PSALMS 92-100 AND MIDRASH TEHILLIM

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Introduction

The primary purpose of this project was to strengthen my rabbinic text skills to ensure that after ordination I can meaningfully study such material on my own. I chose to study Midrash Tehillim because of the diversity of its midrashim and the accessibility of its language. I focused on the Midrash on Psalms 92-100, because of its liturgical significance as well as its stirring poetry. For my text study, I utilized Solomon Buber's edition of Midrash Tehillim.

This project consists of three essays that analyze Midrash Tehillim on Psalms 92-100. The first paper examines how the Midrash responds to the biblical material and determines whether the rabbinic interpretations constitute exegesis or eisegesis. The paper outlines key elements in the biblical text and then highlights key areas of interpretation in the rabbinic material. The second paper lays out the five central themes of the Midrash: Creation, Liturgy, Repentance, God's superiority and the Messianic age. It then identifies a coherent structure to the Midrash's organization of these themes. The third paper examines scholarly questions and issues regarding the Midrash. It explores the nature of this midrashic compilation and its authorship.

As a result of this project, I have developed a deep love for midrashic literature. Reading one text over and over again helped me to appreciate the endless layers of Rabbinic thought and the complexity of the original biblical text. This particular section of Midrash Tehillim also deepened my personal worship experience during Kabbalat Shabbat. Lastly, the experience boosted my confidence in my ability to negotiate rabbinic texts as a rabbi in the field.

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Norman Cohen for all of his support. He went out of his way to meet with me regularly; respond quickly to countless emails; and ensure that I kept to a reasonable time line. He pushed me to ask critical questions of the text as a whole, rather than focusing only on the individual midrashim. I would also like to thank my classmate Diana Fersko for being a wonderful chavruta who enriched this entire process with her positive energy, organization and resolve.

First Paper:

Comparison of the Biblical and Rabbinic Material

This paper analyzes the relationship between Psalms 92-100 and Midrash Tehillim's commentary on those psalms. It examines to what extent the Midrash responds to the biblical material and whether the rabbinic interpretations constitute exegesis or eisegesis. In other words, does the biblical text determine the meaning? Do the Rabbis examine the text and form an opinion or do they use the text as a stepping-stone for their own agenda? Overall, the Rabbis focus less on issues of language and structure and more on key themes that particularly speak to them, like Creation and Messianic Redemption. The paper first outlines key elements in the biblical text. Then, progressing psalm by psalm, it highlights key areas of interpretation that the rabbinic material addresses.

What the Rabbis Overlook

This material from Midrash Tehillim does not generally respond to issues of language and structure in the biblical material. First, the Midrash does not address examples of word plays and vague Hebrew. For example, the word for "wild ox" (*kir'eym*) in Ps. 92:11 has a similar sound to the root for the word for "those who are hostile" (*m're'im*) in Ps. 92:12. The word play for the two subjects emphasizes the contrast between the verses. While God raises up Israel's horns like those of the wild ox, God brings down the enemies who are hostile toward Israel. Instead of this word play, the Rabbis focus on the word "wild ox" (*re'eym*) in connection with King David. R. Huna teaches that David once miraculously survived riding upon a *re'eym*. As a result, he vowed to build the Temple as high as the horns of the dangerous animal. Therefore, v.11, "You raise up my horn like the wild ox," can be understood to mean that David raised up the Temple as high as the horns of the wild ox. Perhaps, the *re'eym* in this midrash represents the

dangerous enemies that David had to defeat in order to secure Jerusalem. In which case, both the biblical word play and the midrash of R. Huna revolve around enemies.

The Midrash overlooks several other examples of key words, repetitions, emphases and unclear Hebrew in the biblical material. The verb "to destroy" (*yatz'mitem*) appears twice in Ps. 94:23: "He will turn back against them their wickedness, through their evil He will destroy them, the Lord our God will destroy them." God is the subject in both uses of the verb. The repetition of this violent word seems to emphasize the seriousness of the punishment, the utter destruction that God would bring. In addition, the Hebrew phrase *v'oz melekh* at the beginning of Ps. 99:4 is unclear. The JPS translation treats it as a noun: "mighty king". The Alter translation assumes that the prefix *bet* is understood within the context of the verse and treats is as a prepositional phrase: "And with a king's strength." Furthermore, the Hebrew word *banot* in Ps. 97:8 can be translated as either "daughters" (Alter) or "villages" (JPS). Rabbinic understanding of the verse could help differentiate between the two contrasting definitions.

Second, the Midrash does not fully address rare phrases in these psalms. For example, the word for "pounding" (JPS) or "roaring" (Alter) in Ps. 93:3, *dakyam*, is a hapax legomenon meaning that it only occurs once in the Tanakh. Ibn Ezra defines this Hebrew word *dakyam* as "shattering". He explains that God causes this to happen when God sends angels like winds to the earth. Similarly, Radak connects this word to the verb for "crush" (*d'kita*) in Ps. 44:20, 51:10. As explanation for this rare word, the Rabbis only offer a brief word play. They interpret Ps. 93:3 to mean that God oppressed (*mid'caech*) them with cruel punishments, playing on a possible root for *dakyam* as "to oppress" (*d-k-a*). In addition, in 99:1, God is described as being "enthroned upon cherubim" (*yoshev*

k'ruvim). This moniker for God only appears here in the Tanakh. Were these cherubim angels? Does this passage refer to the Temple? This complicated name for God remains overlooked by the Midrash. Perhaps, the image emphasizes that God is as exalted over all just as the Temple is. Similarly, the term "silent realm" (*dumah naf'shi*) in Ps. 94:17 does not appear elsewhere in the Tanakh. Radak understands the phrase to mean death. He likens it to dwelling in a grave. The Midrash does not further define either rare phrase.

Third, the Midrash seems uninterested in the structural forms of the biblical text. For example, chiastic structures mark many of these psalms. Ps. 92:5, 6, 12 offer the best examples. For instance, in v. 5:

a. For You made me rejoice, Lord,
b. Through Your acts,
B. Of the work of Your hands
A. I sing in gladness.

The four elements form a mirror-like reflection in the shape of an "X". Modern biblical scholars have shown a particular fascination with how this structural aspect of the text gives the poetic words added rhetorical power. However, the Rabbis do not seem interested in it. So, too, the evil ones in Ps 92:8 spring up (*p-r-ch*) like grass while the righteous in Ps. 92:13 spring up (*p-r-ch*) like a palm tree. The use of the same verb in the two verses emphasizes the differences between the fate of the righteous and the fate of the evil. While grass is ephemeral, the palm tree has deep roots. Furthermore, Ps 93, 94, 95, 96 and 97 have no superscription at the beginning and Ps. 98 has only a zero-degree superscription of "Song" (*Mizmor*). This rare formatting sets these six psalms apart from the others, whose superscriptions typically indicate who the psalm is meant for such as David, Asaph, the Korahites and others. Yet, the Rabbis do not react to this unique attribute of these psalms.

Fourth, the Midrash does not overtly treat Psalms 92-100 as a discrete unit. The Rabbis do not explicitly explore the linguistic connections between Psalms 92-100. For example, the phrase *Adonai Malakh* repeats throughout these psalms in Ps. 93:1, 96:10, 97:10 and 99:1. Ps. 95 has a similar kingship theme although not this exact phrase. As a result of these similarities, modern scholarship views these psalms as constituting a separate section and refers to them as the "Kingship Psalms."

Fifth, the Midrash ignores the multiple intertextual allusions to other psalms. For example, Psalms 92 and 94 share vocabulary. "To understand" (*yavin*) appears in both Ps. 92:7 and Ps. 94:7 and "evil ones" (*re'im*) appears in both Ps. 92:12 and Ps. 94:16. In addition, Psalms 96 and 98 both begin with the term "new song" (*shir hadash*). The Rabbis do not comment on what constitutes a "new song," but this term also appears in Ps. 93:3, 40:4, 144:9 and 149:1. Of those examples, only Ps. 149:1 begins with the same call, "Sing to the Lord a new song!" When commenting on Ps. 96:1, Rashi argues that the term *shir hadash* means a messianic psalm about the future. Furthermore, Psalms 96 and 98 also conclude similarly. Ps. 96:13 ends, "He judges the world in justice and people in His faithfulness," while Ps. 98:9 ends, "He judges the world in justice and peoples righteously." The only major difference between the two verses is the final words: "faithfulness" (*emunah*) and "righteousness" (*meisharim*).

There are also multiple examples of intertextual allusions to other sections of the Tanakh. For example, Ps. 95:11 concludes with a quotation from God, "They shall not come to My resting-place." This alludes to the punishment that God decrees in Numbers 14 when the spies return with their pessimistic message about the Land of Israel. Furthermore, the imagery in Psalm 97 of a mountain afire surrounded my dense fog,

lightning and clouds echoes the account of Mount Sinai in Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 4. Lastly, the imagery in Ps. 98:8, “Mountains together sing gladly” is echoed in Is. 55:12 where the mountains and hills shout aloud, employing the same verb for rejoice (*r-n-n*).

What the Rabbis Address

The omitted biblical material explicated above demonstrates the Midrash’s general lack of interest in issues of language, structure and allusion. As readers and commentators of the text, the Rabbis have another agenda as to what they choose to focus upon. They are primarily attracted to the thematic content of the Psalms.

Psalm 92

The Midrash focuses the majority of its commentary on Psalm 92. Perhaps, this is due to the liturgical importance of Psalm 92 and/or the psalm’s linguistic connection to Shabbat. Psalm 92 begins with “A song for the Sabbath day” (*Mizmor Shir L’Yom HaShabbat*). This superscription only appears in this psalm. The Rabbis present several connections between this psalm and Shabbat and Creation. First, the psalm begins with two words for song: *mizmor* and *shir*. Shabbat also has double (*kaful*) portions of many things: manna; sacrifices; punishments; rewards and warnings.

Second, the Rabbis link this psalm to the liturgy of the Shabbat. The text notes that we welcome Shabbat with psalms (*mizmor*) and songs (*shir*). It then follows with a midrash from R. Levi about each hour of the sixth day of Creation. After Adam sins in the tenth hour and is brought to judgment in the eleventh hour, God is about to destroy his new creation in the twelfth hour. Suddenly, Shabbat arrives and advocates on Adam’s

behalf before God. After listening to Shabbat's pleas to preserve the holiness and rest of the seventh day, God decides to only expel Adam from the Garden. Out of immense gratitude to Shabbat for saving his life, Adam begins to sing a hymn to Shabbat. However, Shabbat interrupts him and insists that they sing a hymn to God together instead. As a result, Psalm 92 begins: "It is good to acclaim the Lord and to sing hymns to Your name, Most High." This midrash places the verses of the psalm into the context of a richly imaginative chapter in the Adam narrative.

Third, the text continues with another midrash from R. Levi. Once Adam has left the Garden, the Shabbat light continues for 36 hours until Saturday evening. The sun then begins to set at Shabbat's conclusion. Adam panics at seeing the creeping darkness, because he thinks that God is again trying to kill him. In order to calm him, God has Adam find two stones and strike them together to create fire. When Adam sees the flame, he recites the blessing for Havdalah: "Blessed are You…who creates the light of the fire." This second midrash again places the verses in the Adam narrative in order to explain another piece of Shabbat liturgy: the ritual of Havdalah.

Ps. 92:4 describes praising God with an *asor*, a rare word from the root for the number ten which does not appear often in the Tanakh. From the context of the verse, it appears to be an instrument like the harp (*navel*) or lyre (*kinor*). The Midrash explains that the harp that David played on had ten strings, thus the word means a "ten-stringed instrument". It goes on to list the significant ritual and liturgical events that require ten Jewish men according to Jewish law: assemblies; circumcision; recital of the Kedushah; Halitzah; and marriage. It also quotes Ruth 4:2: "And he took ten men for the elders of

the city." This interpretation of *asor* illustrates that the Midrash occasionally does focus on explaining rare words.

The Rabbis link Psalm 92 to a vision of the World-to-Come. Firstly, the Midrash focuses on Ps. 92:5: "For You made me rejoice, Lord, through Your acts, of the work of Your hands I sing in gladness." The text cites two aggadic tales to explain this verse. R. Jehezekiah's story focuses on the disciples of R. Simeon ben Yohai who envy the riches of a fellow disciple. R. Simeon teaches his disciples that the material wealth they earn in this world will detract from their reward in the World-to-Come. Therefore, the students recite v. 5. The second story revolves around R. Simeon ben Halafta who prays for money so that he can provide for his family on Passover. As a result, he receives a precious stone that he uses to buy food for the holiday. When his wife discovers what he has done, she chastises him, because he took now what could later have been his portion in the World-to-Come. She makes him return everything and pray that the stone be returned. In addition, the Midrash links v. 5 back to Adam's narrative. God takes Adam on a tour of the World-to-Come. During the tour, Adam sees that the righteous will dwell in the Garden of Eden; that the four kingdoms will perish; and that the son of Jesse will rule in a time to come (*l'atid lavo*). Therefore, Adam praises God's works with the words of v. 5. All three of these stories interpret the great works and acts in v. 5 as rewards that will occur in the World-to-Come.

Secondly, the Midrash utilizes vv. 8-13 to present a clear Messianic vision through Adam's eyes. During God's tour of the future described above, Adam sees what will transpire when the Messiah comes. At first the wicked will cover the face of the earth like grass as described in v. 8 and the enemies will place a heavy yoke upon the

Israelites. Then, the days of the Messiah will come and God will be on high forever as in v. 9 and the enemies will perish as in vv. 10, 12. The Israelites will be like the fresh green olive oil in v. 11. A son of David will thrust to the four ends of the earth like the high horns of the wild ox in v. 11 and he will be pleasant looking, sweet and good like the palm-tree of v. 13.

Thirdly, the Midrash utilizes the palm-tree in v. 13 to further build upon a Messianic vision. Just as the shadow of the palm-tree is far away, so the rewards of the righteous will not arrive until the world-to-come. Just as a palm-tree can be transplanted from row to row, God can transplant Israel from an unclean to a clean land where they will dwell in the holy court of the Temple as described in v. 14. These various visions of a future world all emphasize that, while Israel has suffered greatly, they know that they will eventually receive their reward and see their enemies punished for their sins.

The Midrash also explores the themes of sin and repentance. The Rabbis reinterpret Ps 92:2 as, "It is a good thing to confess to the Lord". This interpretation transforms "To thank" (*l'hodot*) into "to confess". In this version of the Creation story, God saves Adam from a punishment of death because he confesses his sin. In addition, the Midrash focuses on the stories of Moses and Adam in light of the conclusion of this psalm in v. 16: "To tell the Lord is upright, my rock, there is no wrong in Him." How can God be perfect if God kept Moses out of Israel and brought death to Adam? Both Moses and Adam refuse to blame God for their punishments and take full responsibility for their sins. Adam even likens himself to a patient who refuses to follow his doctor's orders.

Psalm 92 focuses on the central question: Why does evil flourish? It answers that there is an ultimate system of God's justice whereby the righteous eventually flourish and

the evil are defeated. Despite the superscription, it does not have any other overt references to Shabbat. The Midrash makes the connection between Psalm 92 and Shabbat more explicit, while simultaneously placing the psalm in the context of the creation story of Adam in Genesis. Both the Bible and the Midrash share a sense of ultimate justice (and victory) of the righteous, but the Midrash links this vision more explicitly with the World to Come and/or the Messianic era. Lastly, in connection with this struggle of good and evil, the Midrash introduces the notion of repentance.

Psalm 93

The beginning of Psalm 93 repeats the word "clothed" (*lavesh*) twice when referring to God. What does it mean for God to wear clothing? This anthropomorphic image appears many times in the Tanakh, particularly in 2 Samuel and Deutero-Isaiah. In interpreting this verse, the Midrash responds with a two-part teaching from R. Hanina. First, God is unique because clothes become God and God becomes God's clothes. Second, God wears seven garments during seven different key moments in Jewish history: Red Sea; Mount Sinai; War with Babylonia; War with Media; War with Greece; War with Edom (or Rome); and the Messianic era. These seven events follow the flow of Jewish history leading up to the Messianic era. The textual support for the existence of these seven garments requires the explication of multiple biblical quotations in order to link the verb "to wear" (*lavesh*) to the different events. For instance, in Is. 59:17, God wears (*lavesh*) the clothing of vengeance (*bigdei nakam*). Then, Jer. 51:11 describes God's plan against Babylon as vengeance for the Temple using *nakam*, the same Hebrew word used above in Is. 59. The assumption behind the Rabbis' logic is as follows: if A

(Ps. 93 *lavesh*) = B (Is. 59 *lavesh*) and B (Is. 59 *nakam*) = C (Jer. 51 *nakam*), then A = C. Therefore, God wore a garment during the battle against Babylon. Again, the image of God wearing attributes like vengeance appears throughout the Tanakh. Overall, the Rabbis search for different uses of the verb *lavesh* to construct the midrash about God's clothing.

Psalm 93 concentrates on water imagery in vv. 3-4. The language emphasizes the powerful sounds that water can make and the heights that it can reach. The Midrash responds to this theme of the power of water with ambivalence. On the one hand, the Midrash stresses the special relationship between God and the waters. The text tells the parable of a King who gives a legion a special honor that cannot be revoked, because they sang him a hymn. Similarly, God gave the waters a special honor that cannot be revoked for first singing God a hymn. We know that the waters sang to God, because Ps. 93:4 reads: "More than the sound of many waters." We also know that the honor cannot be revoked, because Ps. 104:5 reads: "He established the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never totter (*bal timot olam va'ed*)." The phrase "it shall never totter" (*bal timot*) also appears in Ps. 93:1. In connecting the two passages linguistically, the parable assumes that the waters constitute the foundations of the earth. On the other hand, the Midrash views the waters as a threat to God's power. An elaborate midrash from R. Berechiah in the Name of Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma begins with the waters trying to reach up to the level of God's throne. God rebukes the waters and defeats them by stomping down upon them and setting bounds with sand to keep them in their proper place. The waters try to escape in every direction, but God orders them to fill up each of the seas. These dangerous waters represent the enemy whether Egypt or other hostile

nations. The key to this midrash is that God establishes God's superiority and sets the limitations against the threat.

Ps. 93:2 and Ps. 93:5 both emphasize God, God's house and God's throne as eternal. In response, the Midrash alludes back to the theme of Creation. The text outlines the six things that existed in God's thought before the creation of the world: throne, Messianic King, Torah, Israel, Temple and repentance. The primordial concepts of the throne and the house in the midrash connect back to those referenced in Psalm 93. While the original biblical verses do not obviously tie in to the theme of Creation, the Midrash finds a way to draw the two together. Moreover, it is worthwhile to note that all of these six things are key vehicles for bringing Redemption.

Psalm 93 focuses on God's power as King. The Midrash expands upon this theme of God's power using the imagery of clothing and water. God becomes a warrior who fights Israel's powerful enemies in the battlefield wearing many garments and who contains the powerful waters.

Psalm 94

Psalm 94 begins with "God of vengeance" (*El Nekamot*). This rare address for God seems out of place in a psalm of supplication. What does it signify here? The Midrash responds in two ways. First, it cites Is. 45:14 which describes the revenge taken upon other nations like Egypt, Nubia and Sabea. All their wealth will pass over to the Israelites and they will declare allegiance to the one God. Therefore, the first verse should be read as a plea to God: "Let the power of vengeance show forth!" Secondly, the Midrash focuses on a similar address in Neh. 1:2: "The Lord is a passionate (*El Kano*),

avenging God; The Lord is vengeful and fierce in wrath." Rabbi argues that, while wrath masters a human being, God masters wrath. In a conflicting interpretation, R. Nathan then argues that while jealousy masters a human being, God masters jealousy. Therefore, *El Nekamot* should be read as, "Master of Vengeance".

Psalm 94 also questions the prevalence of injustice in the world. Why do the wicked prosper while the Israelites suffer? The Midrash offers two answers to this difficult question. First, God is chastising Israel as a father chastises his son and these chastisements are ultimately good. The Midrash then presents a list of different reasons why chastisements are good. R. Meir argues that they bring the Israelites three gifts: Torah, World-to-Come, and Israel. R. Jose bar Judah teaches that God comes to rest upon the chastised one. R. Nathan bar Jose explains that chastisements caused the creation of the covenant between God and Israel. R. Nehemiah thinks that chastisements can serve as better sources of atonement than offerings. Second, Samuel the Younger teaches that, while the wicked receive their reward here and now, the upright will receive their reward after death. Therefore, the suffering in this world does not matter as much. This argument harkens back to the discussion of the World-to-Come in Psalm 92.

Psalm 94 confronts the central dilemma of theodicy. It offers a resolution of comfort: Ultimately God will bring justice and defeat the enemies of the Israelites. The Midrash expands upon this theological message. Focusing on the verb "to chastise" (*y-s-r*), the Midrash argues that it is good for God to chastise the Israelites right now, because in the future, God will take revenge upon other nations and the Israelites will receive their reward. The Midrash also emphasizes that God will choose to protect Israel, because of "the merit of the fathers" (*zechut avot*) and "the merit of Torah" (*zechut Torah*).

Psalm 95

The word “shout out” (*naria*) appears twice at the beginning of Psalm 95. What is the significance of this word? Why are they rejoicing so much? The Midrash answers by connecting this verse to other passages with “shout out” (*naria*) and other similar words. In Zeph. 3:14-15, Zion rejoices because God has annulled the judgment against her and swept away her enemies. In Is. 14:5, all the world cheers because God has defeated the wicked tyrants. In Prov. 11:10, the city shouts for joy because the righteous ones prosper and the wicked ones perish. In Ps. 94:23, God annihilates the evil ones. All of these passages imagine a Messianic vision where Israel rejoices, because God defeats the enemies. In another example of defining *naria*, the Midrash cites Jonah 2:10: “But I with loud thanksgiving (*b’kol todah*) will sacrifice to You.” Connecting *naria* in Ps. 93 with *b’kol todah* in Jonah, the Midrash argues that offering thanksgiving is greater than offering sacrifices. This notion of prayer taking the place of animal sacrifice is a common motif in Rabbinic literature after the destruction of the Temple.

Ps 95:3 portrays God as the King over all of the gods (*elohim*). This recognition of other deities seems to challenge a theology of monotheism. The Midrash asks this same question: Are there other gods? Doesn’t Deut. 32:39 teach: “See, then, that I, I am He; There is no god beside Me”? The text answers by quoting Chron. 16:26 and arguing that the “gods” of the evil ones are merely idols (*elilim*) who perish with their owners in Gehinom.

Psalm 95 contains multiple allusions to the Genesis Creation story. Vv. 4-5 portray God as the creator of the earth and the sea. The Midrash uses these verses to

differentiate between a mortal king and God. While the mortal king knows the dimensions of the earth and sea, God created them both and controls their measurements. God as the creator trumps the mortal king as owner. In addition, v. 7 urges the Israelites to heed God's voice this day (*hayom*). R. Levi interprets the verse as saying that if the Israelites kept but one Shabbat, then they would be redeemed. He understands *hayom* to be Shabbat.

Another biblical allusion comes at the end of Psalm 95. Vv. 8-11 alludes to Exodus 17 and the incident at Massah and Meribah. The Midrash connects this passage about the Israelites "testing God" (*nisuni*) to a midrash about the ten times that Israel tested God. The basis for the number ten comes from the reference to ten tests in Num. 14:22. The last three of these ten tests—Taberah, Massah and Kibroth-hattaavah from Deut. 9:22—provoke God even more than the others. These tests illustrate the Israelites' lack of faith in God's abilities and therefore lead to great punishment, although the possibility for repentance always remains. Lastly, the Midrash connects the psalm to Shabbat again.

Psalm 95 praises God as creator in Genesis, but also warns of an angry God who punishes the Israelites like in Numbers. The Midrash further emphasizes God's power as supreme creator, punisher and warrior.

Psalm 96

The beginning of Psalm 96 repeats the phrase "sing to YHVH" (*shiru l'Adonai*) three times. In the Midrash, R. Abahu says that the three repetitions of this phrase correspond to the three daily prayers. Each repetition connects linguistically to shacharit,

minhah or ma'ariv. For instance, the first repetition in v. 1 includes the word "new" (*chadash*), since God renews (*m'chadesh*) the work of creation every day. This is a rare example in this section of Midrash Tehillim when the Rabbis respond to the poetic repetition in the biblical text.

Ps. 96:4-5 returns to the theme of other gods and/or false idols in Ps. 95:3. However, this time the Midrash asks a different question: What exactly are *elilim*? R. Yosi goes through several Hebrew words for false gods and explains the etiology of their names. For instance, the word *atzavim* brings its worshipper grief (*mitazbim*) from the same Hebrew root. In addition, the Midrash adds the word "but" (*aval*) to v. 5 to help explain its meaning: "For all gods of the people are ungods, but the Lord has made the heavens." Only God serves as Creator.

The Midrash frames the rest of Psalm 96 as a vision of the coming of God's rule on earth. Each line of the psalm elaborates upon the picture of the Messianic era in the World-to-Come. In this future time, they will grant glory to God's name and bring tribute to God's courts as described in Ps. 96:8. They will worship God as imagined in Is. 66:23. God will reign as King over all the earth in righteousness without the presence of the wicked as described in Ps. 96:10 and imagined in Zech. 14:9. Finally, God will judge the people in equity and deliver the people Israel while the heavens and fields of Eden rejoice, as described in Ps. 96:10-12. While some of the wording of the original biblical text supports the rabbinic vision, this midrash illustrates a time when the Rabbis impose a strong agenda unto the biblical text.

Psalm 96 sings praises to God as King and as Judge. It imagines the inhabitants of the earth coming together to sing of God's kingship and the subsequent coming of God's rule

on earth, a messianic vision of justice. The Midrash further emphasizes these same themes. First, God is supreme over all of the other competing idols. Second, the Midrash expands upon the messianic vision interpreting each line to paint a picture of this future era with liturgy and ritual images.

Psalm 97

Psalm 97 continues to explore a Messianic vision in which God shows mercy to the righteous and punishes the nations of the earth. In Ps. 97:1 God rules and all rejoice. The Midrash teaches that God cannot reign nor can God's name or throne be whole as long as Edom exists. However, in the fourth exile, God will become King and the vision of Zech 14:9 referenced above in the midrash on Psalm 96 will be realized. Then, God will fight against the nations of the earth. The clouds, fog and fire that surround God in Ps. 97:2-3 signify that God will show mercy to the people of Israel, but the nations of the earth will be burned up. The earth quaking and mountains melting like wax in Ps. 97:4-5 also represents the punishment that the nations of the earth will face in the World-to-Come. Similar to Psalm 96, this midrash also pushes a rabbinic agenda onto the biblical text. It feels more like a continuation of the discourse begun in Psalm 96 than a separate interpretation of Psalm 97.

In Ps. 97:7, all gods (*elohim*) bow to God. Similar to Ps. 95:3 and Ps. 96:5, the biblical text again challenges notions of monotheism. This time the Midrash uses the verse to tell a specific story about God's actions in the World-to-Come. God will have a dialogue with all of the idolaters and prove to them that the idols that they believe in are made of nothing by bringing the idols to life and having them come and bow down to

God. God brings them to life and has them come and bow down to him, which greatly embarrasses the idolaters. At that moment, the idolaters will realize their mistakes and feel shame as described in Ps. 97:7 and they will throw away their idols to Abaddon. Then, Zion will rejoice because of God's judgments against the nations of the earth, saving the Israelites from the wicked as described in Ps. 97:8-10. The Midrash weaves together two themes from earlier in the text: defending monotheism and imagining the World-to-Come.

Ps. 97:11 reads that, "Light is sewn for the just." What does this "light" represent? The Midrash teaches that God created this great light when God created the earth. God has been hiding this light away until the time that God will unsheath it and proclaim Ps. 97:12 that the righteous can rejoice. Although a typical example of rabbinic exegesis of a key word, this last section of the midrash in Psalm 97 combines two of the key thematic elements explored above: Creation and a Messianic vision. It begins with an element from Creation and turns it into a tool of final redemption.

Psalm 97 focuses on a God of mountain and fire, a God of Sinai, where the Heavens and All proclaim God's Kingship. The Midrash, however, focuses more on a messianic vision of God's triumph. The rabbinic text takes the excitement of Psalm 97 and projects it into a future vision.

Psalm 98

Psalm 98 has more of a military emphasis with words like "right hand", "holy arm", "sounding of horns" and "victory". If this is a battle, then who is the enemy in Psalm 98? The Midrash draws a parallel between Ps. 98:1 and Is. 42:10, both of which

share the same first four words in Hebrew. The Isaiah verse also refers to God as a warrior and declares a new time in the future—a time of deliverance for the Israelites after exile. Similarly, R. Aha connects the "holy arm" (*zaroa kadsho*) in Ps. 98:1 to Is. 52:10 where God bares God's holy arm to defeat all the nations and declare victory for Israel. R. Aha teaches that this can only happen with Israel's redemption and comes back to the psalm by referencing Ps. 98:3 when God remembers the House of Israel and brings victory. Moreover, all three verbs in Ps. 98:4 (*pitzchu, ran'nu, zameiru*) basically mean to "celebrate musically". Why does the text repeat itself like a piece of liturgy? The Midrash explains that all of this celebration is to teach us that complete happiness can only come with a return from exile with Israel's redemption. In this case, the celebration is expressed liturgically. Again, the Rabbis take each disparate image from the psalms and link them back to a World-to-Come.

In Ps. 98:8, the rivers clap and the mountains sing. This personification of nature also appears earlier in Ps. 93:3 and Ps. 96:11-12. Can these elements really behave like humans and clap and sing? R. Nehemiah points to three references in the Tanakh with the clapping of hands and explains the mechanics of the clapping: People clap hands; trees clap branches; and waters lap against the river bank. Here the Midrash employs an independent exegetical voice. It assesses a difficult question about a detail in the psalm's content/wording and offers an answer with scriptural citations.

Psalm 98 focuses on God as Warrior and God's nature (*tzedek, hesed, emunah*). The Midrash, on the other hand, primarily continues the Messianic vision of redemption from Psalms 96 and 97. Every image from the military elements to the musical celebration to nature clapping becomes a different sign of redemption.

Psalm 99

Similar to Psalm 96, the Midrash uses the beginning verses of Psalm 99 to create a Messianic vision of God returning to Zion, building the Temple and meting out punishment. The people tremble in Ps. 99:1 because God will redeem Israel and the Kingdom of Heaven will be at peace. According to R. Hanina, when God returns to Zion, God will be great as described in Ps. 99:2, "The Lord is great in Zion and exalted over all the peoples". Alternatively, R. Johanan interprets v. 2 to mean that God is great because God did not spare God's own people Israel from punishment. Now, God will return to punish the "destroyers" even more.

Psalm 99 imagines God as an awesome King. God is situated in Zion, but exalted above the whole world. It contains several allusions to the Temple on the Holy Mountain with its throne/footstool and its Levitical priests. It also adds images of leaders like Moses, Aaron and Samuel. The Midrash projects this portrayal of God, the Temple and the leadership into the future where God will return to Zion and create justice.

Psalm 100

Psalm 100 begins with the unique superscription, "a thanksgiving psalm" (*Mizmor L'Todah*). What defines this unique type of psalm? The Midrash offers two answers, all playing on the verb *l'hodot*. First, R. Jacob teaches that a scene of *todah* to God includes every knee bending and every tongue swearing loyalty as described in Is. 45:23. This scene of God's Kingship will happen in "God's time" (*bezman sheli*), presumably an idiom for the World-to-Come. In this interpretation, *todah* means to

recognize God's Kinship. Second, the Midrash links Ps. 100:1 to Prov. 28:13: "He who covers his sins will not succeed. But he who confesses (*modeh*) and gives them up will find mercy." The Midrash offers three interpretations of this Proverbs verse. First, R. Abba bar Kahana argues that the first part of the Proverbs verse applies to Adam who did not properly repent for the sin of eating the fruit and therefore did not succeed in staying in the Garden of Eden. Conversely, R. Huna thinks that the second part of the Proverbs verse refers to Cain who did repent in the presence of God. Second, the first part of the verse concerns Saul while the second part of the verse concerns David. Lastly, R. Simon and R. Joshua ben Levi argue that this verse describes the nature of God's relationship to mortals. When a human being refuses to confess, God judges her. However, when a human being does confess, God remits the charge against him. In this multi-layered second interpretation of Ps. 100:1, *todah* means to confess to God in order to repent.

The Hebrew word *todah* repeats in v. 4: "Come into His gates in thanksgiving (*todah*), His courts in praise. Acclaim Him, Bless His name." The Midrash takes this notion of thanksgiving and applies it to its messianic vision. R. Pinehas, R. Levi and R. Johanan teach that in the World-to-Come, there will be no sacrifices or prayers, except for the thanksgiving sacrifice or the thanksgiving prayer, which will last forever. This interpretation of Psalm 100 recognizes the liturgical sense in the original biblical text with words like worship (*ivdu*) and courts (*chatzrotav*), but imagines the worship occurring in the future. The Midrash takes the biblical focus on *todah* and links it to a Messianic era.

Psalm 100 primarily focuses on giving thanks to God. The psalm does not seem to fit with the other psalms in this section. It is the shortest psalm in this grouping. It does

not progress through an argument or represent a change in the speaker, but repeats the same notion of thanksgiving in different ways. If one assumes that these psalms form a unit, then perhaps this psalm functions like a postscript or a short ending after the other psalms have established God's Kingship. This set of psalms begins with *Tov l'hodot l'YHVH* and ends with *Mizmor l'todah*. The word *todah* acts like an inclusio to the psalmic unit.

The Midrash chooses not to address many key elements of the biblical material, particularly around specific linguistic or structural issues. It rarely goes line by line through an entire psalm. The first two psalms have extensive commentary, but the commentary on the rest of the Kabbalat Shabbat psalms is very concise, picking and choosing specific themes to discuss. While there are examples of exegesis, the core of the rabbinic text is eisegesis. The Midrash focuses primarily on the themes of Creation, Liturgy, Messianic Redemption, and Repentance. These prominent themes demonstrate that the Rabbis have a clear agenda as they read through the biblical material. Yet, how much does this Rabbinic agenda shape the text as a whole? Does a coherent structure hold the Midrash together? Do the key themes above tie the material together and, if so, to what extent?

Second Paper:

Theme and Context of the Rabbinic Material

The Rabbis tie the material in Midrash Tehillim together around five central themes: Creation; Liturgy; Repentance; God's superiority; and the Messianic age. The first section of this paper examines the nuance, flow and commonality among the textual examples of each theme. It also attempts to identify a coherent structure to the material's organization of the five themes.

The theme of Creation appears throughout the Midrash. First, in connection with Ps. 92, the Midrash focuses on Adam's experience during the last days of Creation, citing two midrashim from R. Levi. The first midrash describes every hour of God's creation of Adam on the sixth day, from gathering and kneading the dust to breathing life into the first human. It expands upon the Genesis narrative by visualizing the steps required to form the first human being. The second midrash from R. Levi suggests that there was only light on the day of Shabbat, because the phrase "there was evening" (*va'yehi erev*) does not appear in Genesis regarding the sixth day. When darkness finally creeps in at the conclusion of Shabbat, it terrifies Adam and leads him to create the ritual of Havdalah. Second, in response to the images of God's house and throne in Ps. 93:3 and 93:5, the Midrash tells of the six things that existed in God's thoughts before God created the world. Third, the Midrash expands upon the portrayal of God as creator of the earth and the sea in Ps 95:4-5. While a mortal king may claim that the earth and the sea are his because he knows their measurements, God created them from the beginning and ultimately controls them. Fourth, the Midrash explains that God created the "light" (*or*) in Ps. 97:11 at the same time that God created the world. Lastly, as a commentary on Ps. 98:8, R. Nehemiah gives textual support for the ability of three items in Creation—people, trees and waters—to all clap, either literally or figuratively.

These five examples of the theme of Creation all emphasize an omnipotent God who can create, control and destroy everything that humans know. The majority of the examples focus on the items that God created whether before or during the act of Creation. The first example is the exception in that it emphasizes Creation from Adam's perspective rather than God's. Overall, as the Midrash progresses, the examples seem to flow towards Redemption. For instance, the six things in God's thoughts before Creation—Throne, Messianic King, Torah, Israel, Temple and Repentance—represent many of the key elements of the Midrash's theme of Redemption that are explicated later in this paper. Moreover, God's creation, the great light of Ps. 97:11, will be reexperienced in a future time when God will take it from its sheath like a warrior readying his weapon for battle in defense of Israel. Lastly, the biblical citations that expand upon the image of clapping in Ps. 98:8 are all set within the context of a future Redemption. The trees of the field in Is. 55:2 celebrate a future time when the people will return to God. The floods rejoice that God has come to judge the earth in Ps. 98:9. The structure of the Midrash implies a cyclical nature to history. The World-to-Come returns to the beginning; the journey is from one Eden to another Eden.

The theme of Liturgy is also a focus of the Midrash. First, in its interpretation of Ps. 92:1, the Midrash argues that, just as Jews should eat, drink and wear clean clothes on Shabbat, they should also sing songs and hymns. Although the text does not explicitly refer to Kabbalat Shabbat, it does hint that the actual words of this psalm were used to welcome in Shabbat. Moreover, in the first midrash of R. Levi referred to above, Adam joins with the personified Shabbat to sing Psalm 92 as a hymn to God on the seventh day of Creation. Second, in the interpretation of Ps. 92:4, the Midrash gives an etiology for

Havdalah involving Adam and his fear of permanent darkness. It includes the specific formula for the blessing over the Havdalah candle: "who creates the light of the fire" (*borei m'orei haeish*). This Shabbat blessing is explained anonymously through an aggadic reading of Adam's narrative. Then, R. Huna in the name of R. Abahu in the name of R. Yohanan adds that Havdalah is also recited at the end of Yom Kippur, because the Priests would extinguish the fire on the Temple altar. Here the text uses a Tannaitic argument about the practice in the Temple to explain the Yom Kippur blessing. The Midrash ties several of its key themes to images of light and darkness as illustrated by this example and the example above of the *or zarua latzadik* in Ps. 97:11. Darkness represents this world while lightness represents the World-to-Come.

Third, R. Abahu returns to explain that the three repetitions of the phrase "sing to YHVH" (*shiru l'Adonai*) in Ps. 96:1 correspond to the three daily prayers of Israel. Each of the phrases uses language that connects it to one of the daily prayers. For instance, the first phrase, a "new song" (*shir chadash*), links to shacharit, which praises God for renewing (*m'chadesh*) the daily work of creation. While the evidence to support these connections is not very strong, it seems more important to the Rabbis that they imagine the psalms as a form of liturgy and that they establish the importance of the three daily prayers. It sounds similar to midrashim which explain the three daily prayers based on the behavior of the three patriarchs.

Fourth, the Midrash connects another appearance of a "new song" (*shir chadash*) in Ps. 98:1 to the same phrase in Is. 42:10. The Rabbis argue that in the future Messianic era they will sing songs and play music like in Ps. 98:4-6 about the deliverance of Israel. Fifth, in commenting on Ps. 100:1-2, R. Yaakov in the name of R. Abahu in the name of

R. Aha teaches that in the World-to-Come every knee will bend and every tongue will swear loyalty to God. Then, in a reference in Ps. 100:4, R. Pinhas in the name of R. Levi and R. Yochanan in the name of R. Menachem also teach that in a future time the thanksgiving prayer and the thanksgiving sacrifice are the only forms of worship that will still exist. Here, as in the third example of the three daily prayers of Israel, the Midrash directly equates prayers with the sacrifices made at the Temple thrice daily.

Overall, the Midrash recognizes the connection between Psalms and Liturgy. The five examples progress through different types of liturgy: the first two examples explain the liturgy for Shabbat; the third example focuses on daily prayer; and the last two examples describe Messianic worship. In addition, the last three examples all focus on terminology and how it relates to liturgy. One example of the nuances of their language play occurs when they try to determine the meanings of *shir chadash* and *mizmor l'todah*.

The Midrash also emphasizes the theme of Repentance. The Midrash interprets *l'hodot* in Ps. 92:2 as "to confess". Specifically, Adam confesses to God about his sin in the Garden of Eden and, as a result, God saves him from the punishment of death. In addition, the Midrash understands the *todah* in *mizmor l'todah* in Ps. 100:1 to mean to confess to God in order to repent. Adam did not properly repent, but Cain did. Similarly, Saul did not properly repent, but David did. God forgives those who confess. Both examples interpret the word *l'hodot* as confession and look to critical biblical figures like Adam, Cain, Moses, Saul and David as examples of this principle. Moreover, in both examples, atonement reduces punishments for sins. The characters experience darkness; yet, ultimately they find the light again. This emphasis on the power of atonement is found in a midrash regarding Ps. 94:2 in which R. Nehemiah teaches that chastisements

can serve as better sources of atonement than offerings. While offerings are made from one's property, atonement must come from one's essential self. Similar to the discussion above about the connection between prayer and sacrifice, the Rabbis draw a parallel between confession and sacrifice. These two very similar interpretations seem to frame this section of Midrash Tehillim, beginning in Ps. 92 and concluding in Ps. 100. Perhaps, the Rabbis wanted to emphasize that, in addition to the tools of Creation, Repentance is also a key vehicle for Redemption.

The Midrash is concerned with emphasizing the theme of God's superiority to other gods. First, in its commentary on Ps. 95:3, the Midrash argues that there are no other gods and that the "evil ones" (*rashaim*) will go down to Gehinom with their idols (*elilim*). Second, Ps. 96:5 also says that the gods of the "peoples" (*amim*) are idols (*elilim*). The Midrash expands upon this verse with a midrash from R. Yosi about the etiology of the names for false gods. Third, in response to Ps. 97:7, R. Samuel bar Nachmani explains that in the World-to-Come, the nations of the world (umot ha'olam) will gather with their idols (*psileihem*) in their hands. They will eventually recognize and worship God and throw their idols to Abaddon. These three examples all emphasize that other peoples' gods are just idols who will ultimately perish.

There is a related, fourth example. The water imagery in Ps. 93 connects to a midrash from R. Berechiah in the name of Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma in which the waters threaten God's power by trying to reach up to God's throne. The creations in nature rebel against their Creator. Ultimately, God stomps down upon them and establishes God's superiority. Although this example does not directly reference other gods, the waters here serve the same purpose as the idols, a challenging power that God must defeat. This

notion of God's power also appears in Ps. 94:1. The Rabbis imagine God as passionate and vengeful, yet in control of that anger unlike human beings.

The theme of a Messianic Age is the most prominent in the Midrash. The text hints at the centrality of this theme at the beginning. In reaction to Ps. 92:5, the Midrash tells three aggadic tales. In the first, God shows Adam what will occur in the future: the righteous will dwell in the Garden of Eden; the four kingdoms will fall; and that the son of David and Jesse will rule in the time to come (*l'atid lavo*). Later on during the commentary on Ps. 92:8-13, Adam's vision continues. He sees that, while at first the wicked will flourish and place a heavy yoke upon the Israelites, God will eventually destroy them and be exalted over all, and the son of David will be an attractive and righteous leader. In the second and third tales about the Tannaim R. Shimon ben Yohai and R. Shimon ben Halafta, the main characters learn that what they do in this world has an impact on the reward that they will receive in the World-to-Come (*olam habaa*). While Adam witnesses the Redemption of the Israelite people, the stories of the Rabbis focus on an individual benefitting in the future. Regardless, all three stories foreshadow the key elements of the theme of a Messianic Age that the Midrash will flesh out: God as King; Four kingdoms; Defeat of the enemies and judgment; Son of David; Individual versus communal Redemption.

The Midrash emphasizes that God will be King in the time to come (*l'atid lavo*). The Midrash interprets Ps. 96:10, "Say among the nations: the Lord reigns", as supporting the visions of Is. 66:23 and Zech. 14:9 that God will be King over all of the earth and all will come to worship God. Similarly, the Midrash connects Ps. 97:1, "The Lord reigns", to Zech. 14:9 and argues that God will be King during the fourth exile. The

Rabbis understood the fourth exile to be the period of exile under Edom or the Roman Empire based on their reading of the Book of Daniel and other biblical passages. Several of the examples of this theme cite parallel phrases or images from the Prophets, particularly Isaiah, in order to connect the Psalms to a Messianic vision.

When God becomes King, God will judge and defeat Israel's enemies. First, the Midrash connects the word *naria* in Ps. 95:1 with similar words in Zeph. 3:14-15; Is. 14:5; Prov. 11:10; and Ps. 94:23. Each of these related verses describes God defeating the enemies (*oyvech*), the wicked ones (*r'shaim*) and the evil ones (*raim*). In Zeph. 3:14-15, God also annuls the judgment against the Israelites. Second, the Midrash interprets Ps. 96:10, "The world will not shake. He metes out justice to people righteously", to mean that the wicked (*r'shaim*) will no longer be present in the world and that God will only judge the peoples (*ha'umot*) equitably. Third, the Midrash understands Ps. 97:1-3 to imply that God will fight, melt and burn up the nations of the world (*umot ha'olam*), but God will be merciful to Israel in judgment. Fourth, based on Ps. 99:2, R. Johanan argues that just as God punishes Israel in this world, God will punish the destroyers (*mahrivim*) all the more so in the World-to-Come. The commentary on Ps. 95 and 99 assumes that God previously judged Israel and the nation is now being punished as a result. In the future, however, God will forgive Israel and transfer the same punishment to the enemies, but to a much more severe degree. These four examples do not always specify who constitutes the enemy. The text vacillates between communal punishment against other nations (*umot*) and individual punishment against evil or wicked people. For instance, when the text refers to the righteous, it is unclear if it is speaking about Israel as a nation or particularly moral individuals. On the whole, the text seems to assume that God will

punish both individual and communal manifestations of evil just as God will reward individual and communal expressions of righteousness.

The Midrash also does not always specify where this Redemption will occur. Utilizing the metaphor of the palm tree in Ps. 92:13, the Midrash foretells that God will transplant Israel from an unclean to a clean land in order to grow in the holy court (*b'hatzrot*) of the Temple. The Midrash also argues that the courts (*hatzrotav*) in Ps. 96:8 refer to the Temple at Jerusalem. Furthermore, commenting upon Ps. 99:2, R. Hanina argues that God will return to Zion. Together, these three examples imagine the Temple in Zion as the site of God's Redemption of Israel.

This theme of a Messianic age first appears at the outset in Psalm 92 and continues all the way through to Psalm 100, becoming more and more of a focus of the Midrash with each psalm. By Psalms 97 thru 99, much of the commentary revolves around the World-to-Come. Moreover, as the Midrash progresses, the idea of this future era grows more elaborate and less textually based. It is also centered more and more on Zion and the Temple. Interestingly, the majority of the examples of this theme are anonymous, with only a few Palestinian Amoraim cited directly.

The Rabbinic Worldview and Its Context

These five themes come together to paint a portrait of the rabbinic worldview. The Rabbis fleshed out the Genesis narrative and the image of God as Creator. They focused on liturgy and worship after the destruction of the Second Temple. They emphasized the importance of repentance, even projecting it back upon biblical figures.

They stressed God's superiority to other deities and God's immense power. They envisioned the Messianic era in great detail.

The second section of this paper examines the connection between these five themes and the historical context of the Rabbis. Why do the Rabbis choose to read these themes into the biblical text? What about their environment and background could have influenced them? How does the portrayal of the Amoraim impact our understanding of the specific amoraic traditions redacted in Midrash Tehillim?

No consensus exists regarding the dating of Midrash Tehillim. Leopold Zunz believes that the text was completed at the end of the Gaonic era and edited in Italy. On the other hand, the style, language and names of the Amoraim mentioned convince Solomon Buber that the majority of the material was earlier Palestinian in origin. He thinks that later copyists wrote in the additional elements that make it seem late Gaonic. William Braude agrees that the majority of the material dates back to the Talmud from Palestinian Amoraim. However, he argues for an extended development of the text spanning from the 3rd to the 13th century. Hanokh Albeck agrees with Braude that there was a long period of composition ending in the 13th century. However, he disagrees that the majority of the material is from Palestinian Amoraim. He attempts to prove that the author also drew upon later Eretz Yisrael midrashim.[1] For the purpose of analysis, this paper will assume that the material in Midrash Tehillim is a product of Amoraim from the Land of Israel and that the final layers of redaction come from a later period.

Overall, the meta-narrative of our section of the Midrash looks towards a future time of Israel's Redemption. The Rabbis use the first four themes of Creation, Liturgy,

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[1] HJ Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1992), 322-23.

Repentance and God's superiority to reach a Messianic conclusion; they represent the key steps along the rabbinic journey towards the World-to-Come. As part of this strategy, the theme of Messianism is embedded in all of the other major themes. Several of the examples of the themes of Creation and Repentance are framed as vehicles for Redemption; examples of the theme of Liturgy focus on Messianic worship; and God's superiority also is evident in the World-to-Come. Moreover, Creation contains elements of Messianic potential. For example, the Rabbis see Shabbat as a taste of the World-to-Come (*me'ein olam ha'ba*). In other words, the Rabbis construct a narrative for how the people Israel will reach the World-to-Come by imagining a clear path: the people are created; they are sinful and punished with chastisements; they then repent for their sins and they are redeemed.

During the amoraic period, liturgy is fluid; still it is not yet fixed. Seth Schwartz describes the worship practice at the time: "According to the consensual view, even the rabbinic liturgy of the fifth and sixth centuries was characterized in Palestine by a marked lack of fixity. Not only did the liturgy vary from community to community, but even within communities, prayer leaders were expected to improvise their prayers."[2] In order to centralize their authority over Jewish life, the Amoraim want to gain more control of ritual practice and did so by codifying the fluid liturgy described above. The Psalms had been a critical part of the religious life of the Temple; they were in essence the Temple liturgy. Therefore, the Psalms constitute a natural place for the Rabbis to discuss liturgy in an effort to lend their innovative, fixed liturgy credibility and continuity. Without the ability to offer sacrifices at the Temple, Jews need to find new ways to atone for their

[2] Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 250.

sins. While liturgy is one way to respond to this challenge, the Amoraim recognize that it is not enough; therefore, they also stress the importance of repentance. As our section of Midrash Tehillim highlights, the Rabbis emphasized that repentance could function in the same role as the sacrifices of the past.

The Jews of the amoraic period often felt powerless. They witnessed the destruction of the Temple and multiple uprisings were crushed and they were then subject to a foreign ruler. The Christianization of the Roman Empire made them feel even more marginalized. They faced numerous incentives to integrate into the surrounding society and convert to Christianity. As a result, the Rabbis emphasized the superiority of their God in order to convince people to remain Jewish and to reassure them. While they may have felt weak, they were supported by a powerful deity. While other gods may tempt them, God will ultimately triumph over these mere idols.

The earlier rabbinic circles of the Tannaim did not emphasize the notion of a Messianic era. Moshe Idel explains why the Tannaim may have avoided this topic:

> "In a period of deep restructuring of Jewish life after the destruction of the Temple, as the mishnaic period was, the cultivation of a restorative, utopian, or revolutionary ideology, which would project the focus on religious activity into the future, could evidently disturb the constructive efforts of the elite to offer an alternative ritualistic version of the second Commonwealth cult, with the temple at the center. The concerns were much more with the present, and with the future as an organic extension of the present, to be shaped by the regulations of Halakhah. At the same time, the distinct messianic nature of emerging Christianity, which could hardly escape the attention of the Jewish authors, might have inhibited an elaboration of eschatological issues in those areas of Jewish speculation where Christianity became influential."[3]

Idel argues that, after the destruction of the Second Temple, the initial generations of Rabbis wanted stability. As a result, they focused on ritual, law and structure rather than

[3] Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 42-43.

revolution, and emphasized the distinction between their Judaism and Christianity. They avoided predictions about a time to come and instead focused on present religious practice. Lawrence Schiffman offers additional reasons for the Tannaim's conservative approach. First, these Rabbis had witnessed the deadly Bar Kochba Revolt against Rome, which had clear Messianic overtones. They wanted to mute the apocalypticism of the past for their own safety. Second, the Tannaim cared most about the observance of halakha in this world. They viewed history as "the ongoing process of sanctification, not salvation, a one-time event in the end".[4] Overall, the tannaitic texts put off these Messianic themes in favor of a restorative and quietist approach. However, a later eschatology was always behind the scenes.

A greater emphasis on the Messianic era reemerges in the time of the Amoraim between the 3rd and 8th centuries CE. The Babylonian Talmud teaches that God will send the Messiah after a period of terrible misfortunes and only when Israel repents. The Messiah will descend from the House of David during the last third of the history of the world. The exiles will return to the Land of Israel, the wicked will be judged, then the righteous exalted, and Jerusalem rebuilt. They already saw glimmers of hope about the rebuilding of the Temple.[5] The Amoraic midrash continues along these same lines of the Babylonian Talmud with an added emphasis on the sequence of the four kingdoms. Although these midrashic texts are primarily compilations of traditions of the Sages of the Land of Israel rather than Babylon, they were being edited on the eve of the Muslim

[4] Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Cambridge History of Judaism v. 4* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1063.
[5] Schiffman, 1066-67.

conquest when apocalyptic forms of Messianism have already become the norm.[6] Schiffman's description of the Amoraic midrashim's views of the Messianic era echoes the themes of the Messianic era in Midrash Tehillim. Overall, the Midrash also imagines Israel undergoing terrible "chastisements" until the nation repents. Then, God will send a descendent of the House of David; the exiles will return to Jerusalem; the evil will be judged; and the Temple will be restored.

Why would the Amoraim reintroduce an emphasis on the Messianic era? Did they not have the same priorities as the Tanaaim after the destruction of the Second Temple and the Bar Kochba Revolt? Neusner argues that the amoraic Messianic myth is meant to make Israel accept its present state rather than rebel against it. He writes: "In the hands of the framers of the norm-setting literature of Judaism, the Messiah serves to keep things pretty much as they were, while at the same time promising dramatic change…If Israel at large yearned for the redemption and the end, then telling them to attain that goal by doing what rabbis wanted would vastly strengthen the rabbinic system".[7] In other words, while on the surface the Messianic myth seems revolutionary and destabilizing, the Rabbis use it to reinforce the central controlling mechanism of their ideology: halakha. Neusner does not believe that the Rabbis actually anticipated immanent salvation, as the impatient and urgent tone of their texts would indicate. In fact, they advised against trying to calculate when the ultimate end would come. Rather, the Rabbis take the activist Messianic myth that they inherited from the Second Temple period and transform it into a rationale for observing their fixed practices and laws.

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[6] Schiffman, 1069.
[7] Schiffman, 176-77.

Neusner's theory sheds light on this section of Midrash Tehillim's emphasis on the Messianic era. The Amoraim do not focus on the theme of the World-to-Come in the Psalms because of political aspirations for great change; rather, they use this theme as a mechanism for reinforcing their power and worldview, while keeping the hopes of the Jewish people alive.

We have examined the historical, political and cultural context in which the midrashic traditions incorporated in Midrash Tehillim were shaped and we have analyzed the central messages that the Rabbis hoped to communicate to their constituents. This exploration helped to elucidate why Creation, Repentance, Liturgy and Messianism are the core themes of the midrash on Psalms 92-100.

The Third Paper:

Scholarly Issues and Concerns

This paper examines scholarly questions and issues regarding Midrash Tehillim. What is the nature of this midrashic compilation? Did it have a single redactor? Does the Midrash treat Psalms 92-100 as a discrete unit?

The notion of a commentary on the Book of Psalms is already hinted at in BT Kiddushin 33a when Simeon b. Judah ha-Nasi taught Hiyya two-fifths of the Book of Psalms (Sefer Tehillim). The name Aggadat Tehillim also appears several times in the Babylonian Talmud. Louis Isaac Rabinowitz argues that it is the only Midrash to a book of the Bible mentioned in the Talmud.[8] However, the Midrash Tehillim that we possess today contains only fragments of that earlier material, as Solomon Buber states in the introduction to his translation: "It cannot be doubted that in our Midrash there remain fragments of the older Midrash."[9] William Braude identifies Midrash Tehillim as a post-Talmudic midrash, which is in effect a new literary arrangement of old material that goes back to Talmudic times. This helps explain why the majority of the teachers whom Midrash Tehillim cites by name were Palestinian.[10] Therefore, the period of composition for the Midrash Tehillim that we possess today spanned several centuries, perhaps as long as a thousand years, from the 3rd to the 13th centuries. As argued earlier, this paper will assume that the material in Midrash Tehillim is a product of Amoraim from the Land of Israel and that the final layers of redaction come from a later period.

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[8] LI Rabinowitz, "Does Midrash Tehillim Reflect the Triennial Cycle of Psalms?," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 26 (1935-36): 350.
[9] Solomon Buber, *Mavo*, 4.
[10] William Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), Vol. I, xi-xii.

Midrash Tehillim has multiple manuscript discrepancies. Leopold Zunz maintained that the Midrash on Psalms 119-150 was composed at a later date based on the differences in language, subject matter, etc. Buber then verified Zunz's claim through further manuscript research.[11] Even the first section of Psalms 1-118 is likely not the work of a single redactor. The manuscripts differ considerably and there are multiple repetitions.[12] Moreover, no version of Midrash Tehillim has commentary on Psalms 123 and 131. The majority of manuscripts and printed editions of the text also exclude Psalms 96, 97 and 98; however, the glosses of Abraham Provencal from the 16th century and the Buber and Jellinek manuscripts from the 19th and 20th centuries include them.[13] Due to its inclusion of Psalms 96-98, this thesis utilizes the Buber edition of Midrash Tehillim.

In addition, Midrash Tehillim lacks a uniform style of interpretation. The Midrash can discuss every single verse in one psalm while only addressing a few verses of another psalm and then only the opening verse of yet another. Similarly, the units are a conglomerate of different midrashic styles, from longer aggadic passages to exegesis of specific words.[14] One explanation for the Midrash's lack of uniformity comes from Hanokh Albeck, who argues that the present Midrash Tehillim consists of groups of midrashim to the psalms that a later redactor joined together.[15]

Rabinowitz offers another way of understanding Midrash Tehillim as a whole. He suggests that the Psalms were read consecutively in a Triennial Cycle on Shabbat

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[11] Jacob Elbaum, "Midrash Tehillim," *Encyclopaedia Judaica, Second Edition, Volume 14*, 191.
[12] Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 322.
[13] Elbaum, "Midrash Tehillim," 192.
[14] Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, Vol. I, xiv.
[15] Elbaum, "Midrash Tehillim," 192.

afternoons. The ritual would be similar to the Torah reading that we continue to observe today. Just like the Five Books of Moses, the Book of Psalms is divided into five books. Just as the midrashim on the Five Books of Moses contain homilies based on the pericopes of the Triennial Cycle, the midrashic units in Midrash Tehillim reflect the period of the year at which the specific Psalm would be read. They can also reflect that same morning's Torah or Haftarah portion and their interrelationship.[16] For example, according to Rabinowitz's calendar calculations, Psalm 24 would be read prior to Rosh Hashanah. The Midrash links Psalm 24 to the Akedah, the Torah portion for the Jewish New Year. As another example, Rabinowitz calculates that the congregation would have read Psalms 17-18 on the Shabbat prior to Tisha B'Av. The Midrash on Psalms 17-18 directly refers to Nebuchadnezzar and the destruction of the Temple by fire.[17]

Rabinowitz conducts this type of analysis on the entire Book of Psalms. With regard to our particular section, he calculates that Psalms 92-100 would have corresponded to the end of Leviticus and beginning of Numbers during the months of May and June. Rabinowitz provides one piece of evidence for the connection between these Psalms and the corresponding biblical pericopes. He points out that the Midrash on Psalm 94 quotes Lev. 26:43 with regard to chastisements being precious.[18] However, the citation appears among four other biblical quotations with similar themes of atonement and it is one of tens of biblical citations in this section alone. Based on this material, proving the connection between the calendar and our Midrash on Psalms is difficult.

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[16] Rabinowitz, "…Triennial Cycle of Psalms?," 350-351.
[17] Rabinowitz, "…Triennial Cycle of Psalms?," 354.
[18] Rabinowitz, "…Triennial Cycle of Psalms?," 366.

What other evidence exists in our section of Midrash Tehillim that could support Rabinowitz's theory? The Midrash does not have any other citations of the specific verses from the corresponding Torah portions in Leviticus and Numbers. However, the text does allude to Shavuot, which is celebrated at the same time of year in the late Spring and early Summer when these Torah portions would be read. At the beginning of its commentary on Psalm 92, the Midrash teaches that God created seven different mountains; but, out of all of those mountains, God only chose Mount Sinai as God's own. In addition, in its explication of the word "except" (*lulei*) in Ps. 94:17, the Midrash cites R. Levi: "Wherever the term 'except' occurs in Scripture, it refers to the guardian merit of Torah, as it is said, 'Were not Your Torah my delight, I should then have perished in my affliction' (Ps. 119:92)." Both examples emphasize Mount Sinai and the centrality of Torah, which are key elements in the celebration of Shavuot.

Rabinowitz offers no criteria to evaluate these examples. How do we know what constitutes legitimate evidence of a connection between the Jewish calendar, the Torah reading and specific psalms? Does the Midrash have to directly cite a verse from the corresponding biblical chapters? Does it need to allude to shared biblical themes or images? How explicitly does it need to reference a season or time of year?[19] For instance, Rabinowitz writes: "Ps. 103 corresponds with Num. 9.22-10, the journeys of the children of Israel in the desert. The Midrash quotes a parable referring to 'all the days that the children of Israel were in the wilderness.'"[20] This connection between the Midrash on

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[19] Biblical scholars engage in similar conversations regarding allusions. For example, Benjamin Sommer argues that Deutero-Isaiah alludes to earlier poetic texts from Psalms and Proverbs. See *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 1998.

[20] Rabinowitz, "Triennial Cycle of Psalms?," 367.

Psalm 103 and Num. 9-10 seems very tenuous. How many other times does the Midrash on that particular psalm refer to the children of Israel being in the wilderness? Similarly, how many chapters of the Bible take place in the wilderness? This weak connection illustrates the tentativeness of Rabinowitz's approach. The same critique can be applied to our earlier examples. The brief allusions to Shavuot in Midrash Tehillim on Psalms 92-100 could be mere coincidences. Our section of the Midrash also alludes in much greater detail to the holidays of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover, which could indicate that these psalms were read during completely different seasons.

Rabinowitz writes at the conclusion of his essay that he had demonstrated the existence of a Triennial Cycle of Psalms "within the limits of reasonable certainty."[21] Yet, I have demonstrated that we still need to address critical questions about the "reasonableness" of his theory. Although his seminal article from the 1930's is often quoted in reference books, no scholar has written a more in-depth response to Rabinowitz's ideas. While his theory has the potential to transform how we read Midrash Tehillim and how we imagine ancient synagogue worship, it still warrants further investigation.

Several scholarly questions remain open to debate. First, no consensus exists regarding the date or dates of composition. If the material, as Braude argues, does in fact span from the 3rd to the 13th centuries, then how can we distinguish the textual layers formed over a thousand years of Jewish history? How many different redactors can we identify and what influenced their editorial choices? Second, if Albeck is correct in his

[21] Rabinowitz, "Triennial Cycle of Psalms?," 368.

hypothesis that Midrash Tehillim originally consisted of different groupings of midrashim that were later brought together, then could Psalms 92-100 be an example of this phenomenon? Could the Midrash on Psalms 92-100 be one of those discrete units that were composed separately? None of the secondary sources directly address this question.

Several of the text's characteristics prove that this unit of material holds together on its own. First, the second paper demonstrated that the key themes of the text—Creation, God's superiority, Prayer and Liturgy, Repentance and Redemption—flow sequentially. They flow from Creation to Redemption: the people are created; they are sinful and punished with chastisements; they then repent for their sins and they are ultimately redeemed. Whether recounting Adam's experiences in the Garden of Eden or using a quotation from Ecclesiastes to prove the futility of each of the seven days, the majority of the commentary on Psalm 92 focuses on Creation and Shabbat. The Midrash on Psalm 93 continues to emphasize Creation by exploring God's relationship to water and it also introduces the notion of God's Kingship and superiority. The chapter on Psalm 94 addresses questions of God's punishments: Why does God chastise the Israelites? How does this ultimately benefit them? The Midrash then shifts. The commentary on Psalms 95-100 goes line-by-line, highlighting verses that relate to God's superiority over other gods and the Messianic Era. By Psalm 100, the Midrash focuses almost exclusively on the Messianic era. Of course, there are examples, which blur this tidy evolution. For instance, there is a long tangent about the linguistic meaning of "except" (lulei) in Ps. 94:17, which does not appear to connect to this broader progression. However, overall,

the material has an apparent trajectory that indicates a deliberate shaping of the text and a presentation of a meta-narrative of the Jewish people.

Second, the theme of Repentance brackets this block of material. The Midrash interprets "to praise" (*l'hodot*) in Ps. 92:2 as "to confess". Specifically, Adam confesses to God about his sin in the Garden of Eden and, as a result, God saves him from the punishment of death. In addition, the Midrash understands the *todah* in *mizmor l'todah* in Ps. 100:1 to mean to confess to God in order to repent. Adam did not properly repent, but Cain did. Similarly, Saul did not properly repent, but David did. God forgives those who confess. Both examples interpret the word *l'hodot* as confession and look to critical biblical figures like Adam, Cain, Moses, Saul and David as examples of this principle. These two very similar interpretations function as an inclusio, framing this section of Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 92 to Psalm 100. They also support the argument above about the text's clear flow from Creation to Redemption. Repentance saved Adam in the Garden of Eden and it will save the Israelites in the future, serving as a key vehicle for Redemption.

Third, there is a unique emphasis on liturgical forms and prayer. The second paper outlined five examples of how the Midrash connects Psalms to Liturgy. The examples progress from Creation to Repentance, further supporting the argument that this section of the Midrash has a distinct trajectory. They begin by describing the origins of Shabbat Liturgy in the Garden of Eden and conclude by imagining worship during the Messianic era. While I have not studied the entirety of Midrash Tehillim in depth, the appearance of five substantial discussions of liturgical forms and prayer in our section seems to indicate a unique emphasis. The Rabbis already saw these Psalms as a liturgical

unit, so it makes sense that they would treat them separately and stress liturgical themes within the commentary.

Fourth, while there are a few examples of repetition in the text, they are not significant. The instances of repetition are as follows: The Midrash cites Zech. 14:9 to describe its Messianic vision in its commentary on both Ps. 96:10 and Ps. 97:1; during its interpretation of Psalms 92, it mentions that the phrase "there was evening" (*va'yehi erev*) does not appear during the sixth day of Creation twice; it repeats the imagery of light and darkness, first in R. Levi's midrash on Psalm 92 about Adam and Havdalah and then in the midrash about the "great light" of Ps. 97:11; and finally it tries to decipher the meaning of a "new song" (*shir chadash*) in both Ps. 96:1 and Ps. 98:1. None of these examples are exact reproductions of individual midrashic interpretation. In other words, they may pose the same question about the biblical text, but they offer different answers. For instance, the Midrash notes that *shir chadash* appears in both Ps. 96:1 and Ps. 98:1; therefore, it raises the question of the phrase's meaning both times, but it does not arrive at the same conclusion in both instances. If multiple redactors were assembling material from different sources without a clear agenda, then the same midrashim could be repeated word-for-word. However, these examples demonstrate that the rare repetitions in our section seem to serve clear purposes.

Fifth, the chapters get shorter as the material progresses. The Midrash on Psalm 92 is twice as long as the Midrash on Psalm 93 and more than four times as long as the Midrash on Psalm 100. It is unclear what the rationale behind this progression was. Perhaps, the redactor(s) refined the message of the Midrash as they move from psalm to psalm. Perhaps, they laid out the key themes in depth in Psalm 92 and then repeated these

themes in their commentary on the subsequent psalms. Regardless of their reasoning, the consistent shortening of the commentary indicates a clear pattern and shaping of the text.

Ultimately, these five features of the text provide enough specific evidence to support the idea that redactor(s) consciously shaped Midrash Tehillim on Psalms 92-100. Our section of the Midrash is not just an anthology in which redactor(s) gathered individual atomistic comments on particular phrases, words, or verses from different periods of time and organized them by each of the nine psalms. Rather, it is telling a story. There is a meta-narrative about the people of Israel that the author(s) want the readers to absorb.

Midrash Tehillim contains a wealth of rabbinic material. Jacob Elbaum describes it as "one of the most beautiful in aggadic literature" because it "[uses] exalted language, colorful themes, cites many stories and parables and makes extensive and tasteful use of the hermeneutics of aggadic interpretation."[22]

Yet, in general, very little contemporary scholarship exists regarding Midrash Tehillim. Perhaps, this stems from the Midrash's broad range of types of material that is more typical of a later midrashic compilation. A scholar would need a range of expertise to confidently examine the aggadic, exegetical and narrative midrashic styles. For example, within one chapter, one could find a long Aramaic story of a rabbi and his disciples; a seemingly disconnected *petihta*; and complicated *gematria*. Furthermore, the significant manuscript issues described above would require careful, painstaking attention to detail. A scholar would have to do extended manuscript comparisons and search

[22] Elbaum, "Midrash Tehillim," 192.

through other extant manuscripts and manuscript fragments to clarify discrepancies. Regardless of these obstacles, the reader is surprised by the lack of interest in Midrash Tehillim within the academic community. The text deserves further consideration.

Midrash Tehillim also enriches its reader spiritually. While the imagery, language and liturgical music of Psalms 92-100 are powerful in and of themselves, the Midrash takes the Kabbalat Shabbat worship experience to the next level. By pushing the worshipper to do a closer reading of the biblical text, the Midrash has can help us appreciate the range of meanings within each poetic verse. When I used to hear the prayer leader begin, "*Tzadik katamar yifrach*" (Ps. 92:13), I would focus on the familiar tune as if by rote. Now, I think of all the different aspects of a palm tree and the multiple layers of the metaphor. I used to quickly recite Psalm 97 under my breath trying to keep up with the pace of the congregation. Now, I pause to reflect on the image of "mountains melting like wax" (Ps. 97:5) and think about the power of God and the possibilities of a Messianic era. These examples and numerous other experiences attest to the fact that the Midrash has expanded the possibilities of the Kabbalat Shabbat Liturgy for me, making each Shabbat an exciting learning opportunity.

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