

INITIATION ONTO THE PATH OF LOVE

by Rabbi Shefa Gold

“The whole Torah is Holy,” says Rabbi Akiva, “but The Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.” When it came time to decide which of the ancient books would become part of the canon for Israel, there was a big argument about this beloved text, sometimes called “The Song of Solomon.” Nowhere in it does the name of God appear; its words were sung in every tavern; it glorifies the sexual love between a man and woman who were clearly not married; it celebrates Nature and the pleasures of the body. Yet, despite vociferous opposition, the opinion of Rabbi Akiva who was a great mystic and an important leader of his time (1st century Israel) held sway, and the Song of Songs was preserved as one of the Holy books of Torah.

Judaism is a great storehouse of treasures. And it is a vital, dynamic, living conversation that spans the globe and the centuries. Every generation inherits the accumulation of text, music, commentary, law, custom, recipes, and secret wisdom. And it is the responsibility of each generation to fully receive, re-interpret, add to the treasure and pass it on in a form that is more relevant and more alive to our present-day challenges.

The Torah commands that you must love God “with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.” You are commanded to “love the stranger” and “to love your neighbor as your self.” And you are asked to receive God’s love in the form of Torah, community, history and the wonders of Nature. These commandments about love are at the heart of Torah. They constitute at the same time, the most simple and the most complicated challenge of living a holy life.

The Path of Love, of rising to the challenge of learning to love and be loved, is the most rigorous spiritual path there is. Stepping onto the Path of Love, I am faced with every resistance, every illusion, every obstacle to self-realization. The Great Work is suddenly laid out before me in startling detail. In the words of the Song, “I was asleep but my heart was awake. Listen! My lover is knocking.”

The Song sings to all whose hearts lie awake, waiting to be roused by God, our true love, who is knocking, who calls us to become ourselves and to be connected in sacred union with all of Creation, and with the Source of All. God is knocking with the reality of each moment. The truth of this moment is distorted when desire compels me to reach out for what’s next and thus miss what is right in front of me, or when I am so preoccupied with the past or my ideas about what should be, that I miss what is. My initiation onto this Path of Love requires that I wake up and stay present to the truth that is before me, to the miraculous garden of my ongoing re-birth. It requires that I open my heart to the “Other”. It demands that I acknowledge every obstacle to love’s fulfillment. Those obstacles are the defenses that the false self has built out of layers of fear and out of the illusion of separateness from God and Creation.

One year I sat around a table at a Passover Seder with a group of women. It was during the war in Bosnia, and we all felt helpless, knowing that the tragedy of genocide was unfolding while the world stood by. As Jews, imprinted with the history of the Holocaust, we felt particularly despairing. As we re-counted the foundational story of our people, the Exodus from Egypt, we

were sensitive to its violence, the fact of all those Egyptians suffering from the plagues and the tragedy of their final drowning in the sea. Someone asked, “Don’t we have any other story? Whenever we win, someone else loses. Do we have to win our freedom at the expense of another people?” We were all reminded of the same tragedy playing itself out in the Middle East where both Israelis and Palestinians claimed their autonomy at the expense of the other, where one people’s victory meant the others defeat. “Isn’t there any other way to Freedom?” we asked. “Don’t we have any other story?” As this question hung in the air between us, the silence felt like a great weight, and then the answer dawned.

“We do have another story!” I shouted. I explained that the Tradition calls us to read and study and sing the Song of Songs during Passover. While the Book of Exodus tells the story of our outer journey from slavery to freedom, the Song of Songs tells the inner story. Rabbi Akiva hinted at this when he called the Song, the “Holy of Holies.” Just as the Holy of Holies occupied the very center of the Sanctuary, the Song of Songs stands at the center of the mystery of Freedom.

Freedom in our tradition is not merely a “freedom from”... from oppression, suffering, or servitude; it is a “freedom to”... to be in direct relationship with God our liberator. God says, I brought you out of Egypt to be your God, to be in relationship with you. It is this relationship that makes us free. The moment we cut ourselves off from God, we are back in Egypt; we are back in slavery.

The Song of Songs tells the story of relationship – its yearnings and heartbreaks as well as its triumphs and pleasures. It shouts the glories of love and whispers its secrets. I move easily from the relationship of a people with their God to the complex web of relationship in my life. The Song sends me on the spiritual path of relationship. In relationship all my ideals are tested and I am shown the places of my own fear, immaturity, impatience, pride and bitterness. Intimate relationship reveals to me where I still need work and healing. And it calls forth my greatest courage and love. My absolute best and worst character traits are made clearly visible in the practice of relationship, as well as a vision of what is possible if I were to open to the Great Love.

As I enter into the Song of Songs I am tending the garden of two relationships at once – with my beloved partner in life, and with God. These two relationships depend on each other for their strength and stability. Shortly after my husband, Rachmiel, and I fell in love, he said to me, “I’m so glad that you love God more than you love me.” He could feel that my love for God was a deep pool, a resource from which all my love flowed. He also knew that having a relationship with God would mean that I wouldn’t expect from a human something that only the Divine could give me. And Rachmiel was right. My marriage to God is the foundation of my life. It keeps me connected, and waters the garden from which all my relationships grow.

As my marriage to Rachmiel grows I am beginning to see how this human relationship refines my ability to give and receive, purifies my intentions, opens me to hard truths about myself. The fire of this relationship makes me more able to stand before God in humility and express my true passion.

As I grow in these two relationships I sometimes get glimpses of the mystery of Love itself. Rachmiel and I disappear and there is only Love. God and I disappear and there is only Love. These glimpses appear when I have surrendered myself totally. The path that the Song of Songs shows me is the path of complete embodiment. Thinking about love will not reveal its mysteries; we must enter through the senses, get our feet dirty, express our passionate longings, and breathe in the fragrances that surround us.

The Song of Songs urges us to go outside; search out the wildflowers, listen for the message of the dove and the nightingale, learn from the gazelle and the wild stag. My initiation onto the Path of Love moves me beyond mere comfort and convenience, and leads me to the wisdom and Grace that are in Nature. Only then can I discover that same wild grace in my own body. My initiation is an invitation to fully inhabit my body, explore its capacity for pleasure, and feel its attunement with the rhythms and cycles of Nature.

The truth of my spiritual life is that I encounter God the most clearly in these three ways: through my body and its expanding senses, through Nature and its dramatic and miraculous beauty, and through intimacy with another. The Song of Songs provides me with a language to talk about these three ways of encounter. Its language connects me with my ancestors who opened the same doors, walked the same path and were initiated into the mysteries of Love. With them I can sing to God, "Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses! Your sweet loving is better than wine."