

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

by Rabbi Avi Baumol

MIZMOR 121

A song of ascents

I lift up my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come?  
My help comes from God, maker of heaven and earth.  
"He will not let your foot fall, "your keeper will not slumber."  
"Behold the keeper of Israel does not slumber or sleep."  
"God is your keeper, God is your guardian by your side.  
The heat of the sun will not beat down on you, nor the moon at night.  
God will protect you from all evil, He will protect your soul.  
God will guard your 'goings and comings' from now until eternity."

You will notice the quotation marks I scattered throughout the psalm. The reason for this is that we are not sure who is speaking to whom in the psalm. While King David often switches the voice of the poem from second person (you) to third person (he), he usually directs his words either to God, himself, 'the people,' or a combination of the three. This poem seems to introduce a new genre into the poetry of David – drama.

Amos Chakham interprets the psalm as a play, where the drama takes place between a father and a son, two close friends or the like. It could go something like this:

Title:  
Last Words

Characters:  
1. Father  
2. Son  
3. God

Setting:  
Long road travels from the town to reach its edge. Ahead in the distance lie the great mountains, which lead to great vistas of new opportunity, but also to great unknowns. A young man stands with his father, sharing a moment before they part for a long time. That moment feels like an eternity....

Son (raising his eyes to the awe-inspiring, snowcapped, mountains):

"From where will my help come?

(Answering his own question) My Help will come from God, maker of heaven and earth."

Father (aware of his son's worries, puts his arm on his son's shoulder and says):

"He will not let your foot fall, your keeper will not slumber."

Son responds affirming:

"Behold the keeper of Israel does not slumber or sleep."

Father (parting with some words of comfort and religious inspiration remarks):

"God is your keeper, God is your guardian by your side.

The heat of the sun will not beat down on you, nor the moon at night.

God will protect you from all evil, protect your soul.

God will guard your 'goings and comings' from now until eternity."

No great new ideas of Torah are being transmitted here. We do not get a sense that these two people are extremely righteous – average people come to mind. The concerns are the safety of the road, the long journey, fear of leaving home, etc. The man is not a philosopher, nor a king, but a simple person accompanying his friend or relative to the mountains.

The poet here gains an advantage by maintaining anonymity. The feeling is that the author is not King David, nor a prophet or priest, but an unknown; perhaps he is my neighbor, or perhaps even I. What is the average conversation between a father and his son or between two friends about to depart? David feels that God, the third 'character,' should take center stage. In a short poem of eight verses, God, or a reference to Him, appears no less than seven times. God is the mila mancha (leading word) of the psalm. Indeed, the message here is that God should be the 'leading' guide in our lives, not just in our poetry. Precisely because He would usually not be found in a situation such as this, He appears here as the central figure.

It should be noted here that in the story, the son, about to embark on his journey asks his question and himself answers it the first time. Only afterwards does he hear the same message from his father. In this case, the son is aware, intellectually sensitive, and capable of grasping the message of the mountains.

What is its message? "As I look up to the mountains I am in awe. In awe of their beauty, their massiveness, their sheer greatness. It makes me feel low. I wonder at this awesome sight, from where did they come? Who is behind them?" When looking at nature, specifically at the beauty of a

mountain, a waterfall, a great forest, or for us urban dwellers, a skyscraper, a bustling city, or a Concord airplane, how many times do we stop and acknowledge the Creator Who sustains it all? When touring and seeing God's creations, how often do we respond "my source of strength is from God maker of heaven and earth?"

Perhaps David's message is appropriate for each human being as he witnesses the hand of God in nature. Perhaps this simple little play belongs not in the drama section but in the liturgy section of our thoughts as it reflects in a literal way the need for man to be reminded of his Maker.

It is thus quite understandable that the Midrash Rabba looks at this Psalm and says that it alludes to Jacob's escape from his brother en route to Lavan, his wicked uncle. Even the Ibn Ezra, who usually opts for a literal approach in his commentary, explains verse four as a reference to Jacob's dream in which God promises to protect him (U-shemartikha) from all evil. It seems that the Ibn Ezra concentrates on the wordplay (SHMR) which the psalmist uses to describe God.

I think that this identification is appropriate, since Jacob more than anyone else in Jewish history is a symbol of all of Israel. He is what we are and who we want to become. For that reason we call ourselves Israel, for our roots return to him.

The psalm is most popular due to its recitation during times of stress - a war, an accident, a catastrophe. In light of the thrust of this discussion, however, I wonder if David's intentions were thereby lost. Instead of an antidote to tragedy, this should be the preventative medicine that protects us throughout our daily life.

The Psalmist chose to use a different technique here in depicting the common-day approach to God and His world. The more we learn, dissect, and analyze the Tehillim, the more we will learn from them all of the different ways that David spoke to, and taught us to speak to, God.