

Parshat Terumah: Intimacy in the Void: On the Keruvim and Shir HaShirim

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Dedicated to the memory of David Wachs, z"l.

Parshat Terumah contains the architectural blueprints of the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle—how to make the ark, its cover, the table (*shulchan*), the *menorah*, the curtains, the alter, etc. It also contains design instructions for the *keruvim*, the golden cherubs that stood atop the ark and ushered in the voice of God. These mysterious winged creatures that sat inside of the Holy of Holies have come to represent much about the nature of holiness itself.

The Vilna Gaon, as quoted by R. Yitzchak Hutner, made a dramatic statement in this regard. Pointing to another source of great holiness, the book of *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs), he explained:

. . . that the holiness of the content of the book of Song of Songs is rooted in the holiness of the cherubs (the *keruvim*), about which are written “their faces toward one another” [Exodus 25:20]. They are entangled [lit. involved] in one another the way that a man and his companion are entangled. (*Pachad Yitzchak* on Pesach, note 6b)

. . . שהקדושה של תוכן ספר שיר השירים מושרשת היא בקדושת הכרובים, שעליהם נאמר "ופניהם איש אל אחיו," והם מעורים זה בזה כמער איש ולויות. (פחד יצחק על פסח, קונטרס רשימות ו:ב)

R. Akiva had already declared *Shir HaShirim*

the holy of holies

שְׁכַל הַקְּדוּבִים קָדֵשׁ, וְשִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים קָדֵשׁ קְדָשִׁים

in Mishna Yadayim 3:5. But the Vilna Gaon makes an additional claim. Not only is *Shir HaShirim* sacred like the Temple, not only is it somehow the poetic manifestation of the ethos of that heaven-on-earth in general, but its holiness inheres in its identification with the *keruvim* in particular. To understand deeply the meaning of the *keruvim* is therefore to gain insight into the meaning of this song of all songs and vice versa. These two epicenters of sanctity echo against one another.

In the course of constructing the *mishkan*, Moshe is instructed to make two cherubs, one for each end of the ark's cover, both hammered out of the same piece of gold. Exodus 25:20 states:

The cherubs shall have their wings spread out above, shielding the cover with their wings. They shall confront each other, the faces of the cherubim being turned toward the cover.

וְהָיוּ הַכְּרֻבִים פְּרָשֵׁי כְנָפִים לְמַעַל סֻכְיָם בְּכַנְפֵיהֶם עַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת וּפְנֵיהֶם אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו אֶל הַכַּפֹּרֶת יִהְיוּ פְּנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים:

These mysterious creatures—with the countenance of babies and the wings of angels, according to some commentaries—stand at the top of the ark, in an unusual posture: facing each other, yet also gazing downward; locked in a winged embrace, yet standing apart; intensely together, yet also separate. With bodies erect and arms arched overhead, this connected-yet-disconnected stance forms a protective canopy for the ark.

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These physical details already echo the love-dance of the *dod* and *ra'aya*, the lover and the beloved, in *Shir HaShirim*. They too are separate individuals, seeking union and yet not joined; touching, yet not touching; sometimes facing one another, often facing apart, constantly coming back to seek the gaze of the other. Over and over again we hear the phrase "I sought but found him not" (Song of Songs 3:1,2), sometimes followed by a momentary (perhaps imagined) coupling, as in Song of Songs 3:4--"אחזתי ולא ארפנו", "I held him fast and would not let him go"--sometimes left dangling with desire.

<p>I opened the door for my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. I was faint because of what he said. I sought, but found him not. (Song of Songs 5:6)</p>	<p>פִתַחְתִּי אֲנִי לְדוּדִי וְדוּדִי חָמַק עֵבֶר נַפְשִׁי יֵצֵא בְדַבָּר בִּקְשָׁתִיהוּ וְלֹא מָצָאתִיהוּ קְרָאתִיו וְלֹא עָנָנִי: (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים ה:ו)</p>
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The *keruvim* can thus be seen, in a sense, as the actors cast to enact the complex dynamic of the relationship that lies at the heart of *Shir HaShirim*.

The identification of these media—the written word and the material form—grows even more textured when we continue to investigate the role of the *keruvim* in the *mishkan*. In Exodus 25: 22, God says:

<p>There I will make myself known to you, and I will speak to you—from above the cover, from between the two cherubs that are on top of the Ark of the Pact—all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people.</p>	<p>וְנוֹעַדְתִּי לָךְ שֵׁם וְדִבַּרְתִּי אִתְּךָ מֵעַל הַכַּפֹּת מִבֵּין שְׁנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים אֲשֶׁר עַל-אֲרוֹן הָעֵדוּת אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה אוֹתְךָ אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p>
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The two *keruvim* grace the top of the ark, and God's voice emerges between them. Ever so subtly, the text indicates that there are actually two different kinds of communications or revelations that happen through this means. God makes Godself known, *v'noaditi*, and God speaks also, *v'dibarti*. There is something to be discovered in this human-divine relationship, it seems, beyond words and beyond discrete commandments. The revelation from between the *keruvim* would be one of content, no doubt. But it would also be a revelation of an ineffable, inexpressible presence. This divine communication would represent that most vulnerable and intimate of all communications: the raw, unmediated exposure of one self to another. Inside the embrace of the angel-humans, God would quietly make Godself known. *V'noaditi lecha sham*.

Here the visual is again quite poignant. As Rashi points out, back on verse 20, regarding the design of the cherubs' wings:

<p>...You shall not make their wings lying down [resting next to their bodies], but spread high alongside their heads, so that there should be ten handbreadths in the space between the wings and the ark cover...</p>	<p>שְׁלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כְּנִפְיֵיהֶם שׁוֹכְבִים, אֲלֵא פְרוּשִׁים וּגְבוּהִים לְמַעַל אֶצֶל רִאשֵׁיהֶם, שִׁיהָ עֶשְׂרֵה טַפְחִים בַּחֲלָל בֵּין הַכְּנָפִים לְכַפֶּת . . .</p>
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For God's voice and God's essence to emerge, there had to be a *challal*, a space, a void. Two beings fused entirely together would not leave room enough for the presence of the divine Other. Yet within the relationship of bonded yet individuated beings, touching yet not merged, God not only speaks, but is made known. As Rebbe Nachman of Breslov says, it is within the Great Void of self-contraction, the *challal hapanui*, that all creativity and all relationality is born (*Likutei Moharan* 64). Making space *for* the other is the first step *toward* the other. Interestingly, with all the variance in interpretation of just what the mysterious *keruvim* looked like, this one thing remains consistent amidst the artistic renderings: the gap between them. It seems that these beings whose very

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name means closeness (*keruvim/krovim*) actually embody the necessity for a crack of distance. Intimacy grows precisely in the space between them.

What is indicated here about the divine-human relationship in the Void is again so very much in line with the interpersonal relationship described in *Shir HaShirim*. The lovers pursue one another, but are known to one another in the distance between them. In their separateness, their axes of connection are made all the more manifest and all the more powerful. The male lover relates to his beloved, for example, precisely through her inaccessibility:

A garden locked is my own, my bride, a fountain locked, a sealed-up spring. (Song of Songs 4:12) גן | נְעוּל אַחֲתֵי כָּלָה גַל נְעוּל מַעֲיֵן הַתּוֹמִים:
(שיר השירים ד:יב)

And yet, he says,

You are a garden spring, a well of fresh water, a rill of Lebanon. מַעֲיֵן גְּנִים בְּאֵר מַיִם חַיִּים וְנַזְלִים מִן-לְבָנוֹן: (שיר
(Song of Songs 4:15) השירים ד:טו)

There is an intimacy that grows between them precisely in these places of separation, all the while dreaming of closing the gap, of letting the waters flow, so to speak.

It seems that the *kedusha* of this work born in the *Kodesh Hakedoshim* is to be found then in the ways in which it echoes and embodies the implicit messages of the holy *keruvim*. In a grand act of *imitatio Dei*, imitating God, human eros takes on the dynamics of divine eros. Together we dance here on earth—coming together and separating, coming together and separating—and in so doing we may mimic the spiritual quest, an always-unrealized journey, studded with transient moments of ecstatic union, but both doomed *and* utterly blessed to take place mostly in the quiet, humdrum moments in between. The *challal*, the longing gap between the *keruvim*, between “the close ones,” is where the bulk of the relationship takes place. It is where they, and we, become known.



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