

PSALMS CHAPTER 63: DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judea (Ps. 63:1).

According to the traditional rabbinic commentaries (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and others), chapter 63 of Psalms was composed by David when he fled into the Judean wilderness to escape from Saul, who wished to kill him. By beginning the psalm with this sentence, the editor of Psalms indicates that it should be read in the context of David's description of his trying experiences in the wilderness, focusing on his physical deprivation. However, instead of complaining about his trying conditions, David directs his feelings of suffering toward God. While many of the terms used in this psalm can have many meanings, in the wilderness context provided by the superscription these verses are understood to refer to the particular experiences and hardships connected with that environment, thus providing additional insights into this psalm. If you have been to the wilderness, the empathetic identification with these experiences makes the metaphors of the chapter much stronger. I will attempt to convey the feelings and context of the wilderness refugee, based to some extent on my own wanderings and ponderings in the very region where David hid.

What things does a person in the Judean wilderness lack? Foremost is water. He also doesn't have enough food. He misses his bed, there isn't enough shade, he feels the sun burning his skin and drying him out. There are wild animals roaming around and if someone brings food into the wilderness, the animals will eagerly snatch it when he is not looking. As the wanderer loses his physical wellbeing, his mind also becomes weakened and he may start to hallucinate. He has visions; he sees mirages.

The fascinating theme of this chapter is the way in which David transforms his feelings of discomfort into a longing for God. In the wilderness, David does not have enough water, yet he does not complain of thirst. As his skin dries out in the hot sun, he does not complain about its peeling and cracking. Instead, he says to God, *My soul thirsts for You, my parched body yearns for*

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You in the arid wasteland, where I am tired and without water (v. 2). These first verses of the chapter set the tone. David takes these feelings of discomfort which result from not having his basic physical needs and transforms them into yearning for God.

After many days without enough water, David begins to see visions. As his mind is weakened by physical deprivation, his imagination is stronger than usual. He does not imagine an oasis in the distance or a messenger coming to announce the passing of Saul's ire, which would free him from his wilderness refuge. As David's rational faculties falter, his imagination wanders toward God. Speaking of God, David says, *I envision* (from the Hebrew verb *hōzeh* – "see a vision") *You in holiness; to see Your power and glory* (v. 3). Alternatively, David may be imagining the Temple, his choice of the word *ba-kodesh* implying not "in holiness" but "in the Sanctuary."¹ When a person finds himself in the wilderness, he can uniquely see and feel God's power, especially in contrast to the weakness of the human being trapped there.

As he feels his strength waning, David senses that his life is in danger. He declares, *Your kindness is better than life itself* (v. 4). David expounds further, exclaiming that as long as *my lips will praise You*, my life is meaningful. In other words, as long as I recognize your goodness, my life is worth something. *I will bless You with my life*, he then adds (v. 5). Sforno explains that David has now achieved a deeper recognition of God's kindness. In a situation where David does not know that his basic needs will be provided, he gains a deeper appreciation of the beneficent God who looks after him.

As with a rich fat [feast], my soul will be sated when with joyful lips my mouth can sing your praises (v. 6). Food in the wilderness is scarce. Why is David speaking about a fine, rich feast? He may wish he had it, but that is not what he says. Instead of lamenting his lack of food, David takes his hunger and turns it into a desire to praise God. His soul will be sated with succulent songs of praise for his God.

On my bed, at night, I think of you (v. 7). Why does David mention his bed? – because he is sleeping on the ground or perhaps on a hastily assembled collection of sticks and rocks. As he settles into these rough accommodations, he does not think about his uncomfortable "mattress" as he goes to sleep. Instead, his thoughts turn to God: *I think of You late at night* (ibid). Why is David lying awake in the middle of the night? In that harsh wilder-

ness environment he just cannot fall asleep. David is once more undergoing extreme physical deprivation. His response, however, is not to complain or bemoan his fate. Instead, he lies awake, uncomfortable but absorbed in contemplating God.

In the shadow of Your wings I will shout for joy (v. 8). While the idea of God's protective shadow often appears in Psalms (e.g., Ps. 17:8, 36:8, 91:1), here the term *tzel* gains additional significance when we understand that in the wilderness David has no such protection. Amid all his suffering, however, David recognizes God's kindness and fatherly eye, proclaiming, *My soul is attached to You; Your right hand supports me* (v. 9).

Then David thinks about why he is here in this tough environment. Why did he escape to the wilderness in the first place? Because he fled from *those who wish to destroy my soul* (v. 10). Enemies who pursued and wished to harm him forced him to seek refuge there. David would like them to fall by the sword, to *be the food of jackals* (v. 11). Why jackals? It seems likely that when David went to sleep, jackals inhabiting the Judean Wilderness came and snatched his food. He certainly heard them howl at night while he lay fearful and unprotected. Instead of troubling me, David feels, let those jackals attack my enemies. These verses do not express a longing for God, but for the punishment of his enemies in the same wilderness environment.

David finally concludes that *the king will rejoice in God* (v. 12). Throughout Saul's pursuit of him, David has never treated Saul as less than Israel's king. He has had several opportunities to kill Saul, but refrained from doing so. Ever since Samuel anointed him as king, David has known that his time will come, but he is in no hurry to oust Saul from the throne. Hence his generic phrase, "the king shall rejoice in God." Whether it be himself or his pursuer, Saul, the rightful king should accept all his challenges and heart-aches and direct them toward God.

This chapter highlights a fascinating way of transforming feelings of discomfort into a passionate and powerful desire for a connection with the Lord.

NOTES

1. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra – Sefer Tehillim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989) p. 364.