

Greeting our Loneliness

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Like many beautiful poems, *Lekhab Dodi* is confusing. The central and perhaps unanswerable question of *Lekhab Dodi* is who is being addressed by whom—who is the beloved? who is the bride? who is the speaker? Is the bride the *Shekhinah*? Is she Jerusalem? Is she the wife of the male speaker? Is she the Jewish people? Is she our second soul? This holy loving confusion always calls to mind for me one of the sweetest *midrashim* that I know about Shabbat:

למה ברכו – ... ר' ברכיה ור' דוסתאי אומרים: שאין לו בן זוג – חד בשבתא תרי, תלתא ארבעתא, חמשא ערובתא, שבתא לית לה בן זוג... תני ר' שמעון בן יוחאי: אמרה שבת לפני הקב"ה רבונו של עולם לכולן יש בן זוג, ולי אין בן זוג! אמר לה הקב"ה: כנסת ישראל היא בן זוגך. וכיון שעמדו ישראל לפני הר סיני אמר להם הקב"ה זכרו הדבר שאמרתי לשבת: כנסת ישראל היא בן זוגך, הינו דבור "זכור את יום השבת לקדשו".

Why did [God] bless [Shabbat]?... R. Berakhiah and R. Dostai say: Because Shabbat doesn't have a partner. The first of the week has the second, the third [has] the fourth, the fifth [has] *Erev Shabbat*, but Shabbat doesn't have a partner... R. Shimon bar Yohai teaches: Shabbat said before the Holy Blessed One: Master of the Universe! Everyone has a partner, but I don't have a partner. The Holy Blessed One said to her: The Assembly of Israel is your partner. And when Israel stood before Mount Sinai the Holy Blessed One said to them: Remember what I told Shabbat, the Assembly of Israel is your partner. That's why the commandment says: "Remember the day of Shabbat to sanctify it (*lekad'sho*)."

R. Shimon bar Yohai's interpretation relies on three exegetical opportunities provided by the 4th commandment—זכור את יום השבת לקדשו, Remember the day of Shabbat to sanctify it. The first is that God says to "remember" Shabbat, although in the unembellished Torah text this is the first that Israel is hearing of Shabbat—so how could they remember it? The second is the extra word "day" in the "day of Shabbat." Finally, the third is the play on the word *lekad'sho* which literally means to set aside, or sanctify (as in *Kiddush*), but often means to betrothe, as in *Kiddushin*. So God asks us to remember (*Zakehor*) the existential loneliness of Shabbat (*yom ha-shabbat*)—which is a function of its singularity as a day, a *yom*—and how we have been promised to Shabbat as her life-partner (*lekad'sho*).

When I sing *Lekhab Dodi*, I like to think that Shabbat is the bride and that we are fulfilling God's promise to Shabbat on our behalf—Israel is your partner, Israel will love, respect, and celebrate you. Israel will appreciate you and greet you with joy.

Shabbat doesn't quite fit in. The other days are about work and Shabbat is about rest. The other days are about surviving and Shabbat is about existing. The six days of the week know why and for whom they have been created, but Shabbat has to wait and find out.

When I sing *Lekhab Dodi* I think about the loneliness of Shabbat, of how it feels to be left out, to be different. And someone else might tell you that what makes you different is what makes you special, but all of that specialness can be isolating and all that uniqueness can feel unkind. The reason why the Jewish people is such a good partner for Shabbat is that human beings understand what it means to be lonely, to feel different, to not understand why we're here, and to feel misunderstood by others. We're a good partner for Shabbat, and Shabbat is a good partner for us because it reminds us to be patient, Shabbat reminds us to listen for a love that is coming, to remember it. Shabbat provides us with an opportunity to appreciate who we are, to connect with other people and with God from a place of understanding that loneliness is a force that unites. Shabbat is alone, God is alone, we are alone—and that brings us together. Shabbat is the bride, but we wear white, because we too are the bride. As we greet Shabbat, we greet ourselves and as we embrace Shabbat, we embrace one another and say, "let's be unique together." And the refrain of *Lekhab Dodi* is "go, my love" which is one person encouraging another—"let's welcome Shabbat"—together.