

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
 ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

by Rabbi Avi Baumol

"Sing, Sing Two Songs"
 An Analysis of Psalms 96 and 98

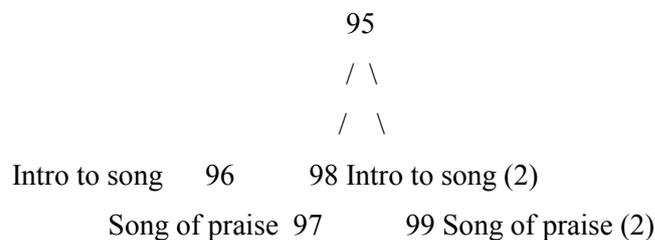
In line with the previous discussion of the duality of Shabbat observance as found in the Kiddush service, we now focus on the psalms themselves, which were chosen to commence the Kabbalat Shabbat service. Before beginning the specific analysis, let us draw a diagram of the five psalms, which were accepted by all in the 16th century.

Just noticing the titles of the four central psalms reminds us of a certain inherent duality:

95		"Lechu neranena la'Hashem" ("Come let us sing to God..")
96		"Sing to the Lord a new song"
97		"The Lord is king"
98		"The Lord is king"
99	[A psalm]	"Sing to the Lord a new song"

Why the need to sing two songs? God is king, God is king? The duality in two songs must focus on two separate aspects of the day. Both of which are inherent components of Shabbat, yet accent different elements of the day.

Through the Psalms, we follow two separate paths in praising God. What we witness is an interesting diamond shape structure in which the first and last psalms are used as an introduction and conclusion to the body of the unit.



In this lecture I would to focus on the body of the Kabbalat Shabbat, namely the four middle psalms. We will analyze the two units and contrast each position, noting that ultimately a twofold responsibility of each Jew exists and is reflected through the liturgy of this day.

Psalm 96

Amos Chakham in his commentary "Da'at Mikra" divides the psalm into four distinct units.

A. A call to sing a song to God: verses 1-3

Verse three outlines the focus of the song:

"Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord, All the earth...
Tell of His glory among the nations,
His wondrous deeds, among all peoples."

The song is specifically addressed to all nations, the entire world joins in to praise God.

B. The proclamation that God is king: verses 4-6

This proclamation might be understood as a justification of the necessity for all of mankind to praise God:

"For The Lord is great... He is held in awe by ALL divine kings. All the gods of the peoples are mere idols, but the Lord made the heavens" (4,5).

C. A call for all nations to fear God: verses 7-10

In almost each verse a reference is made to the nations in general, highlighting an emphasis on the universal nature of this psalm.

D. All creation is happy with the coming of God to judge the earth: verses 11-13

What emerge are not only four separate units but also a progression of the universalistic aspect of Shabbat. It begins with a general call to sing to God, with a reference to all nations, followed by an explanation of it. A call is made not only to be aware of the greatness of God but also to fear Him. Ultimately, it is not only all of mankind which should acknowledge God's kingship, but the heavens, earth, oceans, and fields, who acknowledge, fear, and finally rejoice in the coronation of God over the world.

The underlying theme is the word "kol" which appears in every unit (verses 1,3,4,5,9,12 - appearing seven times!). This highlights the universal harmonious aspect of God. He relates to all man, and all man (indeed all creatures) should praise Him. No one is singled out, as no creature is specific in this general call.

What is the song? After having prepared us for a song of praise to God, the psalmist offers it in psalm 97, beginning with the cry "God reigns...." Before analyzing this, however, I would like to focus on psalm 96's parallel.

Psalm 98

In contrast to psalm 96, its 'partner' (98), while on the surface seeming analogous to it, reflects quite a different tone. Psalm 98 begins the same way, with a call to sing a new song to the Lord, but who is to sing? As opposed to the additional verse of "sing to the Lord all the earth" which commences psalm 96, psalm 98 omits that line, only calling to sing a new song "for He has worked wonders His right hand, His holy arm has won Him victory."

To what victory does the author refer? Where else have we encountered the symbolism of God's right hand? The answer is clear; the victory refers to the Israelite wars, to the Exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the sea, where God shone his might through His strong right hand.

The psalm changes directions from the previous one in terms of its focus as well. Right from the start the psalmist expresses the revelation of God to His people, something which the other nations could only watch:

"The Lord has manifested His victory, has displayed His triumph in the sight of the nations. He was mindful of His steadfast love and faithfulness toward the house of

Israel, all the ends of the earth beheld the victory of
Our God."

Who is talking here? As opposed to the previous psalm, which maintained a distant connection with God, referring to Him as The God, in verse three we witness a switch to "Our God", who brought us salvation. This revelation inspires song, praise, even dancing to our God, while the rest of the world can also share this joy (despite the fact that in the beginning of psalm 99 the nations tremble in fear).

The notion of salvation is repeated three times in the first three verses, forming a unit once again progressing to a culmination. The song will be sung to God the savior, who expressed His salvation to all the nations, where HE remembered His people whereby all the nations witnessed the salvation of OUR GOD.

This fact alone represents the drastic departure from the previous psalm, one of universal recognition. The call is made for the land to dance and sing a new song, and for nature to participate in order to praise God as the king of the Israelites. And indeed as we will see, the next Psalm, 99 sings this Israel-oriented song of praise to God.

After our introduction to Kabbalat Shabbat (which will serve as the key to the whole section) we begin ushering in the Shabbat by recognizing God and his kingship over the world. In Psalm 96 we prepare to sing a new song, a universal song, one that the world sings, and is the subject of the good God has bestowed on us. Psalm 98 asks us to depart from the rest of the world and prepare a different channel of praise; the song will not celebrate God and the world, but God and his special relationship with His people.