

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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MIZMOR 126: A Praise and A Prayer

For years we have sung various tunes to the "shir ha-ma'alot" prior to reciting birkat ha-mazon; we all know it by heart. The content and nature of the psalm, however, is quite obscure to say the least.

Already in the opening lines we encounter difficulty:

"When God restores (restored?) the "Shivat Tzion" (?) we were (are?) joyous"(126:1), ... "Restore our "shiviteinu" O' God, like watercourses in the Negev"(4). Is this prayer a praise for a past event or a plea for the future?" Who or what is the term "Shivat Tzion?"

Aside from the issue of obscured meaning, we should like to attribute the significance of the psalm to a specific reason. Why has this psalm attained such grand exposure in Jewish liturgy? Our examination will be based on conceptual and literal analysis.

Due to its brevity, allow me to quote the psalm in full:

A song of ascents

A

When the Lord restored the "Shivat Tzion"

we saw it as in a dream.

(2)Then our mouths shall be filled with laughter,

our tongues, with songs of joy.

Then shall they say among the nations,

"The Lord has done great things for them!"

(3)The Lord has done great things for us

and we shall rejoice.

B

(4)Restore "shiviteinu," O Lord,

like watercourses in the Negev.

(5) They who sow in tears

shall reap with songs of joy.

(6) Though he goes along weeping,

carrying the seed-bag,

he shall come back with songs of joy,

carrying his sheaves.

On the one hand, the psalm reflects a parallel relationship between paragraph A and B. For example: Verse one uses the term "Shivat Tzion," while four reminds us of it with "shiviteinu." Both verses one and four use a metaphor to demonstrate their point. Finally, both verses two and five are connected with the word "rina," joy. It would seem that the psalm follows a poetic literary structure of ABC/ABC, meaning that the second half of the psalm reinforces the first half.

However, a closer inspection of the literary features reveals that the two halves do not really correspond at all. While verses 1-3 seem to indicate that the psalm is about a spiritual or historical event (the restoring of the "Shivat Tzion"), verses 4-6, with their agricultural motifs, give the impression that it was written by farmers asking for rain!

Additionally, when analyzing the voice the author uses to speak to God, we notice that the first part in relating to God, speaks OF Him - "when God returned the "Shivat Tzion" we were like dreamers. Then there shall be laughter and joy..." Verse four, though, begins by the poet turning TO God pleading, "Return us O' God like....."

How, then, can we harmonize the two distinct units in this psalm? Is the author a spiritual person or a farmer? Is he writing about God or to Him?

The fundamental issue in this psalm concerns the question of what is its theme. It seems to vacillate between two seemingly disparate issues: history; agriculture, spirituality; material wealth. In analyzing these two ideas we can posit three options:

A. The psalm focuses on a great historical event - the returning of Shivat Tzion to Israel. This is the opinion of Rashi and Malbim. With this approach, the second half of the psalm must then be interpreted on a figurative note (as Rashi does).

B. The psalm is mainly an agricultural one, focusing on the people witnessing a rebirth in the crops from God - we ask for rain to rush down the mountains through the watercourses in the

desert. How, then, are we to understand the first part which focuses on the phrase "Shivat Tzion?"

C. A combination. The first half indeed refers to an historical element, while the second half relates to the physical, agricultural issue. We would then have to explain both halves and attempt to synthesize the two.

Let's now analyze these positions in depth.

I.

Professor Y. Efrati agrees with Rashi's claim that the "Shivat Tzion" refers to specific people. Upon the destruction of the first temple in 586 B.C.E., the Jews were banished from Tzion, thinking they would never return. This did not prevent them from yearning, praying, and hoping for the day when they would finally return to Tzion.

In 538 their dream came true. King Cyrus allowed these "'longers' for Tzion" to return to their land. He subsequently gave them permission to rebuild the Beit Ha-mikdash in 516. Led spiritually by Chagai and Zekharia, and politically by Zerubavel, the first group of exiled Jews arrived back on the soil of their homeland, ready to begin life anew.

It is at this time, Efrati claims, that the psalm was written. The first paragraph fits perfectly: He thanks God for returning them, the Shivat Tzion (those who longed to return to Tzion) to Jerusalem -something they would have thought only to be a dream a few years ago. "Then," (referring to the stage he is in at present) their mouths will be filled with laughter and our tongues, joy. They are so fortunate that the surrounding nations have come to realize the greatness that God has bestowed upon His people; they have realized this fact as well.

The author of this psalm spends one half praising God and thanking Him for all that had transpired including the ability to rebuild the Beit Ha-mikdash, a goal which was only dreamed about in the past. How, though, do we understand the second half which seems to ask for salvation from God, and uses agricultural terminology to do so?

Efrati explains that while life was starting to look up, there were still two fundamental issues which had to be confronted. First, the amount of Jews who returned to Israel made up for a very small percentage of the Jewish community. Most of them were still scattered throughout the Persian empire.

Second, while Jews had a certain sense of autonomy, the appointed leader Zerubavel, while stemming from a Davidic dynasty, did not achieve total sovereignty, rather the control still rested on the Persian empire. This was indeed not the eschatological vision of the Jewish people living freely in their homeland.

The author of the psalm, sensitive to these deficiencies, directs the second half of the psalm to God in a plea to restore Jerusalem to ALL its glory, to help bring a complete revival of Jewish life, kingship, and religion. One thing interfered with this goal - the Persian empire. Having just bestowed all these gracious rights to the Jews, for them to hear songs of rebellion, revolution and war, would be catastrophic. The author, instead, opts for a more hidden message in his quest for absolute independence.

Using commonly known metaphors, found in the prophetic books of Jeremia and Ezekiel, he sends out a coded message for all to pray for a complete redemption. In describing the exile Jeremia says "weep and cry as you walk away" (22:10). Alternatively, Ezekiel describes redemption in the following way: "He then took some of the seed of the land and planted it in a fertile field; he planted it and set it like a willow beside abundant waters" (17:5).

The message, in its time, was clear and conclusive: While we pay tribute and praise God for the beginning of redemption, and though we have the ability to laugh, true, complete joy will come only with the final salvation. Just as we witnessed the lamented realization of the Jeremia prophecy, crying as we walked into exile, so too, we hope and pray that the prophecy of Ezekiel, of rebirth, revitalization, replanting a new willow (one which is able to thrive and flourish in abundant waters) will be fulfilled.

II.

While Efrati defines the phrase "Shivat Tzion" on an historical plane, and is therefore forced to reinterpret the second half of the psalm along metaphorical lines, Yechezkel Kaufman takes the opposite approach. This psalm has nothing to do with the period of the second temple. In fact, it is not even referring to an historical event. The psalm should be understood as it is read - a prayer for rain and sustenance.

In this light, the reading of the second half of the psalm is more literal. "Return our land to its glory - the land flowing with milk and honey. At this point the farmer lays his seed crying but one day (with your help) he will reap rejoicing."

However, we are confronted with the first half of the psalm which has no allusions to agricultural nomenclature. We are forced to read into the phrase "Shivat Tzion" as not reflecting any historical aspect. This is rather difficult to accept for two reasons. First, if we interpret the first half as a praise for the rain they received, it directly contradicts the latter half. Secondly, why would this be cause for other nations to say "The lord has done great things for them?"

III.

Our final option is to synthesize the two ideas, or rather, to accept each half of the psalm as a unique means in reflecting the sign of the times. The psalm was written during a great historical time period, one where the hand of God was readily apparent in certain ways, but hidden in others. The author acknowledges the miraculous scene, but also prays and hopes for total salvation.

The psalm much like its title (see last shiur) reflects different aspects of praise, and different approaches for future redemption. For some redemption comes through kingship and the re-establishment of the Beit Ha-mikdash; for others a more mundane method is required to retrieve the people. Through a resuscitation of the agricultural situation, the Jews themselves will return to Tzion "like watercourses in the desert."

What the author creates is a cyclical pattern. The redemption is set in motion, God reveals Himself albeit in a limited way. For some people that revelation is enough to uproot themselves from their complacent society and make the journey - the ma'ala - to Israel. The majority waits in anticipation for the final redemption or for a more practical incentive to join their brethren. Without the preponderance of Jews, however, the country does not repopulate, the nation remains weak.

According to this approach, the prayer begins with a review of the miracles they had seen before their very eyes. Something about which everyone had dreamed began to emerge. Even the gentiles praised the remarkable rebirth, and yet, the author expresses, neither God, nor the people had completed the circle. Perhaps if God helped us out, he prays, if there was a little physical incentive, the majority would rush in like "watercourses in the desert."

Conclusions

Whether we accept the historical interpretation, the agricultural one, or the synthesis of the two, this psalm seems to have struck a chord in our tradition. Perhaps, precisely due to its multilateral explanations does it reserve such a strong place in our liturgy.

When sitting at our Shabbat table, reflecting on our week, we sing a psalm which in some way talks to all of us. A song of praise; a prayer; a wish for spirituality, without losing sight of our physical needs. Ultimately, it is an acknowledgment of the great Hand of God in history, yet at the same time, a plea for the final redemption when all of us will indeed reap with joy.

May it be the will of God to fulfill our song of praise and prayer, returning us to a rebuilt, repopulated Jerusalem.