

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

by Rabbi Avi Baumol

MIZMOR 6

God, do not, in Your wrath, chastise me, do not, in Your anger, afflict me.
Shed Your grace upon me for I am weak, heal me God, for my bones shudder.
And my soul shudders greatly, and You, God, how long...?
Return, O God, deliver my soul, save me on account of Your kindness.

God

That is the beginning of psalm six. There is no confusion, no poetic, artistic license. The author makes his intentions perfectly clear. God. Almost the entire psalm is written in second person — You (God)...

Much of our day we spend talking about God, about our relationship with Him, or about how He runs the world. In school, we learn about the Creator of the universe, or the God of the Jews, but rarely do we talk TO Him. Why? Quite simply because we are scared. Scared of looking a bit foolish in our modern society. We believe in God, we pray to God, fear, love, follow God, but speak to Him? ...to You? ...

God, I am learning the psalms of Your servant David. I am trying to understand his words, his poetry and his message in order to apply them to my life and times. I feel that King David represents a model for me to emulate in learning about myself and my relationship with You.

When I speak of a relationship I find it difficult because it is hard for me to (outside of my prayers) talk to You. Our society has developed a rational, tangible outlook on life. "What you see is what you get." And while I believe in You, I must confess that to believe that You will speak to me in the world to come, and believing that I can speak to You here and now, are two separate things. Not different, just separate.

I envision the biblical days when Abraham, Joseph, Miriam, Chana, and the rest of the prophets and personalities, at different times in their day, looked up (as I am looking up now) and spoke, telling You what was on their mind. Nowadays, we pay a hundred dollars an hour to speak to people, but I imagine back then it was easier and more prevalent. Of course it didn't hurt that You spoke back. Wouldn't it be something if You responded to me?

And yet, I wonder what gave way first. Did You stop responding because we stopped talking to You and started talking about You, or did You stop first?

I picture David running away from King Saul, or from his son Avshalom, or from his other enemies who are out to kill him. Alone, in a cave, or even in a village of supporters, he must have been very lonely. And yet, we have his poetry, the records of him calling out to You; sometimes he is confiding in his friend, or learning from his father, or fearing his master, but all the time he is talking to You!...

In psalm six, David expresses seeming despair. He describes a physical ailment in verses three and eight, a psychological disease in verse seven, a spiritual low in verse four, and his enemies in verse eleven. Could it be that David suffered from all of those difficulties at one juncture in his life? Or perhaps he was being figurative, trying to reflect on one aspect of his sickness through metaphors. A third possibility is that the author combined all of his fears and lonely feelings into one, in order to drive home his message.

I would like to suggest an alternative reading of the psalm. I do not know if this was David's intention, but it is something I experience, and as I said before, I feel that I can extrapolate from the great king's words to my everyday life.

It seems to me that David describes the feelings of a person suffering a depression. When you go through a phase of depression, either stemming from a previous illness, a social altercation, a business venture gone bad, or even without some external stimulus, you feel as though nothing is right in your life. The rational fears and the irrational concerns blend together so that they begin to snowball, ultimately overpowering you and casting you into the mixture so that you cannot discern one from the other.

Perhaps David, troubled by his sin, (second verse — "do not rebuke me"), or stung by an external foe (look no further than the title of psalm three!), feels broken. He feels pain, either from his heart, his mind, or actually one part of his body. But when you are in good spirits and you have a headache once in a while you accept it as part of life; when you are depressed, however, it takes control of you and you become submerged. We know that the author had a right to be concerned about his enemies at certain times in his life but we do not know if at this time a realistic fear existed. All in all, whereas some explain that he felt one of these types of problems, it is possible that he actually felt them all.

Perhaps David, aware of his condition, strives to impart a message: how to deal with depression when it comes upon us.

What is my reaction when I get depressed? I curl up into my bed, speak to no one, don't get dressed or leave my house, and wallow in self-pity. What is the reaction of King David? God.

The first verse attempts to identify the source of David's predicament — "God, I realize that You are the source of my situation, first and foremost, I beg forgiveness from You. 'Do not in Your wrath rebuke me....'" The poetic parallelism he uses in verses two through six underscores an emphasis and hierarchy of priorities — what do you do when you are down? Instinctively look to God for support, realize that you are guilty if being punished and/or mortal in not understanding His ways, but turn to Him and Him alone for salvation.

The second section of the psalm — verses 7,8 — explores the various symptoms of illness in greater depth. "I sigh exhaustively, I weep nightly, I cannot sleep for my tears. The intense crying has rendered my eyes faulty; I feel old and beat, due to the enemies [fears] that exist within me."

David teaches us to express ourselves and our predicaments. Until verse six we are certain that David is speaking to God; seven and eight, however, are subject to debate, while nine through eleven already speak of God in third person. In this middle section is he describing his ailments to God as a continuation of the last segment, or is he speaking to himself? Muttering at how difficult this time has been for him, wondering aloud when the pain will cease, trying to battle the depressive state.

If we accept this theory, the segue into the final three verses occurs nicely. He commands the 'po'alei aven' to depart, "...for God has heard my cry. God has hearkened to my supplication, He will receive my prayer; my enemies will disappear..." in an instant as quickly as they came.

Who are these po'alei aven of which he desires to be rid? Since when does he have such confidence to demand from his enemies to retreat? Some commentators describe the word as a general portrayal of evildoers. Others suggest that the word connotes the occult, hidden demons and warlords.

Perhaps in our context we can look internally into David's personality and say that the 'po'alei aven' represent his psychological fears, his depressive feelings that had been oppressing him, motivating him to write this psalm. Whatever drove him to a lonely depression is now rooted out by his resurgence of belief in God, faith in himself, and his newfound commitment to carry on.

The psalm, then, might be a formula for how to react to a depressive state. David might be teaching us the one true way to deal with seemingly overbearing troubles. It helps that the author has spoken to God, has heard God's reply. But that is not the critical point here. What counts is that he is willing to speak directly to his Maker. Either for assurance, comfort, mercy, or just to express his pain, but to God.

Perhaps when I find myself in such a stand manage to heed David's words, turning to God - to You in silent (or even crying) devotion, I will learn more about myself, and my relationship with You as I grow in Your world.

I hope that I have not distorted Your servant David's message too much, I hope that my interpretation is part of the words that King David has handed down to us. The Psalms are the poetics of Your spirit uttered by one of Your most cherished souls.

Ultimately, Your servant, David, intended to have this song sung. "To the chief musician of Neginot the player of the 'sheminit' instrument." It is hard for me to capture the nature of this as song, but perhaps one day I will merit to realize the poet's call.