

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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MIZMOR 8: The Definition of Man - A Poetic Paradox

When I consider Your heavens the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars You have created. [I ask myself] What is man that You should be mindful of him, the son of man that You should regard him?

(Vatachserehu) ... You have made him a little less than an elohim and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him have dominion over the works of Your hands, You have put all things under his feet. (Psalms 8:5-7)

Psalm 8 can be cut into two. The first half, verses 1-5 discusses God, and leads up to God's dominance, omniscience, and omnipotence vis a vis man, and all other living creatures. His name is too great for the earth, it belongs in the heavens - "your splendor is extolled throughout the heavens."

The Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi 13th century, Spain) explains the second verse "God our Lord, how awesome is Your name over the earth, that Your splendor is spread in the heavens," to mean that while God's strength and power can be seen throughout the land, His beauty, awe, and splendor are reserved for the heavens alone. The psalm is one of praise of God, His awe and splendor soaring beyond man's comprehension. Man is not on the map.

The second half starts with man at his height - just a little less than God. Afterwards, it works its way down to other life forms. In the second section of the poem, Man stands at the height of creation; for him the world was created.

We ask ourselves, how can this paradox exist? Was it David's intention to exalt God and reflect on Man's insignificance, or the opposite - to praise man as the highest form of life under God?

Before we explore this question, it should be noted that one thing stands out in the style of the psalm. "When I look...", the concern is entirely with how man perceives God and himself in God's world. Isn't it interesting that the theocentric first half is nevertheless described from man's perspective just as is the anthropocentric second half. I would have expected the first half to be more removed from

man; when man is a speck in the universe of God, what is his place using the 'I?'

The author's intent is to build the paradox inside the mind of man. We can debate about our worth, God's interest in us, and the celestial spheres versus the worldly ones as long as this discussion is rooted in our minds. Thus, the personal element transcends the entire psalm despite a seeming contradictory stance in the first section.

Before returning to the paradox of Man's worth, let us first ask an additional question which might provide the key to unlocking the message of the poem.

There is only one transitive verb which begins a verse in this psalm. That verb sets off the crucial sixth verse, which begins the second, anthropocentric segment of the psalm. I refer to the 'Vav' which as a prefix can have several different meanings. Vav in Biblical Hebrew can either mean 'and' (vav ha-chibur - conjunction) or 'but' (vav ha-nigud - negation). [There are several more possibilities which do not concern us right now.]

This 'vav' either functions as an addition to what was said, or introduces a contrast to that which has been stated. How do we view the 'vav' in our crucial sixth verse?

On the one hand, a conjunctive 'vav' comes to include man as just another part of His creation and grand plan. "And the Lord created the heavens, the earth, trees, dinosaurs, man, insects, shrubbery" This approach humbles man, it forces us to realize our place in God's world and gives us pause in our day. Take a look at a picture taken by the Hubble space telescope. In it are to be seen thousands of galaxies, millions of worlds, and our earth does not even merit a speck on the picture. [For an elaboration of our rapidly expanding universe, see the February issue of Scientific American.] Where are we, then, in the greater scheme of things?

It is this attitude which describes man at night (see my lecture on psalm 5 - "A Morning Detour"), when he looks up to God with faith, out of fear of the other elements in the world.

Permit me to quote from Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch who writes in his commentary to verse 4 - 5 in Psalm 8:

The psalm is uttered at the sight of the starry sky at night. By day, man, blinded by the sunlight, sees only earth, and the heavens arched over it, supplying the earth below with light, warmth and moisture. It is only at night, when earth has receded into the shadows and the sky above it becomes visible with its starry hosts of shining worlds that the earth shrinks to a mere speck in the universe and man on this speck becomes so infinitely small.

Man looks to God for shelter in this world; indeed, we are still struck with awe - meaning fear - at the "acts of God" for which we pay so dearly in insurance! "What is man" captures our greatest fears and our most humbling experiences as but another creature created by God in this wide world.

But then there is the 'vav ha-nigud' - the negating vav. It does not mean AND, rather, BUT. When wielding this definition of the word we stand erect. We recognize ourselves not as another created being, but as the reason for creation. We are not incidental to the world but the center of it!

On earth, we rule. Man is the highest life form - the most creative, communicative, thinking, feeling creature. Man is capable of building skyscrapers, launching spaceships, finding cures for diseases, performing heart transplants; there is no limit to our ability.

This attitude permeates the morning of our day, when we are confident, self-assured, and self-involved. Not only is man highly evolved but he is created in the 'image of God.' Translations vary, but one interpretation focuses on the innate Godly nature inside all of us.

In this state, where we could be swept away by our self-absorbed feelings, we remind ourselves through the psalm that the discussion is still based on man's relationship to God. At a time when we least think about God, that is where we must be reminded of Him. The final line in the psalm is a reversion to its opening. The inclusio is a poetic tool which through repetition of words aims to bring one full circle in a poem or story.

We started as unimportant, and amidst our feelings of insignificance we recognize (through the style of the psalm) that we are still able to speak to God. The critical ambiguous 'vav' turns the poem on its head as we begin to take pride in our 'almost Godlike' status. At this time, too, we hesitate approaching God, not due to humility but exactly the opposite - arrogance. The final line echoing the opening one says that in our morning and our night, in pride and humility, in feelings of finiteness and infiniteness - we still speak straight to God, His glory is always upon us.

David uses two poetic tools to demonstrate his dialectical, yet, cohesive stance. The ambiguous 'vav' aims to stimulate two opposing world views. The inclusio fuses the two together; it tells us that it is not only possible to have both feelings, but it is indeed what being human is all about. Some days we will feel the conjunctive 'vav' - as a cog in the ever-expanding galaxy. Other days we will feel the opposing 'vav' - the world is our oyster. All of our days we should recognize who created us and acknowledge these kaleidoscopic feelings as part of the beauty of God's creation.

It is said in the name of the famous Kotzker Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, disciple of the Magid of Mezritch) that each person should always have both pockets filled. In one pocket one should have "I am dust of the earth," in the other pocket, "for me the world was created." Contradiction? Yes, and that is the message of the psalm.