

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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MIZMOR 9: David and His Multi-colored Message

"La-menatzeach al Mut Laben, a psalm of David"

In this ninth psalm of David, we cannot even understand the title. In previous lessons we have seen that la-menatzeach could mean to the conductor, or to the victor. But what of the next three words? The preeminent commentator - Rashi - (Solomon ben Isaac, 1040-1105, France) mentions in his commentary at least seven different interpretations of these three words. Other commentators add countless more.

How could one phrase have so many possibilities of interpretation? Not only is this phrase important for understanding the verse, but since it is the title sentence, it can reflect on the psalm in its entirety. An analysis of these various assertions, then, might prove fruitful in allowing us to gain perspective on the range of emotions and experiences from which the poet might be drawing.

That is to say, poetry can be defined as a physical record of emotional outpouring. Sometimes it is spontaneous, while at other times it is planned out. Sometimes strands of thought are knitted together into one theme, while at other times the combination of different feelings from which the author is drawing are left disparate. Could it be possible that the ambiguity of the title (and certain contradictory statements in the psalm for that matter) stems from the uncertainty David felt inside? Or could it be possible that the double (or triple?) entendre in the title emanate from two or three different, possibly inconsistent, emotions?

With this introduction, let us proceed with an analysis of the three words: "al mut laben."

Here is a basic listing of some of the possible definitions of the words:

1. "upon the death of a son"
2. "upon the death of Laben - or Nabal"
3. "immortality to the 'son' - Israel--alone"
4. "eternity when we will be cleansed"
5. "to the conductor, upon the musical instrument played by the 'ben'"

As you can see, the meaning is by no means agreed upon. Is the title referring to an historical event, a spiritual

awakening, eschatological expectations, or a simple reference to the musical nature of the psalm?

Rashi begins by voicing our most instinctual and literal understanding of the words. 'Al' means on, 'mut' is death, and 'laben' connotes 'to the son.' Thus, David writes a poem in honor, memoriam, (praise?) of having lost a son.

Which son? Some commentators attribute the identity of the son to Avshalom, David's adversarial child who took over the throne, and chased his father out of the kingdom. Thus, he is writing a psalm concerning the death of his son.

Yet, while we can conceive of David's outpouring of emotions regarding his son's death, can we honestly relate the news of the death of his Avshalom to the third verse in the psalm - "I shall rejoice and be relieved, I will sing to your great name?"

A second possibility stems from the death of another son in David's life, and in this case a literary parallel exists. When David sins with Bat-Sheva the prophet Natan tells him "your child from this relationship will die too" (mot yumat). Perhaps it is the loss of this infant son that is the subject of this psalm. Does this not make verse three an even more extreme case of inappropriateness?

Yet perhaps we can find some assistance in the fifth sentence. "For You have furthered my justice and judgement, appointing Yourself a righteous judge for the judgement seat of the future." This is an acknowledgement of God's system of justice, in which God carries out His judgements, i.e. by punishing wickedness with immediate retribution.

In the story in Samuel II, chapter 12, we find a strange sequence of events. David's initial response to the prophet's rebuke is summed up in two words, "I have sinned to God (chatati la-Hashem)." Natan informs the king that he will not die due to his immediate repentant reaction. But since he has "caused the enemies of God to blaspheme Him," his new child - who he conceived with "the wife of Uriah" - will die.

David in response pleads to God, fasts, and sleeps on the ground in order to attempt to sway the verdict. On the seventh day the child dies, but instead of reacting to the death as we might have expected, he gets up from the floor, washes, anoints, changes his clothes and goes to pray to God. Afterwards he eats a meal.

One wonders how it is that David expresses almost the opposite of mourning after his son's death! Can it be that he felt no pain? David himself replies to his amazed servants: "While my son was still alive (but dying) I fasted and cried, thinking that perhaps God would have mercy and reverse the verdict. Now that he is dead ... can I return him to life?"

Perhaps the message of the story revolves not around David's emotions vis-a-vis his son, but rather his understanding and acceptance of the divine judgement. While his son was alive, he mourned his own actions, he repented at the thought of his son's death being the punishment for his acts. Once the child died, he wept no more, he realized that the true judgement of God had been manifested, and that the process of returning to God had begun.

Could this story be a reference to "la-menatzeach al mut laben?" Perhaps.

Rashi rejects the opinion that this is to be translated "on the death of a son," but still maintains that it refers to the death of someone. He offers a second approach, this time entering the exegetical realm of remez (allusions). The word Laben in Hebrew is LBN. If, however, we read the Hebrew letters left to right (and in our case the English letters right to left), the word Nabal emerges. Who was Nabal? None other than the ruthless landowner, who treated David and his band unjustly (see Samuel II:25). The theme of the psalm - rejoicing in God's vengeance - is much clearer, but at the same time, why give his name in code? Elsewhere in Psalms other names of enemies (include Avshalom his son) are mentioned explicitly.

In this vein, other commentators identify this person as a prince of the surrounding nations who were enemies of David, who after having harassed the King of Israel, he died an untimely death. Still others identify the deceased as a king who was a terror to David, Ibn Yichyeh, (a Spanish Medieval commentator) suggests that it refers to Goliath whom David killed, and he thus rejoices over God's involvement in that escapade.

Thus, the event which is the source of David's feelings of joy and praise of God remains to us uncertain. One can, however, sense from the verses a feeling of relief on the part of the king. "I wish to attain joy and relief through You, I desire to sing in Your name" (3), "You have threatened nations leading a wicked people to destruction ..." (6), "Arise, O Lord, let not the man who is degenerate in violence feel invincible; let the nations who opposed you be judged" (20).

Yet a third approach focuses on a debate amongst the ancient grammarians (ba'alei mesora). They argue whether or not the three words we mentioned are really only two. Joining 'al' and 'mut,' yields 'almut.'

This word itself is a source of debate. One definition is based on the root 'olam' meaning eternity, or forever.

This might explain the references to a national eschatological vision (rather than a personal one): "All the nations that have forgotten the Lord shall retreat toward the grave" (18); "For he who is defenseless shall not remain

forgotten forever, lest the hope of the poor man be lost for eternity" (19); "But the Lord reigns forever; only now does He prepare His throne for judgement" (8).

A second possibility focuses on the root word 'ALM' meaning hidden, or secret (Hirsch). A third explanation sees the root 'ALM' as indicating youthful vigor (alma, cf. Exodus 2:8; Isaiah 7:14). Thus, the specific definition might point to an eschatological catharsis. Rashi, who maintains this position, explains the word 'laben' as a verb - meaning to whiten (cf. Isaiah, 1:18). Thus, the psalm relates to a future time when all of darkness of Israel will be cleansed, and they will shed their infantile conduct. Part of that cleansing process depends upon the eradication of the lineage of Amalek.

For this the psalmist is happy, in the knowledge that his sins will ultimately be cleansed. "For you have furthered my cause and my right; you have appointed yourself as a righteous judge upon the judgement seat (of the future)" (5).

Finally, the word 'almut' might be a musical instrument (cf. Psalms 46:1). The reference would thus be to another instrument which was used to play the melody that accompanied the recital of this psalm.

This lesson, in line with the psalm it analyzes, sounds like a hodgepodge of ideas, lacking clarity and one distinct theme. Can it be? Why not? Do we expect our thoughts to always follow a pattern? Not necessarily, but when writing ideas down we tend to sift and separate, structure our words, and utilize style. But what would happen if we wrote down all of the thoughts we had a given moment without structuring them? Remarkably for David, all of his thoughts at this moment are related to God.

Amos Chacham, the editor of the commentary Da'at Mikra on Psalms, usually begins each psalm by breaking down the poem into sections. Psalm 9 does not have such a breakdown, and this because it is difficult to find thematic unity in the verses. Perhaps this psalm is not about one thing but is deliberately 'multi-colored.'