

MIDRASHIC INTERPRETATION OF PSALMS 6 AND 20

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The literary theorist Wolfgang Iser remarked that "completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text" and considered it evidence of "the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written."¹ This attitude, typical of the reader-response school of literary theory, seemingly allows for interpreting texts at will. Not that which is written is most important, but what it evokes in the reader. Yet Iser himself realized that one cannot reasonably claim to interpret a text by reading any arbitrary emotion into it. He therefore qualified his theory, stating that "the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy."²

Midrashic literature offers rich symbols and metaphors, and often uncovers remarkable inter-textual links for interpreting Scripture. Sometimes, however, these homiletical interpretations develop a life of their own and the text becomes interpreted in light of the new meanings that worshipers read into them, with the result that the simple meaning of the text is lost. While this may seem problematic for a reader interested in understanding the biblical text in its historical context, the Sages themselves were not so concerned, as their goal was to transmit religious lessons rather than explanations of the text. The Midrash did not feel restrained by the limits Iser suggests. Midrashic literature is a genre in which the simple meaning of the text, the *peshat*, is not as relevant as the message that the Sages wished to impart; and it did not consider itself bound by the limitations that the original text imposed.³ That is particularly true of midrashic analysis of Biblical verses, which was often undertaken in a public setting as a teaching tool to impart religious ideas to the masses.⁴ This article will offer an understanding not of the biblical text, but of midrashic symbolism. We will examine the midrashic interpretation of Psalm 6, which in many circles is recited at circumcisions, and of Psalm 20,

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PSALM 6: KING DAVID BECOMES CONSCIOUS OF BEING CIRCUMCISED

A number of works have noted the custom of reciting Psalm 6 at a circumcision, either after the actual *berit milah* or at the festive meal that follows.⁵ Indeed, the Talmud (TB *Menahot* 43b) links the psalm's superscription with the covenant of circumcision:

Our Rabbis taught: Beloved are Israel, for the Holy One, blessed be He, surrounded them with precepts: *tefillin* on their heads, *tefillin* on their arms, *tzitzit* [fringes] on their garments, and *mezuzot* on their doorposts. Concerning these David said: *Seven times a day do I praise You for Your righteous ordinances* (Ps. 119:164). As David entered the bath and saw himself naked, he exclaimed: "Woe is me, that I stand naked without any precepts around me!" But when he reminded himself of the circumcision in his flesh, his mind was set at ease; and when he came out, he sang a hymn of praise, as it is written, *La-menatze'ah [bi-neginot] al ha-sheminit – For the Leader; [with string music] on the Eighth. A Psalm of David* (Ps. 6:1) – that is to say, regarding circumcision, which was given eighth [i.e., to be observed on the eighth day, or which was given as the eighth commandment in the Torah, specifically to Israel, the first seven commandments having been given to the sons of Noah; see Maharsha].

This view of the superscription, claiming that it links Psalm 6 with *berit milah*, is hard to substantiate. Neither of the psalms which the Talmud could have had in mind, Psalms 6 and 12, contains an obvious reference to circumcision or to any specific occasion. Psalm 6 is the impassioned plea of a deeply suffering individual; Psalm 12 is a cry for help against slanderers.

Furthermore, the word *ha-sheminit* in the superscription refers to an eight-stringed lyre, not to any sign of the covenant or rite of the eighth day. The standard commentaries to Psalms – notably those of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Metzudot – unanimously declare that *ha-sheminit* (in both Ps. 6 and 12) refers to a musical instrument. Radak even cites the aforementioned rabbinic

exegesis and concludes, "*ve-rahok hu*" (it is farfetched)! Radak's comment is nothing less than a rabbinic precursor to Wolfgang Iser's statement that "the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications," thus distancing the midrashic interpretation from the *peshat*.

Are we then to dismiss the rabbinic exegesis of this verse? The answer is that we must correctly understand the purpose of Midrash. What the Sages did here was to use the superscription of the psalm in order to comment on the theological significance of circumcision and how it relates to other religious precepts. The psalm, an important text deserving its own treatment, is used as a didactic tool for understanding *mezuzah*, *tzitzit*, *tefillin*, and *berit milah*.

There is no serious claim that this psalm was actually written by King David apropos circumcision. Here, the Sages are teaching that it is an eternal, permanent sign of the covenant between God and Israel, using the psalm as an *asmakhta*, a kind of literary jumping-off place, rather than as an actual proof-text. The rabbis are free, within the context of the aims of midrashic literature, to detach the superscription from the body of the text itself.

PSALM 20 AND CHILDBIRTH

Psalm 20, which also forms part of the Jewish weekday morning liturgy, has for some become a prayer for women in the throes of labor. This association is confirmed, for example, by R. Jacob Emden (Yavetz), who sees the nine verses in the psalm following the superscription as paralleling the months of a full-term pregnancy.⁶ R. Hayyim David Azulai even constructed an elaborate liturgy for when a woman is in labor, where he suggests that "the husband should recite Psalm 20 twelve times, because it has seventy words that correspond to seventy sounds."⁷ And let him not conjugate the psalm in the feminine gender, but rather recite it [exactly] as written."⁸

Rabbi Azulai's warning not to recast the psalm in feminine form prompts one to note that the natural tendency is in fact to change the gender, since thematically Psalm 20 seems far removed from birth stools and midwives. Its theme is a military one, evidently intended for soldiers going to war against a powerful, well-equipped enemy: *Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will call on the name of the Lord our God. They collapse and lie fallen; but we rise up and gather strength* (verses 8-9). What possible connection

can there be between going to war and giving birth?

Rabbi Emden's recommendation, that this psalm be recited for a woman in labor, is made parenthetically. Trying to explain why, in the first place, it was incorporated in the weekday morning liturgy, he paraphrases *Midrash Tehillim*, as did R. David Abudarham⁹ and Elijah Rabba (*Or ha-Hayyim* 132-3:1) before him. That Midrash, elucidating the verse *May the Lord answer you in time of trouble; the name of Jacob's God keep you safe* (Ps. 20:2), brings the teaching of R. Joshua ha-Kohen: "There are nine verses in this psalm, corresponding to the nine months of pregnancy. And what do they say? May the One who answers the call of the laboring mother answer you too."

Once again, we must understand that Iser's statement, "the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy," has no relevance to midrashic literature, which is not bound by textual limits.

Psalm 20 is headed by a superscription, *La-menatze'ah mizmor le-David*, which the NJPS translates as "For the Leader. A Psalm of David." Yet *Tehillah le-David* can also mean "a Psalm for David,"¹⁰ the interpretation followed in *Midrash Tehillim*.

Said R. Simeon ben Abba: You will find that there are eighteen psalms preceding this one, as Psalms 1 and 2 are considered a single unit. [These eighteen psalms] correspond to the Eighteen Benedictions recited [thrice] daily. And they tell him: "May your prayers be answered." So, too, after eighteen psalms, they said to David: "May the Lord answer you in your day of distress."

According to R. Simeon ben Abba, Psalm 20 was recited to David by some third party in the way one does to a fellow worshiper after the conclusion of the *Amidah*. Psalm 20 is thus seen not as a prayer to God, but as a well-wishing declaration to another Jew at prayer.

What custom is R. Simeon referring to here? When do we wish one another anything in particular after reciting the *Amidah*? Abudarham, Elijah Rabba and Jacob Emden apparently understand that the Midrash was explaining the liturgical use of Psalm 20. It serves as a blessing to our fellow worshipers, on concluding the *Amidah* and the *Tahanun* petitions, that our prayers may indeed be answered on High.

The idea that this psalm is in some way connected to a woman in labor is just one of several situations that the Midrash quotes to explain the phrase, *May the Lord answer you in your day of distress*. Thus, there is no claim that this psalm is about, or particularly appropriate for, childbirth. Indeed, childbirth here is an archetypal situation where we hope that God listens attentively to our prayers. In the Midrash, R. Simeon ben Lakish explicitly states: "This is analogous to a pregnant woman in difficult labor, to whom they say: We do not know what to tell you, but may He who answered your mother's prayers in her time of distress answer your prayers as well" (*Midrash Tehillim* 20:4). It would appear that the Midrash marshals these analogies to give the beneficiary of the blessing renewed confidence that his or her personal prayers will indeed be answered, since God has answered the prayers of many in the past.

R. Jacob Emden's parenthetical assertion, that the recitation of this psalm is particularly appropriate during labor, thus becomes questionable. However, a more precise reading of his remark allows for the possibility that he did not mean to say that an expectant mother should recite it, but that others should utilize the psalm to bless her, that her prayers be answered, as he writes: "It is propitious to say it to a woman in labor" [emphasis mine – AF]. This is a psalm that carries the message of God hearing the prayers of those in distress, of which childbirth is an example offered by the Sages.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Psalms intentionally hides or obscures the exact setting of most psalms, apparently in order to make them polyvalent. Though originally written on a particular occasion, they should be neutral enough to be recited by other people in their respective situations when they are moved to prayer. This exercise continues in the Midrash, which often suggests a particular occasion when the psalm is fitting, and even reinterprets the psalms to apply to new situations.

The Sages of the Talmud and Midrash were not primarily interested in teaching the plain meaning or historical context of the psalms: their aim was to utilize them as a springboard for conveying important theological messages. They used Psalm 6 to teach the significance of circumcision, and Psalm 20 to teach that God answers the prayers of those in distress.

Dedicated to my loving wife Faigy, who "battled" bravely as she gave birth to our five children, and who always showed great courage in settling in the various cities we have called home.

NOTES

1. Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: a Phenomenological Approach," *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) p. 279.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
3. Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible and the Believer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 62.
4. Anat Reizel, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Alon Shevut, Israel: Tevunot, 2011) p. 285 (Hebrew).
5. *Kol Bo he-Hadash le-Inyanei Berit Milah* (New York: 2004) p. 469.
6. *Siddur Yavetz – Ammudei Shamayim* (Altona: 1744/1745) vol. 1, fol. 164b.
7. He may be playing on the tradition maintained by some communities to blow the *shofar* 70 times on Rosh Ha-Shanah. Most present-day communities blow 100 sounds, but the tradition of blowing 70 only persists in other communities, including that of Basel, Switzerland, where this writer formerly served as senior rabbi.
8. *Sansan Le-ha'ir* (Livorno: 1794) fol. 9b.
9. Abudarham ad loc., in his commentary to the weekday morning prayer.
10. Superscriptions often attribute the authorship to some person, e.g., *Tehillah le-David*, "A Psalm of David" (Ps. 145). Although Psalm 72 follows the same pattern, with *Li-Shelomo*, lit. "[A Psalm] of Solomon," that attribution is doubtful, as the psalm ends with the postscript *Kallu tefillot David ben Yishai – This completes the prayers of David son of Jesse*, implicitly incorporating the entire psalm in the body of Davidic prayers. Hence, some commentators explain the superscription of that psalm as a dedication; *Li-Shelomo* is thus translated as "about Solomon" or "[a psalm dedicated] to Solomon."



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