

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
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TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

By Rav Avi Baumol

Standing in H(h)is Holy Place

Psalm 24 part 2

Last class we focused on Psalm 24 and its introductory words praising God as the creator of heaven and earth. We noticed a shift in the voice of the psalmist, starting out with a declaration of faith ("To God belongs the land"), and ending up with a qualification of that line ("for He fashioned it upon the oceans").

We noted that the necessity to engage in an explanation of God's connection to the land stemmed from our appreciation of His ongoing sustaining of the world. In addition, we sense a movement, beginning at point one – the creation, and telling us that we must see this relationship between God and the world throughout human existence up to this very day.

This class will explore this psalm's midsection, roughly verses three through six. In it we find a discussion of who is worthy to be a part of this "ascension to God." This leads us to wonder if there is not a more formal aspect to this psalm. Is it simply about praising God, or is there a specific design for these words?

I would like to draw your attention to an excellent book on Tehillim, written by a well-known Biblical scholar, Dr. Nachum Sarna. The book, entitled "Songs of the Heart, an Introduction to the Book of Psalms," presents an extensive analysis of ten

psalms. He also writes a beautiful introduction to the book of Psalms, well worth reading.

I have used him extensively outlining his interpretation of the psalm, as well as using his translation above. In the book he includes Psalm 24 along with Psalm 15 as a unit modern scholars have called the "Liturgies of Entrance." The reason for this is that in both psalms a certain guideline is set up for who is worthy enough to "ascend the mountain of God," or "dwell in God's holy tent."

Both psalms include descriptions of the "worthy" personality, both in the realm of positive actions as well as the refraining from the negative. Some suggest that there was a ceremony at the approach of the Temple to ascertain whether an individual was fit to enter. These psalms may have been part of the curriculum.

Sarna points out that in some ancient Egyptian temples, one can see the inscriptions of worshipers who would proclaim their guiltlessness to a variety of different deities. This message of a proclamation of innocence is widespread within the ancient cultures and would then appear to be natural in the Hebrew culture as well.

What would be a proper time for this ceremony to take place? Perhaps it was during the triennial pilgrimage to the Temple that every Hebrew was commanded with. The Torah states that when each individual would come to the Temple, "no one should come empty-handed" (Devarim 16:16). The implicit assumption is that each Hebrew would bring an offering to God in the Temple.

The question of "who is worthy to ascend" that the priest or the Levite may ask parallels the statements of the sages found in the Nevi'im (Book of Prophets). Shmuel, Natan, and especially

Yeshayahu all rebuke the man who comes with an animal offering to God but bears sin in his heart. For this reason, much of the rebuke, and many of the themes in the psalms, focus on the inward feelings of the heart, rather than the outward expression of the individual.

The response in both is a series of moral and ethical character traits that stress honesty, guiltlessness, and moral uprightness.

The relationship between the external actions of an individual and the internal feelings is fundamental in Judaism in general and Temple times in particular. At a time when the offering of a sacrifice took a large part of one's time and means, prophets rebuked those who tipped the scale on the side of ritual, while abandoning what it represented.

In a word, if we accept Nachmanides' perspective on offerings, that the animal represents the substitution for the individual, then there must be clear consonance between the subject (the person) and the object (the animal). This is a reason that so much Talmudic discourse is focused on a person's intention during the presentation of an offering - how can you offer your substitute if you are not involved, body and soul? For this reason, or more precisely, for the rejection of this fundamental synergy, the prophets lashed out against the individual acting on external alone.

Hence, after the question, "Who shall be allowed entrance?" the response is clear: "neki khapayim u-var leivav (clean hands and a pure heart)." This simple formula reflects the important relationship between our actions (hands) and our thoughts (hearts). When standing in the Temple and presenting offerings in front of the priests and the assembly, it is easy to look well-intentioned - but God knows if our intentions are true.

Therefore, if we are deceiving others with superficial service, God despises it and sees it as a fracture of our trust in Him. This is the basis of the prophets' scorn, since man's inner thoughts do not match his external actions. The poet, thus, chooses his words wisely, offering us the litmus test for one's "ascension" to the Mountain of God.

When I say "ascension" what exactly do I mean? The phrase, "Mi ya'ale be-har Hashem (Who will ascend on the mountain of God)?" can be read literally or figuratively. Sarna opts for the literal interpretation, claiming that this was used as a warning to those desiring to enter the Temple mount, which is at an elevated state.

To Sarna, this is simply a way to get through the doors, on your way to presenting your annual offering. If this is true, then the message is that in order to enter the holiest place in Jewish life, the most sanctified house of God, be sure that you are ready inside and out and that your actions and thoughts correspond.

There is, though, a figurative interpretation - and why not? The beginning of the Psalm 24 seems to expand our vision from a local discussion at the gates of the Temple to a more universal concept. We read about the foundations of the world, the notion that God Himself participates in sustaining the world, as we mentioned in the previous lesson.

In this vein we look at the second section of the Psalm and address the more fundamental aspects of our lives. What should our focus be on this journey of life? How should we approach the essential issues in our lives? In other words, "Who shall ascend" to the lofty heights of Godliness, spiritual fulfillment, and a life of meaning and worth?

In this context I come to the title of this lecture. I purposely left ambiguous the translation of the word "kodsho" because the pronoun leaves us an opening for other possibilities. "Who will ascend the mountain of God, and who will rise in H(h)is (?) holy place?" Generally, we assume the hemistich to be symmetric in the poetic verses in Psalms such that the second half would simply be repeating the first phrase in different words.

There is another possibility, however. Instead of asking twice, "Who will rise to God's mountain or holy place?" the poet leads us away from the formal event of entering the Temple of God and directs us towards a more fundamental approach – man's journey towards Godliness in this world.

Thus, while the first hemistich is clearly asking who is worthy to ascend in his life towards Godliness and spirituality, the second half does not concern itself with that lofty level. Rather, it asks, who will replace the original person! As one individual merits a step closer to God, there is another person who merits reaching the penultimate level. The message comforts us in saying that it is not an all-or-nothing deal. Our quest for Godliness is a process, which, done methodically and in the right time, will lead us up that ladder to our final destiny.

Who will finally take the last leap towards God? More importantly, who will accept the challenge, taking the former's place as the process continues in our journey of life. Perhaps this is the timeless question of King David. The answers are the same: true of heart and innocence of deed.

In addition to heart and mind, one should learn to guard one's tongue and not use God's name inappropriately. One who

accomplishes these goals will certainly receive a blessing from God, "u-tzedaka mei'elohei yish'o (and righteousness from the God of his salvation)."

The psalmist then continues expounding on the universal journey, saying this search for God, this elevation of holiness on the part of the individual is timeless, stretching into generations. "Ze dor dorshav (this is the way of the generations who search for God)." We emerge with a feeling of movement, a constant yearning for the next stage in one's development in life, a this-worldly pursuit of Godliness, spirituality, and morality. This represents the second vital segment of Psalm 24.