

# PSALM 27 - HASHEM ORI V'YISHI

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לע"נ אמי מורתי מרים בת יצחק ורבקה הכ"מ

## INTRODUCTION

Beginning on the first day of Elul, nearly all communities begin reciting Psalm 27 ("God is my Light and Salvation") twice daily, continuing through the end of Sukkot. In Eretz Yisra'el, the custom is to continue through Hoshana Rabba (21 Tishri) and in the Diaspora the recitation continues through Sh'mini 'Atzeret (22 Tishri). (Parenthetically, this is the only custom - of which I'm aware - which binds together the reflective season of Elul with the festivities of Sukkot). Although all traditions who recite it exclusively during this season (the Vilna Ga'on did not recite it, due to his general principle of only reciting one "Psalm of the day" per day; some eastern communities recite this Psalm every day of the year) include the recitation during Shaharit (at some point after the Shir Shel Yom), the second recitation is subject to different customs. Ashkenazim say it after 'Arvit, whereas Hasidim and S'pharadim recite it after Minhah.

Significantly, there is no mention of this custom anywhere in the literature of the Rishonim (and certainly not in Rabbinic literature); it first appears in a Siddur published by R. Shabtai of Raskov (1788). Nonetheless, as noted above, the custom of reciting it during this season is nearly universal and almost assuredly predates the late-18th century. Generally, the custom is associated with the Midrash, which appears much earlier than the custom, which interprets the opening line as a reference to the highlight of the season:

(another interpretation: ) the Rabbis interpret the verse as referring to Rosh haShanah and Yom haKippurim. [Hashem is] my Light on Rosh haShana, which is the day of judgment, as it says: *And He shall bring forth your righteousness like the light, and your judgment like the noonday.* (T'hilim 37:6). My Salvation on Yom haKippurim, when He saves us and forgives us for all of our wrongdoings (Midrash T'hilim 27:3).

In this essay, we will address two interrelated issues: The "sense" of the psalm and its propriety to the season. As will soon be demonstrated, identifying the coherence of the chapter is no easy matter - it seems, prima facie, to be two unrelated psalms that were "fused" together. As we review the text, we will note the point at which "Psalm A" becomes "Psalm B" - after which, we will demonstrate the literary coherence of the psalm and then address the thematic integration - which

will help us understand the association with this season of Elul-Tishri.

## II THE TEXT - TRANSLATION AND COMMENTS *l'David.*

1. Hashem is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? Hashem is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?

As we pointed out in our analysis of Psalm 47, the "superscription" which appears as the heading of many of the psalms need not be understood in a uniform manner. Whereas some superscriptions indicate dedication (e.g. 122, 72) and others may point to composition with a particular group of Levite musicians in mind (e.g. Sa'adiah's explanation of "T'fillah l'Mosheh" - #90, as well as one suggestion of the Korahide psalms), the most conventional and "straightest" explanation is that the superscription operates as a colophon which identifies the author of the psalm. Further on (at v. 4), we will assay the likelihood of that approach here.

The psalm opens with a parallelism (light:salvation) within a parallelism (light/salvation : strength of my life). The tone here is one of confidence - which will grow as we proceed through the psalm. Note that God is not being addressed here; rather it is an audience (or a musing) who hears these praises of God and of the security, enabled by God's Presence, experienced and extolled by the psalmist.

*2. When the wicked, my enemies and my adversaries, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell.*

Whereas the first verse gave us no direct information as to the context of the fearlessness, we are now brought into the direct circumstance where this security is felt. The setting here (explicated yet more overtly in the next verse) is one of war - which heightens our curiosity as to the propriety of this psalm to the season of Elul through Sukkot.

This verse utilizes three words for enemies (m're'im, tzarai, oyvai li) which neatly parallel the three words/terms used to describe the security of God's Presence in the previous verse (ori, yish'i, ma'oz hayyay).

The final two words - stumble and fall (kash'lu v'naphalu) are utilized in war contexts throughout T'nakh (e.g. Vayyikra 26:36-37).

*3. Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war should rise against me, even then I will be confident.*

The casual reader often assumes the second word (tahaneh) to be second person male singular - to wit: "If you encamp", but it neither makes sense given the sympathetic audience, nor is it supported

by the second stich. Rather, since Mahaneh (camp) is a feminine noun, the word Tahaneh is to be understood as third person feminine singular (as translated above). Thus, the (army) camp (in the first stich) and its parallel "war" (in the second stich) are both treated as active.

*4. One thing have I desired of Hashem, that I will seek after; that I may dwell in the house of Hashem all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of Hashem, and l'vaqer in His temple.*

Given the doubled stress ("One thing...that I will seek" - Ahat sha'alti...otah avaqesh), it is proper to understand the word "only" in translation: *There is **only** one thing that I ask of God, that is what I will seek after...*

While the sentiment of this verse is, to say the least, both noble and inspiring (and the source of many beautiful songs), it seems to border on religious "over-confidence" (arrogance?). The psalmist is so assured of his physical safety as ensured by God's Presence, that he seems to take that for granted - and can turn his attention to his one true desire. We will yet address this mercurial expression of emotion.

Although the psalmist stresses that he has only one request - note that there are six components to the request (dwell in the house, behold the beauty, l'vaqer, hide me, protect me, set me upon a rock). This is not unusual, since all six are aspects of the one basic request - to maintain this level of intense cleaving to God, as expressed both in physical security and spiritual enlightenment.

As we mentioned in the comments on the superscription, this verse has much to tell us about the authorship of the psalm - or does it? At first glance, one might argue that any mention of Beit Hashem and Heikhalo militate strongly against Davidic composition, since the Bayit (and Heikhal) were not built until after his death. This proof, however, may be used against itself. Since the psalmist experiences such intrepidity in the face of danger, conquering the only obstacle with which he is challenged, the only thing left to desire is the one thing withheld from him (see II Sh'mu'el chapter 7). As such, l'David is most easily rendered "of David", i.e. authored by David.

Notice that I haven't translated the word l'vaqer; it is not only difficult to translate, but what is the most likely translation gives us an opportunity to expand our awareness of the beauty of Hebrew.

The various times of day are not depicted by arbitrary words; rather, they relate to the opportunities afforded by that time. Since the central utility which shifts during the hours of the day is visual acuity, that is the central emphasis in the Hebrew words used to define this time.

Ramban (Sh'mot 12:6) maintains that the three terms 'erev, boker, tzohorayim cover all times of the day (based on Psalms 55:18).

As R. Avraham ibn Ezra (B'resheet 1:5) explains, the word Erev (evening) is anchored in the same root - 'RB, which means "to mix, to combine" (hence - 'Eruv, a mixing of ownership of property; the verb 'arev, to mix its homophonic noun 'arev - a co-signer, who has admixed his responsibilities with that of the borrower.). This is a time of day when it becomes hard to distinguish various items from each

other (e.g. a pole and a man); the lack of visual acuity leads to a "mixture" of sensory input as it is translated by the brain. As Ibn Ezra himself states: yit'arvu bo hatzurot - various forms become intermingled at this time.

The middle of the day, tzohorayim, comes from the root TzHR, (and its variant ZHR), meaning "gleam" - that is the time when the light is strongest and clearest. According to Ramban (ibid.), the paired form (tzohorayim) is used because there are two hours at the middle of the day which most properly take this name.

The root BQR means "investigate" (cf. Vayyikra 19:20). The first time of day when visual investigation becomes possible is after sunrise - hence, the morning is called Boqer.

As a result of various stages of this philology, some commentators (Rashi, Ibn Ezra) read the phrase l'vaqer b'Heikhalo as "to visit His Sanctuary every morning" (taking the applied meaning of bqr); however, others (Radak, Me'iri) understand it as "to cogitate" - i.e. to contemplate the various aspects of Godliness. This explanation, favored by modern commentators as well, fits more comfortably with the use of the root as a verb (using the verb as connected with "morning" is unattested in T'nakh). In addition, it fits contextually, as the single request increases in intensity:

1) to sit in God's House

2) to gaze at the beauty of God

3) to contemplate His Presence (or His teachings - see the elliptic comment of Me'iri).

*5. For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in Sukkoh (His pavilion); under the cover of His tent shall He hide me; He shall set me up upon a rock.*

This is the continuation of the "one request" introduced in the previous verse. Parallel to the three aspects of nearness to God expressed in v. 4, this verse highlights three forms of protection from enemies which the psalmist expects God to employ on his behalf. The first of the three protections (his pavilion) serves as the hook on which to hang the extension of the recitation through Sukkot.

The "rock" mentioned here likely refers to a cropping of rocks which forms a natural fortress and protection from the enemy. This is also known as a M'tzad (see Shoftim 6:2).

*6. And now shall my head be lifted up above my enemies around me; therefore I will offer in His tent sacrifices of joy; I will sing, I will make music to Hashem.*

The reasonable conclusion of all of this praise is to offer thanksgiving to God. The mention of the tent (as opposed to "the House") serves as added support for Davdic composition, as the Ark was

housed in a tent during his rule.

At this point, we have reached the conclusion of "Psalm A". The first and final words in this section are God's Name - and the entire piece is of one tone (confident) and one address (an audience of supporters or allies).

Observe how dramatically and suddenly everything shifts as we begin "Psalm B":

*7. Hear, Hashem, when I cry with my voice; be gracious to me, and answer me.*

The psalmist turns to God, turning his back on an audience (if it exists at all) and is begging for Divine grace. Not only is the tone one of supplication, but the psalmist is even unsure of God's readiness to hear his prayer.

*8. Of You my heart said, "Seek My face"; Your face, Hashem, will I seek!*

He continues to introduce his prayer with this justification - he is, to wit, impelled to seek out God and to pray to Him as it is the incessant urging of his heart which has driven him so.

*9. Hide not Your face from me; put not Your servant away in anger; You have been my help; do not abandon me, nor forsake me, O God of my salvation.*

Note how drastically the tone varies from the earlier exaltation - the psalmist has angered God and faces the worst possible consequence: The hiding of the Divine Countenance (see D'varim 31:17-18). The fear of experiencing a manifestation of deus abscondum is explicated as God abandoning & forsaking the psalmist.

*10. For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but Hashem will take me up.*

It is unclear whether this verse is part of the prayer or an aside, reflecting the psalmist's hope that it will be answered. In any case, the sense of desperation and isolation is intensified here, as all "safety nets" have been removed and the psalmist has only one hope left to him - "we can only turn to our Father in Heaven".

*11. Teach me Your way, Hashem, and lead me on a level path, because of my enemies.*

It is curious that the psalmist, in his return to the direct-address prayer, pleads for God's direction (certainly a noble request) with less than noble motivations. Instead of asking that God lead him on the proper path for its own sake, or to become closer to God, his focus is utilitarian and defensive. He hopes that his enemies will wither away when they sense God's Presence in his life due to the instruction he receives. His motivation highlights the desperation he feels, that even proximity to God is chiefly viewed as a vehicle to safety.

*12. Do not give me up to the will of my enemies; for false witnesses have risen up against me, and they breathe out violence.*

Some render Nephesh ("will") as "throat", claiming that the imagery utilized here is one of the enemy swallowing up his prey; although an unnecessary extravagance, this picturesque approach is poetically attractive. The final phrase *viY'fe'ach* Hamas is often rendered "breath violence" (as here), understanding the penultimate word as associated with the root NPhCh. The form belies this, and the suggestion has been raised, both based on the parallelism within the verse and a common use in Ugaritic, that we understand the meaning of *Y'fe'ach* as "witness". This meaning is possibly attested to in Mishlei 14:25.

*13. Were it not that I believe I should see the goodness of Hashem in the land of the living.*

This verse is awkward any way it may be read. [Those who suggest an emendation of the first word *Lulei* do so unnecessarily; a brief foray into the various forms of speech in T'nakh will clarify the strange construction here.] The conditional clause is present, to wit: If I hadn't held my faith... but the consequence is missing. What would have happened had the psalmist wavered in his belief? The next verse does nothing to satisfy our discomfort - at no point is the conditional resolved.

It is, however, not all that strange to find similarly elliptical statements in T'nakh. The usual form of an oath, taken by the challenged party (as opposed to administered by an officiant), includes an oath-formula introduction (usually invoking a reference to God), the word *Im* (if) and the opposite of the truth statement to which he is attesting. For example, when Ya'akov and Lavan formalize their separation pact at Gal-Ed, Lavan states:

*If you shall afflict my daughters, or if you shall take other wives beside my daughters, although no man is with us, God is witness between me and you. (B'reshet 31:50).*

Lavan never states what will happen if Ya'akov violates the pact. That is the form of oaths - to leave the punishment unstated. This may be done to increase the anxiety relating to a violation or merely to avoid stating such a terrible consequence; either way, an undesirable and terrifying result of a presently hypothetical situation (e.g. violating an oath, losing faith) need not be explicated. The ellipses serve a greater purpose, leaving the unstated punishment looming over the head of the speaker.

In our case, the psalmist is averring that if he were to lose his faith in ultimately seeing God (or however we understand the end of the verse), something awful would have befallen him (most likely, he would have been "lost").

*14. Wait on Hashem; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; and wait on Hashem.*

This final verse is hard to assimilate into either "Psalm B" or "Psalm A". It doesn't reflect a prayerful stance, as in "B", addressed to God; neither is it exuberant and confident as in "A". It is, rather, exhortative to the (probably) receptive audience. This leaves us with two questions regarding this verse - to which section of the psalm does it belong and what are we to make of the doubled phrase *Kaveh el Hashem*? However we might translate *Kaveh* (hope, wait, pray, long for, anticipate etc.), it is

the only repeated phrase in the psalm; a phenomenon which deserves our attention.

### III LITERARY CLUES TOWARDS TEXTUAL INTEGRATION

All of the information presented so far points us towards the "two-psalm" approach; two independent psalms, one a petition and the other an exaltation, were merged into one unit. In spite of the evidence presented thus far, this approach is hard to maintain even without the literary clues we will utilize further on. Why would anyone combine two psalms which are so different in tone and address, creating one confusing hybrid? The vast difference between "Psalm A" and "Psalm B", ironically, lends support to textual unity.

Beyond that, however, here are some significant observations regarding the literary structure and deliberate use of words which serve to clearly tie the two sections together.

1) As the attached chart shows, even though the two halves are imbalanced in number of verses, they have the identical amount of phrases (I am using the schema suggested by Rav Elhanan Samet, whose observations form the core of this shiur.)

2) God's Name appears six times in each half - thus increasing the sense of deliberate balance between the sections. 3) Perhaps most telling, there are a significant number of words which are repeated in both halves - including some words which are relatively uncommon in T'nakh. What makes the textual unity at once clearer while increasing our confusion is the dialectic method in which the same word is used in each half. For instance, in v. 1, the psalmist declares that God is "my salvation" - as part of trumpeting his confidence in his virtual invulnerability. In v. 9, in contradistinction, God who is "the God of my salvation" is beseeched not to turn away and expose the psalmist's vulnerability. The same tzarai who "bite the dust" in v. 2 are the tzarai who threaten to eat the psalmist alive in v. 12. A most convincing example of this method of ironic repetition is the use of the root STR. In v. 5, the psalmist is confident that God will hide him in the folds of His tent; in v. 9, the psalmist begs God not to hide His countenance from him.

We have, so far, demonstrated that this psalm should be treated, after all, as one textual unit, made up of three sections; vv. 1-6, 7-13 and v. 14. That raises the bar significantly, for we now have to explain the vast difference in tone (and address) between the two halves and the purpose and meaning of the epilogue.

### IV THE SOLUTION

The relationship between God and Man, while multi-faceted and constantly shifting, admits of two

poles - "God seeking Man" and "Man seeking God".

There are times in the life of the individual - and of the nation - when God addresses Man, seeking him out and making His Presence felt in all of its immanent power. The model for this overpowering meeting is the Stand at Sinai, when God "descended" on Mount Sinai, which was then covered with a thick cloud as smoke, fire, lightning and the sound of the Shofar were felt by the entire nation at the foot of the mountain. (see Sh'mot 19, 20:15, 24:16-17 and Mekhilta at 20:15). This is similar to the experience of a coronation, when the king, in all of his splendor and glory, is presented to the people with fanfare, pomp and circumstance.

There are times when Man has to set out, in quiet solitude and with no assurances, to seek God. No earthquake, conflagration or tornado highlights the meeting - Man is listening for the still, small Voice. There are oft- times in life when it feels as if God's Presence has waned and the burden falls upon us to seek Him out. The model for this "timid" meeting is, ironically, atop the same mountain. After the initial giving of the Torah, with all of the commotion cited above, the B'nei Yisra'el eventually violated the covenant and built a golden calf, which they idolized. When the various stages of Mosheh's supplication to God that He spare the nation were completed, he was told to ascend the mountain again to renew the covenant. This time, however, there was no shofar blast, no smoke, fire or lightning. Mosheh was not entering a Divine cloud which had descended; rather, Mosheh himself had to ascend the mountain, seeking out God and His forgiveness.

Each half of our psalm reflects the station of a person found in either of these poles of the continuum in this relationship. The first half ("Psalm A") is sung by someone who is engulfed in God's Presence, hearing the shofar, surrounded by the Divine cloud, with nary a thought of outside threats (which cease to exist) and only a deep yearning to make this station permanent.

The second half ("Psalm B") is the prayer of a person who feels isolated, desperate and far from God, seeking Him out at every juncture, terrified by the possibility of failure and begging God not to turn from him.

Although we have "aligned" the two opposing halves with the poles of the relationship between God and Man, we have yet to explain why they are presented in one (deliberately) unified text. The epilogue, in the light of the questions we asked on that final verse, will be the key to our answer.

The two poles of this relationship - the overwhelming distance and the overwhelming Presence - share one common feature. Both inhere the danger, for Man, of losing his bearings in this, the most important relationship in which he is engaged.

The man who has been met by God, in all of His glory, can fall into the trap of believing that it can never be different. This total envelopment in God's Presence, expressed by Haza"l in such statements as "He held the mountain over them like a pot" (following Mahara"l's explanation), "For every word uttered by God, their souls fled their bodies" etc. can lead Man to feel that he never need to worry about suffering from distance. This is always a source of Man's downfall - as he cannot

fathom the possibility of being pushed away from the Divine.

The man who feels isolated, frightened and desperate can give up hope, again never believing that his station can ever change.

To the proud marcher in the Independence Day parade of 1968 and to the mourning relative outside of Sbarro's; to the confident trader on September 10 and to the despairing relative with a picture titled "Missing" on September 11; to the one and to the other the psalmist turns and exhorts: Kaveh el Hashem. Never lose your hope and expectation and your awareness that all of this may not last; and never give up hope, falling into the despair of accepting your isolation as permanent. Kaveh el Hashem.

V

## THE SEASON

As we have discussed in our shiur on the Parashat haMo'adot, Rosh haShanah is presented in the Torah as a commemoration of the Stand at Sinai - a commemoration of a shofar-blast. This is, of course, the initial stage of Mattan Torah, complete with the entire audio-visual experience. Indeed, the central Mitzvah of the day is one of noise - the same noise as that heard at Sinai.

According to Rabbinic tradition, the day on which Mosheh finally descended Sinai for the third and final time, carrying the "second tablets" and the assurance of God's forgiveness was on Yom haKippurim - and this most singular of days is understood as a commemoration of that event. Here, again, there is one central Mitzvah - confession. This Mitzvah, unlike the shofar, is primarily fulfilled quietly "before God", approximating Mosheh's lonely ascent to Sinai to achieve God's forgiveness.

The duality of the season cuts much deeper than this; from the onset of "Elul", we are simultaneously gripped with dread of facing God in Judgment and excitement at the imminent coronation of the God of Israel. The fear and joy course throughout the season.

We now understand not only the sense of our integrated psalm - but also the propriety of reciting it during this season of feeling God's immanence while seeking Him out from the depths of our loneliness.

It is generally perceived that the "season" ends with the trumpet blast at the conclusion of Yom haKippurim - but, as many Jewish thinkers have proposed, the forty days which reach their apex at this point are but a preparation for the entrance under the "marital canopy" of the Sukkah where God, having encountered Man and having been found, as it were, by Man, rejoice together under His protective cloud.

Psalm 27, an elegant composition reflecting the confidence of resting securely in God's Presence and the fear of distance from Him, is recited as long as we seek Him, are sought by Him - and as long as we reside together under His clouds of glory.

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