



Shir Hashirim (Mandatory Palestine, ca. 1930)

The decorations are based on those found in copies of Megillat Esther from 18<sup>th</sup> century Italy, albeit with coloring typical of 1930s Palestine, and transferred to this cherished book of the Bezalel School. It was created as an art object for tourists who sought to bring home a piece of the Jewish art of the Holy Land. Fittingly, the tourist would have acquired a copy of the book of the Bible that describes the Land of Israel itself most vividly.



שבת חול המועד פסח תשע"ז Shabbat Hol Hamoed Pesah 5777



**Another Passover Season**  
**Ruth Messinger, Finkelstein Institute Social Justice Fellow, JTS; Global Ambassador and Former President, the American Jewish World Service**

As we come, again, to the end of another Passover season, many of us are looking forward to moving beyond the matzah intensity. We are obliged, also, to ask ourselves what it means to have retold the story of our people's quest for freedom, what new insights we might have gained, what the lessons are that we should take back into the world. I want to talk about our commitment to fight oppression as it manifests itself today in our lives and in the lives of others, and I want to make some observations about the roles there are to play in these struggles, about what we can learn about how to lead in these endeavors.

We tell and retell our story to remind ourselves that we have been where others are today. We are instructed to use the memory of our people's past experiences as a "compass for doing justice", speaking out and acting on behalf of those who are today's victims of oppression and inequity, as we are commanded again and again in the Torah (e.g. Exod. 22:21, Deut. 24:22).

We tell our story, and we expand on it to remind ourselves that our redemption is not complete as long as there are still people suffering. It is because of what we experienced when we fled despotic regimes that we must recognize the needs of today's immigrants—people similarly fleeing terrorism and oppression, looking for refuge, for safety, and for a new start.

And so, both implicitly and explicitly, we need to acknowledge these contemporary problems—the denials of basic human rights, discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, thefts of land and water from subsistence farmers, mounting terrorism and displacement—and think about

what we can do as individuals, in organizations, and as the entire Jewish community to help today's victims.

Our *Dayenu* prayer—as rewritten in the 2017 American Jewish World Service Haggadah—would then read:

If the world hears the cries of the oppressed, but does not come to their aid—*it will not be enough.*

If we empower others to escape violence but fail to offer them refuge—*it will not be enough.*

If our generosity supports the needs of today, but forsakes the needs of tomorrow—*it will not be enough.*

However, if we persevere until stability, peace, and justice have been attained...*Dayenu! Then it will be enough.*

And as we recite and reflect on the Exodus story, we recognize the role of a strong leader, Moshe, taking command of our people, providing them with a vision of the Promised Land, and urging them on to a better future. But we are also given several reminders that Moshe is not perfect—that he sometimes doubts his own capacity to do the job, that he wonders if his followers will actually be there for him, will stick with him on the journey. We all know and sometimes share these doubts: How did I end up in this position? How can I convince people to work with me? What if they figure out that I don't have all the answers?

There are two elements of the story that have implications for the roles we do and are called on to play in the world. One is that leadership can be scary, as it was for Moses: in order to lead, we have to acknowledge our anxieties and determine when and how to take risks. The other is that Moses is not the only hero of the Passover / Exodus story. He is alive, first of all, because of the bold actions of the midwives Shifra and Puah, whose decision to save Jewish lives is often cited as the first example of civil disobedience. And then, when Moses and his followers got to the Red Sea, it was not Moses, according to the Midrash, but Nahshon who stepped in first, waded out into danger, and was saved as the seas parted.

In rabbinic commentary on Nahshon (נחשון), we are told that he is so named because he went down into the waves [נחשול / *nahshol*] while Moses was talking with God, and we are taught that he is rewarded for this bravery (Num. Rabbah 13.7). We are told that Moses was “prolonging his

prayer,” delaying taking his next step. It was Nahshon who first faced the fear of stepping out into the unknown, who prayed as he walked that the waters not swallow him up (BT Sotah 37a).

According to the Rabbis, there is a lesson here for us as leaders, a lesson articulated by God, who said to Moses, “My beloved ones are drowning in the sea and you prolong your prayer to me? Speak to the children of Israel that they go forward” (Exod. 14:15-16).

It is possible that Moses learned from Nahshon, or was reminded again from this incident, that there are times to move forward despite one's fears. We are reminded when we listen to the story that leaders are not perfect, that they need help and encouragement. And we are taught that there are times when we must stop thinking and talking and take action, when we must exercise moral courage, stepping into whatever sea confronts us and hoping that we do it in a way that induces those who have been with us to join us in taking that next step, moving our cause forward.

*Ruth would like to acknowledge Joseph Gindi of AJWS for providing citations for the referenced texts.*

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).

## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

### A Scroll of The Song of Songs

#### The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

This decorated scroll of Shir Hashirim (which is read on the Shabbat of Pesah) is a product of the circle of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, dated to circa 1930, though the scribe and artist are unidentified. The artistic movement associated with this school was informed by the Zionist ideals of the society in which it was immersed. Many of the pioneers sought a return to an intimate physical connection between Jews and their Land, and a reimagining of the image of the Jewish body. Influenced by this ideology, the Song of Songs became beloved of the writers and artists of this group for its emphasis on the physical features of the Land of Israel—and of the bodies of the two lovers who narrate the book.