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TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 92:

"Stuck In The Middle With You"

Of the psalms we recite for each day of the week in our morning Tefila (the Shir shel Yom), 92 is the only one whose connection to the specific day of the week is mentioned in the psalm itself. Yet, specifically with this psalm, the connection seems most tenuous. What does the Shabbat day have to do with the themes and ideas expressed in "mizmor shir le-yom ha-Shabbat?"

Before attempting to answer the question, let's break down the psalm into its components. The first section (verses 2-8) discusses ways and reasons for praising God, leading into a sentence on the wicked in the world and the unjust rewards they receive. A middle section (9) is inserted consisting of one verse - four words which I will discuss shortly.

The second half of the psalm (10-16) discusses the fleeting nature of the wicked and the burgeoning of the eternal righteous as they praise God. The final verse with its verb to recite - "le-hagid," reminds us of the opening sentence, forming an inclusio. If, at first, the poet wanted to praise God's chesed (lovingkindness), "le-hagid ba-boker chasdekha," the last line transforms that praise into a declaration of truth - stating that God is just, "le-hagid ki yashar Hashem ..."

From the breakdown of the mizmor, the psalm seems to be discussing: a) the value in praising God, and b) the age-old dilemma of good and evil. We may, though, ask again, what do these topics have to do with Shabbat?

Rabbi Yissakhar Jacobson, in his important work "Netiv Bina," (an explanation and elucidation on the siddur of the weekday and the festivals) lists several possibilities in bridging the gap between the title and the content. Here is a sampling:

- 1) Masekhet Tamid - The Mishna, in discussing the services pertaining to the daily sacrifice, announces the concept of the "Shir Shel Yom" (the daily song recited by the Levites

during the preparation of the sacrifice). The Mishna relates the psalm corresponding to each day, quoting a line from the actual psalm. For example, on the first day of the week they recited "La-Hashem ha-aretz u-melo'ah" (To God belongs the land in its entirety), referring to the first line of psalm 24.

On the seventh day, the Mishna offers the title of the psalm - "Mizmor shir le-yom ha-Shabbat" (the first line in psalm 92) as well as a commentary - "Mizmor shir le-atid lavo, le-yom she-kulo Shabbat u-menucha le-chayei olamim" (Sing a song for the future when the day of true total Shabbat will appear). Rashi connects the two phrases; the world to come will resemble all the beauty of Shabbat.

- 2)The Ibn Ezra writes that Shabbat is the only time in the week where one takes the time out of the busy schedule to contemplate God's wonders and ways (which is an important component of the psalm).
- 3)The Radak focuses on the notion of "tov le-hodot la-Hashem" - how great it is to praise God. When is the best time to extol your creator, he asks, when your body and soul are at peace and your extra "neshama" can abet your spiritual experience.

Each opinion offers a perspective on the relationship between Shabbat and the psalm, yet does not fully satisfy a comprehensive understanding of the psalm. Perhaps taking a step back and approaching it from a different angle will shed some light on the nature of the psalm.

While the content seems to elude the seventh day of the week, its form implies it. Seven times the name of God (YHVH) appears in the psalm, three in the first section once in the second, three in the third. More important is the division into sections; part one includes seven verses, part two one verse, and part three - seven, so that the two halves of the psalm sandwich the middle section. (Nachum Sarna noted how each half of the psalm consists of exactly fifty-two words, reminiscent of the fifty-two Shabatot of the year.)

The middle segment consists of one line with four words in it. "Ve-ata marom le-olam Hashem" ("And you God are eternally praised").

What emerges is a message of the centrality of the seventh day of the week and how it encompasses the eternity of God, without even mentioning it directly. The aesthetic nature of this tool conveys a strong feeling through the poetry it presents. Through it, the focus of the

structure is undeniably the (1) - the verse on God's loftiness. How the two halves address this truth is the next stage in the analysis, but as stated, awareness must be first devoted to the core line composed of those four simple words.

### The Vav

The sentence in question is an ambiguous one. "And You God are eternally exalted." The word "ve-ata"--"and You," in Hebrew is prefixed by a 'vav' - which has different functions in the Hebrew language. It could either mean 'and' referring to a conjunction, or 'but,' denoting the contrasting nature.

Which one is it in our psalm? Is God and His eternal praise exclusive to humanity and the plight of our morality, or is He couched in it? Likewise, is Shabbat separated from the rest of the week, to the extent that it is its own entity, or is it part and parcel of the week?

Our answer, as you can imagine, in line with our multi-faceted approach to Tehillim, is both. God is both raised above and beyond anything ephemeral, any human philosophical ideas, any mundane depiction of morality, while at the same time, He, the creator of the human condition, the one who imbibed His spirit into man - by whom He is extolled, is joined, and united with man.

Similarly, Shabbat is holy. Holy by definition reflects a separateness, divorced from the mundane activities of man, and can be seen almost as an entity on to its own. At the same time, Shabbat is inherently connected to the rest of the week, to man and his activities during the week. Indeed, Shabbat, if it is the culmination of the week, must have an integral connection to it. The famous debate between the Academies of Hillel and Shammai concerning the relationship between Shabbat and the week, expands this point.

Beit Shammai feels that every acquisition during the week should be done with Shabbat in mind, Beit Hillel sees each day as having its own value.

It is clear at least to Beit Shammai, that Shabbat plays an important role not only in being the pinnacle of the week but being a part of every weekday. Hence, "today is the third day of Shabbat, to which the Levites recited..., " is found at the end of the morning liturgy.

We find another interesting Halakhic ramification of the integral relationship between Shabbat and the week. If one forgets to recite Havdala - the service which describes the uniqueness and seeming isolation of Shabbat - on Saturday night, he recites it until Tuesday. For the three days preceding the Shabbat and the three days subsequent to the Shabbat, are incorporated into the Shabbat day.

Additionally, the Talmud in Shabbat discusses starting a trip three days before Shabbat, stating that it is prohibited due to the proximity to Shabbat.

We emerge with a harmonious symmetry between Shabbat's relationship to the week, God's relationship with His people, and the relationship between the two halves of psalm 92 and its center. Just as the center verse, " Ve-ata marom le-olam Hashem," acts as the centripetal force drawing in all around it, so too, Shabbat represents a magnetic force which connects it to the weekdays. And just as Shabbat and the psalm which is connected to it, symbolize a dialectical idea of being a part of, and at the same time apart from, its surroundings, so too, God, our creator, our guide, places Himself in the midst of His people, and yet is at the same time endless, and timeless.

"And you God are eternally praised." God and His people, Shabbat and its surrounding days, verse 9 and its encompassing verses, all aim to reflect the most beautiful, yet mysterious, relationship. This is the "good" praise, which begins the psalm, and this is the synthesis of the 'chesed' and 'emet,' which encircle the psalm, creating a perfect song, praising God, on a perfect day.