

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 14: "A Poetic Sermon"

Sometimes David prays, and sometimes David preaches. (Of course some times there is a bit of both). In our Mizmor, today, the first thing we should see is that there is a change in the direction of the poet's words. He never speaks to God! This is a far cry from psalm 13 where he calls out in complete devotion. A far cry from "va'ani be-chasdekha batachti... (And I in your faith will trust)."

We need not ask why, rather we should observe it and note this as yet another shade of this remarkable personality – King, warrior, lover, poet, prayer, and preacher. (I am sure there are more we can add to the list, send me some of your suggestions). Certain times a rabbi, or teacher, feels like he/she is preaching to the converted. They exhort the people in the synagogue to come to prayer, give charity, learn Torah, yet these are the same people who are involved in the age-old Jewish activities. How does the preacher speak to those not from his/her community? Perhaps it is through poetry or the medium of literature.

Literature is non-confrontational. I can read, I can quietly sing along, I can learn the ideas, accept or reject them, but I never have to be confronted by a person, never have to make a split decision. If poetry can be defined as the emotions of a person recalled in tranquility, then poetry is also to be read and ingested in a tranquil state. While literature is non-confrontational, it can also be rigid and objective. Poetry opens up the subjectivity – renders the text malleable, and brings it to each individual. Thus, the ideal preaching might be found in poetry rather than prose.

(Most prophecy, which is about preaching the word of God, is in poetic style).

Let this be a backdrop for psalm 14.

1. "To the conductor, a psalm of David:

Naval thought to himself, "there is no God"

they corrupted, they have been abominable, there is no one who does good.

2. God looked down from the heavens to see if there was anyone enlightened, a seeker of Elohim.

3. Everyone strayed together, they have acted sordidly, there is no doer of good – not even one.

4. Did not the workers of iniquity know, those who consumed my people, like eating bread; God they did not call.

5. There they feared the terror, for God is in the camp of the righteous. (God dwells in the righteous generation).

6. You, with your ill advice to the poor, will fail, for God defends him.

7. I wish that the salvation of Israel shall arrive from Zion, when God returns His nation to their once assumed status Jacob will regale, Israel will rejoice."

I noticed a strange phenomenon in the voice of the poet in this psalm. In addition to the ambiguity of its direction, we never know who the subject is or subjects are. Is he referring to a singular person or a community? The psalm seems to be vacillating between talking about 'them' and 'him,' almost unsure which way to go. Is David commenting on the relationship between the individual and the community?

Verse 1 has David speaking in the voice of 'Naval.' Who is he? Perhaps it is not a he, but an it. While there

existed an incorrigible and foolish personality called Naval in David's lifetime (see 1 Samuel 25:25), many commentaries understood the usage of this name as a symbol for the quintessential "rasha" malefactor (see Targum, Midrash Tehillim (Buber), Metzudat Tzion, Hirsch, Amos Chakham). David chooses to use a person, who stands for an idea.

There is also a discrepancy that my good friend Simi Chavel noted in this verse. Where does Naval stop speaking, where does David start? In other words, who is speaking the words "hishchitu, hit'ivu...?" Does Naval see a corrupted world and therefore no reason to consider God, or does he contribute to the general milieu of the generation upon which David is commenting? In either reading, the text once again jumps from the plural - "they are corrupt and acted abominably," but ends on the singular, "there is no 'doer of good'" (Hirsch).

In response, God looks down from the heavens onto the sons of man (plural) to find one (singular), yet in verse three, "they all strayed together" (plural), a group effort. But then it resumes to the singular - "no doer of good, not EVEN ONE" (singular). Verse four once again reverts to "ALL who should have known, and who did not call out to God;" their punishment is an intense fear and the realization that God is indeed in the camp of the righteous.

What emerges in my mind is a tactic of the poet trying to compel the association between the individual and the community. Each person feels in some way distant from the community and in other ways a part of it. When one generalizes and often in a negative context about 'society' today, we tend to take an outsider's position. "Look what they are doing to our world...." At some point, though, we must be aware of our responsibility towards our community, our influence from the community, and our influence on the community.

David underscores this important message by setting up the 'Naval' to be apart from the community, and yet to be the community itself. It is quite a clever poetic move to make us think of one person, but upon reading the sources (Duet. 32:6, 1 Samuel 25:25, Isaiah 9:16, Proverbs 17:21, Job 2:10) realize that this person is not really a person at all, rather an idea, representing an entire community. Through this approach of personifying the 'Naval' as the one speaking evil, we can look at him and accuse him, without involving ourselves. But according to our interpretation that it is he who is looking at us who are corrupt in our views, he coerces us into accepting responsibility for the world at large.

Let me put it a different way:

We look at Naval, who is looking at us, to find one individual who is good. There is none, perhaps because we do not allow ourselves to be included in the array of people about which he refers. What happens when the evil ones cannot find any good in their own world? The Naval finds none, and then remarks - there is no justice above and below, there is no God. When the Naval sees no good, it filters down to all of society. We share part of the blame for his actions. (Rav Shlomo Carlebach used to tell a story about a 'ganef' - a thief - who had his own rebbe - his own master. There was great significance to the idea that even a ganef can have a rebbe).

Perhaps this can lead us to a parallel (though opposite) connection between verse 1 and 2. In the second verse, God (He? It?) looks down on mankind to find one who seeks Him. He looks for a community of individuals from which to pick the enlightened one. The response is a confederated straying from that community - "they all strayed together... there is no doer of good in His.

In this respect the message is one of inclusion, collectivism, and shared responsibility. The scene changes in the subsequent verses.

If the first half is a commentary on all of society and renders the entire community responsible for each other, the second half of the psalm - 4-7 - divides the community. It contrasts the righteous generation where God resides, with those evil in society, who consume man mercilessly "as if eating bread," and who exploit the poor shamelessly. Their vice - they don't acknowledge God while committing such atrocities (God they do not call (4)). They are void of guilt and morality. David's response? They will receive their due. In verse 5, the evil will learn to fear God (Hirsch), Elokim dwells amongst the righteous. In response to the exploitation of the poor, God shall protect them. Ultimately, the time will come when the nation of God will be separated from the evil society, when Jacob will rejoice, and Israel will celebrate.

You might ask, there seems to be an inner contradiction in the psalm. The first half asks us to unite with the community at large, and makes us responsible for our detachment. The second half, though, praises distinctness and dissociation. Perhaps the answer lies in the combination of the two. We are at once part of and apart from the community at large. Our bond with society exists because we are all the children of Adam and Eve, all created in His image. Yet, at the same time, we are also children of Abraham and Sarah, chosen, distinct, separate. The message of the dialectic in our world radiates from the psalm; we now must live by it.