

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Tehila U-Berakha: Blessings and Praise
An In-depth Analysis of 'Mizmor 145'* - Part I

"One who says 'Tehila Le-David' (Ashrei) every day, three times, (1) it is promised to him that he is considered a 'ben olam ha-ba.'" (Bavli, Berakhot 4b)

Psalm 145, commonly referred to as "Ashrei" (2) in Jewish liturgy, is one of the most renowned psalms in Tanakh. (3) The Talmud's grandiose extol of the one who recites Ashrei, highlights the mizmor's stature in Psalms and in the liturgy in particular. What is so special about this prayer that, amongst all the psalms, Chazal picked Ashrei as one of the decisive prayers in the preparatory stages of tefila? (4)

The Talmud suggests two answers, which, working together reveal the importance of the mizmor. On the one hand the pasuk (verse) of "poteach et yadekha" (... God sustains all man) is a critical element in the prayer. The idea of God providing for all in need is the highest form of physical good, which should be a prerequisite for praise and thanks. On the other hand, the Talmud explains that the uniqueness of Ashrei lies not in the explanation of any specific pasuk alone, but in understanding the mizmor's all-inclusive approach towards speaking to God. The acrostic nature gives a sense of an all-encompassing praise of God.

In line with the Gemara, I would like to suggest that the pre-eminence of this mizmor is based on internal (specific pesukim) and external (the mizmor as a whole) analyses. Through a short analysis of the structure, and some of the pesukim, perhaps we can begin to appreciate the depth of the tefila and how it truly embodies our most genuine outpouring of emotions.

I. "TEHILA LE-DAVID"

Amos Chacham, in the sefer Da'at Mikra on Tehilim (p. 570), points out that the heading "tehila le-david," as a phrase, is a hapex legomenon; it appears only once in all of Tanakh. This fact coupled with the literary allusion to the last pasuk of Ashrei - "Tehilat

Hashem yedaber pi..." sets up an inclusio (an enclosed unit) of a song created for, and dedicated to, praising God.

If the idea of tehila is one foundation of the prayer, the notion of berakha is the other. Permeating throughout the mizmor, the concept of berakha makes its presence as an integral force in one's relationship with God. Some scholars assert that the word 'berakha' in the mizmor is a "mila madrikha" - a guiding light throughout the psalm. (5) It is no coincidence, then, that there exists an inclusio with regard to the word berakha as well. The last line in the perek, "...Vi-yevarekh kol basar..." reminds us of the first pasuk: "Va-avarkha shimkha...."

An initial blessing from the author alone, evolves into "all mankind blessing His holy name for eternity." The tradeoff between King David's personal praise and blessing in the mizmor, and a more universal one, pervades the psalm. (6)

A praise and a blessing, two expressions of man's encounter with his creator; yet, each focuses on a distinct aspect of man's consciousness. What is the nature of these two approbations? Let us attempt a response through an analysis of the first two pesukim.

"AROMIMKHA," "BEKHOL YOM"

"I will exalt you my king / I will bless your name forever."

"Every day I will bless you / I will praise your name forever."

The first two pesukim of Ashrei ("Aromimkha" and "Bekhol yom") seem redundant. In fact, when analyzing the two statements next to each other they are almost an exact mirror image.

Why do we need both pesukim? Why must both a praise and a blessing appear side by side, twice, as they introduce us to the mizmor? The answer might stem from an investigation into the definitions of the acts of praising and blessing.

What is the meaning of praise? When we praise someone, we, first and foremost, set that person apart from ourselves. "You, who are worthy of praise, are in a class of your own." The more extraordinary the person, the more meaning is given to the praise, and the more separated the person giving the praise becomes from the one receiving it. (7)

When we praise God, we attest to his transcendence and imminence beyond all scope of our reality. At the same time, we realize our own limitations and humility that we even dare make an association between the lonely servant and the 'melekh malkhei ha-melakhim.' The tehila, then, reflects the distance between man and God.

Now that we understand the notion of praise, does the "tehila" mentioned in the first line reflect this exalting, distancing idea? Through the use of a literary technique called chiasmus (8) we might develop a clearer picture as to the definition of this word. When looking into the first two pesukim a striking pattern emerges - ABBA.

(1a) "Aromimkha Elokai hamelekh // (1b) Va'avarkha shimkha le-olam va'ed."

(2b) "Bekhol yom avarekheka // (2a) Va-ahalela shimkha le-olam va'ed."

1a "I will EXALT you my Lord, the King //

1b (And) I will BLESS your name forever."

2b "Every day I will BLESS you //

2a (And) I shall PRAISE your name forever."

The second verb (1b) to bless, is equal to the third verb (2b) to bless. At the same time the first and fourth verbs correspond to each other - exalting and praising. Tehila, then, takes on the meaning of "aromimkha" - of raising God up to unfathomable levels.

Tehila, then, I understand. It refers to a praising of God by raising Him up and definitionally lowering, and distancing, ourselves from Him. The question though is how to define the term berakha. The Encyclopedia Biblica begins by saying that the etymology of this word is the source of great debate. (9) While some define it in terms of greeting or giving goodwill, others say it stems from giving a gift to another. Putting those two definitions together we have a notion that "God will be granting the recipient a special providence and that He will have a special relationship and CLOSENESS to the one receiving the blessing." (10)

In contrast to the praise which engenders distance, berakha seems to do the exact opposite. When I bless someone, there is a sense of familiarity and comfort enabling this good wish to be conveyed. I bless because I know you and respect you as a friend, and because I would like to cultivate and enrich that relationship. A blessing stems from an intimate experience between man and fellow man, or between man and God.

If a berakha exhibits a connection, a tehila reflects a separation; one evokes familiarity, the other, reticence. How then can it be that these two seemingly contradictory themes are found in the same mizmor - nay, in the same pasuk! Do they not evoke absolutely contradictory feelings about one's friends, about one's God?

In truth, these two contradictory feelings comprise much of man's feelings towards his creator - and yes they are contradictory. At times God is so far away, it is hard to imagine He is guiding us at every turn. Yet, at that point, a shy attempt is made to connect, to praise Him:

"Aromimkha Elokai ha-melekh - I will exalt you my king."

Suddenly, a warm, soothing, feeling overtakes him, and the aloof praise evolves into an intimate, yet penultimate, blessing:

"Va-avarkha shimkha... - and I will bless your name."

Man finds it in himself to surge to the sky, to be one with his maker - to bless God. It becomes one of those special moments within each person which imparts strength and encouragement, comfort and reassurance.

In the same breadth, while God is so close, the author attempts to express the next level in the relationship. At first the blessing would only reach the 'name' of God:

"Va-avarkha shimcha," - "I will bless your name;"

in the second pasuk, there is no medium between man and God:

"Bekhol yom avarekheka - every day I shall bless you."

We can reach the level of intimacy with our creator; the king we had encountered in the first pasuk, has gently turned into our father, our friend.

Yet, when all is sublime, when we think we have reached the pinnacle of spiritual existence, as sudden as it came, the closeness fades away, the aloofness sets in, we can only praise His name:

"Ve-a'halela shimkha... - and I shall praise your name...."

The ups and downs in our spiritual activity, the moments of ecstasy and times of despair, these are what mold our being, create our religious personality, comprise our dialogue with our God. This might be part of the message of the mizmor; when we describe our dialogue with God, we must recognize the nature of who we are and what we can achieve. We begin with the tehila - we approach God tentatively, sheepishly, but at times we are able to bless Him with the familiarity of a close friend (11).

This notion of tehila and berakha which introduces the concept of the mizmor, concludes the prayer in the same style:

"Tehilat Hashem yedaber pi, vi-yevarekh kol basar shem kodsho le-olam va-ed." ("My mouth will speak praise to Hashem, and all mankind will bless His holy name forever.")

If tehila and berakha are indicated as the key elements in the mizmor, which one transcends the other? Is the ideal a praise or a blessing of God? While we needn't count points and choose the "winner" of this mock contest, Dr. Meir Weiss offers an internal answer, pointing to berakha as the key to the whole prayer. When surveying the mizmor the word berakha appears three times in three different ways.

1. Pesukim aleph and bet - "Va-avarkha" = I will bless
2. Pasuk yud - "Va-chasidekha yevarakhukha" = your righteous will bless you"
3. Pasuk kaf-aleph - "vi-yvarekh kol basar" = all mankind will bless you forever."

What we witness is a desire, an implicit yearning on the part of the author, that this close relationship which he experiences with his maker, evolves into a universal cognizance and even closeness with God.

Once we accept the idea that Ashrei attempts to reflect a relationship which can be comprised of unceremonious dialogue with our creator, one question remains: how do we attain that closeness of blessing beyond the fleeting emotional high? The answer might be found in some other vital pesukim in the mizmor. A further analysis of specific pesukim in the psalm will help elucidate on the nature of how man achieves closeness to God.

Endnotes:

(1) The Vilna edition of Shas includes the words "three times," whereas the edition of the Rosh did not have those words. See Gilyonei Ha-shas of Rabbi Akiva Eiger Berakhot 4b. See Teshuvot Rav Natronai Gaon, Ofek Institute edition, Jerusalem 1994.

(2) Though the first two pesukim in which the title "Ashrei" is found were added on by Chazal, and stem from psalms 84 and 144 respectively. Why they inserted these two pesukim is a topic for another shiur.

(3) For an overall, in-depth, analysis of this mizmor, see: Dr. Meir Weiss, in Yovel Shai, Bar Ilan pub. 1958 pps. 185-207; Jacob Bazak, Structures and Contents in the Psalms, Dvir Publishing, Jerusalem 1984, pps. 11-49. See also Yehuda Breuer in Sefer Ha-yovel of Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, Vol. 2 pps.15-27; and Amos Chacham, Da'at Mikra, in Sefer Tehilim, Vol. 2 pps. 576-580.

(4) The Ba'al Ha-maor, in his interpretation of the Yerushalmi, places Ashrei as penultimate to Kri'at Shema in preparation for Shemoneh Esreh. See Ba'al Ha-maor on page 1 of the Rif Berakhot.

(5) Dr. Meir Weiss, in an article entitled "Tehila Le-david," quotes L. J. Liebreich in HUCA XVII Cincinnati 1956, 181-192. Weiss, himself, builds on this idea and uses the concept of berakha in the mizmor to show an escalation from the first pasuk, until its pinnacle in pasuk 21. See inside.

(6) One might say that the move from singular praise/blessing to a collective one was the hope and aspiration of King David as he wrote the Psalm. See Weiss, pps. 205-207.

(7) An analogy of this would be to praise your friend saying he was a good basketball player. That praise might not reflect your feeling lower or worse of a basketball player than he. However as you begin to praise greater players, reaching the superstars of the sport, you cannot help but recognize their supreme, overarching, greatness in this sport, to the exclusion of anyone else in the world. The thought of playing on the same court as them would seem

ludicrous. Lehavdil, this sense of unworthiness is our feeling when we praise God, who is omnipotent and omniscient in all.

(8) Reflecting a chiasmic structure - ABBA.

(9) Encyclopedia Mikra'it; Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1964 pps. 354-361.

(10) This quote is from Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, in Jewish Meditation, Schocken Books New York, p.108.

(11) For a beautiful, extensive, analysis of this relationship, see Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, "U-vekashtem Mi-sham" in Ish Ha-halakha - Galui Ve-nistar, Jerusalem, 1979.