

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 7

Every Day is Judgement Day

We don't really want God to judge us; we are too frightened by the outcome. For this reason we as Jews have come to dread the 'high holidays' or the 'days of awe,' or the 'days of judgement,' where the 'books of life and death are opened before Him,' and we repent, for He judges us during those ten days.

We fear judgement probably because we assume that we are not worthy, and that if we were judged, 'it would all come out in the open.' And yet, we are told that we cannot hide behind our fear. We must stand up and accept God's judgement upon us, even if it means accepting the worst. This of course takes much courage. And for this reason, the popular Jewish approach has been to confine these fearful days to ten -- the ten days of repentance between Rosh Hashana (the New Year) and Yom Hakippurim (the Day of Atonement).

However, what has been restricted in our day and age might have been quite prevalent in ancient times. In Biblical times, 'every day was judgement day.' Perhaps this is what David alludes to in Psalm 7 when he asks God to judge him.

Psalm 7 begins with a strange word, used only once in Tehillim, and twice in all of the Bible. That word is "shigayon." The title, which often reveals some connection to the psalm, is quite elongated in psalm 7. "A shigayon to David,

who sings to God, about the words of Kush the son of the Yimini." This title has baffled the commentators for centuries, and continues to do so today.

Rashi quotes several variations of the Midrashic interpretation, that the word 'shigayon' stems from the word 'shegaga,' meaning mistake - "shigayon le-David," a mistake of David. The general understanding is that David committed some sin and is singing in the form of a prayer to redeem himself from it. Ibn Ezra quotes a similar stance taken by one group of scholars, and Metzudat David and Metzudat Tzion, as well as Hirsch, follow in one form or another.

Two other possible interpretations are offered. The first, quoted by Rashi in the name of his teacher Menachem, as well as Radak, which Amos Chacham adopts, states that the shigayon was a type of musical instrument, similar to a kinor, shoshanim, and others. The second approach is found in Ibn Ezra who considers the word to mean 'longing,' as in the verse in Mishlei 5:19 "tishge tamid."

Let us focus on the notion that David was singing or praying about a mistake he made in his past. What could it have been? Who was this Cush guy about whom David was singing? Is there a relationship between his 'sin' and the words or actions he encountered with Cush? Once again, the commentaries debate the issue. Was it a code name for king Shaul (Rashi, Radak, Metzudot, Hirsch, etc.), or perhaps there was another person named Cush (Malbim, Ibn Ezra, etc.)?

In terms of the type of sin committed, once again we are unsure. Certainly in David's life there are sins to choose from. Neither the Bible, nor the Midrashim attempt to hide any errors made by David (or anyone for that matter) in his lifetime. The

opposite is true - almost immediately retribution is given to him, teaching us an important lesson in how David chose to live his life. This idea we will flesh out entirely as the theme of this mizmor. In our case, the rabbis offer some suggestions.

1. He cut off a piece of King Shaul's robe when he met Shaul in a cave while being hunted by him.
2. Rashi offers that he sang a song of rejoicing when Shaul died.
3. Rashi also forwards that David was somewhat responsible for Doeg the Edomite killing the priests in Nov.
4. An additional approach offered by Chacham from the Midrash, states that merely calling Shaul "Cush," was the sin.

In contrast to the position that shigayon refers to a physical error, Hirsch understands the words as relating instead to an intellectual error. He compares the word shigayon not to shagag - a physical mistake, but to shegiya - an intellectual error. This he gleans from the circumstances surrounding the only other time the word shigayon is used - Chabakuk 3:1.

Whatever the interpretation, whatever the definition of the word, one idea emerges from this line of commentators. David sinned, and now he reckons with it, and God is a part of the equation. Perhaps the intention of the poet was to be elusive about the specific infraction, for that was not his point. What is central however, is the formula for how to deal with sinning, and then returning to be judged by God.

Does David

(1) ignore it, shuffling it to the recesses of his consciousness, convincing himself of the more important things in his life?
Or...

(2) immediately justify himself, saying it was not me, and there is no reason to feel remorse?

Or perhaps...

(3) brood over it, paralyzing himself in self-doubt or self-pity, thus clouding thus other necessary actions he must take to secure his safety and security.

We will see from the psalm that David does none of the above, and the religious message of the psalm might be to direct us at how to deal DAILY with sin, punishment, justification, and atonement.

To the Mizmor itself: It is quite complicated with twists and turns, once again perhaps part of the message. I am listing several of the choice verses from the psalm, hoping to paint a picture of David's mindset in the psalm.

O Lord, God, in You I seek refuge
Deliver me from all my pursuers and save me,
Lest, like a lion, they tear me apart, rending in pieces, and
no one save me.
O Lord, if I have done such things, if my hands bear the guilt
of wrongdoing,
If I have dealt evil to my ally...
Then let the enemy pursue and overtake me,
Let him trample my life to the ground, and lay my body in the
dust.

Rise O Lord in your anger, assert yourself against the fury of
my foes,
Bestir Yourself on my behalf you have ordained judgment.
The Lord who judges nations, judge me O Lord, for the
righteousness and blamelessness that are mine.

Let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the
righteous.
I look to God to shield me,
God judges the righteous, and sends His wrath on the enemies
every day.

See, He hatches evil, conceives mischief and gives birth to
fraud...

I will praise the Lord for His righteousness, and sing a
hymn to the name of the Lord most high.

As I said, it is a complicated psalm, but a certain arrangement emerges. At first, a voice of trust and faith in God (2a), but then the realization that one must confront the reality of one's day. Therefore, the poet turns to an immediate plea for salvation (2b). But he does not let this stand on its own; he asks himself whether he is worthy of this merciful act of God.

Verse 4 has David setting up a self-judgement - O Lord if I am not worthy of Your salvation, then let my enemies consume me. Let them trample my life to the ground...(6b).

Then there is a pause, as if to wait for God to allow him to continue. And then he does continue. Rise O Lord in your anger, assert yourself against the fury of my foes (7). David does not recoil in fear of reprisals, but asserts his righteousness, blamelessness. An air of confidence permeates - "Judge me O Lord, for the righteousness and blamelessness that are mine" (9b). His willingness to confront his destiny in judgement stems from two perspectives.

First, the specific infraction that David is referring to in the psalm is almost blameless. It is not the case of Batsheva (of which we will soon learn), but at most a case of circumstances that forced him to react, perhaps in a less than perfect manner.

Second, we must realize that it is not David alone who is being judged, but his enemies, the evil ones. They too, must receive judgment. The absoluteness of the evil that controls his enemies leads David to ask for judgement, provided that the judgement is aimed at all. In this light, 12a discusses the judgement of the righteous, and 12b begins David's treatise on the evil people, who after hearing about the judgement, continue to bask in their evil finite rewards, and will ultimately pay the price.

David gets carried away on the issue of evil, as if he is constantly barraged with the theological question of evil, and how to answer it in the framework of God and judgement to all.

In the end, David acknowledges God based on His righteousness ("ke-tzidko"), but we cannot help thinking of the same word he used for himself: "ke-tzidki" (9b).

The point: David recognizes that we will sin, we will give in to our passions, desires, and intellectual aspirations. In addition to major sins, we will err in judgement, misperceive a situation. David's concern, however, is how we pick up the pieces. How, upon reflection, we recognize what we did, and whether we will take steps to accept the ramifications of our actions, and seek judgement, but also stand up for ourselves, struggling to maintain our religious composure even in the darkest hour.

We are familiar with an automatic submission to God, a plea for salvation. What intrigues us is the routine nature of his declaration, "judge me O God," and his insistence that only through God's daily judgement of all creatures can the world exist, can justice prevail, and can the evil ones who constantly mock him ultimately receive their punishment.