

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

by Rabbi Avi Baumol

MIZMOR 146: Duplicity and Simplicity - Halleluya!

Rabbi Jose said, let my place be with those who finish the 'Hallel' every day ... in the morning prayers (Shabbat 118b).

(Hallel, which literally means 'praise', is understood here as a collection of prayers from Tehillim, which reflect the entire work.) This phrase from the Talmud reflects the importance that the recitation of Psalms held for the Jew from time immemorial.

In fact, while psalm 145 holds a special place in our liturgy as it "renders the one who recites it daily, worthy of the world to come" (Berakhot 4b), the insertion of the last five psalms 146-150, into the morning prayers stems from the comment of Rabbi Jose, and acts as a representative of the notion of "finishing the Psalms each day." With this in mind, an analysis of these five psalms might be worthwhile. We might also conjecture that the pre-eminence of these five psalms as the culminating words of the psalmist might teach us about the entire system of King David's prayers.

These last five psalms form a clear and concise unit generally referred to by their appellation, "Halleluya," which begins and ends each prayer. Is there a pattern amongst these five songs? We should certainly like to see a relationship, particularly one in ascending order, as we might assume the conclusion of the book of the Psalms to be its climax.

What can these psalms offer us in attempting to portray the entire multi-faceted, multi-leveled, gamut of Psalms in general? Let us begin with the first one bearing in mind that the poet might have been driving at some progression in his concluding his book this way.

1 Halleluya!

Praise the Lord, O my soul

2 I will praise the Lord all my life

Sing hymns to my God while I exist.  
3 Put not your trust in the nediw (prince)  
In mortal man who does not have salvation  
4 His breath departs he returns to dust  
On that day, his plans come to nothing.  
5 Happy is the one who has the God of Jacob for his help  
Whose hope is in the Lord his God.

Psalm 146 can be divided into two sections. In the first section, verses (1-5), the psalmist discusses praising God despite the weakness and insincerity of princes who reject Him. The second half (6-10) consists of seemingly general statements of praise to God. The transition from one half to the next leaves us a bit baffled. Moreover, the discussion of the insincere, or weak, man finds no place in the psalm. How do we account for these two issues? Perhaps if we take a step back and attempt to grasp the essential quality of Psalms as a whole, we can apply it to our case here.

We may argue the essence of Psalms lies in its attempt to sensitize humankind to the cognizance of God, so that they might all proclaim in praise "God is One." Those three simple words eluded millions during the pagan era, and proceed to elude hundreds of millions in our day and time. Of course, Jewish thought believes that inherent in those words is the notion that God, as the One, involves Himself in the lives of His creatures. This point sets apart millions more.

The psalmist underscores this idea by beginning psalm 146 with "Praise the Lord, O My soul," emphasizing the individual nature of his praise, while concluding the last line of psalm 150 with the vision of "Let All of the souls praise the Lord, Halleluya" (150:6). His aim is clear; he wants to transform the individual to the collective, the I with the We. The question of how to do this involves a lifetime of work and the entire Psalms acts as a point of departure. Yet, perhaps a hint is given in the last five psalms.

Let us return to our psalm 146, and pose our question. It would seem that there is no need for a transition between speaking of intention to praise and a list of the actual praise. Skipping verses 3 and 4, which insert the issue of the insincere prince, would allow for a more natural flow in the psalm. Perhaps, though, the psalmist was sending us a message that the "nediw," the prince who promises salvation, and the believer in this prince, are worth the superfluity in the verse. In fact, it is them to whom the psalmist directs his words, as they are the key to the transformation.

In this case, the psalm is not about speaking of God's greatness, or even about the praises themselves, but specifically about those who do not praise God. An attempt is made by the psalmist to lure people away from the trap set by the haughty prince. If the psalmist presents as his ideal all humankind praising God, then with this first hymn he is far from reaching his goal. If, however, he is attempting to strike at the root of why every soul does not praise Him, then it is with those who refuse to extol that he chooses as his point of departure, and it is here where we must commence our discussion. In order to understand the reasons for Not praising, let us comprehend the notion of praise.

What does it mean to praise God? Necessarily, a certain sense of belief in Him goes along with it. If you praise His omnipotence, His omniscience, His acts of over-arching kindness and love, you are testifying to those traits in Him. Alternatively, one who does not praise God for these things does so for a few different reasons. First, he may not believe in Him or His acts of kindness. Second, he may not care to acknowledge Him, or them. The latter position is certainly more caustic than the former, and, specifically in our psalm we learn of the sordid relationship between the two.

Who is this "nediv" (prince) who claims to "save?" The prince is aware of God and His salvation, yet chooses not to acknowledge it. Whether it is his self-seeking lifestyle, which prevents him from accepting the truth, or his belief that he might actually have the power to save man, the "nediv" promises, lures, and cajoles the simple man into a disguised faith. His power brings forth the masses, his masses grant him power.

To him the wisdom of the psalm relates:

"Put not your trust in the nediv (prince)

In mortal man Who Does Not Have Salvation

His breath departs he returns to dust

On that day, his plans come to nothing."

While a searing rebuke of the evil prince is appropriate, a calming, soothing, warning to the non-believer is in order. The psalmist wants to educate him, to illustrate the misgivings of man, yet, at the same time, to teach of the praises and the ways of God. It is for him that the author continues to list an array of praises of God. An interesting grouping is represented here. While praise of God as the creator of heaven and earth is included, and there is a mention of justice, the preponderance of adulation centers on the loving-kindness of God, as

He relates to man. For the disbeliever, the God who heals, who frees, and protects the downtrodden, is worthy of praise more than the God who created the heavens and earth.

The message of the psalm then, is one of remonstrance of the prince; while at the same time it has didactic value for the non-believers. Through these two opposing approaches, and relating in very different ways to two very different personalities, the poet/teacher paves the way towards attaining his goal of a comprehensive praise of God.

These two character traits parallel a description of two of the four sons we refer to at the Passover Seder table - the wicked son and the simple son (including perhaps the one who cannot ask). The impression we receive is not that the wicked son does not believe in God or His miracles, but asks "why bother?" To him we take drastic measures in our response.

The simple son who just wonders, "what is this", requires a genteel reply, a soft touch, and a tolerant temperament. For him, and the son who cannot ask, we open their eyes to the wisdom of God, and teach about the miracles and the salvation that only He can grant.