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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

by Rabbi Avi Baumol

MIZMOR 95

"Lekhu Neranena"

Dichotomic Beginnings...

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Let us recap what we have done so far. We drew a diagram of the structure of the six psalms, which comprise the Kabbalat Shabbat. As you recall, it took the shape of a diamond, commencing with "Lekhu neranena," and then splitting into two distinct sections.

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A. The universal aspect - focuses on humankind, as well as nature, preparing a song of praise to God, and then singing it. In this regard, the Jewish nation stands together with the rest of humanity, and ultimately all of creation, in uniting and recognizing God. Psalms 96 and 97 encompass this position.

B. The national aspect - shifts the attitude of the psalm to the children of Israel, as it discusses the relationship between God and His chosen people. This covenant requires a higher standard for His people - the observance of all the mitzvot, but at the same time grants them the ability to attain Godly holiness. This relationship is reflected through the medium of prayer and praise, as found in the specific psalms. Psalms 97 and 98 comprise this national gesture.

What about psalm 95, the introductory prayer? Into which category does it fit? Is it a universal prayer or a particularistic petition, or perhaps both?

Before addressing this issue, we should focus our attention on much more difficult concepts in the psalm. Let us attempt to analyze the song as a unit.

The concepts of praising God and dancing in His honor, in the first verse, are in line with the universalistic nature of the subsequent psalms. However, a stronger parallel exists. The literary motifs in the first half of the psalm point to a connection to psalms 96 and 97. For example:

(1) The language in verse 3, finds its counterpart in Psalm 96:4 -

"For the Lord is a great God, the great king of all divine beings." (95:3)

"For the Lord is great and much acclaimed, he is held in awe by all divine beings."  
(96:4)

(2) An additional connection is found concerning the reference to mountains -

"In His hands are the depths of the earth; the peaks of the mountains are His." (95:4)

"The earth is convulsed at the sight (of God's lightning), mountains melt like wax at the Lord's presence." (97:4,5)

(3) Finally, the sea plays a role in praising God in 95 and 96:

"His is the sea, He made it, and the land which is His He fashioned." (95:5)

"Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult; let the sea and all within it thunder..."  
(96:11)

These examples provide the backdrop for an implicit connection to the universal element in recognizing and praising God, and act as a proper introduction for the psalms entitled "universal recognition of God's coronation."

Midway through the psalm, though, the tone changes, in fact, the entire theme shifts. No longer is it a praise of God, but God's rebuke of His children during their travels in the desert. We like the melodious tone in the last lines of the first psalm, yet, when translating them, who would want to sing it? "Forty years I was provoked by that generation (the

children of Israel who left Egypt for Israel); I thought, 'They are a senseless people, they would not know my ways.' Concerning them I swore in anger, 'They shall never come to my resting place (the Land of Israel)!' How depressing!

Surely, we would not expect to find this last paragraph in the upbeat psalms about acknowledging and praising God's revelation. A fortiori with regard to inserting this as the introduction to the Shabbat, where we sing praise and bow down to God for His bestowing upon us the holy Shabbat!

We might answer this last question based on understanding the first issue. To which side of our equation does psalm 95 belong. In a word, both.

Indeed, Psalm 95, the introduction to the unit of psalms on God's coronation, addresses and presents us with a taste of both elements of Shabbat. On the one hand, we sing and dance and praise, together with the entire universe, acknowledging God's reign. This aspect abruptly stops, though, in the middle of the seventh verse. Just as we get comfortable with the idea that Shabbat equals praising and singing to God alone, the author reminds us otherwise.

"For He is our God,  
and we are the people He tends, the flock in His care,  
O, if you would but heed to His call (ha-yom im be-kolo tishma'u)."

What is the reason for the sudden turn to His nation, and flock? Where do the words "ha-yom im be-kolo" fit in, and where do they come from?

There are two ways to approach this line, or specifically, to define the word "am" in this sentence.

1. Either this is a continuation of the previous verses, and the nation of God is really the entire world - the flock in His care, as it were.
2. Or we could restrict this to the specific nation of God - the Jewish people.

In either case, the last line of the verse refers explicitly to an historical event for which only the children of Israel understand: "Ha-yom im be-kolo tishma'u." To which 'day' might this allude?

The first time we notice the children of Israel being called a nation is during the exodus. God shows them His wonders, smites the Egyptians, and leads the nation of Israel into the desert. At this point, they are on a free ride, following Moses, their leader, who speaks of the God of their forefathers.

At Yam Suf, they express ambivalent attitudes towards how to deal with a calamity, which is about to befall them. First they pray to God, then they scream to Moses to save them. Moses replies, fear not, "The Lord will battle for you; you hold your peace!" (Exodus, 14:14).

The miraculous crossing of the sea inspires the nation to sing a song of praise to God, as an air of euphoria permeates throughout the camp. But it is the incident that transpires precisely after Kriyat Yam Suf, the test at Mara, which is important for us.

"Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Mara, but they could not drink the water of Mara because it was bitter... And the people grumbled against Moses saying, 'What shall we drink?' So he cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet.

"There He made for them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test. He said, 'If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any diseases... for I am the Lord your healer.'

"And they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there beside the water."

Several questions arise in attempting to understand this passage. First, why now was it time for a lecture on the relationship between God and his nation? Second, what is the meaning of the story of Elim, where nothing eventful occurred there?

I believe this story is a pivotal one which sets the stage in the life of Israel, as they set out on their journey to the Promised Land.

After the crossing of the Red Sea, there were two agendas left for this new nation of Israel - receiving the Torah, and settling in Israel. After the miraculous salvation from Pharaoh and his nation, the journey to their destinations and their destiny was about to begin.

Before they set out, however, God chose to test His nation, bringing them to a town without water. The people cried out for water, and God in turn brought forth water from a rock.

At this point, the children of Israel are told that the days of being innocent bystanders are over. The relationship between themselves and God depends not on their status, but on their actions. "Im shamo'a tishme'u be-kol Hashem Elokekha...". If you will follow His commandments, observe His ways, Listen to His words, and keep His laws, then the relationship will be reciprocal, and you will be rewarded. If not, if you expect only to receive and think that a song or a praise will suffice, you are dead wrong.

If the nation of Israel, at the onset of their journey learn this valuable lesson, they merit the Law, the Land, and the Holiness, which is imparted in both of them. If they do not keep up their end of the bargain, "Forty years I was provoked by that generation...".

The historical message is clear for us as it was for King David who composed it. While there is certainly place for singing, praising, and dancing before GOD, it does not preclude the day to day observance of His Laws. Similarly on Shabbat; while the nature of the day is to reflect on God, to praise His glory for revealing Himself to the world, it does not preclude the commandments, prohibitions, and fulfillments on the day.

The psalmist has a specific lesson to teach, and therefore, he veers from his typical lofty ending to a biting one which aims at the heart of every Jew preparing themselves for the entering of Shabbat. It is a day of spirituality, where the entire universe partakes in praising and recognizing God; it is also a day of kedusha, where through the observance of the laws of the day, the nation of Israel sanctify themselves, preparing for another week.