

Dr. Shira Weiss

Tehillim Chapter 27 (“Le-David”): The Benefit of the Doubt

Tehillim chapter 27 (commonly referred to by its opening word, “Le-David”), recited at the conclusion of morning and evening prayers from the first of *Elul* through *Shemini Atzeret*,¹ expresses the struggles within man’s relationship with God. The psalmist describes the oscillation between faith and doubt that results from man’s dialectical awareness of God’s presence and elusiveness. During the period of introspection in preparation for the *Yamim Nora’im*, this is a particularly poignant, honest, and hopeful *mizmor* which reflects the natural religious tensions experienced by humanity.

The progression of chapter 27 reflects the duality of man’s stance before God, as the *mizmor* can be divided into two sections which differ in form and substance. The first half (vv. 1–6) evokes an absolute trust in God, a feeling of closeness to Him and a firm belief, unmediated by any doubt. “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” (v. 1). He has only one request of God and is certain it will be fulfilled: “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life” (v. 4). Man’s confidence in God’s protection and in his future triumph over his enemies is described in present tense: “For He shall hide me in His tabernacle on the day of evil.... And now my head shall be lifted over my enemies who surround me” (vv. 5–6). Certain of such victory, the psalmist concludes the first half of the *mizmor* by describing his thanksgiving sacrifices to God, accompanied by song and praise that he will present upon His salvation: “And I will offer in His tabernacle sacrifices with trumpet-sound” (v. 6). Reflecting his conviction, he speaks about God in the third person, with no urgent need to appeal to God directly.

Man’s relationship with God shifts dramatically in the second half of the *mizmor* (vv. 7–13), however, as the psalmist calls out to God in distress: “Hear, O Lord, my voice as I cry out; be gracious to me and answer me” (v. 7). No longer feeling a sense of security, 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 abandon me and do not forsake me.... Do not deliver me to the desire of my enemies” (vv. 9, 12). The latter verses describing God’s anger, remoteness, and abandonment of man seem antithetical to the former which express God’s compassion, concern, and salvation, as the psalmist’s imminent triumph seems no longer so assured.

Despite the desperate pleas, all hope in God is not lost in the second half of the *mizmor*: “For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will gather me in” (v. 10), metaphorically alludes to the psalmist’s placement of trust in God as if he was a helpless and rejected child with no other form of protection. The psalmist maintains a semblance of hope in God which he articulates in an enigmatic manner: “Had I not believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living...” (v. 13). This conditional negative is understood as a positive: I do believe that I will see the goodness of God while I am yet alive, for were this not so... The psalmist leaves the statement open-ended for the reader to complete, implying that a conclusion would be ineffably horrific.² In other words, were

¹ The Sages interpret the opening words of chapter 27 to refer to Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. “My light” (v. 1) alludes to Rosh Ha-Shanah, which is the Day of Judgment, as it is written, “He shall bring forth your righteousness like the light, and your judgment like the noon.” “And my salvation” (v. 1) refers to Yom Kippur, “when He saves us and forgives us for all of our sins.” “He will hide me in His shelter” (v. 5) is a reference to Sukkot, since once we are forgiven, God shelters us from danger as He protected Israel in the desert. Thus, we conclude the recital of the *mizmor* at the end of the holiday (*Midrash Tehillim*).

² R. Elchanan Samet interprets this verse consistently with the formulation of other similar statements in *Tehillim*, including “Unless the Lord had been my help, my soul would have rested in silence” (94:17); “Had Your Torah not been my delight, I would have perished in my sorrow” (119:92); “Were it not for the Lord who was with us, when men rose up against us, they would have swallowed us up alive” (124:2–3). See “The Lord is My Light and My Salvation,” *Sefer Tehillim Shiurim*, Virtual Beit Midrash (<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/tehillim69/01tehillim.htm>).

it not for his trust in God and in His goodness, through which he gained the strength to endure, he would have perished.³

The final verse of the *mizmor* serves as a conclusion to the entire text. It is distinct from the previous verses in that the psalmist is no longer talking about himself in first person, but appeals to the reader/listener to hope in God in both confident and distressful times, as alluded to in the repetitious language: “Have hope in the Lord; be strong and He shall give courage to your heart;⁴ 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.”⁵ 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, or whoever, those enemies may be.⁶ Man’s relationship with God often wavers between overwhelming faith when God’s presence seems clear and inevitable doubt when experiencing the harsh realities of life that cause one to feel abandoned by God. Man’s religious feelings are complex as he struggles to maintain a sublime faith in God in spite, at times, of God’s seeming hiddenness by crises, enemies, or man’s own inclinations. Perhaps the psalmist is trying to convey that doubt is inevitable in religious experience; however, such uncertainty need not be consciously avoided, but rather, it can be sublimated in a constructive manner to strengthen faith.

Many modern theologians recognize the existence of doubt and the important role it plays within religious consciousness.

[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.⁷

Faith and doubt do not essentially contradict each other. Thus, Paul Tillich defines faith as the “continuous tension between itself and the doubt within itself.”⁸ While this tension does not always manifest in a struggle, it is consistently latent. The tension between faith and doubt is represented by

... the oscillation between closeness and distance, ardor and bitterness. It is an integral part of man’s relation with God, his deepest religious experience, and neither can nor should be removed.... It is they – the trust – correlatives of certainty and doubt – that constitute the dynamism and the very essence of the genuinely religious man’s spiritual biography.⁹

R. Soloveitchik explains that religious experience is, in essence, a struggle and is not devoid of “the pangs and torments that are inextricably connected with the development and refinement of man’s spiritual personality.”¹⁰ He rebukes the ignorance of those who seek to escape reality and find comfort in religion. The religious individual, he argues, does not find tranquility in religion, but rather confronts an environment filled with doubts and fears, contradictions and refutations.

That religious consciousness in man’s experience which is most profound and most elevated, which penetrates to the very depths and ascends to the very heights, is not that simple and comfortable. On the contrary, it is

³. Amos Chakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary* (Jerusalem, 2009).

⁴. The words between the repetitious phrase “Hope in the Lord” recall the words of Moshe to Yehoshua as he transferred his leadership to his protégé (*Devarim* 31:7). Yehoshua was to be strong as God would protect and save him as he led the nation to the Promised Land.

⁵. Rashi, *Tehillim* 27:14.

⁶. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York, 2007), 94.

⁷. Stephen Davis, *Faith, Skepticism and Evidence* (Cranbury, 1978), 196.

⁸. Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago, 1955), 60.

⁹. Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (New York, 1972), 24.

¹⁰. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. L. Kaplan. (Philadelphia, 1983), 140, n. 4.

exceptionally complex, rigorous and tortuous. Where you find its complexity, there you find its greatness.... The ideas of temporality and eternity, knowledge and choice (necessity and freedom), love and fear (the yearning for God and the flight from His glorious splendor), incredible, overbold daring, and an extreme sense of humility, *transcendence and God's closeness* [my italics], the profane and the holy, etc., etc., struggle within his religious consciousness, wrestle and grapple with each other.... The pangs of searching and groping, the tortures of spiritual crises and exhausting treks of the soul purify and sanctify man, cleanse his thoughts, and purge them of the husks of superficiality and the dross of vulgarity.¹¹

The religious individual emerges from such struggles with a “powerful spiritual enthusiasm”¹² as he achieves a more perceptive understanding of his surroundings. Thus, human life is essentially characterized by incompleteness, striving, and growth, in which doubt is an inherent component.

A mature faith, therefore, develops out of doubt, which is a substantive feature in religious growth. The truth affirmed by faith “is not given to us for the price of mere assent,” but “is the prize for which we must engage in a fierce struggle.”¹³ Doubt is not an “impediment” to true faith, but rather a “goad” that stimulates us to deepen our faith.¹⁴ In his discussion of stages of faith development, James Fowler describes the significant role of doubt in enabling the individual to introspect and gain greater self-understanding that will ultimately bring him closer to God. It is valuable for the individual to appreciate the complexity of truth, both in striving to connect to the divine and in realizing the limits of human comprehension.¹⁵ Theologians of many religions recognize the value of humility that results from doubt.

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 godness 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.¹⁶

Through the progression of the *mizmor*, the psalmist relinquishes his false sense of security, and humbly acknowledges his doubt and ultimate dependence on God. Faith, therefore, is not to claim certitude, but rather the willingness to act and commit oneself without certainty.¹⁷

Life's continuous quest for meaning will, almost necessarily, lead at times to spiritual anxiety due to doubt. Since often the religious individual fears to doubt yet doubts in fear, it is important to recognize the psalmist's message regarding the inevitability and permissibility, and perhaps even the benefit, of confronting the confusions and anxieties of one's environment. The juxtaposition of the two halves of the *mizmor* depicts this religious tension of man's dialectical relationship with God, as even the most confidently faithful experience uncertainty. The psalmist concludes, “Have hope in the Lord; be strong and He shall give courage to your heart, and Hope in the Lord” (v. 14), thus teaching the reader and, perhaps even himself, that doubts need not threaten faith, but can motivate an enhanced relationship with God, as a challenged faith can foster a firmer foundation and more meaningful commitment. “I begin by believing despite doubt; I end by believing all the more firmly because of doubt.”¹⁸

¹¹. Ibid.

¹². Ibid., 143.

¹³. Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (New York, 1972), 16.

¹⁴. Ibid.

¹⁵. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York, 1995), 174, 198.

¹⁶. M. Homes Hartshorne, “Faith Without Doubt is Dead,” *Theology Today* 13:1 (1956): 70. R. 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” (“The Source of Faith is Faith Itself,” *Leaves of Faith* [New York, 2003], 364).

¹⁷. As William James writes, “Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance” (“Rationality, Activity and Faith,” *The Princeton Review* 2 [1882]: 70).

¹⁸. Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (New York, 1972), 15.