

Rabbi Ozer Glickman

## The Simplicity of Song

Although the *mishnah* in *Tamid* lists all seven of the daily psalms recited by the *Levi'im* in the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, their connections to the day of the week on which each is recited are obscure and much debated. One strategy at least as ancient as *Midrash Tehillim* has been to search within the individual psalm for references to the biblical account of Creation for that day. This is not effective for Psalm 92, the Song of the Day for Shabbat. There is no mention of the completion of Creation or of the imperative to imitate the Creator and rest ourselves.

Psalm 92 has something the other daily psalms do not, however. It is the only one in which the particular day is identified at all in the Hebrew text. In the Greek translation of Alexandria, the Septuagint, other daily psalms are similarly identified, but Psalm 92 is the only Song of the Day with an explicit tie in to the day of its recitation. Its first verse proclaims:

A song, an elegy to the Sabbath day.

Jewish law concretizes that linkage in contemporary halakhic practice. The latest time for the beginning of Shabbat is set according to sunset with extra time added for prudence. The commandments of Shabbat become obligatory when that time is reached and no later. The mere recitation of the first verse of Psalm 92, however, is enough to launch the Sabbath, provided the midpoint of the halakhic afternoon has passed. By reciting the Song of the Day for Shabbat, a Jew signals his intention to accept the strictures and positive obligations of the -Sabbath even before the later astronomical time.<sup>480</sup>

This first line of the psalm begs, then, for interpretation. It suggests that Psalm 92 is in some way related to the Sabbath in theme and content. Unlike the other Songs of the Day where the connection may be only homiletic, Psalm 92 is explicitly dedicated to the Sabbath within the text. We shall have to work hard to uncover how this linkage expresses itself in the remainder of the psalm.

After the dedication, the psalmist opens his elegy with a general observation about prayer and thanksgiving. In the Jewish Publication Society's oft-quoted translation:

It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord,  
and to sing praises unto Thy name, O Most High.

"A good thing" does not capture the sense of the Hebrew word "*tov*." It is much more than good. Consider the admonition of *Kohelet*<sup>481</sup> (again in the Jewish Publication Society's translation):

It is better (*tov*) to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting;  
for that is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to his heart.

One can hardly describe a visit to a house of mourning as good. The word rather conveys the idea of appropriateness. It is more fitting, -*Kohelet* teaches, to go to a house of mourning because it more accurately -captures the nature of life.

The same is true of other places in Scripture in which the word "*tov*" is used. The creation of woman is prefaced with a Divine -observation of the loneliness of human life:

And the Lord God said: "It is not good (*lo tov*) that the man should be alone;  
I will make him a help meet for him."

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<sup>480</sup>. *Mishnah Berurah* O.C. 261:4.

<sup>481</sup>. 7:2.

In this context as well, good is such a weak word. Rather, it is not appropriate or fitting that man should be alone. This more fully conveys the sense of the verse.

We can buttress this point by noting the Torah's repeated observation that God saw that His creations were "good." The word "tov" there, and in all of these occurrences, indicates that something is fitting and appropriate, that it accords with life and the responsibilities and/or -status of the person to whom it is addressed, that it makes sense.

The beginning of Psalm 92 begins then with the assertion that it is fitting and appropriate to give thanks to God through songs of praise. In the fifth verse we are told why:

For Thou, Lord, hast made me glad through Thy work;  
I will exult in the works of Thy hands.

Psalm 92 is the Song of the Day for Shabbat because it asserts the basis for singing songs of praise on the Holy Day. It is in other words its own proof-text. The Sabbath may mean cessation and rest but it is more than idle relaxation. It is a day of song and rejoicing.

Robert Alter, the biblical translator and literary critic, has observed that the book of Psalms exhibits "a greater reliance on the conventional, the familiar, in imagery, in the sequence of ideas, in the structure of the poem."<sup>482</sup> Because the psalms were recited by "pilgrims in procession on their way up to the temple mount, or recited by a supplicant at the altar or by someone recovered from grave illness, offering a thanksgiving sacrifice," they avoided -complex syntax and involved imagery. Sung in the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* or on the way to its precincts, the psalms were at once eloquent and easily comprehended.

This is not to assert that the ideas expressed in the psalms are elementary or simplistic. In Psalm 92, the psalmist in fact asserts that this is not so:

How great are Thy works, O Lord! Thy thoughts are very deep.

It requires a measure of sensitivity and perspicacity to recognize the Divine design in nature:

A brutish man knoweth not, neither doth a fool understand this.

The boor is insensitive to the beauty of Creation; the fool lacks the capacity to understand. They miss the connection between the Six Days of Creation and the Song of the Day; they do not perceive the imperative to sing.

The responsibility to praise is not the result of complex philosophic thought, however. The psalmist knows that complexity and -profundity are not the same. The scientist may react to the complexities of Creation; the spiritual person reacts to its profundity. The American poet Walt Whitman himself explored this difference in a short poem *When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer*.

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.<sup>483</sup>

Formulae can be elegant. Data can exhibit structure and symmetry. They are however abstractions that detach us from the -phenomenon itself. The poet asserts that they do not encapsulate our -experience of Creation. Poetry, like philosophy, begins where -scientific -abstraction ends.

Ironically, it was the father of the Western philosophic tradition, Plato, who launched the attack on poetry that continues in some circles until today. This is unfortunate since philosophy and poetry are both targets of the New Materialism. A closer reading of Plato suggests that his animus against poetry, which he lumped together with rhetoric,

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<sup>482</sup>. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, 1985), 112.

<sup>483</sup>. *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855.

was targeted more toward sophistry.<sup>484</sup> He did not need to fear the elemental poetry of the psalmist. He should not oppose the eloquence of what is honest and forthright.

For the Jew, wisdom begins with the perception of the Divine in the natural world.  
But Thou, O Lord, art on high for evermore.

This is neither the negation of science nor the promotion of magical thinking. It begins as Whitman does looking at the heavens. It does not, however, end there.

For lo, Thine enemies, O Lord, for lo Thine enemies  
shall perish: all the workers of iniquity shall be scattered.

The psalmist wants us to do more than gaze at the stars. We are called to acknowledge the profundity of the Divine design because it has implications for human history. When the psalmist praises the Creator for the beauty of Creation, it is never an end in itself. There is always a corollary. Because the world has order, life must be ordered. Consider Psalm 104. The first part of the psalm is devoted to the wonders of God's works:

How manifold are Thy works, O Lord! In wisdom hast Thou made them all.

In an abrupt shift, the concluding verse calls for justice and order even as there is no evidence of such anywhere else in the psalm:

Let sinners cease out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul. Hallelujah.

The appeal to order and justice frequently takes the form of a paean to God's law. Consider Psalm 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork.

Creation testifies to the handiwork of the Creator. That is not enough, however. It brings with it the recognition that the glory of God is reflected in His Law.

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;  
the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.

Modern biblical critics have suggested that both psalms are pasted together from multiple sources.<sup>485</sup> They do not perceive the connection between the order of Creation on the one hand and the imperative to pursue justice and law on the other. This is, however, precisely the message of *Sefer Tehillim*, not only in the two psalms cited but in Psalm 92 as well. Recognizing the order of Creation entails a responsibility toward the Creator.

This same linkage between God as Creator and God as Lawgiver appears throughout the entire prayer book. These two attributes form two thirds of the troika of ideas identified by many from the *Tur* to the Tashbetz to Franz Rosenzweig as the core of Jewish thinking: Creation (there is intentional order to the universe); revelation (this entails a -program of laws that govern our place in the universe); redemption (there is ultimately order in human history).

The third important theme, that of redemption, does not appear in our psalm. Rabbinic sources, however, read it here in the very words that link the psalm to the day of its recitation:<sup>486</sup>

R. Yishmael said: This psalm was recited by Adam the First and subsequently forgotten throughout all the generations until Moshe came and reinstated it, as it is said, "A Psalm, a song for the Sabbath Day," for the day that is wholly Shabbat and rest for eternity.

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<sup>484</sup>. Charles L., Griswold, "Plato on Rhetoric and Poetry," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Spring 2012 ed.).

<sup>485</sup>. Alter notes this view without complaint in his commentary to both Psalms. See his *Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, 2007).

<sup>486</sup>. *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 19.

What is the day referenced in the psalm's title? The time of our redemption when we will live in an era that is wholly Shabbat. The allusion to Moshe is probably in the heading itself: *Mizmor Shir Le-Yom Ha-Shabbat*.<sup>487</sup>

For R. Yishmael, the psalm was initially a song of praise for Creation and was sung by Adam the First, as the *Midrash* tells us, on the first Sabbath. For Adam the First, it represents the spontaneous expression of praise for the Creator during the Sabbath of Creation.

For Moshe Rabbenu, however, it is much more. Once the Sabbath has been enshrined in the law, when we apply the model of order over chaos of Creation to our own lives, then humanity can aspire to the fulfillment of its history. In the rabbinic reading of the psalm, its very connection to the Sabbath heralds the promise of redemption.

Whitman never went far enough. He recognized the eloquence of order and simplicity but failed to assert its implications for humanity.

It is hard to hear the music of the spheres when the cacophony of the urban choir dominates the airwaves. There is, however, no religious experience without community and people, family, and friends. We stop, reflect on the sublime order of Creation, and realize the challenge it presents to us to replicate that order in time so that one day humanity will fulfill its promise in the warm light of the eternal Sabbath.

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<sup>487</sup>. See the Rada's commentary.