

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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PSALM 24

Why does Psalm 24 get so much "press"? It is certainly one of the most used psalms in our prayers. We recite it every Sunday as the first of the "shirei shel yom," Levitical songs in the Temple. Ashkenaz (Eastern European) tradition is to recite the psalm every time we return the Torah to the ark (Mondays, Thursdays, and Shabbat afternoons). In addition, it is prominently recited on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, during the High Holiday prayers. I would like to spend the next few lectures on this complex and comprehensive psalm.

What is so special about this psalm? Let us begin with its translation, dividing the psalm into three distinct sections:

(1) "To David, Mizmor, The earth is the Lord's and all that it holds, the world and its inhabitants.
For He founded it upon the ocean, set it on the nether-streams.

(2) Who may ascend the mountain of Hashem and who may stand in His holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken
A false oath by my life, or sworn deceitfully.

He shall carry away a blessing from the Lord, a just reward from
God, his deliverer.

Such is the circle of those who turn to Him, Jacob, who seek Your
presence.

(3) O' gates lift up your heads,
Up high, you everlasting doors,
so the king of glory may come in.
Who is the king of glory?
God, mighty and valiant, God, valiant in battle.
O gates lift up your heads,
Lift them up you everlasting doors,
so the king of glory may come in.
Who is the king of glory?
The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of glory(1).

The three sections in the psalm seemingly have nothing to do with each other. The first section exclaims a primordial truism: to God belongs the land; He fashioned it upon the waters; and upon the streams He set it.

Part two of our Psalm has the psalmist asking a question, "Who will ascend the mountain of God, and who will rise in his holy place?" A display of ethical and moral characteristics ensues. In addition there is a message for generations who seek the face of God.

The final segment of the psalm directs our attention towards the holy gates, as David summons the heavenly gates to open and await the entrance of the "king of glory."

What does each section have to do with each other, and is there a specific theme running through the psalm? Also, what is so special about these concepts, which when sewn together into a psalm, render it worthy of its prominent liturgical place? Let us analyze each section and hopefully find a thread to weave the psalm into one.

I. To God, the Earth...

The psalm begins with a declaration, a praise of God, acknowledging Him as the creator of the world and its inhabitants. In it there is a direct reference to the land's belonging to God. In fact, the intense and direct nature of the first phrase focuses our attention on "God and His land" - La-Hashem ha'aretz (to God is the land).

Presumably, we are directed this way to combat a prevalent assumption that the reader might feel either:

- a) God did not create the world: man or happenstance were at work.
- b) God's realm is only in the heavens and should not interfere with earthly matters. After creating the world, He removed Himself.

Either way, the text offers a simple and straightforward response - to God belongs the land. He created it and continues to be involved with it and its inhabitants on a consistent basis.

A question arises. Based on verse one, we emerge with a declaration of belief, a testament of faith not founded on reason or logic. We are asked not to attempt a cognitive, causative debate concerning God's control, just to accept it: "To God belongs the land."

Yet the second verse seems to contradict this "declaration," as its first word, "ki," acts as a modifier.

If we were to interpret ki as "because" or "for," a common translation, we must then search for the way that this latter verse explains the former. God reserves the right to the land BECAUSE He founded it upon the oceans and the streams. Can we justify God's right to the land based on how He fashioned it? Is it not presumptuous of the psalmist to attempt to prove this ownership of the land on the part of God?

Perhaps not. Perhaps there is a great necessity to supply us with the second, supporting verse. To simply state that God owns all and not to offer some insight as to its significance would be trite. Instead the poet asks us to understand the reason behind this "right" to the land and its inhabitants.

What does it mean that God "fashioned the land upon the oceans, set it upon the streams"? There is a motif that the mere notion of the land being supported on top of waters, itself a seeming contradiction in terms, is significant. Earth is soluble; water is a solvent. Science would have the land sink into the waters, yet the Torah attests that this was how the earth was fashioned. If this is true, then the imagery in the creation is vivid and quite significant. It is as if God Himself is holding up the earth from immediate immersion.

If that is the case, then a fundamental concept is proclaimed right from the start. God created the earth and its inhabitants, and if that alone is not worthy of His "claim" to the earth, then the fact is that His involvement in our world daily, hourly, attests to His commitment to being its ruler.

The message from the start is that God, who we proclaim the Creator of the land, must also be seen as directly involved in the existence of the land and the waters. God deserves our acknowledgment as ruler unconditionally, yet if we analyze a little deeper, we understand the intensity of God's day-to-day involvement in our lives.

SUMMARY

We began this psalm with a statement of faith, to God belongs the land and its inhabitants. Were the psalmist content with this belief, he would not have modified the statement in the next verse. The fact that the verse begins with the word "ki" suggests to us the important

need for both a faith oriented outlook, as well as a rational perspective in realizing that without God's day-to-day involvement, we would sink.

We emerge with an important introduction to our psalm. We proclaim to the world and to ourselves our readiness to accept God's rule over this world. At the same time, we testify that we will continue our pursuit of a greater appreciation of God and His constant involvement in our world.

We also begin with one point in time - creation - but almost immediately leap ahead millennia right to our day, as we witness God's ever-continuing presence in our lives. The psalm says begin at point one and project forward full thrust.

This sets us on a course towards the psalm's interpretation. In the next class, we will piece together the final two segments and try to weave our Biblical tapestry.