

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

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Providence, Guidance, a Rod and a Staff:

A Study of Life at a Time of Death

Psalm 23

A psalm of David.

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not lack.

He makes me graze in beautiful pastures; on peaceful waters He guides me.

My soul circles for peace; He directs me in circles of justice for His name.

Yes, though I walk in the valley of death's shadow, I fear not, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff comfort me.

Set up the table against my enemies; You anointed my head with oil; my cup runs over.

Let only goodness and kindness pursue to me all my life, and may I dwell in the house of the Lord for the length of time.

Certainly one of the most famous of the chapters in Tehillim, Psalm 23 is almost universally accepted as a reflection on death. In the Jewish tradition, this psalm is recited in the house of mourning (though not as prominently as others which I mentioned last class), as well as at Friday evening and Saturday evening services. Christian services (I am told) include this as the main psalm to be recited at a funeral. We are somehow all familiar with the notion that this belongs in, if not at the head of, the category of "psalms about death."

Yet, one question stands out in our minds as we analyze this psalm: what is its exact relationship to death? If anything, it talks about life, about God directing us, comforting us, anointing and showering kindness upon us - where is the reference to expiration or passing on to the next world? There is only one clear reference to death, and even that is veiled: the word "tzalmavet" is not translated as death, but rather as a shadowy and dark place. What other mention of death exists?

For the moment, let us focus on the literal nature of the psalm, reading it as a poetic work. Perhaps we will emerge with a greater understanding of why this chapter, despite its lack of references to death itself, is considered the paradigmatic psalm on the topic.

To analyze a psalm in Tehillim, one must attempt to find a central theme, an overall structure, and underlying messages through its poetic and stylistic mechanisms. To do this, we must break down each verse into its composite elements, and ask ourselves how each one is defined, and then how they together contribute to an overall message. Amos Chakham, author of the highly regarded Da'at Mikra commentary on Tehillim, when approaching this psalm in his commentary, immediately divides the chapter according to its distinct components.

In college, in my "Introduction to Tehillim" course, Rabbi Mordechai Cohen forced me to constantly search for the different segments in each psalm, write a title for each section, and then put all the pieces together to see what and how each psalmist composed each work. Thus, it is from this point of departure that we begin.

The problem here is that the structure of this chapter is not at all simple. Amos Chakham neatly divides the psalm into two, the first section of which, consisting of four verses, he refers to as the sheep metaphor. In my eyes, however, these four verses cannot be simply lumped together as a consistent analogy. There is a clear shift in the complexity of the verses, and the near-incoherence is purposeful. The author intentionally disrupts a steady flow of imagery and commentary in order to teach us how deeply this metaphor is interwoven in our lives. Let me explain.

The Shepherd/flock metaphor works in verses one and two clearly:

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not lack

He makes me graze in beautiful pastures; on peaceful waters he guides me.

Verse three, however, interrupts this vision jarringly: "My soul circles for peace; he directs me in circles of justice for his name." It is nigh impossible to fathom the concept of a sheep being guided in a path of justice. The verse must be turning to man, to whom the concept of justice might apply. Additionally, the term "nafshi" (my soul) relates directly to a human perspective, as only humans are referred to by the solitary term of "nefesh." The sheep metaphor (mashal) has concluded; the referent (nimshal) now arrives on the scene.

This new flow seems to be disrupted in the next verse. It continues with man (presumably) walking in a shadowy and dangerous place, but fearing not, for "You are with me; Your rod and Your staff comfort me." The rod and staff and remind us of the shepherd once again. Thus, the imagery forces us back to the shepherd and his flock. What, then, is the psalm focusing on: the metaphor or the referent, the mashal or the nimshal? This issue only grows more perplexing as the psalmist abruptly, in the final verse (6), returns to a human image: "may I dwell in the house of the Lord for the length of time."

Another inconsistency of method in this sequence is the classic shift of voice from third person to second person. Verse 3's "He directs me... for His name" abruptly becomes "You are with me" in verse 4. Yet this direct call to God does not last beyond the next verse; the psalm concludes with David's wish to "sit in the house of the Lord for the length of time" - a return to the third person.

In sum, the metaphor of the sheep is interrupted by the nimshal, the referent, the poet himself, who proceeds to define his relationship with God. As we pick up speed with the personal account, we experience suddenly another change in the medium, with a reversion to the sheep metaphor; then at the end, we return to a human vision of dwelling "in the house of the Lord." Similarly, but not in tandem, the person shifts from third to second and back again. Ultimately, the answers to these questions should hopefully explain why this chapter is considered the psalm uniquely fitted to being recited during the mourning process.

We may begin to approach an answer by pondering the following issue: is God like a shepherd to David, or is He in fact David's shepherd? Are we not sheep in the eyes of God, as He directs us and guides us throughout our lives? Is there really a neat division between the world of the metaphor and the world of reality in the psalm? Perhaps this ambiguity and crossing of realities was the intention of David; perhaps, indeed, another psalm influenced his approach.

We noted in our last class the bitter attitude of the authors of Psalm 49, the Korachites, with their remarks that man, despite his riches and honor (v. 7), is likened to silenced animals (13). For both, death ends the drive toward living forever (10). "Like sheep man descends to his grave, death leads [literally: shepherds] them and strikes them day after day..."(15).

A clear contrast thus emerges between our psalm and Psalm 49. David, perhaps, is picking up on the Korachites' morbid reference to animals, and reversing it in his own poem. Life is not about death, but about life. We may be like sheep, but our shepherd is the Lord Himself (1), guiding us through lush pastures and peaceful waters (2). In the midst of our fated existence we remember the crucial thing which divides us from the animal kingdom - our soul - and we appreciate that our being led in the circle of life is for the sake of God (3).

We are comforted not only by the fact that through His mercy He steers us on a path during our lifetime which is not only good for us (2), but just and right (3); furthermore, when we falter, when we stray from the herd and end up in a shadowy, dismal, dangerous place, we fear not because God is by our side (4).

In contrast to Psalm 49, where death "strikes them day after day," the rod and the staff, which represent discipline and regulation, comfort David as he realizes that without them the sheep would stray too far away and never return.

It is precisely at this juncture that the psalm changes from third person formal, to first person,] personal. "I will not fear evil (ra),"

for God, declares David, You are my shepherd (ro'i), and Your discipline, Your striking me, I understand; it even comforts me.

Herein lies the secret of the psalm and its relationship to death. The death of a loved one is a time of reflection on one's life; it is when we look back and wonder about the general game plan of God in our lives. What is it all about, if God took so-and-so at this time? We become philosophical, yet the more tragic the case, the more emotionally and personally we take it, and the more our wondering turns to complaints and accusations.

The psalm comes to teach us that at the time of loss, we should reflect not on the preempted future of the deceased in this world, but on the past. Let us think about the life led, the guidance of the merciful Shepherd, as God nurtures and nourishes us in green pastures and on peaceful waters. It is a message of wisdom and understanding of the circle of life; we recognize that the pursuit of justice defines the life that we lead as ultimately for the sake of God. This, indeed, is the message that the comforters want to impart and that the mourners need to internalize, at a time of sorrow and seeming emptiness.

Thus, it is the realization that "shivtekha u-mishantekha hema yenchmuni" (Your rod and Your staff, they will comfort me) that is the crux of the psalm and the climax of the lesson learned about death. Sometimes God directs us gently and lovingly; other times He guides steadfastly; at still other times His hand may deal what seems to be a harsh blow. The degree to which we can see each level as a comfort is the measure of how deeply we comprehend the beauty and love of His ways.

Radak (13th century Provence) questions the necessity for two terms describing the shepherd's crook, as both "rod" and "staff". He explains that the rod, used for striking recalcitrant animals, represents suffering, while the staff, on which one leans, represents the Torah. Both of them are guides; what we cannot learn from the Torah about meaning and commitment in our lives, sadly, we must glean from our suffering. Both strive to maintain us on the circle of life.

The centrality and the affirmation of life in the psalm speaks to each person at the moment when the life is no more. But just as the soul surprises us in verse 3 with its appearance, we are comforted by its eternal status; that too acts as a comfort for those who experience the loss of a loved one. Ultimately, it is this idea of the soul's survival with which David concludes. Appropriately, the last verse connects a this-worldly request - that good and kindness shall chase him throughout his days - with an other-worldly final prayer: "Ve-shavti be-veit Hashem le-orekh yamim," "And may I [my soul] dwell in the house of the Lord for the [eternal] length of time."

As a message of life at a time of death, as a hope for eternity when it seems so distant - in spite, ultimately, of its addressing a dreary topic which is often dominated by a sense of the transitory - Psalm 23 teaches us about direction, guidance, providence and eternal comfort.