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TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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The Philosopher Poet

Evil: A View from the Outside

Psalm 10

With his pride a rasha (evil one) sets the tormented ablaze, they are caught in his mischievous baneful concoctions. For the rasha praises the fulfillment of his desires, and a swindler's praise is blasphemous to God. The rasha in his arrogance seeks not, God is not part of his plan. Yet, the ways of the rasha will find success, the heavenly justice is far away, as he blows away his enemies with ease. He says in his heart, I shall never falter, forever I will be victorious. His mouth is filled with vows and yet it is all deceit and malice, under his tongue there is mischief and violence... (Psalm 10, 2-7).

Since when do we find a treatise on evil in Psalms? Since when do we see a description of the evil man, his thoughts, his personality in the Psalter? Are Psalms not poetic songs of praise and prayer to God? If so, why do we find almost none of the above in psalm 10? Only in the beginning and end of the psalm is there a reference to God, and only in a few verses does the psalmist actually speak to God in the first person. The rest of the poem is concerned with objective concepts of evil, and the actions of evil people in the world. Why is this psalm different from every other?

The truth is that some commentators view psalm 10 as only half a psalm. Many consider this to be a sequel to psalm 9, (Malbim, Hirsch, Chacham, Rav Avraham ben Hagra). Perhaps due to

the seemingly non-Psalms-like style, it can be better understood as half of psalm 9. This would 'solve' the problem, since the ninth psalm is in typical Davidic style.

Let's take a look at some similarities between the two psalms:

Both psalms refer to evil in the world and the plea of the psalmist for God to eradicate that evil. The phrase 'kuma Hashem' appears to link the two together as a cry for God to rise in wrath at the malfeasance that exists. In addition, several words appear in both to join the two together. 'Enosh' - 9:20-21, 10:18; 'shachakh anavim' - 9:13, 10:12; 'doresh damim' - 9:13, 'lo tidrosh' - 10:13; 'misgav la-dakh' - 9:10, 'yatom va-dakh' - 10:18.

In addition, the acrostic of aleph bet in psalm 9 almost continues with psalm 10, lamed then kuf, resh, shin, tav. All these factors might compel us to look at the two psalms as one long one that was split apart due to its length (Chacham).

Others, however, argue for the independence of psalm 10. Despite being an 'orphan psalm,' (see class on psalm 2 on my website [[www.tehillim.net](http://www.tehillim.net)]), there is a different perspective one notices in psalm 10, distinct from its predecessor. Psalm 9 is typical of a Davidic prayer to God. It is a poem of gratitude to his savior for his victory over the enemy (verses 2-13), yet the enemy is not completely defeated. Therefore he supplicates before God (14, 15) in order that he may continue to praise God in his life. In psalm 9 David is the subject, and the evil is the product of his discontent.

Our psalm is different, though. David is not the subject; in fact, there is no title. Accident? Coincidence? Or perhaps there was a need for a sense of anonymity due to the subject

matter. Perhaps the approach taken was one devoid of typical prayer, and has entered into the realm of treatise.

Most of the time we acknowledge Tehillim as a collection of subjective poems, as prayers between a man and God. The purpose of its dissemination might (as I have suggested) be for others to learn about the author's relationship with God, and to apply it to their own lives. In this sense, the reader of Tehillim draws personal conclusions from the divinely inspired ruminations of the individual psalmist.

Psalm 9 offers a different perspective, one which we find in other areas of wisdom literature. There are two approaches to wisdom literature. In the Jobian model, man speaks to God from the depths of his suffering. This is typical of many Davidic psalms, e.g., psalms 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, etc.

Then there is the philosophical treatise, of which Kohelet is representative. My teacher Rabbi Shalom Carmy once commented, "Kohelet is concerned with the meaning of life, whereas Job is concerned with suffering. For Kohelet suffering is important because it makes life meaningless; for Job, lack of meaning is troublesome when it's part of unjust suffering."

Each book focuses on different perspective towards understanding God and the ways of the world. One speaks of suffering from within, one from without. Each teaches us important philosophical concepts and forges a part of Jewish philosophic thought.

The psalms offer both perspectives. Many poems we have discussed followed a Jobian approach - "O God why have you forsaken me?" But there are several psalms which ask about the nature of the world. Why do the wicked rejoice, or what is the

nature of the rasha? Alternatively, what are the characteristics of a God-fearing individual?

A Kohelet type psalm might be commenting on the sad (or positive) state of affairs in his day or giving an analysis of the nature of a specific attribute (in our case, vice). Our psalm is, if you will, a psychoanalysis, of a rasha.

Why does the author engage in this discourse, why not stick to the typical call of distress, or praise for redemption? Perhaps there is merit to understanding the enemy, trying to figure out what is deficient in his personality. In such insight there may lie an opening towards resolving conflicts. Perhaps for this reason we can view the psalm on its own two feet as an analysis of the archetypal rasha. What does this person think, what is his relationship to God if any?

With this introduction, let us look into the words of the psalm, and glean some of its themes.

The word rasha appears six times in the mizmor. Aside from it, the subject of the rasha is most prominent throughout the psalm. Hirsch explains the word rasha as the absence of law - a lawless person. It certainly fits into the theme of the psalm here. Others interpret it generically, as we would expect: a villain, a wicked, evil individual.

The author begins attacking the rasha, focusing on what motivates him - pride. It is this arrogance which drives him to behave insolently towards man and God. The rasha is always plotting, conceiving of ways to destroy the poor and weak. He then praises himself for his cunning.

One senses the poet's frustration not at the success of the rasha, but at the hubris with which the villain carries himself.

The rasha's disdain for the indigent gives him easy prey, and his actions make a mockery of the world created by God, in effect blaspheming God Himself: "...He has mocked the Lord" (verse 3). "Is there no justice?" the psalmist wonders. For the villain whose world is his oyster, there is no God, and justice is to be bought, or blown over.

Worse, it seems like the smug contention of the rasha that he will never falter holds true. "He says in his heart, 'God has forgotten, He has hidden His face, He will never see.'"

The upshot is found in the final request of the psalmist in verse 12. Instead of the poet saying, "Rise God to MY distress, forget ME not," or "Destroy MY enemies," he remains objective, Kohelet-like, asking for the divine response to the phenomenon of the successful, yet wicked individual. For example:

Verse 12 - "Arise God lift up Your hand, forget not the humble."

Verse 13 - "Why does the rasha mock God, he says in his heart, God cares not."

Verse 14 - "You have seen their plight, You have always saved the downtrodden..."

Verse 15 - "Break the arm of the rasha, until you find evil no longer..."

All the verses point to a general call for God to observe His system of justice, to break the evil, and to not let the downtrodden be trampled upon. God, after all, "champions the fatherless and the oppressed" (verse 18), and therefore it is (almost) incumbent upon Him to act swiftly and completely.

The Psalmist steps away from the mold in psalm 10. He adopts a philosophical attitude towards man, towards evil, and towards God's relationship with resha'im. In attempting to

understand the enemy, the poet finds scorn and arrogance directed by the rasha at God Himself. Can it be that God would idly sit by and allow such blaspheme? Finally, at the end of the philosopher's psalm, we find a call to arms for God. But once again, we see not a subjective, personal salvation, but simply a restoration of the order of the world created by God for man.