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# TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

by Rabbi Avi Baumol

## MIZMOR 2

> Eighteen? There are really nineteen! It must be that "Ashrei Ha-ish" (psalm 1) and "Lama ragshu" (psalm 2) are really one. Thus said Rabbi Shmuel Bar Nachmani in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, 'every chapter that David especially appreciated he began with [the word] Ashrei and ended with Ashrei, as it is written Ashrei Ha-ish (praise the man) and Ashrei kol chosei bo (praised be those who put their trust in Him) (TB Berakhot 9b-10a).

The explanation of the above Talmudic passage is as follows. At the end of the nineteenth psalm, we find a concluding verse which also is used to conclude our daily prayer of shemoneh esreh: "Yiheyu le-ratzon imrei fi ve-hegyon libi le-fanekha, Hashem tzuri ve-goali" — "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable before You, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer." The Talmud suggests that the rabbis chose to use this verse to complete the shemoneh esreh, as a parallel to King David's Psalms. Since David used the verse after eighteen chapters, the rabbis followed his example and instituted it after the eighteenth blessing (1). The Talmud asks, "but are there not nineteen psalms before the introduction of this line? The Talmud responds that the first two psalms are, in fact, counted as one.

Thus, the Talmud explicitly joins psalms one and two, and claims that they are one unit. They justify their reading based upon the word 'ashrei,' which opens and concludes this series of verses. The scholars of the Talmud might have also been hinting at the fact that psalm two, like its predecessor, has no title. Our rabbis coined a name for those psalms which do not have a title — "orphan psalms." Last time, we discussed how the first psalm conspicuously lacks a title such as "a Psalm of David." The same can be said of Psalm 2. In fact, the same lack of a title is a feature of thirty-two other psalms out of the one hundred and fifty which comprise the book of Tehillim.

In addressing this mystery, some scholars have forwarded an idea which pertains to the quote under discussion. The contention is that most of the psalms that are 'orphaned' are part of a unit meant to be distinguished from the others. The 'coronation' psalms of 93-99, and the 'halleluya' psalms of 146-150 (both of which I analyzed last year) represent two

examples of this idea. Psalms 114-118, the 'hallel' psalms in Jewish liturgy, also represent such a cluster. This theory can be used to string together a set or sets of psalms.

Our task now, having accepted a textual theory for linking the psalms, is to trace that binding idea which connects psalms one and two.

Let us begin by breaking down psalm 2 into its specific sections. The psalm consists of four stanzas, each containing three lines.
1-3 The formation of a rebellion led by the kings of the land.
4-6 The response of the Almighty, King of kings.
7-9 The King of kings addressing the king of Israel.
10-12 The response of the poet to the kings of the land.

The 'mila mancha' (leading word), "king," characterizes the essence of the psalm. In contrast to psalm 1 , which I argued centered on the 'common man,' this poem revolves around the aristocracy. Instead of the concluding verse commenting that the path of 'regular' evil people leads to ruination (verse 6), psalm 2 closes with the thought that the evil ways of the great kings will ultimately lead to their demise.

If we take the last verse from each psalm, we can, in fact, construct a chiastic structure, which underscores the message of the poet:

Psalm 1 — "For the Lord knows the way of the righteous [A], but the way of the evil will be lost [B]."

Psalm 2 — "[The evil kings who attempt to overthrow God and Israel] will perish [B], [but] praised be those who put their faith in God [A].

The chiasmus as a literary tool can be used in different ways to analyze lines in poetry. Certainly, this structure highlights the symmetry of ABBA, but more importantly, it emphasizes the core of the structure - the BB. In our case, it perhaps suggests the universality of evil drives; when you analyze the king in his great power, the driving force behind his actions might be very similar to the driving force of the average evildoer, namely greed, pride, sloth, etc.)

Once we establish a connection between the two psalms, showing that the condition of the common man is in consonance with that of the king, we may begin to compare the former to the latter. To King David composing in his court, the common man was his audience, but in the villages and towns, the court of King David was the talk. The king's palace was a barometer of how regular people lived their lives; the king, the representative of God, certainly had the ability to teach prfound lessons through the example of his personal conduct.

During Kind David's life, this truth was so tangible that one could feel it. As one reads through Samuel, one cannot but sense that the actions of David reverberated in the kingdom. When he was fighting battles and constantly calling out to God for guidance, the nation was spiritually moved and followed suit. When he sinned in his palace with Bat-sheva, the people were confused, did not know how to react, and along with his own children turned on him. They were unable to trust him as their leader or their father. Ultimately, the nation learned that the quality of repentance pervaded David's soul, and once again he was raised up as their great leader.

To sum up, the connection between the two psalms is clear if we see them as complementary. The first aims to dictate to the common man how to live his life, how to repel the evil people in his midst. The second one brings the message back to the royal chambers. Evil can exist and flourish at the top just as it does in the small towns. But whereas the first psalm gives a blueprint for success of the individual, the second addresses the nation of God as a whole.

We are reminded of the portion in the Torah in which Bil'am is requested to curse the people of Israel, but God turns each curse into a blessing. Here, it is not the individuals of Israel whom God protects but rather the nation as a whole. Subsequently, and possibly at the advice of Bil'am (2), the individuals of Israel do sin through illicit sexual activities with the women of Moav at Ba'al Pe'or. In this circumstance God does not condone but instead punishes, until an individual comes forth and, by his conduct, puts a stop to God's wrath.)

As for His nation, the psalm constructs an inseparable link between God and the king ('my son' — verse 7) (3), providing comfort that despite the indignant attitude of the 'surrounding peoples' God will protect His nation for eternity.

The final message is a note of mussar — a moral lesson delivered by the poet to the kings of the lands.

> And now kings, understand, learn this lesson, leaders of your lands. Serve God with fear, and be joyous in trembling."

The psalm thus concludes on a positive note, suggesting that destruction and oblivion is not the only destiny of the nations. If they serve God with fear, and not out of a haughty pride, if their feelings of joy and happiness are tempered by a subconscious sense of trembling, then all may not be lost.

Endnotes:

(1) This line in the Talmud predates the institution of the nineteenth blessing found in the tractate of Megilla where

Shmuel Ha-katan authored an additional blessing against the 'minim' transgressors and informants.

(2) For a discussion on this issue, see the article by Menachem Leibtag in the virtual Tanakh Study Center, which can be accessed through the VBM website.

(3) This is also how the nations of the world see us, as they state: "we will overthrow and attack "God and his anointed one" (verse 2).