

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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MIZMORIM 146 - 150

Dedicated in memory of Shoshana Lunzer (Bayla Raizel bas Harav
Binyomin a"h) on the occasion of her first yahrzeit, 28 Sivan.

An analysis of the Last Five Psalms

In this last lecture of the year, permit me to draw some broad strokes on the structure of the last six psalms in the book. In a previous class, we observed a bifurcation at the end of Ashrei (psalm 145) stemming from the last line: "MY mouth will speak praises of God, and ALL MANKIND will bless His name forever." The relationship between the praise of the one and the praise of the many will be the focus of the subsequent two psalms – 146, 147.

If we take one step back, however, and read the penultimate line in psalm 145: "God will protect all who love Him, and all the evildoers He will destroy," we may begin to develop the structure of the remaining psalms. Perhaps a diagram will convey my thoughts a little more clearly.

145

"Ashrei"

147

"MY mouth will speak praises"

"ALL MANKIND will bless"

148

(A) symmetry

149

"God will protect all who love Him, and all the evildoers He will destroy."

150

Finale

While the five concluding psalms do not interlock to form one enclosed unit, they do present us with different angles towards grasping an awareness of God. Psalms 145, 146, and 147 constitute a section with the latter two working off the last line of 145.

148 gives us a perspective on praising God through the vehicle of a literary tool called symmetry.

Psalm 149 reverts to the penultimate sentence in 145 and closes the circle of praising God before commencing with 150. When we discuss the idea of praising God, we must also devote some time to the converse - those who do not praise Him. Built in to man's desire to acknowledge or not is the variable of good and evil in the world we live in. "Why should I acknowledge God as building this perfect system when I see evil right before my eyes," they ask. For them, who refuse to see God through the opaque, psalm 149 sets the record straight.

Ultimately, psalm 150 has the poet rejoicing not only in the desire to have "all souls praise God," but in believing in its manifestation.

With this introduction, let us analyze parts of the next four psalms.

I.

146, we discussed in detail in last week's shiur. It revolved around the praise of the one: "I will praise the Lord all my life, sing hymns to my God while I exist." Through a rejection of the "prince who offers deliverance," the individual is ready to invest in his or her own realization of God's salvation.

As opposed to the individuality of 146, the next psalm concentrates on the public message. In the twenty verses of the psalm, we find many different references to God's greatness. Amos Chakham focuses our attention on two different types - *gedulato*, *anvetanuto*; His greatness, His humility. Our rabbis proclaimed, "wherever you find His [God's] greatness, there you will see His humility. By this they mean, that we can praise God for His overarching, metaphysical, and cosmological deeds - creating the world, fashioning existence, keeping the galaxy in motion, things which we cannot describe due to their magnitude.

At the same time, we can depict God as the loving, caring, personal, God, who heals the ill, frees the imprisoned, and feeds the hungry. Different people might regard the two approaches with different feelings and motivations. It is this corpus - the community - to which the psalm is directed.

If psalm 146 concentrated on the nature of how the individual praises God (in whom should one place one's trust, to who should one look for redemption, etc.), psalm 147 embodies the praise of the many. Both together encourage the individual to become a part of the community, and the community to recognize the rights of the individual, in perceiving God, and submitting to His salvation.

II.

This perspective represents only one facet of the education required to praise God. Another effective didactic tool in illustrating this grand idea is the concept of symmetry. This method is used in the Torah often for a variety of reasons.

While often symmetry is used to convey a harmony, parallel worlds and so on, sometimes the one point of contention in the symmetry - in a sense the asymmetry - acts as the catalyst for a deepened understanding of the issue. What is different highlights how much they are the same, or how much the intention of the author is to equate the two seemingly disparate ideas despite their differences.

An unavoidable symmetry exists in psalm 148. Verses one through six, which begin with the words "hallelu et Hashem bashamayim (extol God from the heavens)," discuss a call that the celestial spheres should praise God daily. Verses seven through the first half of thirteen seemingly relay the same call that the world below praise, and begin with the words "hallelu et Hashem min ha-aretz (extol God from the earth)."

Two major differences, however, can be deduced from an analysis of the psalm: one structural, the other textual. To begin with the former, we would expect to see a parallel structure in how the bodies, which are praising God, are presented. Thus, if the first half begins with the Angels and Armies of the Lord - the highest forms in the celestial spheres - we would expect the second half to be likewise. Unfortunately, the highest form of being in the "eretz"-land segment, is stated last. Why not correspond the Angels with Man?

The second issue surrounds the culmination of each component of the psalm. In each the words "yehalelu et shem Hashem" (praise the name of God) appears, but they differ in the reason for why this praise should take place.

Verse 6

"praise the name of God - for He commanded and they appeared".

Verse 13

"praise the name of God - for His name alone is supreme."

What is the nature of this alteration?

Perhaps the answer might have to do with the nature of the symmetry being presented. As I stated, often the differences between the two parts of the psalm reflect what their similarities. Put into our framework, though, in order to conclude a correct symmetry we would have to assume that the world below would respond to the call in the same way as the world above. This, however, is not the case, since the celestial spheres DO praise God daily. This is a fact. Why do they? For the same reason that they were created—as the creation of God, they are programmed to praise.

The world below, our world, is defined by its multivalent feelings and positions. It would be absurd to treat man the same way an angel of God is treated, since man has free will. Yet, it is precisely free will, which the psalmist addresses. It is no coincidence that boys and girls, old and young are represented here instead of 'man.' When depicted like they are, it seems impossible to think they would all comply to one way of thinking, or adhere to one message. Yet, this is exactly the intention of the poet. "You are not really like the Angels of God," exclaims the poet, "you are not robots programmed to abide, for you the reason to praise God is not because He made you, but for the aesthetic, emphatic realm." "ki nishgav shemo levado" (for his name alone is grand).

For this reason, there exists no symmetry when it comes to portraying man like the angels. Perhaps specifically to teach us that as opposed to the celestial spheres, they will be the LAST ones to praise, they will have to be convinced before they act.

For those people who suffice to emulate the Angel and submit to God for His sake, they are praiseworthy in their own right, but the poet is turning to the world at large. To them he must impart a sense of grandeur, of awe never experienced before by man. The awe, which is described throughout the psalm and the previous one, he hopes, will be translated into praise.

The symmetry is an oasis, it gives off an identical feeling, when in fact, none exists. But in the end, the world below will begin to forge a bridge between the two spheres. "Hodo al eretz ve-shamayim" (His splendor is on the land and on the heavens), the two become one in praising God.

III.

"Sing to Hashem a new song, let his praise be in the congregation of the devout" (149:1).

A new song is presented in psalm 149, what is it? To whom does it belong? Another ambiguous phrase is appended to the statement, "kehal chasidim" (the congregation of the devout), who are these people?

Psalm 149 appears to be destructive, as most of it describes the days of ultimate punishment. Attached to these harsh descriptions are joyous, almost spiteful delight by the "devout" as they praise God in all their endeavors. Perhaps understanding who these devout are can contribute to an understanding of the nature of the psalm.

Some commentators are of the opinion that the devout ones are Israel and Israel alone. In this case we would have to take much poetic license in calculating all the synonyms for Israel together as one corpus. The phrase devout is used three times, while a reference to Israel is used three times

as well. All in all, it seems difficult and unnecessary to equate Israel with the devout. Instead, claims Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch, the devout refer to anyone who places his or her faith in God.

Thus, the realization of psalm 145 verse 20 comes to the fore, as together with the destruction of God's enemies is the encouragement to those who love God to prosper and rejoice.

Psalm 149 is the last step in the process. It comes after a genuine attempt is made to influence all of God's creatures that regardless of the difficulties which arise, our job is to recognize God and His association to this world.

IV.

Psalm 150 serves as the culmination of the process, when we witness the meta-universal praise of God – "kol ha-neshama tehalel Ya halleluya (every soul praise God, halleluya)."

The concluding dictums of Ashrei set off in motion the unit of Halleluya. The attempt is to direct humankind towards the supreme goal – a universal God-consciousness. There is one goal in mind, "on that day, God will be one, along with His name."

The individual and the community; the earthly and the heavenly; the devout and the evildoers, all compose the kaleidoscopic world we live in. From this rich environment, the psalmist directs us, guides us, and ultimately imparts to us a yearning for unity and harmony in praising God.

What began as a call of the one, has metamorphosed, with the help and advice of the psalmist, to an existential call of all souls in the world to acknowledge God.

"Kol ha-neshama tehallel ya, halleluya"

(All souls will praise God, praise God).