

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

by Rabbi Avi Baumol

MIZMOR 27: Faith in the "Land of Life"

I. "Le-David: God is my light, my salvation; from whom shall I fear? God is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?" (27:1)

II. "One thing I ask from God, it, shall I beseech of Him: that I may dwell in the house of God all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of God and to inquire in His Temple." (27:4)

III. "Hide not Your face from me [God]; do not withhold Your help in anger ... cast me not off, nor forsake me, O God of my salvation. Deliver me not unto the will of my adversaries; for false witnesses have risen up against me, and breathe out cruelty." (27:9,12)

Psalm 27 can be split into three units. Verses 1 to 3 might be entitled "Hymn of Confidence." This section reflects David in his most trusting state towards his Creator. Verses 4 to 6 have David requesting "one" seemingly multifaceted thing of God. The last section of the poem (from 7 to 14) exhibits a temperament contradictory to the first section: fear leading to despair.

Several questions arise after reading this psalm:

Structurally, how can we resolve the seeming contradiction between the first section and last section? What is the link between King David's trust in God, his fear of man and his uncertainty about God's salvation?

Additionally, how does the middle segment, the request from God, fit into any aspect of the psalm?

A third question is a grammatical one: verse 12, which reads, "Were it not for ..., I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" appears to be incomplete. Additionally, this verse is interesting because the word "lulei" (were it not) has a

set of dots over and under it. The interpretation of this word might be the key to understanding this sentence, even the psalm as a whole.

As stated, the first and last sections of the psalm reflect David's contradictory stance towards God. On the one hand, he says "...my light, my salvation...;" on the other hand he begs, "Hide not Your face from me, Do not withhold Your help in anger...". How can the psalm posit such inconsistent feelings by a man towards his God?

The answer is clear. Poetry can be defined as the ability to transmit to paper that which one feels at any given moment. The beauty of the Psalms lies within the poetic medium through which King David allows us to experience his thought processes. This permits us to feel the emotions which reverberated in his soul. This principle is a guide to understanding many of David's psalms.

Man, by his very nature, is inconsistent. Perfection, absolute consistency, is left for God and His angels. The tension which exists between the sublime faith in God as one's salvation versus the harsh reality of life (where one might sometimes feel abandoned by God) leads to a complex set of emotions regarding faith in religion.

The drastic change in tone between the sections of this psalm has led some scholars to suggest that the two halves of this psalm were originally two separate songs put together by an editor. According to our understanding of this psalm, this is far from the truth. It is precisely this tension which King David intended to convey through the different tones of this psalm.

Precisely when King David feels implicit trust that God will ultimately save him, he looks around in this world and sees his enemies, his misfortune and his uncertainty, all of which lead him close to despair. Often our relationship with God wavers between blind faith and the practicality of a troubling present. The struggle lies in trying to overcome our fear of reality and simultaneously bringing our faith to the forefront of our lives.

King David lived through many trials and much loneliness, where it seemed as though he was abandoned by everyone who loved him. In this psalm we witness David's endeavor to rise above his apprehensions and integrate his faith into the real world. Perhaps this is the message which emerges from this psalm. We cannot deny our humanity, which

includes inconsistent feelings towards God. Instead, we should harness our energy to overcome these fears and ask for God's help in accomplishing this.

The second question we asked challenges the relevance of the middle section in light of the rest of this psalm. It is here that David requests "to sit in the house of God all my life." This section functions as the transition between the former and latter segments of the poem. In the first part, David pledges his unbending confidence and trust in God. This confidence could be described as David's "other-worldly" faith in God. The latter half reflects his "this-worldly," practical feelings of his tribulations and afflictions, which prevent him from undying trust in God. The middle paragraph, the supplication of David to his God, comes to bridge the gap that exists between his ironclad confidence in God and his uncertainty in life. The appeal is that if God allows him to "sit in the house of God" (21:4) - possibly a metaphor for having the glory of God as a constant in his life - he will no longer fear his enemies and doubt God's guidance. From this request stems all the other components of his plea: "to witness the beauty of God, and inquire in the holiest of places;" "to be guarded against the evils in the tent of God;" "to raise myself up against my adversaries," and ultimately: "to sing and praise God consistently throughout my life."

However, we still have not resolved the grammatical problems posed by verse 12. To understand it better, let us first look at the surrounding verses. Perhaps the context will give us some insight:

"Deliver me not unto the will of my adversaries;  
for false witnesses have risen up against me, and  
breathe out cruelty." (27:11)

"Were it not for ..., I had believed to see the  
goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." (27:12)

"Wait for the Lord, be of good courage and He will strengthen your heart; wait  
for the Lord." (27:13)

Many commentators explain verse 12 as a sentence fragment, saying that it really should have read, "Were it not for the fact that I had believed in God, I would have fainted." Or, as Rashi states, "If I had not believed in God, the evildoers would have breathed out cruelty to destroy me..."

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch reads the passage differently. According to him, the strange dots over "lulei" inform the reader that this word is referring to the previous sentence. According to Hirsch, the verse reads as follows:

"Were it not for the fact that these false witnesses are rising up against me causing me harm, I would be able to [consistently] believe that I would see the revealed good of God already in this world, the world of the reality, and not only after my death (in the world to come). But it is those suspicions and the slander that they speak against me which pain me, and therefore, against them, I ask You God, for Your help."

Rav Hirsch recognized that until the very end of the psalm, David was pained by the harsh reality of his world, and turned to God in supplication to effect his destiny. The last line has David encouraging himself not to give up hope, to continue to wait for God to grant him salvation. "Wait and hope for God [to alter your predicament]; be strong, and God will strengthen your heart...wait for God."

Psalm 27 relates to us the deepest emotions the King of Israel felt at a troubling time in his life. His constant struggle between absolute faith in God and uncertainty due to his enemies left him with a "single" multifaceted request: to bestow upon him the glory of God, in all aspects of his life, to certify that his enemies will no longer detract from his uncompromising faith in his savior.

Through this understanding of David's poetry, we can relate his message to our everyday lives. We also struggle between faith in God's active role in our lives and the seeming lack of God's presence when we hear of tragedies or misfortune. Our goal, like King David's, is to pray and hope that with God's help we can overcome our mundane feelings and sing and praise God in the house of God, consistently, in "the land of life."