

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 24 Part Three
In the Beginning and the End

(3) O gates lift up your heads,
Up high, you everlasting doors,
so the King of Glory may come in.

Who is the King of Glory?
God, mighty and valiant, God, valiant in battle.

O gates lift up your heads,
Lift them up you everlasting doors,
so the King of Glory may come in.

Who is the King of Glory?
The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory."

We reach the final segment of the mizmor (psalm), the last four verses. We note, of course, that there really are two statements, repeated with minor changes occurring between them. The most fundamental change is that the answers to the question, "Who is the King of Glory?" is God, but the answers differ in their descriptions. In the first, He is God of might, God valiant in battle. In the final verse, He is God, Lord of the Hosts, King of Glory.

What is the meaning of these verses? How do they fit in to the rest of the psalm? What is the connection between these words and the significance of the mizmor?

In terms of the simple meaning of the verses let us refer to the early commentators. Rashi, quoting the Midrash in several locations, places this psalm in historical perspective - as King Solomon attempted to transport the Holy Ark into the Beit Ha-mikdash (Solomon's Temple). (See Martin Buber's "Midrash Tehillim," 207:45, for an analysis.)

Lest one should question how it is that David authored this psalm but referred only to Solomon, the Talmud in Shabbat 30a offers the entire version of the aforementioned midrash:

Said David to God, "forgive me for that great sin (according to Rashi, his sin with Batsheva)." God said to him, "I forgive you." David responded, "Give me a sign in my life." God responded, "In your son's life I shall give a sign, not in yours." When Solomon built the Temple he desired to bring the Ark into the Holy of Holies, but the walls closed together so as not to allow an entrance. He exclaimed, "Open up the gates and let the King of Glory in." The walls would not budge until Solomon uttered the verse: "Remember for the sake of my father David;" the gates opened up and he brought the Ark in.

The Gemara teaches us about David's desire for atonement and about his recognition of continuity found in the reign of his son Solomon. Even after Solomon constructed the Temple that David was not permitted to build, the Temple could be consecrated only upon reciting David's name, as if to say, through the hands of father and son the presence of God will finally rest in the House of God.

In a certain sense, the two versions of kingship found in the psalm represent the two styles of monarchy demonstrated by David and Solomon. David is the warrior-king, "mighty and valiant," while Solomon is the political "king of glory" and wisdom. According to this idea, the repetition of "Who is the King" is not for poetic purposes but to close the chapter that King David opened. He built Jerusalem and planned the construction of the House of God, but his son Solomon completed the final goal.

This approach focused on the literal and historical aspect of the reason behind the "gates." There is, as we have seen earlier in the psalm, a more figurative, timeless message of the last segment as well. For this we need to step back and view the psalm through someone else's eyes.

Perhaps we should begin with what the authors of our liturgical tradition felt about the importance of this mizmor. We noted that this is the accepted psalm for the first day of the week. We know also that this psalm is recited on the High Holidays, Rosh Ha-shana and Yom Kippur. We know as well that this psalm is included in the prayers when we return the Torah to the ark. What logical reason is there for the insertion of the psalm into the liturgy at any given day?

It fits in very nicely for us to see that the three areas in which the psalm is introduced into the liturgy represent the three segments of the mizmor. The Mishna in Tamid 7:4 states, "On the first (Sunday) what did they say? 'To God belongs the Earth and its inhabitants...'" The Talmud (Rosh Ha-shana 31a) discusses the reason why this psalm was chosen to represent the beginning of our week: "Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rabbi Akiva, 'On the first (day of the week) what did they say? 'To God belongs the Earth, and its inhabitants' [Why? Since this represents that God] acquired it, imparted it, and is the lone ruler of (sustaining) the world.'"

According to the Talmud, when we begin our new week, brimming with self-confidence, about to embark on our creative work, we should bear in mind to whom it all belongs and that we have been given a gift of this world to shape, mold, work, and guard. We also must be constantly aware that God alone

created, ruled, and continues to sustain our world day in and day out. The beginning of our week corresponds to the beginning of time, and as we create, we are reminded of our Creator and the world that He has given us. (This idea I tried to convey in the first part of the psalm 24 lectures.)

The next level is to understand our limitations and expectations as people and as Jews during our lives here on earth. For this we focus on the second section, which asks us, "Who will rise to the mountain of God, and who will take his place?" We noted in my second lecture that one may view this charge as a rhetorical lesson of how we should view our own lives. We are here to set our goals heavenward, always keeping in mind the ascension to the King of Kings, but at the same time always remembering that it proceeds one step at a time.

This message is worth reiterating at the time when we coronate our King of Kings, during the High Holidays. It is especially important to lift up the spirits of those of us who at the end of a year realize that we have not achieved all of our grandiose objectives; we are nowhere near the "Mountain of God." The psalmist comes to comfort us and encourage us at the same time - elevate yourself a small degree, just enough that you can take over the position of the man who has just taken his own step closer to God.

Of course, the moral characteristics will be stressed as one realizes that the all-merciful God will pardon our sins against Him, but cannot tolerate our sins against one another. Therefore a pure heart, honest mind, and innocent hands are a crucial part of the recipe.

This brings us to the final episode of our world and the final verses in the psalm. "Open up the gates, and let the King enter." The verse may be a call on behalf of the guardians of the ark that protect the gates of the Temple to

ensure the safety of its most treasured vessel. It may be a call that King David wished he could announce, but instead prophesied that his son would utter upon witnessing the resting of the divine presence in the Temple.

But it may also be much more. It may be imparting an appropriate closing for our psalm, which begins before the creation of man and ends after our ultimate demise, when no one is left but the heavens and the King of Kings. The psalm spans the eons of history, commencing with God alone and ultimately concluding with God alone. The gates of heaven represent for us the final destination and the ultimate House of God.

"Who is the King of Glory...?" The psalm repeats this rhetorical question offering us variations of God's characteristics to teach us that it all ends with God. In this respect the opening and closing of the psalm go together, and the whole mizmor is not about man, but about man realizing that God is the beginning and the end: "I am first, I am last, and without Me there is no other..." (Isaiah 44:6).

This brings us to an interesting perspective on the psalm. In a sense, our lives on earth, which we deem so significant, creative, and earth shattering, are nothing more than a fleeting moment sandwiched between two eternities, God's beginning and ending. We are asked to put our lives in perspective: we are here to elevate ourselves, pursue Godliness, and champion the very essence of man that God created. Yet we must never lose sight of Him, of "To God belongs the Earth," and "God, the Lord of Hosts, King of Glory." This we remind ourselves every time we return to the ark the Torah - the word of God and the blueprint for living a meaningful life here on Earth.

Indeed, these messages are important for us on the first day of every week, when returning the Torah to the ark, and

during the holiest of days, as we coronate the merciful King and ask for atonement.

In the end, Psalm 24 teaches us how to view ourselves in a world given to man by a God who began it, sustains it, and will ultimately end it - a sobering, yet comforting message. God is before us and after us, but at the same time, He is watching over us as a father witnesses the first steps of a child, with love and devotion.