

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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Psalm Monday - Psalm 48
The Next Step For a Jew in God's World

If Sunday was about a new beginning, (and a knowledge of an eternal ending as well), what of Monday? If the previous psalm encourages us to acknowledge God as our creator, sustainer, and father in heaven, where is our next step?

Where does our new week begin? The answer is simple. Israel. It is impossible for anyone to read the Bible, God's Word to His people, without simply realizing that He chose a land where His children of Israel would and should dwell. God tells this to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses throughout the Torah and the Children of Israel themselves time and time again.

Indeed many laws in the Torah begin with the prefatory statement 'ki tavo'u el ha-aretz asher ani noten lachem' (Exodus 12:25, Leviticus 14:34; 23:10; 25:2, etc.). Others while not beginning with the formulaic statement are known to only apply in the land of Israel.

One great Medieval Jewish leader even maintained that performing mitzvot outside the land of Israel was good practice but not the 'real thing.' In short we do not have to go far to realize God's intentions, He states it repeatedly, specifically, and consistently throughout the Torah.

Why then do I stress this point? It is obvious. We are living in Exile. Rav Menachem Liebttag always tells me that at some point those in 'galut' (exile) became the Jews of the

'Diaspora' which has a much more positive sounding title. For one reason or another we Jews have chosen to live outside of Israel, missing out on God's true intention for His nation. This is not a Zionist pitch it is simply a realistic outlook on the Jewish world today.

Perhaps then it is appropriate, as we experience yet another Yom Ha'atzmaut - Israeli independence day (while still the majority of Jews remain outside Israel), to draw our attention to the Monday psalm and its focus on Israel - specifically Jerusalem - as the epicenter of our religious expression.

1. A song. A psalm to the sons of Korach.
2. The Lord is great and much praised in the city of God His holy mountain.
3. Beautifully scenic, the joy of the whole land, Mount Zion, the summit of Tzaphon, city of the great king.
4. Through its citadels God has made himself known as its guardian.
5. Behold the kings have joined forces, advancing together (to Jerusalem)
6. But when they saw it they were stunned, terrified, they panicked.
7. They were seized with a trembling like a woman in the throes of labor.
8. With an easterly wind, the Tarshish fleet was destroyed.
9. That which we have heard, we have seen [with our own eyes] in the city of the Lord of Hosts, the city of our God; god will preserve it forever selah.
10. We picture your kindness, God, in your holy Temple
11. Your name, God, like your praise, reaches the ends of the earth, righteousness embodies your right hand.
12. Let those in Mount Zion rejoice, the daughters of Judah exult, because of Your judgments.

13. Circle Zion circle it, count its towers.
14. Incline your hearts to contemplate its structures,
go through its citadels so that you may recount it to
a future generation.
15. For this God, our eternal God, He will lead us
evermore.

The psalm can be 'roughly' split up into four sections. I say roughly because I am unsure about verse nine. Clearly one (an introduction) to four praise God not as God over the children of Israel, not as a personal savior, but in this regard the praise is for His unyielding connection and guardianship over the land of Israel - His holy Mountain, Jerusalem.

Five through eight describe an historical event, or perhaps a collage of historical events which consider what happens when an external force attempts to conquer Jerusalem and God is protecting it. Armies shudder, nations are repelled, kings are frightened, no one will penetrate its borders.

Verses ten through twelve change direction as the call is made to God directly. As if to say, "we have praised God, we have seen the historical glory of God and the miracles He has performed for His land, now we look to You God, and praise You, for Your unbending kindness. Know that Your righteousness is proclaimed throughout the land, the land itself rejoices."

The final section of the psalm is a call to the people - circle the land, look through its citadels, count its magnificent structures, so that you can recall this greatness to the next generations. Tell them that God's connection and protection of the land will never cease, He will guide us in it to eternity.

The verse in question is verse nine. Where does it belong? As opposed to the subsequent verses which call out to God, this verse makes an editorial comment. But as opposed to the previous verses which describe a miraculous event, this verse reverts to the beginning praises of God - "in the city of our God, God will preserve it..."

So where does verse nine belong? What is its significance?

I think verse nine lies the key to unlocking the beauty of the message in the Mizmor, and the timeless message for all Jews, especially for us in our day and age.

One might look at the Mizmor and consider it as a series of random statements about Israel and God. That is not the case. The psalm is a progression. There is a message inherent in it which confronts our understanding of God's providence over us throughout the ages.

In the beginning of the psalm the poet praises God for His greatness with regard to His holy city. God, as if to say, stations Himself in the palace over Jerusalem and protects it from harm. In this He is 'noda le'misgav' - known as its guardian. The point of departure is an objective description of God's control over His most precious earthly dwelling. In the land of Israel, upon the mountain of Zion, on the summit of 'tzafon,' and on top of that on the roof of the citadels, stands God, protector and guardian of this most cherished place.

[Permit me to digress into the definition of 'yarkatei tzafon.' Many scholars debate the location and the definition of these words. Radak simply maintains that Zion is in the Northern section of Jerusalem, though some wonder at this geographical conclusion. Hirsch argues and maintains that

yarkatayim can be translated as 'gateway,' meaning that Zion is an ideal we pursue as the gateway to our redemption – there God rests.

Amos Chacham in his commentary 'Daat Mikra' offers the theory later expanded by Nachum Sarna in his book 'Songs of the Heart' that the epithet 'tzafon' in ancient times did not refer to a geographic location, rather to a toponym, a place-name by which ancient kings would call the special abode of the highest god. (See Sarna page 156, and I acknowledge his translation of the Psalm of which I used partly.)

In this regard the description fits in perfectly with the image of God being in the highest, loftiest, tower on earth, yet grounded to Mount Zion, thereby creating a link between heaven and earth on one place on earth—Mount Zion. This reminds us of Jacob's words "this is not anything less than a house of God, which is at the gates of heaven" (Genesis 28:17).]

The first half of the psalm, until the end of verse eight, focuses exclusively on God and His protection of His land. The sections are devoted to statements of praise of God and historical proofs for this statement.

The tenor of the psalm changes with verse nine - it introduces US. We of course are the children of Israel and this land is Our Land promised to us by God Himself. But should we be included in the psalm? It depends on the nature of how we yearn for and ultimately actualize our dreams to return to Israel and inhabit God's holy city. Thus the second half of the psalm begins with verse nine, with an important change in the tense. "That which WE have heard, WE have seen, in God's city."

There is a personalization (subjectification?) that takes place in which the author includes OUR perspective on God's

presence. It is therefore natural that WE turn and speak to God, stating, "We imagined your kindness God," now WE must experience it on OUR own.

As a result of this realization in verses 9, 10, 11, it follows that verses 12-14 call on the Jewish people, those in the land of Israel around Mount Zion, and perhaps those not yet in the land of Israel, to rejoice in the land, encircle it, make sure it is ours, count our towers, lookout from its peaks. In other words, take the steps required for the world to see that the land belongs to us and we have returned to it.

The final verse sums up the entire process. "For this God" - who was the objective guardian of the land and its holy mountain-"He is our God for eternity" - He will show His love and protection for His people as they join Him on this land, for eternity, "He will guide us and protect us from danger" - for Israel and Jerusalem is the only security for the Jew.

I write this at a time of danger and peril in the land of Israel. Not a day goes by that I do not pray for the safety of my friends, my brethren in my homeland. I know now (and hence the forethought of our Sages who proscribed this) that every Monday I can be reminded of my special link to Eretz Yisrael, and the great responsibility that goes with it. That it is my duty to acknowledge God as the objective guardian for the land He promised Abraham our forefather, but at the same time I must recognize OUR individual responsibility to go to Israel, live there, and 'encircle Zion, look out from its peaks, and be able to tell of its greatness for many generations.

I know too, that in light of this psalm and many other references to Mount Zion, a thought, even the notion that we as Jews may compromise on OUR Temple Mount is unconscionable. Precisely because it is a time when there are those who claim the Temple Mount has no significance for Jews, we must rally

and stand firm on the fundamental, theological, historical and political right of the Temple Mount, Jerusalem and all of the land of Israel. We must declare and recount to 'the final generation' that the land belongs to the Jewish people and their guardian who lurks from the citadels, and the palaces, He will protect its inhabitants for eternity.