

A Case for Pesukei De-Zimrah

Introduction

When contemplating our relationship with prayer the topic of *kavanah* and our inability to concentrate is often at the forefront of our minds. Today, with our BlackBerries and iPhone in hand we find it difficult to focus on one thing for an extended period of time. Whereas in other areas one may consider “multi-tasking” a positive trait, our goal in prayer is to remain focused on the words in our *siddur*. One avenue to realizing this goal is the study of the structure of the prayer service itself and how better understanding this structure can enhance our *kavanah* while we stand before God.

Although we often associate the extent of our knowledge of *Pesukei De-Zimrah* in terms of the laws pertaining to one who arrives late to *minyan* and which paragraphs can be omitted, *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, literally “Verses of Song,” provides us with a daily opportunity to improve our concentration. While studying sources related to *Pesukei De-Zimrah* two themes emerge. The first is the parallel between *Pesukei De-Zimrah* and *Hallel*. The second is how *Pesukei De-Zimrah* serves as a preparation and introduction to the *Amidah*.

Pesukei De-Zimrah as a form of *Hallel*

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 118b) teaches in the name of R. Yose that although one who recites the standard text of *Hallel* daily is considered a blasphemer, one who says *Pesukei De-Zimrah* daily is considered to have completed the *Hallel* every day.¹⁸¹

Similarly, R. Shlomo Ganzfried, in his *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh* (128:1), characterizes all of prayer, and by extension that of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, as “*rinat dodim*” – “a joyful song of lovers.”

The text of *Pesukei De-Zimrah* is taken primarily from the book of *Tehillim*, and the selected chapters relate to topics of praise and thanks.¹⁸² R. Shimon Schwab notes¹⁸³ that there are two recurring words within *Pesukei De-Zimrah* that are translated very similarly, “*shirah*” and “*zimrah*.” What is the difference between these two words, which both connote a sort of song? R. Schwab explains that “these words are not synonymous; rather, they complement one another.” “*Zimrah*” is taken from the Hebrew word “*li-zmor*,” which means “to prune.” Just as pruning removes

¹⁸¹ R. Yose said: I wish to have my portion with those who conclude *Hallel* every day. Is this so? But doesn't Mar say that one who reads *Hallel* every day is considered blasphemy! Rather he (R. Yose) was referring to *Pesukei De-Zimrah*. (*Shabbat* 118b)

Why is it considered blasphemy to recite the standard text of *Hallel* daily but not of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*? R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, as cited in Arnold Lustiger's *Derashot HaRav: Selected Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (New Jersey: Ohr Publishing, 2003), 153–156, explains that *Hallel* is recited to commemorate a spectacular miracle. As such, if one recites *Hallel* daily he is considered a blasphemer because “one should not require the daily invocation of overt miracles to appreciate God's greatness. R. Yose thus says that he would like to be among those who recite *Hallel* (i.e., *Pesukei De-Zimrah*) every day, because they appreciate God's true greatness. When one truly appreciates that God in nature is His most magnificent possible manifestation on earth, he recites *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, reflecting the profound sense of awe that is experienced upon witnessing natural phenomena.” The purpose of *Pesukei De-Zimrah* is to thank God for all of the hidden daily miracles. For example, we thank God for our livelihood and our health. However, there seems to be one exception to this rule, our recital of *Az Yashir* at the end of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, which celebrates the supernatural splitting of the sea. In fact, perhaps due to this difficulty, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefillah* 7:13) cites the practice in some places was to recite the *Az Yashir* after completing *Pesukei De-Zimrah* (see also *Arukh Ha-Shulchan*, O.C., 52:1 for another explanation of this practice). Perhaps we can suggest a rationale for the insertion of *Az Yashir* based upon the Talmud (*Pesachim* 118a) which states that both man's ability to support his family and the fact that his excretory system functions well are no less of a miracle than the splitting of the sea for the Jewish people upon their redemption from Egypt. This new insight links our appreciation of the natural course of life with supernatural historical events. As such, when reciting the *Az Yashir* chapter, which is intentionally placed at the end of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, a feeling of appreciation for these “daily miracles” should be felt as well, on a personal level.

¹⁸² According to the Rif (*Berakhot* 5a), Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefillah* 7:12), and *Masekhet Soferim* (17:11) the phrase of “those who conclude *Hallel* daily” is attributed to the last five paragraphs of the book of *Tehillim*, which we recite from “*Tehillah Le-David*” through “*kol ha-neshamah tehallel Kah*.”

¹⁸³ *Rabbi Schwab on Prayer* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2001), 115–116.

impediments to the healthy growth of a tree, so too we say *zimrah* to remove any sinful thoughts and replace them with deep feelings of coming close to God.¹⁸⁴ On the other hand, *shirah* is a form of song which originates from our connection to God¹⁸⁵ and our expression of that attachment through song. In contrast to *zimrah*, which removes that which has separated us and God, *shirah* expresses the deep feelings that we have developed already. As such, *Pesukei De-Zimrah* combines these two elements of drawing closer to God, actively reshaping how we think about God and giving voice to the feelings that we have for Him. It is fitting, therefore, that as we describe God in *Yishtabach*, the final blessing and climax of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, we describe Him as the “*bocher be-shirei zimrah*” – referring to both of these elements, the process of pruning and praising.¹⁸⁶

Pesukei De-Zimrah is made up of hymns of thanks and praise. A song takes on greater meaning when sung passionately while attempting to express the innermost message conveyed by its words. Therefore, just as when we offer praise to another person we would do so in a deliberate and measured way, the *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 51:8) recommends that the verses should be said with devotion at a pleasant slow pace and not in a rush – in fact, the *Mishnah Berurah* compares the pace to that at which one counts money, “*ke-ilu moneh ma’ot.*” As such, it is reported¹⁸⁷ that R. Moshe Feinstein would always pray with the text of the *siddur* in front of him and he would read the words slowly from the text and not by heart.¹⁸⁸

Pesukei De-Zimrah* as an Introduction to the *Amidah

The focal point of the three daily prayers is the *Amidah*. Aside from the basic understanding of the words, there is an additional obligation to feel that one is standing before his or her Creator.¹⁸⁹ However, prayer is structured in way in which we do not begin with the *Amidah*, but rather always with introductory verses from *Tehillim*, the longest being *Pesukei De-Zimrah* of *Shacharit*. The Talmud¹⁹⁰ praises those who prepare for an hour before praying the *Amidah*. While most people do not or cannot devote this time on a daily basis, we are obligated to prepare ourselves in some way before saying the *Amidah* in order to attain the requisite *kavanah*. This can be accomplished through a proper recital of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*.¹⁹¹

The Abudirham¹⁹² describes the prelude of *Pesukei De-Zimrah* before the *Amidah* as a hallway leading into a large ballroom. In order to enter the ballroom with proper attire and intent, one must first prepare in the hallway. *Pesukei De-Zimrah* offers us the time and a means of focusing on all that God provides for us and all that we should be thankful for, and thereby prepares us to stand before Him in prayer.

¹⁸⁴. See also the explanation of the *Mishnah Berurah* 54:5.

¹⁸⁵. *Shabbat* 51b.

¹⁸⁶. See R. Ovadia Yosef, *Yabi’a Omer, Chelek 8, O.C.*, Responsa 7, where he draws further comparisons between *Hallel* and *Pesukei De-Zimrah* and notes that this is the reason why we have a blessing both at the beginning and end of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, similar to that of *Hallel*.

¹⁸⁷. See R. Ephraim Greenblatt, *Rivevot Ephraim* 2:48:99.

¹⁸⁸. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch characterizes a prayer lacking proper intent as an act of blasphemy!

All our hymns are empty if they are not employed to promote the active service of God in everyday life or to engender the fear and obedience of Him. And if lip-service should actually be deemed a substitute for such conduct, then it is nothing short of **blasphemy**...faithful obedience to God, that is the solemn resolve which every *tehilla* should engender within our hearts in ever new inspiration. We are to become a “blessing” to His will and to His rule on earth. (*The Hirsch Siddur* [New York: Feldheim, 1978], 44)

Since the purpose of the prayers is to engender a sense of obedience and connection to God, anything short of that intent and concentration during our prayers renders them useless and futile.

¹⁸⁹. See R. Chaim from Brisk, *Reb Chaim Ha-Levi al Ha-Rambam, Hilkhos Tefillah* 4:1.

¹⁹⁰. *Berakhot* 32b.

¹⁹¹. The *Mishnah Berurah* (52:1) cites the *Beit Yosef* (in the *Magid Meisharim, Parashat Behar*) who extols those who arrive early to prayers with ample time to recite all of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, word by word, since each letter is based upon deep secrets of the *Kabbalah* and warns that those who skip paragraphs are literally “destroying the channels” that connect our prayers to heavens above.

¹⁹². “And afterwards they [*Chazal*] instructed to say psalms from the end of *Tehillim*, and these are the passageway into prayer [*Amidah*]” (*Sefer Abudirham*).

The *Tur*¹⁹³ accents this same idea from a halakhic perspective. He cites the Talmud¹⁹⁴ that says “we are to stand before God in prayer, not from laughter, frivolity, or idle chat, or anger, but rather from a sense of joy.” Therefore, asserts the *Tur*, the ideal introduction to the *Amidah* is our practice of saying the verses of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, which enable us to attain the level of joy and happiness appropriate for standing before God in prayer.

The notion of joy leading to the proper mindset for prayer is further developed by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik.¹⁹⁵ He describes *Pesukei De-Zimrah* as a “*matir*” – a way of permitting man to stand in prayer before God. The necessity of such a *matir* can be understood in two ways. One approach views *Pesukei De-Zimrah* as consisting of words of thanks and praise, which serve as a means of introducing our entreating of God for specific needs during the *Amidah*. Just as one cannot speak with the President of the United States without first being granted permission, so too we cannot stand before God in prayer without prefacing that prayer with *Pesukei De-Zimrah*. This is the simple understanding of the statement of R. Simlai¹⁹⁶ that one should always prepare words of praise and then pray to God.

The second approach is that *Pesukei De-Zimrah* acts as *matir* for the *Amidah* not due to the praise which it expresses but rather as a fulfillment of *talmud Torah*,¹⁹⁷ which provides the necessary -predisposition of joy and serenity in advance of the prayer service. In order to support this approach, R. Soloveitchik presents similarities between prayer and Torah study, arguing that both Torah study and prayer have many analogous motifs. They both are characterized by the Rambam¹⁹⁸ as a “duty of the heart (*avodah she-ba-leiv*),” they both contain a combination of praise¹⁹⁹ and beseeching of God, and both provide to man the opportunity of connecting to God in a meaningful way²⁰⁰ which brings about accepting upon oneself the yoke of heaven (*kaballat ol malkhut shamayim*).²⁰¹

Case Study: Women and the Latecomer

A related question to the rationale behind our saying *Pesukei De-Zimrah* pertains to whether women are obligated in their daily recital. The *Shulchan Arukh* does not explicitly codify this particular law. Most *poskim*²⁰² assume that although women are obligated in prayer they are not obligated in reciting *Pesukei De-Zimrah*. However, most notably, the *Mishnah Berurah*²⁰³ cites the opinion of R. Akiva Eiger who assumes that women are indeed obligated to recite *Pesukei De-Zimrah*. Perhaps this debate revolves around a basic understanding of the nature of *Pesukei*

¹⁹³. *Siman* 93.

¹⁹⁴. *Berakhot* 31a.

¹⁹⁵. As quoted in *Reshimot Shi'urim* on *Masekhet Berakhot*, 380–381.

¹⁹⁶. *Berakhot* 32a.

¹⁹⁷. This approach is stated in order to explain the words of *Tosafot* who refer to *Pesukei De-Zimrah* as a form of *talmud Torah*: “Therefore, one does not pray from levity and laughter, but rather with a seriousness of mind and joy of the *mitzvah*. For example after first studying Torah, and therefore there is a custom to begin with *Pesukei De-Zimrah* and *Ashrei* before the [*Amidah*] prayer” (*Tosafot Berakhot* 31a).

¹⁹⁸. *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, mitzvat aseh* 5: “And the words of the *Sifrei* ‘and to serve Him’ [is expressed] through Prayer, and it is said that ‘and to serve Him’ [is also expressed] through Talmud [study].”

¹⁹⁹. The Rambam in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (3:13) eloquently states:

Even though it is a *mitzvah* to study during the day and at night, it is only at night that a person acquires most of his wisdom. Therefore, a person who desires to merit the crown of Torah should be careful with all his nights, not giving up even one to sleep, eating, drinking, talk, or the like. Rather, [they should be devoted to] the study of Torah and the words of wisdom. Our Sages declared: “The song of Torah can [be heard] only at night, as [*Eikhah* 2:19] states: ‘Arise, sing out at night...’” Whoever occupies himself with Torah study at night will have a strand of [Divine] favor extended over him during the day, as [*Tehillim* 42:9] states: “During the day, God ordains His kindness and, at night, His song is with me, a prayer to the living God.”

²⁰⁰. *Berakhot* 6a teaches that although prayer requires a quorum of ten men in order to attain the presence of God and recite *devarim she-bi-kedushah*, if even one person is studying Torah “the *Shekhinah* is with him.” Similarly, *Berakhot* 8a relates how although there were an abundance of synagogues in Tiberias, R. Ami and R. Assi intentionally prayed in the *Beit Midrash* in which they studied Torah.

²⁰¹. For a full transcript of a lecture from R. Soloveitchik on this topic, see *Al HaTefillah: Shiurim by Rabbi Soloveitchik on Prayer* by R. Reuven Godner (Israel: 2010), 40–72.

²⁰². *Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav* and *Arukha Ha-Shulchan*, O.C. 70:1. See also R. Shmuel Vosner in *Shevet Ha-Levi* 6:12.

²⁰³. 70:2.

De-Zimrah. If the purpose of *Pesukei De-Zimrah* is perceived as enhancing our prayers and focusing our minds, then perhaps women are merely obligated to fulfill the basic obligation of *tefillah* and not necessarily the introductory preparations, just as they are not obligated to pray with a *minyán* or in the concept of *semikhut ge'ulah li-tefillah*. On the other hand, if *Pesukei De-Zimrah* is part of the basic structure of the prayer service and not only viewed as preparatory but integral to the entire process, similar to the obligation of facing east and bowing at specific points, then women should be obligated to recite *Pesukei De-Zimrah*.²⁰⁴

A similar analysis relates to an individual who is late and finds the *tzibur* (congregation) is finished with *Pesukei De-Zimrah*. The *halakhah*²⁰⁵ is clear that one should skip sections of *Pesukei De-Zimrah* under these circumstances in order to say the *Amidah* with the congregation. The question then arises – does one go back and say *Pesukei De-Zimrah* after completing the *Amidah*? This too may depend upon the purpose of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*. If the main purpose of its recital is preparatory or as a *matir*, then it would be futile after the fact. However, if it adds a distinct value to the prayer itself then it would still be meaningful after the *Amidah*.²⁰⁶

Conclusion

Whether *Pesukei De-Zimrah* was instituted as a form of *Hallel*, or as an introduction to the *Amidah*, or both, is up for debate. However, everyone accepts its importance and centrality to the daily prayer service. If we wish to improve our general concentration and connection to God through our prayers, *Pesukei De-Zimrah* provides us that opportunity – to clear our minds from our mundane functions and responsibilities and to focus on our spiritual quest and the words in front of us. If we truly want to be considered as being among the elite group of those who “complete *Hallel*” every day and also as among those who are promised a place in the World to Come,²⁰⁷ *Pesukei De-Zimrah* affords us this unique opportunity.

²⁰⁴. For additional explanations see R. Eliyahu Falk in *Machazei Eliyahu* 15 and Hebrew fn. 14 to R. Menachem Nissel's *Rigshei Lev* (New York: Targum, 2001). One could have made the opposite logical conclusion, which is that if *Pesukei De-Zimrah* is to be viewed as a preparation for the prayers, like a hallway to enter the ballroom, then women would indeed be obligated to recite them as a prelude to the *Amidah*. See also R. Ovadia Yosef (*Yabi'a Omer* 8:8), who asserts that since women are not obligated to recite *Pesukei De-Zimrah* the Sephardic practice is that they do not say the blessing beforehand of *Barukh She-Amar* or afterwards that of *Yishtabach*.

²⁰⁵. *Shulchan Arukh* O.C. 52.

²⁰⁶. As such there is a debate amongst the authorities whether or not one returns and recites the paragraphs previously omitted after completing the *Amidah*. See the comments of the *Bach* (O.C. 52), *Arukh Ha-Shulchan* (O.C. 52:4–5), and *Ishei Yisrael* 16:18, fn. 55.

²⁰⁷. Says R. Elazar says R. Avina: Whoever says the Psalms of David [*Ashrei* ch. 145] three times a day – is guaranteed to a place in the next world. Why is this so? If it is due to the fact that [*Ashrei*] is derived from the *Aleph-Bet* [the beginning of each verse], then perhaps [a different psalm, ch.119] “*Ashrei Temimei Derekh*” which has an eightfold alphabetical arrangement! Rather because it contains [the verse] “Open Thy hand [and satisfy every living thing].” Then let him recite *Hallel Ha-Gadol* [ch. 136] in which it states, “He who gives bread to all flesh!” Rather [the reason why *Ashrei* is chosen is] because it has both reasons. (*Berakhot* 4b)