

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 82 - Introducing Asaf: A Tuesday Thought

"Mizmor Le'Asaf Elohim nitzav be'adat El" (A Psalm of Asaf: Elohim stands in the congregation of God)

We must begin with some basic questions: Who was Asaf and why did he author a Psalm? Didn't King David create the Psalms alone? Why introduce another poet?

In order to answer these questions we need a bit of information about Tehillim in general. Nachum Sarna, in his introduction to his book "Songs of the Heart," discusses the relationship between the Psalms and King David, who is said to be their author. The Talmud itself (Bava Batra 14b) recognized that not all psalms were composed by David - in fact David included the work of ten others: Adam, Malkitzedek, Avraham, Moshe, Heman, Yedutun, Asaf, and the three sons of Korach. Nonetheless, the Psalter is considered David's.

Why, then, was the entire book of Tehillim attributed to David? According to Professor Sarna, although in his lifetime David was a warrior, king, and a leader, he was better remembered for his deep love of God, and for his involvement in music as a means to connect to God throughout his life. He was skilled in playing musical instruments, and perhaps even crafted some of his own. Throughout his life, we often see him (calling out to God and playing an instrument. Indeed, in 1 Samuel (16:16) David is introduced as a 'yodea le-nagen' a

man of musical instruments. The two defining themes that we notice about him are his instrumental prowess and that God is with him.

Perhaps, the best proof that King David was behind the singing of Psalms to God during worship and Temple service stems from a passage in 2 Chronicles. The chronicler describes the revival of the Temple worship in the days of king Chizkiyahu (ca. 715 B.C.E.). During this momentous time, when the king and his subjects were returned and restored the Temple, they were accompanied by musical instruments, songs to God and words of prophecy. The passage attributes the instruments, the songs, and the commandment to sing during the Temple service to King David (ca. 1000).

Let me recount the narrative:

And all the vessels which [evil] king Achaz threw out in his reign they prepared, sanctified, and brought to the altar of God. King Chizkiyahu arose early in the morning, gathered the princes of the city and ascended to the house of God. [They brought sacrifices] as sin offerings, for the monarchy, for the Temple, and for Judah. He said to the sons of Aharon, bring them up for a sacrifice to God. The animals were offered, atoning for the sins of Israel. [... Chizkiyahu set the Levites in the house of the Lord with musical cymbals, lutes and lyres according to the commandment of David, and of the seer Gad and of Natan the prophet. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David [klei David] and the priests with the trumpets. Chizkiyahu commanded to offer the burnt offering to God upon the altar, and when the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments of David king of Israel. All those present prostrated themselves before the Lord. Moreover, Yechizkiyahu the king and the princes commanded that the Levites sing praise to the

Lord with the words of David and of Asaf the Seer... (2 Chron. 29:19-30)

We see from the passage that Asaf, seemingly the author of our Psalm, was considered the author of "words of praise to God" alongside King David.

David deserves the title of greatest king for successfully modeling the Jewish concept of a king: One who was fearless and political, but entirely human and walked amongst his people; who was extremely religious; who, though vulnerable to his desires and susceptible to sin, at the same time possessed the capacity to repent; one who never lost sight of his prophets, his seers and his God as he composed, prayed, praised, sang, and danced before God all through his life. For these reasons, the Psalter is his.

Nevertheless, this psalm belongs to Asaf! What of him? Who was he? We return to Chronicles 1 chapter 6:16:

"And these men (from the sons of Levi) David set up for service of song in the house of the Lord after the Ark rested. They would minister to the Ark in song until Solomon built the Temple ... his brother Asaf who stood on his right hand, Asaf the son of Berachyahu the son of ... Gershon the son of Levi." [...] And David appointed them to sing with the cymbals, the lutes, and the Lyres." "And David appointed them before the Ark of God, the Levites who would serve Him, invoke, thank, and praise the name of the Lord, God of Israel. Asaf the chief, next to him Zecharya... Then on that day David first delivered this Psalm into the hand of Asaf and his brethren.

David composed the Psalms and the music to accompany them. He had a group of poets and singers who developed the Psalms along with him, the most prominent of which was Asaf.

He was a member of the Levite tribe and he participated in the organization of the Psalms with David. He authored twelve Psalms altogether, eleven of them in a row from 73-83. In Ezra (2:41) we find that the children of Asaf were among those who returned to Israel seventy years after the destruction of the first Temple, when the exiles were finally allowed to come home. There his family is referred to as the 'meshorerim' - the singers.

This is Asaf: he sang, he composed, and he helped organize the 'shirei David' (songs of David). Most importantly, he was a close contemporary and perhaps a lifelong friend of king.

Now that we are familiar with Asaf, what did he have to say in Psalm 82? And why is this short Psalm recited every Tuesday by hundreds of thousands of Jews around the world?

It is clear from the "mila mancha" (guiding word) that the theme of the psalm is judgment (the root appears four times in different form). One of the fundamental principles that guides society is the development of a justice system. In fact, it is a positive commandment, not only for the Jewish people, but for all peoples who believe in God the creator (see Rambam, Mishne Torah Melakhim 9:14). Thus, it should be a universal ideal to set up communal courts of justice all over the world, in which judgment is carried out by wise, honest and God-fearing, men.

In this psalm, Asaf laments the state the social justice system in his society. For him, judges must be unyielding, impervious people who will not falter at the hands of bribes and evil. At the same time they must judge with the 'wisdom of Solomon' to penetrate into the minds of the people.

Permit me to read the Psalm again, this time adding interpretations:

A psalm for (by) Asaf:

(O, how sad our system of justice has become. If only God Himself would take a place on this tribunal; for only God can withstand the biases, the bribery and such.)

If only Elohim came to judge amidst the elohim (judges).

The Torah (ad ha-elohim...) sometimes refers to judges with the same reverence that we reserve for the divine. Why? Because their role is none other than to pass judgment on man, the very job of the Almighty. "Will the judge of all the land not do justice?" (Genesis, 18:25). And yet, "the earth He has given to the children of Man" (Psalms 115:16) - the world is for us to rule, to develop and to live in. Therefore, we appoint judges to rule and decide the fate of man. The intention is that we will choose the most righteous and upstanding members of society for such a lofty task.

(But the state of affairs has sunk to the point where)
"I wish the Lord himself joins this tribunal."

Why? What has transpired during his time?

Verse 2.

Speaking to the judges or about them: "How long can you judge wrongly? How long will you submit in favor of the evil ones?"

It seems to the author that the court is spending its time taking care of the rich, pandering to the higher echelons, while rejecting the misfortunate.

"Instead, judge the poor, the orphan, justify the humble and destitute."

Not that they should merit the person just because he is poor, which is unacceptable based on Torah law (Leviticus 19:15),

rather justify them by listening to their case, by acknowledging them as part of society. In addition, save them from those who take advantage of the destitute, free them from the clutches of the schemers and evildoers. And yet, says the poet to himself:

nobody listens, they do not see, it is as if they walk in darkness, let their establishments dismantle, let them fall from within their impenetrable institutions. I thought you were like Elohim's. I thought you could soar to the divine in your wisdom and your justice. Instead you are like mortal man, you shall die, like a simple officer you shall fall.

The poet at once realizes that these judges are not what he dreamt of they are too mortal, they can fall, and at the same time he wishes their humanness upon them--that they falter and die.

"Let the real God rise and judge the land, for is it not your land to judge?"

Why did our rabbis choose this to be recited every week on Tuesday? The psalm asks God to return to the world, not a distant Creator who leaves man to run the show, for we are too feeble and weak. Man cannot judge; it belongs only to the Omniscient. Man cannot be placed in a high position over others, for his evil inclination is too great, and he can always be bought.

It is a somber realization for the author who once had hoped for the fulfillment of the Torah's dream that man aspire towards the divine by partaking not only in creating the world, but in judging it and developing society.

Sometimes society feels the urge to "take matters into their own hands." Sometimes it sets up social norms and mores based on selfish considerations without looking for ideals and

higher objectives. It is at times like these when we need a reminder of the great responsibility man has in living in this world of God. We are here to serve and guard, to control and develop, propagate, and promulgate the message of God throughout the land. In so doing our message must be honest, sincere, void of selfish or hedonistic considerations. We must learn to judge like God. Until then, says Asaf, we wait and pray for God to return to His throne of judgment and resume to judge as He once did.