

The Soul's Refuge

Meditations on the Psalms



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THE SOUL'S REFUGE

EDITED BY
Shaina Trapedo

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The Soul's Refuge
Meditations on the Psalms

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Prologue

Hashem created us, gave us breath and a soul,
and intellect and insight and emotions.

Hashem gave us the ability to feel love and joy, and fear and pain.

We are blessed with the blueprint of the Torah, showing how to live.
Along the way, most of us find suffering crosses our path.

But we have a toolbox of treasures available,
helping us navigate during these dark chapters.
One of the most accessible and timeless tools is the book of *Tehillim*,
the Book of Psalms.

I am in the pit as I write this. But I know,

אֱלֹהִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ בְּלִתְמוּט יַעֲזֹרָהּ אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֹת בְּקָרָה.

G-d is within her, she will never fall;
G-d will help her at the break of day. (Ps. 46:6)

And so,
I keep walking forward ...
I limp toward the light of that promised day.

May we all, all of *Am Yisrael*, merit the *yeshuos* and *geula* that await us.

חֹזֵק חֹזֵק וְנִתְחַשֵּׁק

Rachel Goldberg-Polin,
mother of Hersh ben Perel Chana v'Yonatan Shimshon (z"l)
Day 523
March 12, 2025
Jerusalem

Preface

Erica Brown and Shaina Trapedo

“Vulnerability,” writes the contemporary philosopher Todd May, “is our natural state.”¹ In recent years, the fragility and preciousness of life has become increasingly apparent, especially for the Jewish people. If vulnerability is quintessential to the human condition, then the book of Psalms sets our vulnerability to music.

The essays in this anthology began as a collection of Yeshiva University faculty and alumni offering their meditations on *Tehillim* and were completed and edited long before the tragedies of October 7 in Israel. Little did we realize at the beginning of this project just how prescient so many of these reflections on the psalms would become as descriptions of existential pain and sources of enduring spiritual comfort.

We called this anthology *The Soul's Refuge* as the call for *maḥaseh* – physical and figurative shelter – is a recurring motif. During Israel's most recent war, the recitation of the timeless verses of *Tehillim* became a true

1. Todd May, *A Fragile Life: Accepting Our Vulnerability* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 160.

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refuge and spiritual anchor. In our homes, schools, and congregations, we recited all of its 150 *mizmorim*. We repeated Psalm 121 at rallies and in quiet hours as if it was scored on our very hearts. “Where will my help come from?” (Ps. 121:1), we asked in desperation. With characteristic Jewish faith we answered: “My help comes from the Lord” (Ps. 121:2). We affirmed our belief in our nation; our commitment to triumph is unwavering. “Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour your hearts before Him; God is our refuge” (Ps. 62: 9).

For Israeli poet and literary critic Bacol Serlui, the book of Psalms “has no equal in literature.”² She, too, turned to “the phenomenon called ‘*Tehillim*’” during the war, and echoes the vulnerabilities of the ancient Israelite poets when she writes, “I am afraid and worried about my people, my dear ones. I struggle with every breath. I feel as if my soul is in a state of vertigo – for a moment hopeful, for a moment sorrowful; a moment of trust, a moment of anxiety.”³

We, too, feel this vertigo.

We dedicate this book to the soldiers who “walk[ed] through the valley of the shadow of death” and “fear[ed] no evil” (Ps. 23:4), to those who died in service, and all held in captivity, who may or may not have known David’s plaintive call or Asaph’s lyricism but prayed nonetheless for their own rescue and that of others.

May we “sing of the Lord’s loyalty forever” (Ps. 89:2) and recite the words of the psalmist as we repair and rebuild, “when the Lord rebuilds Zion” (Ps. 102:17). Let us take inspiration from the words of the prophet Amos:

They will build ruined cities and settle.
They will plant vineyards and drink their wine.
They will grow gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them on their land,
and they never again will be uprooted from the land which I gave
to them. (Amos 9:14–15)

Erica Brown and Shaina Trapedo

2. Bacol Serlui, “Psalms for a State of Vertigo,” *Tradition* 56:1 (2024), 3.

3. *Ibid.*, 4.

Acknowledgments

The volume you hold in your hands began as a Google spreadsheet circulated among the Yeshiva University community during the pandemic in 2021 by Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern, at the suggestion of our then-colleague Dr. Chaya Sima Koenigsberg. The goal was to gather short reflections on all 150 Psalms by faculty and students, from undergrads to alumni, in meaningful collaboration in spite of imposed distance. And while this project has undergone many iterations since then, I stand by my claim that many good things at YU can be traced back to Stu, and to the rest of my colleagues at the Zahava and Moshael J. Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought, especially its director, Rabbi Dr. Meir Y. Soloveichik, for whose wisdom and leadership I am gratefully indebted.

The spreadsheet was passed along to me almost a year after it was posted, with several compelling essays, including many from my own dear students. While we had not received enough submissions to constitute a book, in partnership with Erica Brown, Shira Weiss, and the Sacks-Herenstein Center, we developed “YU Reads Tehillim,” an online collection of soulful expressions by students and faculty that I invite you to visit at yu.edu/tehillim-project.

Deriving inspiration from the creative process of the psalmist, I still

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hoped to orchestrate a *shir hadash*, a “new song,” with a chorus of diverse voices – each writer bringing their own unique motifs and perspectives to the timeless score of *Tehillim*. Over time, and with Erica’s indispensable encouragement, the original melody transformed into something robust and resonant, providing historical context, cultural reception, homiletics, exegesis, literary analysis, and personal meditation on the Psalms. Together, these meditations showcase the innumerable ways *Tehillim* engages us and articulates the range of human experience. I am so grateful to each of the contributors for their valuable insights and remarkable patience, and for approaching this project “glowing like a champion about to run his course” (Ps. 19:6). I hope I justly represent them in expressing thanks for the collective support of the parents, partners, children, and friends who have made this work possible.

The text and translation of the Psalms that appear throughout this book are taken from The Magerman Edition of the Koren *Tehillim*. My sincerest thanks to publisher Matthew Miller and Maggid’s dedicated team, including Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, David Silverstein, Ita Olesker, Nechama Unterman, Tomi Mager, Tani Bayer and Esther Shafier, whose professionalism and generosity of time and spirit shepherded this book to you.

Above all, to our souls’ Refuge:

I thank You with all my heart ...
for Your loyalty and truth,
for You have exalted Your name
and Your word above all. (Ps. 138:1–2)

Shaina Trapedo
July 2025 / Tamuz 5785

Introduction

Shira Weiss

T*ehillim*, the biblical book of Psalms, is a collection of diverse poetic compositions containing words of prayer.¹ Its 150 chapters reflect a variety of styles and cannot be easily classified into exclusive categories. Rather, many of the *mizmorim* (psalms) include more than one type: complaints, praise, thanksgiving, ethical rebuke, etc. For instance, psalms of thanksgiving often recall the distress from which one has been saved or supplicate for similar future salvation. There is also variation within each category; some are prayers of the individual, while others reflect the collective community. They are written from different points of view, many from multiple perspectives within the same psalm. Though perhaps intended to be recited on particular occasions, as, for example, some refer to the ill while others allude to times of war, all psalms are

1. Adapted from the author's chapter on *Tehillim* included in *Mitokh ha-Ohel: From Within the Tent, The Festival Prayers*, ed. D. Feldman, S. Halpern (Maggid, 2017).

formulated in general terms, allowing for broad access by different people to recite whenever they feel that such prayers are needed.

As a case in point, Psalm 27, recited in prayer during a period of introspection in preparation for the High Holy Days, has general appeal as it expresses humans' struggle in their relationship with God. The psalm encompasses multiple forms including praise, thanksgiving, and complaint, while describing the oscillation between faith and doubt as a result of the dialectical awareness of God's presence and elusiveness. This duality of humanity's status before God can be understood through the progression of the chapter. The first half (vv. 1–6) evokes feelings of closeness with and trust in God, unmediated by any doubt. "The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom need I fear?" (v. 1). Confidence in God's protection and in the future defeat of enemies is conveyed in the present tense. "For He will keep me safe in His shelter in times of terror.... Now my head is high above the enemies around me" (vv. 5–6). Certain of victory, the psalmist concludes the first half of the psalm with thanksgiving sacrifices, song, and praise for God's salvation: "I will sacrifice in His tent with shouts of joy; I will sing and chant praises to the Lord" (v. 6). As an expression of his conviction, he speaks about God in the third person and has no urgent need to appeal to God directly.

However, in the second half of the psalm (vv. 7–13), the human relationship with God shifts as the psalmist distressfully calls to God: "Hear, O Lord, my voice as I cry out; be gracious to me and answer me" (v. 7). Lacking the sense of security depicted earlier, the psalmist pleads with God in the second person, "Do not hide Your face from me. Do not turn Your servant away in anger... Do not reject or forsake me... do not abandon me to the will of my foes" (vv. 9, 12). The latter verses, conveying a fear of God's anger, remoteness, and abandonment, are juxtaposed to the former, which express faith in God's compassion, care, and salvation, as the psalmist's immanent victory is no longer assured.

The final verse of the psalm serves as a conclusion to the entire text. The psalmist does not speak about himself in first person anymore but appeals to the reader/listener to place hope in God in both confident and distressful times, as alluded to in the repetitious language: "Hope in the Lord; be strong and brave of heart, and hope in the Lord" (v. 14). Rashi interprets the unique meaning of each of the repeated phrases:

“Hope in the Lord’: hope to God, and if your prayers are not fulfilled, return and hope again.”² Robert Alter comments, “This last exhortation – whether of the speaker to himself or to an individual member of his audience – is an apt summary of the psychology that informs this psalm. It begins by affirming trust in God and reiterates that hopeful confidence, but the trust has to be asserted against the terrors of being overwhelmed by implacable enemies,” whatever those enemies may be.³ Human relationships with God often vacillate between overwhelming faith when God’s presence is felt and inevitable doubt when harsh realities cause feelings of abandonment by God. In such a complex relationship, one struggles to maintain an abiding faith in God in spite, at times, of God’s seemingly being hidden by crises, enemies, or human inclinations. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “Faith does not mean certainty. It means the courage to live with uncertainty. It does not mean having the answers, it means having the courage to ask the questions and not let go of God, as He does not let go of us.”⁴

Perhaps the psalmist is trying to convey that doubt, though inevitable in religious experience, plays an important role within religious consciousness. Such uncertainty does not need to be intentionally avoided but can be sublimated in a constructive manner to strengthen faith. “[The] best kind of religious faith is dynamically involved with doubt; faith needs a kind of healthy skepticism to be genuine. An absolutely certain faith is a dead faith, a static faith, unable to move forward or improve itself. For it is by means of doubts and questions, honestly faced, that the believer moves to a more mature, stronger position of faith.”⁵ A mature faith develops out of doubt, which is a significant step in religious growth. Doubt is not an “impediment” to true faith, but rather a “goad” that stimulates us to deepen our faith.⁶

In his discussion of the stages of faith development, James Fowler

2. Rashi’s commentary on Psalms 27:14.
3. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (w w Norton & Co., 2007), 94.
4. Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (Schocken, 2007), 197.
5. Stephen T. Davis, *Faith, Skepticism and Evidence* (Associated Universities Presses, Inc., 1978), 196.
6. Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (KTAV, 1972), 16.

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describes how doubt motivates individuals to introspect and enhances self-understanding that brings them closer to God. It is valuable to appreciate the complexity of truth, both in striving to connect to God and in realizing the limits of human comprehension.⁷

Doubt threatens life with meaninglessness. Faith does not remove this threat, but it does give us the courage to take upon ourselves the burden of doubt and to rejoice in the loss of the certainties to which we had clung with idolatrous tenacity. It delivers us from the folly of pretending that faith gives us knowledge and virtue that transcend the relativities to which human wisdom and goodness are subject.... Faith grants us the humility of men who do not and cannot know for certain, who never possess God, but forever need Him.⁸

Through the progression of Psalm 27, the psalmist relinquishes humanity's false sense of security and humbly acknowledges his doubt and his dependence on God. Faith is not a claim of certitude, but rather the willingness to commit oneself without certainty.

Life's continuous quest for meaning will often lead to doubt. However, since the religious individual fears to doubt yet doubts in fear, the psalmist gives permission to such inevitability, and alludes to the benefit of confronting such confusion. The juxtaposition of the two halves of the psalm reflects the religious tension felt by even the confidently faithful who, at times, experience uncertainty. The psalmist concludes, "Hope in the Lord; be strong and brave of heart, and hope in the Lord" (v. 14), teaching that doubts do not need to threaten faith, but can motivate a

7. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (Harper and Row, 1995), 174–198.

8. M. Homes Hartshorne, "Faith Without Doubt Is Dead," *Theology Today* 13 (1) (April 1956): 70. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein similarly iterates man's need to acknowledge his limitations in religious understanding as he candidly describes his personal life lessons: "What I received from all my mentors... was the key to confronting life, particularly modern life, in all its complexity: the recognition that it is not so necessary to have all the answers as to learn to live with the questions" (Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Source of Faith Is Faith Itself," in *Leaves of Faith* [Ktav, 2003], 364).

stronger relationship with God, as a challenged faith can foster a firmer foundation. Rabbi Norman Lamm writes, “I begin by believing despite doubt; I end by believing all the more firmly because of doubt.”⁹

Such a theological message is but one of many themes that are conveyed in the chapters of the book of Psalms. Topics vary widely, from those pertaining to history and nature to religion and morality. Though not an exhaustive explication of all 150 chapters, the collection of brief essays on individual *mizmorim* that follows is arranged topically in nine unique categories and demonstrates the diverse styles and approaches of the authors. They are headed: “Joy, Song, and Celebration”; “The Centrality of the *Beit HaMikdash*”; “Fear of Enemies and the Stain of Exile”; “The Power of Words”; “Revelation and Israelite History”; “Sin, Repentance, and Forgiveness”; “The Gift of Gratitude: Psalms of Thanksgiving”; “The Wonder of Nature”; and “Yearning for God.” Many of the psalms presented reflect multiple classifications, but the choice of these categories and the *mizmorim* included in them are intended to provide samples of the vast array of topics and forms that comprise the book of Psalms and to offer creative interpretation that enriches the meaning of these poetic prayers.

9. Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (Ktav, 1972), 15.

Joy, Song, and Celebration

Introduction

Erica Brown

Happiness punctuates the book of Psalms at every turn. The collection of 150 *mizmorim* opens with the Hebrew word *Ashrei*, “Happy,” as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes, “The biblical word for happiness, *ashrei*, is the first word of the book of Psalms and a key word of our daily prayers.”¹ “Joy” in various psalms describes an emotional range from the happiness of personal, national, and financial security to the exultant feelings of delight when singing in community. Psalm 1, for example, begins with personal happiness and offers a prescription for achieving a life of serenity and contentment that connects joy with virtue:

Happy is the one who does not walk
in the counsel of the wicked,
who does not stand on the path of sinners,
who does not sit among the jeering cynics –

1. Jonathan Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality* (Maggid, 2021), 257.

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instead, the Lord's teaching is all his desire,
and he contemplates that teaching day and night.
He is like a tree planted on streams of water,
yielding fruit in its season, its leaves never withering –
all it produces thrives. (Ps. 1:1–3)

Happiness here is described in “negative” terms, what one should not do to become who one should be, and only then transitions into the joy of constant study. These verses then explain the conditions one must create for a lifetime of happiness. Just like a tree must be planted beside water to yield its fruit, virtue must be cultivated for human beings to flourish.

Happiness is also a spiritual state descriptive of those who enjoy an intimate relationship with God and take shelter in God's holy Temple, the *Beit HaMikdash*.

Happy are those who dwell in Your house;
they will ever praise You. *Selah*.
Happy are those whose strength is in You,
the paths ahead are in their hearts. (Ps. 84:5–6)

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra defines those who dwell in God's house as the priests and Levites, the *kohanim* and *Levi'im*, who steward God's house and whose closeness to it catalyzes joy. In his commentary on Psalm 84:6 he writes that those who are happy are pilgrims on the journey to Jerusalem, the “paths” referenced in the verse, that lead to divine worship.

The spiritual bliss of experiencing God as a source of strength has an almost kinesthetic quality: “I am ever mindful of the Lord's presence; He is at my right hand; I shall never be shaken. So my heart rejoices, my whole being exults, and my body rests secure” (Ps. 16:8–9). One's entire being moves and rests with the joy of God's company. The psalm continues and closes with God's fidelity and then returns to joy: “For You will not abandon me to Sheol or let Your faithful one see the Pit. You will teach me the path of life. In Your presence is perfect joy; delights are ever in Your right hand” (Ps. 16:10–11).

Financial security is also a factor in personal happiness, as is evident from the causal relationship depicted in Psalm 4. *Natata simha belibi*,

“You have filled my heart with more joy than others feel in abundance of grain and wine. In peace I shall lie down and sleep soundly, for You alone, Lord, keep me safe” (Ps. 4:8–9). Malbim, Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, relates this joy specifically to the harvest after a famine when a farmer can finally lie down and sleep after months of economic worry and travail. This type of happiness is associated with material relief and is not minimized throughout Psalms. It is difficult to experience unalloyed joy and thanksgiving when the members of one’s household are hungry. Satiety, too, is cause for celebration.

The psalmist’s expressions of personal joy – moral, spiritual, and financial – are different than the exultant, ecstatic joy experienced in community, usually accompanied by song. The relationship between joy and song is apparent everywhere in Psalms. Rashi, in his very first comment, notes that the book contains ten expressions of song:

בנצוח, בנגון, במזמור, בשיר, בהלל, בתפלה, בברכה, בהודאה, באשרי,
בהלליה

(1) with conducting, (2) with melody, (3) with musical accompaniment, (4) with song, (5) with praise, (6) with prayer, (7) with blessing, (8) with thanksgiving, (9) with praises, and (10) with “Praise God.” He believes that these correspond to the psalm’s ten composers mentioned throughout the book: (1) Adam, (2) Melchizedek, (3) Abraham, (4) Moses, (5) David, (6) Solomon, (7) Asaph, and (8–10) the three sons of Korah.

Various psalms elaborate on the glee and the noise, the very thrill of music made together in God’s honor: “All you peoples, clap your hands; shout to God with joyful cries. For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared, the great King over all the earth” (Ps. 47:2–3). All the universe is a chorus called upon to perform in unison: “Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless His name; proclaim His salvation day after day. Declare His glory among the nations, His wonders among all peoples” (Ps. 96:1–3). The inanimate earth itself bursts into melody: “Shout out to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with joy; come before Him in glad song” (Ps. 100:1–2). Just as there are psalms that capture the happiness of personal security are there psalms that speak to national military security that are also expressed in song,

Joy, Song, and Celebration

likely praises and refrains recited to God and to soldiers returning from battle: “Shout for joy to God, all the earth; sing the glory of His name; laud Him with glorious praise. Proclaim to God, ‘How wonderous are Your deeds! In Your sheer strength, Your enemies come cringing before You’” (Ps. 66:2–3). There is elation in knowing that God is Warrior and Protector. It stirs the hearts of the victorious and puts fear and reverence of God’s might in the minds of the vanquished.

There is another type of happiness found in the book of Psalms. It is not that of individual security or rapturous communal joy. It is found instead in the quiet recognition of a just world: “Light is sown for the righteous,” writes the psalmist, “and joy for the upright of heart. Rejoice in the Lord, righteous ones; give thanks to His holy name (Ps. 97:11–12). On those days when goodness is visible and justice thrives, we nod our heads in gratitude and with joy we say, “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice in it and be glad” (Ps. 118:24).

Psalm 16

Shiviti and the Essence of Happiness

Mordechai Schiffman

Following a popular motif within *Tehillim*, Psalm 16 emphasizes the link between serving God and living a blessed life. This stands in stark contrast to those who “court other gods” and are destined for unhappiness and failure (v. 4).

Embedded within the account is a famous and oft-cited verse, *Shiviti Hashem lenegdi tamid*, “I have set the Lord before me always” (v. 8).

Toward the end of *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides utilizes this verse to emphasize that if we are mindful of the fact that God is always present and attentive, we would be more careful about our behavior: “When the perfect bear this in mind, they will be filled with fear of God, humility, and piety, with true, not apparent, reverence and respect of God” (III:52).

Undoubtedly the cluster of traits noted by Maimonides can be a byproduct of always setting God before us, yet when examining the

Joy, Song, and Celebration

context of the verse within *Tehillim*, there seems to be an added consequence, namely, happiness.

By proclaiming “In You I take refuge” (v. 1) and placing his trust in God and God’s counsel, King David feels confident and secure that God will guide him and provide for him, both in this world and the next. These thoughts, along with experiencing God’s presence in his life, provide the ultimate felicity. It is by internalizing God’s presence and guidance that “my heart is glad, my spirit rejoices” (v. 9). Because God provides for him the path of life, the psalmist concludes, “In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand, bliss for evermore” (v. 11).

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch elaborates on why internalizing *shiviti* leads to happiness, noting that the word’s root means to “smooth out.” In contrast to those who conceptualize God as transcendent and towering above earthly affairs, David, as it were, is stating:

My conception of Him is very different. I have perceived His presence on the level of my own earthly existence; I no longer seek Him in the heights, but I have set Him before my eyes in everything I do on earth. Nothing here below is so small or insignificant that God would be indifferent to it Only now . . . that I am certain that whatever may come to me in life, be it momentous or insignificant, was sent me directly by God, can the apex of outward happiness give me true joy.

In short, *shiviti* emphasizes divine immanence and providence, which infuses all aspects of life with significance and meaning.

As mentioned, the happiness that accompanies *shiviti* serves as a counter to the unhappiness of idol worshippers: “Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another [god]” (v. 4). Their misery and disappointments are rooted in the fact that their gods will not protect them nor inspire them to a moral and spiritual life of meaning and well-being.

Me’am lo’ez extracts two additional barriers to happiness from the aforementioned verse, both reliant on alternative readings of the cause of their sorrows. In Hebrew, the two relevant words in verse 4 are *aher maharu*, usually understood as “they hasten after another,” referring to serving other gods. Alternatively, causality can be read here as “because

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of their haste, they magnify their distress.” Following this understanding, their unhappiness is rooted in impetuosity. If they were more deliberate and prudent, they would make better decisions. Another possibility is to read “*aher*” not as “another” god or as “because” of their haste, but as “later.” This approach faults those who “hasten to think what will be later” and fixate on what may be ahead rather than what exists in the here and now. Their unhappiness stems from their obsessive worry about the future. Even though they have what they need for today, they are despondent because they are too anxious about tomorrow.

The antidote to this unhappiness, whether rooted in idol worship, impetuosity, or anxiety, is *shiviti*, to place God before us always. He serves to remind us and guide us to live spiritual and moral lives infused with deliberate, thoughtful, and reflective practice, with the confidence and mindfulness to live effectively in the present moment.

May we all merit the pure happiness that comes from internalizing this vital and fundamental value.

Psalm 68

Laudations of the Lowly

Susan Weissman

What occasions merit celebration? Is spirited rejoicing reserved for awesome and exceptional events, or can the mundane engender momentous joy too?

Psalm 68 begins with a brief paeon to God, seemingly prompted by His dispersal of Israel's enemies:

As smoke disperses, disperse them ...
may the wicked perish before God,
while the righteous rejoice and exult
before God, delighted and joyful.
Sing to God; sing praises to His name.
Laud Him who rides the clouds ...
and exult before Him. (vv. 3–5)

While the psalm goes on to note many feats deserving of jubilation – caring for orphans and widows, bringing the lonely back home, and setting

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captives free (vv. 6–7) – King David soon describes even more (literally) groundbreaking occurrences:

The earth shook;
The heavens, too, poured down before God,
Sinai itself before God, God of Israel! (v. 9)

Many commentators take such a statement as a clear reference to the trembling of Mount Sinai immediately prior to the Giving of the Torah as recounted in *Parashat Yitro* (Ex. 19:18), a portion of which we also read on the first day of Shavuot. Additional mentions of the Revelation at Sinai appear later on, where there is an enumeration of the number of angels that accompanied Hashem (“thousands upon thousands”) when He descended onto Mount Sinai (Ps. 68:18). The vast multitude of His heavenly entourage is a testament to His love for the Jewish people (Rashi) and to His own holiness (Malbim). The angels that surround the heavenly throne are described in the prophecy of Ezekiel known as *Maase HaMerkava*, the “Heavenly Chariot,” the complementary portion of *Nevi'im* read as the *haftara* for the first day of Shavuot.

Yet the verse from Psalm 68 that I would like to focus on records an event, wholly absent from the text of Tanakh but described openly by *Hazal*, that took place “behind the scenes,” around the time of the Giving of the Torah – an event so dramatic that had it not occurred, *benei Yisrael* would never have received the Torah. After describing Hashem’s celestial retinue, King David writes, “You ascended on High, you have taken a captive, you took gifts for men” (v. 19, translation follows Rashi). According to *Hazal* in Shabbat 88b, the subject here is not Hashem (as in the previous verse) but Moshe Rabbeinu, who ascended to heaven to receive the Ten Commandments, but was accosted by the angels who refused to admit such a lowly being into their ranks (“What is one born of a woman doing among us?”). Collectively, they sought to prevent the Torah, “a coveted treasure that was concealed by You for 974 generations,” from leaving their domain and being given “to one of flesh and blood.” When prompted by Hashem to defend his actions, Moses replied by asking God to share what was written in the Torah that he sought to receive. After God itemizes each one of the commandments, Moses challenges

the angels with a series of accusatory questions: “Do you dwell among the nations who worship idols [that you require a prohibition against idolatry]? Do you have a father and a mother [that you are required to honor]? Is there an evil inclination within you [that you need the prohibition of not committing adultery]? Is there jealousy among you?...” Upon hearing this, the angels immediately accede to Moses’s request and allow him to receive the Torah on behalf of the children of Israel. The Torah, then, explains Rashi, is the “captive” alluded to in Psalm 68 that Moses forcefully wrested from the adversarial angels and, through it, brought “gifts” down to the Jewish people.

Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldwicht, founding *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Kerem BeYavneh, in a treatise entitled “*Arbaa Maamarim BeAggada*,” asks the following penetrating question: As beings of supernal intelligence, were the angels not already aware of the incompatibility of the Torah’s laws to purely spiritual beings? Did they not perceive that it was directed to corporeal creations imbued with an evil inclination and in constant confrontation with a host of environmental temptations – elements totally irrelevant to them? The answer, Rabbi Goldwicht argues, lies in an understanding of God’s purpose in creating the world – to reveal His glory. The Mishna in Avot 6:11 declares, “Everything that Hashem created in His world, He created only for His Honor (*kavod*).” Since the ministering angels sing God’s praises in open song every day, what greater manifestation of *kavod Shamayim* could there be, they reasoned. Despite the multitude of practical laws it contains, the Torah, in its essence, is a vessel for revealing Hashem’s *kavod* in the world, and no being excels at this task more than they do. Their logic, as Rabbi Goldwicht points out, was fundamentally flawed. What the angels failed to understand is the even greater role played by humans in revealing the Almighty’s glory.

Prior to Creation, “the entire universe was filled with His glory” (Is. 6:3). The task of Creation involved God concealing Himself within the physical world so that He was no longer perceptible. (The word for world or universe, *olam*, also means “hidden.”) Post-creation, the angels remained in a realm in which Hashem’s glory was clearly manifest, and their daily songs of praise served only to articulate a fact that was already apparent; they added nothing new. Human beings, on the

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other hand, occupy a world in which God's glory is hidden and barely perceptible, if at all. By observing the laws of the Torah, they succeed in harnessing their evil inclination, resisting outside temptation, and performing many positive acts in the service of Hashem. In doing so, they tear down the layers of concealment in which God's presence is buried and reveal His existence and greatness. By overcoming their corporeal natures and aspiring to holiness, the Jewish people uncover the latent spirituality within the physical world, thereby increasing Hashem's glory in the universe. Only from this lower vantage point can we "sing praises to His name. Laud Him who rides the highest heaven" (Ps. 68:5) and send forth processions, "first came the singers, next...the musicians amidst the girls playing tambourines" (v. 26), which precede ministering angels (Rashi). As the only beings capable of fulfilling the true purpose of Creation, Moses argues, *benei Yisrael* deserve the Torah, often regarded as *oz*, "might," as the psalmist concludes: "It is Israel's God who gives might and power to the people" (v. 36).

Through his daring and courageous act, Moses valiantly champions the cause of his people and succeeds in bringing down the Torah for the benefit of all generations to come. It is precisely because we are corporeal beings with mundane challenges that we merit the ability to sing and celebrate God, "who bears our burdens every day" (v. 20).

Psalm 84

Blessing, Happiness, and Home

Deena Rabinovich

What does the term *ashrei* mean? It is used twenty-five times over the course of *Tehillim* and has been translated in a variety of ways. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, editors of the *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, provide two definitions: “happy” and “blessed.” What is happiness? The state of well-being, contentment. And what is blessedness? The state of being blessed with divine favor.

In this *mizmor*, both definitions work. Verse 5 might be read as “Happy are those who live in Your house and forever praise You,” and “Blessed are those who live in Your house, and forever praise You.” But who are these people? Perhaps they are the *hasidim*, the righteous, who would come to the *beit kneset* to sit one hour before their *tefillot*, as the *Yalkut Shimoni* suggests? Or perhaps, as Radak says, they were the priests and Levites who served God in the *Beit HaMikdash*? Or perhaps a regular person who yearns to dwell in the House of God like a bird yearns

“to make a home for herself” and “the swallow a nest where she lays her young” (v. 4)? Whatever the definition, there is a positive feeling associated with those who spend time in the House of God, the feeling of being home where one is safe and protected.

How are these feelings of safety and security depicted? Through various terms and images that sustain the psalm’s metaphors. There are many terms for domestic spaces: *bayit*, “home” (v. 4), *mishkan*, “dwelling” (v. 2), *hatzer*, “a courtyard” that surrounds and protects a home (v. 3). Sometimes, though, a home is not enough for the feeling of security. You need elements to survive, crucial elements like *shemesh*, “sun” (v. 12), or *moreh*, “water,” and *maayan*, “rain” (v. 7). In a land of meager rainfall, a source of water is a source of *berakhot*, “blessings” (v. 7), which plays on the idea of *berekhot*, “wells,” as both words are spelled the same in Hebrew.

Structure and elements are crucial, but sometimes more is needed – the presence of God in the *Mikdash* and the feeling of protection He engenders. This is conveyed by the many terms throughout the psalm used for God that encompass the different ways He protects us: *Hashem Tzevaot*, “Lord of Hosts,” with a military connotation (v. 13); *Kel Hai*, “a living God” (v. 3); and *Malki*, “my King” (v. 4). Further words and phrases that complement this image include *miḥayil el ḥayil*, “from strength to strength” (v. 8); *magen*, “shield” (vv. 10, 12); and *bote’ah*, “feels safe” (v. 13).

What is the context for this *mizmor*? Radak implies that it was written after the destruction of the First Temple either as a retrospective, remembering how happy people were when they were able to sit in the House of God, or looking toward the future when people will once again be able to sit in the House of God and feel safe and protected. The commentary identified as that of the Rashbam suggests that the *mizmor* was written during the time of the Second Temple. Whatever the timing of the *mizmor*, it encapsulates the foundational and enduring feeling of safety and protection that home provides.