

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 94 - Wednesday - Nekama

Wednesday:

Nikmat Hashem-God's Vengeance

The last lecture, which analyzed the Tuesday's Psalm-82, focused on the author's struggle with one of the most fundamental and universal commandments by God, namely setting a justice system that can judge the society honestly and fairly. The psalmist attempts to accept the incumbent system, but rejects it due to the vilified nature of these 'judges' and the inability of society to rise above the bribery and deception. Ultimately the poet asks God to rise up once again and judge His people.

Wednesday's message clearly follows the ideas presented in Tuesday's. After a discussion on the merits or vices of the justice system, it is quite logical to escalate to the abuse of that justice system as it relates to acts of treachery, debauchery, haughtiness, and merciless depravity. How do we respond, theologically, to evil in our world? This is a timeless and timely question. There is a bit of a sting in the psalmist's voice since he must deal not only with the sheer terror of killing the innocent and downtrodden (verse 6), but also with the shocking hubris of these villains. His only recourse is one word: revenge (nekama)!

But what is the mechanism of this revenge? What are its parameters? How does it work? For this we turn to Psalm 94.

[It should be noted that this is not a class on the nature of the Jewish concept of nekama. Such a discussion, though of great merit, exceeds the confines of this lecture. My goal here is to discern the poet's perspective on nekama stemming from his existential concerns. (For sources on nekama in the Tanakh see endnote #1)]

I would like to begin with an outline of the psalm, asking questions along the way in an attempt to impart my own methodology of I analyzing a Mizmor.[see endnote 2]

Step one: Peshat!

Peshat means to simply understand the words of the Mizmor. This is a challenge in its own right. There are many translations of Tehillim, which often differ greatly on the definition of the words. I glance at many translations and attempt to come up with one that fits the context of the mizmor. Often there will be a word that is simply untranslatable or a word about which the commentaries vary greatly. In this case, leave the word in Hebrew and work around it. When you have an idea that might be a meta-theme, plug the definition back into the mizmor.

Step two. Identify the 'Meta-theme.'

Each psalm attempts to impart one unique message. Like a poem, which twists and turns but ultimately delivers a powerful and meaningful thought, Tehillim achieve the same purpose. This meta-theme might be divided into mini-themes, each forming another component which constitutes the whole.

Step three: Division of Mini-themes.

We find the different mini-themes by dividing the psalm up into categories. Where does one idea end and a new one begin? In order to pinpoint the transition of mini-themes one looks for transitional words as well as changes in speech. In other words, when is the psalmist speaking to God, when is he speaking to the readers, and at what point is he speaking to himself?

Final Stage: Literary Techniques and Final Meta-theme.

Once we pick up all the author's mini-themes, we try to find the purpose of his writing this psalm. What overall idea did he want to convey to his readers and to himself? Through studying the different literary techniques employed, (parallelism, chiasmus, wordplay, inclusio, rhyme, rhythm, etc.) one tries to emerge with the upshot of his work, and how it applies to his life and to ours.

Without further ado, let us begin our task of analyzing, mizmor 94. It would be a good idea to read through the psalm in Hebrew and in translation.

Section 1: 'O God, appear and avenge.'

- 1) O God of revenge Lord, God of revenge appear.
- 2) Arise, O judge of the earth, return to the arrogant that which they deserve.
- 3) How long shall the evil ones of God, how long shall the evil exult?
- 4) They gush out, they openly utter injustice they speak their minds all the workers of abuse.
- 5) They crush Your people O Lord, and they afflict Your inheritance;
- 6) They slay the widow and the stranger, and murder the orphans.
- 7) All this while saying "the Almighty will not see, the God of Jacob will not notice"

Peshat:

I mentioned above that the word nekama needs to be further studied; nonetheless, it is generally translated as 'revenge,' or 'to avenge in verb form, and vengeance in the noun form. (Although Hirsch translates the word as 'champion of justice,' and Sarna uses 'God of retribution').

Theme:

Verse one sets the stage for the following six: "God you are the 'el nekamot' therefore appear and respond. Mete out retribution to those who mock, for how long can they laugh and dance around our law and

our morality?" The psalmist feels the need to describe to God (as if He is unaware) the persecution of the innocent, the murdering of the orphans, the widows and strangers. We sense an urgency on the part of the psalmist; how that will affect the overall theme is an important question to keep in mind.

Transition:

Calling out to God, as if the psalmist waiting for a divine response, he receives none. As a result the author continues, in verses 8-11 his own diatribe against the wicked:

[Many would lump verses 1-11 together as the psalmist's tirade against evil; however we should always take note of a change in speech patterns, or of who he is addressing as his audience. While in verses 1-7 the call is to God, verses 8-11 direct our attention to the wicked themselves. This shift we note for the end of the analysis as we combine all the mini-themes.]

Section 2 A Rebuke for the Reshaim (wicked).

Binu boarim ba'am - acquire some wisdom you foolish ones of the nation; u'chsilim matai taskilu-dolts, when will you understand? He who plants the ear, does He not hear? Does the creator of the eye not see? He who has given morality to man, will He not seek retribution for those who abuse it? God knows the thoughts of man....

Literary Considerations:

"Binu boarim ba'am" is an example of alliteration which is used often in Biblical Poetry. We might want to consider the reason for the word play here. We might, though, accept it as a part of his poetic demeanor without justifying it for this specific occasion.

Summary of the First Sections:

Thus the first two sections of the psalm flow easily from one to the next. In a state of despair, witnessing the evil running rampant around him, forced to confront the shameless and boastful miscreants, the author pleads with God to rise up and avenge the evil perpetrated against the downtrodden. He then turns to the wicked themselves with a litany of castigations of their hubris and, ultimately, their foolishness. At this point, though, the nature of the psalm changes.

Section Three. 'Fortunate is the man...?'

Verse 12 "fortunate is the one who suffers at the hand of God, and from His Torah we shall learn [He shall teach us]."

This verse seems out of place. What does Torah learning have to do with suffering? Why wax poetic about enduring suffering in a psalm dedicated to rebuking evil, and its perpetrator's ultimate punishment by God?

In order to answer these questions we must understand the nature of this transition, the definitions of peshat, the mini-theme on its own, and how it fits in with the rest of the Psalm. This might prove to be the crux of the whole psalm.

Try to chart out the remaining sections and themes and group together all the ideas. How will verse 12 affect the overall idea? Is it marginal? Fundamental? Together we will try to understand the underlying message of our psalmist as he calls out to God in his greatest time of need.

ENDNOTES:

[1] A cursory search on the root N.K.M. reveals 73 different appearances in the Tanakh. To explore the notion of nekama in the Tanakh, clearly the verse in Exodus is the departing point (chapter 21, verse 20): "And if your slave should be smitten at the hand of the rod 'nakom yenakem' vengeance (revenge) will be taken" Or the verse in the

section of blessings and curses, (Leviticus 26:25): "I shall bring a sword upon you that will execute the vengeance (revenge) of the covenant..." And what about the verse in Numbers (31:2) "God spoke to Moses saying avenge (revenge) the children of Israel from the Midianites....," followed by Moses' command in verse 4 "...exercise God's vengeance (revenge) over the Midianites?"

[2] Many of these ideas I developed over my years of analyzing Tehillim. I started in a class at Yeshiva University by Professor Mordechai Cohen.