

**Frenemies, Wannabes and Sisters:
The Role of *B'not Yerushalayim* in Shir HaShirim**
Rabbi Yael Hammerman

I. Frenemies
Chapter 1:5-6

Shir Hashirim begins as the Shulammitte praises her lover, asks for kisses and expresses her wish to rejoice in their love together. Before he responds though, the Shulammitte shifts her attention to the *bnot Yerushalayim* – the daughters of Jerusalem (1:5). In the throes of intimacy, we get our first hint that maybe the Shulammitte has other matters on her mind... She says:

(ה) שחורה אני ונאווה בנות ירושלם כאהלי קדר כיריעות שלמה:
(ו) אל תראוני שאני שחרחרת ששזפתני השמש
בני אמי נחרו בי שמני נטרה את הכרמים כרמי שלי לא נטרתי:

*I am black but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem –
Like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.
Don't stare at me because I'm dark, because the sun has gazed upon me.
My mother's sons were angry with me,
They made me guard the vineyards; my own vineyard I did not guard.*

- How does the Shulammitte present herself here?
- What's the role of the *bnot Yerushalayim* (daughters of Jerusalem)?

Marcia Falk¹ reads and translates this excerpt as follows:

*Yes, I am black! and radiant –
O city women watching me –
As black as Kedar's goat hair tents
Or Solomon's fine tapestries.*

*Will you disrobe me with your stares?
The eyes of many morning suns
Have pierced my skin, and now I shine
Black as the light before the dawn.*

*And I have faced the angry glare
Of others, even my mother's sons
Who sent me out to watch their vines
While I neglected all my own.*

- What do you think of Falk's translation? Does it change how you read 1:5-6?

¹ From Poem #2: Falk, Marcia. The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1990.

II. Queen Bee & Wannabes

Chapter 2:4-7

The next time the Shulammitte addresses the *bnot Yerushalayim* she is either in the midst of a tryst with her lover, or she has just left him. She recounts:

(ד) הביאני אל בית היין ודגלו עלי אהבה:
(ה) סמכוני באשיות רפדוני בתפוחים כי חולת אהבה אני:
(ו) שמאלו תחת לראשי וימינו תחבקני:
(ז) השבעתי אתכם בנות ירושלם בצבאות או באילות השדה
אם תעירו ואם תעוררו את האהבה עד שתחפץ

*He brought me to the banquet hall, and his banner of love was over me
Sustain me with raisins; refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love.
His left hand was/is under my head; his right arm embraced/s me.
I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem –
By gazelles or by does of the field:
Do not wake or rouse love until it so desires/is ready!*

- Now, how does the Shulammitte present herself?
- Here, what's the role of the *bnot Yerushalayim*?
- What does the Shulammitte mean when she says the following?

*I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem –
By gazelles or by does of the field:
Do not wake or rouse love until it so desires/is ready!*

III. The Sisterhood

Chapter 5:7-8 and 5:9-6:1

The Shulammitte encounters the chorus again while searching at night for her lover in the streets of Jerusalem. This risky hunt clearly expresses her sexual longings – it would be dangerous for a young woman to set out in the dark city streets alone.

(ז) מצאני השמרים הסבכים בעיר הכוני פצעוני נשאו את רדידי מעלי שמרי החמות:
(ח) השבעתי אתכם בנות ירושלם אם תמצאו את דודי מה תגידו לו שחולת אהבה אני:

*The watchmen met me, those who patrol the town;
They struck me, they bruised me
The guards of the walls stripped me of my mantle.
I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem –
If you meet my beloved tell him this:
That I am faint with love.*

- In this excerpt, how does the Shulammitte present herself to the other women?
- What's the role of the *b'not Yerushalayim*?

While the *bnot Yerushalayim* always appear in dialogue with the Shulammitte, they say very little. However, they open their collective mouth in 5:9:

מה דודך מדוד היפה בנשים? מה דודך מדוד שככה השבעתנו?

*How is your beloved better than another, O fairest of women?
How is your beloved better than another, that you adjure us so?*

- What's the initial reaction of the *b'not Yerushalayim*?

The Shulammitte then responds with a 7 verse litany of her lover's glorious beauty, regaining her confidence and sense of superiority. It does the trick: the daughters' interest is piqued and they join her search. They ask:

פרק 1

(א) אנה הלך דודך היפה בנשים? אנה פנה דודך? ונבקשנו עמך:

*Where has your beloved gone, O fairest of women?
Where has your beloved turned? Let us seek him with you.*

- How do the roles of the Shulammitte and the *bnot Yerushalayim* shift and develop over the course of Shir HaShirim?
- What does Shir HaShirim teach us about:
 - Women's voice in the Tanach?
 - Women's relationships with each other?
- How are Shir HaShirim and its lessons relevant to us today?

