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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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MIZMOR 1

"Happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked,  
Or taken the path of sinners, or joined the company of the insolent.  
Rather, the teaching of the Lord is his 'desire' (cheftzo) and he studies it day and night..." (Tehillim 1:1-2)

Much has been written about this first psalm. Rav Yudan, a fourth century Palestinian scholar, considered it "the choicest of all psalms." It being the first, it is incumbent upon us to understand the uniqueness of this poem, why King David began his composition with the motifs expressed by this chapter.

Let us begin by examining the language of the psalm. Subsequently, we will study its structure and finally we will attempt to comprehend its conclusive message.

The psalm begins with a series of praises concerning 'a man,' who does not blindly follow the attractive path of the evildoers. However, we immediately notice some inconsistencies:

Firstly, why is the evil man here contrasted with a regular 'ish' - man? Why not insert instead a tzaddik - a righteous individual who constitutes a more balanced opposite to the wicked.

Secondly, why are this psalm's praises phrased in the negative? Should not the psalm have read "praiseworthy is the good man who walked in the ways of the righteous and stood in the company of honest men?"

Finally, as we read the contrasting verse to the former, we again notice an incongruity. As opposed to walking with evil, standing in the path of sinners, or sitting in the company of the insolent, the man's response is completely passive - the Torah is his 'chefetz.' How do we reconcile one saying with the next?

At the outset, we should ask ourselves for whom the Psalms were composed. One might assume that they were written for the scholar, the righteous individual who studied the words of Torah day and night. But is that assumption entirely correct? In fact, psalms were most often sung, not recited, and it is quite plausible that singing them was a means of

allowing the populace at large to enjoy and partake in the words of the Bible.

Right from the start, then, we are introduced to the intended audience. "Happy is the person..." - the average man on the street is the psalmist's listener. It is within his world that the day-to-day battle of good and evil takes place; it is for him that King David writes his words and experiences; it is that man who will ultimately internalize these words in order to achieve spiritual growth.

Perhaps this is the reason why the introductory phrase "Mizmor Le-David", which appears often in the Psalms and introduces the author of the Psalms as David, is conspicuously absent in the introductory message. If it were to begin with the name KING DAVID the average individual would perhaps disregard the book, feeling inadequate to the task, and thus miss out on its important message.

What is that message? With what words does King David initiate his emotional songs? Perhaps through his 'anonymity' he is emphasizing that he is not part of the 'righteous' either and that his poetry - his emotions and experiences - can and should be experienced by ALL. The book is about 'a man,' a regular person in the street - perhaps he is a king or perhaps a priest, but when it comes to battling evil and overcoming its blandishments one can learn from David as well.

Of course, one might look unfavorably on this interpretation and claim that it denigrates the holiness of the 'anointed one.' In fact, I choose to see the exact opposite. A king should regard himself as first and foremost a representative of his people - albeit bestowed with certain privileges, but not above God's law. Perhaps the greatest aspect of King David is his humanness, his potentiality to sin, but more importantly his ability to regret, reevaluate, fight back, and ultimately teach us about teshuva - true and sincere repentance.

Why does the mizmor (psalm) commence in the negative? Perhaps it is to drive home the point that the average person does not start his day in a spiritual vacuum, guided by thoughts of all the good deeds he can commit. Rather, in "today's" immoral society, it is a constant struggle to just stand on one's own two feet. When one walks in the streets confronted on all sides by 'counsels of the wicked,' the battle against evil has already begun.

Let one not be misled into believing that in order to be worthy of praise one must first achieve a tzaddik's greatness. Actually, true happiness can be obtained through constantly combating the evil of one's own "mundane" surroundings. How does one combat this evil?

"Rather, the teaching of the Lord is his 'desire' (cheftzo) and he studies it day and night..."

In the beginning of the psalm, we notice a constant state of movement: walking with evil, standing in the company of the insolent, and sitting with the irreverent. The intent of the verbs is to suggest that, while living our daily lives, we are in a constant state of motion. The psalmist is careful to include all of the states in which the body normally conducts its activities (lying, in contrast, is associated mostly with inaction, namely sleeping).

One gets the impression of a society in motion, always moving in a direction, frequently changing its course. "Life moves pretty fast, and if you turn around for a second, you'll miss it".

Critical to our discussion is understanding the definition of one word - 'cheftzo.' "Rather, the teaching of the Lord is his chefetz." Chefetz in biblical Hebrew connotes a yearning, or a strong desire. In our psalm, David suggests that the formula for combating the motion towards evil is through expressing a constant yearning for God's law to be a part of one's everyday life.

Thus, we do not respond to the evil that surrounds us by fleeing from the world and assuming a monastic approach. Instead, we search for an antidote which will enable us to focus even in the bleakest of circumstances. That antidote, King David avers is the yearning for Torah. Those who can maintain a quest for observing God's law and for being in God's presence, even in the most dire of circumstances, are the ones who are truly fortunate.

Often we find ourselves falling prey to a physical or psychological desire, which upon reflection we realize constituted a sin. We can then respond in one of two ways:

- 1) We can disregard the specific infractions until they amass to such a bundle of sin that we cannot deal with ourselves and reject religion altogether (this of course in the extreme), opting to live an irreligious life.
- 2) We can acknowledge our sin and put in the right perspective. Thus, we believe in God and in His law. We struggle to abide by God's rules daily. But we are human, and occasionally err. But the Torah remains our chefetz - our strongest desire and our most treasured possession (Parenthetically, modern Hebrew defines chefetz as a possession, whose acquisition flows from one's desire). It affords us the framework for living in a world of evil, and prevailing against it. Adopting this attitude can help us in our battle against sinning, return us on the path to God (Teshuva - repentance), and ultimately bring happiness into our religious expression.

Of course, the only way to appreciate the Torah and actualize the cheftzo-yearning element is through studying it 'day and night.' This complementary second half of the verse teaches us that there are no shortcuts. To acquire the Torah

as your chefetz (a possession which manifests your desire) you must contemplate its message and deliberate over its meaning.

Of course, 'day and night' need not mean twenty four hours out of your day, but rather to treat Torah study as the most important element of the day, as something which in an ideal world could encompass your entire existence.