

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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MIZMOR 5: "A Morning Detour"

O Lord, morning You will hear my voice, morning I shall direct my prayer to You, and anticipate (5:4).

Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak stated, that [which was said that a person should be very conscientious about the afternoon prayer] applies to the morning prayer as well, as it says "O Lord, morning You will hear my voice, morning I shall direct my prayer to You and anticipate" (TB Berakhot, 6b).

Psalm five is a morning psalm. Or better yet, a morning prayer. But isn't a prayer a prayer regardless of the time of day? Maybe not. Perhaps David attempted to express how a particular part of the day could affect the moods of a human being. David realized that the nature of being human is to have different moods, depending on many factors in one's life. Some factors include the time of day, the weather, and the surroundings. (As you receive this in different climates throughout the world, some in white snow, others in gloomy rain, others in sweltering heat, it should give you some pause).

All of these will influence a person, change their demeanor, and modify their outlook. For David, a morning sun, the light of the dawn, the fresh smell of the dew might have motivated him to greet his Maker in a certain positive way.

Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak utilized the literary tool of repetition for emphasis when he quoted not the first words of the verse, but both sections, thus repeating the phrase 'morning' in his statement. (The Talmud rarely finishes a verse since it is concerned with the words required to prove the point; here, however, the whole sentence is listed.) Repetition is often used to emphasize an idea, or to introduce a word as the theme-word of the poem. Perhaps 'boker' — morning — despite appearing only twice, is indeed the heart of this psalm.

With this in mind, let us examine the structure and content of this mizmor.

Verses 2-4 are an introduction to the psalm, culminating with the title—morning when I pray to God...

Verses 5-8 are full of praises David gives to God, but as we shall see, they are of a specific type.

Verses 9-13 comprise David's request. The final two verses of this section describe how those who follow and support God will rejoice in His safe haven.

What seems like a typical structure for a Davidic psalm — introduction, praise, request, and trust only describes its outline after we understand its theme — a morning prayer.

There is one word which I think reflects this change from an 'evening' prayer to a 'morning' one (look at the prayer and try to guess which one it is). First, however, let me offer an explanation of the difference in attitude evoked by morning versus evening. Morning is a time of brightness, excitement, expectation, and confidence:

"...and in the morning joyousness" (Psalms 30:6).

Evening, on the other hand, is full of fear, uncertainty, insecurity, and darkness. The first half of the aforementioned verse is a reference to the evening:

"in the evening there is weeping ..."

The weeping stems from an unknown, an eerie feeling that you are not in control. Who is? In ancient times when no lights were lighting up the streets, one had to run home before sunset for fear of robbery or some other mishap. Nowadays, though, in our modern scientific world, the same feeling takes hold of us when the evening draws near.(it is for good reason that horror movies usually take place at night...).

Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch, in his commentary on the Torah, expands on this idea. He notes that man has two opposing feelings about his place on earth, depending on the time of day. We recite the keriyat Shema (biblical prayer announcing the oneness of God) twice a day, once in the morning, and once at night. After its recitation, there is a prayer which we would expect to be the same, but in fact, is quite different from morning to evening. In the morning we recite 'emet ve-yatziv (true and upright)', in the evening 'emet ve-emuna'(true and faithful). This prayer is taken from a verse in Psalms, as David writes:

...to speak of your kindness (chasdekha) in the morning, and your faith at nighttime (92:2).

Why is it that in the morning we speak of kindness and uprightness, but in the evening only of faith? Rav Hirsch

responds by using the analogy of the skies and how we see them at different times of the day.

Wake up in the morning and look at the clear blue sky. All you can see is blueness of the sky above, and the products of man's creations below—the world becomes a very small place which consists mainly of us. What we accomplish, what we see, how we create, is the essence of our outlook on life at that moment. Under these circumstances, when man feels his 'image of God,' and aims at perfection and its reward, he expects that reward as well.

As the evening comes upon us, and the light of the moon barely gives luminance, we become aware of the galaxies surrounding us. We look up at the constellations, we are told that each speck is ten times the size of the earth, and we feel our insignificance, that we are nothing. At this point, we begin to fear; fear of the night, fear of the other worlds and fear of the infinity around us. "For man is created from dust and returns to dust, likened to a fleeting dream or a blowing wind..." are words which permeate our minds.

We retreat into ourselves we look to God for help, and we hope to God in faith. Finally, we sleep unaware of our future, hoping to rise the next morn with our health intact, ready to do battle for another day.

Our psalm is a morning psalm. David mentions the morning and we sense that he is feeling confident, that despite his troubles and enemies, he knows (and almost expects) God to be by his side.

The one key word which might set this psalm apart from the others is found at the end of our theme - verse:

O Lord, morning you will hear my voice, morning I shall direct my prayer to you, AND I WILL ANTICIPATE (va-atzapeh).

We should note that this is the ONLY time in Psalms that this word, or any form of its root, appears.

David expects. The morning brought him confidence and he inhaled it letting it lead him throughout his day — until the first obstacle stood in his way. His children rebelling against him, his enemies, or perhaps something less drastic — his lack of intention in his prayers, his business preventing his study, his lack of peace...

We begin our day with a jolt, we are enraptured by morning, we smile, we want, we pray, we hope, and yes, sometimes we expect. Verses five through seven reinforce this expectation: "You are not a God who condones evil ... Hooligans do not stand before you... evildoers you hold in contempt..."

But I with Your grace, will come to Your house, I will bow down before You in fear in Your holy place."

This section offers us an uncharacteristically upbeat David, a confident, expectant person. We do not usually think of King David to be so self-assured of the outcome of his troubles. Instead, we think of him hoping, waiting, and praying to be answered. Yet, perhaps specifically because we see a detour here, we should focus on this as the message of the psalmist.

The 'boker' psalm tells us that we are human, and that once in a while we may escape into a flight of fantasy, expecting a dividend for our efforts in a world of evil. But knowing the psalmist and reading this psalm in the context of his poetry we should acknowledge that this is the exception which proves his rule.

In a 'morning' of our life, feeling in good spirits, we too will look to God, hope, pray, and maybe even expect from Him. But then the day moves on, our lives adjust and we remind ourselves of the pitfalls of expecting from God.

The psalm should teach us not to feel dejected by our expectation, but to embrace it as part of our human instinct. But we should note with strong caution that this feeling is a departure from a typical Davidic psalm. A morning detour.