

Week 7: Song of Songs 6:13-7:13

¹³ Return, return, O Shulammite!
Return, return, that we may look upon you.
Why should you look upon the Shulammite,
as upon a dance before two armies?

Man:

¹How graceful are your feet in sandals,

O queenly maiden!

Your rounded thighs are like jewels,
the work of a master hand.

² Your navel is a rounded bowl
that never lacks mixed wine.

Your belly is a heap of wheat,
encircled with lilies.

³ Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle.

⁴ Your neck is like an ivory tower.

Your eyes are pools in Heshbon,
by the gate of Bath-rabbim.

Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon,
overlooking Damascus.

⁵ Your head crowns you like Carmel,
and your flowing locks are like purple;
a king is held captive in the tresses.

⁶ How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden!

⁷ You are stately as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.

⁸ I say I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its branches.

O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
and the scent of your breath like apples,

⁹ and your kisses like the best wine—

Woman:

that goes down smoothly,
gliding over lips and teeth.

¹⁰ I am my beloved's,
and his desire is for me.

¹¹ Come, my beloved,
let us go forth into the fields,
and lodge in the villages;

¹² let us go out early to the vineyards,
and see whether the vines have budded,
whether the grape blossoms have opened
and the pomegranates are in bloom.

There I will give you my love.

¹³ The mandrakes give forth fragrance,
and over our doors are all choice fruits,
new as well as old,
which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.

Meditation

This poem begins with the image of the woman dancing, elusive and ever in motion, in harmony with all that is alive. The voice seems to be a chorus calling out to the woman, perhaps in the rhythm of her dance. The name "Shulammite" has multiple meanings: it is a play on the name Solomon and its root may be both *shalem* (Jerusalem) and *shalom* (wholeness). Again, the woman embodies all that is good and noble, all that we desire, the union of human and divine. This does not imply that she is divine, but that love itself is a yearning for union with the divine.

The man's praise for his beloved's beauty uses a pattern of imagery familiar from the other poems, incorporating all the senses and an all-encompassing vision of city and country in settings both familiar and exotic (*Heshbon, Bath-rabbim, Lebanon*). This poem itself recreates the movement of dance as the woman interrupts the man without pause (7:9), and offers an invitation that echoes the very first song (7:11: *Come, my beloved, /let us go forth into the fields*). She repeats that "belonging" to her beloved and being the object of his desire does not demean her or make her his property (7:10: *I am my beloved's, / and his desire is for me*). The structure and language of this poem express the beautiful mutuality of love, like the movement of a dance, ennobling both lovers in the bold and gentle rhythms of life.

Nelson Mandela's letters from prison to his wife Winnie Madikizela-Mandela express a similar vision of love as a force that is both grounding and liberating, making the world both safe and exciting, ever familiar and ever new.

These are excerpts from *The Prison Letters of Nelson Mandela*, ed. Sahm Venter (Liveright Publishing, 2018)

November 16, 1969 (p. 140) – *I do wish you to know that you are the pride of my heart, and with you on my side, I always feel I am part of an invincible force that is ready to win new worlds. I am confident that, however dark and difficult times might seem to be now, one day you will be free and able to see the beautiful birds and lovely fields of our country, bathe in its marvelous sunshine and breathe its sweet air. . . .*

June 20, 1970 (pp. 175-76) – *During the eight lonely years I have spent behind bars I sometimes wished we were born the same hour, grown up together and spent every minute of our lives in each other's company. I sincerely believe that had this been the case, I would have been a wise man.*

July 1, 1970 (p. 179) - *If calamities had the weight of physical objects we should long have been crushed down, or else we should by now have been hunch-back, unsteady on our feet, and faces full of gloom and utter despair. Yet my entire body throbs with life and is full of expectations. Each day brings a fresh stock of experiences and new dreams. I am still able to walk perfectly straight and firmly. What is even more important to me is the knowledge that nothing can ever ruffle you and that your step remains as fleet and graceful as it has always been – a girl who can laugh heartily and infect others with her enthusiasm.*