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TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm 17.  
A Tefilla of a(n Un)Repentant Psalmist

"A Tefilla of David."

Five times in all of Tehillim, the word 'tefilla' introduces a psalm. What is the definition of this word, and how is it affected in the framework of our analysis here?

What is prayer? Prayer, which generally is referred to as communion or spiritually connecting with God, actually means asking from God. The word in English comes from Latin precari meaning to entreat. (It also has indo-European roots in prek, to entreat.) We are quite used to the idea that the act of praying to God has to do with putting ourselves at the mercy of God, as we humbly implore Him for our needs.

Yet, while in English the word prayer connotes asking from God, the word in Hebrew - tefilla, from the root PLL - involves the act of judgement. When we come before God to ask Him for something, the first thing that happens is that we are judged. "You need health, wealth, happiness? Do you deserve it?" is the initial reaction. But since God is filled with mercy for His people, even after He sees that the person does not deserve the reward (or his life, for that matter), God nevertheless invokes His attribute of kindness and answers his needs.

In theory, prayer is a two step process. It should start out as a judgement (tefilla), with the individual analyzing whether he is worthy of reward or punishment, and only later should the judgement turn into an unabashed 'prayer' despite his unworthiness. Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov expected to be judged, as did Moshe, Yosef, and David. Somewhere along the line we chose to focus on the second step of the process, for fear of the repercussions a judgement would bring.

Hirsch raises the point that while the word 'tefilla' means judgement, the verb is 'le-hitpa'el,' which in grammatical Hebrew is reflexive, meaning 'to judge oneself.' Hirsch must have felt that during prayer, a person must acknowledge that his worthiness is being judged, and that if he is not worthy, he must work to attain that higher level of religious consciousness.

With this in mind, when David prays to God, we have to ask ourselves, is it a mercy-oriented prayer, or a justice-oriented tefilla? The opening sentence and the closing verse give us the answer, as they both contain the word 'tzedek' - justice. This is the technique of the inclusio, which attempts to instruct us to read the poem in the framework of the main inclusionary word. In Psalm 17, the inclusionary word is 'tzedek.'

David prays to God, and we would expect a plea for mercy, as we find in other psalms. Instead, we find an attempt at justification. We can explain this justification from two extremes, based on various medieval and modern commentators. On one extreme, the Malbim maintains that David expects his prayers to be answered, since he has a clean slate, with no sins. In the psalm, he claims to have been checked, investigated, and tested, and to have passed all of the tests, and therefore he expects his prayers to be answered.

Rashi, Radak, Meiri, Seforno, and others understand David to be offering a confession for his actions, specifically those related to his sin with Bat-Sheva. Rashi and Radak explain that David is asking to be judged, though not for this major sin. He is not asking to be judged for the sin with Bat-Sheva either because he suffered enough paying for his sin, or because his other accomplishments should balance it out. In the words of the Metzudat David, "do not perform the judgement that is deserving for my guilt, instead look at my positive deeds, and according to them, judge me." It is in light of the two opposite approaches of the commentators that we undergo our analysis of the psalm.

The psalm goes through three stages. The first focuses on the introductory lines of prayer for salvation due to David's sins being extinguished (or not existent). The second section, verses 6-12, describes the enemies of David and their evil. In the third part of the psalm, David asks for respite from his enemies, and he pleads to be satiated with seeing God's face with justice.

Let us begin by analyzing some difficult verses. For each verse we analyze, we will develop the differing perspectives according to the debate of the commentators.

"A Tefilla of David: Listen God justice, please pay attention to my prayer, hearken to my supplication (for it is) without deceitful lips." (17:1)

The initial remarks of the Psalmist already leave us wondering. Our first concern regards the literary terminology. In verse 1, the first three words that follow the introduction are missing a preposition. "Listen God ? justice" - it is the job of the exegete to insert the proper preposition to complete the

thought. Depending on your insertion here, a different outcome of the theme might emerge. Here are two possible examples:

- 1 Listen God **TO** my prayer, i.e. justice (judgement)
- 2 Listen God **WITH** judgement (to my prayer)

According to the first explanation, King David is praying (in a Hirschian way - le-hitpalel) and therefore asks God to adhere to the outcome of his self-judgement. In this scenario, Malbim sees David's attempt here at a complete exoneration from sin. It is almost as if David is not expecting a judgement because he has done no wrong.

Seforno understands the verse according to the second explanation. David knows that he has sinned, and therefore Seforno maintains that David is performing a confessional prayer. "Listen God justice - the confession that I will say, which is WITH justice and wholeheartedness."

A second question relates to the last fragment of the verse - "without deceitful lips." Which expression is this phrase modifying? Is it his supplication and quest for mercy that is without deceit? In that case, David is saying, 'God, please have mercy, and heed my prayer, for I sincerely require it, and I place myself in your mercy to receive it.' Or, is David remarking that in his act of justification he is speaking from the heart, without chicanery, even though it might seem that he is exhibiting self-adulation and conceit?

We emerge with two separate and almost contradictory approaches to the Psalm.

A. This is a prayer of a 'ba'al teshuva' - a repentant - who, having realized his sins, has accepted his punishments and turns to God with hope that he will find favor in His eyes and be protected from future pain. This approach to the psalm is proposed by Rashi and others.

B. There is no remorse at all. David is stating most emphatically that he has not sinned, and therefore does not deserve all the troubles that are coming his way. He speaks with justice on his tongue and as a result is praying with some expectation that his enemies will disappear. Malbim, in his commentary on the Tehillim, understands the Mizmor this way.

An additional line worthy of our inspection is in verses 2 and 3:

"From before you my judgement emerged, your eyes see the truth. You have tested my heart, remembered (checked) at night, scoured me not finding..." (17:2,3).

The words in the poem are quite difficult. We will see that, depending on your outlook, you can read these words in entirely different ways.

Malbim gains strength from the first words: "Milfanekha mishpati yetze" - from before you my judgement emerges. Malbim explains the line as follows: "Though others have tried to make me fall by implicating me wrongly, MY judgement comes before You alone, and You will acquit me of all wrongdoing. You tested (checked) my heart to see there was no sin, and at night you inspected me, making sure my thoughts were pure..."

On the other extreme, Radak (quoting his father) feels that the "night" is a reference to 'that fateful night' (of his adulterous affair with Bat-Sheva). Rashi also claims this, and states that David is confessing here that God checked him and did not find him innocent.

In fact, claims Rashi, David is referring to a point in his life when he exclaimed that God should test him, and that he would pass the test. In Psalm 26, David recalls the time he told God to "test me and probe into my life, scour my heart..." (There is no before and after in the Tehillim.) Psalm 26 begins, interestingly, with the words, "Judge me, for I have walked in innocence." Rashi's claim is that when writing Psalm 26, David was at an earlier stage - pre-Bat-Sheva - and he used the words BCHN - test, TZRPH - scour, and LV - my heart, to ask God to test him (26:2). Now, in Psalm 17, post-Bat-Sheva, David recalls how he asked God to test him, and he failed. Using the same words (BCHN, TZRPH, LV) in verse 3, he recalls his arrogance and recognizes his failure to pass the test.

Once again, in verse 4 of Psalm 17, we can read the final section of the verse in two ways. Malbim states that David has not sinned in action or thought: "I guarded from the ways of evil." Amos Chakham understands this to refer to David having sinned and gone astray. And so once again, David recalls his misdeeds in confession, nevertheless asking God for judgement based on other merits, or merits since.

At this point, Rashi departs and claims that David's teshuva - repentance - started after he realized that he sinned with Bat-Sheva. Since then, David has changed, grown, suffered, and felt free of any more guilt. Now, says Rashi, David begins again, with the hope that as a ba'al teshuva, his slate is cleared, his sins are expunged, and his new life is ahead of him. Thus, the last line of the psalm labels him 'worthy' or 'just' in his prayer to see the face of God.

Malbim, on the other hand, closes the psalm as he opened it, stating that David desires to witness the glory of God in the world to come, being satiated by the vision of eternal Godliness. Then, when my soul will emerge "I will be sated from the

eternal bliss, and from the fruits of the just actions I have done throughout my life, I will merit to see your face..." (Malbim on 17:15).

Psalm 17 is a complicated psalm with difficult words and ideas. We have skimmed the surface by proposing two almost contradictory themes in the mizmor. According to some commentators, David regrets nothing, raises his accolades, and his prayer is a tefilla, a judgement from God. Did Malbim understand this psalm to be written before Bat-Sheva, like Psalm 26? Did he not see a sin in his actions with Bat-Sheva and Uriah? I shall leave you with these questions.

Rashi, Radak, and others see this psalm as a confession. David comes to God in tefilla, but is really offering a prayer. Acknowledging his sins, recognizing his inability to pass all his tests, aware of the trials in his life, some of which he passed, others of which he failed, David is ready for judgement. His readiness to accept judgement does not imply innocence but an understanding of the true nature of a ba'al teshuva – as one who sins but is able to rise above his faults and surge to his creator.

Which one was it? Was David praying or reciting a tefilla? Perhaps, as we have done so many times in the class, we can say that there is a little bit of both. On certain days we feel like we have done no wrong. We even expect a little something from God. Our prayer is a tefilla, and as we judge ourselves we ask God to witness our worthiness. But more often than not, we are the ba'al teshuva, trying to find our way back to God, and if we are successful, we pray, and hope, that God accepts our prayer with justice in recognizing from whence we came, and to where we are going.