

## Torah Thoughts Shabbat/Pesakh VIII

5778:

On each of five Jewish holidays – the three pilgrimage festivals, Purim and Tisha B'Av – we read an entire book of the Tanakh. On Purim we read the book of Esther, of course, as its story is the basis for the holiday, and on Tisha B'Av we chant Eikha (Lamentations), whose mournful words and melody reflect the sadness we feel over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Each of the three major festivals also has a book associated with it: We read Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) on Sukkot in the fall, because of the connection between its focus on the transitory nature of wealth and the sukkah's representation of the fragility of our physical comforts. On Shavuot, the book we read is Ruth; as the first recorded convert to Judaism, Ruth's promise to live as a Jew accords well with Shavuot, as it commemorates the Israelites' initial promise at Mt. Sinai to accept the words of the Torah.

That leaves Pesakh, and it too has a book of its own, Shir haShirim (Songs of Songs). This work might appear to be an odd one to associate with Pesakh, consisting as it does of love poetry, some of it rather racy. In fact there was an argument among the early rabbis as to whether the book should have been included in the canon of the Tanakh at all. But on the basis of an interpretation of Rabbi Akiva, it was allowed in. He made the argument that the man and the woman whose love is described in Shir haShirim are none other than God and the people Israel; the entire book is a long allegory for their relationship.

I have always wondered just how serious Rabbi Akiva was about that interpretation. It seems to be reaching for something that is certainly not obvious, which in fact strains believability. Perhaps he just enjoyed the poetry and feared that, lacking the more exalted interpretation about God and the people, it would be lost. If so, Rabbi Akiva teaches us something important about the flexibility of the term 'sacred.' No one ever claimed that Shir haShirim was the word of God, the way Torah is, and no one associated it with a prophet, who was speaking God's message. It is not a historical work or a book of wisdom literature. Unlike any other book of the Tanakh, Shir haShirim focuses on physical attraction and love. By giving it his stamp of approval to become part of the Hebrew Bible, Rabbi Akiva granted permission to sanctify physical love just as we sanctify the acts of eating, prayer, or any other activity. By canonizing Shir haShirim, Rabbi Akiva teaches us to sanctify loving intimacy.