



## LIBRARY COPYRIGHT NOTICE

[www.huc.edu/libraries](http://www.huc.edu/libraries)

### Regulated Warning

See Code of Federal Regulations, Title 37, Volume 1, Section 201.14:

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

PSALMS OF LONGING:  
AN EXPLORATION THROUGH TEXT AND SONG

LARA BROOKE TESSLER

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
Rabbinic Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
Graduate Rabbinical Program  
New York, New York

February 26, 2024  
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Adriane Leveen

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	2
<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>“The use of Water as Metaphor” - Psalms 42 &amp; 63</b> .....	7
Psalm 42 Annotated Translation.....	8
Analysis.....	10
Psalm 63 Annotated Translation.....	12
Analysis.....	14
Comparison.....	16
<b>“From the Depths I call You”- Psalms 61 &amp; 130</b> .....	20
Psalm 61 Annotated Translation.....	21
Analysis.....	23
Psalm 130 Annotated Translation.....	26
Analysis.....	27
Comparison.....	30
<b>“Call and Response”- Psalms 13 &amp; 121</b> .....	34
Psalm 13 Annotated Translation.....	35
Analysis.....	36
Psalm 121 Annotated Translation.....	38
Analysis.....	39
Comparison.....	42
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	44
<b>Appendix - Recital Program</b> .....	52
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	63

## Acknowledgements

To my thesis advisor, Dr. Adriane Leveen, thank you for saying yes to taking on this project with me. Your excitement and willingness to dive deeply into the psalms has been a consistent source of joy through each of our meetings together. I am grateful to have had you as an editor, a thought partner, and a hevruta partner.

To Cantor Josh Breitzer, thank you for all of your guidance through the recital process, and for always being so eager to teach a curious future Rabbi. Thank you for accompanying me, both literally on the piano, and figuratively throughout my time as your student.

To Sarah Diamant, I could not have asked for a better spiritual director pairing. Thank you for holding space for my questions, for celebrating my simchas, and for being present for my struggles. You have helped me find the language for so much of what I long for and pray for, and this thesis would not have been fully realized without our time together.

To Rabbi Mara Young and Woodlands Community Temple, thank you for everything. Woodlands has been my home for three years, and it is the place where I have blossomed into the Rabbi that I am about to be. You will always have a piece of my heart.

To my Mom, Randi, and my brother Logan, thank you for always being my best advocates and my biggest supporters. I love you both. And yes, mom, you were right about the Rabbi thing.

To my dad, just as the words of these psalms express a longing for the divine, my soul longs to feel your presence with me every day. I miss you dearly.

Finally, to my partner Jordan, thank you for singing these psalms with me. You're my person. I love you and cannot wait to build our life together.

## Introduction

For as long as I can remember, I have always felt a strong connection between music and Judaism. As a young child, I would sit in the pews in a Friday night Shabbat service and sing my heart out to the melodies of the prayers. Music and song were how I expressed myself in moments of joy and it is what I turned to again and again for comfort in times when I needed it. These texts provided me with a language for emotions that I did not know how to articulate, and the melodies of various musical settings were the vehicle for my self expression.

I have struggled for much of my life to define what my relationship to God looks like. My own interpretation of a divine presence in my life has changed over time and I imagine it to be an ever evolving understanding as I continue to learn and experience new things. One thing that I have always strived for in my relationship to God is to never feel alone. I have found myself combating my own feelings of loneliness and have always had a deep desire to feel a sense of safety. I wanted to know that I will be okay no matter what challenges come my way. In recent years especially, there has been an appearance of a “public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our country”<sup>1</sup>. This issue also reaches into our Jewish communities. People all over the world spanning across many different religious communities long for a connection to a sense of peoplehood, and to a feeling of some sort of divine presence. I have found myself searching for the same, and I found that many texts in the Book of Psalms also express that longing.

For many years and even still to this day when I am left alone with my own thoughts I find myself revisiting over and over again a few central texts that I have encountered through different moments in my life. The first is not a psalm, but instead an excerpt from a *piyut* - a liturgical poem by Yehuda HaLevi:

---

<sup>1</sup> (ASH Media, 2023).

“Yah, Where Shall I find You? Your place is high and hidden. Where shall I not find You? The world is full of your glorious presence. I have sought your closeness, with all my heart I call You. In my going out to meet You, I found You coming to meet me.”<sup>2</sup>.

This text revolves around a desire to feel a closeness to the divine and asks questions of where to find God. There is a yearning in these words that is exemplified in the action of using the voice to call out. For someone like me who uses voice and singing to express emotion, this text had a sense of relatability in its words. The ending line shows a reciprocal nature of reaching out and reaching inwards that creates a feeling of closeness. The way in which the *piyuut* ends, affirming a sense of intimacy with the divine, provides me with a sense of comfort when I am in doubt of that connection.

For this thesis, I went searching for psalms that convey a similar message to the above text. This *piyuut* has many similar qualities to the psalms in this project which revolve around the theme of longing. Each of them expresses a desire to feel a closeness to God, but I quickly found that some have more in common than others. The six psalms were separated into three pairs of two, each pair with their own common theme that will be explored.

The first step of this project was to pick the psalms. Some of them were very familiar to me before beginning this process. Psalms 42 and 121 were two of my favorites already, and then the remaining four were chosen because they were similar in their messaging and desires. The next step was to translate all six - psalms 13, 42, 61, 63, 121 and 130. The translations featured in this project are my own translations, taking direction from a few main source texts. They were Robert Alter’s *Book of Psalms*, *The Jewish Study Bible*, and the JPS *Hebrew-English TaNaKh*<sup>3</sup>.

Each translation is annotated with footnotes of my own commentary that provides clarification, translation of some Hebrew words, explanation of relevant themes, as well as

---

<sup>2</sup> Translation by Lara Tessler. See Appendix - Recital Program page 60 for more.

<sup>3</sup> Note on translation: When the translation is taken directly from another source, it will be cited.

commentary from other sources. These footnotes provide deeper understanding that is relevant for the analysis and comparison of the psalms.

Since my own connection to these texts began through music, it was clear to me that in order to have an experience that felt authentic to my relationship with these psalms, that music needed to be a part of this thesis. Along with this written thesis, I decided to add another layer to my project which took the form of a recital in which musical settings of the psalms were performed alongside a program with translations and commentary on the melodies. Being able to embody these six psalms through performing them myself added a level of deeper understanding that made these texts feel all the more personal through my own lived experience of them. Singing these words and connecting them to my own individual hopes and desires made the words on these pages feel more alive and relevant to my own life. The process of preparing and then performing these psalms, all combined with writing this thesis, has led to a feeling of my own knowledge of these texts which will be reflected upon in the conclusion.

These psalms express emotions that are relatable to any human being. They explore feelings of fear, doubt, and loneliness and they also express hope and a commitment to a belief in the divine. These texts allow for an experience that oscillates between these varying emotions and they take the reader on a journey of transformation which moves them towards healing. For anyone experiencing their own sense of longing, these words can provide comfort. In these psalms, “the human soul extends itself beyond its confining, sheltering, impermanent house of clay. It strives for contact with the Ultimate Source of all life. It gropes for an experience of the divine Presence. The biblical psalms are essentially a record of the human quest for God.”<sup>4</sup> This record helps people to understand that Jews have been experiencing these types of emotions throughout history, and these texts can help someone who is feeling alone to feel seen and

---

<sup>4</sup> (Nahum M. Sarna, 1993, pg. 3).

understood by our tradition. Judaism, and the rituals and liturgy within it, create opportunities for these texts to be revisited time and time again. The messages of these psalms have been brought into people's lives in times of grief and need for hope and comfort, both on an individual level and for communities. Anyone who comes to read these psalms can find a sense of peoplehood within them with the understanding that even when one feels alone, there are others in the world looking to these psalms for the same reasons.

My hope is that this thesis can serve as a resource for those who have a curiosity about these psalms and how music can also deepen one's experience of them. This project can help anyone who, like me, longs for a connection to God and wants to find Jewish texts that hope for the same.



**“The use of Water as Metaphor” - Psalms 42 & 63**

## Psalm 42<sup>5</sup>

Translation:

1 A poem of contemplation for the Korachites<sup>6</sup>  
 2 Like a deer longs for a channel of water, thus my soul<sup>7</sup> longs for you, Oh God<sup>8</sup>  
 3 My soul<sup>9</sup> thirsts<sup>10</sup> for God, the ever-living God. When will I come to appear before the face of God?<sup>11</sup>  
 4 My tears<sup>12</sup> were my food day and night<sup>13</sup>. They<sup>14</sup> say to me all the day, “where is your God?”  
 5 When I recall this, I pour out my soul, I passed through with them slowly, to the house of God. Voices shouting thanks in crowds of the pilgrimage festival<sup>15</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> This Psalm is included in the Zemirot (Song/Hymn) for Shabbat.

<sup>6</sup> The Jewish Study Bible explains that this title attributes the Psalm to the sons of Korach (Adele Berlin, 2004, pg 1314).

<sup>7</sup> Soul = נפש. The word נפש is not only a person's soul, but in biblical contexts it is meant to describe one's entire being. It is their soul, but also their body, and life. Examples from Torah are in Genesis 1 where נפש is translated as “creature”, Gen 19:17 it is Lot's entire “life”, or even in Exodus 16:16 where the word refers to the count of people in a census. A more modern interpretation of this understanding can be when a pilot has to account for how many “souls” are on board his/her flight. In the translations of these Psalms, the word נפש will be translated as “Soul” with the understanding that the word also means a person's physical body and entire being.

<sup>8</sup> Parallelism is present with the word pairing of longing and thirsting. Longing is the first feeling presented and then thirsting is presented as a subset of longing. The need for physical sustenance captures the feeling of urgency and the satisfaction once one drinks as an analog for the necessity as spiritual sustenance. Note the use of the word ‘longing’ in verse 2. The first mention is longing, while the second is thirsting. The mention of thirsting makes the longing of the speaker more specific.

<sup>9</sup> Soul = נפש mentioned again. The word is mentioned 6 times in this Psalm. The repetition of the word is central to the metaphor presented at the beginning of the Psalm and the consistency in the use of this specific word makes the argument even stronger. The word נפש is important for the entire Psalm because it emphasizes the overall message of the text. The speaker is longing for God so intensely that they can feel it through their entire being, their whole existence yearns for God.

<sup>10</sup> Longing as more than just a surface level emotional desire. Here, having a relationship to God is just as important for life as water is.

<sup>11</sup> The desire to see God's face is something that is familiar within TaNaKh. To see the face of God creates a deeply intimate relationship. God = אלהים. To see God's face is also fraught with danger (ie Exodus 33:20). One must not see God's face, only God's back (Exodus 33:23) making the desire even stronger.

<sup>12</sup> Tears are water. Just as a body of water sustains an animal, tears here are keeping the speaker alive because tears are being substituted for bread. In the speaker's weeping, there is no longer an appetite because they are being fed by their own tears.

<sup>13</sup> “Day and night”. The speaker is feeling these emotions constantly. There is a consistency with the use of time in verse 9, where the speaker is experiencing kindness during the day and expressing praises at night.

<sup>14</sup> “They” - people who doubt the connection to the divine like this speaker's enemies in v.11.

<sup>15</sup> The “them” in this sentence are the “they” of the previous verse, these individuals could be people who discount the speaker's connection to God and make the speaker doubt further. This sentence may feel disconnected from the rest of the Psalm because it is. This added quip from the speaker could be a recounting of a past experience ascending to the temple while walking in a group of thousands of other people.

6 Why, so downcast my soul? Why so disquieted within me? Have hope in God, I will praise God<sup>16</sup> for God's salvation<sup>17</sup>

7 My God, my soul is downcast<sup>18</sup>. Thus I remember you, in the land of Jordan and Hermon on Mt. Mihza

8 The depths<sup>19</sup> call to the depths in the voice<sup>20</sup> of your waters, and all your channels of the water and your waves swept over me<sup>21</sup>

9 Daily, Adonai commands God's kindness, and nightly a song is with me, a prayer of my life

10 I say to El<sup>22</sup>, my rock<sup>23</sup>, "why have you forgotten me? Why do I walk in darkness, oppressed by my enemy?"

11 Shattering my bones, my enemies<sup>24</sup> taunt me. They say to me all the day "where is your God?"

12 Why, so downcast my soul? Why so loud within me? Have hope in God, I will praise God for God's salvation.. My God<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Since the Hebrew language used in these texts is gendered, in order to remove gendered pronouns the word God will continue to be used in places where it is relevant.

<sup>17</sup> Call and response, question and answer. This format is one that appears in other Psalms (like 13 & 121 later explored). In a way, the speaker is talking to themselves, and the answer given provides hope and comfort to them.

<sup>18</sup> Downcast = תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה. The root, שחח means to physically bow or crouch. In the Hithpolel form used here the word means to be "cast down". If one's emotions are cast down, then they could also be in an emotional state of despair or be mentally/emotionally low. The word appears before in v.6 as well.

<sup>19</sup> Depths = תְּהוֹמוֹת, same as Gen 1:2, as a reference to the swirling waters during creation.

<sup>20</sup> Another nod to creation. God creates through speech and the depths calling to one another in verse 8 references the same use of speech. The creation story is important because in the story, the entire world was created from water. Water in this Psalm is an integral factor to life and to connection to the divine and it is the same for the way in which our world was created.

<sup>21</sup> There is a swirling nature of the waters in this verse in which the waves crash upon one another and sweep over the speaker. This reference to water is one that is not calm like a brook, but instead is chaotic like the waters of the deep in creation. This contributes to the feeling of being lost and being engulfed in darkness.

<sup>22</sup> El = אֵל. This is a word used to refer to God, clarifying further that the "rock" in verse 10 is God.

<sup>23</sup> Rock = סֶלֶעַ. This use of the word rock is a metaphor for God that represents strength. This descriptor could have been chosen here for the speaker to remember God's strength as inspiration for their own strength in times of feeling alone and weak.

<sup>24</sup> People who pose a threat to the speaker in the world in which they live.

<sup>25</sup> Question and answer similar to v.6. The answer is to have hope and praise God. Through this, one can find the connection that they are so longing for.

### Analysis:

Psalm 42 is a text about deep desire for a connection to the divine. The speaker is expressing this need in the form of a metaphor, comparing the need for God to a deer thirsting for water. This metaphor for deep desire is equated to thirsting. Just as living beings need water and sustenance to survive, the speaker is saying that they need a relationship to God to survive. To be in relationship with the “ever-living God”, to appear “before the face” of God is the goal. This form of relationship with God is an intimate one, one that involves a level of closeness other than just surface level. It’s a basic need to be in relationship with other humans, and this is something that the speaker is seeking from God. Just as it is a basic human need to be in relationship with others, so too, is it a basic human need (or animal need) for water to sustain life.

Water in this Psalm is not just referred to in the form of the channel that the ram drinks from. It also appears in this text in the form of tears and of תהום, the water filled deeps of creation. The tears serve as a source of sustenance for the speaker while they sit and cry out to God and question. Tears are made up of water and there is a connection here between the metaphor at the beginning of the Psalm and this particular mention of tears. A deer thirsts for water as the speaker thirsts for God, but here the tears reflect the psalmist’s desperate need for God.

The waters of the deep are chaotic and dark, and the depths add to the feeling of being lost that the speaker is feeling. This lost feeling is a feeling of being downcast. In this emotionally low state of despair, the speaker’s emotional state is cast down low. In this emotionally low place, the speaker still looks for God and needs God, and this is a common theme for Psalms which will be explored later in the themes of Psalms 61 & 130. Essentially,

when one is stuck in a low place, looking up to find God is the answer to pull them out of the depths.

The depths of תהום, though, are not a physically low place like the depths of the earth. These are the primordial waters and are also a direct connection to God through the story of creation. Before the world was created all that existed were God, and תהום. God makes sense of the swirling watery chaos, and creates the rest of the world from it. The swirling waters that are imagined to sweep over the speaker are in a way a version of coming physically closer to God, and when the speaker imagines being nourished by water (the tears) they are also nourished by God.

The question and answer format that appears in this Psalm appears in other Psalms as well. When one is questioning themselves, God, or the world around them, the answer they give themselves is a form of self comfort. The writers of these Psalms created these texts as a way to deal with the world around them and the events that were happening to them. This type of format offers the reader a coping mechanism and a way in which the speaker was talking to himself. Where might the answer to all of the questions in the Psalms be? Right in the Psalms themselves. In this psalm in particular, the answer to feeling downcast is to praise God. This type of praise will allow for one to ascend out of those emotions of depression, but the praise in God will also allow for a feeling of closeness to the divine.

## Psalm 63

Translation:

- 1 A psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah<sup>26</sup>
- 2 God<sup>27</sup>, You are my God<sup>28</sup>. I search<sup>29</sup> for you. My soul<sup>30</sup> thirsts<sup>31</sup> for you, my flesh<sup>32</sup> yearns for you as a dry land weary without water<sup>33</sup>
- 3 Thus I shall behold you in the sanctuary<sup>34</sup> and see<sup>35</sup> your strength and glory
- 4 Truly, your kindness<sup>36</sup> is better than life, my lips<sup>37</sup> praise you.
- 5 Thus I bless you in my life<sup>38</sup>, I lift up my hands<sup>39</sup> invoking your name.
- 6 As like with suet and fat<sup>40</sup> my soul is sated. I sing<sup>41</sup> praises with joyful lips<sup>42</sup>.
- 7 When I remember You on my bed, in the night-watch<sup>43</sup> I murmur<sup>44</sup> about you.

---

<sup>26</sup> This title places the Psalm within its textual context of when David flees from Saul within the book of Samuel, I Samuel 23:14. This reference to David supports the theory that David may have written some of the psalms.

<sup>27</sup> God = אֱלֹהִים. This is the Hebrew name used for God in this verse. There is a prominent use of אֱלֹהִים as the name for God in Psalms 42-72. (S. E. Gillingham, 2008, pg 7).

<sup>28</sup> My God = אֱלֹהֵי. The use of אֱלֹהֵי, "My God", makes this connection to God even more personal.

<sup>29</sup> Not just search for God, but seek or desire. This desire connects to the feeling of yearning.

<sup>30</sup> Soul = נֶפֶשׁ. This word is the same in Psalm 42 every time soul is used. There is a clear connection here between the two psalms and their use of the word and the understanding of it to be a person's entire being.

<sup>31</sup> Thirst = צָמָאָה, same as the thirsting in Psalm 42. In this Psalm, the thirst is a land needing water in a drought, while in Psalm 42 the thirst is a deer's need for water to have a drink. Both of these metaphors emphasize the desire for both speaker's connections to God.

<sup>32</sup> Flesh = בָּשָׂר. In this analogy, נֶפֶשׁ and בָּשָׂר are used together to exaggerate that it is the speakers entire being. Both the soul and the physical body together yearn for God. This is similar to the notion proposed in Psalm 42. See footnote 3.

<sup>33</sup> Comparison that the physical need for God is similar to land needing water in a drought. This metaphor equates the feeling of a drought due to lack of water to that which the speaker is experiencing from their lack of connection to God. The parallelism here lies with dry land thirsting for water and the speaker yearning for God. Here, thirst is a subset of yearning.

<sup>34</sup> The sanctuary is a place of holiness. It could be understood especially after the destruction of the temple that "The synagogue is the microcosm of the Temple - not as a place of sacrifice, but of prayer and praise" (Gillingham 110).

<sup>35</sup> Beholding and seeing God is an intimate relationship. Doing so in the sanctuary makes it even more that way.

<sup>36</sup> Loving-kindness = חֶסֶד, God is a being that contains a quality of "loving-kindness" towards humans. This idea also appears in Psalms 61 & 130.

<sup>37</sup> Lips = שִׁפְתָּה. The mention of lips declaring praises involves using the physical body. The voice calling out praises to God can be done through speech or song. Multiple characters in Torah praise God through not only thoughts, but movement of their lips (ie. Hannah in I Samuel 1:13. This connection to Hannah could be another connection to the book of Samuel).

<sup>38</sup> Life = חַי, different than נֶפֶשׁ, but used for the same affect. This proves further the understanding of the word נֶפֶשׁ to not only be a person's soul, but their entire life.

<sup>39</sup> The lifting up of one's hands is a physical gesture of praise and an attempt to physically reach out to be closer to God. This is an embodiment of desire and praise.

<sup>40</sup> Suet and fat are the pieces of an animal that would have been offered up for sacrifices. This reference of suet and fat satiating God during a sacrifice equates that level of satisfaction to the speaker.

<sup>41</sup> Singing as a form of praise.

<sup>42</sup> Repeated exclamation of the praises being spoken aloud through physical movement of one's lips.

<sup>43</sup> Night watch also in Psalm 130. This job is to stay up all night in the wilderness waiting for the sun to rise. It could be imagined that while doing this job, the only thing to do is to contemplate one's life and God.

<sup>44</sup> Almost like talking to oneself. This can be connected to one's soul being disquieted in Psalm 42.

- 8 For you are my help, and in the shadow of your wings<sup>45</sup> I shout for joy.  
 9 My soul<sup>46</sup> clings<sup>47</sup> to you, your right hand<sup>48</sup> supports me.  
 10 May those who seek<sup>49</sup> to ravage my soul, enter the depths<sup>50</sup> of the earth  
 11 May they be split by the sword, may they be to prey to the jackals  
 12 And the King<sup>51</sup> shall rejoice in God, all who swear an oath by him will praise when the  
 mouths of liars<sup>52</sup> are stopped up.

---

<sup>45</sup> The shadow of God's wings are a protective presence.

<sup>46</sup> Soul = נפש, repeated 4 times in Psalm 63. Since this word can be understood to be connected to one's entirety and not just the inner soul, there is a large focus in this psalm on one's whole being longing for God.

<sup>47</sup> Cling = דבק, (similar to the clinging between Adam and Eve in Gen 2:24, or that of Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 1:14). This word supports the idea of a deep, profound attachment. This is the type of connection that the speaker is yearning for with the metaphor in verse 2, and also the metaphor in Psalm 42 verse 2.

<sup>48</sup> A personification of God's body, the right hand of God is a symbol of strength in other Psalms as well like Psalm 18:36 and Psalm 48:11.

<sup>49</sup> Enemies, possibly even a reference to Saul.

<sup>50</sup> Depths, same root word used in Psalm 42.

<sup>51</sup> Another reference to Saul, one day David will also be King.

<sup>52</sup> Liars could also be thought of as enemies to David.

### Analysis:

If the psalm had been written by David, then this psalm is an expression of his emotional journey while he was in the wilderness escaping from Saul. There is a sense of deep emotional and physical yearning for God, which is equated to the way in which the Earth would yearn for water in a drought. David, alone in the wilderness, could have felt feelings of dread and isolation, and a connection to God was his hope. Being exposed to the elements, he may have literally been thirsting for water, and this metaphor of him being dry like land in a drought could very well have been true. This metaphor, although put into the perspective of David's story, could be representative of anyone's longing towards a connection to God.

The word for wilderness, מִדְבָּר, has a number of references in TaNaKh. Another meaning for the word instead of "wilderness" is "desert". This wilderness or desert may have been similar to the desert that the Israelites were journeying through with Moses after the exile from Egypt. Whether he was in a desert or the wilderness, water would have been an absolute necessity for David's survival, just like it was for the Israelites. The comparison of yearning for God to thirsting for water fits the case of both. They needed water to physically sustain themselves, and they needed God to spiritually fulfill their needs. This experience of the Israelites plays itself out in the Torah, and specifically in the book of Torah titled במדבר. Both the Israelites and David spent time "in the wilderness" or במדבר, and it can be understood that their emotional fears and physical needs would have been similar.

David, fleeing from those who he would call his enemies, is also searching for protection from God. In this psalm there is a reference to being in the "shadow" of God's wings and to God's "right hand". This shadow is something that is metaphorically and literally quite important to anyone needing protection. Support and safety is needed in the future for Israel's survival, but



it is also important to be protected against the sun by literal shade in the desert. These descriptors of God being personified with wings or a strong right hand are common to evoke God's might and power.

Another way in which God is glorified in this psalm is through prayer. There is an exclamation by the speaker that praises will be sung to God, and there is a physical embodiment of lifting up one's hands invoking God's name, and using their lips to praise. All of these are physical actions taken by the speaker to express praise and gratitude for God in an attempt that protection from God and connection to God will be restored.

## Comparison

Water cleanses, water heals, and water sustains. Water was a scarce resource in Torah, and many times served as a source of redemption and life for the Israelite people. When the Israelites were traveling through the desert, the well of water that followed Miriam sustained the people and nourished them on their journey<sup>53</sup>. Drought, and a lack of water was a threat to daily life, and it was no different for the authors of the Psalms. “The prevalence of water in our people’s story demonstrates its centrality in the Israelite psyche”<sup>54</sup>. Water is so present in our stories, originating in the narrative of creation and playing a large role in Israel’s redemption, that it is obvious for the focus on the need for water as being central to physical sustenance and emotional prosperity. The need for water as a metaphor for the deep desire for a relationship to the divine, is a personal necessity. Both of these texts exemplify the dynamic between metaphor and reality within the book of Psalms.

Psalms 42 & 63 both evoke the imagery of water being a source of physical sustenance for animals and land. With this comparison, they equate the feelings of thirst and drought to the need for God. In these psalms, and in many places in TaNaKh, “The significance of water was heightened for biblical writers, who lived in a region where water was scarce, and drought a constant threat to life.”<sup>55</sup>. Just as water can help bodies and the land to survive, so too, can a relationship to the divine help one’s soul to feel as if they can also survive. In a way, God is also the water that gives life. Just as a deer would feel an urge for water to drink, and just as land would long for water to be refreshed, the human soul “gropes for an experience of the divine presence”<sup>56</sup>. This desire though, is not just about having a connection to God or knowing that

---

<sup>53</sup>The text of the Midrash supports the idea of the well of water that appeared for the Israelites in the desert “on account of the righteousness of Miriam” - Taanit 9a.

<sup>54</sup> (Sara Pearl Luria, 2013, pg 7).

<sup>55</sup> (Leland Ryken, 1998, pg 929).

<sup>56</sup> (Sarna 3).

God's presence is there. It is also about being in relationship, having an intimate connection, and feeling a closeness. This need for closeness is emphasized through Psalm 42's exclamation of wanting to appear before the face of God, and in Psalm 63, when one beholds God in the sanctuary. To see God's face is not only an anthropomorphism of the deity which is done often in Psalms<sup>57</sup>, but it also is an act that was strictly forbidden<sup>58</sup> in Torah after Moses spoke to God "panim el panim"<sup>59</sup>, "face to face" in the book of Exodus. The sanctuary of the temple was the place where it was believed that the holiest of holies existed. The sanctuary is where God's presence dwelled<sup>60</sup>. For David, this is the location where he can achieve a physical closeness to God in an attempt to achieve an emotional and spiritual closeness as well.

Psalm 42 makes a mention of תהום, the watery depths of creation, and both Psalms mention depths whether it be the water-depths of תהום, or the depths of the Earth. These depths are different from the depths of Psalms 61 & 130 which will later be explored<sup>61</sup>. This inclusion of the reference to תהום connects further to the metaphors of water as the focus of these two Psalms. Both psalms reference these waters of the deep and add to the theme of water being central to both texts. Not only do they both begin with a metaphor focused on water, but then they both refer back to another body of water to make the comparison all the more apparent.

Metaphors in the psalms are a characteristic of their poetic style and can be seen as a tool. It takes an idea or a feeling that is abstract and uses a concrete idea to express itself. The way in which these two do so specifically is through the emphasis of physical thirsting as a spiritual one as well. The use of this particular metaphor in both of these psalms is meant to express the

---

<sup>57</sup> In psalm 13 God has a face, psalm 61 God has wings, psalm 130 God has ears.

<sup>58</sup> Exodus 33:20.

<sup>59</sup> Exodus 33:11.

<sup>60</sup> Exodus 25:8.

<sup>61</sup> The depths in 42 and 63 are תהום - the watery depths of the Genesis story of creation. The depths in psalm 130 are מַעְמִיק - attributed to a physical location in the Earth.

spiritual desire for God “in the most concretely somatic terms”<sup>62</sup>. Water is a source of life for the Israelites through the centuries and it is also a source of life for these two authors of the psalms.

Both of these psalms invoke language of praise as a source of hope and connection to God. Even in these moments of deep longing and desire, these texts are able to spark a connection with the divine through the proclamation of loyalty and praises. When one needs help the most, the solution for these psalms is to praise God, because God provides a source of strength and comfort. In these psalms and in other psalms in this project, praise to God is presented as an answer to all of the questions of the speaker’s doubt. When a question comes, like “where will my help come from?” or “why so downcast, my soul?”, the answer to the question is a form of acknowledgement and praise of God and God’s glory and power.

Another common thread through these two psalms is the mentioning of enemies. These enemies take form in outside forces inflicting torture and doubt upon the psalmists. At the time that these texts were written, it is very possible that there were outside forces and literal enemies for the authors of the psalms. These enemies could have been outside peoples looking to overtake the land and the king of the time, but the enemies referenced in these two texts could have also been imagined and self-inflicted. Doubt and fear in a time when one feels lonely and far from God is also possible, and all the more reason for the need to be connected to God and to be kept physically and emotionally safe in the psalms.

These psalms are expressing a deep spiritual need for the divine and comparing it to a physical need for water, but it’s not just one’s “soul” that is longing for God. The word נפש, can mean soul and is used in the translations that way, but the word נפש means much more than that one term. The word also means one’s entire physical being, so both one’s soul and body are all encompassed, together. Robert Alter explains that the hebrew can also mean “life-breath”, but

---

<sup>62</sup>(Robert Alter, 2017, xxvii).

that it is also a term used to refer to the throat, “the passage through which the breath travels”<sup>63</sup>.

If we then understand the word נפש to have all of these various meanings, then the use of the metaphor is even stronger. The need for water and for God for one’s entire being to survive is not all that different from the deer or the land.

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

**“From the Depths I call You”- Psalms 61 & 130**

## Psalm 61

### Translation

- 1 For the leader<sup>64</sup> with instrumental music<sup>65</sup>, Of David<sup>66</sup>  
 2 Hear<sup>67</sup> my cry<sup>68</sup>, oh God<sup>69</sup>, be attentive<sup>70</sup> to my prayer.  
 3 From the end of the Earth<sup>71</sup> to you I will call<sup>72</sup>. When my heart is faint, you lead me to a rock<sup>73</sup> that is high above me.  
 4 For you have been a shelter to me. A tower of strength<sup>74</sup> in the face of an enemy<sup>75</sup>.  
 5 Let me dwell in your tent forever<sup>76</sup>, let me take shelter under the cover of your wings<sup>77</sup>, Selah<sup>78</sup>

<sup>64</sup> For the leader = לְמַנְצֵחַ, this term refers to the music director or choirmaster who would be performing this particular psalm with the other musicians. (Jeffrey Cohen, 2018, pg 4).

<sup>65</sup> Title with information that this Psalm would be set along to music. The word נְגִינָה indicated music of a stringed instrument from the BDB Dictionary. This information is included in other Psalms as well, such as Psalms 12, 22, 147, 150, etc. (Berlin 1334).

<sup>66</sup> The mention of David in the title supports the tradition that David may have been the author of some of the psalms. There are 73 psalms out of the 150 that are classified as a part of what is called the “Davidic” collection. There are sources in the Talmud (Pesachim 117a) that support the theory as well, “to the effect that “David gave Israel five books of Psalms.”” (Sarna 19).

<sup>67</sup> Hear = שָׁמַע, The word is used here with the hopes that God will not only hear, but also listen to the cries.

<sup>68</sup> Cry = רִנָּה, can also be understood as ringing cry which means that it’s not just a typical kind of crying, but more intense than that. The ringing cry in this case is of words of prayer. They’re meant to be heard by God, listened to and given attention.

<sup>69</sup> God = אֱלֹהִים. The name for God is used three times in this psalm. The multiple use of the name for God emphasizes the speaker’s desire to be connected to the divine.

<sup>70</sup> root - קָשַׁב “pay attention”, “listen”. The speaker doesn’t only want God to hear their prayers, but to really pay attention to them and listen to them. This is a deeper type of understanding than just listening to something. This is the same word used in Psalm 130.

<sup>71</sup> The end of the Earth is a far away place, far enough away to be similar to when one is stuck in the depths.

<sup>72</sup> Call = קָרָא, to invoke the use of voice. The speaker is not only thinking of their prayers, but also directing them outwards towards God by calling out vocally.

<sup>73</sup> Rock = צוּר, God is also referred to as צוּר, this high rock could be a mountain. This place is where many people in TaNaKh have communicated with God, ie. Mt. Sinai. The rock also signifies strength. When the speaker is feeling faint, God leads them to a rock which provides strength and support.

<sup>74</sup> Tower = מִגְדָּל, This a term for a literal tower, but it can also serve as a metaphor for “security and protection”. (Danilo Verde, 2020, pg 132).

<sup>75</sup> Similar to the enemies referred to in psalms 42 & 63. Anyone who may seek to do the speaker harm.

<sup>76</sup> There is a desire to not only be protected, but to be so for all time.

<sup>77</sup> Wings cast a shadow for protection. For the Israelites and for the speaker of this time, the sun was dangerous and people needed protection from it. God’s wings could serve as protection from anything that may cause one harm.

<sup>78</sup> Selah = סֵלָה. This term is some sort of exclamation. The Jewish Study Bible describes it as a “musicological term” explaining that “Radak understands it as “with a raised voice” from the Hebrew root “to raise”” as described in the Jewish Study Bible. (Berlin 1271), This claim would further increase the argument for this psalm to be set to music.

6 For you, God, have heard<sup>79</sup> my vows<sup>80</sup>. You have granted the plea<sup>81</sup> of those who fear your name.

7 Add days to the days of the king<sup>82</sup>. His years like those of the generations

8 May he dwell forever in the presence of God, steadfast loving-kindness<sup>83</sup> will preserve him.

9 Thus let me sing<sup>84</sup> your name forever, as I complete<sup>85</sup> my vows<sup>86</sup> day after day.

---

<sup>79</sup> Heard = שמע, In this verse, the speaker's cries and prayers mentioned in verse 3 have been heard. The psalm opens with the desire for acknowledgement, and towards the end the hope has been achieved.

<sup>80</sup> Vow = נדר. These vows are the speaker's prayers and words of praise of God.

<sup>81</sup> The translation of this word as "plea" is given by Robert Alter. He explains that the literal meaning of the word אִרְשָׁתָּה is "inheritance", but that it could be believed that the original reading of the word was meant to be אִרְסָתָּה - "plea". (Alter 212).

<sup>82</sup> There is a shift here from the focus of the speaker being on themselves, to speaking of the King. This can be explained either as a completely separate thought to the rest of the psalm, moving on to hopes of prosperity for the king at the time the psalm was written, or it can be reflected that the speaker sees their future being intertwined with the king's, possibly being that "he identifies the fate of the nation with his own fate". (Ibid).

<sup>83</sup> Loving-kindness = חסד. The steadfast loving-kindness of God will protect and preserve humankind forever. The use of this word to describe God is used throughout many psalms in this project.

<sup>84</sup> I will sing = אֶזְמְרָה, the last line emphasizing singing to God, as the entire Psalm is meant to be set to music as instructed in verse 1.

<sup>85</sup> Complete = שלם, this word can also mean "pay" which would mean that these vows are not just prayers, but also a sort of transaction or sacrifice.

<sup>86</sup> Same word as verse 6. The speaker will continue to perform vows of praises to God as a hope of remaining protected by God forever.



### Analysis:

This psalm opens with an instruction for the text to be set to music. Music throughout Jewish history has been an integral source of connection and elevation for various texts and prayers. The idea that some psalms were originally intended to be set to music supports the overall venture of this entire thesis project, which combines text study of psalms with the practical application of exploring various musical settings of the texts in modern times. With the knowledge that psalms like this one and many others would be set to instrumental music or would be sung aloud, it can be further understood how integral the connection between prayer and music was, and still is in modern times.

In Psalm 61, there is a large focus on the use of voice in an attempt to be heard by God. The psalmist cries out to the divine, calling out, begging to be heard. When one cries out, there is a sense of desperation or sorrow added to the voice. The emotional intensity is heightened with the act of projecting the voice, and the ability for the words to reach out is important because of the sense of how far the words need to travel to be heard.

The speaker cries out from the ends of the Earth. The ends of the Earth could be thought of as a physically estranged place, like the “four corners of the Earth”<sup>87</sup> where dispersed people dwell in the book of Isaiah, or the desert where the Israelites traveled for 40 years, but the ends of the Earth could also be symbolic for an emotional state of being. It is not a requirement to be in a physically distant place to feel an emotional or spiritual separation from God or other human beings. One can feel this kind of estrangement and isolation during times of loneliness and desperation, where one might struggle from grief and sorrow.

Crying out to God from this state of being, whether a physical or emotional one, is an expression of a deep desire to be heard and to really be paid attention to. For the speaker in this

---

<sup>87</sup> Isaiah 11:12.

particular psalm, they are crying out to God looking for comfort and strength and in their desperation, they are remembering when in the past God has been that source. When their heart has been faint, God has provided the strength that they needed.

Strength in this psalm is presented through multiple references to images that represent shelter and safety. The first is a rock, which is a common term used to describe God. In many prayers God is referred to as a rock as a source of strength and here, the speaker is invoking that same language to refer to God and what God has given to them. God is referred to as a “tower of strength”. In this psalm and many others, God is used as a metaphor for a safe place for humans to find shelter. In regards to this idea, it is said that “several metaphors envision God as a secure place for the people, blending images of natural and man-made structures, which provide stability, with God”<sup>88</sup>. The various ways in which God is described in psalm 61 supports this claim.

The speaker expresses a desire to “dwell” in God’s tent forever. This desire to live in the tent of God is not just a prayer for the particular moment of this psalm, but it is a deep desire to always be in the presence of the divine. This tent is a place of intimacy where one can be in relationship to God. If it is achieved, one may feel safe and secure.

There is another psalm that conveys similar desires. In Psalm 27, there is a particular line that reads *Achat sha'alti me'eit Adonai, otah avakesh, Shivti b'veit Adonai, kol y'mei chayai*. This text is read during the month of Elul leading up to the High Holy Days, and in English reads, “One thing I ask of Adonai, only that I seek to dwell in the house of Adonai all the days of my life”. Whether it be a house or a tent, the message is still the same as what is expressed here in

---

<sup>88</sup> (Verde *introduction*).

Psalm 61, and it is the same in other psalms as well<sup>89</sup>. There is a deep yearning to be kept close to Adonai, and to be sheltered in God's presence forever.

Towards the end of the psalm, there is a shift in the speaker's message. The beginning of the text is quite personal, speaking from the first person point of view with a focus only on the individual's need for acknowledgement and preservation. As the psalm concludes there is a shift to a reference to some king. This transition to a completely separate thought in one psalm is not unfamiliar to the poetry, as other psalms may have a shift in their texts as well. If one believes the tradition that this psalm could be attributed to David, then the text could be prophesying his reign. Otherwise, the text directs its hopes towards future kingship in general, which ultimately lends itself to hopes for general preservation and protection for all peoples in the future.

The psalm closes with the speaker exclaiming in a first person voice that they will continue to praise God forever. This statement assures their loyalty to praising God and secures their ongoing relationship with the divine. The need for these prayers to be heard is not just in a singular moment of need, but always. With this in mind, there is a feeling of security in what was before unsure. At the beginning of Psalm 61, the fear was that the speaker's pleas would be ignored, but now through understanding God's protection and loving-kindness, there is a sense of commitment to continue to praise God forever. By the end of this psalm, the speaker finds themselves in a new position of clarity on their beliefs and dedication to their relationship to God. The entire psalm allows for an individual to work through their doubts and fears, and then arrives at the end with a confident, positive outlook.

---

<sup>89</sup> Psalm 23 also claims a hope to dwell in the house of God.

## Psalm 130

### Translation

- 1 A song of ascents:<sup>90</sup> From the depths<sup>91</sup> I call<sup>92</sup> you, Adonai<sup>93</sup>.
- 2 Adonai, listen to my voice. Let your ears be attentive<sup>94</sup> to the voice<sup>95</sup> of my plea<sup>96</sup>
- 3 If you keep account of iniquity, oh Yah. Adonai, who will endure<sup>97</sup>?
- 4 Because with you is forgiveness<sup>98</sup> in order that you may be revered.
- 5 I hope<sup>99</sup> for Adonai, my soul<sup>100</sup> hopes for him. I wait for his word.
- 6 My soul is eager<sup>101</sup> for Adonai, more than night-watchers<sup>102</sup> for morning, night-watchers for morning.
- 7 Wait, O Israel, for Adonai, for with Adonai is loving-kindness<sup>103</sup>, and with him much power to redeem<sup>104</sup>
- 8 And He will redeem Israel<sup>105</sup> from all their iniquities.

---

<sup>90</sup> Title. Psalms with the title of songs of “ascent” were believed to be a part of a collection that would have been sung as pilgrims were “wending their way ‘up’ to Jerusalem during the three main pilgrim festivals”. (Cohen 7). They were believed to have also been sung as priests were ascending the steps of the temple to perform their daily rituals.

<sup>91</sup> Depths = מעמק, this Hebrew term for the word “depths” is different than the watery depths in Psalms 42 & 63. These can stand for a physically low place or an emotionally low state of being.

<sup>92</sup> Call = קרא. Same type of call in psalm 61.

<sup>93</sup> Adonai = יהוה. Another name for God used seven times in this psalm. The repetitive nature of mentioning God’s name shows how important God is to this psalm and to the speaker.

<sup>94</sup> Same word used in Psalm 61. Both Psalms express a desire for God to pay attention to the speaker’s words.

<sup>95</sup> Voice = קול. These pleas are being vocalized to God in an attempt to be heard. This notion of engaging with the voice in prayer is similar to psalm 61 which would be set to music.

<sup>96</sup> The word תְּחִנָּה “plea” is the same as the Tachanun prayer, which is a plea of mercy that is a part of the modern day Shacharit service.

<sup>97</sup> Endure = יעמד, to physically stay standing. Here the speaker is questioning if God takes account of people’s iniquities, then who does God allow to live? If God judges and then punishes humankind for their sins, how can they survive? These are questions that the speaker is asking, and then in the next verse the speaker answers. God contains loving-kindness and because of that, God allows for humans to live.

<sup>98</sup> God is believed to be capable of forgiveness. The word סְלִיחָה, “forgiveness” is connected to the prayer in the traditional weekday Shacharit service in the Amidah section that begins “סְלִיחָה לָנוּ” “forgive us”, which is also familiar in the High Holy Day liturgy. Asking for God’s forgiveness is not unfamiliar in modern liturgy.

<sup>99</sup> Hope = תקווה, positive optimism and belief.

<sup>100</sup> Soul = נפש. This term can also mean one’s entire being. With this understanding, the individual’s entire essence is eager for God.

<sup>101</sup> The speaker feels a great amount of anticipation for God, and says that it is even greater than the anticipation that the night-watchers would feel for the morning to arrive. This clarification exaggerates the feeling of eagerness, especially because the night-watchers’ only job all through the night is to sit and wait for the morning to come.

<sup>102</sup> The night-watch is similar to what is mentioned in Psalm 63.

<sup>103</sup> Loving-kindness = חסד. Same descriptor is used for God in psalm 61.

<sup>104</sup> Adonai forgives with chesed and also redeems the Israelite people.

<sup>105</sup> The speaker switches from a focus on the sake of the individual to a focus on the collective. God will not only allow for the speaker to live, but all of Israel.

### Analysis:

This psalm opens with a cry from the depths. The depths represent a physically low place, but they could also serve as a metaphor for an emotionally low place. Ancient commentators also understood that when one experiences feelings of dread and despair, their innermost emotions can contribute to imagery of being physically low. 12th century commentator Ibn Ezra makes a note of this very psalm and explains that the text says “from the depths” as a contextual argument of how people might have felt emotionally “because of the depth of low poverty and status in the diaspora”<sup>106</sup>.

Similar to Psalm 61, the use of voice here in calling out from the depths does so with the goal of reaching towards God. In order to propel oneself out of this low place, the speaker directs their prayers towards the divine out of hope. This call, whether it be out of speech or song, is evoked through voice and language and the request of the speaker is to be heard. It is not only about releasing the plea into the universe, but it is about these specific prayers being listened to and received attentively by God. This specific desire requires a level of relationship between the speaker and the divine, one that is more intimate. There is a need to be heard, to be listened to, and to be received by God in the words of this text.

A continual thread throughout the rest of this psalm is the iniquities of humans, more specifically the iniquities of Israel, and how God will forgive human-kind for their sins. There is a quality to God, similar to other psalms where the divine is described as having *chesed*, loving-kindness towards humans, but in this case, it is focused on God’s ability to forgive. There is a fear in the speaker’s words which can be heard through the yearning in the text. They are questioning the fate of their survival and God’s power in being able to absolve people of their

---

<sup>106</sup> Ibn Ezra on Psalm 130:1.

[https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.130.1?lang=bi&p2=Ibn\\_Ezra\\_on\\_Psalms.130.1.1&lang2=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.130.1?lang=bi&p2=Ibn_Ezra_on_Psalms.130.1.1&lang2=bi).

sins. The speaker is questioning their own survival, fearful that their own iniquities will lead to them not surviving somehow. This fear is one that is then resolved through the faith exemplified in the following verses. There is a great sense of hope in the divine and loyalty towards a belief in a God who is loving and kind and forgiving. For the speaker, and for Israel who the speaker is addressing, there is a great need to believe in God as a source of hope and strength for redemption and survival. This sense of fear around one's sins and looking for absolution and forgiveness in this Psalm is still relevant in practice today, as Psalm 130 is used in modern liturgy<sup>107</sup> for "confession and repentance"<sup>108</sup>.

There is a repeated sense of a yearning for God in this Psalm. The need to be heard and listened to is communicated clearly in the text of verse 2, asking God to make one's ears "attentive:" to the pleas. There is a clear sense of desire to know and be in relationship with the divine, and there is a sense of eagerness that makes this desire all the more intense. The speaker compares this feeling to the eagerness of the night-watchers, who's entire job was to stay awake all night long to ultimately watch and wait for the rising of the sun. In ancient times, the night-watch was a duty divided into multiple shifts where people would stay on guard throughout the night. In Mishnah and Talmud<sup>109</sup>, the night-watch becomes important in regards to discussions on when it becomes too late in the evening to say the Shema prayer. For those who are on duty, their only job is to watch out for intruders as the darkness passes. It can be understood that these individuals would pray for protection and safety during the most dangerous times in the night, while eagerly waiting for the sun to rise. In this psalm, God is placed in a parallel with the Sun, and the speaker is like the watchers of the night. To explain further, one

---

<sup>107</sup> "Liturgy" = "the formal and mandated recitation of a text, usually but not exclusively, in the context of a public gathering or a synagogue setting". (Abraham Jacob Berkovitz, 2023, pg 74).

<sup>108</sup> (Gillingham 62).

<sup>109</sup> Talmud Berakhot 3a.

could imagine that the speaker might be thinking “The watchmen sitting through the last of the three watches of the night, peering into the darkness for the first sign of dawn, cannot equal my intense expectancy for God's redeeming word to come to me in my dark night of the soul.”<sup>110</sup>.

This comparison of an individual's eagerness towards God and the night-watch is not unfamiliar to the psalms, as a similar idea is also mentioned in psalm 63.

The psalm ends with a reminder that God is capable of much love and forgiveness. This time instead of only thinking on a personal level, the speaker focuses on the people of Israel and the ability for all people to be redeemed. By moving on from a perspective of the individual to the collective, the speaker can place themselves within that larger group to ease the feelings of loneliness that were established at the beginning of the psalm when calling from the depths.

---

<sup>110</sup> (Alter 456).

### Comparison

Reaching to God from the depths of the Earth is a familiar concept to the Psalms. To quote Psalm 118, מִן־הַמַּצָּר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה, “From the straits, I called out to Yah”. Ancient commentators understood that the word צָר could mean a physically narrow place, but they also had a belief that the word could mean distress<sup>111</sup>. From a far place physically, or in an emotional crisis, people would call out to God. This calling out in Psalm 118, is the same as the calling in Psalms 61 and 130. In all of these texts, the speaker is using the imagery of a far away place like the ends of the Earth, or the depths to relate to the emotional feelings of loneliness and longing for God.

Psalm 118 contains “a vision of how we long to feel and how we long to be seen”<sup>112</sup>, but this rings true for the psalms 61 and 130 as well. These psalms beg for the individual to be received by God, and to have their prayers heard in times of emotional strife. There is a need in the words of both of these psalms for the speaker to be heard and it comes from a very emotionally raw place. There is a sense of desperation in the words almost as if the longer they wait, the more connection to God is necessary.

The ends of the Earth in Psalm 61 and the depths in Psalm 130, although different words, can be understood as the same type of place. Both represent a physical estrangement, and the speakers of both psalms express feelings of loneliness and isolation. “From the darkness of emotional despair, on the verge of death, [one] calls out to God.”<sup>113</sup>. The depths represent the imagery of a physically low place that only feels even lower in the Earth when paired with

---

<sup>111</sup> Midrash Tehilim 63:1.

<sup>112</sup> (Danielle Upbin).

<sup>113</sup> (Alter 455).



feelings of depression and isolation being displayed through these psalms. They are not the same as the watery depths in Psalms 42 and 63, although the English term being used is the same<sup>114</sup>.

In Psalms 61 and 130, the use of voice and the action of calling out is a main feature of how the speakers hope to connect to God. From both of these distant locations imagined in these texts, the speaker cries out begging to be heard and accepted. In so doing, each psalm attempts to bring God closer. The use of spoken word or song is a powerful way in which the speaker can interact with God. There is a sense of hope that their pleas and prayers will be heard, and the implementation of an audible sound like the voice emphasizes that desire. When one actually speaks or sings, it adds an additional layer of being able to physically embody the text which ultimately leads to a deeper connection to the meaning of the words.

The words of these psalms are ultimately praying for hope, comfort and safety. There is a desire in the words of these psalms that God will be “attentive” to the speaker’s prayers. In our modern liturgy, we have prayers for the very same thing. The prayer *Y’hiyu L’ratzon*, asks for the same. “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, Adonai, my rock and my redeemer”. Just like the psalms, this prayer has a focus on literal words and the desire for them to be accepted by God.

These words, focused on the desire for acceptance of prayers, are in their own way prayers. They convey a deep desire to be heard by God and there is a sense of longing in these words. There is a need to be in relationship with the divine that revolves around the acceptance of one’s prayers and for people to be granted forgiveness for their wrongdoings. When one uses texts like these, either the psalms or the liturgical prayers, it is in an attempt to make sure the words of their prayers are really being taken into account by God. One can say whatever their prayer is aloud, but with this added hope, that their words have power. When one feels so

---

<sup>114</sup> For a definition of these depths, see section titled “Psalms 42 and 63 - “The use of Water as Metaphor””.

estranged emotionally and physically like in these psalms, the way to bring them closer to the divine is by calling out to God. For someone feeling such distance either physically or emotionally from God, redemption and forgiveness can help them feel closer.

The God represented in these psalms is full of love, *chesed*, and provides strength and shelter to human beings. The word *chesed* appears in both psalms and is important to understanding the relationship that the speakers in both psalms wish to have with the divine. In psalm 61, God brings strength to people in times of need, and there is a sense of hope that this will be continued forever for all people. The same is said for psalm 130 in understanding that people can be forgiven for their transgressions because of the loving-kindness that God has towards human beings. This quality of God being a God of *chesed* is important to each psalm and how each of them end, prophesying the safety and prosperity for others and for future generations.

These texts move from a focus on the individual to the collective, bringing a sense of belonging to the larger world. Each psalm begins with a cry of despair from a place of physical estrangement and emotional isolation, but they both end with a sense of relationship to God, a sense of identification within the larger community of Israel, and with a sense of hope. What happens in both psalms is that “the individual and the believing community merge into one as the poet speaks with, for, and to the community. He or she embodies the guilt and hope of Israel.”<sup>115</sup>. When they first open, each text displays emotional distance through imagery of physical estrangement, but by the end, through the use of the voice and prayers, hope moves them closer towards an outlook of prosperity and strength.

Psalm 130 “begins with uncertainty and the worry that human wrongs will prevent God from acting on our behalf; but it concludes with the confidence in God’s forgiveness and in the

---

<sup>115</sup> (Konrad Schaefer, 1996, pg 311).

fact that even in times of trouble, God will always be at our side.”<sup>116</sup>. The same can be said of the message of Psalm 63. In both psalms, there is an emotional transformation from beginning to end. Through this journey each text focuses on the use of voice to call out to God and to pray for closeness, and through that prayer itself, the speaker automatically get a little bit closer.

---

<sup>116</sup> (Carlie Weisbrod Daniels, 2015, pg 45).

## **“Call and Response”- Psalms 13 & 121**

## Psalm 13

Translation:

1 For the leader<sup>117</sup>, A Psalm of David<sup>118</sup>

2 How long<sup>119</sup>, Adonai? Will you ignore me forever<sup>120</sup>? How long will you hide your face<sup>121</sup> from me?

3 How long will I have cares on my mind<sup>122</sup>, grief in my heart daily? How long will my enemy<sup>123</sup> rise up against me?

4 Look at me. Answer me<sup>124</sup>, Adonai, my God<sup>125</sup>. Illumine my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.

5 Lest my enemies say, “I have overcome him”, my foes rejoice when I totter.

6 But, in your loving-kindness<sup>126</sup> I trust<sup>127</sup>, my heart<sup>128</sup> will exult in your salvation. I will sing<sup>129</sup> to Adonai, for he has been good to me

---

<sup>117</sup> This term is an instruction for the leader of musicians who would be performing the psalm. The title was ascribed to the psalm from a later organizer of the psalms. Same as לְמַנְצֵחַ from Psalm 61.

<sup>118</sup> “this is the psalm that David said in the moment of his distress from his enemies; or it is said in the language of exile”- Radak on Psalms 13:1. (Ris Golden-Sieradski, 2014). This idea supports the tradition that this psalm is a part of the collection written by David.

<sup>119</sup> How Long? = עַד אַנָּה. This question is asked four times all one after the other. This line of questioning presents significant doubt for God’s presence in this psalm.

<sup>120</sup> Forever = בְּנֶצַח. The use of the word forever intensifies the questioning of the speaker. There is a fear that this distance from God will never end, which makes the need for connection even stronger.

<sup>121</sup> Exodus 33:20 “But you cannot see My face, for a human being may not see Me and live.” Humans are not allowed to see God’s face, but in this case of the question, the word “hide” is important. The focus here is not on not being able to see God’s face, but instead about the idea that God’s presence overall is being withheld.

<sup>122</sup> Mind = בֶּפֶשׁ. The questioning in this psalm supports the inner dialogue going on in the speaker’s mind, but the use of the word בֶּפֶשׁ, which can also mean “soul” or “being” extends the struggle to one’s entire being struggling, not just their mind.

<sup>123</sup> A reference to David’s enemies. Enemies also show up in other psalms, like psalms 42 & 61, showing a common theme that appears throughout these texts.

<sup>124</sup> There is a longing to be seen and acknowledged, to no longer be left alone and to have these questions answered.

<sup>125</sup> Not just Adonai, but also אֱלֹהֵי = my God. The connection to God here is more personal with the possessive ending. There isn’t just a desire to feel a closeness to a general sort of God, but a sense of a personal connection to a God.

<sup>126</sup> Loving-kindness = חַסֵּד. A common adjective used to describe God in the psalms. Through the trust in God’s kindness, the belief in God and loyalty remains even in times of doubt.

<sup>127</sup> There is a sense of confidence in this statement of trust. It’s not just that God’s loving-kindness will lead to one’s salvation, but also that their loyalty to that belief will bring it about. This is a shift in tone from the doubt being presented in the line of questioning at the beginning of the psalm, moving from a fear of isolation from God to a trust in the divine.

<sup>128</sup> Rejoicing won’t just come from songs of praise, but also from the heart. This adds a deeper level of sincerity and meaning to the belief.

<sup>129</sup> I will sing = אֲשִׁירָה. Singing and the use of voice is shown in other psalms as well, also supporting the idea that this psalm may have been set to music from the instruction in the title.

### Analysis:

Psalm 13 opens with a series of questions that express doubt in God. These questions revolve around a fear of being ignored and forgotten, living in a state of anguish and grief. עַד אֵנָּה “How long?” puts into perspective that these questions are not just about one singular moment, but that there is a fear of them lasting for all time. This question presents a dialogue that the speaker is trying to have with God in the hopes that they will receive answers. There is also an internal dialogue within the psalm itself leading the speaker to their own clarity.

There is a fear of being ignored by God and being left completely alone. This loneliness leads to dread and this feeling is one that is present within many other psalms. When one feels alone, they look to God for company and comfort, but in this case, the speaker is left only with themselves. There is a sense of longing exemplified by the line of questioning, and as the questions go on, the desperation can be perceived as growing stronger.

Verses two and three each contain within them two questions, and with each they become more specific. Verse two is directed towards God and the speaker’s relationship to the divine. The question opens asking if the speaker will be ignored by God forever, but then gives an example as to how they are being ignored. Here, the divine is described as having hid their face from the speaker. In the Torah, to see God’s face is forbidden. It is an act too intimate for human beings to be able to do, but something that the speaker in this psalm is longing for. There is a need to feel a closeness to the divine and to have a connection to a comforting source. Verse three opens with asking how long there will be “cares on my mind, grief in my heart” and continues with giving a specific example of what is causing that anguish. The enemies of David would be one way to understand this verse if it were to be read literally, but if taken figuratively,

enemies could represent any sort of force either external or internal as in an inner voice, fear, or doubt.

Verses four and five are an exclamation from the speaker begging to be heard and seen by God. This is similar to the feelings expressed in Psalms 61 and 130, that also long for this relationship with the divine. Along with the need to be heard by God, there is an implied need for protection against one's enemies and also a need for protection against death.

The psalm concludes with a shift in tone. The first five verses express fear, dread, and doubt, and a longing for a connection to God, but in the final verse there is a drastic change in the language to a positive outlook. There is an "affirmation of faith" which "is a turning point in the mood, and perhaps even in genre"<sup>130</sup>. The psalm opens with notes of desperation, but concludes with a strong declaration in loyalty and trust in God. In a way, the speaker takes a journey from loneliness and longing for a connection to the divine to coming back into a relationship with God. Through the simple act of expressing this need and affirming their belief in God, closeness is achieved. The end of the psalm exclaims a confidence in trust in God, and declares a commitment to praising God. This praise is done through song and through the use of voice, which is common for other psalms to also implement the use of voice in an attempt to reach a closeness to the divine. Music, here, is brought in as a vehicle used for such praise, which also supports the venture of this project with the use of music for expressing the text of the psalms.

---

<sup>130</sup> (Alter 39).

## Psalm 121

### Translation

- 1 A Song of Ascent<sup>131</sup>: I lift my eyes<sup>132</sup> to the mountains<sup>133</sup>. From where will my help come?<sup>134</sup>
- 2 My help comes from Adonai<sup>135</sup>, the one who makes heaven and earth<sup>136</sup>
- 3 He will not let your foot slip<sup>137</sup>, your guardian<sup>138</sup> will not slumber
- 4 Behold, the guardian of Israel<sup>139</sup> will not slumber and will not sleep<sup>140</sup>
- 5 Adonai is your guardian, Adonai is your shadow<sup>141</sup>  
at your right hand<sup>142</sup><sup>143</sup>
- 6 Daily the sun<sup>144</sup> will not strike, nor the moon by night<sup>145</sup>
- 7 Adonai will guard you from all trouble, and guard your soul<sup>146</sup>
- 8 Adonai will guard your going and coming now and forever<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Title ascribed to the psalm putting it into the collection of other “songs of ascent” like psalm 130.

<sup>132</sup> This “lifting of the eyes” to the mountain could have been literal for those traveling to Jerusalem during the pilgrimage festivals, but it is also symbolic for anyone looking upwards towards the skies to look towards God.

<sup>133</sup> Mountains in the Torah are the place where God dwells and where humans have come to interact with the divine. For example, Moses receiving the tablets from God at Mt. Sinai.

<sup>134</sup> The psalm opens with a question which then prompts the response in the rest of the text.

<sup>135</sup> An immediate answer to the question posed in verse 1. Adonai is the source of help.

<sup>136</sup> Identifying God as creator gives a context for this particular understanding of God. Who is Adonai? The one who made heaven and Earth and all of creation.

<sup>137</sup> Showing ways that God provides help to humanity through strength and protection.

<sup>138</sup> Guardian = שומר. This is another descriptor of God as a protector and a shield for humans when they are in need.

<sup>139</sup> Guardian of Israel, not just individuals. This brings the collective into the narrative of this text, also placing the individual into the context of belonging to a group of people.

<sup>140</sup> Continuous and constant protection, God does not tire or need rest.

<sup>141</sup> Shadow and shade is protection, similar to that of psalm 61.

<sup>142</sup> The right hand is a symbol of strength.

<sup>143</sup> This particular verse presents two different metaphors for God, one is human as a guard, and one is non-human as a shade, “the element of protection connects these two images”. (Verde 163).

<sup>144</sup> The metaphor of shade provided by the word “shadow” applies a protection from sunstroke, “a real danger in the semi-desert climate of the Land of Israel”. (Alter, Psalm 121).

<sup>145</sup> This statement is an emphasis on the idea that there will be protection from God at all times, not just during the day when one is awake, but also at night during sleep. The state of being in sleep can be understood even further as death, where God provides protection even in death. Psalm 121 is often read as a part of the poetry read at funerals, and this belief can make that use even more appropriate.

<sup>146</sup> Soul = נפש. Not only will one’s soul be protected, but so will their entire being.

<sup>147</sup> The messaging in this last verse signals that one will be protected for all time, not just in a particular moment. This idea supports the rest of the messaging of this psalm that God is a constant source of protection in life and after.



Analysis:

Psalms 121 has multiple uses within Jewish spaces. It is frequently used in prayer services to provide comfort and hope during times when necessary, and it is a part of the collection of optional texts read aloud or sung during funerals<sup>148</sup>. It is also a part of the collection of psalms that are songs of “ascents” that are believed to have been sung during pilgrimage festivals. When people experience moments of grief and sadness or even the feelings of fear of the unknown, this psalm serves as a reminder to look towards God for hope and strength.

In the Torah, God meets with people on mountain tops. Mt. Sinai is where the Israelites received the 10 commandments, and Moses spoke the words of God to the Israelites upon a mountain top in his final address to them at the end of the book of Deuteronomy. “The mountain tops are where heaven and earth meet, and thus provides access to the divine realm”<sup>149</sup>.

Mountains represent a holy place that contains much knowledge and a closeness to God. These mountain tops represent God and serve as a representation of “a source of inspiration and hope”<sup>150</sup>. The psalm begins with an image of one lifting up their eyes to the mountains. Lifting up one’s eyes represents the speaker literally looking upwards towards God.

The psalm opens with a question. “From where will my help come?”. When looking upwards to the mountains, there is already an answer provided in that singular motion. The speaker looks to the place where the divine’s presence is known to dwell in search for God while questioning. In an immediate succession, verse two continues with an answer: “My help comes from Adonai, the maker of heaven and Earth”, and then the psalm moves forward with an expansion on this concept.

---

<sup>148</sup> (Donald Goor, 2015, Mourn29).

<sup>149</sup> (Daniels 34).

<sup>150</sup> (Benjamin Segal, 2013, pg 594).

The rest of the text gives a larger explanation on various qualities of Adonai. From verse two on, the psalm provides an answer to the question in the opening line, and “we have what looks like a response to the question and affirmation of the speaker at the beginning.”<sup>151</sup> God is described in a few different ways, but the one descriptor that appears multiple times throughout the text is that there is a main idea that God is a protector or a “guard”. The Hebrew word for guard, שמר appears 6 different times in this psalm. 3 of those times occur in the last two lines. The consistent use of this word emphasizes the idea that God is a protector and is a presence that will keep people safe. The repetition of the word at the end of this psalm allows for it to end on a note focused on the consistent protection that God will provide for humans. When one is particularly fearful of their vulnerability, ending the psalm on this note creates an emphasis on the ending phrase and how this kind of protection from God will last not just in the moment, but for all time.

There is also a large focus on this psalm on the idea of sleep, and how that is something that God does not do. When we humans sleep we are in a particularly vulnerable state. For anyone, especially someone who is alone, sleep is a time where one cannot protect themselves from the dangers of the outside world. It is also a Jewish belief that sleep is the closest state that we can get to in our human lives to death<sup>152</sup>. There is also a “pre-scientific belief... that losing consciousness in sleep is dangerous, for there is no guarantee that we will continue living during that state, and regain consciousness when sleep is over”<sup>153</sup>. In this psalm, the references to sleep could also be a metaphor for death, explaining that humans will be protected in their sleep and in death. This psalm emphasizes that God is a being that does not sleep or take rest, and that there is an everlasting presence of protection at all times.

---

<sup>151</sup> (Alter Psalm 121).

<sup>152</sup> “sleep is one-sixtieth of death” - Berakhot 57b.

<sup>153</sup> (Lawrence Hoffman, 2005, pg 84).

Adonai is a shadow, protecting us at all times during the day, physically from the sun and metaphorically from all other harm. At night, when we are more vulnerable, we are also protected. Our bodies are protected in our daily lives and this psalm also clarifies that our souls are protected as well. We can also understand the word נפש to mean one's entire being, and the use of this word in this psalm confirms the wide scope of protection that is achieved.

Psalm 121 ends with an exclamation that confirms the “pattern of asserted trust”<sup>154</sup> exemplified through the repetition of examples of how God serves as a שמר, protector for humankind. Even though the entire psalm opened with a question, the nature of the remainder of the text supports the idea that psalm 121 is actually a “trust psalm”<sup>155</sup> which expresses confidence in the speaker's belief in God as being the source for where their help comes. The psalm goes through a transition of opening with questions to ending with answers. This format could convey a conversion, either between two parties or could even be an internal dialogue “with one's own soul”<sup>156</sup>. This pattern could prove useful to people going through their own questioning of faith and feeling as if they too, need answers. In its modern practice, that's exactly what this psalm is used for. It provides comfort and trust to individuals when they need that reminder.

---

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> (Walter Brueggeman & W. H. Belinger, 2014, pg 11).

<sup>156</sup> (Hans Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 1989, pg 427).

## Comparison

Psalms 13 and 121 both follow a format of opening with questions that then follow with answers. There is a pattern of reaching out in curiosity and then reaching back internally with affirmation which moves each psalm along a journey from fear, longing, and doubt, to a state of confidence, trust, and praise.

When one doubts God's presence, and then responds with a newfound sureness, this only secures and confirms the relationship to the divine even more. Both of these psalms end on a note of positivity which is completely opposite from how they began. This format, moving through vastly different emotions, can prove to be useful for people who, just like the speakers of these psalms, are experiencing feelings of desperation and longing. For people who are doubting their relationship to God, these texts can help them find a sense of assuredness. For those who are afraid of the unknown, these psalms can aid in providing hope and comfort. These psalms serve as examples in our Jewish texts for when these circumstances have appeared in much earlier times throughout history; and, they are widely known and used, which automatically grants a feeling of community and a connection to a sense of peoplehood.

Psalms 13 and 121 have this overall structure in common along with the arc of transition of emotional landscapes that they each move through from beginning to end. They also have specific things in common in the words they each use for God, what they are hoping for from the divine, and also the everlasting nature of their relationship to God presented at the end of the psalms.

Both psalms use the Hebrew word יהוה for God. This word, Adonai, is a commonly used name for God, that is also used regularly in the Torah. In Psalm 121 God is described as *Shomer Yisrael*, a “guardian of Israel”. The idea that God is a guard and a sort of protector is a major

theme in Psalm 121. When people are in need, God provides them with protection and keeps them safe. Although this theme is not explicitly stated in Psalm 13, the psalm does describe a need to be kept safe from whatever harm may come one's way. Both psalms need this sort of safe presence from God and express through their questions that it is not something that they feel in their lives at the present moment. Through praise and belief in the divine's power to be that safeguarding presence, it becomes all the more believable.

In both of these psalms, there is a dialogue presented by the speaker that could either be an outward conversation, or they could be an inner dialogue. When thinking of them as an inward conversation within one person's mind, it supports the idea that these two psalms "express not one static attitude but an inner evolution of oscillation of attitudes. Perhaps the prayer itself served as a vehicle of transformation from acute distress to trust"<sup>157</sup>. These two psalms both end in confident exclamations in their trust in God's power and their faith in their relationship to the divine. This pattern is present in other psalms of this project as well, like Psalms 61 and 130, that also begin with feelings of longing and despair which transform into faith in God.

These emotions and how the psalms oscillate between them is something that can be very powerful for people to see. When people don't have the ability to put into words their own emotions, these psalms help to articulate those feelings, and then help people work through their emotions. These particular texts are helpful to use in bringing comfort and peace to anyone when they are in need. Just as the psalms themselves take a journey, they bring people along in that transformation to help lift people up in times of need.

---

<sup>157</sup> (Alter 39).

## Conclusion

Through this work, I have found major concepts that have enriched my understanding of Psalms 13, 42, 61, 63, 121 & 130. These common themes and attributes include the use of metaphor, the attribute of *chesed*, the connection between the soul and the body, the use of voice as a form of expression, and how the texts help to move the reader along on a spiritual and emotional transformation. This conclusion also describes the process of adding in the recital in which I performed musical settings of these psalms at HUC-JIR New York on December 5th 2023. The written program that accompanied the performance can be found in the Appendix.

### Metaphor

The use of metaphor in psalms is a common feature that allows for ideas to be expressed in a multitude of ways. Metaphor creates an opportunity for a complex thought to be presented with the use of common imagery and simple terms. By using other references and examples to explain a particular idea, the meaning can be understood more deeply.

In these particular psalms, metaphor is used to help articulate feelings of longing. Psalms 42 and 63 each use a metaphor involving water to express their desire for God. They equate the way in which living beings or the Earth thirst for water for physical survival to the way in which humans need God for emotional sustenance. This comparison allows for anyone who has ever experienced thirst to understand what it might feel like to feel the same for the divine. The text takes the basic need for water and transforms it into something much more complex, turning a physical need into a spiritual and emotional one.

There are other instances where the psalms present physical imagery that represent emotional states of being. The “ends of the Earth” of Psalm 61 and the “depths” of Psalm 130 are two examples. These places, so far from humanity and from God, express feelings of isolation

and despair. When one feels extremely lonely, it may feel as if they are literally estranged from the rest of the world.

The use of the word “depths” in the psalms of this project has multiple meanings. There are two different uses for this word. In Hebrew we have תְּהוֹם (*tehom*) the primeval waters of the universe in the creation story. We also have מַעְמָק (*ma'amak*) a low place or a valley. It is something to note that we have one word in English that means a few different things in Hebrew. Both of these physical entities serve as metaphors for similar emotions. The depths of water are chaotic and swirling, symbolizing an emotional state of being that is unstable and lacks inner peace. The depths of the Earth are a place where one feels alone and in a state of despair. Both versions of the depths need a connection to God to restore a sense of inner peace, comfort, and safety.

These psalms long for a sense of security, a feeling that the Psalmists are missing when experiencing doubt of their relationship to the divine. Many of the texts use metaphor to symbolize strength and protection. God is referred to as a “rock”, and a “tower” representing stability and safety. God is also referred to as a “shadow”, a being that has “wings” that provides shade, and is also a “shelter”. The word “guard” appears as well, giving the impression that the divine will grant protection from any sort of harm that may befall a person. This potential harm could come from an “enemy” like those mentioned in Psalm 13 and 61. If one takes this idea literally, then the enemy could be imagined as another person or an adversary in one’s life. This enemy could also be more figurative, taking the form of other sorts of potential dangers or sicknesses, or even one’s own inner antagonistic voice rooted in fear and insecurity. No matter what form it takes, any potential danger that is harmful to a person’s physical or mental being is less terrifying when one has faith that they will be protected by God.

There is a hope in the words of these psalms that God will provide safety for all time, not just in one particular moment. Although these psalms speak to an individual moment in time, they represent a need that is everlasting. The metaphor of water explains this well. Just as an animal or the dry land needs water to support physical life, so too, do humans need God to nourish their souls. The basic human need for water is not just a singular need in one moment, we need water for all time in order to live and to be sustained.

### חסד (*Chesed*)

*Chesed* is defined as a quality of “loving-kindness”. In some contexts, is it believed to be a modern Jewish value that people can strive to pursue in their own lives. Treating others and the world with kindness and with love is a goal to strive towards. In these psalms, God is described as a being that also contains that same *chesed*. This quality of the divine is important to note because it is what keeps the speaker of the psalms loyal and steadfast in their belief in God. Since God has *chesed* for human beings, surely they will continue to be protected and kept safe from harm. It is assumed that Divine Chesed also allows people to be forgiven for their sins and allows people to be redeemed. This loving-kindness is what helps to sustain the personal relationship that these psalms are longing for. The fact that God is a being of kindness keeps hope alive.

### The Soul and the Body

The word נפש (*nefesh*) can be defined simply as “soul”. This word appears in four of the six psalms a total of thirteen times. It is more than just a person’s soul. It refers to one’s entire being. In these four psalms, and in all six, *nefesh* functions exactly in that way. There is a sense



of longing for the divine that comes not just from one's soul, but from one's entire body. The metaphor for water and the symbolism for emotional sustenance is just one example of this use of language. In the other psalms as well, the heart and the mind are in sync, hoping and waiting for God. These emotions come through the speaker's entire body, showing eagerness through their words and actions. The lifting of the eyes in search of God, or raising the arms in praise are two examples of the embodiment of these desires. This sort of longing and this hope is so personal and so strong, that the body cannot help but feel what the heart already feels. The soul and the physical body are so connected in these desires that they manifest in both words and action. They are not two separate entities feeling similar things, they are two parts of the same whole.

### The use of Voice

The words of these six psalms feature various ways in which the voice is implemented to reach outwards towards God. Calling, crying, and singing are all different ways in which these emotions are released and that praises are given. Each of these actions involve using the voice as the vehicle for expressing deeply personal emotions such as sadness, frustration, eagerness and hope. Using one's voice to release such desires makes the experience all the more personal and allows for an individual to embody their feelings more deeply. These words are also projected outwards towards God in an attempt to bring the divine closer. The Psalmists ask God to listen and to be attentive to the words of the speaker. They are asking and hoping to be heard. In a way, "hope bridges the gap between the psalmist and God"<sup>158</sup>. When one propels their voice towards the divine, these prayers of hope create a sort of imaginary line of connection between one's soul and God.

---

<sup>158</sup> (Schaefer 311).

It is believed that many of the psalms were meant to be set to music. It is clear in their instructions that various musical instruments were used, and in Psalms 13 and 61, there are lines in the text declaring that they will “sing to Adonai”. Music and singing in the psalms is connected even in their original form. Singing is inherently a part of the book of psalms through how they were meant to be performed in practice and also how the words themselves expressed emotion. With this in mind, the addition of performing these texts live felt completely natural to me, as someone who already encounters the texts in this way on a regular basis.

### A Spiritual and Emotional Transformation

The psalms of this project take the reader on a journey that moves them from one emotional state of being to another. All of these texts open with some sort of declaration of desire, despair, loneliness, fear, or questioning. The main body then explores those various emotions and dilemmas either through metaphor, story, or an exposition on what was presented in the beginning lines. As the verses move along, there is a shift in tone that resolves by the closing line stating some sort of realization of God, either through a declaration of praise, or an expression of hope.

When one encounters a psalm that speaks to their own emotional experience, it allows for the text to feel all the more personal. These psalms provide a lens for navigating various emotions and finding a sense of comfort and peace. When one puts themselves into the mindset of the psalmist, it allows for the words of the psalms to become their own and a sense of deeper understanding and healing can be achieved. For anyone feeling alone in their struggles, finding these words can help them to feel seen and understood. Jewish narratives and Hebrew texts have been used by people throughout history to find a way to ground themselves in Jewish tradition,

and the use of these psalms throughout time is the same. Anyone who has ever struggled or questioned the presence of God in their lives can understand these words, and through sitting in those feelings and exploring them more deeply, they create the opportunity for others to do the same.

There is a natural transition within the psalms that moves the reader along towards finding comfort and a sense of a connection to God. This emotional and spiritual transformation allows for the reader to experience their emotions and to begin to heal. People find words in the Psalms for the emotions that they cannot find themselves, and the roadmap that they are given leads them towards realization, hope, and peace.

#### The Recital: Preparation, Process, & Reflection

In order to prepare the recital portion of this project, I spent the Fall 2023 Semester doing an independent study with Cantor Josh Breitzer, cantorial faculty member at HUC-JIR. We met on a weekly basis August-December, and spent our time together crafting the setlist, discussing my vision for the performance, and then learning and practicing each piece. A few of the song choices felt obvious to me from the beginning. These were pieces that I already knew, and ones that had significant impact during various moments in my life. I wanted to share them as a part of this project, since my own experiences with them informed my choice in taking on this thesis topic. In order to find the remaining melodies, I scoured the internet and various music resources to find settings of the different psalms that were both traditional and modern. Having a setlist composed of older and more contemporary melodies, some exclusively in Hebrew and others that included English, created a well-rounded experience that reflected all sorts of melodies that people from many different Jewish communities might interact with.

At the same time of preparing for the musical performance, I was continuously working on the annotated translations that are in this written project. Translating the psalms myself provided me with a deeper understanding of the Hebrew and allowed for the words that I was singing to feel all the more like my own, since I understood what they meant. Feeling these words within my own body and expressing them in my own way allowed for me to connect to the meanings more deeply. Many of these psalms speak of crying out, calling, and singing, and that is exactly what I was able to do with my own voice. Singing these words created an opportunity for me to tap into my own feelings of longing, my own desires to feel safe and protected, and my own hopes for a connection to the divine.

The musical settings themselves were an added layer of meaning making. The songs took on a life of their own using word-painting, which is when the melody of the music reflects the meaning of the lyrics. An example of this can be seen in Ben Steinberg's Psalm 121. The words of the opening line create an image of someone looking upwards towards the mountains, and the melody line ascends from a lower pitch to a higher register representing the same type of upward motion. Some of the psalms that speak of longing and despair have a slower tempo, and as the lyrics progress towards the declaration of singing to Adonai in praise, the music itself speeds up to resemble the steadfast nature of the words. The music itself is just as reflective as the text in helping to carry people from one emotional state of being to another. When the two are combined they create an experience all the more powerful. When put together, these art forms create an added level of awareness of the emotional undertones and meanings of the words that people can feel more deeply within themselves. These psalms inspire a journey of emotional healing and transformation, which when combined with music, allows for an embodied and immersive experience.

### Final Thoughts

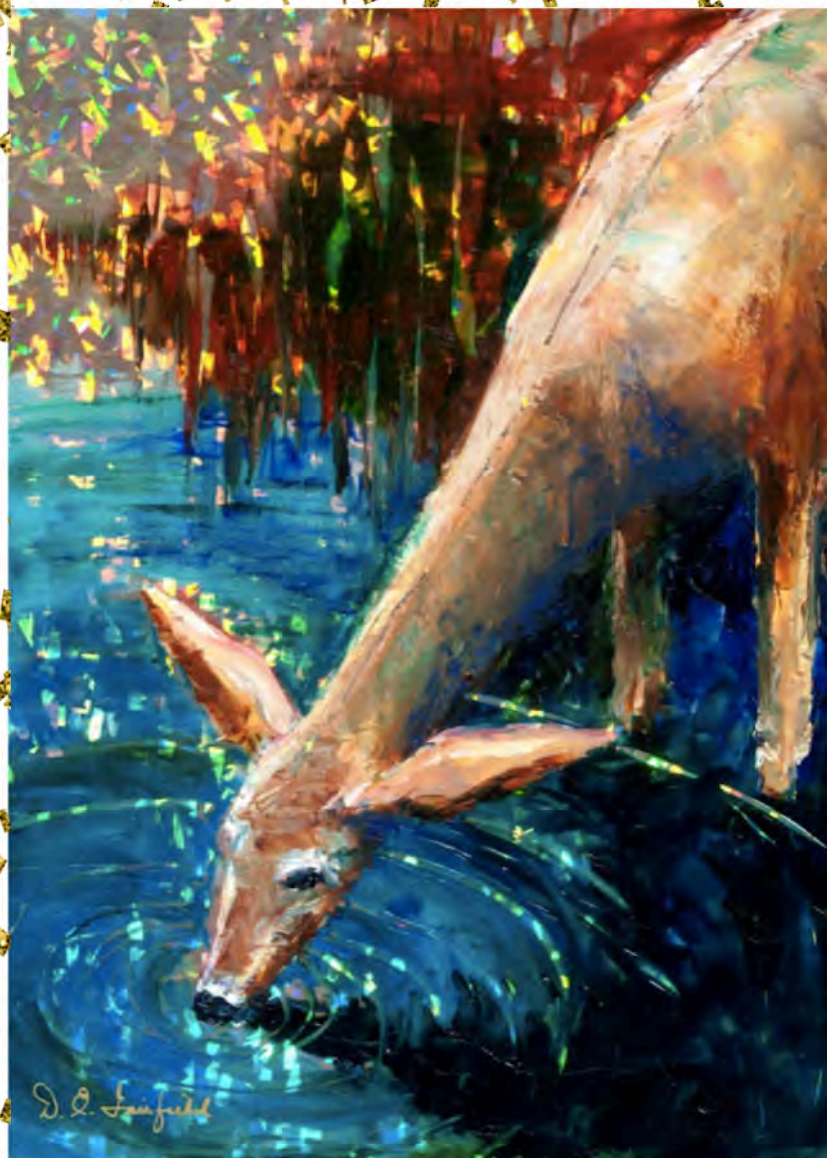
My journey while in Rabbinical school has been about finding ways to bring music into my own future Rabbinate, and I feel fortunate to have been able to make this experience an example of how that goal can be achieved. In a large way, this project has felt like an expression of my own soul. My spiritual journey has revolved around a longing to find a connection to a divine presence in my own life, to feel safe and protected, and to hold onto a sense of hope in my own belief in God. These psalms reflect the same desires, and have been what I have turned to when needing comfort. This experience from beginning to end has provided me with a sense of clarity over the language that I use when expressing my own longing. It has strengthened my skills of analyzing poetry and recognizing metaphor in Hebrew texts. I feel even more connected to music as a form of sharing these psalms, and I look forward to finding ways to modify this research for various audiences, whether that be through text study or prayer services.

I hope that the music of these psalms can help to accompany anyone on their own journey of longing, and that for anyone who reads this, that they are able to see a reflection of their own soul in mine.

# Musical Expressions of Psalms of Longing

A Recital by

**Lara Tessler**



**December 5th, 2023 / 22nd of Kislev 5784**

**Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion**

**LINK TO VIDEO RECORDING - <https://vimeo.com/891110891>**

### Introduction

*This project has truly been a labor of love through a lifetime of exploration. In many moments of my life I have turned to music as an outlet of self expression. Many of these texts in particular have ebbed and flowed with me through times of joy and celebration as well as times of struggle and loneliness. The authors of these psalms turned to written poetry as a form of expression and comfort, and I myself have looked to these particular texts for the very same reasons. This recital is both a presentation of my own favorite settings of these psalms, and an exploration of how these texts can be brought to life through music and song.*

*Each of these psalms expresses a deep yearning for a connection to the divine. This longing for a relationship to God in these texts are displayed in a variety of ways:*

- *Psalms 63 and 42 feature metaphors which relate the basic need for water to a similar need for God. The use of the metaphor links these two texts to one another. Their language allows for anyone who has ever experienced thirst to understand what a thirst for God might also mean.*
- *Psalms 130 and 61 call out to the divine from faraway places. Whether it be from the depths, or the ends of the Earth, these two texts reach out to God from a sense of displacement and isolation. Even at a vast distance, either physically or emotionally, these psalms call for God to come near and to bring comfort and a sense of company.*
- *Psalms 121 and 13 are both forms of call and response. Each psalm presents a question and then provides an answer to that dilemma. The texts present both a real questioning of God's presence, and then immediately proceed to give a reassuring answer. How can we maintain a connection to the divine? By holding fast to our faith.*

*\*Translations of Psalms by Lara Tessler with the guidance of Dr. Adriane Leveen\**

Psalm 63	צִמְאָה לִּי נַפְשִׁי	Chabad
Psalm 42	צִמְאָה נַפְשִׁי	Joey Weisenberg
Psalm 121	אֵשׁ עֵינֵי	Ben Steinberg
Psalm 130	מִמַּעַמְקִים	Shirona
Psalm 13	עַד-אָנָּה	Miqedem
Psalm 61	Psalm 61	Cantor Becky Mann
	Where Might I Go to Find You	Cantor Ellen Dreskin & Dan Nichols

Featuring: Cantor Josh Breitzer, Elana Arian, Ivan Barenboim, Sierra Fox  
Kevin McKenzie, Lauren Roth & Cantor Becky Mann

## Psalm 63 - צְמָאָה לָהּ נַפְשִׁי - Chabad

צְמָאָה לָהּ נַפְשִׁי כָּמָה לָהּ בְּשָׂרִי בְּאַרְצ־צִיָּה וְעֵינִי בְּלִי־מַיִם  
כֵּן בִּקְדָּשׁ חֲזִיתָהּ לְרֹאוֹת עֲזָה וּכְבוֹדָהּ

“My soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you as a dry land weary without water.  
Thus I shall behold you in the sanctuary and see your strength and glory.”

<p>1 A psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah</p> <p>2 God, You are my God. I search for you. <b>My soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you as a dry land weary without water</b></p> <p>3 <b>Thus I shall behold you in the sanctuary and see your strength and glory</b></p> <p>4 Truly, your kindness is better than life, my lips praise you.</p> <p>5 Thus I bless you in my life, I lift up my hands invoking your name.</p> <p>6 As like with suet and fat my soul is sated. I sing praises with joyful lips.</p> <p>7 When I remember You on my bed, in the night-watch I murmur about you.</p> <p>8 For you are my help, and in the shadow of your wings I shout for joy.</p> <p>9 My soul clings to you, your right hand supports me.</p> <p>10 May those who seek to ravage my soul, enter the depths of the earth</p> <p>11 May they be split by the sword, may they be to prey to the jackals</p> <p>12 And the King shall rejoice in God, all who swear an oath by him will praise when the mouths of liars are stopped up.</p>	<p>מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד בְּהִיּוֹתוֹ בְּמִדְבַּר יְהוּדָה: אֱלֹהִים אֵלֵי אַתָּה אֲשַׁחֲרֶךָ צְמָאָה לָהּ נַפְשִׁי כָּמָה לָהּ בְּשָׂרִי בְּאַרְצ־צִיָּה וְעֵינִי בְּלִי־מַיִם: כֵּן בִּקְדָּשׁ חֲזִיתָהּ לְרֹאוֹת עֲזָה וּכְבוֹדָהּ: כִּי־טוֹב חֶסֶדְךָ מִחַיִּים שְׁפָתִי יִשְׂבַּח וְיִגְדֹּל: כֵּן אֲבָרְכְךָ בְּחַיֵּי בְשִׁמְךָ אֲשָׂא כָפִי: כָּמוֹ חֶלֶב וְדָשֵׁן וְדָשֵׁן תִּשְׂבַּע נַפְשִׁי וְשִׁפְתִי רִנָּנוֹת יְהִלֶּל־פִּי: אִם־זִכְרָתִיךָ עַל־יְצוּעֵי בְּאַשְׁמְרוֹת אֶהְגֶּה־בְךָ: כִּי־הָיִיתָ עֲזָרְתָה לִּי וּבָצַל כְּנָפֶיךָ אֲרִנּוּ: דְּבָקָה נַפְשִׁי אַחֲרֶיךָ בִּי תִמְכָּה יְמִינְךָ: וְהִמָּה לְשׂוֹאָה יִבְקָשׁוּ נַפְשִׁי יָבֹאוּ בְּתַחֲתִיּוֹת הָאָרֶץ: יִגִּירָהּ עַל־יְדֵי־חֶרֶב מִנֶּת שְׁעָלִים יִהְיוּ: וְהִמָּלֵךְ יִשְׁמַח בְּאֱלֹהִים יִתְהַלֵּל כָּל־הַנִּשְׂבָּע בּוֹ כִּי יִסְכֵּר פִּי דוֹבְרֵי־שָׁקֶר:</p>
---	--



## Psalm 42 - צְמָאָה נַפְשִׁי - Joey Weisenberg

כְּאַיִל תַּעֲרֹג עַל־אֲפִיקֵי־מַיִם כֵּן נַפְשִׁי תַעֲרֹג אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהִים  
צְמָאָה נַפְשִׁי לְאֱלֹהִים לְאֵל חַי

“Like a deer longs for a channel of water, thus my soul longs for you, Oh God.  
My soul thirsts for God, the ever-living God.”

<p>1 To the lead player, a <i>maskil</i> for the Korahites 2 <b>Like a deer longs for a channel of water, thus my soul longs for you, Oh God</b> 3 <b>My soul thirsts for God, the ever-living God.</b> When will I come to appear before the face of God? 4 My tears were my food day and night. They say to me all the day, “where is your God?” 5 When I recall this, I pour out my soul, I passed through with them slowly, to the house of God. Voices shouting thanks in crowds of the pilgrimage festival. 6 Why, so downcast my soul? Why so disquieted within me? Have hope in God, I will praise God for God’s salvation. 7 My God, my soul is downcast. Thus I remember you, in the land of Jordan and Hermon, from Mt. Mihza 8 The depths call to the depths in the voice of your waters, and all your channels of the water and your waves swept over me 9 Daily, Adonai commands God’s kindness, and nightly a song is with me, a prayer to God of my life 10 I say to El, my rock, “why have you forgotten me? Why do I walk in darkness, oppressed by my enemy?” 11 Shattering my bones, my enemies taunt me. They say to me all the day “where is your God?” 12 Why, so downcast my soul? Why so loud within me? Have hope in God, I will praise God for God’s salvation.. My God.</p>	<p>לְמַנְצָח מִשְׁכִּיל לְבְנֵי־קֶרַח: כְּאַיִל תַּעֲרֹג עַל־אֲפִיקֵי־מַיִם כֵּן נַפְשִׁי תַעֲרֹג אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהִים: צְמָאָה נַפְשִׁי לְאֱלֹהִים לְאֵל חַי מְתִי אָבוֹא וְאֶרְאֶה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים: הִתְהַלֵּלִי דְמַעְתִּי לֶחֶם יוֹמָם וּלְיֵלָה בְּאָמַר אֵלִי כָּל־הַיּוֹם אֵיךְ אֶלְהִידָּה: אֵלֶּה אֶזְכְּרָה וְאֶשְׁפָּכָה עָלַי נַפְשִׁי כִּי אֶעְבֹּר בְּסֶף אֲדִידִם עַד־בֵּית אֱלֹהִים בְּקוֹל־רִנָּה וְתוֹדָה הַמּוֹן חוֹגֵג: מִה־תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה נַפְשִׁי וּתְהַמִּי עָלִי הוֹחֲלִי לְאֱלֹהִים כִּי־עוֹד אוֹדְנִי יְשׁוּעוֹת פְּנִי: אֱלֹהֵי עָלִי נַפְשִׁי תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה עַל־כֵּן אֶזְכְּרָה מִאֲרָץ יִרְדֵּן וְחֶרְמוֹנִים מִהַר מִצְעָר: תְּהוֹם־אֶל־תְּהוֹם קוֹרָא לְקוֹל צְנוּרִידָה כָּל־מִשְׁבָּרִידָה וְגִלְיָדָה עָלִי עֲבְרוּ: יוֹמָם יִצְוֶה יְהוָה חֲסִדֹּו וּבְלֵילָה שִׁירָה עָמִי תִפְלָה לְאֵל חַיִּי: אוֹמְרָה לְאֵל סִלְעִי לְמָה שְׁכַחְתָּנִי לְמָה־קִּדַּר אֶלְךָ בְּלַחֲץ אוֹיֵב: בְּרִצָּח בְּעִצְמוֹתַי חֶרְפוֹנִי צוּרִי בְּאֶמְרָם אֵלִי כָּל־הַיּוֹם אֵיךְ אֶלְהִידָּה: מִה־תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה נַפְשִׁי וּמִה־תְהַמִּי עָלִי הוֹחֲלִי לְאֱלֹהִים כִּי־עוֹד אוֹדְנִי יְשׁוּעוֹת פְּנִי וְאֶלְהִי</p>
---	--

## Psalm 121 - אֲשָׁא עֵינַי - Ben Steinberg

---

שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת  
 אֲשָׁא עֵינַי אֶל־הַהָרִים מֵאֵין יְבֹא עֲזָרִי  
 עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה עֹשֶׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ  
 אֶל־יִתְּן לְמוֹט רַגְלִי אֶל־יָנוּם שֹׁמְרִי  
 הַגֵּבָה לֹא־יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל  
 יְהוָה שֹׁמְרִי יְהוָה צִלְּךָ עַל־יַד יְמִינִי  
 יוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא־יַכְכָּה וַיָּרֶחַ בַּלַּיְלָה  
 יְהוָה יִשְׁמְרֶךָ מִכָּל־רָע יִשְׁמַר אֶת־נַפְשְׁךָ  
 יְהוָה יִשְׁמַר־צִאֲתֶךָ וּבֹאֶךָ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם

---

### A Song of Ascents:

I lift my eyes to the mountains. From where will my help come?  
 My help comes from Adonai, the one who makes heaven and earth.  
 He will not let your foot slip, your guardian will not slumber.  
 Behold, the guardian of Israel will not slumber and will not sleep.  
 Adonai is your guardian, Adonai is your shadow at your right hand.  
 Daily the sun will not strike, nor the moon by night.  
 Adonai will guard you from all trouble, and guard your soul.  
 Adonai will guard your going and coming now and forever.

---

**Psalm 130 - מִמַּעַמְקִים - Shirona**

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת  
 מִמַּעַמְקִים קָרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה  
 אֲדֹנָי שְׁמָעָה בְּקוֹלִי תִהְיֶינָה אָזְנוֹיךָ קְשׁוּבוֹת לְקוֹל תַּחֲנוּנָי  
 אִם-עֲוֹנוֹת תִּשְׁמְרֶנָּה אֲדֹנָי מִי יַעֲמִיד  
 כִּי-עַמָּךְ הִסְלִיחָה לְמַעַן תִּזְרָא

A song of ascents:  
**From the depths I call you, Adonai.**  
**Adonai, listen to my voice. Let your ears become attentive to the voice of my**  
**plea.**  
**If you keep account of iniquity, oh Yah. Adonai, who will endure?**  
**Because with you is forgiveness in order that you may be revered.**

קִוִּיתִי יְהוָה קִוְּתָה נַפְשִׁי וְלִדְבָרוֹ הוֹחֵלְתִּי  
 נַפְשִׁי לֹאדֹנָי מִשְׁמָרִים לִבְקָר שְׁמָרִים לִבְקָר  
 יַחֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יְהוָה כִּי-עַם-יְהוָה הִתְקַסַּד וְהִרְבָּה עֲמוֹ פְדוּת  
 וְהוּא יַפְדֶּה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָיו

I hope for Adonai, my soul hopes for him. I wait for his word.  
 My soul is eager for Adonai, more than night-watchers for morning,  
 night-watchers for morning.  
 Wait, O Israel, for Adonai, for with Adonai is loving-kindness, and much power to  
 redeem.  
 And He will redeem Israel from all their iniquities.

## Psalm 13 - עֵד־אֲנָהּ - Miqedem

---

לְמַנצַח מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד  
 עֵד־אֲנָהּ יְהוָה תִּשְׁכַּחֲנִי נָצַח עֵד־אֲנָהּ תִּסְתִּיר אֶת־פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי  
 עֵד־אֲנָהּ אֲשִׁית עֲצוֹת בְּנַפְשִׁי יִגּוֹן בְּלִבִּי יוֹמָם עֵד־אֲנָהּ יָרוּם אֵיבִי עָלַי  
 הִבִּיטָה עֲגִנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָאֲרֶזָּה עֵינַי פֶּן־אֵישָׁן הַמָּוֶת  
 פֶּן־יֹאמַר אֵיבִי יִכְלֹתִיו צָרִי יִגִּילוּ כִּי אָמוּט  
 וְאֲנִי בַחֲסֶדְךָ בְּטַחַתִּי יִגַּל לִבִּי בִישׁוּעָתְךָ אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי גָמַל עָלַי

---

For the leader, A Psalm of David:

How long, Adonai? Will you ignore me forever? How long will you hide your face  
 from me?

How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart daily? How long will my  
 enemy rise up against me?

Look at me. Answer me, Adonai, my God. Illumine my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep  
 of death.

Lest my enemies say, "I have overcome him". My foes rejoice when I totter.  
 But, in your loving-kindness, I trust my heart will exult in your salvation. I will  
 sing to Adonai, for he has been good to me.

---

## Psalm 61 - Cantor Becky Mann

שְׁמָעָה אֱלֹהִים רִנָּתִי הַקְשִׁיבָה תְּפִלָּתִי

From the end of the Earth I call to You  
From the end of the Earth I call  
When my heart is faint, You guide my way  
And I rise above my Rock, my strength

כִּי־הָיִיתָ מַחְסֵה לִּי מִגְדָּל־עֹז מִפְּנֵי אוֹיֵב

1 For the lead player, with instrumental music, Of David:

2 Hear my cry, oh God, be attentive to my prayer.

3 From the end of the Earth to you I will call. When my heart is faint, you lead me to a rock that is high above me.

4 For you have been a shelter to me. A tower of strength in the face of an enemy.

5 Let me dwell in your tent forever. let me take shelter under your wings, Selah

6 For you, God, have heard my vows. You have granted the plea of those who fear your name.

7 Add days to the days of the King. His years like those of the generations

8 May he dwell forever in the presence of God, steadfast loving-kindness will preserve him.

9 Thus I will sing your name forever, as I keep my vows day after day.

לְמַנצֵחַ עַל־נְגִינַת לְדָוִד:

שְׁמָעָה אֱלֹהִים רִנָּתִי הַקְשִׁיבָה תְּפִלָּתִי:

מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ אֵלֶיךָ אֶקְרָא בְּעֹטֶף לִבִּי

בְּצוּר־יְרוּם מִמְּנֵי תַנְחֵנִי:

כִּי־הָיִיתָ מַחְסֵה לִּי מִגְדָּל־עֹז מִפְּנֵי אוֹיֵב:

אֲגוּרָה בְּאֶהְלֶךְ עוֹלָמִים אַחְסֵה בְּסִתֵּר כְּנָפֶיךָ

סֵלָה:

כִּי־אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים שְׁמַעַתָּ לְנַדְרֵי נַתַּת יְרֵשֶׁת יִרְאִי

שְׁמֶךָ:

יָמִים עַל־יְמֵי־מְלֹךְ תוֹסִיף שְׁנוֹתָיו כְּמוֹ־דֹר וְדֹר:

יָשָׁב עוֹלָם לִפְנֵי אֱלֹהִים חֶסֶד וְאַמֶּת מִן יִנְצְרֶהוּ:

כֵּן אֲזַמְּרָה שְׁמֶךָ לְעַד לְשִׁלְמֵי נְדָרֵי יוֹם יוֹם:

**Where Might I Go to Find You - Cantor Ellen Dreskin & Dan Nichols**  
(From a piyyut by Yehuda HaLevi)

דְּרִשְׁתִּי קִרְבְּתְךָ	יְהִי, אֲנִי אֶמְצְאֶךָ
בְּכָל־לִבִּי קִרְאתִיךָ	מִקֹּמְךָ נִעְלָה וְנִעְלָם
וּבְצִאתִי לְקִרְאתְךָ	וְאֲנִי לֹא אֶמְצְאֶךָ
לְקִרְאתִי מִצָּאתִיךָ	כְּבוֹדְךָ מְלֵא עוֹלָם

“Yah, Where Shall I find You? Your place is high and hidden. Where shall I not  
find You? The world is full of your glorious presence.  
I have sought your closeness, with all my heart I call You. In my going out to meet  
You, I found You coming to meet me.”

Another translation:

“Where might I go to find You, Exalted, Hidden One? Where would I not go to  
find You, Everpresent, Eternal One? My heart cries out to You: please draw near to  
me. The moment I reach out for You, I find You reaching in for me”<sup>159</sup>

---

*This text is an excerpt from a piyyut by Yehuda HaLevi.. These particular verses focus on the same feelings explored throughout the other psalms in this project. There is a real questioning of God’s presence, and a longing being expressed with one’s heart crying out to the divine. Even with the questions of where and how to maintain connection, there is a sense of assuredness in the final statement. When one is reaching outward towards God, there is a reciprocal action being made by the divine to draw in closer towards them.*

*When I have found myself in moments where I need comfort and a reassurance of my own connection to God, I have turned to this piyyut. This setting by Cantor Ellen Dreskin and Dan Nichols, as well as the version by Alan Goodis, have been two of my favorites for many years. These songs played a large role in my inspiration for this entire thesis project, and in particular for this musical recital.*

---

<sup>159</sup> English from the lyrics of “To Find You” by Alan Goodis - Another setting of the piyyut by Yehuda HaLevi, translated by Joel Hoffman & Larry Hoffman.

### Closing Thoughts

The melody of “Where Might I Go to Find You” reflects a sense of longing and desire and can represent the ways in which the other songs of this project achieve similar goals of expression of the texts through music. The song begins in a low register and climbs to a higher octave in the niggun, which to me, represents the notion of reaching upwards to the divine. The niggun itself allows for an expression of emotions that words cannot necessarily capture. When words fail to describe how we are feeling, music aids us by filling the space.

The other pieces of music chosen for this project reflect the text of the psalms in similar ways. Shirona’s Psalm 130 calls out from the depths with a melody that starts low which, when combined with other instruments and dynamics, reflects a place of lowness, both physically and emotionally. Steinberg’s Psalm 121, in its opening line, propels the voice upwards just as the text explains that the speaker is lifting their eyes upwards towards the mountains. The shifts in tempo and the volume in dynamics of the voice translate into a sense of questioning and then a feeling of assuredness in the words of the text, which is reflected in the voice of the singer. In Miqedem’s Psalm 13, the song finishes in a repetition in the final line of text *Ashira L’Adonai*, “I will sing to God”, while the music itself builds in an exultant way to express the confident nature of the words.

Each one of these pieces of music reflects the text of the psalms in their own unique way. While writing my thesis, I have been able to explore the psalms in depth and begin to understand their layered meanings and emotional undertones. Through the addition of this recital, I have had the opportunity to dive deeply into how these texts come to life through music. Some of the melodies featured have been known to me for many years, and others I have discovered through preparing this recital. This project has created an outlet for my own personal expression through music, something which I am passionate about and hope to continue sharing with communities as I continue on my way as a soon-to-be Rabbi. I hope to share this project with both the HUC-JIR community and others in my future as well. I plan to eventually adapt the discoveries of my thesis project into many different forms, including teaching, prayer, and shared communal singing in all moments in which people thirst for God’s closeness and need comfort, as called for in these psalms.

I am immensely grateful to everyone who has contributed to making this recital possible...

Cantor Josh Breitzer

Dr. Adriane Leveen

Elana Arian

Ivan Barenboim

Sierra Fox

Kevin McKenzie

Lauren Roth

Cantor Becky Mann

Marcus Villegas & Edgar Rivera

The entire HUC Maintenance Staff

Rabbi Lisa Grant & Cantor Jill Abramson

Rabbi Rachel Gross-Prinz & Rabbi David Adelson

Sarah Diamant

Rabbi Mara Young

Cantor Jenna Mark

Jordan Wilesnky

My mom, Randi

My big brother, Logan & my sister-in-law, Gaby

All of my family & friends

THANK YOU! :)



### Bibliography

- Alter, Robert. *Book of Psalms - A Translation with Commentary*. Ww Norton & Co, 2007.
- ASH Media, “New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States”, 2023, <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>
- Berkovitz, Abraham Jacob. *A Life of Psalms in Jewish Late Antiquity*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023.
- Berlin, Adele. Brettler, Marc Zvi. *The Jewish Study Bible* Jewish Publication Society. Tanach Translation. Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Brown, William P, and William P Brown, editors. *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Brueggemann, Walter, and W. H. Bellinger. *Psalms*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2014. Kindle Edition.
- Cohen, Jeffrey M. *Book of Psalms: Poetry in Poetry*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2018.
- Daniels, Carlie Weisbrod. "The Healing Power of Psalms: Utilizing Psalms and Music in Pastoral Care." Thesis. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 2015.
- Dreskin, Ellen & Dan Nichols, “Where Might I Go To Find You” from *Beautiful And Broken*, Dan Nichols & Ellen Dreskin. 2015 <https://www.dannicholsmusic.com/>
- Fairfield, Diane. *As the Deer*. <https://www.dianefairfieldart.com/large-multi-view/Figurative/2888218-7-203100/Painting/as-the-deer.html>
- Friedman, Benny & Eli Marcus. “Tzoma Lecha Nafshi” Chabad.org, [https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/music\\_cdo/aid/4897397/jewish/Tzoma-Lecha-Nafshi.htm](https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/music_cdo/aid/4897397/jewish/Tzoma-Lecha-Nafshi.htm)
- Gillingham, S. E. *Psalms through the Centuries*. Blackwell Pub 2008.
- Golden-Sieradski, Ris. “Psalm 13 - Who is it Written for Anyway?” *Sefaria*. 2014. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/3260.1?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en>
- Goodis, Alan. “To Find You” from *This Place*. 2014. <https://www.alangoodis.com/music>
- Goor, Donald, editor. “Mourning” *L’chol z’man v’eit For sacred moments: the CCAR life-cycle guide*. CCAR Press. 2015.
- Hoffman, Lawrence A. *My People's Prayer Book*. Vol. IX. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishers, 2005.

- JPS *Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999.
- Klein, Alexandra R. "Psalms of Jewish Mourning: Poetry of Despair, Poetry of Hope" Thesis. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 2015.
- Kraus, Hans. *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1988.
- *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989.
- Luria, Sara Pearl. "Mayim Rabim: The Prevalence and Power of Water Imagery in the Book of Psalms." Thesis. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 2013.
- Mann, Becky "Psalm 61" <https://www.beckymannmusic.com/sheetmusic/p/psalm-61>
- Miqedem. "Ad Ana" Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5JybtKj\\_sE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5JybtKj_sE)
- Ryken, Leland, Wilhoit, James, Longman, Tremper, *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Intersity Press, 1998.
- Sarna, Nahum M. *Songs of the Heart: An Introduction to the Book of Psalms*. 1st ed., Schocken Books, 1993.
- Segal, Benjamin J. *A New Psalm: A Guide to Psalms as Literature*. Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2013. Kindle Edition.
- Schaefer, Konrad. *Psalms - Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry*, edited by David W. Cotter. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996.
- Shirana. "Mima'amakim", from *Best of The Celebrate Series*, Shirana. 1999
- Steinberg, Ben. "Esa Einai", Transcontinental Music Publications, New York, NY. 1984
- Upbin, Danielle. "Min Ha-meitzar: Calling to God From the Depths". <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/min-ha-meitzar-calling-to-god-from-the-depths/>
- Verde, Danilo, and Antje Labahn. *Networks of Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible*. Peeters Publishers, 2020.
- Weisenberg, Joey. "Tzama Nafshi" from *Nigunim, Vol. V: Songs from the City of Brotherly Love*. 2016.