

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 12

Words

Psalm 12, in a word, is about words. Our greatest medium of expression is indeed King David's most precious vehicle for connecting to his creator. However, there is a grave danger that surrounds the use, or rather abuse, of words. With words I can write poetry, create laws, and build civilizations, and with words I can lie, cheat, hurt, and even kill.

Words represent the bridge between our greatest inner thoughts and our ability to exchange with the world around us. The twentieth century has taught us the importance of communication with words in all its different manifestations. 'Talk shows,' 'chat rooms,' 'power meetings,' all these represent how the power of words has pervaded our society, sometimes for good, sometimes for bad.

It is with this introduction that we notice a phenomenon in King David's Psalms that we have not yet seen in the other psalms we have studied.

Psalm 12 represents a significant change in David's attitude in his Psalms. It is an enclosed unit devoted almost entirely to one topic: words. It does not have to do with David's suffering, or his despair. Nor is there a plea for salvation in general. Rather, David has one thing on his mind:

"Save O God, for honesty, integrity is gone, trustworthiness has been stripped from man. Lies and deceit speaks one to the other, a language of smoothness, superficial communication. Let God obliterate all who smooth talk, those who speak with high-flouting language.

Let God obliterate those who brazenly state, our words will strengthen us, we are our own masters. They who prey on the downtrodden, they who embezzle from the simple. I shall arise, says God, wage war against those who breathe out erring air. God's words are pure, as molten silver, glowing from the furnace. You God (alone) will guard the downtrodden, watch over this generation."

As we have seen in previous psalms, our sages have approached this psalm in different ways, each one with his own angle on what he gleans from the words of the psalmist. Each one offers us a glimpse of the reservoir of messages that emerge from a single poem.

We begin with Rashi, who, as is his wont, remains true to the tradition and maintains that the psalms were written by David, and are about David. If the topic of the psalm revolves around dishonesty, deceit and chicanery, there is room for us to witness that in King David's life as well.

As David was dodging King Shaul's spear, he experienced an eerie alliance from people living in the wilderness of Zif. They accepted him and offered him peace. At the same time, using their 'other hearts,' they went to Shaul and betrayed David's hideout, waiting for a reward for David's ultimate demise.

It was not the people of Zif who were killing David; they merely spoke words to Shaul, informing on David, and causing a near tragic ending to David's life. Against them, David speaks out, 'where are the honest and wholehearted people in the world? Why must I encounter smooth talkers who speak with one heart but adhere to the other? Let God strike down those who talk with such haughtiness...'

Rashi finds an historical background to trace the motivation for David's psalm. Radak accepts the premise that the psalm discusses those individuals who deceive and ill-treat the weak and impoverished. He argues, however, that the psalm is not about David and his generation, but rather:

"This psalm was said with the holy spirit (ruach ha-kodesh) for a future generation in which an evil populace will abuse and overpower the feeble."

Radak goes on to describe this 'prophecy' which rebukes a majority of deceitful people defrauding the poor and swindling the simpleminded. God will champion the cause of the downtrodden and save them from the evil clutches of the deceitful people.

Why does Radak reject Rashi's historical approach? Did he not find enough historical basis for the psalm? Was David's life not characterized as one in which he was tormented by smooth talkers and swindlers? Perhaps Radak noticed an interesting aspect of the psalm. The poet never turns to God and asks Him for something. As opposed to David's formula in other psalms of reality of the enemy/justification or innocence/plea for salvation etc., in this psalm there is no turning to God.

In fact, in the first section (verse 4) the poet refers to God in the third person, and in verse 6 he refers to God in quotations (the typical prophecy voice). The final time the psalmist turns to God (verse 8) is more of a statement of fact than a request: "you will guard them God..." Perhaps Radak concludes that if there is no direct request to God, the psalm must not be referring to David's current situation.

Instead, claims Radak, the psalm is a prophecy about a time that will bring with it self-centeredness, double talk, and deceit. At such a time, only God will be there to defend the poor, the innocent and the weak at heart.

Malbim introduces the element that the double talk is directed against God as well. The key phrase that he brings as proof is in verses 4-5: "(Let God obliterate those who) speak big words, who say our words will strengthen us."

Malbim writes:

"Those who speak towards God in matters of faith, their language marks intense religious feelings, but they philosophize over it and ultimately reject it."

For Malbim, perhaps more important than the deleterious effect the abuse of words has on one's fellow man is the extremely detrimental effect it has on the religious beliefs of individuals. Throughout history there have been sophists, casuists, sectarians and the like who have used the power of words to persuade the populace to veer away from God, and to engage in hedonism. Either due to succumbing to one's desires, or to succumbing to one's intellectual justification, the outcome is the same, a gradual slide into a theological abyss.

The anti-spiritual climax is reached in verse 5 when the 'enlightened' individual states rhetorically, "who will be master over us?" After the person disproves divine providence and calls everything happenstance or the whims of nature, he concludes that the one who controls nature is the true master. Those with the power convince the masses against believing, and warp the minds of the populace who cannot afford to think about such lofty issues as faith and God.

I am reminded of the famous story – the Grand Inquisitor, in Dostoyefsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the story, the Grand Inquisitor controls and rules over the starving and feeble-minded populace. It is a hard life, and there is much pain. Suddenly, the Lord descends and takes on flesh, walking amongst the people. The crowd flocks to him, he heals a young girl about to die, and he incites a spark of hope in the village.

The Grand Inquisitor quickly pulls this 'miracle worker' aside and castigates him for even appearing. 'Who do you think you are for coming down here and inspiring faith into my people...?' he shouts. Ultimately, the Inquisitor overcomes the Lord, and the Lord goes away.

The power of this story lies in its overarching question of what is more important, God or bread? And when one can control bread, God has 'no right' to enter the lives of the populace.

In our psalm, according to the Malbim, the issue is that those individuals with the power of words can influence people to stray away from God. Only God and His Torah can repel this arrogant attitude. God, whose word is pure, whose Torah is truth, will protect the innocent, and guard against the evil of the generation.

God will not shy away from the inquisitors of the generation, but will defend, and lead, and protect the rights of the downtrodden forever.

We have focused on three explanations of the psalm, all legitimate, all seeing a different perspective in the words of the poet. Each one presents us with a unique approach towards studying the Bible. Rashi underscores the historical aspect – how David fought external and internal foes, and always relied on his Creator as the source of energy to continue.

Radak focuses on the Biblical words as prophecy, with a message for each generation. No doubt the words of the psalmist can apply to our day and age. Indeed, we are subject to the same types of misuse of words, and double talk, the same corruption and arrogance. Ultimately we rely on words that are pure, and still aglow from the crucible through which God creates them.

Malbim reminds us that the words we use against others can often act as the spear we thrust towards the heavens in hope of controlling our own destiny and answering to no one. Once again the words of the Torah, the word of God, is the only repellent to the heartless and superficial jargon heard in our community.

Ultimately, our goal is to utilize all the facets of the psalm, to understand David and his relationship with God, and to glean the timeless messages of the psalm for our own lives.