

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Jerusalem: A Piece Of Heaven, An Eternal Haven

Psalm 125

A song of ascents:

(1) Those who have faith in God, like Mount Zion, which never sways but remains forever.

(2) Jerusalem, her mountains surround her, so too God surrounds His people from now unto eternity.

(3) For God will not allow the rod of the wicked to affect the lot of the righteous; thus the righteous will not have to resort to violence.

(4) Do good, O God, to the good people, and to the straightforward in their hearts.

(5) But those who turn their crooked ways even further from the straight path, may the Lord bring them their retribution - peace be upon Israel.[i]

A year ago approaching Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem day) I wrote about Psalm 122 and the unifying force Jerusalem had on its people[ii]. The thrust of the psalm is that throughout history Jerusalem has been a place of unity for the Jewish people and a picture of peace.

I will quote the last two paragraphs of that class, which describe the nature of Jerusalem in that psalm:

"The final 'ma'ala' relates not to the joy of its being built, not to the function it holds on the specific levels, but to the essence of the city and what it ultimately stands for: "Sha'alu shelom Yerushalayim,

yishlayu ohavayikh." (Pray/ask for the peace of Jerusalem; [Jerusalem] pray for the peace of Your loved ones.) A reciprocal relationship of peace exists between Jerusalem and its people. The author poetically turns to Jerusalem to respond in kind to the peace offered by the Israelites as they return to their land throughout Israel.

The last two verses summarize the point of the psalm as a whole. The symmetry of

1) for the sake of my brothers and friends,

2) for the sake of the house of the Lord our God

reflects the intrinsic connection the House of the Lord has with the 'brothers and friends,' the nation of Israel, who serves God through that House. The two together, the 'beit Hashem' and the 'achai ve-rei'ai,' speak one word, a word of peace."

In a word then, the theme of last year's mizmor was one of peace among Israel, celebrated by Jerusalem as the centerpiece of that lofty goal.

This year we are celebrating Yom Yerushalayim, not entirely out of joy, but with a bit of sadness, not out of song "we traverse to the house of God," but with some pain and suffering. For instead of being the center for spirituality and brotherly love among Jews and their co-religionists, it has witnessed ugly terror, horrors of war, and many tears. For this reason, I chose to analyze a different psalm today, one that reflects on a different aspect of the holy city, and one that hopefully can emit a feeling of comfort even during the most trying times in Jerusalem.

(1) "Ha'botechim ba'Hashem, ke'har tzion lo yimot, le'olam yeshev."

The psalmist begins with the declaration: Those who have faith in God, like the mountain of Zion, will never falter, will eternally reside. As Jerusalem is guarded by her mountains, so too God surrounds and guards His nation-forever. There is a clear relationship between God's protection of Israel and the safeguarding presence of Jerusalem's mountains. What is this connection? How do we view Jerusalem in light

of this declaration by the psalmist? What does Jerusalem represent to us?

Jerusalem reflects our aspiration to find our home, to unite, to come together for 'aliya le-regel' on the pilgrimage festivals. Jerusalem is that place of serenity, spirituality and harmony:

Jerusalem built up, a city knit together, to which tribes would make pilgrimage, the tribes of the Lord, As was enjoined upon Israel - to praise the name of the Lord. (Psalm 122)

The city is a microcosm of the essence of Israel as a whole. It is the ultimate destination for the Jewish people, the land promised to our ancestors, bequeathed to us as a national treasure, provided we take care of it, provided we follow the word of God and do not reject it or Him.

Israel; a treasure, a trophy we merit for believing, for upholding the traditions of our past, for sacrificing, for uniting as one, and realizing our dreams.

But there is another Israel, there is another Jerusalem.

The Torah discusses the importance and significance of 'eretz canaan' - the land of Canaan, i.e. Israel - in many places in many contexts, yet one stands out through the depth of its message. In Parashat Eikev[ⁱⁱⁱ] Moshe encourages his people in his farewell speech before his death and their entrance into the land. As they stand on the Planes of Moav, on the cusp of the land of Israel, Moshe warns his people to walk in the ways of God.

In chapter eight of Deuteronomy, Moshe speaks of Israel as the reward for observing God's law:

And you shall follow the mitzvot of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to fear Him. For (as a result) the Lord your God will bring you to a land filled with rivers and springs, fountains

and depths springing forth from the valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates, a land of olive-trees and honey; a land wherein you shall eat bread without scarcity, you shall not lack anything in it, and land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you will dig brass; and you will eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God on the good land which He has given you. (Deut.8:6-11)

It is a rosy picture, one of great promise, one of plenty, of rewards to no ends, and one which states that the land will produce for them all that they desire. The vision of the land of Israel is heavenly in nature, ours for the taking provided we abide, we walk, we fear, love, have awe for, and respect God.

It is thus fitting that the next section discusses the warning of not following in the laws of God, of feeling smug with this wealth, arrogant with your plenty and forgetful of the source for your treasure. But as for chapter eight, it clearly describes the land of Israel as the heavenly reward for a life well led, a Shangri la for the Jewish people to reside.

This is not the case in chapter nine (or ten and eleven, for that matter).

Listen Israel, today you are about to cross the Jordan to conquer and inherit the land of the nations greater and stronger than you, cities enormous and fortified up to the heavens; a people big and tall, sons of giants whom you know (and who inspire fear in all around them); know that you will conquer them, but not because you deserve it! Remember, don't forget how you angered the Lord in the desert... (ibid 9:1-7)

We witness a barrage of rebuke from Moshe to his nation, reminding them of their faults, their inadequacies, big and small, throughout the years of their travels and travails in the desert. After a full chapter of history, rebuke, mussar, and inspiring fear in the people, Moshe returns to the same words we began with in chapter 8, verse 6:

"And you shall follow the mitzvot that I command you today (11:8)."

But then Moshe continues:

"In order that you should be strong, entering the land, inheriting it and conquering it. And in order that you should last on this land that God promised your ancestors to you and their seed. For this land is not like the land of Egypt but rather it is a land which the Lord your God watches over it and desires it always; a land where God's eyes are on it from the beginning of the year to its end (11:9-12)."

I would argue that this second description of the land of Israel relates to Jerusalem and Israel as a fortified land, a place of refuge for the nation.

At certain times in history, Israel's function for us will not only be one of a heaven but of a haven. It will not be the trophy but the sanctuary for our people, a place from where we can defend ourselves, a land where the buck stops, and we defend our borders, our citizens.

At this time the city of Jerusalem is not one which speaks of the fruit it produces, but of the fortification it provides. As opposed to Egypt, which is built on physical prowess with palaces and towers, Jerusalem has God to defend her from the beginning of the year to its end.[iv]

It is fitting for the section following these verses to discuss the rewards the children of Israel receive for following God's words. The Parsha concludes with a reminder of the great nations that are to be battled in the future. The Torah begins one last time with the words "if you shall observe the laws of God to walk in His ways, to cleave to Him..., then you will inherit the land of peoples stronger than you, greater than you, every place you tread your feet in this land will be your borders, from the desert in the south to the Lebanon in the north, from the Euphrates in the east to the great sea. NO man will stand up

to you, you will inspire fear and awe amongst the enemy, you will keep the land like the Lord has spoken to you(11:22-25)."

Israel is not only our treasure, it is also our refuge. It guards us and protects us from our enemies, God watches over us in our land, with a watchful eye, with a determined hand.

In this respect we return to the theme of Psalm 125, to the prayer and the declaration.

"ha'botechim ba'Hashem, ke'har tzion lo yimot, le'olam yeshev.-- Those who have faith in God, like the mountain of Zion will never falter, for eternity will reside."

Echoing the words of the Bible, those who have faith in God, observe His laws, in the land of Israel they will be protected, they will not falter. Built into the land of Israel is the hand of God. Jerusalem sits surrounded by mountains protecting it from her enemies; her inhabitants are worthy of the divine shelter. So long as they are in the land, worthy of the land, God will watch over them and the fear and awe of the Lord and His people will spread forth throughout the world.

This message carries special feelings in light of the difficult times we are experiencing in Israel and throughout the world. If it seems bleak, we should look back on history and realize that without Israel we were wanderers, fraught with troubles and no house of refuge, no place to call home. We are now living in the beginning of the redemptive era, a time when we have come back to our roots, when Jerusalem of old stands once again at the forefront of our consciousness, and indeed where like the Psalmist declares:

"Jerusalem, her mountains surround her, so too God surrounds His people from now unto eternity"

We are truly blessed.

There have always been enemies, the evil ones have always attempted to destroy us, but in the land of Israel, with Jerusalem as our capital as in the time of the great King David, we can surely see the conclusion of this prophetic psalm.

"For God will not allow the rod of the wicked to affect the lot of the righteous...

Do good, O God, to the good people, and to the straightforward in their hearts.

But those who turn their crooked ways even further from the straight path, may the Lord bring them their retribution-peace be upon Israel."

Endnotes:

[i] Translation based on Hirsch "The Psalms" Feldheim 1966, New York. Pps 382-383

[ii] see the entire lecture at "<http://www.tehillim.net/Psalm122.htm>

[iii] it would be a good time to look at a Chumash, chapters 8 through 11 of Devarim.

[iv] While no mention of the military aspect of the contrast exists, one cannot deny the imagery of God watching over His land, as well as the fact that this portion is split off from the previous section appearing only after the fear of conquering the nations and the impending attacks they will suffer in the land. For this reason I choose to see this aspect as God's protection of the people through the land.