

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 126: The "Shir Hama'alot"

But First - An Introduction

Part 1

Before analyzing psalm 126, we should note that it is one of a set of fifteen prayers beginning with the title "shir hama'alot" - a song of ascents. The uniqueness of this appendage manifests itself in Jewish liturgy as this psalm 126, was designated to precede the Birkat HaMazon every Shabbat. Its overriding notability will be the focus of next shiur, while this week I will present an introduction to the Shir Hama'alot.

Other psalms of the "shir hama'alot" play a prominent role in Jewish liturgy as well. When praying for a sick person, or trying to overcome an impending tragedy, two psalms "shirei hama'alot" have become formulaic: 130, "mi-ma'amakim keratikha" "I call out from the depths to God", and 121, "esah einai el heharim" "I raise up my eyes to the mountains".

Additionally, as far back as the Abudarham - David ben Joseph, a 14th century Spanish liturgical commentator, the idea of reciting all fifteen psalms of the "shirei hama'alot" every Shabbat took hold.

The classification "shir hama'alot" which designates each one of the fifteen psalms converting them into one unit, is the subject of an extensive debate among commentators and scholars. What is the definition of these "ascents"? Upon analysis, we will come to the realization that it does not have one specific definition. This fact, however, will only enhance its stature, not detract from it.

The earliest source - found in the Mishna Succah 5:3 - relates the number fifteen to the amount of stairs which adjoined the Women's section to the men's section in the Beit Hamikdash. The Talmud (53a) relates a similar idea bringing a parable of how David sang these songs in order to raise the primeval waters which fell due to David preparing the foundations of the future Beit Hamikdash.

Others take an historical approach in defining this concept. Rashi, Radak and other Medieval commentators claim that this phrase is based on a verse in Ezra 7:9 "Yesud ha-ma'ala miBavel" - "the journey up from Babylon was started", coining those who returned from Bavel "ma'ala" (nowadays we make "aliya" from the same source). While some commentators direct it to a certain period of returning from exile (in the time of Ezra and Nechemiah), others state it as a general expression of yearning to return to the promised land from the diaspora.

Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch defines the ascent on a spiritual plane. From our low spiritual depth, we call, pray, and sing to God to lift us up, or to give us the ability to lift ourselves up to the greatest heights. A clear example would be the famous beginning of psalm 130. "From the depths I call out to you O God".

Yet a fourth group of exegetes defines the phrase along different lines. Saadiah Gaon and the Meiri claim the title (similar with other titles in Tehillim such as "Lamenatze'ach" - "To the conductor...") refers to a strictly musical allusion. These songs are sung starting from a low point ending on a high note.

It is interesting to note the wide range of categories in which this phrase might belong. Does this group of psalms refer specifically to the Beit Hamikdash, reflecting the author's deep-felt connection between his prayers and the service in the Temple? Or is it based on some historical dimension of returning to Israel, either a ritualistic one - as a prayer recited by the person going up to Jerusalem for the holidays, or as a general theme song for those who yearn to return to their homeland?

Perhaps, though, it is conveying a spiritual/ psychological idea, asking the person to search into his soul and raise himself up to greater religious heights? Or does it relate to how to sing the songs of the poet?

There is no one clear answer, and perhaps this is part of its mystique. It is not uncommon for a poet, with one phrase, to reflect one's dialectical feelings. Perhaps it is precisely its openness in interpretation which enables the concept of "shir hama'alot" to thrive in the liturgy.

What relates to one person through the medium of religious fervor, affects another due to its ritualistic nature. What enlightens one person on an intellectual level, as it reflects

an important historical time period, influences another person emotionally due to its spiritual content. Precisely its adaptability to a wide audience renders these psalms as significant and important in Jewish life.

In this light we might single out the fifteen songs of ascent from the Psalms, as they play to a kaleidoscopic field of emotions in the Jew.

What is unique about psalm 126, bestowing upon it a prominent place in the liturgy? That will be the topic for next shiur.