

The comparative-perspectivistic method

The comparative study of cultures, i.e. how each culture interprets the Bible and the history of Israel in their generality and in their details, considers the following four basic questions:

1 How was the Bible interpreted literally in each one of our cultures and how was its meaning, as expressed through symbols, parables, mysteries, and allegories, understood by the commentators?

2 To what degree did these commentaries reflect the ontology of their authors, and what is the implication of these commentaries in the larger religious, historical, and philosophical context, i.e. what characterizes these commentaries as prototypical expressions of a culture, and how did the commentators themselves view their works as contributing to the individuation of their culture?

3 How do the commentaries of one culture differ from those of other cultures in the eyes of one who surveys the Jewish historical landscape in all its breadth? In other words, as we look today at our history, to what extent do we find it characterized by continuity in our cultures, or by ruptures and breaks? In the final analysis – and this is our argument here – it is impossible for meanings to continue shining as brightly as “when they were given;” for the world of the interpreter intervenes to create a distance and to place the interpreted text in the historical perspective of its own time.

4 And finally, as we, members of the National-Israeli culture, attempt to find in the Biblical culture a foundation for our own culture, we cannot disregard the relevance that the interpretations advanced by previous cultures carry for us today; no real understanding is possible without an appreciation of self-understanding and its limitations. The critical and reflective research which is imbedded in historical perspectivism does not profess to have arrived at definite conclusions, only to attempt them, as far as possible. The new method is, for the time being, more of a mission and a charge. It is fascinating, for example, to compare commentaries from different cultures to the same Biblical work, for example, the Song of Songs. Let us consider the Talmudic commentary, Gersonides' *Philosophic Commentary on the Five Scrolls*, Moses Alshech's *Mystical Shoshanat ha-amakim*, and commentaries from the Enlightenment period down to our own day. This comparison will demonstrate how the new method applies to Biblical study in particular and to the study of differences between cultures in general.

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SONG OF SONGS – A PARADIGM OF CULTURAL CHANGE

Johann Gottfried Herder – at a crossroads of cultures

Commentaries on the Song of Songs furnish a most revealing illustration for the comparative approach to the study of Jewish cultures and their divergent conceptions of God, man, and the world. No other Biblical book so patently exemplifies each culture's unique interpretation of the spiritual and vital forces which fashioned the nation's character. In fact, the variety of commentaries of the Song of Songs should constitute not one, but two subjects for study, a subject within a subject. The first question we might consider is this: when viewed through the prism of their interpretations of the Song of Songs, how do the cultures of traditional faith as a whole compare with the last two secular cultures, i.e. the Emancipation and the National-Israeli cultures? Secondly, and no less importantly, what are the varieties of views on the Song of Songs within the cultures of traditional faith themselves? Our main interest in the following pages lies with the second topic, but let us begin with the first, which encompasses the entire framework.

One is hard pressed to find among all the books of the Bible a work whose interpretations better illustrate than the Song of Songs the fundamental differences between the cultures of faith and the last two secular cultures. Is the scroll a “holy of holies,” or is it a collection of popular love-songs? Is it a metaphor of God's relation with the Congregation of Israel, or are these songs erotic profanities, over which the Sages, in their dramatic style, lamented: “The Torah, dressed in a sack, stands before the Holy One, blessed be He, and says: Lord of the Universe, thy children have made me a fiddle on which frivolous persons play” (*San. 101a*).¹

The early Maskilim did not seek to comment on the Song of Songs. We may attribute this reticence to the embarrassment and doubt raised by the book's erotic nature. Even Herder's declaration that the Song was of divine inspiration in its content, but the handiwork of a great, albeit human, lover-poet, did not resolve their doubts. Herder is never mentioned by Mendels-

sohn in his treatise on the "subject of poetry and its nature in the holy books," contained in the *Bi'ur*'s² preface to the Song of Moses. Mendelssohn, who rightly considered himself the first Hebrew exponent of the formal aspects of Biblical poetry, "for [he had] not found in any of the commentaries of the Torah a statement that adequately explain[ed] the matter," failed to acknowledge that Herder had preceded him on this subject with more than an "adequate" treatment (in German, however).³ Let us briefly examine Herder's thoughts on Hebrew poetry in general, and on the Song of Songs in particular. For they represent a crossroads in European civilization, a point at which the modern secular cultures part from the cultures of traditional faith.

We know that Christian commentators, like their Jewish counterparts, viewed the Song of Songs as an allegorical dialogue. Jesus Christ was the lover, the church, his beloved and bride. Her two breasts were the Old and New Testaments. The "threescore valiant men" of Solomon (3.7) were the Fathers, from Adam to Jesus. Indeed the Song of Songs had frequently been commented upon in Christian theology as a book of sacred love, revealed in the Holy Spirit. This tradition was broken when Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) ventured an interpretation of the Holy Scriptures devoid of a Christian theological bias. He no longer saw references to Jesus in those famous verses from the Old Testament which had so often been taken out of context and stripped of their literal meaning. For Herder, the Song of Songs was strictly a collection of love-poems. No German theologian has ever matched Herder's appreciation for the unique artistry of the Bible.⁴

In 1778 Herder published his treatise on the Song of Songs entitled *Lieder der Liebe* ("Songs of Love"), followed in 1782-3 by his great book *Vom Geist der Hebräischen Poesie* ("On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry"). Since much has been written on these books, I shall devote our discussion here to one of his lesser known essays entitled *Über die Wirkung der Dichtkunst auf die Sitten der Völker in alten und neuen Zeiten* ("On the Influence of Poetry on the Morals of Nations in Ancient and Modern Times"), published in 1778 as a prize-winning entry in a competition.⁵ That essay summarizes the views of this extraordinary theologian, historian, thinker, and poet.

The Holy Scriptures, says Herder, were inspired by the Holy Spirit and there is no doubting their divine origin. They are God's revelation of Himself through the spirit of the Prophets and poets of Israel: "This people was poetic in its very origins. Indeed it was the divine blessing of poetry that set apart the seed of Shem, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and his sons."⁶ Moses was a poet, not only a lawgiver. The first grand impression that he imprinted on Israel's soul stemmed from the power of poetry - the Song at the Sea, which is the song of the exodus, a song that still stands like a rampart in the midst of the sea. Moses' last song (Deut. 32) is another mighty fortress, a poetic monument:

Where was there a lawgiver who desired more than Moses to wield a profound influence upon the morals of his people? Even Lycurgus pales beside him, and when he [Moses] attempts now to summarize in words his life's work, a song bursts forth . . . His whole heart and soul, his law, his life, the heart and morals of the nation, its destiny, joy, and tragedy, and all its history are encompassed in this magnificent song. It is to be an eternal monument to the law-giver, a song that will shape the nation's character and its heart for ever.⁷

King David too, the "lyre of Israel," worked "kingly deeds" by virtue of the poetry of his Psalms. These poems were a "crowning glory at the end of his life." His son Solomon has patently demonstrated how laws and good manners influence poetry and how poetry, in turn, implants these in the hearts of men. On the Song of Songs Herder wrote: "These Songs of Love are the most delicate and mysterious lilies of the dawn; no royal hand ever plucked their like in the vale of joys. His court was magnificent, full of poets and singers, lovers of the royal muse."⁸ Hebrew poetry was composed and sung in the Holy Spirit; it was "divine" in that it aimed at moral improvement and spiritual refinement and awakened the love of God. In all of these qualities the Song of Songs notably excelled.⁹

We have noted that Mendelssohn did not mention Herder in his own writings on the poetry of the Holy Scriptures, and that other Maskilim seem to have been reluctant to render an unequivocal opinion on the Song of Songs even after Herder's ground-breaking insights into the "divine" intent but "profane" form of the songs of love. They seem to have recognized that love-songs to the bride-the beloved need not resemble the "fiddling of the frivolous," and that they could indeed be holy. Yet with the sole exception of Naftali Hertz Wessely (or Hartwig Weisel, 1725-1805), who attempted an audacious excursion into Biblical poetry in an epic poem on the life of Moses, *Shirei tiferet* (influenced, apparently, by Herder and Klopstock), a long time would pass before a Hebrew Maskil expressed an opinion on the Song of Songs in Herder's new spirit. Solomon Loewisohn (1788-1821), historian, grammarian, and linguist, embraced Herder's approach, but with a difference: in his *Melitzat Yeshurun*,¹⁰ he ascribed to the Song a new plot, one that was to become a distinct hallmark of interpretations in the Emancipation culture. In Loewisohn's view, the Song of Songs was a collection of fourteen poems recounting the love of King Solomon for the Shulamite, a rustic maiden who did not return the King's love because her heart was given to a young shepherd. She was taken against her will to the King's court, but remained faithful to her swain. Finally, she fled the palace, and that is the meaning of the book's last verse: "Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like a roe" (8.14). This Maskil poet still attributed the Song of Songs to King Solomon, but the songs themselves were no longer an allegory.

Herder's views attained great popularity with later Hebrew Maskilim, because his approach opened up for the creators of the Emancipation

culture vast possibilities of new blendings of Torah with *derech ʿeret*, or of the holy and traditional with the secular and modern. His interpretation was not entirely novel; some German Biblical scholars had preceded him in these innovations, but none had grasped the implications of the new interpretation more fully, so that if he was not the sole originator of this view, he undoubtedly endowed it with unprecedented impetus and vigor. For both Jews and non-Jews of his generation Herder's method of interpretation facilitated the transition between cultures; for that reason he has merited our special attention in this study.

Later scholars who maintained that this small volume of poems was simply the love-song of a youth and a maiden, a work devoid of any distinct religious idea, have nonetheless asserted that the love it described was no ordinary passion; not only was it "as strong as death" (8.6), but also pure and radiant with sanctity. Simon Bernfeld declared that there simply was no place for such a work in any religious anthology, even if we enlarge the concept of religion to encompass doubts and misgivings about religious truths (as in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes). In Bernfeld's opinion, the Song of Songs is a "profane work that does not belong in the Holy Scriptures. The book owes its preservation and inclusion in the Holy Scriptures entirely to an accident, i.e. to its attribution to King Solomon."¹¹ But although Bernfeld does not share the opinion of earlier scholars on the divine nature of these poems, he explicitly agrees with Herder that they are holy in their "natural and simple truthfulness, in their delicacy. This is the pure love of two innocent souls . . . the words are so endearing in their beauty and natural innocence that they do not impress us as the expression of vulgar passion; the erotic is ennobled by the poetic naturalness."¹²

Similarly, and even more ardently, Aaron Kaminka wrote in the introduction to his commentary on the Song of Songs: "True, the book contains no explicit idea of holiness. From beginning to end it is an amatory dialogue that appears entirely profane. But this great and consuming love, depicted without inhibition, is enveloped by clouds of glory in which a revelation from a higher sphere, as it were, may be sensed." The name of God is not once mentioned in the book (if we exclude the last syllable of the word *shalhevetiah*, literally "flame of God," 8.6), yet God's presence pervades it throughout. Moreover, although the book makes no allusion to the nation, to its vision, and its life,

early Hebrew readers probably as far back as the Second Temple must have felt in the soft images that so lovingly cling to the mountains and hills of Judaea and Israel, in the poetic metaphors that embrace Lebanon and Carmel, Jerusalem and Tirezah, the Tower of David and the valiant men of Israel, a distinct awareness that it was not the individual soul that was here consumed with love, but the soul of the entire nation. They must have sensed that the song was merely a symbol and a vision, and that all its words were like burning embers on the altar of the Lord God of Hosts.¹³

An interpretation that sees in the Song of Songs an expression of the nation's love for its ancestral land clearly identifies its author as a member of the modern National-Israeli culture.

Let us proceed now with our second and most important topic of examination wherein we compare how the cultures of faith that preceded the Emancipation each related in its own way to this love-poem. This comparison seeks to strengthen the principal thesis about the multiplicity of cultures in our history.

The Talmudic interpretation of the Song of Songs

In order to educe allegorical and figurative insights from every verse, the Rabbis were wont to take certain liberties with the holy texts. Nonetheless, they were careful to insist that their interest lay with the plain, literal text. Rashi too pointed out in his introductory comments to the Song of Songs that, while each verse of the Torah could be interpreted in more than one way, a verse always retained its most simple meaning and could not be divorced from it. The Rabbis were particularly wary of allegorization, lest the arbitrariness and playfulness of allegory trifle with the Torah and the commandments. It is therefore all the more remarkable that of the entire Holy Writ, one book alone was not subject to this inhibition: from the very outset the Song of Songs was regarded as a purely symbolic text. This book would undoubtedly have been excluded from the canon had its meaning not been divorced from a literal reading as a secular love-poem. According to tradition, the book was pronounced admissible when the Rabbis of the Great Assembly finally alighted upon the allegorical device: the book was to be interpreted symbolically as an intimate dialogue between the Holy One and the Congregation of Israel.¹⁴

The Tanna'im still debated the nature of the book: was it truly holy (in their words, did it "defile the hands," or "render the hands unclean"),¹⁵ or was it profane? They were well aware that the Song of Songs had initially been found unfit for canonicity, as were other problematic works like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, until the men of the Great Assembly pronounced it a dialogue between God and the Congregation of Israel. The *mishnah Yadaim* (3.5) presents a debate among the Tanna'im which is pervaded with doubts and hesitations about the nature of the Song of Songs, but also contains Rabbi Akiba's ardent exclamations on this "holy of holies." Rabbi Akiba declared: "God forbid that it should be otherwise! No one in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs does not defile the hands. For all the world is not worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." And he was not content until he had elevated the Song of Songs to a level of importance rivaling that of the entire Torah. The following admiring

utterance is found in a later *midrash*: "Rabbi Akiba said, 'Were there nothing given in the Torah except Song of Songs, it would be enough to guide the world.'" ¹⁶ To such an extent did he value this scroll! He also refuted opponents like Rabbi Yosse, a disciple of Rabbi Ishmael, who had maintained that while Ecclesiastes was definitely profane (did not "render the hands unclean"), the status of the Song of Songs was arguable. These and similar sayings are veiled testimonials, spoken in a code that was easily intelligible to Akiba and his contemporaries, to the many hesitations and doubts about the Song of Songs that the Rabbis had to overcome through considerable efforts of faith.

The dispute was finally settled with the general acceptance of the interpretation that the Song of Songs was a parable of the love between God and His chosen people, and of the longing of each for the other, particularly during Israel's exile. This was, then, a love-song about God and Israel, the Torah and the Temple, exile and redemption, a spiritual and holy love. Once this allegorical interpretation was firmly established by the Talmudic Sages, subsequent Jewish cultures of faith embraced the basic premise that the Song of Songs was not to be read literally. Our main interest here is to examine the nature of this allegory in the Talmudic, the Poetic-Philosophic, and the Mystical cultures. We have alluded earlier to the interpretations promulgated by the culture of the Emancipation and by the subsequent National-Israeli culture.

The Song of Songs was widely popular in the Talmudic culture and was generally attributed to King Solomon.¹⁷ King Solomon, according to this tradition, had composed the songs in his youth: "When a man is young, he sings songs. When he becomes an adult, he utters practical proverbs. When he becomes old, he speaks of the vanity of things."¹⁸ Thus, after writing the Song of Songs in his youth, Solomon composed the book of Proverbs in his maturity, and Ecclesiastes in his old age. But some Sages found in the opening verses, "The song of songs which is Solomon's," a reference to God (the root of the name Shlomo, Solomon, is the same as that of the word *shalom*, peace, hence: "the song of songs by Him who has peace"), i.e. the song of God Himself to whom peace pertains. Every reference to Solomon was to be read as an allusion to God (with only two exceptions).

The first thing that strikes us in the Talmudic approach to the Song of Songs is that the Sages wished to elevate the work, to which they had imparted new symbolic meaning expressive of the relationship between God and the Congregation of Israel, to the highest grade of sanctity. They said: "The Song of Songs – the best of songs, the most excellent of songs, the finest of songs."¹⁹ The Holy One in all the glory of His greatness had spoken it. Rabbi Yoḥanan said: "It was spoken at Sinai." Rabbi Meir said: "It was spoken in the Tabernacle."²⁰ Whoever reads the Song of Songs as a profane work commits a sin: even one who "trills his voice in the chanting of the

Song of Songs," (i.e. sings it as one would a profane song), admonished Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Nuri, "has no share in the world to come."²¹

Echoing Rabbi Akiba, Abraham Ibn Ezra warned in the introduction to his commentary to Song of Songs: "Far be it that it should be understood as an erotic poem, but it is to be taken allegorically."²² Ibn Ezra explained the Talmud's interpretation: the Song of Songs referred to the Congregation of Israel and to God. The Prophets had often compared Israel to a woman, and Israel's Lord to a loving husband. Isaiah says, "A song of my beloved touching his vineyard" (Isa. 5.1), and "As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee" (Isa. 62.5). Hosea said, "I will betroth thee unto me for ever" (Hos. 2.19), and "Go, take unto thee a wife" (Hos. 3.1). In Ezekiel we read, "Thy breasts are fashioned, and thine hair is grown, whereas thou wast naked and bare" (Ezek. 16.7), and so forth in that chapter. These erotic images and metaphors are stripped of their literal meaning and made to assume the guise of a strictly spiritual love. Countless examples could be added to Ibn Ezra's enumeration. It was the prevalence of such references throughout Scriptures that allowed the Rabbis not only to include the Song of Songs in the sacred texts, but to elevate it to a supreme level of sanctity.

The second striking feature that emerges from a study of the Talmudic exegesis is that the Song of Songs was viewed, in the words of Rabbi El'azar ben Azariah, as a means of inculcating "the fear of God and the acceptance of His yoke." The "yoke," of course, was the burden of the commandments. The verse, "Thy love is better than wine" (1.2), was interpreted as a reference to Torah and commandments, as explained by both Rashi and Sforno, in the spirit of the Midrash: "Thy love, that is the Torah and the commandments which, in Your great goodness, You have written down for our instruction, is more pleasant and desirable to me than wine" (Sforno).

The third outstanding characteristic of the Talmudic commentary to the Song of Songs is the tendency to direct the Song to the eschatological future. It is taken out of its setting in the time of King Solomon and is generalized into a reference to the entire Congregation of Israel (*Knesset Yisrael*), as the Jewish people is called in Talmudic parlance. Exiled, afflicted by foreign oppressors, the Congregation of Israel yearns to return to the home of its youth, to its "first husband" (Rashi, in the preface to his commentary on the Song of Songs, based on numerous Talmudic *midrashim*). Rabbi Akiba expounded the verse, "Therefore do the virgins love thee" (1.3), as follows: "They have loved you even unto death; for Thy sake are we slain every day." From its exile and bondage the Congregation of Israel longs for redemption and beseeches God to fulfill His promise: "Draw me, we will run after thee" (1.4). The Song of Songs is viewed as Solomon's divinely inspired foreshadowing of the impending and catastrophic exile.

These three main features, then, characterize the interpretation of the

Talmudic Sages: the Song of Songs is read as a metaphor of the love between the Congregation of Israel and God. The bond between Israel and its God is the study of the Torah and the observance of the commandments. The Song is felt to be a cry from the anguish of exile and a foreshadowing of the great destiny intimated by the Torah and the Prophets. The conclusion that these are indeed three cardinal features of the Talmudic interpretation can be substantiated by additional examples. In the interest of brevity, however, we now proceed to a different interpretation of the Song of Songs and a radical antithesis to the entire Talmudic commentary.

Song of Songs in the Poetic-Philosophic culture

Among the many Poetic-Philosophic interpretations of the Song of Songs, that of Gersonides merits our particular attention as an outstanding illustration of the underlying assumptions of this culture. His interpretation comes closest to typifying the elements of this culture's conception of the superordinating concepts and the archetypal collective experiences, as it saw them.

Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, Gersonides (1288-c. 1344), a native of Bagnols in southern France, was a versatile personality: philosopher, Bible commentator, mathematician, Talmudic scholar, astronomer, astrologer, inventor of a device for calculating the motions of the heavenly bodies, author of astronomical tables, engineer, and physician. He was one of the greatest Jewish minds of all times, both in the profundity of his thought and in the scope of his scientific and technological interests, an *uomo universale* in the Italian Renaissance mold. His grandfather, Levi ben Abraham, a Bible and Talmud scholar and an expert in engineering, physics, and astronomy, had been harassed by Rabbi Solomon Adret during the controversy over Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* at the beginning of the thirteenth century. It appears, however, that his illustrious grandson, the most radical Aristotelian in Jewish philosophy, did not suffer persecution, as there is no record of severe controversy surrounding him during his lifetime. After his death, as the world-view of the Poetic-Philosophic culture gradually waned and was shunted to the sidelines of spiritual creativity by the new Mystical culture and by a fortified Rabbinic culture, his views came to be opposed, notably by Rabbi Ḥasdai Crescas (1340-1410), whose *Or Adonai* ("The Light of the Lord") was aimed against Gersonides' *Millhamot Adonai* ("The Wars of the Lord"). But Gersonides continued to retain a following of loyal admirers.

Like other thinkers of his day, Gersonides believed that not only could there be no internal inconsistency within the Torah – the Torah of God being perfect – but that no contradiction between Torah and true science or philosophy was possible, as the intellect, like the Torah itself, was a gift of

God from above. In the introduction to his Torah commentary, Gersonides argues that the Torah is intended to guide us toward true perfection, which is none other than perfection of the intellect, albeit moral perfection is an important preliminary stage leading to intellectual perfection. Knowledge of nature leads to knowledge of God, which, in turn, leads to the true love of God. The "benefits" (*to'alyot*) with which Gersonides summarized the ethics derived from each section of Biblical narrative or prophecy, endeared him to his readers. In the nineteenth century, Adam ha-Kohen Lebensohn wrote that, were the collection of Gersonides' *to'alyot* to be published as a book in its own right, it would constitute a more noble work of ethics than all other ethical treatises hitherto produced by the Jewish people.

We mentioned in chapter 2 that the Biblical exegetes of this culture shared some of the problems which occupied Muslim interpreters of the Koran, stemming from the need to eliminate from Scriptures anthropomorphisms of God, which were to be explained in true philosophical spirit by each school according to its own concept of truth. The conflicting schools of Muslim commentaries on the Koran are clearly reflected in the works of these Jewish scholars.²³ Even later thinkers such as Gersonides, who lived outside the Islamic sphere, in Provence, and no longer wrote in Arabic, continued to be influenced by Muslim thought. Maimonides was influenced by Avicenna (Ibn Sina), while Gersonides, a more radical Aristotelian, accepted many of the views of Averroes (Ibn Rushd). Moreover, even though Gersonides wrote his works in Hebrew, he imitated the Arabic-patterned Tibbonite style.

Many medieval Biblical exegetes begin their works with lengthy expressions of regret that they can find no simple and credible interpretations among their predecessors. Whenever we encounter such prefaces, generally accompanied by considerable polemics and argumentation, there is good ground for suspicion that the *peshat* (literal meaning) of this new exegete, who has audaciously nulled the work of his predecessors, will itself prove to be one of far-fetched *derash* (homiletics). Gersonides opens his commentary to the Song of Songs²⁴ with the complaint that a correct and seemingly interpretation of the scroll was not to be found: "We have not seen a plausible commentary which clarifies the words of this scroll." All of the commentators who had preceded him had strayed from the plain meaning of the verses in "the way of sermonics," and had thus expressed the antithesis of what the book itself intended. Gersonides believes that if an exegete wishes to say certain things which are, in themselves, worthy and correct, he ought to say them in a work of his own, and not artificially attach them to Scripture by way of exegesis, for "it is not right that he should mix together with commentaries words of his own sermons." This creates a confusion and a mixing of literary types which bewilders the readers and misconstrues the subject. In light of the many failures in the interpretation

of Song of Songs, including the *midrashim* of our Sages, which may appear reasonable, yet in fact fail to interpret the scroll properly, he comes to "write what seems to us the correct meaning of this scroll, without mixing into it other things which do not fulfill this intent."

Gersonides then proceeds to explain his interpretation of the book, its general subject-matter, and how one ought to interpret its details "according to its true intention." Following this introduction the reader learns to his astonishment that Song of Songs is intended to guide the intellect on its path towards perfect apprehension of divine wisdom. As understood by Gersonides, in the spirit of Averroes and others, Song of Songs is an allegorical presentation of Aristotelian philosophy. The intellect is called "King Solomon in Jerusalem," the faculties of the soul are the "daughters of Jerusalem," while the activities of the intellect are the "daughters of Zion." The ripe fruits are the perfection of speculative science, while the flowers and lilies are the fruit "in potential." The entire scroll is an allegory of man's effort to attain the intelligible forms, the apprehension of which bestows eternal life or the survival of the soul. The intellect "grazes in the lilies" when it is in an imperfect stage, influenced by the power of imagination, wherein the intelligibles are only found in potential. The conclusion of Gersonides' "literal" commentary is that Song of Songs is intended to guide man "towards complete perfection, to approach it and make every possible effort to attain it."²⁵

The details of Gersonides' philosophy are not our concern here. It is sufficient to note that although Gersonides follows with only minor changes the Averroistic school and thus exaggerates a certain trend within Aristotelianism, his general direction is typical of the dominant view of the entire Poetic-Philosophic culture. What interests us is Gersonides' belief that Song of Songs in fact provides, in poetic form, instruction of a certain philosophical approach. He believes that the entire book is an "allegory and metaphor" for the path that the hylic human intellect must take in order to receive the fulness of the "active intellect," thereby acquiring comprehension of the universe in all its lawfulness and regularity, and, particularly, knowledge of the divine wisdom. A man ought not commit the error of thinking that the meaning of this scroll is transparent.²⁶ It was written in its present form in order to hide from the eyes of the unworthy, while revealing to the worthy, how they may attach themselves to the Object of their desire and attain perfect knowledge. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" refers to spiritual attachment. Intellectual love "is more desirable and honorable than bodily pleasures." "For the kiss indicates attachment, and it is concerning this that it is said of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam that they died by the divine kiss, meaning that at the time of their death they were attached to God." Further on, he observes, "However, it is written 'let him kiss me,' and not 'may I kiss him,' for in reality God is the active party in this, for

whatever knowledge we have of Him is due to the fulness which is poured upon us from God, by means of the active intellect."²⁷

The phrase, "I am black but comely" (1.5), is explained as the words of the hylic intellect addressed to the soul, "which is originally black, lacking all intellect, but is comely in terms of its readiness to receive the intelligibles [pure ideas] when there is something to arouse it to this." There are many difficulties on the way to attaining perfection of divine wisdom, and the commentator enumerates the various "obstacles" to perfection, even to the longing for perfection, in his explanation of the verse, "I sleep but my heart waketh," (5.2).

This is what the loved one said: although her will and heart were awake to do the will of her beloved to the best of her ability, she was asleep in terms of the deeper [metaphysical] level of these matters and [in terms of] the difficulty of being intellectually prepared for this wisdom, until her beloved called upon her, but she was too indolent to rise and open to him.²⁸

It is impossible to attain the level of speculative perfection without a great deal of knowledge.

Here is a philosophical interpretation of two other key verses: "A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (4.12). The spring is the abundance of the active intellect, which is free of matter, "as explained in *De Anima* that the active intellect cannot affect our intellect, unless the phenomena have first been perceived by our senses . . . as Averroes mentioned in his abridged version of *The Book of the Sense and the Sensed*." This and more is alluded to in this verse. He concludes: "Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices!" [8.14] She told him that she had already prepared what is needed, and that he should try to ascend the mountains of spices, which is divine wisdom, with diligence and greatest possible haste."²⁹ The Song of Songs demonstrates, like the well-known Platonic parable, how one may ascend from the cave of folly, sense, and imagination, to the spice-hill of speculative perfection (which includes ethical perfection) where the acquired intellect may attach itself to the active intellect. The Song alludes to the manner in which the human spirit clings to the spiritual entity with which God guides the world and determines its order. The Talmudic symbolism has disappeared without a trace: neither the Congregation of Israel nor the Shechinah, not even the happiness or redemption of the nation, are the subject-matter of Song of Songs, but rather the redemption of the individual soul and the supreme joy which it experiences when it approaches perfection and enters its halls – "the king hath brought me into his chambers" (1.4) – "for the most perfect joy and pleasure is the full, true comprehension of the honored [One]."³⁰

We have taken Gersonides as an outstanding example of the dominant

type of interpretation of the Song of Songs in the Poetic-Philosophic culture. One may certainly find in the interpretations of other thinkers, such as Joseph Ibn Aknin, a friend and student of Maimonides, differences of detail and nuance, but not of substance. For purposes of comparison, it should be noted that in the *Guide for the Perplexed* Maimonides quotes only six verses of Song of Songs, all of which are explained in a manner quite similar to that of Gersonides. The three principal quotations are at the end of part 3, in which he discusses the highest level of human perfection and how it may be attained. Like Gersonides, it is clear to Maimonides that Song of Songs was meant to instruct human understanding in the path toward perfection; this is the ultimate end of "eternal success" or "eternal beatitude." Moses alone ascended to a level where, "whilst speaking with others, or attending to our bodily wants, our mind is all that time with God; when we are with our hearts constantly near God, even whilst our body is in the society of men."³¹ This is alluded to in the verse: "I sleep but my heart waketh" (5.2). He explains the verse, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," and the Talmudic simile of "death by a kiss" in connection with Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, like Gersonides.

The meaning of this saying is that these three died in the midst of the pleasure derived from the knowledge of God and their great love for Him. When our Sages figuratively call the knowledge of God united with intense love for Him a kiss, they follow the well-known poetical diction, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth."³²

The Song of Songs thus speaks of knowledge of God, which is both apprehension and love of Him; it "allegorically represent[s] the state of our soul"³³ and points to

the true perfection of man; the possession of the highest intellectual faculties; the possession of such notions which lead to true metaphysical opinions as regards God. With this perfection man has obtained his final object; it gives him true human perfection; it remains to him alone; it gives him immortality, and on its account he is called man.³⁴

The verse ". . . mine own vineyard have I not kept" (1.6) refers to the abandonment or neglect of this perfection.³⁵ Thus, despite differences in their understanding of Aristotelianism or in interpretations of individual passages in the Song of Songs, there is general agreement between Gersonides and Maimonides, the foremost, if not the first, thinker of the Poetic-Philosophic culture.

The Mystical commentary – Alschech's *Shoshanat ha-ʿamakim*

The Mystical writers embroidered the Song of Songs with esoteric meanings: it was the Song, they said, that the Holy One Himself recited each day.³⁶ The

book was not only a paean to God, but also, as it were, God's own song. It "contain[ed] all mysteries of the Torah and of divine wisdom; the song wherein is power to penetrate into things that will be; the song sung by the supernal princes (*sharim* = *sarim*)."³⁷ Its praises abound: "When on earth we living terrestrial creatures raise up our hearts in [this] song, then those supernal beings gain an accession of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, so that they are enabled to perceive matters which even they had never before comprehended." He who is deemed worthy to grasp the depth of all its mysteries and allusions "becomes adept in the doctrine and obtains wit to discern what has been and what will be." King David was already cognizant of and inspired by it to "compose hymns and songs, many in number, in which he hinted concerning future events." His son Solomon then "made a book of the song itself."

What the Talmudic Sages had only hinted at, the Kabbalists developed into a full-fledged theory: the Song of Songs was the song of the deity and the celestial attendants; King Solomon had brought it down from heaven, or had used it as a model. The book contained all matters of Torah and wisdom and prefigured future events, mainly mysteries of the exile and the redemption. More precisely, the Song of Songs was first sung here on earth on the day that Solomon erected the Temple in Jerusalem as a true replica of the celestial Temple. The day when the Song was unveiled to the world was a day in all ways perfect: "The Shekhina came down to earth, and Solomon spoke the Song in the Holy Spirit."³⁸ The song contains the secrets of Creation (*maʿaseh bereshit*), the mysteries of the deity (*maʿaseh merkavah*), the deeds of the Patriarchs, the bondage in Egypt and the exodus, the Song at the Sea, the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, Israel's exile among the nations, the future redemption, and the resurrection of the dead.

In brief, the book alludes to everything that has been, is, and shall be, as foreseen by King Solomon through divine inspiration. The *Zohar* summarizes all this in one long sentence:

This song comprises the whole Torah; it is a song in which those that are above and those that are below participate; a song formed in the likeness of the world above, which is the supernal Sabbath, a song through which the supernal Holy name is crowned. Therefore it is a holy of holies. Why so? Because all its words are instinct with love and joy.³⁹

The Song, then, is more than a parable. It is also mystery and allegory. The physical imagery alludes to lofty spiritual matters. As to the details of the similes, the Kabbalists produced quite a variety of commentaries. But they all agree that the kiss alluded to the adhesion of the soul to the source of life, and an influx of the Holy Spirit that derives from this adhesion. "I am black but comely" (1.5) are the words of the Shechinah "which went down to Egypt with our Patriarch Jacob and was in exile with Israel . . . and was

lamenting and fretting over her exile, walking about darkly with the other powers charged over the nations, saying: the exile has rendered me black and gloomy."⁴⁰ The perfumes ("the savour of thy good ointments," 1.3) represent the flux from the upper to the lower worlds, the holy perfume of anointment which emanates from the Holy Ancient One. The chambers ("Bring me into your chambers," 1.4) are an allusion to the hidden mysteries of the soul when it cleaves to the source of life. His right and left ("His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me," 2.6) designate the two substances, the upper substance, the simple and pure, and the lower, the polluted. The lover is the divine intellect, the crown ("the crown wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his espousals," 3.11) is divine providence, and the espousals, the true supreme goal.

The above summarizes briefly the approach to the Song of Songs in the early generations of the Mystical culture, primarily in the thirteenth century, before it had gained widespread currency. When the efficacy of the Poetic-Philosophic culture began to wane, the Mystics gained ascendancy, so that even before the flowering of Lurianic Kabbalah, the great codifier Rabbi Moses Isserles could testify that Kabbalah was steadily spreading among the people, and that not only scholars, but everyone, even simple, ignorant folk, who could barely distinguish between their right and their left, were jumping on board and learning Kabbalah.⁴¹ Thus by the mid-sixteenth century the writings of the Mystics were already accessible to a wide public.

Among the many Kabbalistic commentaries to Song of Songs, one that gained considerable popularity was *Sefer Shoshanat ha-amakim* ("The Book of the Lily of the Valley") by Moses Alshech.⁴² It is interesting to compare Gersonides' philosophic interpretation completed in 1326, with this Kabbalistic work of 200 years later.

Rabbi Moses Alshech was born in Adrianopolis in 1507. He settled in Safed and was an important Kabbalist there until the advent of Rabbi Isaac Luria (the "Holy Ari"). According to tradition, the Holy Ari refused to teach Alshech the mysteries of his lore. Alshech became known primarily as a Biblical exegete, preacher, and codifier (Posek). *Torat Moshe*, his commentary on the Pentateuch, attained great fame and endeared him to readers who eventually came to call him "the Holy Alshech." He also composed homiletics and commentaries on the Prophets and the Five Scrolls. His commentaries were in no small measure responsible for the popular spread of Kabbalah. He explained the literal meaning of Scriptures based on the Rabbis and Rashi and on his own insights, but mainly he let himself be guided by the *Zohar* and other Kabbalistic writings.

Alshech, too, believed that the Song of Songs was superior to all other songs found in the Bible, including the Song of Moses,⁴³ and that only in the days of King Solomon, when the Temple was erected, did joy spread

throughout the world by virtue of the Song of Songs. Alshech thought that the Scroll's essence is a dialogue between the exiled Congregation of Israel and its Lord, a proclamation of the reciprocal love between Israel and God. In lovely parables the Scroll compared Israel to "a princess, loved by a great king, replete with wisdom and beauty. The king took this maiden, who found favor before him more than all other women, for a wife and went out to war against her enemies; she too loved him." But later he found fault with her, "because she made love to one of the courtiers; the king was very angry, and he banished her from his house." Ever since the queen has been wandering from house to house and from court to court finding no rest for her weary feet; in her painful wanderings she recalls her "first love . . . and she weeps . . . the king too remembers his wife and her fate." In the end, the king takes his spouse, his beloved, back to his bosom. This is the story-line of the Song of Songs, a dramatic tale of love, sin, exile, return, reconciliation, and consolation, more or less in keeping with the Talmudic *midrashim*. The difference is in the *sodot*, the mysteries.

Alshech does not wish to stray too far from the literal meaning, the *peshat*, but we have already noted that such well-intentioned promises by the exegetes are seldom kept. The *peshat* and the *sod* (mystical meaning) fuse in *Shoshanat ha-amakim* to produce some truly bizarre commentaries. A critical reader of this commentary will readily identify its author as an active participant in the revolutionary Mystical spiritual transformation, which undertook to reveal, via theurgic-cosmic symbolism, a new truth in both the inner content and the outer shell of the Torah. The Song of Songs contains, in Alshech's opinion, symbols of the inner, hidden life of the deity; whoever can grasp this system of mysteries and allusions may attain a high degree of personal perfection, may actively assist all of Creation, and may add strength to God – this being the ultimate goal of man's service. Every Jew is required to participate in "mending the world" and precipitating redemption. Israel's exile is but one revelation of the reign of "shells" in the world. Therefore, mending the world and Israel's redemption are a single holy endeavor, the essence of which is giving strength to God. There are many expressions in the Kabbalah to this giving. The Song of Songs, according to Alshech, introduces the intelligent reader into the knowledge of the *sodot* and brings him closer to the redeeming act.

How so? Let us look at the details of the commentary as they relate to the soteriological dimension, i.e. to personal salvation, to the redemption of Israel, and to the mending of the Shechinah and the world. The name Song of Songs itself testifies to a twofold praise: the Congregation of Israel lauds the Holy One, and He lauds Israel: "And perhaps this is what our Sages meant when they said: 'All the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.' . . . This Song contains two holies, the praise of the Holy One and the praise of the Congregation of Israel."

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (1.2) refers to *devekut*, mystical cleaving to God; to address him "mouth to mouth," as did Moses, is ultimate perfection. "Thy love is better than wine" (1.2) – those who drink wine are in need of sleep, to rid themselves of the effects of the liquor. But with their drunkenness, the sweetness of the wine they have tasted will also wear off:

Not so is Your love, for when You brought us to the place our Sages called "the winecellar of Torah" and gave us Your love and rejoiced in our love for You, we knew then too that the Temple would be destroyed because of our sins; since then You have been sleeping because of our evil doings, until You awake, O God, to redeem us . . . Your sleep has not removed Your friendship from us, for although You exiled us to another land, You have not despised us and our union has not been broken, unlike wine which sours.

A bold metaphor indeed! God has fallen asleep from an excess of the wine of love and must be awoken. When He wakes, His sweet love for Israel will never depart again.

Alschech comments at length on the verse, "Look not upon me, because I am black" (1.6). The Gentiles accuse Israel of double blackness, inside and out, in its soul and in its material being, in sinfulness and in miseries inflicted upon it from without:

This nation has sold out its honor. But Israel replies that the darkness of its sins is not its natural hue, for "I am scorched by the sun," and darkness clings to me as something unnatural, which is not the case with you [Gentiles], whose blackness is intrinsic . . . No evil has clung to the part that is my soul.

In brief, the darkness of the soul is unnatural and temporary. Moreover, when the Temple still stood, the Congregation of Israel watched not only over the vineyard of the Lord God of Hosts, i.e. over the House of Israel, but also over the vineyards of other nations, by offering sacrifices for their welfare. When Israel ceased cultivating its own vineyard, the Holy One punished it and destroyed the Temple, but this He did only as a father would chastise a son. The Gentiles reprove Israel that it still clings to its Beloved and believes itself superior to other nations, when in fact it is black and dark-spirited because of their oppression. To this Israel replies that it suffers only from external afflictions, from the stroke of the sun, and is likened to the "tents of Kedar" (1.5), "because the Holy One did not inflict these [evils] on the inner soul, only on the outer form, in order to protect the inner soul, as the tents of Kedar suffer to be blackened from without from the heat of the sun in order to protect that which is within."

"Thy two breasts are like two young roes" (4.5, 7.4) allude to the two interpretational methods, *peshat* and *sod*, which should be applied to the study of the Torah as the two most important of the four methods for

interpreting Torah. The exegete assumes, as do all the Mystical commentators, that "each and every *mitzvah* has a source of holiness above, each according to its mystery; when a man performs a *mitzvah*, he awakens its holy source and root; the light increases, and his soul cleaves to the Supernal." Every person can draw down the divine light from above when he fulfills a commandment. In the sequence of the four methods for comprehending the Torah: literally, allegorically, homiletically, and mystically, there is an ascending order, the last being nearer to the Blessed One than the three underlying levels. But all four levels are interconnected, and it is possible to draw down the spirituality of the Torah from above by any one of these methods. The Mystical Sage knows how to proceed from the literal meaning to the allegorical, from there to the homily and thence to the profound mystery of the Torah. Thus he makes the connection between the upper and the lower worlds "until the fire of the upper world invades the earth below . . . and that is the purpose of this world's existence."

Like Gersonides, Alschech concludes on an eschatological note. But whereas the philosopher mobilized all of Aristotelian philosophy, as he understood it, to prove that the Song of Songs provided instruction in personal salvation by the acquisition of "intelligibles" and a cleaving unto the "active intellect," the popular Kabbalist ends with the redemption of Israel. In this he is certainly closer to the Talmudic Sages. We are again reminded that every culture was enchanted by the road leading to the "mountains of spices" (the final words of the Song of Songs), but that the paths to salvation taken in each culture were quite different.

The influence of Mystical commentaries, as illustrated by Alschech's *Shoshanat ha-^camakim*, was varied and profound. The Ḥassidic movement founded by the Ba'al Shem Tov had a very special regard for the Song of Songs, and its adherents used to chant it with intense enthusiasm and concentration on Sabbath eves, after ritual immersion, as though it were a prayer, and a prayer of particular sanctity at that, which combined the study of Torah and the observance of the commandment of prayer. The *Zohar*, Alschech's commentary, and other exegeses contributed to the transformation of Song of Songs into a book used in prayer. The Mystical culture triumphed over the Poetic-Philosophic culture and swept aside the latter's world-view. Scriptural commentaries of the kind offered by Gersonides fell into discredit.