

Reading Shir haShirim, Ruth, Eicha and Kohelet

By: ZVI RON

The reading of *Megillat Esther* on Purim is dealt with extensively in the Mishna and Talmud in *Masechet Megilla*. Today it is customary to read *Shir haShirim* on Pesach, the *Book of Ruth* on Shavuot, *Eicha* on the Ninth of Av and *Kohelet* on Sukkot. None of these readings are mentioned in the Talmud. In this article we will trace the origin of this custom, the ways it was performed and the reasons given for it.

The Traditional Connections Between the Holidays and the *Megillot*

Shir haShirim

A possible conceptual source for reading *Shir haShirim* on Pesach is found at the end of R. Saadia Gaon's introduction to his commentary to *Shir haShirim*. He states there "and when Solomon reigned and sat on his throne in the last days of Pesach he prophesized in *Shir haShirim* (ניבא) (בשיר השירים)." The source for this idea is unknown, but it may explain the connection between *Shir haShirim* and the last days of Pesach, when it is customarily read.¹

The earliest source that provides explanations for reading each of the *megillot* on a particular holiday is the 11th-century work *Machzor Vitry*. *Machzor Vitry* explains that *Shir haShirim* is read on Pesach because it was understood to hint to the redemption of the Israelites in 1:9, "I have likened you, my darling, to a mare in Pharaoh's chariots."² In the 1300s, R. Avraham b. Natan haYarchi reiterated the explanation found in *Machzor*

¹ S. Wertheimer, *Geon haGeonim* vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1925), p. 81, note 49.

² S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: J. Bulka, 1926), p. 304.

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Vitry in his work *Sefer haManbig*,³ which was in turn quoted by Abudraham.⁴ Additionally, many verses in *Shir haShirim* are interpreted in *Shir haShirim Rabbah* as referring to the Exodus⁵ and there are kabbalistic connections between Pesach and *Shir haShirim* as well.⁶

Another approach is that many songs are associated with Pesach, the *Song at the Sea*, the *Hallel* sung at night and at the Seder, the song to be sung in the future in the *Haftorah* of the last day of Pesach in the Diaspora, making *Shir haShirim* an appropriate addition to this holiday of songs.⁷

Ruth

The earliest explanation for why Ruth is read on Shavuot is found in the beginning of the midrash *Ruth Zuta*. The midrash asks, “What is the connection between Ruth and Atzeret, so that it is read on Atzeret, the time of the giving of the Torah? To teach you that the Torah is only given through suffering and poverty. And so it is written, ‘Your tribe dwells there; O God, in Your goodness You provide for the needy’ (Psalms 68:11).” The Torah said before the Holy One Blessed be He, “Master of the Universe, make my portion with the tribe of the needy, for if the wealthy deal with me they will become haughty, but when they are needy and deal with me, they know that they are hungry, as it is said, ‘Folly was placed on lofty heights, while rich men sat in low estate’ (*Kobelet* 10:6).”⁸ It is not clear when this midrash was composed. Most opinions range from the 10th through 12th century, though some give a much earlier date.⁹ This explanation is also brought at the end of the 11th-century work *Midrash Lekach Tov* on Ruth,¹⁰ with slightly different phrasing. Later this explanation was quoted in *Yalkut Shimoni Ruth* (end of remez 596), and from there in *Magen Avraham (Orach Chayyim 490:8)*.

³ Y. Refael, ed., *Sefer haManbig* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1978), pp. 416-417.

⁴ *Sefer Abudraham* (Jerusalem: 1995), p. 266.

⁵ See for example, *Shir haShirim Rabbah* 1:2 and 1:7. See also Shmuel Gelbard, *Otzar Ta'amei haMinbagim* (Petach Tikvah: Mifal Rashi, 1995), p. 296.

⁶ See J.D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u'Minbagim* (Tel Aviv: Shilo, 1975), p. 414.

⁷ Amos Chacham, *Da'at Mikra – Shir haShirim* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1990), p. 15.

⁸ S. Buber, ed., *Midrash Zuta* (Vilna: Romm, 1925), p. 39, 1:1. See the discussion of this teaching in Yosef Chaim David Azulai, *Simchat Haregel* (Lemberg: 1863), *limud* 3, p. 5.

⁹ Anat Reizel, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Alon Shvut: Tevunot, 2011), p. 178 (Hebrew).

¹⁰ S. Bamberger, ed., *Peirush Lekach Tov – Ruth* (Mainz: Lehman, 1887), p. 46.