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R. YUVAL CHERLOW'S INTERPRETATION OF *SONG OF SONGS*: ITS CRITICAL ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

R Yuval Cherlow has composed an extraordinary book on *Song of Songs*.¹ The conventional verse-by-verse commentary begins on page 361 and comprises a mere 60 of the book's 510 pages. The first 360 pages are about the process, assumptions, and methodology of learning *Song of Songs* and the *peshat-derash* relationship in general. The final 90 pages survey the history of Jewish Thought with an emphasis on why *Song of Songs* should stand at the center of the pursuit of contemporary religious experience.

R. Cherlow is well positioned to compose such a book. As Rosh Yeshiva of the yeshivat hesder in Petah Tikva, he has written on the thought of R. Kook and R. Soloveitchik.² He also answers thousands of halakhic questions on the internet from people from all walks of life in Israel, and therefore has his finger on the pulse of Israeli society extending

¹ R. Yuval Cherlow, *Abarekha Narutsa: Song of Songs: 'Let Us Run After You': A Contemporary Commentary on the Spiritual Significance of King Solomon's Love Poems* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Miskal-Yediot Aharonot and Hemed Books, 2003).

² *Ve-Erastikh Li le-Olam: Demuto ha-Datit shel ha-Adam be-Et Tebiyya be-Mishnato shel ha-Rav Kook* (Hebrew) (Petah Tikva: Yeshivat ha-Hesder Petah Tikva, 2003); *Ve-Hayu la-Ahadim be-Yadekha: me-Dialektika le-Harmoniya be-Mishnato shel ha-Rav Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik* (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Hegyonot, 2000).

far beyond the walls of his yeshiva.³ This book is a comprehensive effort to bridge the worlds of Tanakh, Jewish Thought, halakha, Jewish History, and contemporary religious experience.

The book's length might deter many from reading it. This essay summarizes some of R. Cherlow's main arguments and places them in the context of the history of interpretation of *Song of Songs*. It is hoped that this overview will spur interested readers to study the book in its entirety, since it has much to offer.

Following in the footsteps of Targum, Rashi, and Ibn Ezra,⁴ R. Cherlow maintains that there is one coherent story line underlying *Song of Songs*; Song of Songs = the best song. R. Cherlow adopts the methodology of Ibn Ezra by employing the literal reading as a springboard to metaphorical readings, but he is not constrained by Ibn Ezra's particular interpretations.

R. Cherlow espouses the traditional interpretation of *Song of Songs* as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. In his introduction to *Song of Songs*, Ibn Ezra bolsters this view by citing examples where prophets liken the relationship between God and Israel to a marriage.⁵ Gavriel H. Cohn marshals internal textual evidence to support the metaphorical reading as part of the original intent of *Song of Songs*. These include: praise of the Land of Israel itself; some of the praises of the woman appear too exaggerated to refer to a person (e.g., 7:5, "Your neck is like a tower of ivory ... your nose like the Lebanon tower that faces toward Damascus"); and the woman appears to be part of a larger group of

³ Four collections of his internet responsa have been published by Yeshivat ha-Hesder Petah Tikva as: *Reshut ha-Rabbim: Teshuvot she-Nitnu ba-Internet be-Inyanei Emuna, Halakha ve-She'lot Mithadshot* (2002); *Reshut ha-Yahid: Teshuvot she-Nitnu ba-Internet be-Inyanei Tseni'ut, Zugiyut u-Mishpaha* (2003); *Reshut ha-Tsibur: Teshuvot she-Nitnu ba-Internet be-Inyanei Hevra, Medina ve-Ge'ula* (2005); *Reshut le-Habamir: Teshuvot she-Nitnu ba-Internet be-Inyanei Humrot, Kulot va-Avodat Hashem* (2007).

⁴ For a discussion of the differences between the approaches of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, see Eliyahu Assis, "The Differences between the Commentaries of Rashi and Ibn Ezra on the Song of Songs" (Hebrew), in *Teshura le-Amos: A Collection of Studies in Biblical Interpretation Presented in Honor of Amos Hakham*, Moshe Bar-Asher et al. (eds.) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2007), pp. 61-69.

⁵ These include: *Isa.* 5:1 (this also having a parable to a vineyard, a central element in *Song of Songs*); *62:5*; *Ezek.* 16:7; *Hos.* 1-3. Gerson Cohen observes further that no other culture likened its relationship with its gods to marriage. Tanakh could do so precisely because it eradicated mythology and cultic prostitution ("The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality," in *The Canon and Masorah of the Hebrew Bible: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Sid Z. Leiman [New York: KTAV, 1974], pp. 262-282).

people who love the man.⁶ It is particularly difficult to pinpoint the boundary between *pesbat* and *derash* in *Song of Songs*. However, the literal reading lends itself to metaphorical extensions; and both literal and metaphorical readings have played prominent roles in traditional understandings of *Song of Songs*.⁷

Amos Hakham (*Da'at Mikra*) rejects the single-narrative approach, since it depends too heavily on *derash*.⁸ Hakham maintains that *Song of Songs* is a collection of different poems purposefully assembled by one author (Song of Songs = a song comprised of several smaller songs). Never one to avoid benefiting from the multiple perspectives within our tradition, R. Cherlow uses the coherent narrative approach for the literal reading and for the historical metaphorical reading (Israel's relationship with God). He then adopts the collection of different poems approach for interpreting *Song of Songs* as a metaphor for the individual's relationship with God (Rambam's interpretation, see below).

To develop a conceptual framework, R. Cherlow presents an ongoing contrast between Israel's two great sins in the Torah: the sin of the Golden Calf and the sin of the Spies. Many consider the Calf to be the greater sin, on the assumption that it was outright idolatry. However, R. Cherlow espouses the approach of the *Kuzari* (I:97) who maintains that Israel wrongfully sought God by building a Tabernacle-like resting place for God's Presence without having been commanded to do so. While the Calf was a sin, it still was better than the sin of the Spies, who attempted

⁶ Gavriel H. Cohn, *Iyyunim ba-Hamesh ha-Megillot* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 2006), pp. 27-35.

⁷ Tsvi Yehuda demonstrates that Hazal valued the literal meaning as well, as did later commentators. Of all biblical books, Rashi wrote an introduction only to *Song of Songs*, and he began by stressing that while all biblical texts contain multiple layers of meaning, "the text may not depart from its plain sense." It was only in the nineteenth century that some rabbis began asserting that the literal reading in *Song of Songs* had no value (presumably as a polemical counterreaction against the assimilationist tendencies rampant at that time). Yehuda also rails against those scholars who assume that Hazal completely reinterpreted a secular song in order to "salvage it" for our traditional canon. On the contrary, Hazal fully accepted the literal reading as sacred, and they were able to extend that imagery into the metaphorical arena precisely for this reason ("Song of Songs: The Sanctity of the Megilla and Its Exegesis" [Hebrew], in *Sinai: Jubilee Volume*, ed. Yitzhak Rafael [Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1987], pp. 471-486).

⁸ Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Song of Songs* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1973), introduction p. 5. He observes that Rashi must resort to flashbacks on several occasions because of the *pesbat* difficulties inherent in his approach. For a brief survey of traditional and academic approaches regarding the unity and structure of *Song of Songs*, see Gavriel H. Cohn, *Iyyunim ba-Hamesh ha-Megillot* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 2006), pp. 54-65.

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to avoid the challenges of living in the Land altogether. The Calf ultimately led to atonement and a closer relationship with God as the nation built the Tabernacle. In contrast, the sin of the Spies led to aimless wandering and death in the desert. R. Cherlow favors the homiletical interpretations that cast the bad spies as “pietists” who insisted that remaining in the desert was spiritually preferable to entering the Land. They failed to realize that the Torah requires us to live in this world rather than remaining in isolation.

LITERAL READING

R. Cherlow believes that the literal story describes the love between a king in Jerusalem and a farmer’s daughter from En Gedi. There are secondary characters which impact on their relationship:

“We have a little sister, whose breasts are not yet formed. What shall we do for our sister when she is spoken for? If she be a wall, we will build upon it a silver battlement; if she be a door, we will panel it in cedar.” I am a wall, my breasts are like towers. So I became in his eyes as one who finds favor. (8:8-10)⁹

The woman’s brothers do not think she is mature enough for a relationship, but she disagrees. While the woman is fundamentally correct—the king loves her—her brothers are also correct that she still has a lot to learn. At the beginning of the story (1:5-6) the daughters of Jerusalem do not think the woman is worthy of the king’s love; perhaps they are also competing with her for his love. The king’s guards and friends also are impediments (3:3; 5:7). Perhaps they oppose the relationship because the woman is unworthy of a relationship with the king. Part of the story is about the couple’s overcoming external impediments to their relationship.

However, these secondary characters comprise only about 20 percent of *Song of Songs*; the remainder describes challenges inherent to their relationship. The woman does not understand the language or lifestyle of the palace, and the king needs to learn to appreciate the world of a farmer. For example, she speaks of vineyards, while he refers to king’s horses:

⁹ Translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).

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Don't stare at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has gazed upon me. My mother's sons quarreled with me, they made me guard the vineyards. (1:6)

I have likened you, my darling, to a mare in Pharaoh's chariots. (1:9)

Additionally, there are other women in the palace, and the royal lifestyle is considerably different from what she was used to on the farm. This reality frightens her back to her mother's house even after their wedding.

R. Cherlow divides *Song of Songs* into four major units, primarily based on the adjuration of the woman to the daughters of Jerusalem not to press her relationship further until it is ready (1:1-2:7; 2:8-3:5; 3:6-6:3; 6:4-8:14). In the first song (1:1-2:7), the woman dreams of his kisses but still feels that she must win his heart. She needs to understand the gaps between their lifestyles. The woman describes herself as a lily waiting to be picked. The king agrees that she is a lily but one that is surrounded by thorns and not yet approachable:

I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. Like a lily among thorns, so is my darling among the maidens. (2:1-2)

In the second song (2:8-3:5), the king approaches the woman at her vineyard during the day but she does not respond. She loves him but wants to wait (2:8-17). She then attempts to pursue him at night (3:1-5). In the first song, the king is hesitant, whereas in the second song, it is the woman who delays.

They get married at the beginning of the third song (3:6-6:3), but the woman is intimidated by the presence of other women and the luxuries of the palace. She retreats to her mother's home despite the king's passionate expressions of love in chapter 4. It is significant that the challenges of their relationship continue into their marriage. Marriage is not a climactic fairy-tale ending, but rather the next stage in the development of a mature loving relationship that requires constant work.

The king then pursues her, knocking on her door and begging her to let him in. Her prolonged hesitancy generates the great crisis in the relationship. He eventually despairs and leaves. She now must actively seek him out:

Hark, my beloved knocks! "Let me in, my own, my darling, my faultless dove! For my head is drenched with dew, my locks with the damp of night." I had taken off my robe—was I to don it again? I had bathed my feet—was I to soil them again? My beloved took his hand off the latch,

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and my heart was stirred for him.... 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; I called, but he did not answer. (5:2-6)

Despite his leaving, the woman remains confident that her beloved has not abandoned her permanently. She again goes out to seek him, enlisting the help of the daughters of Jerusalem (5:8-6:2). These women are now convinced that she truly loves the king and therefore cease to be skeptical as they had been at the outset of the story.

Many of the woman's problems stem from her misunderstanding of what she saw in the palace after their wedding. In the fourth song (6:4-8:14) the king explains royal life, hoping to assuage her fears. While there are other women in the palace, she is unique to him:

There are sixty queens, and eighty concubines, and damsels without number. Only one is my dove, my perfect one, the only one of her mother, the delight of her who bore her. Maidens see and acclaim her; queens and concubines, and praise her. (6:8-9)

They finally come together, and she invites him to the field for a full expression of their love (7:12-14).

However, her call for him to flee like a deer in the final verse (8:14) demonstrates that their love is an ongoing story that will continue to develop even after *Song of Songs* closes. Yehuda Feliks explains that when deer go into heat, they do not mate immediately. The males and females first seek each other and flee from one another.¹⁰

METAPHORICAL READING #1: HISTORICAL

There are literary advantages to using metaphor: it can express what words cannot; it can accommodate multiple meanings, including national history and individual spirituality; it also speaks in terms that everyone can understand—in this case, human love.

The most prevalent metaphorical interpretation in Jewish tradition casts *Song of Songs* as symbolizing the historical relationship between God and Israel (e.g., Targum, R. Sa'adya Ga'on, Rashi, Rashbam,¹¹ and Ibn

¹⁰ Introduction to *Da'at Mikra: Song of Songs*, p. 16.

¹¹ Regarding the attribution of the medieval commentary of "R. Shemuel" on *Song of Songs* to Rashbam, see Sara Japhet, "The Commentary of R. Shemuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on *Song of Songs*" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 75 (2006), 239-275.

Ezra).¹² In his historical-*derash* interpretation, R. Cherlow generally follows Targum, the first interpreter to present a coherent historical narrative based on earlier Midrashim.¹³ He deviates from Targum when he believes that alternative approaches create a greater correspondence with the literal reading.

R. Cherlow's overall metaphorical reading differs from Targum's by interpreting the second song as moving ahead to the period of Joshua through David, rather than viewing it as again referring to the Exodus as did the first song. The four songs correspond to the periods (1) from the Exodus through the end of the Torah narrative; (2) Joshua through David; (3) the building of the Temple through the Return to Zion; and (4) the final redemption.

The first song (1:1-2:7) opens with the revelation at Sinai as a kiss. Israel's being "black yet beautiful" (1:5) refers to the Calf. Though it was a sin, Israel had beautiful intentions – they were attempting to draw closer to God (*Kuzari*). The sin of the Calf stemmed from Israel's trying to serve God on her terms rather than on God's terms. However, the Calf did not lead to the severing of the relationship; God pardoned Israel and they built the Tabernacle. At the end of the first song (2:5), God makes the daughters of Jerusalem swear not to awaken Israel's love, since she is not yet ready. This refers to the sin of the Spies, which demonstrated that the nation was not yet ready to enter the Land.

¹² This was not the only midrashic understanding, however. In the summary words of David M. Carr (with minor transliteration changes): "While we see the male fairly consistently linked to God, we find the female of the Song of Songs related to the house of study (*b. Eruvin* 21b; *b. Bava Batra* 7b), an individual sage (*t. Haggiga* 2:3), Moses (*Mekhilta Beshallah Shira* 9), Joshua the son of Nun (*Sifrei Nitzavim* [305] and parallels), local court (*b. Sanhedrin* 36b; *b. Yevamot* 101a; *b. Kiddushin* 49b and *b. Sanhedrin* 24a; cf. also *b. Pesahim* 87a), or the community of Israel as a whole (*m. Ta'anit* 4:8; *t. Sota* 9:8; *b. Shabbat* 88; *b. Yoma* 75a; *b. Sukkot* 49b; *b. Eruvin* 21b; *b. Ta'anit* 4:4; *Mekhilta Beshallah Shira* 3)" ("The Song of Songs as a Microcosm of the Canonization and Decanonization Process," in *Canonization and Decanonization*, A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn [eds.] [Leiden: Brill, 1998], pp. 175-176).

¹³ See Philip S. Alexander, "Tradition and Originality in the Targum of the Song of Songs," in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in Their Historical Context*, D. R. G. Beattie and M. J. McNamara (eds.) (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp. 318-339; Isaac B. Gottlieb, "The Jewish Allegory of Love: Change and Constancy," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 (1992), 1-17. For a more detailed analysis of Targum's reading, see Esther M. Menn, "Targum of the Song of Songs and the Dynamics of Historical Allegory," in *The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity: Studies in Language and Tradition*, ed. Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 423-445.

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In the second song (2:8-3:5), the king seeks the woman, but she does not respond. This episode refers primarily to the period of *Judges*, when God could not hear Israel's voice since there was a general religious decline in that period. Even in the beginning of *Samuel*, the people's first instinct was to bring the Ark to battle as a magical savior rather than praying to God.

The marriage in the third song (3:6-6:3) refers to the building of the Temple. The story does not end happily ever after because of King Solomon's involvement with foreign wives and their idolatry. One could argue that these marriages—like the Golden Calf—were well intentioned since through them Solomon built alliances and sanctified God's name with the steady flow of foreign visitors to Jerusalem. Ultimately, however, Solomon's disregarding halakha brought spiritual harm onto himself and his nation. The woman's retreat to her mother's home after the marriage symbolizes the remainder of the history in *Kings*.

The great crisis in the historical narrative arises when God knocked at the time of Cyrus and the Jews failed to respond adequately.¹⁴ God realized that He must encourage Israel to pursue Him, rather than allowing her to take the relationship for granted. Prophecy ceased. When longing for God in His absence, Jews began to translate their religious experience into words. Some employed the language of universal philosophy while others turned to *kabbala*. These are manifestations of the woman's efforts to enlist the daughters of Jerusalem to help her locate her lover (5:8-6:2).

The fourth song (6:4-8:14) represents today. Messianic potential exists, but there is no guarantee of ultimate redemption right now—just as at the time of the Return to Zion under Cyrus. To achieve redemption, we need to benefit from the accumulated experience of our relationship with God and approach it with mature wisdom. R. Cherlow's historical narrative brings us to the open ending of *Song of Songs*. It is up to us to determine whether we are sufficiently mature to engage God as a nation of destiny.¹⁵

METAPHORICAL READING #2: PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY

Though the dominant traditional metaphorical reading of *Song of Songs* refers to the relationship between God and Israel, Rambam interprets it

¹⁴ See, e.g., *Berakhot* 4a; *Yoma* 9b; *Kuzari* II:24; Malbim on *Hag.* 1:1. For further discussion, see Hayyim Angel, "Prophecy as Potential: The Consolations of Isaiah 1-12 in Context," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37:1 (2009), 3-10.

¹⁵ R. Cherlow cites the parallel to the thought of R. Soloveitchik in *Kol Dodi Dofek*. R. Soloveitchik also turned to *Song of Songs* as the call of destiny to our generation.

as a symbol of the love between an individual and God.¹⁶ While R. Cherlow assumes a coherent sequential narrative both for literal and for the historical-metaphorical reading, he shifts for the personal-metaphorical reading and adopts the approach of multiple songs, since not everyone follows the same path in personal religious development.

The common denominator underlying all approaches to God is that an infinite gulf separates God and us. There are external impediments to faith, but the internal barriers are far greater. The need for a relationship with God is innate. However, many people misdirect these inclinations and cast God in their own image. Today's paganism is manifest through approaching God with no rules. God also is expected to act instantly during crisis. The Calf serves as the paradigm for jumping into a spiritual relationship with God without following halakha. We must pursue the love of God using God's language and norms. The woman also pursues the king even when he does not respond, a key message of prayer even in times of suffering.¹⁷ We need a gradual process to build an enduring mature relationship with God.

Marriage is the ideal form of relationship, but it creates a whole new set of challenges. It may become stale, and both partners experience a loss of freedom. Similarly, some have great faith when they are younger but then lose their enthusiasm as they enter adulthood. The ongoing process of seeking God keeps our religious fire burning and increasing throughout our lifetime.

In his book on R. Soloveitchik, R. Cherlow sets out the central thesis of *Abarekha Narutsa* by briefly surveying the history of Jewish Thought. Rambam based faith on Genesis, *Kuzari* based faith on Exodus, whereas R. Soloveitchik based faith on *Song of Songs*.¹⁸ R. Soloveitchik also did not

¹⁶ See *Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:3; *Guide* 3:51. See Yosef Murciano, "Rambam and the Interpretation of *Song of Songs*" (Hebrew), in *Teshura le-Amos: A Collection of Studies in Biblical Interpretation Presented in Honor of Amos Hakham*, Moshe Bar-Asher et al. (eds.) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2007), pp. 85-108. For an analysis of medieval philosophical readings of *Song of Songs*, and how Malbim and R. Soloveitchik (in *u-Vikkashtem mi-Sham*) adopted variations of that approach, see Shalom Rosenberg, "Philosophical Interpretations of *Song of Songs*: Preliminary Observations" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 59 (1990), 133-151.

¹⁷ It is striking that of the 117 verses in *Song of Songs*, some 61 are spoken by the woman, with only 33 in the man's mouth. She initiates their encounters more frequently than he, and she gets the last word except for two dialogues. The woman takes to the streets alone at night to search for her beloved (3:1-4; 5:6-7), and even the secondary characters marvel at her unusual behavior (cf. Yair Zakovitch, *Mikra le-Yisrael: Song of Songs* [Hebrew] [Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1992], pp. 11-14).

¹⁸ See R. Yuval Cherlow, *Ve-Hayu la-Abadim be-Yadekha: me-Dialektika le-Harmoniya be-Mishnato shel ha-Rav Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik*, pp. 33-41. See

perceive a fundamental difference between the historical-metaphorical and the personal-metaphorical readings of *Song of Songs*, since both pertain to the relationship between God and humanity.¹⁹

**FINAL CHAPTER: SURVEY OF JEWISH THOUGHT
AND HOW SONG OF SONGS CAN ADDRESS TODAY'S
SPIRITUAL NEEDS**

Medieval Jewish philosophers from R. Sa'adya Ga'on through R. Hasdai Crescas attempted to translate faith into the universal language of philosophy. They explained Judaism's paradoxes and systematized its ideas, even though Tanakh and aggada do not speak in those terms. Translation makes the Torah more accessible but something gets lost in the process, particularly the experiential religiosity that Tanakh and aggada create.

R. Yehuda Halevi disagreed with most Jewish thinkers of his era. He maintained that philosophy is rooted in unproven assumptions and axioms. The *Kuzari* used philosophy to demonstrate that human reason does not contradict the Torah, a process that is different from assuming that tenets of faith can be demonstrated rationally. The *Kuzari* was proven correct over time. We cannot fathom all of life's contradictions, the nature of God, the reasons behind the *mitsvot*, and so on using only reason.

Medieval Jewish philosophy ultimately declined because it failed to answer its questions and instead generated many more. This decline was accompanied by an inward shift in Jewish Thought toward mysticism, messianism, and pietism. There was a parallel growth in talmudic *pilpul*, which creates an internally coherent system but not one that translates Judaism into a language that outsiders can understand.

Meanwhile, Kant demonstrated that philosophy cannot prove the axioms of faith. Many perceived this conclusion as reason to defect from faith altogether. R. Soloveitchik disagreed, asserting that Kant had liberated religious thinkers from some of the unsolvable questions that had bedeviled medieval philosophers. The pendulum of contemporary faith has swung back to the pre-medieval experiential world of Tanakh-aggada-Jewish Thought. We no longer attempt to prove the axioms of religion

also R. Shalom Carmy, "On Cleaving and Identification: R. Soloveitchik's Account of *Devekut* in *U-Vikkashtem Mi-Sham*," *Tradition* 41:2 (Summer 2008), 100-112.

¹⁹ See R. Soloveitchik, *U-Vikkashtem mi-Sham*, in *Ish ha-Halakha: Galui ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1992), pp. 119-120 (n. 1).

on rational-philosophical terms but rather generate authentic religious experience. This does not mean that intellectual endeavors are obsolete, only that reason alone cannot serve as the foundation of faith.

Maskilim were dissatisfied with rabbinic responses (or lack thereof) to the new intellectual-spiritual trends that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. R. Kook called on rabbis to restore aggada to its rightful place – joined with halakha. He believed that this potent combination would provide an intellectually and spiritually compelling approach to Judaism. Large segments of the Orthodox world ignored R. Kook's call and instead raised greater barriers between themselves and the general culture. R. Cherlow is answering R. Kook's call to reconnect halakha and aggada so that they form an organic unity in our religious experience.²⁰

Once we understand our history as an ongoing love encounter with God, we become part of that experience. If we ignore God's knocks, we will miss a golden historical opportunity. If we assume that today is the beginning of a guaranteed redemption because we now have the Land of Israel, it should be remembered that the couple in *Song of Songs* struggled into their marriage. On both the literal and metaphorical planes, love can never be taken for granted.

On a broader level, religious commitment is often treated today as a personal choice rather than as an externally binding commitment to God. Many other contemporary trends have impacted profoundly on every aspect of individual spirituality and society, and we need a language that can speak to people nurtured in this environment.

The Reform Movement concluded that religion is a personal choice and people should accept God and Torah on their own terms. In *Song of Songs*, the woman made that fundamental mistake at the outset (= the Golden Calf). Others refuse to acknowledge that today's world is any different from previous ages, so they erect barriers to the world (= the Spies). While this group might survive as an independent religious culture, their philosophy violates the basic principle that the Torah is eternal and relevant to all social realities.

Song of Songs teaches that there is an infinite gulf between God and us, accompanied by a constant dynamic struggle in the relationship. In our world, the tendency for instant gratification prevails. In contrast, true

²⁰ R. Haim David Halevi (1924-1998, the late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa) similarly composed his five-volume halakhic work *Mekor Hayyim ha-Shalem*—a comprehensive guide to halakha that meshes with aggada—in response to R. Kook's call (see his introduction in volume 1, pp. 9-20).

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love may be judged by its ability to weather crisis and grow into mature adulthood. In brief, our ability to relate to God is measured by our ability to love as people.

R. Akiva proclaimed that *Song of Songs* was “*kodesh kodashim*” (Mishna *Yadayim* 3:5); he considered *ve-ahavta le-re’akha kamokha* (love your neighbor as yourself) to be the central axiom of the Torah (*Sifra Kedoshim* 4:12). He also famously loved his wife, and successfully entered *pardes*.

Haggiga 14b: Four men entered the Garden (*pardes*) namely, Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, Aher, and R. Akiva.... Ben Azzai cast a look and died.... Ben Zoma looked and became demented.... Aher mutilated the shoots. R. Akiva departed unhurt. *Haggiga* 16a: R. Akiva went up unhurt and went down unhurt; and of him Scripture says: “Draw me, we will run after you (*aharekha narutsa*).” (*Song of Songs* 1:4)

The phrase used by Hazal about R. Akiva’s successful trip to *pardes* is “*aharekha narutsa*”—the title of R. Cherlow’s book. R. Akiva teaches that the love of God is not what leads to the love of people; rather, the love of people ultimately leads to the love of God. The planes of interpersonal love and love of God fuse into the Holy of Holies.

One Midrash suggests that King Solomon made the Torah accessible in a manner that nobody had done since the Torah was revealed:

He listened and tested the soundness (*izzen ve-bikker*) of many maxims (12:9)—he made handles (*oznayim*) to the Torah.... R. Yosei said: Imagine a big basket full of produce without any handle, so that it could not be lifted, until one clever man came and made handles to it, and then it began to be carried by the handles. So too, until Solomon arose, no one properly understood the words of the Torah, but when Solomon arose, all began to comprehend the Torah. (*Song of Songs Rabbah*, 1:8)

R. Cherlow’s book is a penetrating analysis and diagnosis of the spiritual needs of our age. Despite its formidable length, it is well worth the effort for rabbis and educators, as well as anyone interested in *peshat-derash* methodology, Jewish Thought, and *Song of Songs* itself. In this manner, we can extend our understanding of human love to make the love of God accessible to all Jews.