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A STUDY OF PERSONAL RELIGION IN FIVE PSALMS

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**My Fate is in Your Hands:
A Study of Personal Religion
in Five Psalms**

by

Andrea Lerner

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Ordination.

Hebrew Union College --
Jewish Institute of Religion
Cincinnati, Ohio
March 3, 1997

Referee:
Professor Samuel Greengus

This thesis is dedicated to my devoted parents,
Dorie Lerner
and Robert Lerner
who nurtured Josh and me,
creating two strong and loving individuals.

And to Greg Steinberger,
whose love for me
sustains me and gives me hope
for a bright future.

Thank you.

"The person who says 'Amen' sincerely
is counted as if the entire prayer has been said."

Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 124:1

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Digest
to
"My Fate is in Your Hands:
A Study of Personal Religion in Five Psalms"

In this study we have examined Thorkild Jacobsen's term "Personal Religion" as a description of a religious attitude that is found in some psalmodic poetry. Within the study we have included descriptions of worship in ancient Israel, Thorkild Jacobsen's theory of personal religion, as well as an explanation of the history and significance of the psalms. We have also taken five psalms: 6, 13, 27, 31, and 39, translated them, and translated their rabbinic commentary. We have incorporated both rabbinic and modern critical commentary of these five psalms into the study in order to develop the themes of personal religion within their interpretation.

As a foundation for our study of the concept of personal religion, we provided a synopsis of the scholarly discussion of cultic worship. In the section titled "Worship in Ancient Israel," we studied the features of the temple cult in order to discern whether the psalms had been used in temple worship. In our study we used the following works: Thorkild Jacobsen's The Mesopotamian Temple Plan and the Kititum Temple, and "Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: The Central Concerns," in Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture; Menachem Haran's "Priesthood, Temple, Divine Service: Some Observations on Institutions and Practices of Worship;" and Moshe Greenberg's Biblical Prose Prayer: As a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel. Having followed the discussion about the use of psalms in ancient Israel, we concluded that worshipers in the temple cult may have had some choices about how they would worship: sacrifice, psalmic prayer, or

personal prayer may have all been present in the worship of the temple.

Next we examined Jacobsen's concept of personal religion in psalmodic poetry, found in his essay titled "Personal Religion," within his larger work The Treasures of Darkness. We discussed Jacobsen's comparison of the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the divine – found in many psalms – with other biblical passages such as Exodus 20:18-19, in which there is great distance between the speakers and God. We concluded that the Psalms contain a unique relationship in which the speaker believes that he truly matters to God.

From here we reviewed the history and significance of the psalms, as well as the possible relationship of the psalmist to the larger community of readers. In our study we consulted the following works: James Kugel's "Topics in the History of the Spirituality of the Psalms," found in Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages; A. Cohen's The Psalms (Soncino); S.E. Gillingham's The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible; and The Jewish Encyclopedia. From a review of these works we learned that psalms have been widely incorporated into Jewish life in every age and for a variety of uses. In addition, scholarship regarding the psalms has developed from form criticism, which focused primarily on the *sitz im leben* of the psalms, to a view of the psalmists as "poets of life" (Gillingham). This present-day view takes into consideration the timeless nature of the psalms.

It is with this foundation of knowledge that we moved to a study of the five above mentioned psalms (6, 13, 27, 31, and 39). These psalms were chosen because in all but one of them the psalmists move from a state of distress -- feeling forsaken by God -- to one of complete trust in God. The one exception, Psalm 39, was chosen because, although it ends on a note of urgent distress, Psalm 39 paradoxically depicts the psalmist both as humble and as

self-important. Since it was written out of the same dire conditions that prompted the other utterances considered, it was thought to be worth including in thesis study for the sake of comparison.

Through this work, a theory has developed about the psalms as an actualization of personal religion. From this study one can perceive of how and why these texts have been appropriated into contemporary Jewish life. One understands how people use psalms, and how and why they work.

Over the course of this study, a real appreciation has been gained for the genius of the psalmists. Through their use of language, of style, of paradox, these authors produced work that is timeless and relevant to so many different individuals and communities, in ancient times as well as today.

Andrea C. Lerner

INTRODUCTION

The book of Psalms contains prayers of lament and songs of praise which reflect the spiritual concerns of individuals in ancient Israel, and have been incorporated into the Jewish and Christian liturgies for two millennia. Yet in spite of the longevity of the use of psalms, very little is known about their origin or their intended use. Scholars disagree as to whether to view the psalms as a historical collection reflective of ancient Israelite communal worship, or as a collection of texts for personal study and meditation.

Biblical scholars generally view the Psalms as liturgies of the temple cult, which functioned as a mode of worship within the ancient Israelite community. The principle method of scholarly analysis has been form criticism,¹ the study of the language and genre of the psalms with a view toward understanding their function in Israelite and Jewish life. The method of form criticism allows the scholar to interpret the Psalms as a historical and communal document. Scholars such as Hermann Gunkel (1904-1932), Sigmund Mowinckel (1916-1962), Steven Croft (1987) and others have studied the Psalms extensively through the method of form criticism.

An alternative to the institutionally-oriented approach of form criticism is to read the psalms as expressions of faith. Scholars such as Claude Westermann, Walter Brueggemann, Menachem Haran, E. Gerstenberger, and Moshe Greenberg have all read the majority of psalms as prayers instituted within the Israelite religion, yet reflective of life in such a way that they become applicable to the common person. According to Westermann, the psalms are not only important literary poems about the individual or the

¹ Patrick D. Miller Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986):3.

nation; nor are they simply cultic texts applicable only to a pre-exilic cult; they are also examples of prayerful reflection on life. As 'reflections on life', they encompass an infinite number of settings. Through the medium of poetry, all readers may share in their 'life-centeredness.'

Consequently the Psalms can also be viewed as documents of personal religion. One such scholar, Thorkild Jacobsen, studied the themes of security and abandonment apparent in the text of the Psalms. In the text he found the message "I matter." According to Jacobsen, the speaker in the Psalms perceives himself "in close personal relationship to the divine."² He expects help in his personal life, awaits punishment upon sinning, and trusts that God will protect him, not abandon him. He matters to God.

It is this theory of personal religion in the Psalms that I have examined. My thesis looks at the prayerful aspects of the Psalms against the background of their formulaic language, as well as their skilled authorship — since the Psalms most likely were not written by the worshipers who used them. First the thesis studies the *sitz im leben*, the life setting in which the psalms were probably used. Studying the *sitz im leben* is an important part of this thesis, because it is the method in which psalms are usually studied. Yet in order to study the Psalms in a wider sense, the thesis also reviews various rabbinic and modern commentaries written on the Psalms. Using Thorkild Jacobsen's view of the Psalms as works of personal religion, I have then included my own comments on the aspects of personal prayer within each of the selected psalms.

² Thorkild Jacobsen, "Treasures of Darkness" in *A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976): 147.

I have also explored questions such as: What relationship does the speaker feel between himself/herself and the divine? How does the speaker simultaneously doubt God, yet trust in God? How have various religious communities and individuals understood the Psalms and how have they used them in their worship experience? What are the possibilities for use of the Psalms in modern times by both individuals and by communities? Through all of the work of this thesis I wish to develop an understanding of the existence of personal religion within the Psalms.

The organization of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter One: 1) Worship in Ancient Israel; 2) Psalms as an Example of Personal Religion; 3) The Historicity and Significance of the Psalms.

Chapter Two through Chapter Six focus on the translations as well as the rabbinic and modern interpretations of the following five psalms: Psalms 6, 13, 27, 31, 39. From the 150 psalms within the Psalter, I have chosen these five which seem to provide examples of a personal prayer experience that has developed between the speaker and God. In most of these five psalms, the speaker begins his communication with the divine because he feels that he is in dire straits. He is distressed, begging God to put an end to his dangerous situation, to provide help for him in his time of need. He is dramatic as he describes the dangerous enemies that surround him or the urgency of his poor physical condition. Yet within each of these psalms, as in many others, something changes for the psalmist. As the psalm ends, the speaker returns to a belief that God is good to him and trusts that God is with him as his helper and protector.

In order to provide myself with a precise understanding of the

language within these psalms, I translated each of the psalms in a way that is both true to the Hebrew texts and is in readable English. To aid my translation, I referred to the Brown Diver Briggs, the Gesenius, as well as the Alkaly dictionaries. I also referred to several translations of the Psalms as found in the following Bibles: The International Critical Commentary, The Interpreter's Bible, The Revised Standard Version, The King James Bible, and The Tanakh by the Jewish Publication Society. In my thesis I use the following abbreviations:

ICC	The International Critical Commentary
IB	The Interpreter's Bible
RSV	The Revised Standard Version
KJ	The King James Bible
JPS	The Tanakh by the Jewish Publication Society

Having translated each of the five psalms, I took it upon myself to translate and incorporate the relevant rabbinic material into this thesis. In reading *Midrash Tehillim* I have discovered that the rabbis viewed the Psalms primarily as a description of the suffering of the Jewish people. In their interpretation of the Psalms, the rabbis describe how the Jewish people has always withstood the burden of maintaining hope amidst suffering and persecution. Rabbinic interpretation focuses on how the Jewish people continues to discern God's presence in our midst, even in times of great stress within our community.

Though the rabbinic commentaries view David as the traditional author of the Psalms, whether David spoke the Psalms for himself or for the Jewish community is debated. Rabbi Eliezer asserts that, in writing the

Psalms, David referred only to himself, while Rabbi Joshua maintains that David referred to the [Jewish] community. Generally the Sages explain that some of the Psalms – those which are couched in the singular – refer to David, himself. Yet other Psalms – those written in the plural form – allude to the community.³ Whether David is perceived as writing for the individual or the community will continue to be debated. Yet through his personal cries of distress and continued faith, David emerges as a role model for Jewish response to suffering.

In addition to the Jewish commentaries, I have also consulted Christian commentaries on the Psalms for the work of this thesis. These modern commentaries are useful for my thesis, because they relate the trials of the individual speaker in the Psalms to those of individuals today. These commentaries seek to provide answers to an individual's questions of doubt and feelings of faith in God's presence in his life. These commentaries seem to promote the idea of the Psalms as texts accessible for personal or individual use. Furthermore, these commentaries offer insight for study, for they maintain that the Psalms are a universal text for all people of faith.

With all of these materials on the Psalms I have attempted to provide for the reader an analysis of how Psalms have simultaneously been used as worship material for both the religious community and the individual. In rabbinic literature, Psalms are ostensibly a communal document. Yet within each interpretation are clues to deeply personal issues of doubt and faith in God's presence. So too with the modern commentary. As a result, a reader who considers himself/herself a part of a religious community, or a stranger to any community, can pick up an edition of the Psalms and gain

³ BT Pesachim 117a.

understanding from its words of emotional intensity, can identify with the speaker's pain and feelings of ostracism from the community, can gain solace from the speaker's continued trusting in God. For this reason, these works of the Psalms are brilliant and timeless masterpieces of literature.

Something must be said about how the complex relationship between God and David works – not only to transfer the relationship to other individuals – but to transfer the relationship to other time periods as well. The use of David as the individual in relation to the divine allows for reinterpretation by other individuals in varied circumstances. The genius of the Psalms is its versatility. Like the works of Shakespeare or Sandburg's "O Captain My Captain," the Psalms can be reinterpreted by others in other circumstances, in other time periods. The writings of the Psalms are eternal masterpieces, applicable to generations to come. How did they become so versatile? Because the Psalms refer to the psychological state of the individual. As we read about the experience of the individual in these verses, we can transfer the experience to ourselves. Just as David speaks for klal Yisrael, David also speaks for the individual. David's words have eternal meaning. And the meaning is double for us. It is both historical and contemporary. David speaks of the historical situation of the Jewish people, continually stressed by oppression, persecution by their enemies. David also speaks for each individual in his own contemporary situation. He feels abandoned by his friends. He lacks confidence or energy to go on. And yet looking back at a lifetime of protection by the Eternal One, he trusts in God's mercy. This double effectiveness is the brilliance of the versatility of the Psalms.

CHAPTER ONE

PART I

WORSHIP IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

A complete discussion of the relevance and the significance of the Psalms must begin with the study of the use of Psalms in ancient Israel's temple cult. This study will discuss the religious significance of sacrificial worship in the temple cult, as well as psalmic prayer in this cultic setting. Scholars cannot fully comprehend the *sitz im leben* or life setting of ancient Israel, nor can they describe with confidence the existence of spontaneous or regulated piety in biblical Israel. Nevertheless, information about religious practice in ancient Israel is available from several sources. Among them are the temple rituals and the Psalms, though these two modes of ritual practice may not reflect the actions of the common people, but rather the elite, educated few.

In ancient Israel, the foundation of religious worship was the temple, as well as its surrounding areas. Various scholars have attempted to elucidate the workings of the temple, its physical structure, as well as the type of worship that took place inside its walls. According to Menachem Haran, the features of the temple cult are: its focus on divine service, its structure as a house of God, its prayer and sacrifice, and its worship of God.⁴

The temple's defining feature was its divine service. It was in the temple that the ancient people would struggle towards feeling proximity to the divine. In their regular visits to the temple, the ancient worshippers attempted to grapple with the divine being in a way that contained religious

⁴ Menachem Haran, "Priesthood, Temple, Divine Service: Some Observations of Institutions and Practices of Worship," *Hebrew Annual Review* 7 (1983): 121.

significance for them. Thorkild Jacobsen describes the concept of religion in connection with Rudolph Otto, who in his modern study of the history of religions, analyzed it as a "confrontation with power not of this world, a wholly other, outside of normal experience and indescribable in its terms; terrifying, ranging from sheer demonic dread through awe to sublime majesty; and fascinating with irresistible attraction, inviting unconditional allegiance: mysterium tremendum et fascinans."⁵ To Otto's description Jacobsen adds that religion is "the urge in man to seek security and salvation in his allegiance with the power."⁶

In order to better imagine the worship practices in the temple cult, it is important to realize that the ancient peoples understood the temple as a *Bet Elohim*, a "house of God," or a house in which God dwelled. Jacobsen and others carefully explain that this designation of the temple as the 'house' of a deity, not merely as a place of worship, is extremely important for the interpretation of the temple structure, as well as its use. In this *Bet Elohim*, people would communicate with the transcendent God through worship and through prayer. The temple was cared for by the priests, whose responsibility, as servants of God, was to keep His house in order. Worshipers would come to the temple to offer sacrifices to God, the Supreme Being before whom they stood in humility and self-denial. They would come to God's house to offer sacrifices of their land or animals, and perhaps afterward offer the prayer in their minds.

Through the service of the priests, through objects such as *urim* and

⁵ Thorkild Jacobsen, "Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: The Central Concerns," *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. William L. Moran (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 39.

⁶ *ibid.*

tumim, people would seek a divine interaction for relief from famine, for success in military adventure, and for healing of their sickness. In this physical sense, priests would also act as "physicians," providing spiritual relief via sacrificial offerings, because healing was considered an act of divine interaction. Within the temple structure, the agency of the priesthood, by means of its responsibility to facilitate sacrifices, was the most authentic service to God.

One of the primary responsibilities of those who served God was to support the temple. The ancient people understood that without a sacrificial offering, they could not come to the temple. Therefore people brought animal or grain sacrifices with them in order to atone for their sins or communicate with God. In Biblical times, Israelites would worship God by bringing an oblation: a free-will, votive, or thanksgiving offering (either burnt, peace, or grain offering) to the sacrificial altar at the temple. The worshiper would go to this house of God with an animal and give it to the priest, who would slaughter it and prepare it for the sacrifice.

For our discussion of the conceivable features of the temple service, it is useful to analyze the probable temple plan structures in an attempt to describe their use in temple times. Thorkild Jacobsen, in his work, The Mesopotamian Temple Plan and the Kititum Temple, (a report presented from a project that Jacobsen carried out in Ishchali in 1934-35 as a member of the Iraq Expedition of the Oriental Institute) analyzed the Kititum plan in Ancient Mesopotamia and compared it to the older Early Dynastic Oval at Khafajah.⁷ Regarding his work in excavation, Jacobsen remarked that both

⁷ Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Mesopotamian Temple Plan and The Kititum Temple," *Eretz Israel* 20 (1989): 79-95.

architectural as well as textual evidence are necessary for analysis of a structure, saying: "While the intended function of an architectural plan and the elements that compose it will often be immediately clear, there are also cases in which textual evidence can help to specify it further, and sometimes textual evidence alone can tell what went on in a room or open space."⁸

In Jacobsen's study, he asserted that in both temple plans the visitor walked up steps to a low platform on which the complex stood. Once inside of the Temple, the visitor would enter the Herdhaus, which consisted of a rectangular room entered by a door in the long side-wall near the corner, containing a hearth in the middle of the room, and a dais at the end wall farthest from the door.

Jacobsen suggested that perhaps a sculpture of a deity stood on a dais here and was enclosed by a curtain to protect it from profane gazes of the passersby who were not worshiping. On this description, Jacobsen refers to an analysis by Woolley, who asserted that "The fact that the "tables" were veiled would seem to imply that there was set upon them something which was only to be seen at certain times -- presumably when a religious service was being conducted in the building -- and such could scarcely be other than the representation of the household gods, whether that took the form of picture, statue or relief."⁹ With this description of a partially veiled table, Jacobsen suggested the possibility that there were sections of the Temple which were not only used for purposes of worship, but also for more mundane duties. One of these areas was an open space in front of the temple, which was a logical place to carry out practical and menial tasks connected with the

⁸ *ibid.*, p.88, note 32.

⁹ Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Mesopotamian Temple Plan and the Kititum Temple," *Eretz Israel* 20 (1989):87, note 10.

temple, such as baking bread and preparing food, and that in time this open space was walled-in for greater privacy. Jacobsen explained that the holiness with which both the open spaces and the areas of worship in the ancient Mesopotamian temple were imbued demanded absolute and immaculate cleanliness. In order to achieve the level of cleanliness, some people used purification with fire. In other cases purely ritual means of purification was preferred.

In our study of the activity within the temple cult, we can also attempt to understand what type of yearnings existed within the ancient peoples. In Jacobsen's essay, "Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: The Central Concerns," in Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture, he discussed the probable fears of four millennia of ancient peoples. He described that during the fourth millennium, the chief fear was the fear of starvation. The aim and purpose of the early Mesopotamian cults were to insure the presence of these essential powers for fertility, produce, and food. During this time: "Man felt solidaric with the powers in nature for fertility and produce and food, on which he depended so utterly, and feeling solidaric, he did his utmost to help and enhance them, to insure that they would realize themselves, appear tangibly before his eyes in their own desirable mode of being."¹⁰

With the third millennium B.C., Jacobsen explained, in addition to the fear of starvation was the fear of war. The intensity of the danger and of the fear it generated can be gauged by the huge city-walls that were built around the towns in this period and the overwhelming amount of labor that must

¹⁰ Thorkild Jacobsen, "Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: The Central Concerns," *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. William L. Moran (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970): 41.

have gone into them. The new concept of creating city-walls which protected the city and its inhabitants produced a feeling of majesty among the people and their rulers. Similarly, the people may have applied this approach of majesty to the gods, which would have profoundly influenced the religious outlook of the time. The gods, seen as kings and rulers, were no longer powers in nature only, they became powers in human affairs – in history.

It is within the second millennium that Jacobsen noted a significant change in the focus of the worshiper. In previous millennia, the individual was immersed in his community. In the second millennium the personal fortunes of the individual worshiper, his fears of personal misfortune, his anxieties about illness and suffering, begin to be voiced; and the fear that may torture individual existence takes its place with the earlier central, conditioning fears, adding a personal dimension to the relation with the divine. According to Jacobsen, it is in this period that the concept of the "personal god" is developed. He explained that "as the second millennium further explored the question of man's acceptability before his god, the problem of the righteous sufferer led on to realization of man's finiteness and the altogether finite character of his insights and his moral judgments... in this realization that all human values are finite -- and that yet man is held responsible to absolutes beyond him -- Mesopotamian religious thought reaches perhaps its finest insights."¹¹

The first millennium B.C. marked the emergence of Israel as a people. Jacobsen observed that Israel came into being in a millennium when the concept of a moral universe had been achieved. At this time, people could

¹¹ Thorkild Jacobsen, "Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: The Central Concerns," *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. William L. Moran (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970): 46.

enter into a covenant of social justice with God as acting in History. Under this covenant, people could live collectively and individually in moral responsibility. Jacobsen surmised that, "the prayers in these millennia would have gone from something like, "Give us this day our daily bread," to "preserve us from evil," or "forgive us our trespasses."¹² From the analysis of these metamorphoses, we realize how Israel could have responded to the cultures and civilizations that preceded her; we also discern how the ancient Israelite people understood their deepening relationship with God.

Using this historical view of the temple cult and culture, we can now discuss the activity within the walls of the temple, itself. We conceive of the earnest worshiper standing at the sacrificial altar of the temple, watching the priest sacrifice his offering and then perhaps offering a prayer of his own. As the worshipers watched their sacrifice consumed in smoke, perhaps they listened to the Levites read or sing the Psalms during or after the sacrifice. One might also imagine that the worshipers then prostrated themselves, bowing down to the ground as the priest would say the name of the tetragrammaton. The worshiper would thus spend this time in reverence for the divine being who received his sacrifice and heard psalms of prayer. Psalms appear to have serviced many individuals, and may have been general enough and have possessed enough themes to be relevant to the spiritual needs of many worshipers at the temple.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, which was known primarily as a place of sacrificial worship, the existence of the Psalms as a feature of the worship service survived. Thus the Psalms survived the great Temple, which was a house of God, and were transferred

¹² *ibid*: 46.

to synagogues, whose purpose originally had been gathering places of the community for the reading of the liturgy.

Yet some scholars would not agree to the idea of the Psalms as a feature of the worship service. For example, Menachem Haran asserts that in the Biblical period, prayer may not actually have been a part of cult worship itself. According to Yehezkel Kaufmann and other scholars, the First Temple priestly service was a "soundless worship."¹³ As noted earlier, worship in the temple existed primarily in the form of sacrificial offerings. For each worshiper a sacrificial burnt, peace, or grain offering was expected. Some scholars, such as Haran¹⁴ suggest that if none of these sacrifices was available, a person would utter a prayer as a substitute. Through this system, prayer became a substitute for sacrifice. As a second choice for temple ritual, prayer, specifically a psalm, would serve as the "offering of the poor." Taken as a collection, the Psalms, as a book of offerings of the poor, would come in this way to be known as a collection of the Jerusalem Temple prayers.

The use of psalms can then be described within temple worship as a secondary feature of Temple ritual. In certain psalms, there seems to be a divine response (pss. 60:8-11, 85:9-14, 121:8) to the worshipers' cries for help. Yet most psalms do not include such responses within them. In terms of the specific use of the Psalms in the temple worship, some scholars say there were cult prophets in the temple itself, whose role in the temple service was to convey divine answers to the petitioners, who were priests.

According to some scholars, the petitions of the Israelites are not unique to the ancient Israelite religion. Erhard Gerstenberger explains that

¹³ Menachem Haran, "Priesthood, Temple, Divine Service: Some Observations on Institutions and Practices of Worship," *Hebrew Annual Review* 7 (1983): 131.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 130.

the petitions and complaints of the individual can be compared to Babylonian incantations.¹⁵ Both of these prayers were probably recited by experts, who acted as mediators between the people and God. In his work, Gerstenberger directs his attention to the formulaic language of the Psalms and discounts the spontaneity of prayer at the temple, sighting the presence of the mediators as proof of the fixed nature of the prayers themselves.

Yet to this discussion, Moshe Greenberg adds his speculation as to the nature of the prayer-relationship between the worshiper and God. According to Greenberg, humans, in their worship, spoke to God as they did to each other. In his view, the worship of the ancient Israelite was a faithful correspondence with God. This correspondence marked the nonprofessional verbal worship, and was the popular religion of ancient Israel.¹⁶ Thus, Greenberg insists on the personal nature of the prayers, regardless of their formulaic structure.

Yet Menachem Haran disagrees with Greenberg. He asserts that irrespective of the relationship between worshiper and worshiped One, prayer in biblical times was not spontaneous. Rather this prayer was written in formulaic language by Biblical authors. Furthermore, Haran and others assert that prayer as unmediated thought is not an ancient phenomenon, but a modern creation. Greenberg agrees that private prayers might be formulaic in their structure and yet could also be ready-made after the pattern of psalmodic poetry from the biblical psalter. Many scholars assert that the prayers at the altar were always read from a written source, because it would be disrespectful to utter spontaneous words to God in His Temple. As a

¹⁵ Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer: As a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983): 41.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.37.

result, prayer as worship evolved from the fixed-forms, such as those in the psalter, to free-prayer.

It is with Greenberg's speculation about the precise nature of the prayer in ancient Israel that I agree. Greenberg asserts that there is something between the set ritual prayers and the free invention; it is the patterned prayer-speech of the Psalms that he has been describing. He explains that the Psalms were created for a visit to the temple. The temple poets prepared the text for the worshiper, but sometimes an Israelite might pray on impulse without prepared texts. Therefore, the psalmodic poetry of ancient Israel was both tailored to the specific circumstances and also conformed to a set pattern of components. As a result, the worshiper had some choices about how he would worship. He might offer a sacrifice. He might choose a prayer from among the patterned speech of the Psalms. Or, if the worshiper did not utter a prayer, he would at least prostrate himself before God. These three legitimate acts: sacrifice, prayer, and prostration complemented each other to serve as elements of the proper worship experience in the temple cult. In the sense that a worshiper had the choice between these three acts of prayer, individual worshipers may have felt an element of the personal nature of prayer during their visits to the temple.

CHAPTER ONE

PART II

PERSONAL RELIGION

We now turn from the possibility of the existence of personal prayer within the worship experience, to the idea of an actual system of expression, called "personal religion." Thorkild Jacobsen, in his essay entitled "Personal Religion," elucidates for the reader about this mysterious term.¹⁷ This phrase, Jacobsen explains, is loaded with emotional content. It is subjective in nature. Therefore the term "personal religion" may mean different things to different people. Having stated his disclaimer, Jacobsen defines Personal Religion as a "religious attitude in which the individual sees himself in close personal relationship to the divine, expecting help and guidance in his personal life and personal affairs, expecting divine anger and punishment if he sins, but also profoundly trusting to divine compassion, forgiveness, and love for him if he sincerely repents."¹⁸ In this relationship, the individual matters to God, who cares about him personally and deeply.

Jacobsen demonstrates these elements of a personal relationship between the individual and the divine by citing, among other works, an excerpt from Psalm 38:

O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath:
neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure.
For thine arrows stick fast in me,

¹⁷ Thorkild Jacobsen, "Personal Religion," *Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976): 146-164.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 147.

and thy hand presseth me sore.
There is no soundness in my flesh
because of thine anger;
neither is there any rest in my bones
because of my sin.
For mine iniquities are gone over mine head:
as an heavy burden they are too heavy
for me.
My wounds stink and are corrupt
because of my foolishness.
I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly;
I go mourning all the day long.
For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease:
and there is no soundness in my flesh.

The lyrics of many of the Psalms demonstrate the characteristics of personal religion: guidance, expectance of divine anger and punishment for sin, and trust in divine compassion. These lyrics of Psalms in ancient Israel can be compared to the literature of Egypt and Mesopotamia in the first millennium B.C. One verse from a Mesopotamian prayer acknowledges the individual's close relationship to the divine. He humbly begs the divinity to give him care and to relieve him from his troubled state as he says: "Many are my iniquities, slip them off (me) like a garment."

Yet the relationship between the individual and the psalmist contains more than just humility – it also includes a fascinating paradox in behavior.

Not only is there the notion that God cares deeply for the humble individual. But there is also the idea that the individual feels tremendous self-importance within the relationship. What strikes a reader most vividly is that the individual seems to completely humble himself before the divine. He is full of self-abasement. He lays out his iniquities. He admits to his transgressions. He describes in full detail the extent of his personal illness, "his loathsome disease." Yet the more one studies about these works of penitence, the more one realizes that something else is necessary in order for this exchange to take place. In order for the individual to speak so earnestly before the divine being, he must be convinced that the divine being cares about him and is attending to his particular and personal needs as an individual. Could it be that in contradiction to his sense of humility before the divine being, the individual must also feel a tremendous sense of self-importance, begging the divinity for individualized attention? Jacobsen contrasts this feeling of an individual's confidence of a close relationship to the divine, with another biblical passage in which the individual is completely awed by the works of the divine: Exodus 20:18-19:

And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.

This sense of God's awesomeness preventing close contact with the individual has disappeared from the penitential psalms. This is the paradox

of personal religion, says Jacobsen: "it bridges the cosmic world and the personal world of the individual."¹⁹

In order to fully describe the elements of personal religion, one must look carefully at the idea of a personal god. In ancient Mesopotamia and other cultures, the idea of individuals having a relationship with a personal god emerged. In the spectrum of gods, a person would acquire one particular god to help him with his personal affairs. In that sense a personal god became associated with the notion of luck. In Sumerian and Akkadian cultures "to acquire a god" was a way of describing one's having good luck.

The ancient religions extended this idea to include the idea of god as a parent figure who provided for the individual. The god, in relation to the individual, was like a parent in four ways: 1) the physical sense, of birthing, or creating each individual; 2) as a provider; 3) as a protector; 4) as a claim for honor and obedience of the individual toward his god. With these four characteristics in place, the individual could expect a close relationship with his god, who would see to it that the person was cared for, sustained, encouraged just like a child by his parent. In exchange, the god would seek honor and obedience from the individual worshiper.

Jacobsen explains that in the years that followed, Mesopotamian and other civilizations seemed to retain this idea of the relationship between the individual worshiper and god, yet the Israelite religion extended this relationship to the national realm. The personal god of the individual became the personal God of Israel. The Bible recounts how human transgressions called forth the

¹⁹ Thorkild Jacobsen, "Personal Religion," *Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976): 152.

divine wrath on a national scale. Also, one reads examples in Jewish text of God as a divine being who passes from father to son in a relationship of a personal nature. We learn about this God in Exodus 3:15: "The Lord God of your Fathers." In this way Israel as a nation viewed God just as the individual had viewed his relationship with God. In the context of the Hebrew Bible, Israel responded to God's compassion and His mercy, but also to God's anger and punishment for His people Israel. As a result, personal religion became a national religion.

This merging of the needs of the individual with those of the nation in one's plea to God is a prominent feature of the Psalms. Yet the above text does not seem to bridge the gap between the personal and the public view of the Psalms. Some difficulty in discerning the exact nature of Psalms still remains. Therefore this thesis now turns to an overview of the history and significance of the Psalms and their uses.

CHAPTER ONE
PART/III
HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PSALMS

WHAT ARE THE PSALMS?

The Psalms, a collection of 150 prayers and praises within the canon of the Bible, provoke disagreement among biblical scholars regarding their origin and authorship. Most biblical scholars agree that the spirituality in the biblical period came from the Psalms. Yet they disagree regarding their origin. Some scholars note the similarities between the writing in the Psalms and in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Yet others comment on how the Psalter resembles the Babylonian hymns of that period. Questions about when the Psalms were written are also common within biblical criticism. While religious tradition teaches that the Psalter was divinely ordained and written by King David, the modern scholarship of Julius Wellhausen asserted that the Psalms were written five centuries after David, long after the Babylonian exile.

The Psalms also arouse disagreement regarding their intended usage. Some scholars note the formulaic language within the Psalter and maintain that the Psalms were composed as prayers for communal liturgy. Yet others who view these formulas claim that they were applied for use by the individual. In his essay titled "Topics in the History of the Spirituality of the

Psalms,"²⁰ James Kugel quotes A.F. Kirkpatrick's understanding of the usage of the book of Psalms:

Remarking that the controversy regarding their usage is extreme, he writes:

The Psalter, then, is a collection of religious lyrics. Lyric poetry is defined as that which directly expresses the emotions of the poet; and religious lyric poetry is the expression of those emotions and feelings as they are stirred by the thought of God and directed God-wards. This is the common characteristic of the psalms in all their manifold variety." R. Smend claimed that the "I" of the psalter was the collective "I." Kirkpatrick answers, "the theory doubtless contains elements of truth; but it has been taken to absurd extremes, and it is connected with the mistaken view that the Psalter was designed as a whole to be the hymn book of the congregation, and the Psalms were written for that purpose."²¹

Though it is not known for what purpose the Psalms were created, many agree that three major themes presented in the Psalms are: Praise, Elegy, and Ethics.²²

1)Praise. This praise includes the praise of God for His goodness and mercy to Israel and all His creatures. His vindication of the righteous when persecuted by the wicked, His Kingship over all humankind, and God's might as the Creator and Ruler of the universe.

²⁰ James Kugel, "Topics in the History of the Spirituality of the Psalms," *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Art Green (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

²¹ *ibid.*

²² A. Cohen, ed. *The Psalms* (London and Bournemouth: The Soncino Press, 1950).

2)Elegy. The elegy in the Psalms tells of the sufferings of individuals and as Israel as a people. The Psalms generally view personal and national distress as punishment for sin. Within this section one hears the earnest confession of guilt, the plea for pardon, the note of supplication for relief and ease.

3)Ethics. These are the didactic, instructive Psalms. They teach the right way of living. These psalms proclaim joy from loyalty to God's will.

Irrespective of the disputes regarding the history of the Psalms, it is recognized that the Psalms are written as human documents. The Psalms remain as works of religious lyric which reflect life experience, the hardships of existence, and the struggle of god-fearing people to remain faithful to their ideals in times of oppression.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALMISTS AS POETS

Critical interpretation of the Psalms as the work of an individual poet is a relatively modern phenomenon, dating from the early 19th century until today. Since that time, scholars have theorized about the role that the individual writer may have actually played within the community. We will review the following categories, all of which are found in S.E. Gillingham's The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible²³: The psalmists as individual poets, the psalmists as poets serving the community, the psalmists as liturgical poets serving the cultic community, the psalmists as liturgical poets serving a private cultus, and the psalmists as poets of life.

The discussion of the psalmists as individual poets marked a phase in

²³ S.E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

critical interpretation of the Psalms, which is called 'historical criticism.' This stage, which originated chiefly in Germany in the 1820's, developed as a response to the Romantic movement within Germany during that century. The main task of historical criticism was to determine, if possible, the date and place in which the psalms were written. As a result of this research, scholars of historical criticism began to speculate further on the life of the individuals who may have written them. In this way, the Psalms became known as works of individual poets who responded to their own particular concerns of illness, grief, suffering, fear of enemies, and even doubt of God's presence in their lives. Therefore, the "I" in the psalms was taken literally to be the "I" of the individual who was relaying his own experience in psalmody.

In the next period in biblical criticism, scholars developed the 'historical-critical method' of describing the psalmists as poets who served their community. In this stage, German scholars, such as Wellhausen and others referred to the nationalistic view of the psalmist. Instead of viewing the Psalms as the autobiographical works of individuals, scholars perceived the psalmist as a representative of his community. In this method, the "I" of the psalmist was understood as a collective "I."

In the 1920's a third interpretation, form-criticism, emerged which focused on the psalmists as liturgical poets who were serving the cultic community. This interpretation specified that the community for which the psalmists wrote was the worshipping community. Hermann Gunkel and his student, Sigmund Mowinckel were the leaders in scholarship concerning form-criticism. They asserted that the "I" of the psalms referred to the representative "I" of the community of worshipers. The method of form-

criticism presumed that the Psalms emerged within a corporate cult, that the cult borrowed from other cultures, that it was also influenced by the prophets of Israel, and that the cult brought about the development of the Psalms into several types of poetic literature. The form-critical approach to the Psalms maintained that they were the work of cult poets, also known as cult prophets, who were employed by the temple as liturgists for the royal cult. This view was further studied by Steven Croft in his 1987 doctoral thesis.

The fourth view, which came about in the 1960's, saw the psalmists as liturgical poets serving a private cultus. Scholars holding this view redefined the role of the psalmist within the cult -- not as a liturgist for communal worship experience -- but as a liturgist who provided liturgy for individuals in various personal circumstances, such as illness, doubt, persecution, etc. Scholars such as Erhard Gerstenberger and others identified themselves in this group.

Finally, a fifth view has emerged in the present-day, which views the psalmists as 'poets of life'. Whereas the previous views all analyzed psalms as ancient texts, this interpretation sees the psalms also as relevant ideas in theology and expressions of faith. These scholars not only struggle with the concept of the psalms within the cult setting, but also explore the problem of 'life-centeredness' found within the psalms which reaches beyond the cult context. C. Westermann and W. Brueggemann maintain that not only are the Psalms worthy of discussion as historical evidence within the cult, but as timeless 'reflections on life.'

RABBINIC INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALMS

Within the context of Jewish tradition the rabbis also interpreted the Psalms. Since their commentary was theological, rather than historical, the rabbis focused on how the collection of Psalms as an entity was an integral part of the Hebrew Bible. In their commentary, the rabbis compared the book of Psalms to the five books of the Torah in order to demonstrate the significance, as well as the divine nature of the text of the Psalms.

Specifically, the Midrash on Psalms reads: "Moses gave Israel the five books of the Torah, and correspondingly David gave them the five books of the Psalms."²⁴ In order to create this parallel between the book of Psalms and the five books of the Torah, the rabbis created five symbolic divisions within the book of Psalms which came after psalms 41, 72, 89, and 106.

For the rabbis, who viewed the psalms through religious tradition, the book of Psalms was an integral part of their own interpretation of Torah. The rabbis regularly applied the verses of the psalms to their biblical commentaries. In fact, disregarding the book of Midrash Tehillim, there is hardly a verse of the psalms that the rabbis did not expound upon in *midrash* and in the Talmud. In addition to applying the psalms to their biblical commentaries, the rabbis also used psalms for homiletical purposes. In order to parallel the psalms with the number of sedarim in the Bible (according to the triennial cycle which was current in Eretz Israel), the rabbis actually reduced the traditional number of psalms from 150 to 147.²⁵ Regarding the use of particular psalms, the rabbis valued their efficacy as spiritual

²⁴ Midrash Tehillim, psalm 1:2.

²⁵ Midrash Tehillim, psalms 22:19, 104:2

documents. About psalm 145, the rabbis said:

"He who recites it three times a day is certain to be vouchsafed in the world to come²⁶."

PSALMS IN THE LITURGY

Though the rabbis invested enormous importance into the Psalms, psalms were rarely found in the liturgy of the rabbis of the Talmud. Only the Hallel psalms (Psalms 113-118) are singled out in the Talmud for use in the festival liturgy. Yet despite the almost complete neglect of the Psalms in the liturgy during Talmudic times, the rabbis did incorporate psalms into their homilies and preaching. Regarding the use of psalms in the liturgy of the Talmudic period, statutory prayers included no psalms whatsoever. Moreover, the Hallel Psalms were the only psalms recited on the shalosh regalim. The later inclusion of psalms in the liturgy came as a result of popular demand. People began adopting the custom of reciting psalm 136, for example, on Passover. In addition, the Pesukei de-Zimra became a part of the statutory prayers. Some psalms were added to those in the Pesukei de-Zimra, such as psalm 27 during the penitential period from the second day of Elul to Hoshana Rabba.²⁷

OTHER RELIGIOUS USES OF PSALMS

In addition to the use of psalms for homiletical purposes and as liturgy, the psalms have had other uses throughout Jewish history. Today, as in the past, the recitation of the entire book of psalms is widespread, whether as an

²⁶ BT Berachot 4b.

²⁷ Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, "Psalms, Book Of," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 13 (Jerusalem: The Keter Publishing house, 1971).

act of piety by saintly individuals, or by groups of unlearned people. In religious communities everywhere, people have formed societies of reciters of psalms, called *hevrot tehillim*. These groups may recite psalms for an individual who is sick and is unable to read them, or as a final act of compassion for a deceased person before his burial. And in recent times a special society has been formed in Jerusalem whereby two separate groups recite the whole book of Psalms daily at the Western Wall. The psalms are included in their entirety in all large prayer books. A prayer has been composed to be recited prior to and at the conclusion of each of the five books as well as for its reading on Hoshana Rabba which specifically equates them with the Five Books of Moses.²⁸ In the introduction to the section of psalms in the prayerbook *Avodat Yisrael*, Baer concludes with a list of psalms which it is customary to recite on Sabbath to correspond with the weekly portion 'in the manner of the haftarah,' thus 'stringing together' the Pentateuch, Prophets, and Psalms.²⁹

In addition to their normative uses, psalms have, in some instances, been used for unusual purposes. In an article in The Jewish Encyclopedia, M. Grunwald describes how at various times, the psalms have been used for "bibliomancy," which he defines as "the use of the Bible for magic or superstitious purposes."³⁰ He explains that employing sacred books, words or verses for divination or for magic cures is universal among all cultures, among both pagans and believers in God. His controversial description of how Jews have practiced bibliomancy continues:

The desire of man to discern the hidden future, or to obtain

²⁸ Seligman Baer *Seder Avodat Yisrael* (Berlin: Schocken, 1937): 5-8.

²⁹ *ibid*, last page, unnumbered.

³⁰ Grunwald, M., "Bibliomancy" *The Jewish Encyclopedia* 3 (1902): 204.

the mastery over nature in hours of great anxiety, by some superstitious resort to superhuman forces, is never altogether extinct in the multitude. Deut 6: 8,9,11,18 and Proverbs 3: 22-26 admonish the people to bind them (the words of God) as a sign upon the hand, and have them as frontlets between the eyes, and to write them upon the posts of the house and upon the gate, certainly induced the Jews to use the Bible, or parts of it, for protective or talismanic purposes.

Grunwald explains that those who use the psalms for this purpose are called followers of *shimmush Tehillim* (the magical use of the Psalms), and he wonders: Did this practice of *shimmush Tehillim* originate with a Syriac manuscript on the use of the various Psalms for magic purposes, or did it originate with the Jews?

Yet Grunwald also points out that both authorities of the synagogue (Maimonides) and of the Church prohibited the use of the Bible -- either as a whole or in part -- for magical cures. However, the Book of Psalms, as well as other books of the bible were used in diverse ways throughout time. For instance, according to Sefer Hasidim the book of Leviticus was placed under the head of a child when the child was first put into the cradle. Sometimes the Torah scroll was brought into the delivery room in order to facilitate the birth. Also, when a person was dangerously ill, the Pentateuch was opened, and the name which first met the eye was added to the patient's name in order to avert the evil destiny (this practice is called *Shinnuy Ha-Shem*). Finally Grunwald speaks of the use of specific psalms. The following list

represents the psalms that I have chosen for this thesis.

Their use may be as follows:

Psalm 6: Against diseases of the eye and danger on land or water.

Psalm 13: Against unnatural death and diseases of the eye, or to drive out demons.

Psalm 27: To conquer a city; as a vermifuge.

Psalm 31: Against the evil eye.

Psalm 39: Against evil design on the part of a king.

Nevertheless, bibliomancy is a view on the uses of bible that is not widely accepted.

THE SPIRITUALITY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PSALMS

With so many hypotheses regarding the historicity and use of the psalms, it is difficult to understand the primary significance of the psalms as texts. Moreover, it seems almost impossible to discern the spiritual nature of the psalms behind the facts pertaining to their development. Yet that is the task that some have chosen to pursue. James Kugel explains, "The challenging part of the task for modern critics has been the attempt to approach the Psalter anew, seeking to investigate the positive side of its spirituality with sympathetic historical imagination and taking full advantage of what is now known about the psalms in their original setting³¹." It is from this point that we now approach the idea, proposed by Thorkild

³¹ James L. Kugel, "Topics in the History of the Spirituality of the Psalms", *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages*. ed. Art Green (New York: Crossroad, 1986): 121.

Jacobsen, of finding "personal religion" in the psalms. This thesis now turns to a selection of five psalms: Psalms 6, 13, 27, 31, 39, to investigate these personal themes further. In the following chapters we will take a closer look at each of these five psalms. Each chapter focuses on one of the psalms and consists of three sections:

- 1) A translation of the selected psalm – translated to capture as clear a meaning of the words as possible, as well as a view towards many varied translations already available.
- 2) A translation of the rabbinic interpretation of the selected psalm with my comments about its significance for the Jewish people.
- 3) A summary of modern interpretation of the psalm as well as a description of how the psalm may exemplify Jacobsen's idea of personal religion.

CHAPTER TWO

PSALM 6

- 1 For the leader, with musical tunings on the eighth string³² :
a psalm of David.
- 2 O God, Do not rebuke me in your anger
Do not chastise me in your rage.
- 3 Have mercy upon me³³ , God, for I am languishing;
Heal me³⁴ , God, for my bones are terrified³⁵ .
- 4 My soul is very disturbed. But You, God, how long³⁶ ?
- 5 Turn back³⁷ , God! Save my life! Deliver me for your
mercies' sake!
- 6 For in death, there is none to remember you.
In Sheol, who will praise you³⁸ ?
- 7 I have grown weary with my groaning.
Every night I flood my bed;
I drench my bed with my tears.
- 8 My eye is wasted away from grief;

³²Gesenius' Lexicon of the Old Testament: "a bass voice."

³³ "Haneini", *have mercy on me* is also found in: 4:2, 6:3, 31:10, 41:5, 41:11, 51:3, 56:2, 57:2, 86:3, 119:29, 119:58, and "v'haneini": 25:16, 86:16, 119:132, 26:11, 27:7, 30:11.

³⁴ "Heal me" is also found in Jeremiah 17:14.

³⁵ or, "dried up."

³⁶ how long (*Ad matai*) appears in six psalms. The others are: pss. 74:10, 80:5, 82:2, 90:13, and 94:3.

³⁷ "Turn back" is found in four other places. ps.90:13, ps.126:4, Isaiah. Nu.10:36.

³⁸ Sheol: This is a theological statement.

The International Critical Commentary (p.48) explains that "the *Sheol* of the Hebrew corresponds with *Hades* of the Greeks, the subterranean region whither all mankind go at death and live in a shadowy state of existence."

It grows weak with all my harrassers.

9 Get away from me, all you workers of evil!

For the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.

10 The Lord hears my supplication³⁹.

The Lord receives my prayer.

11 All of my enemies will be ashamed and will be very
disturbed.

They will turn away. They will feel shame all at once.

³⁹ "Shema," *Hear* is found in seven places: 6:9, 6:10, 28:6, 66:19, 78:21, 78:15, 81:12.

MIDRASH TEHILLIM

PSALM SIX

1. *For the leader, with the musical tunings on the eighth [string] (Psalm 6:1).* This is what is written [elsewhere]: *Seven [times] a day do I praise You (Psalm 119:164).* Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi taught: *Seven times a day do I praise You* refers to the seven prayers surrounding the recitation of the Shema: The "Yotzer"; the "Ahava Raba"; the "Shema"; "V'haya Im Shamo'a"; "Vayomer"; "Emet V'Yatziv"; and "V'ga'al Yisrael." However, because wearing tzitzit is not obligatory in the evening, [nor is the "Vayomer" mentioned above], we add [the Hashkivenu]: "...Who spreads the tabernacle of peace" on Shabbat and on Yom Tov, and on a weekday [evening]: "...Who guards Your people Israel."

Another interpretation of *Seven [times] a day do I praise You (Psalm 119:164).* [These are] the seven concluding blessings relating to the Recitation of the Shema in the morning and in the evening prayer, for in a Mishnah we learn: In the morning two blessings are said before [the Shema], and one [blessing] is said after it, and in the evening, two [blessings] are said before it, and two after it. So there are seven.

Another interpretation of *Seven [times] a day do I praise You (Psalm 119:164).* [This is] the seven times that the leader of the service recites the Kaddish each day.

[Another interpretation of *Seven [times] a day do I praise You (Psalm 119:164).* Rabbi Abin said: These are the seven commandments that a person performs each day:] The recitation of the Shema twice [during the day], the

Eighteen Blessings three times, and the Grace after meals twice each day, morning and evening. So there are seven.

Rabbi Meir used to say: A person wraps himself in the mitzvah of t'fillin on his head and his arm, and his four tzitzit enclose him on all four sides, [plus the circumcision on his skin [now there are seven]], and he enters his house and there is a mezuzah on its entrance, you find the [seven] commandments surround him like a wall. And it was about him that David said: *The angel of the Lord camps round about them who fear Him, and delivers them (Psalm 34:8).* Therefore when this man goes into a bathhouse and looks at himself, he says, "Here I am stripped of all the commandments." But then he sees [on himself] the commandment of circumcision which equals all the other commandments, and his mind is set at rest.

When David saw this [circumcision], he said: Hey, I will compose a Psalm about it: *For the leader, with the musical tunings on the eighth [string] (Psalm 6:1).* That is: on circumcision, [the eighth commandment], which is performed on the eighth [day].

Precious is circumcision, for the The Holy One Blessed be God made a covenant with Abraham that any man who is circumcised will not go down into Gehenna, as it is said: *In that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram (Genesis 15:18).* Who will go down into Gehenna? See what is written afterwards in the Torah: *The Kenite, the Kenizzite, and the Kadmonite, etc. (Genesis 15:19-21).* And likewise Ezekiel says [to Egypt]: *[To the nether parts of the earth]... go down, and lay down with the uncircumcised (Ezekiel 32:18,19).* And Isaiah said: *Therefore the nether-world has enlarged her desire, and opened her mouth for him without measure (Isaiah 5:14).* That is to say: "for him upon whose flesh there is no law (of the covenant of

circumcision).” How do we know that circumcision is called a statute? Because it is said: *[The covenant] [God] made for Isaac, [God] established unto Jacob as a statute... to Israel as an everlasting covenant (Psalms 105:10).*

But the heretics and the sinners of Israel who renounce the central [aspect of Jewish faith], which is the The Holy One Blessed be God, will be cast into Gehenna, as it is said: *[God] has put forth His hand against them that were at peace with Him: He has profaned His covenant (Psalm 55:21).*

And so it is with every commandment that is in our hands; we do not observe it according to its proper manner and according to halacha. And if we were to examine the way each of them is observed among us, it would be difficult to understand why the The Holy One Blessed be God continues to sustain us or continues to sustain His world. For there is no commandment that we hold tightly in our hands, except the commandment of circumcision and the (innocent) prattle of the mouths of children in school, who are without sin, as it is said: *If not for My covenant day and night, I should not sustain the ordinances of heaven and earth (Jeremiah 33:25-6).*

2. Another interpretation of: *For the leader, with the musical tunings on the eighth string (Psalm 6:1).* [This verse refers to] the four exiles of Israel under eight kingdoms, Edom being the eighth. [Of the eight kingdoms] it is written: *You O king, were watching, and behold a great image. This image, which was mighty and whose brightness was surpassing stood before you; and the appearance of it was terrible. (As for this image,) its head was of fine gold, its breast and its arms of silver, and its belly and its thighs of brass, its legs of iron, its feet part of iron and part of clay (Daniel 2:31-32).* By “its breast and arms” is meant two [kingdoms]; by “thighs” two ; by “legs” two; and “feet”

two – eight in all: Babylon, Chaldaea, Media, Persia, Greece, Macedon, Ishmael, and Edom.

Rabbi Aibu said: the congregation of Israel says to the The Holy One Blessed be God: Master of the Universe, we will sing praise to You on the day when You will have gathered us out of the eight dispersions, which it is said regarding that day: *The Lord will set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people, that will remain from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea (Isaiah 11:11), and because eight kingdoms are named in this verse, therefore it is said: For the leader, with the musical tunings on the eighth (Psalm 6:1).*

Another interpretation of *For the leader, with the musical tunings on the eighth (Psalm 6:1)*. Two Amoraim differed. One said: The phrase refers to the six laws that were given to Adam, as intimated by the [six words in the] verse: *And the Lord God commanded Adam (Genesis 2:16);* [a seventh law in which] Noah was commanded concerning eating of flesh cut from a living animal; [and an eighth law that was given to] Abraham, concerning circumcision. The other Amora maintained: [The phrase *on the eighth*] refers to circumcision which is performed on the eighth day [after an infant's birth].

3. *Do not rebuke me in your anger, do not chastise me in your rage (Psalm 6:2).* Rabbi Yudan in the name of Rabbi Ami said: this is what the community of Israel said before The Holy One Blessed be God: Our master of the world, even though it is written, "*The one that God loves He reproves*" (*Proverbs.6:12*), *God do not rebuke me in your anger.* Even though it is

written *Happy is the man whom you instruct, O Lord. (Psalms 94:12). Do not chastise me in your rage.*

Rabbi Yochanon said that this could be compared to a king who had two evil executioners. And each province with which he was angry, he would rule it via one of them (the executioners). One time one of his provinces rebelled against him. So he called the inquisitors to rule it. As they began they cried out to the king: Our lord, king please, rule us with anything that you want except these.

So says Israel before The Holy One Blessed be God: Our master of the world: *Do not rebuke me in your anger, and do not chastise me with your rage.* The Holy One Blessed be God said to them: If so, why have wrath and anger? They said: You know upon whom to cast them as it is written, *Pour out your anger to the nations who do not know you (Psalms 79:6).* And The Holy One Blessed be God accepted their statement and said: *So I will in anger and fury take revenge upon the nations (Micah 5:14).* But on Israel, what is written about them? *I will not execute the fierceness of my anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim (Hosea 11:9)* And it is also written: *I have no anger (Isaiah 29:4),*

Rabbi Eleazar said: With whom may God in His punishment [of Israel] be compared? With a king who became angry at his son, and at that moment, holding in his hand an unsheathed sword, swore that he would whip it across his son's head. But then the king softened and said: "If I whip it across my son's head, his life will go, and there will be no one to inherit my kingdom. And yet to revoke my decree is impossible." What did the king do? He put the sword back into its sheath, and then whipped it across his son's head, and so his son was spared, and his oath was kept.

Rabbi Hanina said that this could be compared to a king who was angry with his son. He had with him a large rock, and the king swore that he would throw it at his son. He thought and said, "If I throw this rock at him, he will die." What did the king do? He ordered that the rock be crushed into little stones, and he began to throw them one by one. The king saved his son, and he kept his oath.

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: this can be compared to a king who was angry with his son and had a rope in front of him. He promised his son that he would hit him one hundred lashes with this rope that was in his hand. The king thought about it and said, "If he gets one hundred lashes, he will lose his life." What did the king do? He coiled [the rope] one hundred times and hit him with the coiled rope one time. So the king saved his son and kept his decree.

The rabbis say that he took the rope and coiled it around his [son's] neck. And thus it says: "*Do not "tie me up" (chastise me) in your rage.*"

4. *Have mercy upon me, God for I am languishing, heal me, God, for my bones are terrified (Psalm 6:3).* There is a parable of a man who was seized by robbers, and every one of them hit him with his blow. One of them with his hand and one of them with his fist. One of them with his stone and one of them with his walking stick, until he slipped away from them. He arrived at his house and fell onto his bed, and cried: "My bones, my bones!" So too are the nations of the world who persecute Israel with all types of difficult labors and terrible laws and decrees. [As it says: *Have mercy upon me, God for I am languishing, Heal me, God, for my bones are terrified (Psalm 6:3).*]

5. *My soul is very disturbed. But you, my God, how long? (Psalm 6:4).*

According to Rabbi, "Incline your ear" is not written here, but rather, *and you, God, how long?* You are the one who promises His people: *I am with him in time of distress (Psalms 91:15).*

And what is [meant by] "How long"? Rav Kahana said: There is a parable of a sick person who was being treated by the doctors. The sick man would watch for the doctor to come. In four hours, or five hours. Six or seven. And he had not come. Eight hours passed, nine ten and he did not come. With the setting of the sun, he came. And he (the man) said: "If I had to wait any longer, my soul would have left me!" So too, David said when he saw that the kingdoms were persecuting Israel. He cried out: *And you, God, how long?* That you are my doctor, and I am waiting for you to come to my dwelling."

6. *All of my enemies will be ashamed and will be very disturbed. They will turn away and feel shame all at once (Psalm 6:11).* The rabbis say that in the time to come The Holy One Blessed be God will take the *tzadikim* down and show them Gehenna with empty places inside of it, and say to them: "These open places are ready for you, but you are worthy of good deeds and have inherited Gan Eden." And He will take the *rasha'im* over and show them Gan Eden and its empty areas, and say to them: "These open areas are ready for you, but by your bad deeds you have condemned yourselves and have inherited Gehenna."

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: The Holy One Blessed be God will curse the wicked with shame, and He will double their curses from now on, as it is said: *All of my enemies will be ashamed and will be very disturbed. They*

will turn away, and they will feel shame all at once (Psalm 6:11). And when He blesses the righteous, He will double their blessings, as it is said: And you shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and shall praise the name of the Lord your God... and My people shall never be ashamed. And you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel and My people will never be ashamed (Joel 2:26-27).

7. Another interpretation of *Do not rebuke me in your anger, do not chastise me in your rage (Psalm 6:2)*. Elsewhere Scripture says: *Do not withhold correction from the child; for if you beat him with the rod, he will not die (Proverbs 23:13)*. That is, when you beat your child, beat him with nothing heavier than a rod, lest he die; as the next verse says, *You will beat him with the rod, and will deliver his soul from the netherworld (Proverbs 23:14)*.

Chastisement is good when it is not given in anger, as Jeremiah said: *O Lord correct me, but in measure; not in Your anger, lest You bring me to nothing (Jeremiah 10:24)*. Hence *Do not rebuke me in your anger, do not chastise me in your rage (Psalm 6:2)*. For anger and rage are two executioners. As Scripture says, *The rage of a king is as messengers of death (Proverbs 16:14)*. And as Moses said: *I was in dread of the anger and rage, with [which the Lord was enraged against you to destroy you] (Deuteronomy 9:19)*. Hence *Do not rebuke me in your anger, do not chastise me in your rage (Psalm 6:2)* means: chastisement is good, but I do not have enough strength to withstand anger or rage.

8. *I have grown weary with my groaning. Every night I flood my bed; I drench my bed with my tears (Psalm 6:7)*. Rabbi Zechariah ben hak-Kassab said to the sages: "By this Temple [I swear] that my wife's hand did not leave

my hand from the time that the heathens came into the sanctuary until the time that they left it." But the sages said to him: "No man may testify in his own behalf." He then began to weep, so that he watered his couch with his tears: For he knew that his wife was pure, yet he would never again know her because of the sages' edict. And he applied to himself the verse *I have grown weary with my groaning. Every night I flood my bed; I drench my bed with my tears* (Psalm 6:7).

9. Another interpretation of *I have grown weary with my groaning. Every night I flood my bed; I drench my bed with my tears* (Psalm 6:7). David said these words of himself at the time of the incident of Bathsheba [and continued]: *My eye is wasted away from grief* (Psalm 6:8). Great grief – for people were saying of him: "Look at this man who murdered the shepherd, took his ewe lamb, and made Israel die by the sword of the children of Ammon, and yet he is a prince in Israel." I wept so much that my vision was dimmed, and my eye was consumed, *like a garment eaten up by the moth* (Job 13:28). *[My eye] grows weak [because of all my foes]* (Psalm 6:8). By *atekah* [is meant that] the light of the eye "went out," as in the verse *He went out from there to the mountain* (Genesis 12:8). By *mi ca'as* is meant that "I have grieved."

10. *The Lord will hear my supplication* (Psalm 6:10). David said to the The Holy One Blessed be God: Master of the universe! A mortal king has servants who receive the petitions which are handed in to him. But I only pray that [God Himself will receive] my petition. Hence he concluded the verse with *The Lord will receive my prayer* (Psalm 6:10).

The Rabbinic Interpretation of Psalm Six:

Psalm six seems to have brought to the forefront several issues of great concern for the rabbis, such as the importance of the fulfillment of mitzvot, their feelings of persecution by the rulers of the countries in which they lived, their fear of their own political enemies, their hope for restitution. The rabbis interpreted the Psalms, which were supposedly written by David, as relevant to the Jewish community as it struggled to maintain the commandments and rituals of the Jewish people, even in times of peril. By means of interpretation of the psalms, the rabbinic sages struggled to define their community's relationship with God.

The number eight in the first verse of psalm six: *For the leader, with the musical tunings on the eighth [string] (Psalm 6:1)* troubled the rabbis. Knowing that each word in the Tanakh holds utmost significance and is without error, the rabbis searched for its meaning. It is not difficult for rabbinic Jews to find meaning in the number eight, however, since Jews are commanded to fulfill the mitzvah of circumcision on the eighth day (Genesis 17:12). Yet having established the significance of this number, the rabbis also searched for meaning in the seven numbers preceding it – and found explanations regarding the number seven, such as the seven blessings preceding the recitation of the Shema or the seven mitzvot to be found on a rabbinic Jew's body and his household.

Having established the significance of these seven mitzvot, the rabbis emphasized that the mitzvot will not always be fulfilled. Perhaps the rabbis did this because they knew that Jews are not always able to fulfill the

commandments in times of duress or persecution. Concerning the observance of the mitzvot, the rabbis wrote: "And so it is with every commandment that is in our hands; we do not observe it according to its proper manner and according to halacha. And if we were to examine the way each of them is observed among us, it would be difficult to understand why the The Holy One Blessed be God continues to sustain us or continues to sustain His world. For there is no commandment that we hold tightly in our hands, except the commandment of circumcision and the (innocent) prattle of the mouths of children in school, who are without sin, as it is said: *If not for My covenant day and night, I should not sustain the ordinances of heaven and earth (Jeremiah 33:25-6).*"

It is in texts such as the previous one that the reader discovers how the rabbis read the Psalms as applicable to the Jewish people. In their commentary, the rabbis pleaded for an end to persecution and dispersion among the people. The tone of their writing is one of distress as they hope for a time-to-come when the Jewish people will no longer be persecuted by other peoples, but will be restored to safety and to greatness.

Yet although their primary purpose is to describe the troubles that have befallen the Jewish people, the rabbis use individual examples to illustrate the themes of divine punishment and reward. In their commentary on psalm six, the rabbis employ the example of a king and his son to portray the relationship between God and Israel. In the parables, a king wishes to physically punish his son. Yet he is also concerned that his punishment not be too severe -- he does not want to kill him. Therefore, the king creates appropriate punishments for his son that demonstrate the king's mercy and kindness toward him. So too is God's love for the people Israel. Though it is

sometimes necessary for God to punish Israel, God wishes mercy upon the people. God's punishment of Israel is merciful.

The rabbis also interpret Israel's nationalistic waiting for deliverance by God in the form of an individual who is in need of healing. In rabbinic interpretation, a man is waiting for the doctor to come. The man is sick and is in desperate need of care from his doctor. He waits for the doctor with hope. Just as he finally realizes that his doctor may not arrive, the doctor does indeed come to his aid and save his life. We know that the patient in this parable is David. But his individuality can also apply to us. We, too, wait for God, the doctor, to deliver us and make us whole. We, too, wait for God's deliverance.

The element of the individual in relationship to the divine develops in yet another way in the literature of the Psalms – in God's chastising Israel as punishment for her actions. The descriptions of how God has punished Israel work to personalize the relationship between the two. The rabbis reason that God could not have forgotten about Israel – that is unthinkable – so it is more likely that Israel, in her desperation, is being punished by God. Although attention by means of punishment is the mark of a harsh relationship, Israel can take from it a feeling that God cares for the community of Israel. If God did not care about the Jews, God would not have punished them at all, but would have simply ignored them. Although at times Israel feels abandoned, Israel is never truly alone, for God is with her.

Modern Commentary on Psalm Six:

Psalm six, a penitential psalm, poses several interesting questions for the reader about both the predicament of the speaker as well as his relationship to God. It is obvious to the reader that the speaker feels he is in dire straits at the time he is writing his psalm. Yet it remains unclear as to whether or not his problem is physical, such as sickness; is external, such as that caused by outside enemies; or is internal, an emotional state of mind. Verses 1-7/8 suggest that the psalmist may be suffering from a physical ailment. He is languishing. His bones are weary. He is groaning. Yet in vs. 9 he mentions the "workers of evil" who torment him, which could suggest to some that these are in fact enemies who physically threaten his welfare. Just as we do not know from what type of sickness he suffers, we are also unsure about the identity of his enemies. We wonder: are they foreign forces? Are they Israelites? Are they his neighbors? His family? Or are they internal, "spiritual demons" from which he suffers? We cannot know. The questions remain unanswered.

We also wonder about the psalmist's relationship to God. It seems clear that the psalmist understands his suffering to be a result of God's punishment of him for his sins. He begs God, "Do not chastise me in your rage." The psalmist believes that his suffering is on account of God's anger. Yet the fact that the psalmist has related his suffering to God's hand suggests that he feels there exists a relationship between

God and himself. His prayer to God is to "tell God all about it."⁴⁰ It seems that by the psalmist's appeal to God, as well as his assumption that God is responsible for his suffering, the psalmist is saying that he is certain that God is concerned about his well-being. Yet certain as he is, the psalmist still haunts us with his cry to God: "How long?" Although he does not deny God's presence in his life, the psalmist does wonder if God is concerned *enough* about him to come to his rescue. Although the psalmist does not know when or how God works, he knows that God does work.⁴¹

Yet I suggest that it is precisely because the psalm does not answer these questions that it is so appealing to us. The psalm suggests several general themes: illness, the threat of enemies, and also isolation from both human and divine contact. Each modern reader of this psalm may take his own personal meaning from its words. Today's individuals may insert their own physical illnesses or feelings of isolation into the words of psalm six. Just as the speaker moves from his utter desperation to confidence that God hears his prayer (verses 9-11), contemporary readers may also grow to trust that God will listen to their voices and heed their words.

⁴⁰ IB: 40.

⁴¹ IB: 41.

CHAPTER THREE

PART I

PSALM 13

- 1 For the leader: a psalm of David.
- 2 How long⁴², God, will you forget me for ever⁴³?
How long will you hide your face from me?
- 3 How long will I have cares on my mind⁴⁴,
grief in my heart all day⁴⁵?
How long will my enemy have the upper hand⁴⁶?
- 4 Look at me! Answer me, O God, my God.
Make my eyes shine,
lest I sleep the sleep of death.
- 5 Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed against him,"
my foes rejoice as I totter.
- 6 But I have trusted in Your goodness;
My heart will rejoice in Your salvation;
I will sing to God, for God has dealt well⁴⁷ with me.

⁴² In addition to the four times "How long" (*ad anah*) appears in psalm 13, it appears in only one other psalm, psalm 62:4. It also appears in Num. 14:11, Josh. 18:3, Jer. 47:6, Hab. 1:2. This is also the subject of the Midrash on verse 13:1. God said it four times in complaint about humanity, therefore it occurs four times by humanity in psalm 13! Also, in retribution, four kingdoms rule over them. It goes on to say that when God says that He will do evil -- He does not do it against Israel. But when God says that He will do evil against the *akum* He does it!

⁴³ The Interpreter's Bible reads this: "How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord: For ever?"

⁴⁴ IB: "...take counsel in my soul."

⁴⁵ The LXX adds "and night."

⁴⁶ or "exalt over me."

⁴⁷ RSV: "... dealt bountifully with me."

CHAPTER THREE

PART II

MIDRASH TEHILLIM

PSALM 13

1. *For the leader: a psalm of David. How long, O God, will you ignore me forever? (Psalm 13:1-2).* This relates to what Scripture says elsewhere: *And it came to pass that, as He called, and they would not hear, so they shall call, and I will not hear, (said the Lord of hosts) (Zechariah. 7:13).* Rabbi Isaac said: Measure for measure! The The Holy One Blessed be God said: Four times I asked, "How long?": *How long will this people despise Me? (Numbers 14:11), How long will they not believe in Me? (ibid)., How long will you refuse to keep My commandments? (Exodus 16:28), and How long shall I bear with this evil congregation? (Numbers 14:27).* Four times you will also ask "How long?" After I will have delivered you over to the four kingdoms, you will cry out four times in your distress, "How long?" – *How long will You forget me, O Lord? Forever? How long will You hide Your face from Me? How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand? (Psalm 13:2-3).* *How long will You forget me, O Lord? Forever? – "(refers) to" the kingdom of Babylon. How long will You hide Your face from Me? – "(refers) to" Media and Persia. How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day? – "(refers) to" Greece. How long will my enemy have the upper hand? -- "(refers) to" wicked Edom.*

Another interpretation: (The verse is read), *How long, O Lord? Will*

You ignore me forever? (Psalm 13:2). The congregation of Israel said to the The Holy One Blessed be God: Master of the universe, is there a king without a throne? Is there a king without a crown? Is there a king without a palace? *How long, O Lord? Will You ignore me forever? -- Did You forget what You said to the prophet Samuel: The Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent (I Sam.15:29)?* You are the strength of Israel! You will not falsify the covenant made between You and the patriarchs. Surely You did not repent of Your favors, that You will not bring them to us. For Scripture says, *God is not a man, that He should lie; neither the son of man, that He should repent (Numbers 23:19).*

Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani said: The beginning of this verse must be read separately from its conclusion; and its conclusion from its beginning. (How is this explained?) When the The Holy One Blessed be God decrees to bring a good to the world, *He is not a man, that He should lie (Numbers 23:19)*; but when He decides to bring chastisement to the world, then (read the conclusion of the verse) *As to that which He has said, He will not do it (ibid).* When God said (about Egypt): *That nation, whom they will serve, I will judge (Genesis 15:14),* (we may read): *God is not a man, that He should lie.* But when God said (to Abram): *(Know for sure that your seed will be a stranger in a land that is not theirs) and will serve them; and they will afflict them for four hundred years (Genesis 15:13),* then, (we read): *As to that which He has said, He will not do it* (i.e. the slavery period was reduced). So also when the The Holy One Blessed be God said to Abraham, *In Isaac will seed be called to you (Genesis 21:12),* *God is not a man that He should lie.* But when God said: *Take now your son, your only son, (whom you love, Isaac ... and offer him ... for a burnt offering) (Genesis 22:2),* then *As to that which He has said, He will*

not do it.

Rabbi Berechiah said: It happened that from a teacher's chair a certain man was expounding the words *You will not afflict any widow, or fatherless child (Exodus 22:21)*. A widow who heard him came to him. When the man said to her, "Go away now," she replied: "If I had not heard you say, *You will not afflict any widow, or fatherless child (Exodus 22:21)*, I would not have come to you. And yet you say to me, "Go away, come tomorrow!" So, too Israel says to the The Holy One Blessed be God: Master of the universe, we would not have come to You, if we had not depended on Your mercy, for You did say: *The needy will not always be forgotten (Psalm 9:19)*. And yet You have forgotten.

2. *How long will You forget me, O Lord? Forever? How long will You hide Your face from Me? (Psalm 13:2)* Rabbi Hanina said that the community of Israel said to The Holy One Blessed be God: Master of the universe, In the past you would wage wars on our behalf, that it is said, *For then, God has gone out before you (Samuel 5:24)*. So, too for the later days, You will do this, as it is said, *Then shall the Lord go forth and fight against those nations (Zechariah 14:3)*. But when we are strong, you do not go out on our behalf, as it is said, *Have you not, O God, cast us off? And you do not go forth, O God, with our hosts (Psalms 60:12)*. How long, O God, will You ignore me? The The Holy One Blessed be God said to them, and did I forget you? Haven't you forgotten me, as it is written, *They forgot God, their savior, (psalm 106:21)?* And have I turned my face away from you? Haven't you turned your faces away from me as it is said: *(Our fathers) have turned their faces away from the tent of God, (2 Chronicles 29:6)?* And they have turned their back, as it is

written: *For they have turned their back to me but not their face, (Jeremiah 2:27)?* God said to them: In this world I hide my face from you, but in the world to come for *Eye to eye they will behold that the Lord returns to Zion (Isaiah 52:8).*

3. *How long will I have cares in my mind? How long will my enemy be raised high above me? (Psalm 13:3).* This is what is written: *After these things did King Ahashuerus promote Haman (Esther 3:1).* Rabbi Akiva said: how high did they raise him? Up to a tree of 50 cubits, as it is said: *Let a gallows be made 50 cubits high (Esther 5:14).* He used to say, *(and set[Haman's] seat) above all of the princes, (Esther 3:1),* until Haman was hanged on the 50 cubits. Kaf, lamed, in gematria is 50.

How long will I have cares in my mind (Psalm 13:3). Although I am enslaved to the foreign kingdoms, the Torah and mitzvot that You gave me on Sinai I continue to observe with my soul. I have had a brit milah, I observe Shabbat, I separate the challah.

Another interpretation of *How long will I have cares against my life grief in my heart all day? (Psalm 13:3).* I have risked my life because the laws that the nations of the world have decreed upon me for the purpose of abandoning your Torah and your mitzvot, but my soul is devoted to them.

4. *Look at me, Answer me, O Lord my God. Lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death (Psalm 13:4)* -- that is, lest we depart (the world) through the sleep of death. *(Look at me, Answer me)... lest my enemy say "I have prevailed against him;" (my foes rejoice as I totter) (Psalm 13:5).* When the The Holy One Blessed be God asked David: The insolence of you to speak

such peremptory words to Me! David answered: Because I trust in Your mercy: *I trust in Your mercy (Psalm 13:6)*, in the mercy ascribed to You in the verse: *The earth, O Lord, is full of Your mercy (Psalm 119:64)*, and also in the verse: *When I said: "My foot is slipping," Your mercy, O Lord, held me up (Psalm 94:18)*. "Your mercy" is Your Torah, which is called *The Torah of mercy (Proverbs 31:26)*.

My heart will rejoice in Your salvation (Psalm 13:6). Rabbi Abbahu said: This is one of those difficult verses which declare that the salvation of the The Holy One Blessed be God depends on the salvation of the people of Israel. It is not written: "My heart will rejoice in my salvation," but *in Your salvation*, by which David meant: Your salvation (requires) our salvation.

Another interpretation: In the kingdom of Babylon we said: *I trust in Your goodness (Psalm 13:6)*. In the kingdom of Persia and Media we said: *My heart will rejoice in Your salvation (Psalm 13:6)*. In Greece we said: *I will sing to the Lord (ibid)*, And in Rome we say: *Because God has dealt well with me (ibid)*.

Another interpretation of : *Because God has dealt well with me (Psalm 13:6)*. The Holy One Blessed be God said: Give Me My things with which I met you in this world, and I will deal bountifully with you in time-to-come: during Sukkot pour water on the altar before Me, for long ago I met you with water, as it is written: *Spring up O well -- sing to it (Numbers 21:17)*, and I will deal bountifully with you in the time-to-come when *The mountains will drop down sweet wine (Joel 3:18)*. Take a *lulav* and with it dance in praise before Me, for long ago I met you with dancing, as it is written: *The mountains skipped like rams (Psalms 114:4)*, and I will deal bountifully with you in the time-to-come when *All the trees of the field will clap their hands*

(Isaiah 55:12). Make a sukkah for Me, for long ago I met you with sukkot, when I had the children of Israel dwell in booths (Leviticus 23:43), and I will deal bountifully with you in the time-to-come when There will be a booth for a shadow in the daytime from the heat (Isaiah 4:6). Thus it is said: I will sing to the Lord , for God has dealt well with me (Psalm 13:6).

CHAPTER THREE

PART III

The Rabbinic Interpretation of Psalm 13:

Psalm 13 introduces the theme of Israel and God waiting for one another. Each is immersed in relationship with the other and waits for the other to respond to its needs. In the Psalm, the speaker asks God: "How long" will it be until God is able to respond mercifully to Israel when Israel is in its time of need? This question "How long" seems to be the central theme for Israel and God. The question is not "Will you come to my aid?" but "How long" until you do? It is an appropriate question also for the rabbis, who are trusting of God's mercy, to also ask this question, for they, too, are waiting for God's deliverance. Furthermore, the rabbis introduce the concept that the waiting in the relationship is mutual. At times God has waited for the Israelites to again trust in God and obey God's commandments. God has also asked "How long" of the Israelites.

Rabbinic interpretation of Psalm 13 presents God's relationship with Israel as favorable, yet somewhat ambivalent. The general theme is that God has been merciful to Israel. When God wants to chastise Israel, God holds back, does not punish Israel. Yet the rabbis cannot help but wonder: Is it possible for God to forget Israel? They answer that there is a difference between the way that Israel feels and the way that the situation actually is. God could not possibly forget Israel, though at times Israel does feel forgotten. Though the individual Jew has obeyed all of God's commandments -- observing the Sabbath, separating a piece of challah for the *kohen* in the

baking of *chalah* – God still seems to have abandoned him. These examples seem to apply both to the nation and to the individual. One can picture the individual Jew, who has earnestly obeyed each commandment, worships God as is required, wears t'fillin, obeys the obligations and the prohibitions of the Sabbath, yet still feels abandoned by God. As the rabbis interpret it, the relationship is between God and the people Israel. Yet it is also personal – between God and the individual.

Yet another aspect of the relationship emerges in the last verse of the psalm in which the text reads, "My heart will rejoice in Your salvation (13:6)." Not only does the psalmist depend on God's goodness to him. It appears that God also depends on the psalmist for God's salvation. The rabbis wonder if it is possible to say that God's salvation could depend on a human being. They seem to come to the conclusion that, ultimately, it does. Rabbi Abbahu said: This is one of those difficult verses which declare that the salvation of the The Holy One Blessed be God depends on the salvation of the people of Israel. It is not written: "My heart will rejoice in my salvation," but *in Your salvation*, by which David meant: Your salvation (requires) our salvation. From Abbahu's words, the reader realizes the tension inherent in this relationship. At times the psalmist feels utterly abandoned by God. Then he feels an intense closeness to God. Finally, he is so utterly happy and secure that he is able to rejoice in salvation that is happening to God. The course of this psalm, which is emotionally exhausting, mirrors the emotions of the Jewish people in their relationship to God.

CHAPTER THREE

PART IV

Modern Commentary on Psalm 13

Psalm 13, though it is very brief, expresses the intense emotions of an individual. This psalm in particular seems to be about the claims and the cries of one individual who personally expresses his desperation towards God. As in other psalms, the psalmist seems to contradict himself, as he speaks directly, bravely to God, yet claims that God has forgotten him. The speaker does not inform us of what ailment or from what desperate situation he suffers. In verse three one might think that his enemy is an internal one, for he has "cares on [his] mind daily." Yet verse five suggests that the psalmist has external enemies who are persecuting him, and will delight in his downfall.

The Interpreter's Bible refers to the phrase "lest I sleep the sleep of death" (verse four) suggesting that perhaps the speaker is suffering from "moral inertia," (IB, p.74). This inertia seems to come from within the mind of the speaker, who feels that, though he tries to overcome it, he is completely incapable of getting out of his misery. In such a case, the individual is compared to the poet Ovid, who exclaimed, "I see and approve the better course, but I follow the worse, (IB, p.74). This individual's judgement is clear, but he has no energy left. He has become inert.

The Interpreter's Bible also analyzes the individual's complaint in verse five – that his enemies "rejoice as I totter" – as modifiable human behavior, and explains that in this verse we find a "prayer that we must

answer ourselves" (IB, p74). This commentary suggests that the enemies rejoice because they realize how they have caused the individual to become disoriented. Yet if the individual had declined from "exposing his wounds" to his foes, he might have avoided hearing their jubilation at his defeat. The interpretation continues by stating that "some of the unworthy clashes that dishonor congregational life would not occur if those who imagine themselves injured declined to admit injury." I was surprised to read this comment, for I had thought that admitting one's vulnerability to others would be the preferable action to take. But in this case, IB proposes that we must sometimes answer the prayer ourselves.

Verse six presents a change in outlook for the psalmist and elicits a variety of explanations from the reader. One such explanation suggests that the psalmist has a change of heart.⁴⁸ Where he once found only sorrow and suffering, he now finds comfort. The writer stops brooding and begins to "count his blessings." Where his eyes were once cloudy with despair, now they are clearer, and he is able to see the world through optimistic lenses.

I might argue that it was not the psalmist's perspective that changed, but his confidence in God's mercy. Through his own words of prayer the psalmist regains his trust in God's presence. By praying to the God who seems to have betrayed him, the psalmist has strengthened his relationship with God. As a result of the strengthened relationship, the psalmist again feels the promise of God's continued presence.

A third view implies that a physical change actually took place for the speaker. The International Critical Commentary explains that the turning of God's face towards the psalmist will make his eyes shine. Furthermore, "The

⁴⁸ IB: 73.

enlightenment of the eyes [is] in the sense of the revival of physical strength and moral energy." Therefore, the psalmist is in danger of death until God's countenance shines upon him and revives him. Regardless of how the change occurs, the speaker undergoes great change in his faith in God within the short span of this psalm. Because of the intensity of this change within the individual, this psalm carries great appeal for its reader.

CHAPTER FOUR

PART I

PSALM 27

- 1 By David:
God is my light and my salvation.
Whom shall I fear?
God is the stronghold⁴⁹ of my life,
Whom shall I dread?
- 2 When evil doers come close to me
to devour my flesh⁵⁰
My adversaries and my foes: it is they
who stumble and fall.
- 3 If an enemy camp may beseige me,
My heart would not fear.
If a war would rise up against me,
In spite of it, I am trusting.
- 4 One thing I ask of God,
Only that do I seek,
to live in the house of God all the days of my life.
to gaze upon the pleasantness of God,
and to visit⁵¹ his temple.

⁴⁹ IB: "the strength."

⁵⁰ IB: "uttering slanders against me," perhaps thinking of the Akkadian idiom *karsi akalu*: "slander." This expression is found in Biblical Aramaic in Ezra 3:8. For discussion see Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influence on Aramaic* (chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974): 63.

⁵¹ IB: "to inquire in his temple."

- 5 For he will hide me in his shelter,⁵²
on an evil day,⁵³
conceal me in a hiding place in his tent,
raise me high upon a rock.
- 6 But now my head is high
over my enemies around me;
And I sacrifice in his tent with shouts.⁵⁴
I will sing and make music to God.
- 7 Listen, God. My voice is crying out.
Show mercy on me! Answer me!
- 8 I imagine Your saying:
"Seek my face!"⁵⁵
God, I seek your face.
- 9 Do not hide your face⁵⁶ from me.
Do not thrust away your servant in anger.
You have been my help;
Do not forsake me;
Do not abandon me, O God, my deliverer.
- 10 For my father and my mother have abandoned me;
But God will take me in.

⁵² JPS: "pavilion."

⁵³ or "in the time of trouble."

⁵⁴ IB: "shouts of joy."

⁵⁵ The IB re-orders the phrases in an explanatory way: "Thou hast said, 'Seek ye my face.' My heart says to thee, 'Thy face, Lord, do I seek.'"

⁵⁶ IB: "far."

- 11 Show⁵⁷ me your way, O God;
And guide me on a level path,
because of my watchful foes.
- 12 Do not subject me to the will of my foes;
For false witnesses and violent accusers
have arisen against me⁵⁸.
- 13 If I had not trusted
that I would see the goodness of God
in the land of the living⁵⁹ ...
- 14 Look⁶⁰ to God;
Be strong and courageous in your heart.
O Look to God.

⁵⁷ *ibid*: "Teach."

⁵⁸ JPS: "for false witnesses have risen against me, and they breathe out violence."

⁵⁹ KJ: "Unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

IB adds: *I had fainted*, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

⁶⁰ *ibid*: "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord."

CHAPTER FOUR

PART II

MIDRASH TEHILLIM

PSALM 27

1. *The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? (psalm 27:1).*

Scripture says about this verse: "And the Light of Israel shall be for a fire, and its Holy One for a flame" (Isaiah 10:17). In the way of the world, when a person carries around a lamp inside his palace, he is (not) able to say: "So-and-so, who is my friend, is allowed to use this light, but so-and-so, who is my enemy, is not allowed to use this light." Rather, everyone is allowed to use the light. But the The Holy One Blessed be God is moreso able to limit the use of the light because [God] created the light. And in the age to come, the wicked will not be able to see by God's light, as it is said: "The light of the righteous rejoices; but the lamp of the wicked shall be put out." (Proverbs. 13:9).

Scripture says elsewhere: ["And God said: Let there be light. And there was light.] And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness" (Genesis.1:3-4). Rabbi Yehuda in the name of Rabbi Simon said: [God] divided the light for His own use like a king who sees a good portion and says, "this portion should be mine." So too when the The Holy One Blessed be God created the world and created the great light, God said, "No one except for me is allowed to use it." And Scripture says: *The light dwells with Him (Daniel 2:22).*

Rabbi Abin the Levite said that the The Holy One Blessed be God took the light and covered Himself with it as a tallit and illumined His universe with it, as it is said: *He covered himself with light as with a garment (psalm.104:2).* But the rabbis said that God set aside the light for the righteous in the world to come, as in the example of a king who has a good portion and says: "This portion shall be for my son!" So Scripture says, *Light is sown for the righteous (psalm. 97:11).*

David asked the The Holy One Blessed be God: "Master of the universe: when will the light come?" And God said to him: "When the redemption comes and Jerusalem is rebuilt I will make the light come, as it says: *Arise, shine for your light has come (Isaiah 60:1).* But as for the nations of the world, for them the light will be made into darkness, as it is written: *And the Light of Israel will be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame: and it shall burn and devour his sito and his samiro in one day (Isaiah 10:17).* What are these: sito and samiro ? These are [the officials of the nations] who maintained themselves in luxury.

David said to God: "Show us illumination from that light," as it is said, *The Lord is God and He has shown us light (psalm.118:27).* God said: "As you live, I will bring light to Israel and darkness to the nations of the world," as it is said: *Arise, shine, for your light is come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the peoples; but the Lord will shine upon you, [and God's glory shall be seen upon you] (Isaiah 60:1-2).* You might be astonished by this, but the The Holy One Blessed be God has already given the world an example of this as it is

said: *And there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days; but all the children of Israel have light (Exodus 10:22-23).* And so you find written in Scripture when the Egyptians were pursuing after Israel: *And the pillar of cloud came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel, and there was the cloud and the darkness, and it illumined the night [but the two did not come together all that night] (Exodus 14:20).* But if the pillar of cloud was there, how could there be darkness? And if darkness was there how could there be a cloud? Rabbi Hoshia explained that the pillar of cloud had two faces: a face of light for Israel and a face of darkness for the Egyptians. David said: "I will say/sing [a psalm] about [God's] light," as it is said: *A psalm of David. The Lord is my light and my salvation (27:1).*

2. Another interpretation of *The Lord is my light and my salvation (27!)*. This verse is written in Scripture: *Your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (psalm. 119:105).* To what are the wicked compared? To someone who walked in the middle of the night in pitch darkness. When he came to a stone he stumbled over it, and when he came to a pit, he fell into it. And so it is said about him: *The way of the wicked is in darkness; they know not at what they stumble (Proverbs 4:19).* To what are the righteous compared? To someone who walked on a path, and in his hand he had a lit lamp. When he came to a stone, he was watchful for it and did not stumble. When he came to a pit, he was watchful for it and did not fall into it. Thus said David: I was about to profane the Sabbath, but the Torah gave light to me, as it is said: *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy (Exodus 20:8).* I was about to commit adultery, but the Torah gave light to me, as it is said:

Both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death (Leviticus 20:10). That is what Scripture means by: Your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (psalm. 119:05).

Another interpretation of: *Your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (psalm. 119:05).* If lamp why light? If light why lamp? But David meant this: "When I began studying the words of the Torah, although I barely began with them, they brought forth light. But as I entered farther into the Torah, the many gates [of light] open to me." Therefore David speaks of both lamp and light.

Another interpretation of: *Your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (psalm. 119:05).* When did David say this verse? When he was walking into the valley of Rephaim, though he would not go into battle until he had consulted the *urim* and *tumim*.

And so you find that when Samuel went to anoint David, the ministering angels, in the presence of The Holy One Blessed be God, made accusations against David, and they said: "Master of the universe, why are you taking away the kingship from Saul and giving it to David?" God answered: I will tell you what the difference is between Saul and David. Saul went to consult the *urim* and *tumim*, but as soon as he saw the Philistines coming to attack him, he said to the priest, "Withdraw your hand," not waiting until he finished the inquiry, as it is said: *It came to pass, while Saul talked to the priest, that the tumult that was in the camp of the Philistines went on and increased; and Saul said to the priest: "Withdraw your hand" (I Samuel 14:19).*

But David, when he saw the Philistines approaching him in the valley of Rephaim, immediately he began to consult the *urim* and *tumim*, as it is said: *And the Philistines came up again, and spread themselves in the valley of Rephaim. And when David inquired of the Lord, He said: "You shall not go up; make a circuit behind them, [and come upon them over against the moving trees]"* (2 Samuel 5:22-23). [By this God meant] Don't stretch out your hand to the Philistines, even if they are very close to you, until you see the tops of the moving trees, as it is said: *But let it be when you hear the sound of a marching at the tops of the moving trees [and not behind them] -- that then you shall determine [to go up]* (ibid). [The words "thou shall determine" usually] denote decision as in the phrase, *seeing his days are determined* [Job 14:5]). And why did [God] give him a sign, not on the tops of the mulberry trees and not behind the Philistines? Rabbi Berechiah said: "there is a kind of mulberry tree completely covered with thorns, so that whenever a person touches it, he cries out in pain." This means to teach you that whenever Israel is in distress, it is as if the The Holy One Blessed be God is also in distress, as if to say, *In all their affliction, He was afflicted* (Isaiah 63:9). Likewise when you are told: *And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a thorn bush* (Exodus 3:2). Here again, why out of a thorn bush and not out of any other kind of tree? Because it is said, *I am with him in trouble* (psalm. 91:15).

When the Philistines came, and the Israelites saw them -- for they were not very far from them -- not even four cubits away -- the Israelites asked David, "Why are we standing still?" David responded: "Because I have already been commanded by the Lord not to lay a hand on them until we see the tops of

the mulberry trees swaying. And if we do lay a hand on them we will die immediately; and if we do not lay a hand on them, they will kill us immediately. But it is better that we die the death of the righteous than the death of the wicked. Therefore, let I and you lift up our eyes to the The Holy One Blessed be God." But at this instant, the tops of the mulberry trees began swaying, and the Israelites attacked the Philistines, as it is said: *And David did so, as the Lord commanded him, and smote the Philistines* (2 Samuel 5:25).

Therefore the The Holy One Blessed be God was able to say to the ministering angels: "See the difference between David and Saul!" And what brought about David's deliverance? The word of the The Holy One Blessed be God which David fulfilled and which brought him light. So [David] said: *Your word is a lamp unto my feet* (psalm 119:05).

3. Another interpretation: *The Lord is my light and my salvation* (27:1).

Rabbi Eleazar, referring to [Israel at the] Red Sea interpreted the verse as:

Thus [*The Lord was my*] light at the Red Sea, for it is said, *The cloud...gave light by night there* (Exodus 14:20). And *my salvation* [also] at the Red Sea, for it is said: *Thus the Lord saved Israel that day* (Exodus 14:30). *Whom shall I fear?* [again] at the Red Sea, Moses said to the people: *Do not fear* (Exodus 14:13). *The Lord is the strength of my life* (27:1): At the Red Sea, Israel sang: *The Lord is my strength and song* (Exodus 15:2). *Whom shall I fear* (27:1)? *Fear and dread shall fall upon them* (Exodus 15:16) at the Red Sea. *When evil doers come close to me* (27:2): *Pharaoh came near* (Exodus 14:10). *To eat up my flesh* (27:2): *Pharaoh said, [I will pursue, I will overtake]...my lust shall be satisfied upon them* (Exodus 15:9).

Rabbi Samuel bar Nachmani taught: A wicked person does not leave this world until he has come up with a verdict for himself with his own mouth. So it is written: *I will pursue, I will overtake* (Ex. 15:9). It is not written here: "We will pursue. We will overtake," but *I will pursue. I will overtake*, which could really be read: "I will be pursued, I will be overtaken." It is not written here: "We will divide the spoil," but *I will divide the spoil*, really signifying, "I will be divided as spoil." *My adversaries and my foes, it is they who stumble and fall* (27:2). For it is said: *But as for Pharaoh and his host, He overthrew them in the Red Sea* (psalm. 136:15).

The Israelites said: From now on, *Though an encampment [of Egyptians] should camp against me, my heart would not fear; though a war [with Amalek] should rise against me, yet will I put my trust in Him* (psalm 27:3), the The Holy One Blessed be God.

4. The rabbis interpreted the verse as referring to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. *The Lord is my light* is on Rosh Hashanah, since this is the day of judgment, it is said: *He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and the judgment as the noon day* (psalm.37:6). *The Lord is my salvation* is on Yom Kippur, when God saves us and forgive us all of our sins. He is my salvation *when the wicked come upon me*: When the guardian angels of the hostile nations come upon me to eat up my flesh. For they come into the presence of the The Holy One Blessed be God to attack the Israelites, saying, "The other nations of the earth worshipped idols, and the children of Israel also worshipped idols." *Even my adversaries and my foes*: you will find through gematria that the numerical value of the letters in the word "ha Satan" is three hundred and sixty four, which is one short of the number of

days in the year. Thus the Adversary is given the authority to make accusations against the children of Israel on all the days of the year, except on the Day of Atonement when the The Holy One Blessed be God says to him: "You have no authority to touch them. Nevertheless, go forth and see with what they busy themselves." So he goes and he finds all of them fasting and immersed in *t'fillah*, dressed in white clothing and cloaked like the ministering angels. Immediately he goes back in shame and confusion. The The Holy One Blessed be God asks him: "What have you found out about my children?" He says, "Yes they are like the ministering angels and I am unable to touch them." At that ~~moment~~ the The Holy One Blessed be God chains the Adversary and says to his children, "I have forgiven you."

The people of Israel say: From now on, *though a host* – that is the guardian angels of the nations of the earth – *should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in this -* in the Torah, which is called "This" as in the verse *This is the Torah* (Leviticus 7:37).

Rabbi Levi said: The word "This" refers to the body of ordinances which You did inscribe for me in Your Torah, beginning with the verse, *With this shall Aaron come into the holy place* (Leviticus 7:37).

5. *One thing have I asked the Lord... that I may sit in the house of the Lord:* Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: These words mean that [David] asked kingship of the Lord. You will find that David asked one thing of the Lord, but that Solomon asked two things, for he said: *Two things have I asked of You... Remove far from me falsehood and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me; lest I be full, and deny You and*

say: *'Who is the Lord?'* Or lest I be poor and steal, and seize upon the name of my God (Proverbs 30:7-9). What is the literal meaning of *tafasti*? Like *apheton*, the Greek for "loose," *tafasti* means "I might deal loosely with the name of God."

Which sin is more grievous: the first or the second? The second is more grievous. How do we know this? Because the The Holy One Blessed be God overlooks sins of idolatry, unchastity, and bloodshed committed by a person in an hour of stress, but God does not overlook the profanation of His name, as it is said, *Thus says the Lord God: Go you, serve everyone his idols...but My holy name shall you no more profane* (Ezekiel 20:39-40).

Another interpretation of: *One thing have I asked the Lord.* The The Holy One Blessed be God said to David: "In the beginning you said, *One thing have I asked the Lord... that I may sit in the house of the Lord.* And then you returned and said: *To behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in God's temple.* David replied: "Master of the universe, shouldn't the servant be like his master? In the beginning, didn't You come to us with but one requirement, as it is said: *And now Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God* (Deuteronomy 10:12). And after that, did You not cause us to discover many commandments, as it is said: *Take heed... to walk in all God's ways, and to keep God's commandments, and to cleave unto God, and to serve God with all your heart and all your soul* (Joshua 22:5)? It is therefore quite proper that the servant be like his master!"

6. The verse *For in the day of trouble God will hide me in His pavilion* (psalm 27:5) alludes to the day of the trouble with Batsheva. And now shall

my head be lifted up above my enemies round about me; and I will offer in His Tabernacle sacrifices with trumpet-sound (psalm 27:6). Rabbi Jacob interpreted this verse as alluding to Joshua: *Then Joshua built an altar unto the Lord God of Israel on Mount Ebal... and they offered thereon burnt offerings unto the Lord, and sacrificed peace-offerings* (Joshua 8:30-31).

Rabbi Jose ben Rabbi Hanina said: "A high place may be used for a sacrifice through the agency of no one except a prophet." And the proof? Scripture says: *Take heed to yourself that you do not offer burnt offerings in every place that you see* (Deuteronomy 12:13), but at a time that sacrifices on high places were already banned, Elijah offered sacrifices every day on Mount Carmel. Rabbi Simlai explained that the word of God commanded Elijah to do this, for in saying, *I have done all these things at Your word* (1 Kings 18:36), Elijah implied "At your word have I done this thing also."

Rabbi Yochanon brought proof from the passage: *The same night... the Lord said to Gideon: "Take your father's bull, and the second bull of seven years old, and throw down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is by it; and build an altar upon the top of this stronghold, in the orderly manner, and take the second bull and offer a burnt-offering with the wood of the Asherah which you will cut down"* (Judges 6:25-6). Rabbi Abba bar Kahana commented that in the offering of Gideon's bulls seven sins were committed: (1) wood of an Asherah was used; (2) hewn stones were used; (3) one bull was set aside for idolatry; (4) the other bull had, in fact, been worshipped already; (5) the sacrifice was offered at night; (6) by one who was not a priest; (7) and on a high-place, which was expressly forbidden. Nevertheless, because of the need of the hour, the offering was received. Proof concerning Gideon, the son of Joash, yes – but what about Samuel?

Scripture says: *Samuel took a suckling lamb, and offered it for a burnt-offering* (1 Samuel 7:9): (1)it is written, *He shall flay the burnt-offering* (Leviticus 1:6), but Samuel's lamb was offered unflayed; (2)it was too young to be brought for a burnt-offering, for Scripture says: *It shall be seven days under the dam; but from the eighth day and thereon it may be accepted for an offering* (Leviticus 22:27), and Samuel's offering was not eight days old; (3) Samuel was a Levite [and not a priest].

7. *Unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord...* (Psalm 27:13). It is taught in the name of Rabbi Yosi: Why is *lule* marked with dots? Because David said to The Holy One Blessed be God: "Master of the universe, I know that in the world-to-come You will give good reward to the righteous, but I do not know whether I am or am not among them."

Another interpretation of *Unless I had believed...* Zabdi ben Levi said: "Wherever the word *lule* is used, it refers to the merit of the fathers." To this statement, an objection was raised: Why did Judah say to Jacob: *Except (lule) we had lingered, surely now we had returned this second time* (Genesis 43:10)? They answered: This verse implies that if it had not been for the merit of the fathers, not one of us would have come out of Egypt. If it had not been for the merit of the fathers, we would not have come up from there in well-being.

Rabbi Yohanon said: *Lule* everywhere refers to the merit of the The Holy One Blessed be God as it is said, *Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant* (Isaiah 1:9).

Rabbi Levi said: It refers to the merit of the Torah, and to the merit of faith.

To the merit of Torah, as it is said: *Unless Your law had been my delight I should then have perished in my affliction (psalm. 119:92).* And to the merit of faith, as it is said: *Unless (lule) I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord (psalm 27:13).*

Look to the Lord; be of good courage, and God will strengthen your heart; O Look to the Lord (Psalm 27:14). Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said: "When you pray and pray again, know that your prayer is heard, and that there will come a time when God will do what you ask." And the proof? *Look to the Lord; be of good courage and God will strengthen your heart; [and it concludes]: O Look to the Lord (Psalm 27:14) .*

CHAPTER FOUR

PART III

The Rabbinic Interpretation of Psalm 27:

Rabbinic interpretation of Psalm 27 focuses on Israel's current distress and her hope for a future deliverance. The interpretation captures the motif of the Light mentioned in the psalm and applies it to the theme of God's setting aside goodness for the righteous people in the world to come. As a nation, Israel devoted herself to her hope for better times. The rabbis often associate the deliverance of Israel with their hope for a time when Jerusalem is rebuilt. Therefore they ascribe to the notion of Light to Israel and darkness to the rest of the world. The personal nature of the relationship between God and Israel permits Israel to say that God can and will create Light for her.

The rabbis also use the light imagery in the psalm to explain how Israel has acted righteously and is worthy of God's mercy. The rabbis use a parable to explain the difference between the righteousness of Israel and the wickedness of the rest of the nations. They explain: The wicked were not prepared to bring a light along on their journeys, but the righteous were prepared. The righteous did not stumble, for they used the Torah as their light. The sages apply this parable as a lesson for all individuals to study more Torah. They explain that David also consulted this verse and it helped him to be successful in battle, and imply that just as David consulted this verse, so too should each individual in the future.

Another important theme in the rabbinic interpretation of the psalm is that God is so personally involved with Israel that God feels Israel's pain.

Whenever Israel is in distress, God is also in distress. God is literally with Israel as she suffers from the torment of the nations and her enemies. In addition, the enemy described in Psalm 27 can easily be interpreted as the current oppressors of Israel. Consequently, the message to Israel and to individuals is clear: Do not fear -- God is with us.

This message of the life of the nation merging with that of the individual comes no clearer than when the rabbis interpret the prayer of the speaker of Psalm 27. With these verses, the rabbis have the opportunity to describe the nature of prayer for the Jewish people. Instead of describing prayer as a vehicle for national deliverance, the rabbis focus on the individual petition. They teach: When you pray and pray again, know that your prayer is heard, and that there will come a time when God will do what you ask. Here is the essence of a personal relationship to the divine.

CHAPTER FOUR

PART IV

Modern Commentary on Psalm 27

Psalm 27 provides us with a rich mixture of faith, joy, fear, and courage and allows its readers to wonder how one psalm could contain such a collection of shifting emotions. Within biblical commentary, it is assumed that Psalm 27 is really a merging of two originally independent psalms: one in verses 1-6, the second in verses 7-14. Though the tone differs greatly between these two divisions, there seems to be a common element of trust in God amidst the attack of one's enemies. Because of this common theme, it is understandable that these two psalms could become joined as one.

The first section, verses 1-6, portrays the speaker as very trusting in God's protection of him. Because of his confidence in God's providence, the individual feels that he is strongly defended against his attackers. The speaker prays that he will always enjoy this divine protection in God's house, the temple. The thought that he might bask in God's sanctuary, safe from his foes who try to lunge at him from all around, causes the individual to shout and sing with joy to God.

The second section, verses 7-14 is a lament to God. The individual is in despair as a result of his family's abandonment of him and of the persecution by his enemies. As he speaks, his anguish shows no sign of ceasing; yet throughout his wailing, his faith in God is constant. The individual, who has lost the protection of his mother and father, seeks the guidance of God as a loving parent who will sustain him and encourage him. Desperate, he now

addresses God in the second person and urges God: "Show mercy on me! Answer me!"

The Interpreter's Bible wonders how these two disparate sections could come together in one psalm. The interpreters propose that these two moods, when taken together, provide a good composite approach to God. In times of trouble, the individual might first concentrate on God as the constant "Helper" (IB p.145) in whom he steadfastly trusts. Then he will "stare at trouble" head on, letting loose his emotional pleading to God, his guardian, his parent figure. In this way, the psalmist comes full circle, and Psalm 27 begins and ends with very similar statements: "God is the stronghold of my life" (verse 1) and "Be strong and courageous in your heart. O Look to God" (verse 14).

Perhaps because of this juxtaposition of two themes: God as a constant Helper with the psalmist's steadfast trust in God, is the reason that Jews recite Psalm 27 from Rosh Hodesh Elul to Simchat Torah. As the holiday of Rosh Hashanah approaches, Jews are asked to take a spiritual inventory of their lives and seek for givenness for their past transgressions. This month-long period of self-reflection can be emotionally stressful for individuals. Consequently, Psalm 27 seems appropriate for this period.

In addition to viewing Psalm 27 as a whole, the modern commentaries focus on several verses individually. Some point to verse three: "If an enemy camp may beseige me, My heart would not fear. If a war would rise up against me, in spite of it, I am trusting," saying that such a fearless statement about the future could be dangerous to a person's physical or moral safety. At times, an individual might feel so confident in his surroundings that he erroneously thinks he is the "master of his world" (IB, p.146). At this

time he believes that he is so powerful that no evil forces can bring him down. This is a dangerous mood, say the commentators, who recite: "Pride goeth before a fall." Being overproud of our spirituality is not a safe situation. The modern commentators remind us that we are the safest when we walk humbly with God.

Interpretation also comes from the psalmist's threefold wish that occurs in verse four: "to live in the house of God...to gaze upon the pleasantness of God... to visit his temple." The IB interprets these clauses in a wider sense to be the three fundamental requirements for a good life: " 1) purpose: to be a steadfast member of the community which puts God at the center; 2) desire: to be at home with beauty and to stay where it is to be found; 3) to determine to associate ourselves with Christlike ends and means. (IB p.147)."

Verses 7-12 and verses 13-14 provide the reader with insight about issues of distress, doubt, faith and patience. Modern interpretation explains that, even in the time of the individual's dire straits, he continues to search for God. Verse eight presents textual problems; but according to IB, the sense is: "[God says: Seek ye my face: we reply]: Thy face, Lord, do I seek" (IB p.148). Therefore one can interpret that God wants us to constantly struggle and search through our own learning and prayer, in order to find God's continued sustenance and care. A person cannot give God a limited time to show up in his life. Instead the individual must continue to seek out God's presence. If he continues to hope for God's help. With hope and patience for God, the individual will "be strong and of good courage."

CHAPTER FIVE

PART I

PSALM 31

- 1 For the leader;
a psalm of David:
- 2 In you, Lord, I have sought refuge;
let me never be ashamed;
With your righteousness, rescue me.
- 3 Incline your ear to me;
Save me quickly;
Be a rock, a stronghold for me;
a strong fortress to save me.
- 4 For you are my rock and my fortress;
For the sake of your name, lead me and guide me.
- 5 Free⁶¹ me from this net which has been hidden for me;
For you are my place of security.
- 6 Into your hand I entrust my spirit;
You have redeemed me, Lord, faithful God.
- 7 I hate⁶² those who pay regard to vanities⁶³;
But I trust in God.
- 8 I will rejoice and be happy in Your lovingkindness;
because you have seen my affliction;

⁶¹ IB: "pull me out."

⁶² ibid: "Thou hatest"

⁶³ IB: "lying vanities."

- You have known about my soul's distress⁶⁴.
- 9 And did not deliver me into the hand of the enemy;
You have set my feet in a spacious place.
- 10 Have mercy on me, God;
for I am in distress.
My eyes are wasted away in grief;
My soul and my belly, too.
- 11 My life is exhausted with grief;
my years with groaning;
My strength has tottered because of my iniquity;
and my bones are wasting away.
- 12 I was a reproach for my enemies,
but especially among my neighbors,
a horror to my friends;
those who see me in the street avoid me.
- 13 I have been forgotten, like the dead;
I have been like an object that is destroyed⁶⁵.
- 14 I have heard the whisperings of many;
terror all around;
as they set themselves close together⁶⁶ against me,
plotting to take my life.

⁶⁴ RSV: "thou hast taken heed of my adversities."

⁶⁵ IB: I have become like a broken vessel.

⁶⁶ IB: "as they scheme together against me."

- 15 But I have trusted in You, God.
I have said: "You are my God."
- 16 My fate⁶⁷ is in Your hand;
Save me from the hand of my enemies and my
pursuers.⁶⁸
- 17 Show the light of your face upon Your servant;
Save me with Your lovingkindness.
- 18 God, let me not be ashamed,⁶⁹
because I have called out to You.
let the wicked be ashamed.⁷⁰
let them be silenced in Sheol;
- 19 Let lips of deceit be silent⁷¹
that speak haughtily against the righteous
with pride and contempt.
- 20 How great is Your goodness!
which you have in store for those who fear you;
that you have done *in full view of men*
for those who take refuge in You.
- 21 You hide them with the protection of your presence;
from the snares⁷² of men,
You hide them in (Your) shelter

⁶⁷ IB, RSV (literally): "my times are in Your hand."

⁶⁸ IB: "persecutors."

⁶⁹ IB: "Let me not be put to shame."

⁷⁰ *ibid*: "Let the wicked be put to shame."

⁷¹ *ibid*: "Let the lying lips be dumb."

⁷² IB: "plots."

from the scourge⁷³ of tongues.

- 22 Blessed is God,
for He has been wondrously loving to me;
as (in) a fortified city.
- 23 And I had said, alarmed,
"I have been cut off from Your sight."
But in fact, You have heard the sound of my supplication
when I cried out to You.
- 24 Love the Lord, all of (you) His pious ones;
God guards the faithful,
and abundantly pays back⁷⁴ the one who acts arrogantly.
- 25 Be strong and let your heart take courage,
all (you) who wait for the Lord.

⁷³ IB: "strife."

⁷⁴ KJ: "rewards."

CHAPTER FIVE

PART I

MIDRASH TEHILLIM

PSALM 31

1. *For the leader. A Psalm of David. In You, O God, I have sought refuge; let me never be ashamed (Psalm 31:1-2).* These words are compared to this verse in Scripture: *Who among you that fears the Lord, that obeys the voice of God's servant, [that walks in darkness, and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and rely upon his God] (Isaiah 50:10).* When the children of Israel enter the synagogues and the houses of study, they say to the The Holy One Blessed be God "Deliver us!" And God replies: "Are there any righteous people among you? Are there any God-fearing people among you?" And they say: "In former days, in the days of our fathers, in the days of Moses and Joshua, in the days of Samuel and Saul, David and Solomon, in those days there were righteous people. But now, as we go on from generation to generation, it grows darker for us, as it is said: *Man walks in darkness, and has no light (ibid).* The Holy One Blessed be God says to them: "Trust in my name, and I will steady you, as it is said: *Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and rely upon his God (ibid).* Why? Because when a person trusts in Me, I deliver him. Know for yourselves that this is true. Hannina, Mishael, and Azariah trusted in my name, and because they trusted in my name, I delivered them, so that the wicked Nebuchadnezzar said: *Blessed is the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, [who delivered His servants] that trusted in Him] (Daniel 3:28).* And Daniel also, I only delivered

him when he trusted my name, as it is said: *Then... the king... commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den (Dan. 6:24). Why? Because he had trusted in his God (ibid).*" So David said: "Since it is true that whoever trusts in You is saved, I too will trust You, as it is said: *In You, God, do I trust (31:2).*

2. Another interpretation of: *In You, O God, I trust; let me never be ashamed. Deliver me in righteousness (Psalm 31:1-2).* These words can be compared to another verse of Scripture: *O Israel, that are saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation; you shall not be ashamed or confounded (Isaiah 45:17).* The children of Israel say before the The Holy One Blessed be God: "Master of the universe! All of the years that we have been enslaved – the shame and the confusion! Save us so that we won't be ashamed. Why? Because Your salvation is an everlasting salvation. Regarding everlasting salvation: It does not say lasting salvation, but everlasting ~~salvation~~. And the The Holy One Blessed be God replied: I am He who redeemed you in the past, and I am He who will redeem you in days to come, as it is said: *So says the Lord that created you, O Jacob, and He that formed you, O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you (Isaiah 43:1).* Here Scripture does not say: "I will redeem you," but rather, "I have redeemed you" – I have said the word and the deed is done.. The Holy One Blessed be God says: "I am He who will be your Redeemer, for I am He who promised that even as I redeemed you before, so I shall redeem you again," for it is said: *The Lord has ransomed Jacob, and redeemed him (Jeremiah 31:11).* Here Scripture does not say: "He will redeem him," but *He has redeemed him.* So the children of Israel said to the The Holy One Blessed be God: "You already redeemed us by the hands

of Moses, and by the hands of Joshua, and by the hands of the judges and the kings. And yet now we are again in slavery and in shame as if we had not been redeemed." So the The Holy One Blessed be God replied to them:

"Because your redemption was by creatures of flesh and blood, and because your leaders were men, here one day and in the grave the next, your redemption was only for the hour. But in time to come, I Myself will redeem you; I who live and endure for ever shall redeem you with a redemption that will last forever, as it is said: *O Israel, that is saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation (Isaiah 45:17). Therefore, You shall not be ashamed nor confounded to all eternity (ibid).*

Then The Holy One Blessed be God says: "In days past, you could live in shame and confusion because you were young. But now that you are old, there is no strength in you to bear the shame of exile, as it is said, *Fear not, for you shall not remain ashamed... indeed you shall forget the shame of your youth (Isaiah 54:4).* And David said: Master of the universe! When the time of redemption arrives, we will no longer be ashamed, as it is said, *In You, O God, do I trust; I will not (then) be ashamed (31:2).*

3. Another Interpretation of: *In You, O God, do I trust; let me never be ashamed.* Another verse of Scripture says: *All my enemies shall be ashamed and vexed; [they shall turn back and feel shame suddenly] (Psalm 6:11).* Rabbi Yochanon taught: "In the time-to-come the The Holy One Blessed be God will condemn the wicked and return them to Gehenna." So it is said: *They shall be ashamed... they shall... be ashamed.* Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani taught: "In the time-to-come, the The Holy One Blessed be God will cause every people to come forward, and each one will call to its god who will not

answer. Then each will see that in its god there is nothing that can answer, as it is written: *Yea, though one cries unto him he cannot answer, nor save him out of his trouble (Isaiah 46:7)*. Because there is nothing to them, as it is said: *They have mouths, but they do not speak (Psalm 115:5)*. The peoples will go to the The Holy One Blessed be God and the Holy Spirit will say to God: "You are their jug of olives! Their gods not having answered them, they now come to You." Thereupon God will condemn them, and banish them from the world. Rabbi Yochanon continued: "Do not say this will happen only in the time-to-come. The Holy One Blessed be God banishes them in this world as well, for God banished the wicked from the world in the days of Sisera and in the days of Sennacherib."

R. Joshua ben Levi taught: "Come and see how fierce is the power of shame; it is mentioned twice in a single verse. Moreover, the words God uses to shame the nations are the same words God uses to bless the righteous, as it is said: *My people will never be ashamed (Joel 2 :26)*."

R. Joshua ben Levi also taught: "Had the entire Book of Ezekiel not been written, except for the verse in which God says, *That you may remember, and be confounded, and never open your mouth any more, because of your shame, when I am pacified toward you for all that you have done (Ezekiel 16:63)*, it would have been enough."

When David saw that the shame was so fierce, he began to pray: *In You, God, do I trust; let me never be ashamed*.

4. Another interpretation: *In You, God, do I trust; let me never be ashamed*. Elsewhere this is what Scripture says: *Ashamed be all they that serve graven images ... [bow down to Him all you gods] (Psalm 97:9)*. R. Yudan said in the

name of R. Nahman: "Some day the The Holy One Blessed be God will give a little bit of life to each idol so that it can come and bow down to the The Holy One Blessed be God as it is said: *Bow down to Him, all you gods (ibid)*, and so shame its worshipers."

R. Pinchas said: "Some day the The Holy One Blessed be God will grant speech to the idol so that it can talk in the presence of its worshipers and say to them: "Woe unto you that left Him who lives for ever, who is the *Maker of heaven and earth (Genesis.14:19)*. and bowed down to that of which it is said *Idols ... have mouths, but they do not speak (psalm 115:5)*."

R. Yochanan said: "When the The Holy One Blessed be God revealed Himself at Sinai, God gave power to the idols, so they bowed down to God."

Rabbi Tahlifa taught: In saying: *All the gods bowed down to Him (psalm 97:7)*, Scripture supports R. Yohanan. It does not say: "They shall bow down to Him," but *They bowed down to Him* – the gods had already bowed down to Him in the past."

R. Yehuda and R. Nehemiah were arguing. One said: "As an idol is made with several joints, so those who bow down to it shall fall apart at their several joints. Know for yourself. Look what it says in this verse: *And this shall be the plague where the Lord will smite all the peoples that have fought against Jerusalem; their flesh shall consume away [while they stand upon their feet], and their eyes shall consume away [in their sockets, and their tongue will consume away in their mouth] (Zechariah. 14:12)*." But other rabbis said: "As an idol is melted down by fire, so those who bow down to it shall be consumed by fire."

5. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani , and (other) rabbis said: " In the time to come when the The Holy One Blessed be God sits in judgment upon the nations of the world and Israel, [God] will find Israel innocent, and the nations of the world will be put to shame. What will [God] do then? He will cause the evil inclination to appear among them, and they will say: 'We demand that God set aside His judgment!' And what will the The Holy One Blessed be God do? He will judge them and condemn them, and they will be put to shame a second time. If they had been silent, they would have only been put to shame one time, therefore it says (in Psalm 6:11):*will be ashamed two times.*"

Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani asked: "Why does it say: *will be ashamed two times?* Because in the time-to-come each people will call its god, one calling to the sun, another to the moon, and neither will answer them since there is nothing real in them; and the peoples will be ashamed because [their gods] have not answered them as it is said: *Ashamed are they that serve graven images (psalm 97:7)*, and *Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed (Isaiah 24:23)*. Then they will come to the The Holy One Blessed be God and God will say to them: 'You made yourselves central and me secondary; so will I make Israel central and you secondary. Why? Because in the beginning you did not come to Me: Had you come to Me in the beginning, I would have answered you.' They will again be ashamed, as it is said: *They cried, but there was no one to save them (Psalm 18:42)*, that is, [cried out] to their images; *even unto the Lord, but [God] will not answer them (ibid)*, that is, [cried out] to the The Holy One Blessed be God who will not answer them. Hence the words: *shall be ashamed occur twice.*"

6. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi taught: "Why does the text say: *shall be ashamed* twice? Because in the time-to-come, when The Holy One Blessed be God judges Israel, the righteous [as well as] the wicked, [God] will grant pardon to the righteous, that they may enter the Garden of Eden, but will send the wicked back to Gehenna. Then [God] will return and take the [wicked] out of Gehenna, and bring them into the Garden of Eden with the righteous, and say to them: 'Here is a place for the righteous, [but here also are places still empty, so that you can not say: "Even if we had repented, there would have been no place open to us with the righteous in the Garden of Eden.]" Then He will take the righteous from the Garden of Eden and bring them into Gehenna, and say to them: 'Here is a place for the wicked but here also are places still empty, [so that you can not say: "Even if we had been found guilty, there would not have been a place open to us in Gehenna.]" But as the wicked have inherited [the places] you might have had, as well as their own [places] in Gehenna, for Scripture says [to the wicked], *Because your shame...[was double... therefore in their land they shall possess double]* (Isaiah 6:7). And God will return the righteous to the Garden of Eden and the wicked to Gehenna. Therefore the nations of the world will be ashamed in the time to come." Thus David said: *O Lord, let me not be ashamed* (Psalm 31:18). Upon whom is the shame? Upon the wicked! As it says: *Let the wicked be ashamed, let them be put to silence in the nether-world* (ibid).

Rab said: "One who discredits [God by idol worship] will not behold [God's] goodness, for it is said: *O how abundant is Your goodness, which You have laid up for those who fear You* (Psalm 31:20)."

Rabbi Abdimi of Haifa said: "Every righteous man will inherit three hundred and ten worlds, as it is said: *That I may cause those that love Me to inherit (yesh) substance (Proverbs 8:21)*, and the numerical value of 'yud, shin' in gematria is three hundred and ten."

Rabbi Isaac ben Teradyon said: "The sword of the The Holy One Blessed be God has sixteen ways to turn, for in Scripture [the sword is spoken to as follows]: *Turn yourself backwards, or turn to the right, or set yourself forward, or turn to the left: wherever your edges are directed (Ezekiel 21:21)*. And the numerical value of 'ayh' in gematria is sixteen. Now if the measure of punishment which God limits Himself turns sixteen ways, all the more so, how much greater is the measure of God's goodness, [which is unlimited]!"

7. Rabbi Yudan said in the name of Rabbi Eleazar bar Abina that the The Holy One Blessed be God revealed the end of time to two people -- to Jacob and Daniel: To Jacob, for Scripture says: *Jacob called to his sons, and said, 'Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you [that which will befall you in the end of days]' (Genesis 49:1)*. [At that moment, however, God] hid the secret from Jacob, for [instead of revealing the future] Jacob said: *Reuben, you are my first-born (Genesis 49:3)*. So [God revealed it] to Daniel, saying: *Now I have come to make you understand what shall happen to your people in the end of days; for there is yet a vision for the days (Daniel 10:14)*. Yet when [Daniel] was about to reveal the end, what did He say? *But you, O Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, until the time of the end (Daniel 12:4)*,
Another interpretation: [The coming of the Messiah was revealed to Samuel also]. For when Samuel went to anoint David, God said: *Do not look at his*

face (I Samuel 16:7). And when David came, God said to Samuel: *Arise, anoint him (I Samuel 16:12)*, as if to say, "The Messiah stands and you are sitting?"

Rabbi Aba bar Kahana said that the The Holy One Blessed be God said to Israel: For My sake you kept the Torah and the commandments, and so for your sake I will keep a part of that goodness laid up for the righteous in the time-to-come. Thus it is said: *O how abundant is Your goodness, which You have laid up for those who fear You (Psalm 31:20)*. Rabbi Abba bar Yudan said: "The Holy One Blessed be God said: You according to your strength and I according to My strength!"

Rabbi Jonathan taught that there are four languages: the Roman is best for battle; the Greek is best for song; the Persian is best for lamentation; and the Assyrian is best for prayer; [these] are alluded to in the verse: *You lay them up in a pavilion away from the multitude of tongues (Psalm 31:21)*.

8. *Blessed be the Lord, for [God] has shown me His marvelous kindness in a strong city (Psalm 31:22)*. That is, in wicked Rome. [For in the words] *I said [in my haste], I am cut off (nigarzti) [from before Your eyes] (Psalm 31:23a)*, *nigarzti*, can only mean being cut down by an iron weapon, [which comes from the same stem as *garzen*] when you say: *neither hammer nor axe (garzen) (I Kings 6:7)*.

Another interpretation: *[I said in my haste], I am cut off from before Your eyes in the wicked kingdom of Rome; Indeed You heard the voice of my*

supplications [when I cried to You] (ibid) . This is in Greece. O love the Lord, all you faithful (Psalm 31:24). These are the righteous of Israel. The Lord preserves those who affirm the faith (ibid). These are the righteous converts.

Another interpretation: *The Lord preserves those who affirm the faith.* [This means preserves] even those sinners in Israel who reluctantly say "Amen," and say "Blessed [are You, O Lord], who revives the dead."

Another interpretation: *The Lord preserves those who affirm the faith.* [This means preserves] the children of Israel who say, "Blessed [are You, O Lord], who revives the dead," and with faith answer: "Amen," and believe with all their faith that The Holy One Blessed be God revives the dead, and still the reviving of the dead has not occurred. And they say: "who Redeems Israel," although they have not yet been redeemed; and who say, "Blessed are You, O Lord, who rebuilds Jerusalem," although Jerusalem has not yet been rebuilt. [About them,] the The Holy One Blessed be God declares: "Only for a little time were the children of Israel redeemed, and then again were they enslaved, but still they affirm their faith in Me, that in the future I will redeem them," [as it says]: *The Lord preserves those who affirm the faith.*

9. [In commenting on the passage: *Then shall you return and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God, and the one who does not serve God (Malachi. 3:17-18)*], Rabbi Acha bar Ada said that the verse *and you shall come to see [the difference] between the righteous and the wicked* means "between him who has faith and him who does not have faith." *Between one who serves God* is the one who is willing to serve

God's need, and *the one who does not serve God* is the one who is not willing to serve God's need. Thus a person should not make the words of Torah an edged tool to cut with for personal use, nor make them a crown to crown himself.

Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani said: *Between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve God* means "Between the one who repeats his chapter one hundred and one times and the one who repeats it only one hundred times."

The Lord... more than repays the others who would act proudly (Psalm 31:24), refers to such of the disciples who study Torah not for the sake of heaven, but for the sake of doing themselves proud in this world, and to such others who expect a reward in this world for their study of Torah. But as for them who occupy themselves with Torah and hope for the reward therefore in the world-to-come, mark that the next verse read: *Be of good courage, and God shall strengthen your heart, all you that trust in the Lord (Psalm 31:25)*. Who is meant by *All you who hope in the Lord*? Those who are content to have their reward laid up in the world-to-come.

I hate them that regard empty vanities (Psalm 31:7) refers to those who give heed to the empty vanities of divination. The Garden of Eden says, *I hate them that regard empty vanities*. "And whom do I love? God who regards Your precepts." And Gehenna says, "I love them that regard empty vanities. And whom do I hate? Those who regard Your precepts." For *the leech has two daughters [who say], Give, give (Proverbs 30:15)*. These two are the Garden of Eden and Gehenna; the Garden of Eden says, "Give me mine," and

Gehenna says, "Give me mine." Thus it is said: *Be of good courage, for God shall strengthen your heart, all you that hope in the Lord (Psalm 31:25).*

For my life is spent with grief, [and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity] (Psalm 31:11). Rabbi Tanhum bar Hiyya said: Four things make a person's strength fail: sin, wayfaring, fasting, and the oppressor's rule. Of sin, it is written: *My strength fails because of my iniquity (Psalms 31:11);* of wayfaring, it is written: *He weakens my strength in the way (Psalms 102:24);* of fasting, it is written *My knees are weak through fasting (Psalm 109:24);* of the oppressor's rule, it is written: *Imposed upon my neck, it saps my strength, the Lord has delivered me into the hands of those I cannot withstand (Lamentations 1:14).*

Rabbi Tanhuma said: Trouble also makes a person's strength fail, for it is written: *My mind reels; my strength fails me (Psalm 38:11).*

CHAPTER FIVE

PART III

The Rabbinic Interpretation of Psalm 31:

Psalm 31 allows the rabbis to describe their fantasy about how the world could be for the Jewish people in a time to come. In addition to themes common to rabbinic interpretation, such as our trusting that God will save us in the dark times, the rabbis actually fantasize about what may happen for the Jewish people when the time of deliverance has arrived. The sages interpret the text to mean that in a time to come all people will call out to their insignificant gods, who cannot save them. But Israel will call out to a real God and be delivered. Consequently, the other nations will be ashamed, but Israel will not. Israel, because she is righteous, will receive deliverance from her God. Attributing Ultimate power to God is imperative for the rabbinic sages, who relish in the thought of the flawed idols bowing down to God, who is mightier than any idol.

This theme that Israel is more righteous and, therefore, more deserving than her neighbors allows the rabbis to fantasize about what righteous Israel will receive upon her entrance into the world to come. The sages contend that entrance into the Garden of Eden or Gehenna is not arbitrary, but is earned. Therefore, even if there was room in Gehenna for the righteous, they could not go; and if the Garden of Eden had empty space, a wicked person could not inhabit it. In general, the rabbis employ psychological measures to describe their fantasy. In present times they are persecuted. Yet they will be patient, for their reward will come to them. An

individual could easily adapt this statement to his own situation. Now he is in a time of trouble. Yet he will wait patiently, for he is content to have his reward in the world to come.

CHAPTER FIVE

PART IV

Modern Commentary on Psalm 31

Psalm 31 could be called a psalm of lament. Within its verses, three themes of lament seem apparent to the reader. The Interpreter's Bible divides the sections as follows: the first section contains verses (1-9) in which the psalmist seeks protection, the second section (10-12) contains a lament of the sick, the third (13-18) reveals the false charges that have been brought against the speaker. Because all of these themes are a part of a single psalm, Psalm 31 may be relevant to a variety of readers who find meaning in different aspects of its verses.

For instance, several verses of the psalm (11-13) may describe how a grief-stricken person is often treated in society. The speaker, who has so recently experienced joy (verses 7-9), is now overwhelmed with grief. In addition, he is getting shut out of society. His friends have abandoned him. Others run away from him when they see him on the street. His grief has multiplied as a result of the poor treatment by his contemporaries. The Interpreter's Bible cautions the reader that when a person submerges himself in his grief, "hugging his misery," he becomes a prisoner of it. Consequently, others grow impatient of it and avoid him. This is a fact of life for the mourner who does not reach out to others.

Perhaps after a time, the speaker does reach out to others. Or maybe the next several verses are written after some time has gone by. Regardless of the cause, the individual begins to lift himself out of the darkest moments,

and once again finds trust in God. It is at this time that he recites what may be the most crucial verse in this psalm: "My fate is in your hand" (verse 16). Although the speaker is not out of trouble yet, he has relaxed enough to trust that the divine being will have compassion upon him. He is finding peace.

Psalm 31 has the distinct quality of expressing so many emotions within one piece. This dramatic emotional fluctuation may symbolize the ups and downs in the life of an individual. At some points he feels vulnerable and asks God for guidance ("For the sake of your name, lead me and guide me"). At other junctures he is glad for his lot ("I will rejoice and be happy for your lovingkindness"). Then he vacillates again to anxiety as he begins to again feel broken by life's blows ("Have mercy on me, God. I am in distress.") Yet, if he is lucky, at the end of his life he once again praises God ("Blessed is God, for He has been wondrously loving to me").

It is for this reason of the emotional depth within the psalm, that some would say that indeed the psalm was written after the fact. Perhaps its writer was an old man nearing the end of his life, writing from a vantage point in which he knew how the story ends. As a result, the psalm ends peacefully. After a lifetime of anxiety, of uncertainty, the speaker communicates a sense of rest and assurance in the end, which has a calming effect on the reader. The psalmist, who once talked only about himself ("Incline your ear to me. Save me quickly" verse 2), now looks to God ("How great is your goodness which you have in store for those who fear you" verse 20). The psalmist is no longer anxious. He has given up control to God.

CHAPTER SIX

PART I

PSALM 39

- 1 For the leader; For Yeduthun, a Psalm of David:
- 2 I had said that I would watch my ways,
with regard to sinning with my speech;⁷⁵
I would guard my mouth with a muzzle,
while the enemy was in my presence.
- 3 I have been silent.
I was restrained more than was good⁷⁶
while my pain grew worse.
- 4 My heart was enraged inside of me,
while my thoughts were all aflame.⁷⁷
I spoke out:
- 5 Tell me, Adonai, what my term is,⁷⁸
and what is the length of my days?
I would know how fleeting I am.⁷⁹
- 6 You have made my days just handbreaths long,
and the span of my life is as nothing compared to you.

⁷⁵ IB: "my tongue."

⁷⁶ KJ: "even from good."

⁷⁷ IB: "My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned."

⁷⁸ IB: "Lord, let me know my end."

⁷⁹ IB: "how frail I am."

- Each person stands like a vapor.⁸⁰ *Selah!*
- 7 A mere shadow, man walks about,
a mere vapor, they murmur on.⁸¹
Amassing, and not knowing who will gather in.
- 8 Now what have I waited for, Adonai?
My hope lies in you.
- 9 Deliver me from all my transgressions.
Do not make me the reproach⁸² of fools.
- 10 I am dumb. I don't open my mouth,
because you have done this.
- 11 Take your striking away from me.
I am consumed by your blows.
- 12 With rebukes for iniquity you have punished man,
and have consumed what is dear to him like a moth.
Humanity is but a vapor.⁸³ *Selah!*
- 13 Listen to my prayer, Adonai,
give ear to my cry for help.
Do not disregard my tears.⁸⁴
because, like all of my fathers
I am an alien resident with you.⁸⁵
- 14 Look away from me.

⁸⁰ KJ: "verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity."

⁸¹ RSV: "surely for nought are they in turmoil."

JPS: "mere futility in his hustle and bustle."

⁸² IB: "scorn."

⁸³ IB: "surely every man is a mere breath!"

⁸⁴ IB: "hold not thy peace at my tears!"

⁸⁵ IB: "For I am a passing guest."

That I might show a smile,⁸⁶
before I pass away⁸⁷ and there is nothing left of me.

⁸⁶ RSV: "gladness."

⁸⁷ IB: "before I depart and be no more!"

CHAPTER SIX

PART II

MIDRASH TEHILLIM

PSALM 39

1. *For the leader; For Yeduthun, a psalm of David: I said that I would watch my way, that I would not sin with my tongue (psalm 39:1).* This is what Scripture says (elsewhere): *A soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger (Proverbs 15:1).* A "slender" tongue is more grievous than idolatry. In the wilderness, when the children of Israel sinned and made the golden calf, it was only after they had also sinned with their mouths that the decree of their punishment was sealed, as it is said: *The Lord heard the sound of your words, and was furious (Deuteronomy 1:34),* and as it is also said: *As I live, says the Lord, just as you have spoken in My ears, [so will I do to you] (Numbers 14:28).* The verse does not say, "You have wearied the Lord with your deeds" but says, *You have wearied the Lord with your words* (Malachi 2:17). Similarly, it is written: *For Jerusalem is ruined, and Judah is fallen; because their tongue and their doings are against the Lord (Isaiah 3:8).* And again: *My heritage has become for Me as a lion in the forest; she has uttered her voice against Me; [therefore have I hated her] (Jeremiah 12:8).*

Because of her [Israel's] voice does [God] hate her? Doesn't [God] love [Israel] because of her voice, as it is said: *Let me hear your voice (Song of Songs 2:14)?* Rather, [God] loves her because of her voice and [God] hates her because of her voice. From this one can say that *Death and life are in the power of the*

tongue (*Proverbs 18:21*).

2. *I had said that I would watch my way, that I would not sin with my tongue* (*Psalm 39:2*). It happened once that a king of Persia was about to die. As he became exceedingly weak, his physicians said: "There will not be a remedy for you until they bring you the milk of a lioness, and you must drink it until you are healed." So the king sent his messengers, who took a great amount of money with them, to Solomon, son of David. Immediately Solomon sent out and called for Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, whom he asked: "How can we get the milk of a lioness?" Benaiah replied: "Give me ten goats." Then [Benaiah] and the (Persian) king's servants went to a lions' den, and there a lioness was nursing her pups. The first day he stood far away, and threw one goat to her, which she devoured. The second day [Benaiah] came a little nearer [and threw another goat]. And so [he continued] day by day. At the end of ten days, he was close to the lioness, until he was playing with her, and he touched her breasts, took some of her milk and went on his way. Then the (Persian) king's servants went back to Solomon; he dismissed them in peace, and they went on their way back.

While they were halfway on the journey home, the physician [who was with the king's servants] had a dream in which he saw the parts of his body arguing with each other.

The feet were saying: "Among all of the parts, there are none like us. If we had not walked, the body would not have been able to get the milk."

The hands replied, saying: "There are none like us. Had we not touched the lioness, he would not be able to get the milk."

[The eyes said: "We are greater than all the rest. If we had not shown

him the way, nothing at all would have been accomplished.”]

The heart spoke, saying: “I am greater than all the rest. If I had not given counsel, you would not have succeeded at all [in the errand].”

Then the tongue answered and said: “I am better than you. If it had not been for speech, what would you have done?”

Then all the parts replied, saying to the tongue: “Aren’t you afraid to compare yourself with us, as you sit in a dark and obscure place -- and in you there is not a single bone like there is in all the other parts?”

But the tongue declared: “This very day, you are going to acknowledge that I rule you.”

As the [physician] woke up from his sleep, he kept the dream in his heart, and went on his way. He came to the king, and said: “Here is the milk of a dog which we sought for you. Drink it.”

Immediately the king became angry with the physician and ordered him to be hanged. As he went out to be hanged, all the parts began to tremble. The tongue said to them: “Didn’t I tell you this day that you are not really [in charge]? If I save you now, will you admit that I rule you?”

They said: “Yes.”

Then the tongue said to those who were about to hang the physician: “Bring me back to the king.” They brought [the physician] back to the king, and he asked the king: “Why did you order to have me hanged?”

The king replied: “Because you brought me the milk of a dog.”

He asked [the king]: “What does that matter to you?” It will cure you. Besides, a lioness can be called a dog.”

The king took some of [the milk], and drank and was healed. And so since it was [proven] that the milk was the milk of a lioness, he dismissed [the

physician] in peace.

Then all the parts said to the tongue: "Now we confess to you that you rule all the parts." Likewise it is written: *Death and life are in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21)*. And so David declared: *I had said that I would watch my way, that I would not sin with my tongue (Psalm 39:2)*.

3. See, what the tongue [offers] is better than all other offerings, as it is said: *I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify Him with thanksgiving. And it shall please the Lord better than that bull-calf or bullock that had horns and hoofs (Psalm 69:31-32)*. If it was a bull-calf, why say bullock? And if a bullock, why say bull-calf? [The verse means] rather, [that what the tongue offers pleases the Lord even more] than that bull-calf which Adam offered as a bullock for thanksgiving, saying: *It is good to give thanks to the Lord (Psalms 92:2)*. [Adam's offering took place] on the Day of Atonement, and corresponded to the service of the high priest, of which it is said: *Herewith will Aaron come into the holy place; with a young bullock for a sin-offering (Leviticus 16:3)*.

[By the words,] *That had horns and hoofs* is meant that the bull-calf which Adam offered had horns before he had hoofs, for the verse is to be read: *that had horns and [then] hoofs*.

Over there (in Babylonia) it was taught: The bull-calf which Adam offered had one horn in his forehead, [for what the verse really] says is "[a bull-calf... that had a] horn and hoofs." It is written *m k r n* as [i.e. defectively, and thus: only singular].

4. Another interpretation of *For the leader. For Yeduthun (Psalm 39:1)*.

Yeduthun refers to the profession of judges and of judgment. Therefore the Psalm continues: *I would watch my way, that I would not sin with my tongue* so as not to pervert judgment; and another Psalm says: *Even though princes sit and talk against me, [Your servant does meditate in Your statutes] (Psalm 119:23).*

I will guard my lips with a muzzle (Psalm 39:2). Is there such a thing as a muzzle for [a person's] mouth? Rather, [the verse means] "I will keep the silence and not occupy myself with idle words, only with words of Torah." So, too, it is said: *A healing tongue is a tree of life (Psalm 15:4).* [And "tree of life" means Torah].

From this you learn that the The Holy One Blessed be God only gave the Torah to the children of Israel so they would not busy themselves with idle words, nor be busy with evil tongues. So the Psalm says: *I would watch my way, that I would not sin with my tongue.* [So, too] Scripture says, "These words ... you shall speak them" (Deuteronomy 6:7). [That is, you shall speak of them, [the words of Torah], not slander, not idle words.

Likewise, David asked: "Who wants to acquire life in the world-to-come?" and they replied: "No person can have it." David said: "[But it can be had], and at a low price": [When] Scripture asks *Who is the person who desires life? (Psalm 34:13)*, [the question means], "Who is the one who wants life in the world-to-come?" And they asked: "Who can have such life?" David answered: *Keep your tongue from evil (Psalm 34:14)* – by evil [it means] slander, of which it is said: *The lips of deceit are silent that speak haughtily against the righteous (Psalm 31:19).* From what is he [who speaks slander] denied? [The answer is in the next verse]: *How great is your goodness which You have in store for those who fear You! (Psalm 31:20).*

CHAPTER SIX

PART III

The Rabbinic Interpretation of Psalm 39:

Of all of the commentaries studied in this thesis, the rabbinic interpretation of Psalm 39 seems to lend itself best to that of the individual. Rabbinic interpretation of Psalm 39 begins on a nationalistic level. Israel knows why she has been punished by means of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Israel, as a nation, has sinned by malicious speech. Yet it seems to the reader of this interpretation that the warning against malicious speech applies easily to the individual as well as the nation. It is the arrogant speech of individuals, not nations, that has led to Israel's punishment.

This individualism can be found in the parable about the dying king who needs the milk of a lioness in order to be healed. The rabbis describe him as literally dying and warn the reader: *Death and life are in the power of the tongue. (Proverbs 18:21)*. In this way, the rabbinic interpretation, like the psalm, speaks personally to the individual, urging him to watch his speech for when he does not, his punishment will be severe. This is an important message for the individual in his personal relationship with God. He trusts that God is listening to his speech. He watches his language, afraid to sin with his lips, because he knows that God is listening to him.

CHAPTER SIX

PART IV

Modern Commentary on Psalm 39

Psalm 39 is a beautifully poetic piece within the Psalter. In it, the psalmist shares his faith, his anger, his resignation, and his hope as he muses about the transitory nature of human existence in the presence of God. The psalmist begins by acknowledging that he has vowed to keep his criticism silent. He has refused to sin by complaining against the other. The reader cannot know from this general description about whom the individual speaks. It is possible that he is referring to how he would like to criticize his enemies, but has decided against it. Another possibility is that he has wanted to criticize God, to voice his doubts about God's willingness to respond to his needs. In either case, the description of his pain is brutal. The individual exclaims that as he restrained himself, " (his) pain grew worse and (his) heart was enraged from deep inside (verses 3-4) while (his) thoughts were all aflame." His silence has caused him aggravation and intense suffering. Therefore he finally gives in to his urge to break his silence.

In verses five through seven, and again in verse 12, the psalmist is troubled by the transitory nature of life. These verses seem to contrast with a common theme in psalmic poetry in which the psalmist assumes a position of self-importance. In those psalms the speaker demands that God listen to his cries because he is important in the nature of things. But in these verses, the speaker realizes, if only for a moment, how little the life of a person matters within all of God's creation. He says in verse six: "and the span of

my life is as nothing compared to you. Each person stands like a vapor." The Interpreter's Bible suggests that at this moment, the speaker is like Job, when he realizes that he is nothing in the scope of all of God's creations. For both the psalmist and for Job, this thought seems to be a comforting thought, for it provides release from one's own responsibility. In order to find meaning in his own life, the individual must give something up to God.

Having come to terms with God's immense reign upon the earth, the psalmist does seem to return to his own self-awareness ending the psalm on a pitiful note. He, as so many other individuals have done, pleads with God to listen to his cries for help. Yet the cry of this individual is more complex than the others, for it is a knowing cry. Aware that his time is running out, he realizes that he, like his fathers, is "an alien resident with (God)," not one who boldly assumes that it is his right to live a long life. Consequently, the psalmist humbly begs for one last show of affection from God, the One who bestows kindness upon all of His creatures, insignificant though they may be.

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