

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Mizmor 13:

Singing in Adversity

- 1) For the (menatzeach) leader, with instrumental music. A psalm of David.
- 2) Until when, God, will You forever forget me?
Until when will You hide Your face from me?
- 3) Until when must I seek counsel in my soul, and find sorrow in my heart by day?
Until when will my enemies rise above me?
- 4) Please look upon me and answer me God, my Lord,
Please lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.
- 5) Lest my enemies say, "I have prevailed over him; my oppressors rejoice when I falter."
- 6) But I have put my trust in Your loving kindness, my heart will rejoice through Your salvation,
I (hope to) sing out to God, saying he has bestowed good onto me."

"Until when will You hide Your face..." (2)

"In Your kindness I trust...." (6)

Starting out in despair, ending up in ecstasy, the psalm is written in a style with which we are familiar, indeed we have encountered it in our previous classes. A question emerges. Is David describing to us a happy ending to his miserable situation, or is his miserable situation at center stage and the optimistic ending there so as not to depress us? In the end, is the song he sings in the last verse a sad song or a happy one?

This specific question might be part of a greater issue. Often we find the psalm resembling the proverbial half-filled/half-empty cup of water. Part of the psalm has David depicting his ailments, enemies, loneliness, or sinful guilt, while the second half has the king rejoicing in God's kindness, happy in God's salvation, and believing in God's providence.

Which one is the primary focus; is David out to justify his difficult spiritual fervor through publicizing his adversity, or

is he attempting to impart his confidence in his faith in God, by showing the extent of his trouble?

Or is it both?

The first thing we should realize after reviewing a few of such psalms is that there is no ONE answer. He follows no formula, nor sets up any standard. Instead we must analyze each mizmor through its poetry and its content to arrive at our conclusion.

If we were to look at the numbers to determine the theme of psalm 13, the question shrouded in despair of "until when" (will my suffering linger), seems to take center stage. It initiates the psalm and continues four times in succession. Only in the last line of this six-verse psalm does the tide turn onto a positive note.

Our sages follow the somber note of the psalm, as the Midrash does not offer solace but comments on the inevitability of suffering when it comes in the form of retribution:

God said, "just as I exclaimed 'Until when' (ad ana) concerning the misdeeds of the children of Israel, they are destined to say 'ad ana' (in response to their exiles)."

[Exodus, 16:28] Until when will they reject my laws?

[Numbers, 14:11] Until when will they (Israel) rebel against me?

[Numbers, 14:11] Until when will they not believe in me?

[Numbers, 14:27] Until when will this evil congregation endure?

In response, says God, I shall hand them over to four kingdoms, so that they will shout out four times 'Until when.'

"Until when, God, will You forever forget me?" - corresponds to Babylonian rule

"Until when will You hide Your face from me?" - Medean (Persian)

"Until when must I seek counsel in my soul, and find sorrow in my heart by day?" - Greek Empire

"Until when will my enemies rise above me?" - Edom (Roman Empire).

So as to fulfill the verse which states, "Just as I called and you did not answer, so too shall you call and I will not respond (Zecharyah, 7:13)." (Tanchuma Shelach, 8).

Working off the fourfold repetitive nature of the statement 'ad ana' - until when - our rabbis found a literary parallel to four times God had to wait, and be patient, vis a vis His nation.

The end result has David foreshadowing the future punishment for the misdeeds of history.

The correlation between the four kingdoms in chronology, to the four sentences of David fits very nicely into the specific historical theme that the empire represented to the Jewish people. Babylonia represents a time when the question of why has God forgotten us was uttered by those who were experiencing the terror of destruction. In this respect the addition of the word *netzach* – forever, aims to psychologically imbalance the witnesses of their horror. To them it is endless, God will not remember.

The second period, that of the Persian rule, the Jews being in exile, living in the Persian colonies, reminds us of the Purim story. A time of *hester panim* – when God's face is hidden, the theme of Mordekhai and Esther is a response to the anonymity of God in the life of the Jew. "Until when will You hide Your face from me" fits in perfectly.

When we think of Greece, we think of their culture. The adversity did not come in the way of physical danger but spiritual assimilation. The fear was not external, but internal to the Jew and it affected the meaning of being Jewish. This corresponds perhaps to the most ambiguous of lines in the poem which could be translated as follows: "Until when will I have foreign thoughts penetrating my soul, which trouble me daily." The meaning of the verse could relate to the influence of Greek culture as the hellenization of Jews permeated throughout the empire.

Finally, the fourth kingdom, Edom, which is associated with the Roman Empire, represented the enemy par excellence. Titus fought against the Jews and their God. The arrogance of the Roman army led them and their lineage to become the adversary of the Jew for generations. "Ad ana yarom oyvi alai" (until when will my enemies rise above me) follows the theme of the last and ongoing exile.]

In this regard, we can see the psalm as an answer, albeit a sad one, to suffering and pain. God says, you deserve it. Rashi accepts this approach stating in the first verse – "four times the phrase 'until when' appears, corresponding to the four exiles and subjugations to the aforementioned four kingdoms. He adds that the message of David is for all of Israel, reminding us of sins of the past, lest we repeat them in the future.

An alternative position to accepting a negative attitude as the central motif is to focus on the positive side in the psalm – the last line. David comes to teach us that though the present seems bleak due to the pressures surrounding him, the future

looks bright with the knowledge alone that God will provide. By setting up a longwinded, detailed analysis of his problems, one would be conditioned towards impending doom in David's life. Indeed, even the imagery used by the psalmist paints a dark and dismal picture. God's face is hidden, David yearns for God to just look at him - 'habita.' He asks God to enlighten him, lest he fall into a continuous dormant state.

David has led us into his psychological dungeon, we expect never to escape, certainly not unscathed. But perhaps this is the purpose of the psalm. Perhaps the lopsidedness comes to teach us that the numbers don't matter. Only one thing matters - faith in God:

"Va'ani be-chasdekha batachti..."

David's vote of confidence manifests itself in these three words.

It has a ring to it. It sounds full of confidence. A chant. (Say it to yourselves a few times, it has a feel to it.) On a purely technical level, there is an alliteration in this phrase. There is also a Caesura that in poetry represents a significant pause in the poem or line of poetry. Until the final verse, you could find a meter of four feet in each double line. Ad ana' Hashem' tishkacheni' netzach;' ad ana' tastir' et panekha' mimmeni.' Habita' aneni' Hashem' Elokai;' hai'ra' einai' pen ishan' hamavet.' Verse six, the verse of faith, forces us to measure three separate units. Va'ani' bechasdekha' batach'ti. And I, in your kindness, trust.

This pause, or slowing down of the meter, aims to strengthen or emphasize a transition taking place in the poem. Here the transition lies within the word va'ani. What does this word, and the poetry invested in it, come to teach us?

On the one hand the 'va'ani' comes to reject all that has been stated - Amos Chakham translates the 'vav' as a contrasting vav = "but I" - David is discarding the aforementioned complaints. On the other hand, the caesura slows down our pronunciation of these three words, as if to say, slow down and think about these three words, and they will change your outlook. Both ideas together represent the turning point for the poet and for the reader.

The second verse, "yagel' libi' beshu'ate'kha" (my heart shall REJOICE in your salvation), also includes a three foot meter as opposed to the previous verses. We are forced to read the verse in accentuated detail. In the context of the psalm, the set comes to literally combat his culminating fear - "tzarai yagilu ki emot" (my enemies will REJOICE for I will falter). It

is not uncommon to use wordplay to bring up, or reject an idea mentioned earlier in the poem.

Finally, David will now sing a song to God. Not only has he escaped his predicament but also he has found the ability to rejoice and sing to God. It is as if David has just been shown a sign by God; his heart begins to dance in knowing that help is on the way. Interestingly enough, the meter reverts to a four foot line: ashira' la-donai, 'ki gamal' alai.' This reminds us of the rest of the poem with its rhythmic and rhyming chant. Perhaps it instructs the reader to read the beginning with the newfound understanding of the ending.

In sum, we have posed two theories about the nature of the psalm. The first, that the feeling of despair and abandonment from God, as well as the harassment by the enemies, is the focus of the mizmor. Sometimes when things are not going your way, you need to outlet, to understand why, to express yourself, to hear if you are unreasonable, or to call out so someone, anyone can offer an answer.

Our sages understand that according to this approach David already had his answer, the four 'ad ana's' correspond to God asking the same questions to the children of Israel. In this regard, the final line is a quest, a yearning for a ray of light to battle its way into his dungeon. Trust in God, will bring him to a day when he can look back, rejoicing in his heart, and be able to sing a new song. But not now.

Alternatively, we suggested the possibility that the psalm is really about faith. It is about believing in God, rejoicing in impending salvation, and being capable of composing a new song to God in the face of the adversity that is very much a part of the present. Perhaps, we said, the number of the gloomy sentences that outweigh the happy ones by many, teaches us the antithesis about playing the numbers game.

Perhaps David knew this all along and the artistic form of his poem added to its dramatic message. Or maybe he came to that realization only in the middle of thinking it through. Wallowing in loss and abandonment he realized that therein did not lie his salvation. BUT I IN YOUR FAITH WILL TRUST, stopped his train of thought in its tracks, and made him take a spiritual about face.

There is a third option, (and a fourth, fifth, and sixth – for your input) and that aims to combine the two previous positions. We should not accept David's bleak outlook as a fait accompli, without acknowledging the end result. At the same time, we should not disregard his feelings of abandonment and loneliness; they are the source of his writing of the psalm. We could say that the two together form a unit of catharsis. David feeling low and alone, describes his feelings of despair and in

so doing arrives at the antithetical conclusion - to wallow in self-pity he can do. But to have faith in God, despite the adversity, that is not an easy task, but ultimately the true path and the most rewarding.

Either way, the message is clear. Faith. Conviction. Salvation. Despite the adversity. In spite of the adversity. Only this way will the song he aims to sing be truly a song of praise to God.