

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

By Rav Avi Baumol

Psalm 16
The Past, Present, and Future King

I had a very meaningful Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement - which took place this year on September 20). Sometimes when I pray I think back to that spiritual moment, and wonder how it is that now I have finished speaking to God before I even started. At those times most I need to recommit.

We often need reinforcement. When one deals with children, repetition, and reinforcement is crucial, and is understood as a means for development. As we grow up, however, less leeway is given to us. If we do not 'get it' we are slow. And if we begin some task and do not continue on that same level, we are slackers.

Some people have the capacity to think quickly and record information instantly. Others, however, try to review, assess, and internalize the information - a process that might take more time. Some people can work in high gear nonstop; others, like myself, feel like we are on a roller coaster ride when we try to process information quickly. Many 'self-help' personalities are asking the right questions - how can we process information, internalize it and maintain it for long periods of time?

What can be said for mundane information in the secular world is heightened when dealing with information in the spiritual world. Human nature is to think only about that which is in front of us. Most of us relate and discuss the events and situations that arise in our everyday lives. For this reason, our Rabbis understood the importance of developing spiritual 'reminders,' 'alarms,' and 'wake up calls' throughout our day. Whether it is an event - a mitzva, or a blessing, or simply the act of saying God's name in prayers, we constantly require some refocusing, so that God is at the epicenter of our lives.

For me, the more Godly activity throughout my day, the more chance that it will penetrate my outer shell of practicality in my busy world. Halakha (the daily guide to Jewish life) recognizes my shortcomings, and finds ways to boost it. The antidote to the hustle and bustle of our busy modern society is a steady and perceptible cognizance that God is in front of me,

watching me and watching over me at all times.

With this introduction, perhaps we can shed some light on a quite difficult psalm. The difficulties stem from the words themselves, but after a translation, we are still left with questions.

1. "A Mikhtam of David, guard me, God, for I have trusted You.
2. You said to God 'You are my God' there is no good without You.
5. God is my portion and my share, You guide my destiny.
7. I will bless the Lord who has counseled me...
8. I place God in front of me always, for from my right I shall not falter.
9. Therefore my heart shall rejoice and my glory will sing, even my flesh will rest in safety.
11. Show me the path of life, the fullness of joy in Your presence..."

Questions

- 1) What is a Mikhtam? Inasmuch as we are uncertain of the titles in the Psalms, we can generally channel them in a direction. Some say a mikhtam is a musical instrument, though uncommon. Others call it an engraved letter (the Greek translation is Stelograph - that which is engraved into stone). Amos Chakham states outright that this word is ambiguous in definition.
- 2) Who is speaking to whom in verse two - "You said to God, you are my God"?
- 3) Is the psalm a reference to the past (verse 2), the present (verse 5), or the future (verses 7, 11)?
- 4) In verse 8, what does it mean to place God in front of you?
- 5) Why is this psalm recited at funerals?

This Psalm plagued me. I wrote an entirely other essay, and then basically threw it away because I didn't feel I put my finger on it. I cannot honestly say I have done it yet, but maybe we can make a dent — or a mark.

Perhaps this Psalm is asking us to think about past, present, and future, with God in mind. Perhaps the meaning of the word 'mikhtam' is based on the word 'ketem' - a stain, but a stain or a mark on your heart that should never go away. Hirsch expresses it beautifully:

"The superscription 'mikhtam' seems to denote a psalm that David has recorded for himself as an everlasting memorial, a tenet to which he would adhere forever."

Hirsch refers to one moment in David's life, when he just barely escaped from peril, as That Moment which he would remember eternally and the one about which he writes now. Let us take that message of Hirsch and extend it for us as a reminder that events in our lives should stand as reminders, memorials of our commitment to God and our adherence to His law.

With whom is David conversing, encouraging, in the second verse? With himself. "Remember that time, that moment when you were eclipsed with Godliness." It was a time when, in a state of euphoric revelation, David trusted in God and realized the futility of life without God. Now he returns to those thoughts. Now, as perhaps he watches a friend being buried, when he is reminded of the ephemeral nature of things, and the futility of a life without God:

"I see the futility of those who pour libations of blood and worship others. I remember, and I will not deign to recall even their names" [as in verse 4].

But instead,

"The Lord, who I have accepted as my portion and my share, YOU hold my fate" [as in verse 5].

Certain times in our lives are possible turning points; often they are missed opportunities. David is going through such an experience and is not letting it slip away. We can learn from David, from this psalm, how to grab on to such moments. We must recall these moments and recognize that these past experiences can be actualized right now through rejecting the idols and ideals of a 'sophisticated,' yet Godless society.

The next step is to make a pledge for the immediate future.

"I WILL bless God who has counseled me righteously. I will bless Him despite my passions which sometimes disrupt/distract/diminish me at nights" [as in verse 7].

To stand up and state confidently, that even when I sin in the night, I will continue to rise in the morning, and bless God. It is not a double standard, but a struggle, a constant battle with myself, my desires, my inclinations. But if I look into my past, remember the spiritual moment that stained me forever, if I internalize it in the present, and hope for the future, I will succeed.

One of the most known aphorisms of classical Biblical literature appears in verse 8 of this psalm. "shiviti Ha-shem le-negdi tamid" - I have set the Lord in front of me always.

In light of the message of the psalm, this is the leitmotif of the entire psalm. The way in which David will accomplish his task is to set God in front of Him at all times. How different would we act if we knew that God was in front of us at all times - AT ALL TIMES? It is a powerful and scary thought. Yet, David is ready. He, more than any biblical hero, can teach us about falling and getting back on our feet, not fearing failure, but staying committed to the struggle.

I began with the beautiful words of Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch; let me conclude with him.

"There are those who labor under the delusion that God must be conceived of as Someone Who towers far above earthly affairs and Who thinks all things terrestrial to be far below Him. But as for me - says David - my conception of Him is very different. I have perceived His presence on the level of my own earthly existence; I no longer seek Him in the heights but I have set Him before my eyes in everything I do on earth. Nothing here below is so small or insignificant that God would be indifferent to it. Whatever I am, whatever I wish to accomplish, lies clearly before His eyes. I shall hold fast to this conviction 'tamid,' forever, and shall never again allow myself to succumb to even one moment of weakness."

Let us heed the words of David, and Hirsch's interpretation. We can live for the moment and despair about our inconsistencies, or we can rise and build on those historical moments when God was directly before us, internalize them for the present, and vow to always, without fail, bless God who has counseled us.