

Torah Insights

Psalm 27: A Prayer for the Penitential Season

It has become customary for Jews to add an additional Psalm to our daily prayers twice daily during this penitential season. We recite Psalm 27 from the beginning of the month of Elul until the end of the holiday of Succoth. The source for this *minhag* - custom, is not as simple as some might think.

The source for reciting this paragraph is cited by both the Hertz Siddur and the Artscroll Siddur as the *midrash*. Yet, *Siddur Tzilusa D'Avraham* writes clearly that the custom to add Psalm 27 to our daily prayers "is not found in the early prayer books, and not in the *Shulchan Aruch* - Code of Jewish Law, nor in any of the commentaries. It is not found in the 'old, accepted texts,' rather this custom has become more prominent in these later generations."

The *midrash* does emphasize the significance of Psalm 27 by pointing out that God's name appears thirteen times in this paragraph. The number thirteen parallels the thirteen attributes of God's compassion. God instructed Moshe to pronounce these thirteen attributes in order to absolve the Jewish people from their sin of worshiping the Golden Calf. Similarly, it is suggested that in the penitential season we recite a paragraph which mentions God's name thirteen times to remind us to pray for forgiveness.

But, are we only concerned with a number count? Are there no other selections in our holy writings which contain 13? Why not recite the thirteen attributes themselves once again to plead for a healthy New Year? Why Psalm 27?

The *Mateh Ephraim*, Rabbi Ephraim Zalman Margolis (1762-1828), basing himself on the *Midrash Socher Tov*, states that God is my light on *Rosh HaShanah* and my salvation on Yom Kippur (verse 1). The *Mateh Ephraim* states that God will hide me in His shelter, an allusion to the holiday of Succoth when we leave our homes to live in a flimsy *succah* (Verse 5). And so the Hertz Siddur, the Artscroll Siddur, as well as others cite both the old *midrash* and this new *midrash*, not found in the ancient sources.

So now we can understand **when** we should recite this additional Psalm. But what is its thematic connection to the penitential season?

My father, Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, שליט"א, provided me with a unique insight into this most beautiful of King David's songs. One must first acknowledge that the individual experiences a unique dynamic during the penitential season. At the time when we approach God pleading for a good new year, we are frightened that we may not receive a favorable reply from the Almighty. Yet, we are confident that God will hear our supplications and answer our prayers if we are truly repentant.

We feel reassured that if we approach God as true penitents, that God will respond in the affirmative and grant us a year of health and prosperity. Is this a contradiction?

That is precisely the theme contained within Psalm 27. We vacillate between confidence and uncertainty. In verse 1, we declare, whom shall I fear when God is my light and my salvation. The evildoers and tormentors are the ones who will stumble and fall (verse 2). Even if an army comes against me, my heart shall not fear (verse 3).

But then in verse 4, King David is uncertain. He asks for permission to dwell in the House of the Lord. (Did he lose his reserved seat?)

In verse 5, David has regained his composure. He is reassured that God will hide him in His shelter on the day of evil. He will be concealed in His tent. David's head is raised above his enemies. David is triumphant offering sacrifices and song to God in thanksgiving (verse 6).

Then in verse 7, David reverts to worry. He hopes that God will hear his voice when he cries out. He does not want God to conceal Himself from David. He is frightened that God might abandon him (verse 9). David does not want God to abandon him in the same way that his father and mother have forsaken him (verse 10). But also in verse 10, David feels certain that God will gather him in.

And, again in verse 11-13, David pleads with God to teach him, lead him, and deliver him because he fears from his adversaries.

King David vacillates between assuredness and uncertainty throughout this most special of Psalms, much the same way that we as individuals and as a People feel that God will give us a good judgment in this penitential season, or maybe He will not. None of us are completely righteous, nor are we completely wicked; we are considered בנינוים, average people with both merits and demerits. We are uncertain of our fate . And, so we beseech the Almighty.

Most importantly, how does he conclude and what is David's message for us in this most holy of seasons? "Have hope in God; strengthen yourself and He will give you courage; and hope in God." There can be no better message for all humanity than Psalm 27 at this season of the year and in a world filled with tension!

(Incidentally, the *Ari HaKadosh* inserts Psalm 27 in the prayers for this season, while the *Gra* omits it.)