

Pesach: A Love Story **Rabbanit Michal Kohane**

Class of 2020

The Hebrew word “*aviv*”, spring, sounds almost the same as “*be’ahava*”, with love, and is identical in its gematria. Just a coincidence? We might never know. It’s up to us to choose what we want to see. That too, is what Pesach is all about, and that too, is love.

Among the Five Megillot in the TaNaCh, Shir Hashirim - Song of Songs - is the one we read on this holiday. It was Rabbi Akiva who famously insisted: “the whole world is only worthy as the day the Song of Songs was given to the People of Israel; for while all the writings are holy, the Song of Songs is the holy of holies” (Mishna Yadayim, 3:5).

Shir Hashirim is passionate, poetic, and full of colorful imagery (a belly like a “heap of wheat”?), but perhaps what is most striking are the intense details. There is no “he’s a good guy”; “she’s a nice person”. No generalizations, but a great attention to every little minutia. The beloved know each other’s every move, every wrinkle, the way he smiles, the way she listens. They can see each other clearly, even from miles apart. They hear each other without words. They share themselves wholeheartedly and are completely attuned.

Love makes it so everything matters. Small things are suddenly a big deal that can make or break a whole day. One kind gesture; one silly word. Everything is magnified; everything is critical; everything has significance.

This is what we do just before Pesach too. We’re looking for every little spec of *chametz*, every crumb. It all must be burned, for between lovers there is no room for even the littlest trace of anything; nothing separates them. We’re so meticulous! It must be done just right. And then comes Pesach eve, and what do we celebrate? That G-d “passed-over” our homes, that we were taken to freedom and liberation, that we were given another chance.

Through what great merit did we deserve this? Have we done anything great? So we were slaves, big deal! What are we whining about? Other people were slaves, and--- remained slaves, at best assimilated into their masters’ nation and disappeared. The fact that we know the “rest of the story” doesn’t mean we can take it for granted. Why are we here? Is there truly anything magnificent we can point to that we have done?

Our sages tell us that there are 50 gates of “*tum’a*” טומאה, “spiritual impurity” and distance, and that we made it to gate 49. But nevertheless, G-d “passed-over” us. He knew we had sunk deep; He knew we were no longer in our best, but He had another plan for us and He saw our “potential” and our “light” and the “big picture”.

And that too, is love.

Rashi says that the word “*u-fasacht*” ופסחתי “and I will pass-over”, means “*vechamalti*” – וחמלתי “and I have shown compassion”.

Yet the same root – p.s.ch – נ.ו.פ. can also mean lame: someone who is limping is a “*pise’ach*” פיסח, and therefore, describing situations that incomplete.

So which way is it?

The prep has to be scrupulous. Such is winter: we count rain days, precipitation, temperatures, clothing, supplies. But when spring comes, that’s all gone. The windows are open; heater is off, and we are joyful to see just the smallest blossom. There is no way to “measure” that. We say thank you not because the tiny flower is physically greater than however many months of darkness and cold we had, but because it’s here; because it exists; because it teaches us hope. We “forgive” all the hardship. Our joy and appreciation “skip over” all the previous days. The Song of Songs, among its incredible details, introduces a loving form of “passing over”, that of the lover’s voice rushing to his beloved, leaping and skipping over any obstacles:

Behold! my beloved! behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, hopping upon the hills. (2:8) קול דודי הנה זה בא, מדלג על ההרים, מקפץ על הגבעות

Love is both about paying careful attention to details, and about skipping over; about daily hard work, and about dancing for joy. The art and challenge is to listen and learn when to apply which. Perhaps figuring that out, is the heart of the journey and exodus from slavery to freedom.



Rabbanit Michal Kohane has been a long-time leader and educator in Northern California, serving as rabbi, federation executive director and more. Most recently she’s been the Rosh Kehila of the Prospect Heights Shul in Brooklyn. Michal holds a BA in Studies of Israel and Education, an M.S. in Jewish Studies, an MA in Clinical Psychology, and is completing her PsyD in organizational psychology. Michal’s first novel, Hachug (“Extracurricular”) was published in Israel by Steimatzky and she writes a weekly Torah blog. Now back in Israel where she grew up, she continues to be a scholar in residence in Israel and abroad.