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

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MIZMOR 40

To whom does King David sing his psalms? When we read the title of psalm 40 — "La-menatze'ach, LE-DAVID Mizmor," are we to translate it as a psalm OF David (in which case we are being told only that he is its author), or does it translate as a psalm FOR David (signaling to us the address of his poetry)? An analogy can be drawn to prayer. Is the purpose of our prayer to reach God or is it also to reach ourselves?

In the previous shiur, we focused on some structural and literary poetic techniques in an attempt to understand psalm 27. Another area which requires investigation is the voice in which the poet writes. In psalm 27, for example, we notice a shift from the poet referring to God in a distant third person, "God is my light, my salvation..." to a direct call in the second person: "Hear, God, my voice which calls out [to you]...Do not turn YOUR face from me..." [27:8,9], and then again back to the third person: "Hope and wait for God, be strong and courageous ... Hope and wait for God" [27:14].

The poet's voice plays a significant role in determining the object of his poetry. In the beginning of psalm 27, when he recalls his special connection with God, we might consider him to be addressing his son, his peers, or perhaps his nation as a whole. With the change in voice in verse 8, we know he speaks to God alone. However, the mysterious last line leaves us a bit perplexed. Whom is he telling to be strong and wait patiently for God? Seemingly, he is speaking to himself.

As we stated in the previous shiur, one purpose of poetry is to attempt to reflect man's inner voice to the outside world; to convey, in literary form, those hidden thoughts through which one discovers his inner nature. [Those hidden thoughts are, we could say, a picture of the person talking to himself — "Should I embrace this commandment or refrain from it; will God protect me from misfortune or not?"]

David gives us a glimpse of this inner voice in psalm 27 and again in psalm 40. While much of 27 has us thinking that this was written for the sake of others, the last line (like

the opening lines of 40) informs us that many of David's psalms are a personal diary of his relationship with God.

With this introduction, let us begin to analyze psalm 40. [It is a good idea to read it over before continuing with the shiur.]

The psalm can be divided into two distinct sections:

The first section can be summarized with verse 2: "I waited for God and HE came close to me..."

The second section is typified by verse 12: "Do not withhold YOUR kindness from me, O God..."

The psalmist first speaks of God in the third person [verse 2 and on] and later in the first person [verse 12 until the end], just like in psalm 27. The first eleven verses can be classified as a "Hymn of Gratitude," where David thanks God for what He has given him. However, verses 12-18 might cause us to assume that the psalm has adhered to the style of psalm 27 where David in distress pleads to God for salvation.

A profound distinction exists between the two psalms. While psalm 27 described David questioning his trust in God's salvation, psalm 40 reveals a different tone entirely: one of gratitude (with a request at the end for God to continue His benevolence).

Psalm 40 begins with the same words which ended psalm 27: "Wait and hope for God." The first half of the prayer of thanks, the one which refers to God in the third person (perhaps David once again speaking to himself), responds to many of the concerns he raised in psalm 27. Let us compare the two poems:

Psalm 27

Psalm 40

[14]"Wait patiently for God, be strong...wait for God" (Kaveh)	[2] "I waited patiently for God (Kavo Kiviti) and He inclined
[5,6] "set me up upon a rock; lift my head above my enemies..."	[3] "He brought me up out of a pit...set me upon a rock"
[6] "Let me sing a song of praises to God"	[4] "He has put in my mouth a new song of praise to God"
[3] "If an enemy should rise I will not FEAR; a war against me, in THIS I SHALL TRUST"	[4] "...many shall see it and fear and shall trust in the Lord"
[12] "For false witnesses have	[5] "Fortunate is the man who



extent, have been perceived as a macrocosm of David's psalm 27. The notion of salvation, the imminence of death and destruction, and the appeal to God for our lives presents us with a gloomy, one-dimensional perception of these days. Perhaps after reading psalm 40, one can gain a new perspective on the "Yamim Nora'im."

While praying for forgiveness to God is certainly an integral part of the service on the Yamim Nora'im, the necessity for introspection and self-contemplation is just as important. Just as God sits down to reckon His works, we should take our own reckoning. This should not, though, be just an inventory of sins and good deeds. It should be an opportunity to take an account of the year which has passed. What have we been granted by God? How many of our prayers (who shall live, who shall die; health, happiness, wealth...) were answered from the previous year? If they were answered, it is our duty, just as it was King David's, to acknowledge, thank, proclaim, and praise God for it.

This reckoning is a major part of our everyday prayer as well. Whether it is through preparing ourselves before prayer (as the early pious Jews did [see Mishna Berakhot, 5:1]), or in the tefilla itself, prayer is a time of quiet reconciliation with ourselves. In fact, Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch defines the word "tefilla" from the root P.L.L., meaning to judge. "Le-hitpalel," Rav Hirsch explains, means to judge oneself. David in his poetry directed himself outwardly to God as well as inwardly to himself. It is our duty to follow his example by speaking to ourselves at the same time that we speak with God.

Let us strive in our prayers to follow in the footsteps of King David. Before setting down our supplications in front of God, we should acknowledge to ourselves what we have been given by God and sing our new song of praise that "we waited for God and He inclined to us, bringing salvation" (40:2).