

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

by Rabbi Avi Baumol

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This week's shiur is dedicated in memory of my uncle Mr. Marvin J. Baumol, alav ha-shalom. His life was filled with laughter, kindness, and his pursuit of the answer to suffering. The shloshim ended last week.

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This shiur is dedicated to the memory of Ze'ev Wolf ben Shlomo Packer by his loving children and grandchildren, the Serman, Packer, and Sicklick families.

MIZMOR 4

How did our Sages look at Psalms? What caught their eyes? What message were they trying to convey through their interpretation? The question I'm asking is, after analyzing the poetry based often on what we see, I would like to know how it was seen thousands of years ago, by Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, and others.

I would like to analyze psalm four from the perspective of different midrashic viewpoints, in order to emerge with a spectrum of midrashic insights and approaches.

What follows is a translation of the psalm; sometimes the midrash is incomprehensible without the specific Hebrew text, due to the fact that the rabbis often used wordplay to develop a point. Therefore, the English will not suffice. Afterwards, I will focus on a series of midrashic comments on specific words and verses.

Psalm 4

- 1 For the (menatze'ach) leader, with instrumental music. A psalm of David.
- 2 When I call, answer me, O God my vindicator!  
You freed me from distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.
- 3 You men, how long will my glory be mocked, will you love illusions, have recourse to frauds?
- 4 Know that the Lord singles out the faithful for Himself; the Lord will hear when I call to Him.
- 5 Tremble and sin no more, ponder it on your bed and sigh.
- 6 Offer sacrifices in righteousness and trust in the Lord.
- 7 Many say "Oh, for good days," lift up the light of your countenance Oh Lord.

8 You put joy in my heart when their grain and wine show increase.

9 Safe and sound, I lie down and sleep, for You alone, Oh Lord, keep me secure.

(Verse) 1. La-menatze'ach is a title whose meaning is uncertain to us. On the one hand it alludes to some kind of conductor, on the other the root comes from the Hebrew NTZCH meaning to conquer. The first midrash found in the Talmud (Pesachim 119a) is as follows.

Rav Kahana said in the name of Rav Yishmael: what is the meaning of the phrase La-menatze'ach, give praise to the One who is beaten( - conquered - won), and is [nevertheless] happy. Come and learn that the attributes of God are different than those of man. When man is beaten he is sad; not so the Lord who, when beaten, is happy, as it says, (Psalms 106:23) "He would have destroyed them (the children of Israel) had not Moses His chosen one confronted Him in the breach to avert His destructive wrath.

This is a classic midrash. By this I mean that the motivation for the author's interpretation stems from uncertainty concerning the meaning of a word. The Torah is the source of the Hebrew language. What do you do when a word in Hebrew cannot be adequately defined? We could accept that the definition of the word "La-menatze'ach" revolves around some kind of musical concept. In fact, many words in Tehillim express some kind of musical content. Selah, Mizmor, Maskil, and others appear throughout David's work, hinting to us that an important dimension - the musical one - is often missing from our purview.

The author of the midrash does not relate to the musical aspect of the word, but chooses to focus on its root. Moreover, the root word of NTZCH in the Bible does not refer to conquest but rather to eternity. Somewhere along the line the meaning of the word changed from eternity to victory. (a gradual and understandable development; Israel is eternal through continuous victories over their enemies...) The author then takes his modern day meaning of NTZCH, and inserts it into the words of King David who lived over a thousand years before.

In addition to this, the interpretation given is a radical one. God is beaten. This itself sounds blasphemous. God enjoys being beaten sounds all the more uncomfortable. Clearly the author of the midrash was intending to be homiletic in his interpretation and to teach us a lesson about how God's mercy transcends our ability to comprehend.

But the freedom with which this interpretation is offered reflects an attitude that the authors of the midrash had, and we might conjecture that their audience understood it as well.

Perhaps precisely because the readers of the midrash were attuned to the homiletic usage, they were able to use their interpretive tools so effectively.

Why is it so effective? Because only through exaggerated almost inconceivable notions can we explain a phenomenon relating to God. God is so compassionate that ... or He is as compassionate as ... What modifiers can we insert in there to emphasize an idea that transcends our humanness? The answer involves supplying some radical metaphysical reading which forces us to concede our limited faculties and search for an answer in the stars.

A second point to ponder is the inherent relationship between God and His people which is developed throughout the midrashic literature. One senses that this theological impossibility of God being overpowered only can take place when the reason for His surrender is His beloved people. Moses rises to the occasion when God is on the verge of judgement (destruction) and pleads, thereby forcing God's will. Such is the power of the righteous individuals before whom God willingly yields.

2. "When I call answer me." In the Hebrew we are uncertain if David is asking God to answer him, or if he is telling God that "when I call You I am answered right away." One way it is a request (and a rather daring one), the other way it is a testament of praise and thanks.

The midrash in Devarim Raba chapter 2 has David arguing his case before the Lord saying that "when the nations of the world come before You to pray, You should not heed their requests for they are insincere. Instead, send them to their gods and they will not be answered. When the children of Israel call You, however, respond hastily and answer our prayers, as it says "when I call You, answer me Oh God my vindicator." Replies God, "by your word, I swear that even before you call I will answer you, as it says (Isaiah 65:24) "before you call I shall answer" for I have no other nation except for you ..."

Once again working with an ambiguity in the text, the author of this midrash reveals the beauty of the verse by creating a court-style discussion of David before God. Judaism often pictures God as the judge with his solicitors, the defense attorneys, etc. Here, the premise of the midrash is most powerful, and it is the dual interpretation of a prayer or a statement which allows for a dialogue to exist within the two possibilities.

According to one reading, David asks for an immediate response from God, in the other reading, he declares it. The midrashic mind asks us to imagine the middle ground between the request and the declaration. When the children of Israel are worthy, the Lord answers their prayers EVEN BEFORE they ask. A time will come when the connection between the people

and the Lord will be so strong that the delineation between wanting something and asking from God and having Him grant it, will become blurred, and the response will come before the request.

The courthouse motif is used to highlight the relationship between God and the Jews, but also to stress the Jews' connection to God in contrast to their surrounding neighbors, the pagans. At the time of the midrashic literature, paganism was rampant, sectarianism was on the rise and it seemed that monotheism was losing the battle. Thus, the midrash emphasizes the uniqueness of the Jewish people who call to God exclusively and who will be answered versus the non-Jewish nations who call to God only to hedge their bets, since they pray to a multitude of other gods as well. Their prayers will go unheeded. In this circumstance, the midrash consoles, comforts and offers hope.

5. Tremble and do not sin... The midrash becomes legal when a specific juridical act is learned from these words. In Talmud Berakhot 4b we find this statement: "Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, even though one has recited the evening prayer of keriat Shema (Mishna Berakhot 1:1) it is a mitzvah (deed) to recite it again at nighttime. Rabbi Yose said, what verse teaches this law to us? Tremble..."

A glimpse at the wealth of midrashim on this short psalm gives us a sense of the magnitude of the rabbinic mind. Indeed, two thousand years ago, without television, without any of the distractions of modern day existence, a talmid chakham or scholar, sat all day and pondered the word of God. He became a sage due to the complete devotion of his life to the purpose of fulfilling God's will.

We have seen a selection of classic midrashim; a radical reading, a typical drama, a legal extrapolation. There are many more types which we can find on this psalm or on many other biblical verses.

We might have thought that the words of the ancient rabbis are conservative and archaic compared to our modern senses and liberal interpretations. In fact, the opposite is true. The authors of the midrash were intent on catching our eyes and sparking an idea, sometimes a radical one. They did not fear a backlash, because they aimed the most effective way of communicating and elevating the word of God. Let us have the strength to follow in their footsteps.