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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

by Rabbi Avi Baumol

Psalm 15

Does David speak to God, or is God speaking to David? Is God the author of the Psalms? Sounds hard to accept, after all we have been working with the theory that David's prayers, his poetry and his prose, represent the expressions of his thoughts, innermost feelings and the outpouring of his emotions. How then can I propose such a seemingly outlandish theory?

The truth is that this is not MY position, but the position of one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of our history. I refer to Saadiah Gaon.

Saadiah Gaon, (882-942) the famous philosopher and anti-karaite polemicist in the tenth century, is considered by many as the father of Jewish philosophy. His famous work 'Emunot Vedeot' – Book of Beliefs and Doctrines – is a milestone of Jewish philosophy and literature, trying to bridge the gap between philosophy/science and Jewish law and belief. In addition to his philosophical work, he wrote many commentaries on the Torah, and was the leader of the Jewish community in Babylonia – the Gaon of the great academy Sura.

Saadiah also wrote a commentary on psalms. In it, he offers a remarkably unique interpretation of the nature of the psalms. In a book by Uriel Simon, titled "Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiah Gaon To Abraham Ibn Ezra," (Sunny Press 1991, English), Simon shares with us the position taken by Saadiah.

Saadiyah maintains that all of the psalms are the voice of God, the Psalter being considered a second Torah. By no means is it a reflection of Man's prayer to God, rather, using the concept of 'dibra Torah be-lashon bnei adam' – the Torah spoke in the words which man can comprehend. The best expression of God is through hearing it from man's perspective. Let me quote for you some lines in Saadiyah's introduction to his commentary.

"Therefore I have seen fit to reveal the entire meaning of this book: I say that it is divine speech, what the Master says to His servant, commanding him and warning him and encouraging him and threatening him and describing to him [the Master's] exalted glory, and reminding him that he is weak before [God] and dependent upon [H]im...(p.24) Simon, p.5

... to keep the reader of this book from discriminating among its contents and understanding what is placed in the mouth of the servant as his own speech and not that of his Master; that is, the reader should not think that 'have mercy upon me,' 'succor me,' 'save me,' and the like are the words of the servant rather than part of the prophet's vision from the Lord; nor should he think that 'they will praise' and 'they will sing' are really in the third person instead of direct address; nor anything that might be construed opposite to the Lord's intention. We must realize that all of these were phrased by the Lord in the various forms of speech employed by his creatures. (Saadiyah p. 53) Simon p. 2.

How far-reaching is Saadiyah's position? How quickly should we dismiss it? Fact: The book of Psalms is part of the biblical canon. The biblical canon is a collection of prophecies from God. Our sages distinguish between levels of God's presence in the tri-partied biblical works. Five books of Moses are the actual word of God, the books of the prophets

(Neviim) are prophecies, either through visions, or hearing the voice of God, while the writings (Ketuvim) of which Tehillim is a part of, is considered to have been written with 'Ruach Ha-kodesh' – the Divine Inspiration.

Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak), a fourteenth century Provencal biblical exegete, writes in his introduction to Tehillim about the difference between prophecy of the Neviim – which comes in a vision or a voice, and the Ruach Ha-kodesh of the Writings – which emanates from the recesses of the person, and elevates his/her personality producing words of wisdom, praise and thanks to their God. RaDaK offers as his source for the book of Tehillim being written in Ruach Ha-kodesh, as the mystical work called the Zohar (3:20). Maimonides in his philosophical work, Moreh Nevukhim, (2:45, second level) also maintains that the Writings were written through divine inspiration.

Accepting the notion of David writing with divine inspiration we still must choose between the inspiration of God USING the vehicle of David (and all of the Writings' writers for that matter) to convey His message to the people, and Man being inspired (or in touch) with/by his divine essence and espousing his or her own message in this higher state of spirituality. We all opt for the latter position, Saadiah opts for the former.

To Saadiah, David is simply another medium for God to convey His message to His people and anybody else willing to listen. The fact that it is written in the form of a man writing about his feelings and emotions, is no different than the five books of Moses which dictate the speeches of the forefathers, the children of Israel, Moses, and Aharon.

Undoubtedly, those who reject Saadiah's view acknowledge that one cannot discount the input on the part of the poet, as he expresses his deepest and most meaningful emotions.

Running away from his son, who might kill him, composing a short but cogent poem on woes and worries, it is difficult to erase David from that scenario.

Perhaps we will have an easier or more difficult time accepting Saadiah's approach. For example, in a psalm which offers prayers from David for his sins (see psalm 51, or perhaps 6) it is difficult to see the voice of God. Saadiah responds in his introduction (p.53) that the words 'have mercy upon me' to be spoken by the Lord – as if to read, I [God] will have mercy upon you. Similarly, 'heed my prayer' is read as I [God] will heed your prayer. Thus, he must go through a process of editing almost every other sentence in many of the Psalms.

However, in a psalm such as 15 we can ask whether there is an edge and some inner logic to Saadiah's postulation. After all, what is the nature of psalm fifteen?

"A Psalm of (for?!) David, O God, who will sojourn in your tent? Who will dwell in you Holy Mountain?"

A genre unto its own is the questioning of 'who is deserved,' 'who belongs in God's place, on God's mountain.' Psalm 15, which asks this question, proceeds to list a series of characteristics worthy of the world to come.

As we begin to sift through the specific qualities registered as the litmus test for entering the next world, we should ask ourselves, is this the definitive list? Whose list is this? The motivation for this question lies in the specific style of qualities presented. Learning Torah does not rate as an essential trait. Doing mitzvot – commandments of God – is not recounted. Instead, there is a listing of moral traits; to use the Talmudic vernacular, this represents a list of the mitzvot bein adam le-chavero (commandments

between man and fellow man), not bein adam La-Hashem (between man and God).

Let us take a look at the specific list to ascertain this delineation as a social/moral set of laws rather than an objective/absolute one:

1. one who walks in simple wholeness
2. acts justly
3. speaks truth in his heart
4. who has no slander on his tongue
5. has done his fellow no evil
6. nor cast disgrace upon his close one
7. in whose eyes a contemptible man is repulsive
8. who honors those who fear God
9. who can swear to his detriment and not retracting
10. does/did not lend out money on interest
11. and takes/took not a bribe against the innocent.

"He who does all these shall never falter."

In light of this list we might add another category to our Talmudic appellations. Not only must one concern oneself with the relationship with God, and with man, but with oneself. Such that excluding any human interaction, the person must adhere to standards set up by him/herself, for him/herself. Thus, the quality of 'holekh tamim' - walking 'whole' or 'simply' or innocently - should be irrespective of social intervention.

Notwithstanding the content of the list, the question of objective lists comes to the fore. Is this the definitive word? And if so, whose definitive word? We have set up two possibilities: David is the author, God is the author. To say that David thought up the list is a commentary on his subjective feelings about being deserving of God's praise. If we attribute the psalm to God it is objective. This is a List

(not THE list since elsewhere in the Torah other lists appear with other requirements).

Taking Saadiah's stance, we might compare this type of list with other prophecies we read where a humanistic stance is dictated by God, in response to a community which skewed the important balance between ritual and social activities.

Isaiah, chapter 1:

"Hear the word of God, O chiefs of Sodom (euphemism for rebellious Israelites) Why do I need your numerous sacrifices, says God, the blood of [your] bulls I do not desire. My soul detests your New Moon, and your appointed times, they have become a burden upon Me, I am weary of bearing them...[instead] learn to do good, seek justice, vindicate the victim, render justice to the orphan, take a grievance of the widow."

Zachariah chapter 7:

"Thus spoke God master of legions, saying: judge with truthful justice, and perform kindness and mercy towards one another. Do not oppress the widow and the orphan, the stranger and the poor, and do not think in your hearts of wronging one another."

In each case, a prophecy focuses on the people of God, focusing on the relationship with God, but forgetting the crucial aspect of how to treat your fellow man. Perhaps this is the most significant way to drive home the point – through making a list. A wholesome individual seeks justice, speaks truth in his heart, does not speak slander, perpetrate evil, cast disgrace on a fellow etc....

Saadiah's position sounds more convincing in our analysis here. We could set up a position which while rejecting

Saadiah does use some latent theories he proposed concerning authorship of Tehillim and the Writings in general.

We stated that the Writings stemmed from Ruach Ha-kodesh, which I defined as the divine inspiration. I quoted Rabbi Kimchi above but let me give a word for word definition of the idea.

Radak described that process as:

"A person at peace with himself involved with the words of God and at peace with all his emotions, not to give up even on one. One who speaks like the average individual, but an elevated spirit stirs inside him and brings forward to his tongue words of praise and thanks to his Lord. Words of wisdom and morality, as well as future premonitions through the power of speech."

I would define this concept based on the general idea that we are all created in the image of God. What does that mean? We all have a body and a soul. What is a soul? There is a part of each human being which is other - worldly. Some would call it Godly, others the spirit, others don't know what to call it. But the 'image of God' inside us is for a Jew, the neshama - the soul. Somewhere in the recesses of our intricate system we call a body is an infinite source of Godliness.

All we have to do is tap into that source. Thus, in the words of the Radak, a person must be 'at peace with his emotions' to experience that holy spirit inside. What emerges will be a mix of the spirit, your feelings, and your thoughts. At times premonitions, at times disdain for the world around us, but at times praise and thankful acknowledgment of the source of that power, of the king of kings, of God.

As we climb the ladder of tapping into that spiritual reservoir, we ascend to prophecy, and ultimately to the level of Moses, the greatest prophet ever. King David at times experienced prophecy, and at times felt that inner spirit. Together with his thoughts and emotions he produced for us Tehillim – the synthesis of body and soul, spirit and flesh, Ruach Ha-kodesh and beautiful poetry.