

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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MIZMOR 3: A Response to Suffering

David, in this third psalm, confronts a subject which has plagued man from time immemorial - suffering. "O Lord, how great are my troubles" (3:2). This penetrating line is the focus of his song.

We suffer. Throughout our lives, either for reasons we create, or for reasons unbeknownst to us, we experience tragedies, feel pain and suffer. Why? This Jobian question disturbs us throughout our period of distress, and continues to torment us when that pain is translated into loss. The prophet Jeremiah is famous for his 'why;' 'eikha,' he proclaims, an expression which sets the mood and acts as the mila mancha (leading themeword) on the saddest day in our history. [Tish'a Be'av - which commemorates the destruction of the first and second holy temples.]

Yet, while Jeremiah exclaimed 'eikha,' it is the response, or lack of response from God, which sets him apart from Job. Job suffered. His friends came to comfort him offering their justification for his situation. Ultimately he responds and searches for an answer, one he will accept only from the Almighty. In the end, it is God Himself who responds to Job's call.

Jeremiah, in contrast, receives word from God that He will not accept prayer any longer. The prophet remarks that "You have clouded the heavens from allowing my prayers to pass through" (Lamentations 3:44) ... "Even when I cry and call for help, He stops my prayer" (3:8). While Job's suffering was more graphic and heart wrenching, it did not involve Jeremiah's tragic sense that God no longer listens to man's prayer, even to inform man of his iniquities.

Living in a time void of the prophetic call, our rabbis of the Talmud constructed approaches in response to affliction.

"Ha-ro'eh yesurin she-ba'in alav, yefashpesh be-ma'asav" -
"If one sees adversity coming his way, he should inquire into his past deeds (perhaps he has sinned) T.B Berakhot.

The rabbis offer an insight into human nature, something to help us begin to understand our predicament. Begin I say, because it would be presumptuous for us to assume that we know exactly what caused our current suffering. Which sin was it?

Which punishment suits which sin? Should we subscribe to a "measure for a measure" approach in our reckoning, or is it impossible to ascribe reason for any specific tragedy?

All of these questions, as stated, are unanswerable without the guidance of the word of God or His prophet. This perhaps is the greatest tragedy; the notion that we can only guess about the reason for our predicament sends a chill down our spines. However, questions such as what to do, how to act, how to walk in the way of God—these questions, despite the lack of prophecy, can be answered in our day and age.

The Mishna in the second chapter of Avot states, "Rebbe said, ... look at three things and you will never come to sin. Know what is above you: an eye which sees, an ear which listens, and all your actions are written in the book" (2:1).

While the literal sense of the line refers to one's realization that God is watching and writing down all of one's actions, my grandfather, Rabbi Joseph Baumol, saw the statement differently. At one time we were on the level where we could actually see God. "And the Lord appeared to him [Abraham] in Elone Mamreh ..." (Genesis 18:1); "And all the people saw the thundering, lightning, and the sound of the Shofar ..." (Exodus 20:15), "And they saw the God of Israel ..." (24:10), "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like Moshe, when the Lord knew face to face ..." (Deuteronomy, 34:10).

The era of the early prophets represented a lower level of connection to God, namely hearing. "Hear O heavens and give ear O earth, for the Lord has spoken (Isaiah 1:2); "And the Lord said to me, herewith I put My words into your mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9). The phrase "thus says the Lord" uttered by the prophet appears countless times throughout the books of prophecy. This, the notion of hearing rather than seeing, epitomizes the second era in our history.

As I mentioned earlier, a time came when even the word of God was not heard, and man was no longer told what to do and where to go. At that stage, which is the stage which exists still today, all we have is the written word of God—"and all your actions are written in the book". The Torah is our guide, teaching us how to live our lives, yet when we disregard the Torah, we have no one to help us see our predicament. For this we pray every day and every week "return us O God, to you and we will come back, renew our days like old" (Lamentations 5:21).

Ironically, the reason the word of God ceased to be handed down from the prophets is that the people rejected it. The harsh words of the prophet upset the populace to the point where they rejected him along with God. God in turn denied His people the treasure of His guidance, sending us forth into a dark and unknown existence.

It is that idea which occupies our mourning on the ninth of Av. Eikha - where were You? How could You let this happen? This was a thought found in the minds of those during the destruction of the temples, and found as well on the lips of those in concentration camps during our most recent Holocaust. It is not only the tragedy which stings; the lack of knowledge about one's destiny, the 'cloudiness' of God's word, hurts us more.

That uncertainty did not exist in King David's time. He knew what was expected of him, heard the words of the prophet or priest, and directed his conduct accordingly.

One of the most salient features that we see in the personality of David illustrated by the stories of David and Saul, and in the subsequent accounts of David as king, is the constancy with which he calls out to God and with which God responds. "And David kept growing stronger, and the Lord, God of Hosts, was with him" (2 Samuel 5:10). A comforting feeling enveloped David with the realization that 'God is by my side', and as a result he grew from strength to strength.

Yet, while this special relationship serves as a guiding light for David when he follows the command of God, in time of his sin, the punishment is swift and unsparing.

After sinning with Bat-Sheva and Uriah, Natan the prophet comes to the king with a message from God: "you have sinned, here is your punishment." See chapter eleven in Samuel 2, which describes the sins. The subsequent eight chapters depict the downfall of David. Of his children, some are killed, one is raped, and one sleeps with his wives - all in the meting out of the punishment which Natan predicted. One cannot help but sympathize with the king; after all he is the great King David, how can everything come tumbling down so quickly? The answer is that with the privilege of 'God at your side', there is the corresponding responsibility of utmost observance and little room for error.

When one knows what is expected of him and nevertheless disregards it by sinning, it is difficult to speak to God in that predicament. David knew this, but taught us the message of the verse in the Torah:

"But if you search there for the Lord your God, you will find Him, if only you seek Him with all you heart and soul. When you are in distress, and all these things have befallen you, in the end you will return to the Lord your God. For the Lord your God is a compassionate God, He will not fail you nor let you go ..." (Deuteronomy 4:29-31).

What sets David apart from the others is his instinctive, though thought out, response to Natan's rebuke - "I have sinned before God" (2 Samuel 12:13). The greatness of David, and the central message that we should all take away with us when we read this passage, concerns David's ability (and ours

as well) to recognize his sin, accept his punishment, and immediately set himself on a course for teshuva - repentance.

Looking in a Hebrew Tanakh in chapter 12, verse 13 in 2 Samuel, we notice a space interrupting this sentence, after the words "I have sinned before God." The Vilna Gaon writes about this seeming 'delay' in the story - "Here David cried." This "crying" epitomizes David's personality and accounts for his greatness.

With this introduction to David's sinning, suffering, and searching for God from his distress, we can now begin psalm 3 which presents this motif in Tehillim. Before we analyze the psalm, however, let me give some background information. Immediately following the David-Batsheva story we read of David's son, Amnon, raping David's daughter Tamar who is from another wife. Tamar's brother Avshalom comforts Tamar, but vows revenge on Amnon, and ultimately kills him. With the murder of the king's son, Avshalom is exiled. After some convincing David receives his son in return but is reluctant to embrace him. While in the king's house, Avshalom gains popularity (due to political attractiveness) and ultimately assumes the throne, overthrowing his father and forcing him to flee. It is this fleeing to which David refers.

1. Distress

"A psalm of David when he fled from his son Avshalom.
O Lord my troubles are so many
Many are those who attack me; many say of me
"There is no deliverance for him through God." Selah

2. Faith

But you O Lord are a shield about me,
My glory, He who holds my head high...
I cry aloud to the Lord and He answers me...
I have no fears of the myriad of forces
arrayed against me on every side.

3. Request

Rise O Lord, deliver me, O, my God
For You slap all my enemies in the face;
You break the teeth of the wicked.
Deliverance is the Lord's;
Your blessing be upon Your people."

Two words act as the 'milot manchot' - the leading themewords, which appear most often in the psalm, 'Rav' - many, describes his enemies and suffering'; 'yeshua' - salvation, refers to the faith David has in God's salvation, and the prayer for His intervention now. The structure utilized in the Psalm is very natural. It begins with a description of what is most affecting David in his life. The onslaught of his enemies, his suffering, and his fear of the future are the thoughts that are at the forefront of his mind and his poem.

It is not only that his kingdom is being overthrown, that his daughter was raped and he was silent in reacting; add to that the fact that his beloved son Avshalom was the mastermind behind it all! These are the multiple troubles which constitute the main part of the psalm.

The second feeling David invokes here is crucial, possibly the most important component in a methodology of relating to God in time of need. " But You O Lord are a shield about me." Amidst the suffering, before the regret, before the prayer for salvation, a calm, confident expression of faith in God is expressed. It is God who will save David, despite his sins! God raises up David's head when all others attempt to lower it. One must honestly and truly acknowledge this step before attempting the next step of asking for salvation from God.

Notice how the extra word of "and you - ve-ata" is inserted in the second section. The emphasis here is on God as his only protector, his saving grace. How can David, who is well aware that what he sees transpiring before him is a punishment for his sins, confidently call out to God as his savior? This is the true message of repentance that is hidden between the lines of the psalm.

The final stage emphasizes the extent to which David is sure of his method in restructuring his relationship with God. After the first and second stage of honest trust in God, in the third stage, the request comes forth in full force.

" Rise O Lord, deliver me, O, my God". David asks God to rise and stand up against his enemies. Passivity is unacceptable here. It is interesting to note that each line in the psalm fluctuates between second and third person. The beginning of each section has David turning directly to God and calling out to Him, culminating with the final section when the call is not just "O God," but "Rise O God!"

In summation, this psalm presents David's three-pronged response towards personal suffering. The human side depicts first the anguish and the pain. The spiritual side acknowledges complete faith in God who saved in the past and will bring salvation in the future. Finally, this human endowed with spirituality strongly entreats God to rise up against his enemies and to smite them.

This same David who sinned in the dark night, now rises on his road to repentance to again find the light of God, letting it shine radiantly upon him. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.