have the merit of embracing the Torah. We can be cleansed.

my cousins exasperated me,  
they set me to guard the vineyards,  
but I did not guard my own vineyard.<sup>6</sup>

7. Tell me, O the one that I love,  
where do you guide your flock?  
where do you give it respite at high noon?  
why should I be like a shrouded mourner  
alongside the flocks of your companions?<sup>7</sup>

*[The king speaks:]*

8. If you do not know the answer,  
O most beautiful among women,  
follow the footprints of the flock,

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<sup>6</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife pleads with her friends not to stare at her with disdain in her blackened state, for she has been burned by the sun. Her cousins have set her to guard strange vineyards, exposing her to the broiling sun, while her own vineyard has gone neglected.

**THE METAPHOR:** We have been led astray by the *eruv rav*, the Egyptians who have joined us when we came out of Egypt. They have influenced us and persuaded us to promote their ways, and we've neglected to safeguard our own legacy, the vineyard we inherited from our holy ancestors.

<sup>7</sup> **THE MEANING:** Broken-hearted, the wife yearns to be reunited with her husband, but she doesn't know where to find him. Where does he tend to his flock? Where does he bring them to rest in the heat of high noon? How can she find this place? How can she make her way back to him if she doesn't know the way? She is alone and lost.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people ask the Almighty how we, His own flock, can survive among the other nations who surround us like wolves. How does it not offend Him that we suffer persecution at the hands of the nations among whom we find ourselves, while the other nations are guided by their own kings and ministers?

then you can graze your young kids  
near the encampments of the shepherds.<sup>8</sup>

9. By the cavalries I sent  
against the chariots of Pharaoh,  
I sought you out as my beloved.<sup>9</sup>

10. Your cheeks are adorned with ornaments,  
your neck with bejeweled necklaces.<sup>10</sup>

11. Golden ornaments we made for you  
along with resplendent silver vessels.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> **THE MEANING:** The husband replies with love that she can find her way back to him if only she seeks out the footprints of his flocks and follows them. Then she can bring her goats to pasture in serenity beside the flocks of the other shepherds.

**THE METAPHOR:** O most beautiful among the nations, replies the Almighty, if you do not want your young people to be absorbed by the other nations follow the footprints laid down by your holy ancestors who embraced the Torah and lived by its commands. Your merit will protect you.

<sup>9</sup> **THE MEANING:** The husband assures his wife that his love is still strong, and he reminds her that he calmed her when she was in distress.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty reminds the Jewish people that He came to their rescue when they were enslaved by the Egyptians.

<sup>10</sup> **THE MEANING:** The husband reminds his wife of all the jewelry he gave her as symbols of his love.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty reminds the Jewish people of all the rich plunder He provided for them on the shores of the sea.

<sup>11</sup> **THE MEANING:** The husband reminds his wife of the gold and silver he gave her as symbols of his love.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty tells the Jewish people that He and with His Heavenly Court decreed that Pharaoh harden his heart and pursue with all his treasures in tow. The treasure that you carried with you when you emerged from Egypt could only be compared to silver, while the treasure that washed up from the sea was like gold.

*[The wife speaks:]*

12. But while the king was still at home  
my spikenard spice released its stench.<sup>12</sup>

13. My beloved brought me a bundle of myrrh  
and rested on my bosom.<sup>13</sup>

14. My beloved brought me a cluster of henna  
in the vineyards of Ein Gedi.<sup>14</sup>

*[The king speaks:]*

15. Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved,  
behold, you are beautiful,

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<sup>12</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife laments that she did not appreciate the relationship when she was together with her husband. She did not honor him with her behavior.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people lament that when the Almighty rested His Divine Presence among us our behavior was reprehensible. We sinned with golden calf.

<sup>13</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife recalls that her husband brought her myrrh so that its fine scent would dispel the stench of the spikenard. With kindness and love, he helped her perfect her behavior.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recall that the Almighty did not turn away from them when they sinned with the calf. He let them build Him a golden Mishkan to atone for the golden calf.

<sup>14</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife recalls the other spices that her husband brought to her as a sign of his love.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people are abashed by the memory of our grave sin. We confess that, like the vineyards of Ein Gedi that produce four or five crops a year, we have sinned again and again in the wilderness and He has forgiven us.



your eyes are like doves.<sup>15</sup>

*[The wife speaks:]*

16. It is you that are beautiful,  
my beloved, also pleasing,  
and even our bed is fruitful.<sup>16</sup>

17. The beams of our house are of cedarwood,  
our fixtures are of cypress.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> **THE MEANING:** The husband consoles his estranged wife. He tells her that she is beautiful and that her eyes are like the eyes of a bride whose qualities can be seen in her eyes.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty assures the Jewish people that He forgave our sins, that we still shine with beauty of having said, “We will do, and we will hear,” with the beauty of our own deeds and with the beauty of our ancestors’ deeds.

<sup>16</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife responds that it is her husband who is beautiful. Their relationship is fruitful with sons and daughters.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recognizes the glory of the Almighty, and we rejoice in bringing our sons and daughters to the Mishkan and then the beis Hamikdash, which are compared to martial bed.

<sup>17</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife recalls the rich woods and the lavish appointments of her former residence in the palace of her husband.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people nostalgically recall the rich woods of the Mishkan.

## Chapter 2

*[The wife speaks:]*

1. I am the rosebud of the Sharon,  
the rose of the valleys.

*[The king speaks:]*

2. As a rose among the thorns,  
so is my beloved among the young women.<sup>18</sup>

*[The wife speaks:]*

3. As an apple tree among the forest trees,  
so is my beloved among the young men,  
I sat with delight in his shade,  
his fruit were sweet to my palate.<sup>19</sup>
4. He brought me to the wine house,

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<sup>18</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife lets her husband know that she is still the most beautiful of flowers. He responds that she is like a rose among the thorns, that no matter how much the thorns puncture her delicate skin, no matter how dire her circumstances, she retains her beauty and color.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people declare to the Almighty that we are still the beautiful rose that we were in the past, and He acknowledges that this is true. Even though our neighbors have attempted to subvert us with their idolatrous thorns, we have remained steadfast in our faith.

<sup>19</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife compares the qualities of her husband, as compared to those of other men, to a redolent apple tree among the fruitless trees of the forest. She recalls that her life with him was wonderful and rewarding.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recall the richness of their lives when the Divine Presence still resided among them.

his banner is a loving memory for me.<sup>20</sup>

5. O, nourish me with delicacies,  
refresh me with apple fragrance,  
for I am lovesick.<sup>21</sup>

6. His left hand supported my head,  
while his right hand embraced me.<sup>22</sup>

7. I forswear you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
with the doom of gazelles or does of the field  
if you provoke or dispute this love  
as long as it endures.<sup>23</sup>

8. The sound of my beloved,

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<sup>20</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife recalls with love that her husband brought her into his celebration hall adorned with the royal banner.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recall with love the Tent of Meeting from where the Almighty communicated to us the details of the Torah as we were gathered around with eager anticipation.

<sup>21</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife pleads with her husband to revive her with delicacies and apple fragrance, for she swoons with yearning for her beloved.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people declare that we are deprived of the Almighty's closeness and love, and we feel an emptiness inside. We plead with Him to provide us with spiritual nourishment, as He once did.

<sup>22</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife recalls how secure she felt when her husband would support her head with his left hand while he embraced her with his right.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recall how the Almighty took us on a three-day journey from Egypt until we arrived at a resting place, and there, He fed us manna from Heaven.

<sup>23</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife warns the women around her husband not to do anything to undermine his love for her as long as it remains in his heart.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people warn the daughters of Jerusalem, the nations who have conquered Jerusalem and among whom we are exiled, not to attempt to subvert us with their pagan ways and thereby turn the Almighty away from us.

behold, it comes near,  
skipping over the mountains,  
leaping across the hills.<sup>24</sup>

9. My beloved resembles a gazelle  
or a young buck among the deer,  
behold, he is standing behind our wall,  
watching from the windows,  
peering through the casements.<sup>25</sup>

10. My beloved spoke up, and he said to me,

*[The king speaks:]*

“Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one,  
come venture forth.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife hears the sound of her beloved approaching in the distance. He approaches quickly, by leaps and bounds.

**THE METAPHOR:** The poet has spoken briefly up to this point, and now he becomes more specific. The Jewish people recall that their decree of exile in Egypt was for four hundred years of oppression, but he came before earlier and brought us out to freedom.

<sup>25</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife had thought that her husband had abandoned her, that he no longer thought about her, but now she realizes that he was watching her unseen and monitoring her situation.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people realize that the Almighty had not abandoned us, that He had observed our suffering.

<sup>26</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife receives a message of encouragement from her husband. He invites her to embark on a journey of return.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty called out to us, and His messenger Moshe conveyed the message. Arise, He commands, it is time to leave Egypt.

**OTHERWISE:** (see Rashi v. 13): The Almighty spoke to us through His messenger Moshe, and Aharon conveyed the messages. Arise, He commands, and let each man and woman borrow valuables from his neighbor so that the wealth of Egypt will be transferred to the Jewish people.

11. For behold, the winter has passed,  
the rains have turned away and gone.<sup>27</sup>

12. Blooming trees appear in the land,  
the time for singing has arrived,  
and the sound of the turtledove  
is heard throughout our land.<sup>28</sup>

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[In the first explanation, the two speakers in the verse are the Almighty and Moshe. In the second, they are Moshe and Aharon. Perhaps this difference is connected to the difference in the messages. In the first explanation, the Almighty is telling the Jewish people to prepare to leave Egypt. The message is to all the people, as a collective whole. The Almighty speaks to the collective, and His messenger is Moshe. In the second explanation, the message is to individuals, since not everyone has a neighbor with valuables. Furthermore, He is speaking to men and women separately; men should ask men, and women should ask women. Since the Almighty does not speak directly to individuals, other than through prophecy, He must be instructing Moshe to speak to them. Therefore, the two speakers to the individual people are Moshe and Aharon, who needs to articulate the message because of Moshe's speech impediments.]

<sup>27</sup> **THE MEANING:** The husband assures his wife that the journey will not be difficult. The winter has passed. The rainy season is over.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty spoke to us in the month of Nissan. The rainy season had passed. It was springtime, and the roads would be clear. It would not be a difficult journey.

**OTHERWISE:** The Almighty informed us that the four-hundred-year winter of our bondage had come to an end prematurely. The eighty-six years of extreme oppression that inundated us with suffering like a relentless rainstorm from the time of Miriam's birth has reduced the term of our exile.

<sup>28</sup> **THE MEANING:** The trees in the fields are blooming, perfuming the air with their sweet scent to the delight of the wayfarers. The birds are singing the songs of spring. The wayfarers are pleased.

13. The fig trees ripened their unripe figs,  
the new grapes are fragrant on the vines,  
arise, my beloved, my beautiful one,  
come venture forth.<sup>29</sup>

14. O my dove, hiding in the cleft rocks,  
in the crevices of the dusty mounds,  
let me see your countenance,  
let me hear your voice,  
for your voice is sweet  
and your countenance is lovely.<sup>30</sup>

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**THE METAPHOR:** The journey to the promised land would be pleasant. The scent of trees in bloom and the sweet songs of the birds would accompany them on their way home.

**OTHERWISE:** The blooming trees are Moshe and Aharon who would provide for our needs. Our destined time to sing the Almighty's praises on the shores of the sea had arrived. The Almighty would guide us home.

<sup>29</sup> **THE MEANING:** The husband gently cajoles his wife to venture forth and return to him. The fig trees and the grapevines have shed their blossoms, and their gleaming fruits have emerged.

**THE METAPHOR:** Along the way, the multitudes of liberated slaves would encounter ripening figs on the fig trees and grapes on the grapevines.

**OTHERWISE:** The time had come to bring the first fruits of our fields and libations of wine to the Beis Hamikdash.

**OTHERWISE:** Some of our people improved in their worthiness to the point that their deeds were as redolent as ripe figs.

**OTHERWISE:** Our people shed the villains among us during the three-day plague of darkness like the fig trees no longer bore unripe fruit. Meanwhile, others repented and were welcomed back.

<sup>30</sup> **THE MEANING:** The husband expresses his concern for his wife's safety in the perilous conditions in which she finds herself. She is like a helpless dove driven to seek shelter from the hawks in rocky crevices in which she encounters a hissing snake. She cannot go forward, nor can she go back. She is desperate.

*[The wife speaks:]*

15. “Seize for us the foxes!  
the small foxes that ravaged vineyards  
while our vineyards were still newgrown.”<sup>31</sup>
16. Yes, my beloved was devoted to me,  
and I to him, the one that guides  
his flock among the roses,
17. until the day blew hot  
and the shadows fled away;  
departing, my beloved, you resemble  
a gazelle or a young buck among the deer  
on unreachable mountain slopes.<sup>32</sup>

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The husband calls out to his estranged wife, “Let me hear your sweet voice. Let me see your beautiful face.” I am here to save you.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty reminds the Jewish people of the time they came to the shores of the sea with the Egyptian army in hot pursuit. They could not go forward because of the sea, nor could they turn back to face their pursuers. At that point, they cried out to Him in fervent prayer, and He split the sea for them.

<sup>31</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife laments the danger in which she finds herself. The foxes attack her vineyards even as they are still not fully grown.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people acknowledge that the Almighty inundated their rapacious pursuers in the sea, also to the young who brought doom to Jewish boys during the royal decree that firstborn boys should be drowned. The parents would hide their infant boys, but the Egyptian inspectors brought their own little boys with them. The little boys would call out in their childish voices, and the hidden Jewish boys would respond and thereby reveal their hiding places.

<sup>32</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife declares that she and her beloved king, the one who tends his flocks through pleasant fields, were devoted to each other until the

## Chapter 3

*[The wife speaks:]*

1. On my bed, in the nights,  
I sought the one that I love,  
I sought him but did not find him.<sup>33</sup>
2. I bestirred myself, roamed the city,  
in the marketplaces, on the boulevards,  
looking for the one that I love,  
I sought him but did not find him.<sup>34</sup>
3. The guards that patrol the city  
discovered me, and I asked,

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day grew hot and the shadows fled away. Then her husband departed like a gazelle to distant mountaintops.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people acknowledge that the Almighty demanded nothing more than that we worship him properly in the Mishkan, while we received from Him all our needs. But when we sinned by worshipping the golden calf, we forfeited the protection earned through our merits. It was our fault that the Almighty withdrew to an unreachable place.

<sup>33</sup> **THE MEANING:** In her darkened bedchamber, the wife wondered how she could find her way back to her husband.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty did not show Himself to the Jewish people for thirty-eight years until the last of the generation that participated in the sin of the Spies had passed away.

<sup>34</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife rose from her bed and sought the answers in various places, but she was unsuccessful.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people sought to bring the Almighty back into the encampment, but we were unsuccessful.



“Have you seen the one that I love?”<sup>35</sup>

4. I was just about to leave them  
when I found the one that I love,  
I clutched him and would not let him go  
until I brought him to my mother’s house,  
to the chamber of the one that conceived me.<sup>36</sup>
5. I forswear you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
with the fate of gazelles or does of the field  
if you provoke or dispute this love  
as long as it endures.<sup>37</sup>
6. “Who is this emerging from the wilderness  
like columns of smoke, completely aromatic  
with myrrh and frankincense,

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<sup>35</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife encountered the city patrols and asked if they knew the whereabouts of her husband, but they do not help her.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people approached Moses and Aharon and asked if the Almighty had forgiven us yet, but prophecy had ceased during the dark period of their disfavor.

<sup>36</sup> **THE MEANING:** Just when the wife is ready to turn away from the patrols in disappointment, they give her the information she seeks. She grasps her beloved husband and brings him to her birthplace.

**THE METAPHOR:** After the last of the generation of the wilderness passed away, just before Moses and Aharon passed away as well, prophecy returned to them. The Jewish people grasped this new opportunity for closeness with the Almighty during the time of Joshua, who brought them into the promised land and built the Mishkan in Shiloh.

<sup>37</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife warns the women around the husband not to do anything to undermine his love for her as long as it remains in his heart.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people warn the daughters of Jerusalem, the nations among who they are exiled, not to attempt to subvert us with their pagan ways and thereby turn the Almighty away from us.

the powder of spice merchants?”<sup>38</sup>

7. Behold, it is Solomon’s sedan chair  
escorted by sixty mighty heroes  
from among the mighty heroes of Israel.<sup>39</sup>

8. They are all armed with swords,  
trained in warfare, each man  
with his sword by his side  
to protect against nocturnal terrors.<sup>40</sup>

9. King Solomon prepared for himself  
a canopy made of trees from Lebanon.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife discerns the approach of the husband by the comments of people who marvel at his stateliness and fragrance.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recall our days in the wilderness when we were guided by a pillar of fire and a pillar of smoke and redolent with the smell of burning incense. The surrounding nations observed this startling phenomenon and were filled with admiration for us.

<sup>39</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife catches sight of King Solomon, her estranged husband, in all his royal majesty.

[See footnote to 1:2.]

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recall the resting place of the Almighty, the King of Peace (see Introduction), in the Meeting Tent and the holy ark, surrounded by six hundred thousand males of military age.

<sup>40</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife sees King Solomon, her husband, surrounded by his well-trained and well-armed royal guard.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recall the great scholars armed with Torah knowledge and the priests in the Mishkan, who were experts in the divine service. They all labored to preserve the Torah for posterity even in the darkest times.

<sup>41</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife admires King Solomon’s canopy, which is made from cedars from Lebanon, the finest woods.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recall the canopy of the Mishkan that

10. He made its pillars of silver,  
its upholstery of gold,  
its riding cushion of purple wool,  
its interior inlaid with love  
from the daughters of Jerusalem.<sup>42</sup>

11. Go forth and gaze, O daughters of Zion,  
upon King Solomon wearing the crown  
with which his mother crowned him  
on the day of his betrothal,  
the day when his heart rejoiced.<sup>43</sup>

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was established in Shiloh. It was like a crown to honor the Divine presence.

<sup>42</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife describes the silver pillars that support the canopy and the rich materials of its upholstery and cushions made with love by the daughters of Jerusalem.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recall the golden cover of the holy ark and the rich fabrics of the curtain behind which it stood, produced by the loving labors of people who feared the Almighty and were loyal to Him.

<sup>43</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife laments her estrangement from her husband. She calls on the daughters of Zion to come out and look at the crown that King Solomon's mother made for him on the day he married his bride, the day of his greatest joy.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people recall the Meeting Tent, the multi-colored crown we made for the Almighty. The Midrash wonders why we are compared to the Almighty's mother, so to speak. The Midrash answers with an analogy. A king had an only daughter whom he loved very much. At first, he expressed his love by calling her "my daughter." But he found the expression inadequate, so he called her "my sister." Still, he was not satisfied, until he called her "my mother." Of course, he did not relate to his daughter as his sister or as his mother. He was also not saying that the love for a sister is greater than the love for a child; it is not. Rather, he was seeking an expression of boundless love. The love for a child is bounded by the parental authority. The love for a sibling is free of that boundary, but it is still bound by equivalence. The love for

## Chapter 4

*[The king speaks:]*

1. Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved,  
    behold, you are beautiful,  
    your features are like doves,  
    your beribboned hair like a flock of goats  
    plucked from Mount Gile'ad.<sup>44</sup>
2. Your teeth are like an orderly flock  
    come up from the washing place,  
    all of them perfectly matched,  
    not a faulty one among them.<sup>45</sup>

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a mother, however, is without boundaries or reservations. If that type of love is directed toward a child, it is the ultimate love. The Almighty's love for us is without boundaries or reservations.

<sup>44</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king lauds his wife's physical appearance. He compares her features to beautiful doves. Her hair, behind the ribbons that keep it in place, is lustrous like a flock of white goats descending from Mount Gile'ad seen from afar.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty lauds the Jewish people their offerings, which He finds pleasing. He compares us to dove, which is ever loyal to its mate. Furthermore, a dove does not thrash about when it is brought the slaughterhouse. It accepts its fate with grace. Similarly, we accepted the weight of Torah observance without complaint.

<sup>45</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king continues to laud his wife's physical features. Her teeth are white, flawless and perfectly even.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty lauds the Jewish warriors who never take what is not coming to them. Moses sent twelve thousand warriors to wage war against Midian. They brought back all the booty and gave it to Moses and Aharon, keeping nothing at all for themselves.

3. Your lips are like crimson threads,  
your conversation is delightful,  
your cheeks are like pomegranate wedges  
within your beribboned hair.<sup>46</sup>
4. Your neck is like the Tower of David,  
constructed for public display,  
a thousand are the shields from it suspended,  
all the quivers of the mighty warriors.<sup>47</sup>
5. Your two breasts are like  
two young deer, twin gazelles,  
guiding their flock among the roses.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king continues to laud his wife's physical features. He compares her round and ruddy cheeks to pomegranate wedges framed by her beribboned hair.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty praises the trustworthiness of the Jewish people. When Joshua sent spies to Jericho, Rachav helped them avoid capture. They promised to protect her and her family during the conquest. She marked her window with a crimson, and the conquerors honored the promise. The mention of a pomegranate reminds us that even the basest among us is filled with mitzvot like the pomegranate is filled with pips.

<sup>47</sup> **THE MEANING:** The King praises his wife for her regal bearing, her neck long and erect like the Tower of David, which is bedecked with the shields and quivers of warriors.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty reminds the Jewish people of the much-admired structure of the Office of the Sanhedrin in the Fortress of Zion from which were issued Torah rulings that would stand for a thousand generations. The arrows in the quivers symbolize the numerous disciples.

<sup>48</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king continues to laud his wife's physical features.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty reminds the Jewish people of Moses and Aharon, who suckled us with Torah teachings. They were like twins, equal in their dependence upon each other.

6. When the day blows hot  
and the shadows are dispersed,  
I will go off to the mountain of myrrh,  
and to the hill of frankincense.<sup>49</sup>
7. You are entirely beautiful, my beloved,  
you are without blemish.<sup>50</sup>
8. You are with me from Lebanon, O bride,

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**OTHERWISE:** The twins represent the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, the five commandments on the second tablet mirroring the five on the first. The first commandment on the first is belief in the Almighty. The first on the second tablet is not to commit murder. Since every person is created in the image of the Lord, the destruction of a human being diminishes, so to speak, the divine image. The second commandment on the first tablet forbids the infidelity of serving other gods. The second of the second tablet forbids the infidelity of adultery. The third commandment on the first tablet forbids swearing falsely. The third of the second tablet forbids theft, which is an outgrowth of dishonesty. The fourth commandment on the first tablet is the observance of the Sabbath, which bears witness to creation. The fourth of the second tablet forbids false testimony, the category to which the desecration of the Sabbath belongs. The fifth commandment on the first tablet is to honor parents. The fifth of the second tablet forbids the desire of what belongs to others. A person who desires what others have will likely have children who seek out others to honor and disdain their own parents.

<sup>49</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king assures his wife that he will come for her when the day grows hot, because she is dear to him.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty tells the Jewish people that when Chophni and Pinchas, the sons of Eli, acted with then heat of sinfulness in the Tabernacle at Shiloh, He removed Himself to the Holy Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem.

<sup>50</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king praises his wife's beauty.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty tells the Jewish people that when we bring our offerings in the Temple on Mount Moriah, they will all be accepted.

come with me from Lebanon,  
gaze from the peak of Amanah,  
from the peak of Snir, from Hermon,  
from the lairs of lions,  
from the mountains of leopards.<sup>51</sup>

9. You won my heart, my sister, my bride,  
you won my heart with one of your eyes,  
with one bead of your necklace.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king assures his wife that he will bring her back from Lebanon, and she will gaze upon her erstwhile home from the majestic peaks of Mount Amanah, from Mount Hermon, which is Mount Snir (see Deuteronomy 3:9).

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty assures the Jewish people that He will be with us continuously when we are exiled from Jerusalem, which is also called Lebanon, that when we ultimately return it will be the end of one continuous journey, accompanied by the Almighty, that began in Jerusalem and ended there. He assures us that when we gaze upon the ingathering of the exiles we will perceive that we earned our salvation result by our faith, *emunah*, from the earliest times when we followed the Almighty through the desert and encamped in the Hermon-Snir mountain range in the land of Og and Sichon, the Amorite kings.

**OTHERWISE:** Amanah is actually the name of a mountain in the north of Israel, otherwise known as Turei Amnon. When the exiles return to the mountainous north of Israel and gaze upon the land of Israel, they will exult and sing praises to the Almighty.

<sup>52</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king tells his wife that she could have won his heart with any one of her many virtues. How much greater is his love when she has so many virtues.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty tells the Jewish people that He would loves us for even one of our virtues and for even one of all the mitzvos we perform, which are like beads, *anak*, on a necklace.

10. How beautiful is your tenderness,  
my sister, my bride,  
how much more pleasing is your tenderness  
than wine, than the fragrance of your oils,  
than all manner of spice.<sup>53</sup>
11. Your lips drip sweet droplets, O bride,  
honey and milk are under your tongue,  
and the fragrance of your garments  
is like the fragrance of Lebanon.<sup>54</sup>
12. A fortified garden is my sister, my bride,  
a fortified fountain, a sealed wellspring.<sup>55</sup>

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**OTHERWISE:** The single bead of our necklace does not refer to the mitzvos we perform but to the patriarch Abraham, who was a towering giant, *anak*, of his time.

<sup>53</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king praises his wife's loving attentions. He finds them more pleasant than fine wine and fragrances.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty tells the Jewish people that all the places where we expressed our devotion to him –the Mishkan in Gilgal, Shiloh, Nov and Gibeon and the permanent Temple in Jerusalem –are beautiful to Him. Our good reputation, symbolized by fragrant oils, is especially pleasing to Him.

<sup>54</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king praises his wife's pleasant conversation and the fragrance of her garments.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty praises the Jewish people for our insightful study of the Torah and for our observance of the mitzvos. He singles out the mitzvos relating to garments, such as affixing *tzitzis* to the corners of a four-cornered garment, the priests wearing the priestly garments and the prohibition against wearing *shaatnez* blends.

<sup>55</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king praises his wife's chastity and modesty. The word *gan* means a garden. The word *gal* means either a fountain or a gate. If it means a fountain, then the end of the verse is repetitive for poetic purposes, as *Metzudas David* explains



13. Even your arid lands  
are a pomegranate orchard  
with succulent fruits,  
henna with spikenard plants,
14. spikenard and saffron,  
calamus and cinnamon,  
and all frankincense wood,  
myrrh and aloes,  
and all the choicest spices.<sup>56</sup>
15. A wellspring of gardens,  
a well of fresh waters,  
crystal streams from Lebanon.<sup>57</sup>
16. Awake, north wind, come, south wind,  
blow on my garden, let its spices flow,

*[The wife speaks:]*

let my beloved come into his garden

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**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty praises the chastity and modesty of Jewish women.

<sup>56</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king praises his wife that even her inferior virtues are extraordinary.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty praises the Jewish people that even the weakest among us are as replete with good deeds, as the pomegranate is replete with succulent seeds, that their behavior is redolent with virtue, as the redolent aroma of the choicest spices.

<sup>57</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king praises his wife that even her dry lands are effervescent with wellsprings and crystal mountain streams unadulterated by mud.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty praises the Jewish women for immersing themselves when they become ritually impure.

let him eat its succulent fruits.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king calls on the north wind and the south wind to carry the wonderful fragrances of his wife's garden to distant places. The wife responds by inviting the king to come to her garden and enjoy its wonderful fruits.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty looks forward to the day when the winds of redemption will gather in the Jewish people from the different points of the exile and bring them all to Jerusalem just as the people came together on the festivals during the time of the Holy Temple. The Jewish people respond that if only the Almighty would come among us we would lack for nothing.

## Chapter 5

*[The king speaks:]*

1. I came into my garden, my sister, my bride,  
I harvested my myrrh and spices,  
I ate my honeycomb with my honey,  
I drank my wine with my milk,  
eat, good friends,  
drink until you are mellow, comrades.<sup>59</sup>

*[The wife speaks:]*

2. I am asleep, but my heart is awake,<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king recalls the joys of his marriage. His life was filled with the pleasures of myrrh and other spices. He enjoyed the honey so much that he even ate the honeycomb. His wine was sweeter and purer than milk. His mood was expansive, sharing his good fortune with his friends.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty came to the Tabernacle during its dedication ceremony ready to enfold the Jewish people in His benevolent and loving embrace. Although incense offerings were restricted to the regular service in the inner sanctum, on this occasion, the Almighty accepted voluntary incense offerings from the princes of the tribes; out of His great love for the Jewish people, He accepted the honeycomb along with the honey. He also accepted the princes' voluntary offerings of sacrifices ordinarily restricted to the regular service, and He welcomed the sweet, limpid wine of the libations. He invited Aaron and his sons to eat some of the sacrificial meat and the rest of the Jewish people to eat the meat of their peace offerings.

<sup>60</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife laments that, lulled by the comforts of her life, she neglected her obligations to her husband, but her sweetheart did not neglect her.

**THE METAPHOR:** Lulled by the peace and security during the First Temple Era, the Jewish people turned inward. We became absorbed in our own lives and neglected to serve the Almighty, but He did not neglect us. He still protected and provided for us.

I hear my beloved knocking,  
“Open for me, my sister, [*he says:*]  
my beloved, my dove, my perfect one,  
for my head is drenched with dewdrops,  
my locks with the hard rains of the night.”<sup>61</sup>

3. But I’d already taken off my coat,  
how could I put it on again?  
I’d already washed my feet,  
how could I soil them again?<sup>62</sup>

4. Then my beloved reached his hand  
through the aperture,  
and my innards longed for him.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife senses that the king is reaching out to her, like man who knocks on his beloved’s door in the rainy night, showing his love by his disregard for the dampness of his head. Let us repair our marriage, she hears him say, before your indifference cause me to go away.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people sense that the Almighty wants a reconciliation. He comes with the merit of Abraham whose deeds were as pleasing as the morning dew. He brings the offer of blessings and rewards, which are gentle as the dew, and also warnings about the hard rains of justice.

<sup>62</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife hesitates to open the door for her husband the king. She has already retired for the night. She has removed her daytime clothing and washed her feet. Should she get up and get dressed again? Should she step on the unwashed floor and soil her feet?

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people hesitate to return to the Almighty. We have already learned other modes of living from the neighboring nations., and we have become accustomed to them.

<sup>63</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife sees the king reach his hand through the aperture of the door, and she is filled with longing for him.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty shows the Jewish people His hand that will deliver retribution centuries hence in the time of King Achaz, the king of Judah. Pekach ben Remaliah, king of the northern kingdom of Israel, and Rezin, the

5. I rose to open for my beloved,  
my hand dripping with myrrh,  
my fingers spreading myrrh

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king of Aram, invaded the kingdom of Judah and slaughtered many thousands. But then King Hezekiah, the son of Achaz, was inspired to return wholeheartedly, along with his entire generation, to the Almighty. The level of learning of that generation was the most outstanding in Jewish history; ignorance of Torah was non-existent.

After King Hezekiah, the Jewish people again went through a period of spiritual decline under the wicked kings Menasheh and Amon, and we again suffered the hand of divine retribution. But then King Josiah led an unprecedented period of repentance and revival, and we were once again reunited with the Almighty.

In the plain meaning of the verse, the sight of her husband's physical hand reaching through the aperture inspires in her feelings of love and longing. In the metaphorical interpretation of the verse, the Jewish people see the divine hand in retribution, and they are inspired to repent. How do these two hands correspond to each other? How the metaphorical hand was a threatening fist of vengeance, would the husband's angry fist have inspired love in his wife's heart? If, on the other hand, the wife saw a gesture of love, how would that represent retribution in the metaphorical sense?

Perhaps the hand perceived by the wife was extended in a gesture of disappointment. When the wife saw that she had disappointed her beloved husband, she was shaken from her lethargy, and the dormant love in her heart was awakened. Similarly, when the Jewish people saw that the Almighty was disappointed with us to the point that He would withdraw His protection from us and leave us at the mercy of our enemies, we were shaken from our national lethargy. Not only did it dawn on us that we would face our enemies without divine protection, we also the depth of our estrangement from the Almighty. Our dormant love for Him was awakened, and we repented.

Until this point, King Solomon makes metaphorical reference to events in the past, the patriarchs, Moses and Aaron the Tent of Meeting and so forth. In this verse, his metaphorical reference is to events prophetically perceived.

over the handles of the lock.<sup>64</sup>

6. I opened up for my beloved,  
but my beloved had vanished, he was gone,  
mortified by his exasperation,  
I went out to seek him, but I could not find him,  
I called out, but he did not respond to me.<sup>65</sup>
7. They found me, the guards that patrol the city,  
they struck me, they wounded me,

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<sup>64</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife rises from her bed and prepares to invite her husband. With excitement and eagerness in her heart, she perfumes herself to please him.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people have an awakening. We remove the stench of our transgressions and replace it with the perfume of devotion.

<sup>65</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife opens the door for her husband, but he is not there. His exasperated words reverberate in her mind, and she fears that he has left her. She runs into the street to seek him, but he is nowhere to be found. She calls out to him, but there is only silence.

**THE METAPHOR:** Even after the Jewish people repent and seek reconciliation with the Almighty, we cannot escape the divinely decreed retribution. King Hezekiah leads a movement of sincere repentance and a remarkable renaissance of Torah study, and yet, the prophet Isaiah tells him that “days are coming when your household will be led off to exile.” King Josiah inspires a [period of unprecedented repentance, and yet, the prophetess Chuldah tells him that the Almighty will “bring calamity upon this place and its inhabitants.”

The prophet Jeremiah would indeed prophesy during the reign of King Jehoiakim, “Return to Me, and I will return to you.” This prophecy was not to be fulfilled fully, however, until we returned from exile in Babylon. Until then, it would only help to mitigate the rigors of the exile. It was too late. The Almighty had turned away. He was, so to speak, not to be found; his decree was irrevocable. But once the punishment was complete, our society would be reestablished in our own land without the threat of destruction.

they took my shawl from me,  
the guardians of the walls.<sup>66</sup>

8. I forswear you, daughters of Jerusalem,  
what to tell my beloved should you find him,  
tell him that I am lovesick.<sup>67</sup>

*[Others speak:]*

9. How is your beloved above all others,  
O most beautiful among the women?  
how is your beloved so above all others  
that you have thus forsworn us?<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife encounters the patrols that guard against thieves in the night. They wound her with their weapons and confiscate her shawl. This is a metaphor within a metaphor. The estranged wife, who is a metaphor for the Jewish people, expresses her yearning for her husband and her sense of loss by conjuring up the image of a woman mistreated by the night patrols.

**THE METAPHOR:** The guards that patrol the city represent Nebuchadnezzar and his armies who were, unbeknownst to themselves, the agents of divine retribution. They stripped away our Holy Temple. Even the archangels, who are called guardians of the walls (Isaiah 62:6), participated in its destruction.

<sup>67</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife forswears the daughters of Jerusalem, should they meet the king, to tell him that she is lovesick and heartbroken.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people forswear Nebuchadnezzar and his nation, who will be called to testify about us on the final Day of Judgment, to speak about the heroic faith of Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah who were thrown into a furnace, Daniel who was thrown into a lions' den and the people of Persia during the time of Haman.

<sup>68</sup> **THE MEANING:** The women ask in what way the king excels over all others.

**THE METAPHOR:** The gentile nations want to know how the God of Israel is so much greater than their own gods? Why are we willing to lay down our lives for Him? Why do we yearn so much for His love?

*[The wife speaks:]*

10. My beloved is alabaster and rosy,  
outstanding among the multitudes.<sup>69</sup>
11. His head is of the purest gold,  
his thick locks are raven black ringlets.<sup>70</sup>
12. His eyes are like doves  
on streams of water,  
bathed in milk, finely set.<sup>71</sup>
13. His cheeks are as a bed of spices  
lush with fragrant herbs,  
his lips are roses dripping

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<sup>69</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife describes her husband as fair-skinned with a ruddy complexion. He leads of army of great multitudes.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people declare that the Almighty can assume a white aspect or a red aspect. At Mount Sinai and in the time of Daniel, the prophetic images representing the Almighty as a Lawgiver were in white, symbolizing that He cleanses our sins. But He is also represented by the Prophet Isaiah in red garments, symbolizing that He will punish His enemies.

<sup>70</sup> **THE MEANING:** His hair shines like a golden crown. His handsome masculine looks are enhanced by his raven black locks.

**THE METAPHOR:** The first words He spoke at Mount Sinai, “I am God your Lord,” were like a shining golden crown that established His kingship over the Jewish people. Only then did He give us the voluminous laws of the Torah, written in black fire upon white fire.

<sup>71</sup> **THE MEANING:** His eyes are beautiful as those of a dove set in a milky white sclera, not too deep, not too shallow.

**THE METAPHOR:** Just as a dove always keeps its eyes on its nest, so does the Almighty look vigilantly at the synagogues and study halls where the Torah, which is compared to water, can be found. When His eyes scrutinize the entire world, the good and the bad, the judgments He issues are pure and clear like the whitest milk. The righteous are vindicated, and the wicked are condemned.



with of flowing myrrh.<sup>72</sup>

14. His arms are golden rods

bursting with beryl stones,

his middle is solid ivory,

inlaid with sapphires.<sup>73</sup>

15. His thighs are marble pillars

anchored in sockets of pure gold,

his appearance is like Lebanon,

distinguished as the cedars.<sup>74</sup>

16. His palate is sweetness,

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<sup>72</sup> **THE MEANING:** The skin of his cheeks is fragrant. His lips are lush.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty gave the Jewish people the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai in a compassionate and gracious manner, reminiscent of a smiling face. He also gave us laws for the various fragrant offerings in the Tent of Meeting that resulted brought us forgiveness and atonement.

<sup>73</sup> **THE MEANING:** His arms are like jewel-studded gold, his body like ivory.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty gave us the Tablets, which He formed with His own Hands, so to speak. The Tablets brought us the holy Torah, more precious than gold, in the form of the Ten Commandments, which allude to all six hundred and thirteen commandments. The middle part of the Torah, the Book of Vayikra, is full of the intricate laws of the sacrificial service, presented in a form as ivory.

<sup>74</sup> **THE MEANING:** His thighs are marble pillars on golden bases. He is as outstanding in appearance among other men as the cedars of Lebanon are the most beautiful among the trees.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Torah is like marble columns sitting in a solid base and crowned with decorative capitals. There is much to be derived and learned from the placement of the topics. Those who study them intently are rewarded by seeing them blossom before their eyes like flowers and leaves in the forests of Lebanon.

and he is entirely delightful,  
this is my beloved, this is my beloved,  
O daughters of Jerusalem.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> **THE MEANING:** He speaks sweet words, the wife concludes. He is a delight to hear. Such is her beloved, she tells the daughters of Jerusalem.

**THE METAPHOR:** The words of the Torah are sweet. They are concerned for our welfare. Moreover, if the sinner repents sincerely, his transgressions are transformed in to merits. What can be sweeter than that?

## Chapter 6

*[Others speak:]*

1. Where has your beloved gone,  
O most beautiful among the women?  
to where has your beloved turned?  
let us seek him with you.<sup>76</sup>

*[The wife speaks:]*

2. My beloved went down into his garden,  
to the beds of spices,  
to guide his flock in the gardens,  
and to gather roses.<sup>77</sup>
3. I am devoted to my beloved,

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<sup>76</sup> **THE MEANING:** Other women torment the wife with their sarcastic questions. Where has your beloved gone? they ask her. If he loves you, why did he abandon you? We want to help you find him.

**THE METAPHOR:** The other nations torment the Jewish people. Why did the Almighty abandon you and leave you like a bereft widow? And now that he has brought you back from your exile to rebuild His Temple, why should you alone be privileged to do this? Why shouldn't we share in the privilege? Their intent, however, is not to be helpful but to sabotage the construction enterprise from within.

<sup>77</sup> **THE MEANING:** My beloved went to his spice-scented garden, the wife responds, to gather the sheep that have strayed and to gather beautiful roses for me.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty has brought the Jewish people back to rebuild His Temple, but not all of us have returned. Some still remain in the faraway lands, and the Almighty has gone to rest His spirit on those who frequent the synagogues and study halls, which are like beds of spices even in those distant places. He cherishes the words of Torah that pass among them like roses from a garden.

and my beloved is devoted to me, the one  
that guides his flock among the roses.<sup>78</sup>

*[The king speaks:]*

4. You are as beautiful, my beloved,  
as Tirtzah, as lovely as Jerusalem,  
impressive as a legion with flying colors.<sup>79</sup>
5. Turn your eyes away from me,  
for they have bedazzled me,  
your hair is like a flock of goats  
shorn away from Mount Gilead.<sup>80</sup>
6. Your teeth are like a flock of ewes

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<sup>78</sup> **THE MEANING:** I am devoted to my husband, says the wife, and he is devoted to me. He shepherds his flock in pleasant pastures.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people and the Almighty are devoted to each other. The relationship is exclusive. The other nations are not allowed to participate in the construction of the Temple. Only we are allowed into His rose garden.

<sup>79</sup> **THE MEANING:** You are comely as the beautiful city of Tirtzah, says the husband, lovely as Jerusalem, impressive as a colorful legion.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty praises the Jewish people when they seek atonement and manifest the pristine beauty of the earlier times in Jerusalem. He will send legions of angels to prevent their enemies from interfering with the work of reconstruction.

<sup>80</sup> **THE MEANING:** Do not gaze upon me, says the king, in the way that once bedazzled me, for I will find it irresistible. Every strand of your hair is lovely.

**THE METAPHOR:** Although the Almighty seeks reconciliation with the Jewish people, the old relationship will not be fully recovered. The holy ark and the cherubim were present in the First Temple, a symbol of His exceeding love, but since the Jewish people betrayed Him, these holy items would not be present in the Second Temple. Nonetheless, although the people as a whole are not deserving, the humble among them are deserving of praise.

coming up from the washing place,  
all of them perfectly matched,  
not a faulty one among them.<sup>81</sup>

7. Your brow is like a pomegranate portion  
behind your veil.

8. Among the sixty queens, eighty concubines  
and maidens without number,<sup>82</sup>

9. she is one of a kind,  
my dove, my perfect one,  
she is the only child of her mother,  
the brightest of the one that bore her,  
women have seen her and praised her,

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<sup>81</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king praises his wife's perfect white teeth that are displayed whenever she smiles.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people are compared to ewes whose parts are all designated for divine service. Their wool is used in the manufacture of *techeileth*, the blue-dyed cloth used for the priestly garments. Their flesh is sacrificed on the altar. Their horns become *shofars*. Flutes made from their shins, violin strings made from their entrails and drums made from their hides all contribute to the music that accompanies the divine service. Evildoers, on the other hand, are comparable to dogs who contribute nothing to holiness.

<sup>82</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king declares that his wife stands out among all the gracious queen, concubines and maidens.

**THE METAPHOR:** Abraham and his descendants during the early generations number sixty. His descendants through Keturah number sixteen, through Yishmael thirteen, through Isaac three, through Jacob twelve and through Esau sixteen, for a total of sixty. The descendants of Noah prior to the time of Abraham number eighty, and the rest of the peoples are too numerous to count. The Jewish people stand out among them all.

queens and concubines have acclaimed her.<sup>83</sup>

10. “Who is this looking like the morning star,  
beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun,  
impressive as a legion with flying colors?”<sup>84</sup>

*[The king continues:]*

11. I went down to the walnut garden  
to inspect the plants at the riverside,  
to see if the vines have blossomed,  
if the pomegranates have emerged.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> **THE MEANING:** She is one of a kind, beautiful and perfect. She is singled out among her mother’s children, among the children of the one who gave birth. All women sing her praises.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people are singled out among all the nations. They alone are compared to a dove which is always loyal to her mate. When their scholars gather in the study halls and argue over the interpretation of the Torah, they all share the common goal of understanding its true meaning. When Jacob considered his many children toward the end of his life, he saw that they were all virtuous. The other nations recognize the greatness of the Jewish people and sing their praises.

<sup>84</sup> **THE MEANING:** They say, “Who is this woman who illuminates her surroundings like the stars and planets in the heavens?”

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people, when they return to Jerusalem and build the Second Temple, will illuminate the world only gradually. After centuries as a colony of the Persian Empire and then of the Greek Empire, they will establish an independent kingdom after the Hasmonaean revolt.

<sup>85</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king goes down to his walnut garden to see if its fruits have emerged.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty will return to the Second Temple, which is His walnut garden. The walnut appears to be hard as wood from the outside, but when it is cracked open, it full of chunks of food. In the same way, the Jewish people conceal their virtues under a cloak of humility.

*[The wife speaks:]*

12. O but I did not realize it,  
and my spirit rendered me  
a chariot for arrogant people.<sup>86</sup>

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He will examine the people to see if our actions are moist and desirable as the flowers and the plants that grow by the riverside, if we are respectful to their Torah scholars and rabbis who are comparable to grapevines, if we are as full of Torah and mitzvos as a pomegranate is full of succulent kernels.

<sup>86</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife acknowledges her failures. Without realizing what she was doing, she put herself in the hands of people who led her astray.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people lament that they were not vigilant enough to avoid the sins that brought us down from our exalted position of honor and greatness. We allowed ourselves to fall victim to unwarranted hatred and discord. The members of the Hasmonean royal family, such as Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, fought with each other relentlessly. In the end, one of them invited the Romans into Israel to assist him, and that was the end of the independent Jewish kingdom.

## Chapter 7

*[Others speak:]*

1. Turn away, turn away, O true one,  
turn, turn, we will empower you.

*[The wife speaks:]*

Could you empower the true one  
as did the encampment dances?<sup>87</sup>

*[Others speak:]*

2. How beautiful are your steps in sandals,  
O noble daughter, the curves of your thighs  
like golden bracelets worked by a craftsman.<sup>88</sup>
3. Your navel is like a marble bowl  
never lacking in beverages,  
your belly like a mound of wheat

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<sup>87</sup> **THE MEANING:** Other women advise the wife to abandon her quest for reconciliation with her husband. They offer to give her all the support she needs, but she is unconvinced. What can they offer her that would compare to the joyous time when she danced in her husband's domain?

**THE METAPHOR:** The gentile nations want to lure the Jewish people away from their quest for reconciliation with the Almighty. They offer us privilege and status, but we will not be deterred. Nothing can replace the feeling of belonging to Him we felt from the beginning when danced in the encampments in the wilderness under the tribal banners.

<sup>88</sup> **THE MEANING:** The other women continue their attempts to draw her to them with lavish praises of how beautiful she was before her estrangement.

**THE METAPHOR:** The beauty of the Jewish people is manifest in our sandals, meaning when we made our thrice yearly pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and the Almighty made golden pipes for the libations on the altar in the Temple.



amid a hedge of roses.<sup>89</sup>

4. Your two breasts are like  
two young bucks, twins of a gazelle.<sup>90</sup>
5. Your neck is like an ivory tower,  
your eyes like the pools of Cheshbon  
near the gates of Bas Rabim,  
your face like the tower of Lebanon  
looking out over Damascus.<sup>91</sup>
6. Your head sits on you like Carmel,  
your braids are like purple thread,  
a king bound in tresses.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> **THE MEANING:** The other women continue to praise her physical beauty.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Chamber of Hewn Stones that adjoined the Temple was the seat of the Sanhedrin. It was considered the navel of the earth because it was the center point of Torah jurisprudence; it was like a mound of wheat, something that everyone needs. A simple hedge of roses was sufficient to prevent trespass and theft.

<sup>90</sup> **THE MEANING:** The other women continue to praise her physical beauty.

**THE METAPHOR:** These are a reference to the two Tablets of the Commandments or to the Jewish king and the High Priest.

<sup>91</sup> **THE MEANING:** The other women continue to praise her physical beauty.

**THE METAPHOR:** The ivory tower is a reference to the Holy Temple and its altar and to the Chamber of Hewn Stone that adjoined it. The eyes refer to the numerous Jerusalem scholars who make important legal calculations. The face refers to Solomon's palace high in the mountains of Lebanon from which there was a panoramic view of Damascus.

<sup>92</sup> **THE MEANING:** The other women continue to praise her physical beauty.

**THE METAPHOR:** The head refers to the phylacteries worn by the Jewish people. The braids refer to the long hair of those who have taken the Nairutin vow. The Almighty is tied to the Jewish people with bonds of love, because we rush to serve Him.

7. How beautiful, how pleasing you are  
for an enjoyable love.<sup>93</sup>
8. This stature of yours is like a date palm,  
your breasts like clusters of grapes.<sup>94</sup>

*[The king speaks:]*

9. I said I would climb up the date palm,  
I would grab on to its branches,  
let your breasts be as clusters of the vine,  
the scent of your face like apples.<sup>95</sup>
10. Let your palate be like fine wine  
that flows directly to my truly beloved,

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<sup>93</sup> **THE MEANING:** The other women have concluded their praises of her individual physical features, and now they praise the totality of her beauty.

**THE METAPHOR:** The totality of the Jewish people – the Temple, the judicial chambers, the scholars, the devotion of the people to the Almighty – is a pleasing portrait of beauty.

<sup>94</sup> **THE MEANING:** The other women add a final comment in praise of her physical beauty.

**THE METAPHOR:** The stature of the Jewish people was manifest in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, the great Babylonian conqueror. All the other conquered people bowed down to his idols, but we stood tall as a palm tree, refusing to be disloyal to the Almighty. Daniel, Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah, who were ready to die for the honor of God, were like breasts that provided the milk of fearlessness to the rest of the Jewish people.

<sup>95</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king speaks to the people who have seen his estranged wife and expresses his yearning for her.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty speaks to the hosts of Heaven with great pride in the Jewish people who sanctify His name in the lower world. He encourages the faithful leaders and scholars to refute the arguments and accusations of the gentile nations for the benefit of the younger generation.

that sets sleeping lips amurmur.<sup>96</sup>

*[The wife speaks:]*

11. I am devoted to my beloved,  
and his yearning is for me.<sup>97</sup>
12. Come, my beloved,  
let us go out to the fields,  
let us take lodgings in the villages.<sup>98</sup>
13. Let us go early to the vineyards,  
let us see if the vines have blossomed,  
if the new grapes have matured,  
if the pomegranates have emerged.

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<sup>96</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king encourages the people to convey his love to his estranged wife.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty cautions the leaders and scholars to be sure that their responses to the gentiles are as convincing as fine wine. He also assures the Jewish people that the flow of His sincere commitment to us is uninterrupted and that even the Patriarchs in their places of interment will rejoice and express their gratitude.

<sup>97</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife expresses her loyalty to her husband and her confidence in his abiding loyalty to her.

**THE METAPHOR:** Even when we are banished from our homeland, the Jewish people express our devotion to the Almighty and our conviction that He has not abandoned us.

<sup>98</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife invites her husband to reunite with her. She asks him to join her in the quiet fields and to seek lodging in peaceful villages.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people ask the Almighty not view us as city dwellers who are prone to theft and immorality but rather as rural people who work hard just to earn enough to live modestly and learn Torah. We ask Him to contrast us with the gentile nations who enjoy His blessings yet turn their backs on Him.

there I will express my love to you.<sup>99</sup>

14. The figs released their fragrance,  
at our door are all succulent things,  
the new and also the old,  
my beloved, I've reserved it for you.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife asks her husband to join her in the vineyard, and together, they will inspect the budding vines. This will bring them closer to each other, and in this way, she will express her love for him.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty declares that He will encounter the Jewish people in their synagogues and study halls. We will observe the progress of the people. Have we blossomed to the point that we have learned the Written Torah? Have we matured to the point that we have learned the Mishnah? Have we emerged as complete scholars by mastering the Talmud?

<sup>100</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife paints an idyllic picture of her encounter with her husband. She sees it as a sign of hope.

**THE METAPHOR:** There are multiple figs, some delicious, some inedible, representing those among the Jewish people who are faithful to God and those who rebel against Him.

## Chapter 8

*[The wife speaks:]*

1. If only you were like a brother to me,  
that suckled at my mother's breasts,  
I could meet you outside and kiss you,  
indeed, no one would scoff at me.<sup>101</sup>
2. I would lead you, bring you  
into my mother's house,  
so that you could teach me,  
I would give you to drink  
some spiced wine,  
some nectar of pomegranates.<sup>102</sup>
3. His left hand is under my head,  
his right hand embraces me.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife expresses her wistful hope that her husband would console her without recriminations, as would the brother of her childhood

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people hope the Almighty would console them, just as Joseph consoled his brothers after they meant to do him harm, because they were brothers after all. If only God would overlook our faults and console us without recriminations. If we would find His prophets speaking in His name, we would hug and kiss them, because as the object of Your love, we know that they would not scoff at us.

<sup>102</sup> **THE MEANING:** If only her husband would reconcile with her, the wife would bring him into the home of her youth and ask him to teach her the proper ways, and she would serve him sweet drinks.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people yearn to reunite with the Almighty in the rebuilt Holy Temple in Jerusalem. We would ask Him to teach us how to serve Him just as He taught us when we were in the wilderness and served Him in the Tent of Meeting. We would bring sweet libations to the altar.

<sup>103</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife yearns for the complete embrace of her husband.

4. I forswore you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
why provoke or dispute this love  
as long as it endures.<sup>104</sup>

*[The king speaks:]*

5. Who is this emerging from the wilderness,  
clinging to her beloved?

*[The wife speaks:]*

I aroused you under the apple tree,  
there your mother was in labor for you,  
there she labored and birthed you.<sup>105</sup>

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**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people yearn for the Almighty's complete embrace.

<sup>104</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife admonishes the gentile women not to attempt to undermine the love of her husband.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people address our gentile conquerors not to attempt to destroy our bond with the Almighty, because it is a futile endeavor. Even though we suffer in exile and lament our bitter lot, we know that He is with us. His constant support helps us survive.

<sup>105</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king sees his wife emerging from the wilderness of her separation, and he acknowledges that she is still devoted to her husband.

The wife responds with memories of nostalgic love.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty remarks on the greatness of the Jewish people who emerged from the wilderness laden with spiritual gifts, admired by the nations of the world, and now, even as they are in exile, they still profess their loyalty to God and cling to Him.

The Jewish people respond by reminding Him of the time we stood at Mount Sinai, which loomed over them like an apple tree. He affectionately called us his beloved mother, as we see earlier in 3:13, and we remind Him that we labored for Him with love.

6. Place me like a seal on your heart,  
like a seal on your forearm,  
for love is as powerful as death,  
jealousy is as harsh as the abyss,  
its flashes are like flashes of fire  
from the flame of God.<sup>106</sup>

*[The king speaks:]*

7. Multitudinous waters  
could not extinguish the love,  
rivers could not wash it away,  
if a man should give all the wealth  
of his household for love,  
they would surely scoff at him.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife begs her husband to acknowledge and always remember it as if it were a seal placed on his heart, a seal upon his forearm. The love she feels for him is so powerful that she would die for him. The flaming jealousy of other women to which she is subjected because of her love for him is as harsh as the abyss.

The Jewish people beg the Almighty to keep us close to His heart, so to speak. Our love is so strong that we are ready to lay down our lives for Him, to suffer the jealous attacks of the gentile nations, attacks that are as harsh as the fires of Gehinnom..

<sup>107</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king acknowledges the enduring love of his estranged wife. No violence can extinguish it. No inducements can get her to disavow her love for him.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty declares that the love of the Jewish people for Him cannot be extinguished by the multitude of gentile nations who attack them, nor can their kings and nobles deter us from our love for Him.

8. We have an adherent, she is small  
with breasts not fully developed,  
what shall we do for our adherent  
on the day she is assailed?<sup>108</sup>

9. If she should be like a metal wall,  
we will build upon her a silver turret,  
but if she should be like a door,  
we will make it of cedar wood.<sup>109</sup>

*[The wife speaks:]*

10. I am a wall, my breasts like towers,  
and thus I was in his eyes

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<sup>108</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king recognizes that his wife wants to adhere to him. He sees her as still being small and underdeveloped, and he wants to protect her from those who would do her harm.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty recognizes that the Jewish people want to adhere to Him and that they comport themselves among the gentile nations with modesty. The time for our redemption, however, has not quite come and He considers how to protect us from the rapacious nations that surround us.

<sup>109</sup> **THE MEANING:** If his wife decides to be loyal to him like a solid wall, the king declares, he will reward her with a silver crown. If, however, she chooses to be like a door that swings on its hinges whenever it is tapped, he will make that door of cedar wood that rots away and leaves her at the mercy of her detractors.

**THE METAPHOR:** If the Jewish people will be steadfast in our faith and our reverence for the Almighty, if we build an impregnable wall around ourselves, He will rebuild the holy city of Jerusalem and crown it with the Holy Temple. But if we are fickle like a door that swings on its hinges when pushed in any direction, He will deprive us of His protection.



like one that found serenity.<sup>110</sup>

11. Solomon had a vineyard  
in the populous plain,  
he gave the vineyard to keepers,  
each man would extract as its produce  
a thousand pieces of silver.<sup>111</sup>

*[The king speaks:]*

12. My vineyard is mine, it is before me,  
the thousand is for you, Solomon,  
and two hundred more  
for the guardians of the fruit.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife declares that she is indeed steadfast in her devotion for her beloved, and therefore, she deserves to be seen as a pristine bride in the tranquility of his home.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people declare that are indeed a faithful wall whose towers, our synagogues and study halls, suckle us with words of Torah. Therefore, we deserve to be returned to our pristine state in peace.

<sup>111</sup> **THE MEANING:** The wife portrays herself as the king's vineyard. She laments that she has fallen into the hands of those who exploit and torment her

**THE METAPHOR:** The Jewish people see ourselves as the Almighty's vineyard. He has allowed us to fall into the hands of others, such as the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans, and we lament that they have all mistreated and exploited us.

<sup>112</sup> **THE MEANING:** The king calls to task those who have exploited his wife. Even though we are estranged, he declares, she is still my wife. I am fully aware of all your illegitimate exploitation. The exploiters confess their transgression. The thousands we have stolen from your wife, they say, they all belong to you. We will pay back even more than we have stolen.

**THE METAPHOR:** The Almighty calls to judgment the gentile oppressors of the Jewish people. Everything you have taken from them, He declares, it is as if you have taken it from Me. The oppressors hang their heads in shame. We will

13. O, the one that dwells in the gardens,  
companions are listening for your voice,  
let me hear it.<sup>113</sup>

*[The wife speaks:]*

14. Hurry, my beloved, be like a gazelle  
or a young buck among the deer  
on mountains of spice.<sup>114</sup>

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return everything we have stolen, they say, and we will make additional payments to the Torah scholars, who are the guardians of Your vineyard.

<sup>113</sup> **THE MEANING:** My people are listening for your voice, the king calls out to his estranged wife. Let me hear it. I want to reconcile with you.

**THE METAPHOR:** You wander in the gardens of strangers, the Almighty calls out to the Jewish people He says, but you live in your synagogues and study halls. The ministering angels of Heaven come to listen to the sound of your voices, and then they sing praises to Me.

<sup>114</sup> **THE MEANING:** Come for me quickly, the wife responds. Come and bring me to your fragrant abode.

**THE METAPHOR:** Come quickly, the Jewish people respond, and redeem us from the nations among whom we are exiled. Let the Holy Presence rest once again upon the fragrant mountain, Mount Moriah, in the Holy Temple that will be rebuilt speedily in our time.