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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag

FOR YOM HA'ATZMAUT - TEHILLIM PEREK 107

In Israel, Yom Ha'zikaron [Memorial Day] and Yom Ha'Atzmaut [Independence Day] are separated by a mere split second.

Even though this proximity doesn't appear to be fair to either day, it is precisely this proximity that gives extra meaning to both days. Our awareness that the dedication of those who fell made our independence possible gives us the strength to cope with the sorrow of Yom Ha'Zikaron. At the same time, our awareness of that terrible price, encourages not only to appreciate our joy on Yom Ha'Atzmaut, but also to strive to channel our independence in the proper direction.

This contrast between sorrow and joy at a time of redemption is reflected in Tehillim 107. It is the custom in Israel to recite that perek before davening Maariv on Yom Ha'Atzmaut. In the following shiur, as we will analyze the internal structure of Tehillim 107, we will arrive at a better understanding of why it was chosen to be read on this day.

[If possible, I highly recommend that you first glance through this perek, noting its opening and closing sections, and paying attention to the key phrases that repeat themselves. See if you can identify a clear pattern.]

INTRODUCTION

Tehillim 107 can easily be divided into four distinct sections:

- 1) 1-3 the opening statement
- 2) 4-32 the main section
- 3) 33-41 an additional section
- 4) 42-43 the closing statement

In our shiur, we will first explain this division; afterwards we will discuss its significance.

THE HEADER - A CALL FOR PRAISE (107:1-3)

Let's begin by reviewing the first three psukim (17:1-3), noting how they actually form one complete sentence:

"Praise Hashem, for He is good, His kindness is eternal [1];
Let this [praise] be recited by those whom God has redeemed
from all adversity [2], and by those whom He gathered from
the lands, from east, west, north, and from the sea [3].

This opening statement 'sets the stage' for the psukim that follow, for beginning in verse four, we will find four examples of individuals whom God has redeemed, and hence need to praise Him.

THE MAIN SECTION (107:4-32)

As you study the next set of psukim, it will become obvious how they form a distinct section. To identify this section, simply note the repetition of some key phrases. Let's begin with the 'phrase of

praise' (that we expect to find based on the header). Note how the phrase "yodu la'Hashem chasdo, v'niflotav l'bnei Adam" is repeated four times (in psukim 8, 15, 21, & 31).

However each of these four 'calls for praise' is preceded by the description of the specific case of distress. As you review the perek, note how four situations are introduced:

- 1) A person lost in a desert without food & water (see 4-5).
- 2) A prisoner jail and in distress (see 10-12)
- 3) A person who became deathly ill (see 17-18)
- 4) A sailor lost at sea in a storm (see 23-27)

Then, each case of distress is followed by an almost identical cry to God for assistance: "v'yitzaku el Hashem b'tzaar lahem..." (see 107:6, 13, 19, and 28).

As we would expect, this prayer is followed by a description of how God brings redemption to each individual:

- 1) Lost in a desert found his way to civilization (107:7).
- 2) The prisoner was released (see 107:14)
- 3) The deathly ill recovered (see 107:20)
- 4) The storm stopped, the sailor arrives at port (107:29-30)

Finally, after this redemption, he who was saved praises God for his redemption. Note as well how each praise of "yodo la'Hashem..." is followed by an additional pasuk, describing a special aspect of that praise (see 107:9, 16, 22, & 32).

In fact, most of us were probably already familiar with these four cases of distress, for they are the four cases when a person today is required to "bench goy'mel":

- I. One who crossed a desert (4-5).
- II. One who was released from prison (10-12)
- III. One who fell deathly ill and recovered (17-18)
- IV. One who returned from travel at sea (23-27)

[During the time of the Temple, these four cases required a person to bring a 'Korban Todah' - a sacrifice of

thanksgiving. Today, we "bench goymel" for them instead of a korban, usually after an "aliya" to the Torah.]

Let's review this four-stage pattern that repeats itself four times in this chapter:

- A) tzara - a situation of distress
- B) zeaka - crying out to God for assistance "v'yitzaku el Hashem b'tzr la'hem, m'mtzukatam yoshi'aym"
- C) yeshuah - salvation
- D) hodaya - thanks, i.e. praise to God "yodu l'hashem chasdo, v'niflo'tav l'vnei adam" followed by a more specific pasuk of 'hodaya'.

In this manner, the main section (107:4-32) provides four examples for the opening statement (107:1-3) of this psalm.

From this section alone, we can learn a very important lesson. When a person is in distress:

- (A) He is expected to pray to God for assistance.
- (B) He should also relate to the possibility that his distress is in punishment of his wayward behavior (see psukim 11, 17, & 20).
- (C) Upon his deliverance he is expected to thank Hashem and tell the story of his salvation in public
- (D). A Thanksgiving sacrifice is offered. [See 107:22 - "... and they shall bring thanksgiving offerings, and tell His deeds in joy".]

THE ADDITIONAL SECTION (107:33-41)

Even though we may have expected the psalm to end here, it doesn't. Instead, we find an additional section in 107:33-41 that no longer follows this 'cycle', nor does it describe situations of individual distress and redemption. Instead, this section describes God's overall 'hashgacha' (providence) over the land and nature. As a consequence of the deeds of the nation, God can take a fruitful land and cause it to become a desert (see 107:33-34). He can also do exactly the opposite (see 107:35), taking a swamp land and make it prosper. The psalm also describes how society can prosper and then fail, the failure - in punishment of their deeds (107:36-39). Similarly, God will uplift the afflicted by this society and return them to the prosperity that they deserve (107:40-41). Now we must explain what this additional section adds to the message of the main section.

HASHGACHA IN BOTH REALMS

Even though both of these sections of this psalm discuss man's recognition of God's providence ["hashgacha"], each deals with a different realm. The main sections deals with the cases that relate to individuals, while the additional section relates to communal life and God's providence over the land and His nation.

God expects man to see God not only in relation to the events of his own life, but also to find His hand in historical events and the rise and fall of societies. As man exists in both realms, he must understand that his relationship with God manifests itself in both.

In the manner, the opening section (107:1-3) serves as an introduction to both sections, as it points to a historical aspect of our national existence as well.

"Hodu L'Hashme ki tov, ki l'olam chasdo. Yom'ru ge'u lei
Hashem asher g'alam m'yad tzar, um'artzot kibtzum
m'mizrach u'maarav, m'tzafon, u'm'yam"

Jews in distress who were saved and gathered together from all four corners of the earth are required to praise Hashem (say Hallel) for their deliverance. Note that even the four examples of individual redemption reflect typical cases of the return of exiles to their land (travelling deserts and seas, battling illness, etc.).

THE CLOSING STATEMENT (107:42-43)

The final two psukim of this perek emphasize this conclusion:

"Let the upright see this and rejoice, as the mouth of the
wrongdoers is stopped.
Let the wise man take note of these things;

and he will recognize God's kindness" (107:42-43)

In this closing pasuk: "mi chacham v'yishmor ay'leh, v'yit'bonnu chasdei Hashem", we find the primary lesson of the entire perek. One who is wise, will understand this concept of 'hashgacha', and will then be able to find God's hand in the history of mankind.

YOM ATZMAUT

From the opening psukim alone, it becomes clear why this perek was chosen to read on Yom Atzmaut. During the first half of the twentieth century, especially during the Holocaust, Am Yisrael was in terrible distress. The State of Israel became the refuge for tens of thousands of Jews who had nowhere else to turn to. Thousands of Jews, unwanted in their own countries, came to the land of Israel from all directions, by land and by sea. There were numerous cases of individual and group salvation, and as these people returned to the land of their ancestors, the land itself 'came back to life'.

A land that lay desolate for thousands of years became fruitful and prosperous once again. One who is 'wise' can perceive that God may be giving a message to His people (through these events) the time has come to return to their land.

TEHILLIM 107 and SEFER SHOFTIM

As you may have noticed already, the 'cycle' that we discerned in the main section is very similar to the 'cycle' of Am Yisrael's history as described Sefer Shoftim. In fact, the overall structure of Tehillim 107 is very similar to the overall structure of Sefer Shoftim.

In our study of Sefer Shoftim, we identified the following sections:

CHAPTERS TOPIC

- 1-2 Introduction to the 'cycle'
- 3-16 The 'cycle' itself (examples)
- 17-22 An additional section (making an educational point)

However, the cycle in Sefer Shoftim was slightly (but significantly) different. There we found the repetition of the following four stages:

- 1) tzara - Bnei Yisrael leave God, and hence are punished
- 2) zeaka - They cry out to God for salvation
- 3) yeshuah - God sends redemption via the SHOFET
- 4) sheket - National stability and quiet are restored

then the cycle starts over again.

Note how the cycle in Tehillim 107 (described above) is almost identical, except for the final stage:

- A) tzara - a situation of distress (caused by sin)
- B) tzaaka - crying out to God for assistance
"v'yitzaku el Hashem b'tzr la'hem, m'mtzukatam yoshi'aym"
- C) yeshuah - salvation
- D) hodaya - thanks, i.e. praise to God
"yodu l'hashem chasdo, v'niflo'tav l'vnei adam"

In contrast to Sefer Shoftim where the final stage was "sheket", Tehillim 107 calls for a more 'active' recognition by Am Yisrael of God's hand in our redemption. This 'passive' reaction in Sefer Shoftim caused the cycle to continue to repeat itself. Had Bnei Yisrael been more 'active' and praised God

properly for their redemption during the time of the Shoftim, that time period may have been more successful.

[Note that in Sefer Shoftim there was one example of "hodaya", i.e. "shirat devorah" (and hence its emphasis). Note as well the Gideon, who had the potential to become king was the next leader. Unfortunately, after his victory he built an "efod zahav" instead leading Bnei Yisrael in praise of God. Recall how Sefer Shoftim takes a sharp turn downhill after that incident.]

However, it would appear that David ha'melech understood this lesson from Sefer Shoftim. Recall that Sefer Shoftim was written by Shmuel ha'navi, the same prophet who anointed David to become king. In the next time period after Sefer Shoftim, i.e. the time period of David, Bnei Yisrael are in distress once again from the

Phlishtim and from many other surrounding nations. First Shaul, and later David become national leaders who achieve military victory over their enemies and bring salvation to Am Yisrael.

It is here where David is different than all who led Am Yisrael before him. Note how David understands the above message and sings God's praise (in song) after each of his victories (see Shmuel II chapter 22, also was Haftara for shvii shel pesach), better known as "shirat David".

In fact, psalm 107 (and most all of Sefer Tehillim) was written during the time period of David. Many other psalms were written by David when he was in "tzaara" (distress), just review the headers of chapters 31 thru 35 and 51 thru 65! Likewise, David wrote numerous psalms praising God for His redemption; simply review chapters 105 thru 118 and 145 thru 150!

It would seem that David ha'melech internalized the message of Sefer Shoftim (and his 'rebbe' Shmuel). Most likely, it is for this reason that David's offspring were chosen to be the dynasty (see Shmuel II chapter 7, read carefully!) that will lead Bnei Yisrael to redemption in messianic times.

BA'YAMIM HA'HEYM, B'ZMAN HA'ZEH

It is also not by chance that the Bet ha'Mikdash is finally built by David's son Shlomo. It is also not by chance that the time period of David is the first time in Jewish history when Am Yisrael reaches a position of international stature, and we achieve positive relations with our neighboring countries.

Should we be able to internalize this same message in our own generation, we would then be worthy of achieving a similar result.

For those who do recite Hallel on Yom Atzmaut, be it chapter 107 and/or Hallel "shaleym" (113 thru 118) [with or without a "bracha"], the message of Tehillim 107 can help guide us in the proper direction.