

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 97

"A Universal Song of Praise: A Glimpse of Holiness"

Note: Last shiur's title mistakenly claimed to analyze 96 and 97 instead of 96, 98. I'm sure as you read on you realized my intention. There was also a problem, which skewed the diagram a bit from its proper impression. I apologize for any misunderstanding.

Last lecture focused on the relationship between psalms 96 and 98. We might coin that relationship an inverse symbiosis - in other words, while they share similar style and structure (the beginnings and ends looking alike), they nevertheless differ in their approaches and attitudes. Yet while they focus on two separate realms - the universal and the national - they nonetheless complement each other and build the ideal "new song" which we will begin to discuss presently.

As stated, the previous psalm introduces and prepares us for the "song" praising God. What is the nature of this praise? "Hashem malakh" - God reigns. The focus of the two psalms, then, is the reaction to the kingship of God in the world. Once again we find a distinction between psalms 97 and 99.

Let's begin with psalm 97:

Within the realm of a universal response to the coronation of God, the psalm breaks down into three units of praise coming from all aspects of the universe.

I. "universal praise"

"The Lord is king let the earth exult, the many islands rejoice.

"Dense clouds are around Him, righteousness and justice are the base of His throne.

"A fire goes before Him and burns up His enemies round about.

His lightnings lightened the world: the earth saw and trembled.

The hills melted like wax in the presence of the Lord...The heavens testified to His righteousness..." (97:1-4).

You will notice that the psalm begins where the previous one ended off. In 96 the call is made first to the nations of the earth concluding with nature itself getting ready to praise God - "Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult" (96:11). We can draw a diagram of the effect as follows:

Psalm 96

Bow down to the Lord majestic in His holiness(9)
Tremble in His presence all the earth (9)
Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult (11)

Psalm 97

Let the earth exult the islands rejoice (1)
The earth saw His lightnings and trembled (4)
All bow down to God (7)

This chiasmic structure centers our attention on the rejoicing and exulting of the earth and the heavens, which heightens our understanding of these psalms as universe-oriented.

The second verse changes our focus to a description of the glory of God. As the earth exults and the islands rejoice, His throne, a glimpse of the grandeur of God, is shone through His qualities of "righteousness and justice." The notion of justice, however, brings with it fear amongst the nations of the world - for realizing that God rules with the Hand of Justice, sends a shudder through all our bones.

The wordplay of "tagel ha-aretz" (the land will rejoice) in verse 1, and "tachel ha-aretz (the land will tremble) in verse 4 reflects the two salient features of the universal reaction to the presence of God in the world. On the one hand there is joy, on the other, fear. Joy of finally seeing God, fear that God is looking at mankind - looking as the God of justice and righteousness. With this notion of impartiality, even the great mountains melt in His presence, the heavens testify to his justice.

II. "god vs. GOD"

The second section shifts from the inanimate "feelings" in response to God's rule (heavens earth, mountains...) to the animated, human reaction. The shift takes place in the

middle of verse 6. Why not at least start a new verse in depicting man versus the natural order? The answer is clear and perhaps it is intentionally done to reflect this idea. In God's eyes animate and inanimate are equal. The heavens shake, the mountains melt, and the nations of the world "see His glory," all in the same breath.

So while there is a clear progression to the human sector, we should not divorce it from everything else that was created by God, and as a result, man will have to react together with nature. For this reason we constantly notice an integration between what was created on the first five and one half days, to that created at the end of the sixth.

An offshoot of the nations of the world recognizing God on this day, is the respect to which the distinction between God and "the gods" will become apparent. All those idol worshippers who until recently triumphed with their deities will be embarrassed (7). The reason for their embarrassment is unclear. The end of the verse states that all the gods will bow down to Him. Why would that shame the idol worshippers? Perhaps an understanding of ancient idolatry will help out. (For an in-depth analysis on the topic, try to obtain "The Religion Of Israel," Moshe Greeberg's translation of Yechezkel Kaufmann's seminal work, "Toledot Ha'emunah Ha'yisraelit.")

Kaufmann suggests that early Paganism conceive of the gods as powers embodied in nature, at times even subservient to a natural order. Nature imposes certain limitations on the gods thereby limiting their omnipotence. Nature, then, acts as an opposing force to the gods. The material objects sometimes are seen as possessing divine power, but other times are just used as a symbol of the deity.

With this in mind the overemphasis in the psalms on nature bowing and trembling before God is of necessity as it strives to point out the flaw Paganism had with Judaism. Additionally, the pagans themselves would come to this realization through the demise of their personal deities.

Amos Chacham points out that the notion of the gods bowing down to God might be a reference to a story found in I Samuel. In chapter 5 the "aron brit Hashem" - the Holy Ark - is taken captive by the Philistines, who brought it to the house of their god "Dagon." This god, who according to Radak was half fish, half man, represented the god of the fertile land and waters. In what might have been a mockery of the "Aron" they placed it in front of the idol of the "dagon." The following morning the "dagon was found on the floor in front of the "aron"; they proceeded to pick it up and put it back in its place.

The next morning it was found once again lying in front of the "aron," its hands cut off and it looked like it was bowing down in front of the "aron brit Hashem." This phenomenon brought the realization that they were in fact worshipping a man-made idol, while the true God was represented by the "aron" and what was inside it. This story resonates in the words "all the gods bowed down to Him," and the notion of embarrassment becomes apparent.

This concept of God rising above all gods is reiterated and reemphasized in the end of the second section, when the author turns from his third person voice to a direct call to God:

"For you are, Lord, above all the earth; you are exalted above all other gods" (9).

C. "righteous light"

We notice the progression of the praising of God - from the universal natural, to the nations of the world, ultimately culminating with the righteous people in the world praising God for the coming of this day. It is important to note the anonymity of this righteous person mentioned in the psalm. For us, he could be any of God's creatures who has learned His ways, and attempted to emulate them.

The fourth part of the psalm discusses the "tzaddik" who, by the nature of his love for God, and hate of evil, will be guarded by God and saved from the enemy. In the last three verses the term "tzedek"-justice appears twice and included with the other two times it appears in the psalm, it represents a key phrase running through the song. God's throne is based in justice, and it is this justice which is the call for trembling of the world on one hand, and the happiness of the just, pious people in the world on the other.

These righteous not only earn happiness, but are able, to connect to His holiness - "kodesho." "O` you righteous, rejoice in the Lord, and acclaim His Holy name" (12). This represents the segue which links the universal psalm to the particularistic one of 99.

In sum, our first song to God is sung by the universe that He created, in commemoration of His coming. God's appearance conveys the notion of pure justice and righteousness, which should yield happiness, but also brings forth fear and shuddering. The psalm moves from nature to human nature conveying that all those who had worshipped gods will acknowledge God as creator of all and bow down before Him.

The culmination of the psalm aims to regard the pious "tzaddik" as close to God, and who can only express happiness on this day. The implanted Godly light in his soul will bring forth rejoicing, but on a higher level "kedusha" — holiness.

Working off psalm 96, the concept of all of God's creations, unified, in happiness and perhaps in fear, comes to the fore. The direct continuity from the previous psalm develops our theory of the universal call, and begins to link the two sets of songs with the concept of holiness.