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TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

By Rav Avi Baumol

Chanuka, O Chanuka, Body and Soul:  
The Insertion of Psalm 30 into Jewish Liturgy

Some Jewish traditions include the recitation of psalm 30 every day of the Chanuka festival. In fact, in his book "Netiv Bina," Professor Ya'akovson quotes Rabbi Avraham Berliner (Germany, 1833-1915, historian and liturgist) who discusses the late insertion of the psalm into the liturgy.

Berliner writes that only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century do we find this psalm entering the prayerbooks. In the Sephardic tradition it became standard to recite psalm 30 before 'Barukh She-amar' (at the beginning of the morning prayers) only on Chanuka. It is quite a strange place for the psalm to be inserted. After all, the pesukei de-zimra (songs of praise) include many psalms which praise God; why not insert the song of David there?

Berliner maintains that from the original tradition of reciting it on Chanuka, it spread to other siddurim - but without the introduction informing them to recite the prayer only during Chanuka! While Berliner attributes this to a faulty editing, perhaps there was another reason why this mizmor, which at first was regarded as a Chanuka mizmor, then merited being placed in the daily liturgy. Let us analyze this psalm and understand its important message.

- 1 A Psalm, a song at the dedication of the house of David,
- 2 I shall praise You O God for You drew me out,  
and You did not allow my enemies to rejoice over me.

3 God my Lord, I called out to You and You healed me.

4 God, You raised me from the deepest nadir, You sustained  
me from falling into a pit.

5 Let the devout of God sing to Him, and show appreciation  
for His holy name.

6 For His wrath is but a moment, his desire for life  
eternal; when at night a man lies down to weep, in the  
morning he shall rise in joy.

7 But I said in tranquility, I shall never falter.

8 God, You desired me to stand firm as a mountaintop, but  
when You hid Your face, I was overwhelmed.

9 To You my God, I call, to my Master I shall beseech.

10 What good is my death, when I fall into the depths -  
can the dust praise You and tell of Your truths?

11 Listen O God and be kind to me; God, be my helper.

12 You transformed my eulogy into a cheer, unloosened my  
clothing to adorn me with happiness.

13 So I shall praise Your honor and never be silent, God,  
my Lord, forever I shall thank You.

"A Psalm, a song at the dedication of the house of David"

Right from the outset we wonder at the meaning of the  
title, and how that meaning should have any connection to the  
rest of the psalm. David composes a song at the dedication of  
his house? What house? Shall we say the Holy Temple? Was it

not his son Solomon who built it and composed his own poetry at its dedication?

Perhaps, as Ibn Ezra writes, it refers to the construction of David's own house, his 'beit arazim,' the house he was allowed to build for himself. At that time, David was deathly ill, but recovered from his illness.

Ibn Ezra quotes "Rabbi Moshe" (his father?) to say that the psalm reflects his sadness and mourning at the news that he would be unable to build the house of God, but then he found joy upon hearing that his son Solomon would indeed build it.

Yet, could we accept that a song would be written in praise of him building his own house? Additionally, what is the reference to the sickness and the healing?

Radak writes that King David composed the psalm with the knowledge that his son's building the Temple would close a chapter of darkness in David's life at a time when he felt at the nadir of his spiritual career. David includes the message of health as a reference to his being redeemed from his sin, and the son who emerged from his union would be the true heir and the holy one to build the house of God.

The Midrash takes this idea a little further, stating that this represents a proof of the notion that thinking something is akin to doing it yourself, and that you get part of the credit. David wanted to build the Temple but was prohibited from doing so; nevertheless, he was rewarded with the title of his psalm referring to that great event.

Ultimately we must contend with the fact that the bulk of the psalm refers to the emotional roller coaster of David's life much more than to historical events. We must acknowledge that

the song is not about a house, nor about any physical building, but rather the emotions, feelings, and movements of his soul towards and away from God.

Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim (1809-1879, Russia, Germany, Biblical exegete) follows this approach in his commentary on the psalm. He states that the entire psalm describes David's reaching out to his soul, and thanking God for helping him recover from the sickness of his spirit, which he himself had inflicted. Permit me to quote from the word of Malbim:

"The entire Psalm is one of gratitude about his recovery, yet what is the connection to any dedication of a house? But let me explain that the house is a metaphor for our physical body which houses the soul of man, which resides in the inner recesses of our body. For is not the essence of a person, one's soul, and the corporeal flesh just a physical abode for it to reside all the while it is in the 'fortress?'

"The time of his sickness is reflected by a breakdown of the structure which houses his soul; and upon his recovery the foundations were poured once again and the soul could now rest assured forever."

Malbim sees the poetry as describing the anguish David felt when sin broke down his fortress of his soul. It began to be penetrable by forces of evil. Unable to protect it, David experienced his soul descending into the depths of she'ol. But then a transformation took place.

Perhaps chronologically we should start in verse 7, when he refers to his tranquil state, when haughtiness controlled even his spiritual status. At the time he knew no evil, and thought that no evil could enter his body or soul. Sin came too quickly

and threatened the very fabric of his existence; it pierced his soul and drove it into a state of shock (8).

As the manifestation of his sin turned towards his body, he began his feelings of despair, and repentance was in full force: "...if I can not praise You, what good am I...(10)". But at the nadir of his soul's existence, he began to emerge, perhaps stronger, with more faith, understanding the nature of man in this world - "...so that we may praise God and never be silent...(13)," never to feel smug in our Judaism or in our level of spirituality.

Those feelings, that emotional upswing, had a profound impact on David. He recognized that this phenomenon might exist in other people's lives, and he was set on illustrating it for others so that they could relate their personal experiences to it. We all house our souls in one form or another. Righteousness allows us to reward our souls and ourselves in this world, while sin is its antithesis. What is the balance between our physical bodies and our spiritual souls, how do they work together, how should we take care of our bodies to house this Godliness inside us?

Perhaps the answer is a rededication of the house - a chanukat ha-bayit. If only we took the time to refocus our energy, to re-channel our efforts when they wane. We must work on our body and soul as a unit, synthesize the two, and thus we will merit being able to house that part of God inside of us, to emerge as king David did, forever praising, never being silent.

What clearer way to drive home this point, other than the story of Chanuka? At a time in history when large segments of the population were focusing on their physical side, to the detriment of any spirituality, the Chanuka story emerged. When

persecutions of the cruelest kind would attack the godliness inside of us, through prohibiting circumcision, Torah study, service in the Temple, etc., a group of committed priests took action in order to return to their spiritual sides forever.

Chanuka is understood as a battle for the soul, rather than for the body. It is then quite appropriate that the psalm, which illustrates the struggle in King David's life, should be recited at this time. At a time in history when there was a surge to rededicate the physical house of God, we delve deeper, realizing that the true triumph was in the rededication of their metaphorical house guarding their soul.

Chanuka thus celebrates body and soul, working in tandem to live a life of Godliness and praise God eternally. In this light, the near eulogy of David, or of the Maccabees, transforms into a cheer, allowing us to sing, rejoice, and praise the name of God for eternity.

But is that all? Is this concept restricted to eight days out of the year? Certainly these messages transcend the precise historical occurrence, and therefore should become part and parcel of our daily thoughts. Perhaps here lies the secret of the strange insertion of the psalm into our pre-prayer slot.

Every morning, as we are about to begin cultivating our spiritual selves, we must remember what the struggle is about - how complacency can cause our metaphorical house to atrophy, and how sin can turn our fortress into rubble, leaving our souls susceptible to the dangerous elements we encounter every day of our lives.

We recite "Mizmor shir chanukat ha-bayit le-David;" we sing a song to the rededication of the house which contains my soul.

We accept upon ourselves a new attitude, a new mission, and a new song in our lives -

"Let the devout of God sing to Him, and show appreciation for His holy name."