Psalm 27 and Teshuvah: an Interpretation

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A custom widely followed among traditionally observant Jews is to recite Psalm 27 at the conclusion of the morning and evening services during the month of Elul, the month leading to Rosh Ha-Shanah (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).[1]

The custom is not ancient, and is not mentioned in medieval sources.[2] The actual origin of the custom is unclear, although various explanations (presumably *ex post facto*) have been offered. One of the explanations is a play on the word ???? (*lulei*, “if not,” “were it not”, “had it not been”), in verse 13 – to which we shall return – which is ???? (Elul) backwards.[3] The problem is that there is nothing overt or explicit in the psalm to connect it to this period of *teshuvah* (repentance; literally “returning”) – so why was it chosen?

Two textual questions

The first question raised in some critical scholarly circles, is whether Psalm 27 is really one psalm or two distinct psalms? According to this view, the first half of the psalm (verses 1-6) manifest self-assurance and confidence, whereas the second half of the psalm (verses 7-14) is more of a lament and petition.[4]

The second question relates to the word ???? in verse 13. In the Masoretic text there are dots above the letters. In ancient manuscripts, such dots were at least sometimes used to indicate letters or a word that should be deleted. Some of the ancient versions, in fact, translate this verse without the word, as meaning “I believe that [I] will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of life (or: of the living)”.
Thus the Septuagint – which was, of course, an Alexandrian Jewish translation of the text – has *Pisteuo tou idein ta agatha Kuriou en ge zonton*. The Peshitta has ??? ?? ????? ????? ????? ????? ????? ???? , and the Vulgate has *Credo videre bona Domini in terra viventium*.

Without engaging in further speculation regarding the actual “original” text and these critical questions, I would like to offer a holistic literary interpretation, in which the otherwise unexplained connection with *Teshuvah* may be understood, and in which the term ???? in the received Masoretic text is essential.

Does the acknowledged shift in mood (already noted by some traditional Jewish commentators) from the first half of the psalm to the second half really mean that it was originally two separate compositions, or two different authors? That suggestion strikes me as remarkably over-simplistic and, indeed, unrealistic in terms of human moods and character. Is it not, rather, the case that all people undergo different moods, at various times and/or in reaction to changing circumstances and progressive self-awareness? In this light, can we not understand the psalmist as portraying his/her four-stage spiritual “pilgrim’s progress” of the process of *teshuvah* in a single literary unit?

Thus, we see such changing moods reflected in the psalm’s terminology, and can read the psalm as describing successive stages in the process of *teshuvah*.

Stage I: verses 1-6 – Excessive self-confidence

"Whom shall I fear . . . of whom shall I be afraid . . . they fail and fall . . . my heart is not afraid . . . I trust in this . . . to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life . . . [God] shelters me in his *sukkah* (booth) . . . He protects me in his tent . . . my head is high over my enemies around me . . . I sing to the Lord."

Stage II: verses 7-8 – Doubts and loss of self-confidence

"Lord, hear my voice as I cry out, be merciful to me and answer me. On your behalf, my heart says 'Seek my face'."

Stage III: verses 9-12 – Despair, I am alone, I need help

"Do not hide your face from me . . . Do not forsake me, do not abandon me . . . My father and my mother have abandoned me . . . Lord, teach me your ways."

Since the psalmist has been abandoned by his/her parents, "Lord, teach me your ways." Although the collective term for parents is not mentioned, and there is no verbal connection between the abandonment by parents – ????? (*horim*) – and "teach me" ????? (*horeini*), perhaps the similarity of sound can be understood as a play on words and poetic license: you are in place of my parents; you teach me, because my parents have abandoned me.

Stage IV: verse 13 – Transition from despair to hope

"Had I not believed" (???? ??????) that [I] would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of life (or: of the living)."

Most of the classical rabbinic commentators connect "had I not believed" to the verse above it (verse 12): "Do not hand me over to the life of my enemies, for false witnesses and unjust accusers have risen against me, spouting injustice."

Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, 1040-1105), for example, understands the connection as meaning "If I had not believed in the Holy One, blessed be He, then those false witnesses would have already arisen against me and eliminated me . . . But if your prayer is not accepted, go back and hope again." Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1167) wrote: "This is connected to what is before it. My foes almost ruled me, had I not believed in God." Verse 13 was also understood to be connected to verse 12 by other well-known traditional commentators, including Radak (Rabbi David Kim?i, 1160-1235) and Malbim (Meir Leibush ben Ye?iel Mechel Wisser, 1809-1879).

I wish to suggest, however, connecting verse 13 to the following verse (14), and here the word ???? ("if not") is critical.

What is the difference between "belief" (in verse 13) and "hope" (in verse 14)?[5] There are three ways of asserting (an alleged) truth.

- "I know X" – meaning there is proof that X is true.
- "I believe X" – meaning I affirm X as true but lack proof of its truth
- "I hope X" – meaning that I cannot affirm X as actually true, but merely express the wish that X be true.

Hope, then, makes no claim that X is externally, factually true, but merely expresses the internal desire that X be true, or that what I ask for become true.

Coming back to verses 13 and 14 in our psalm: even if because of my despair I cannot believe (affirm) that my *teshuvah* will necessarily succeed, and I can, nevertheless, hope for its success. In

this sense the psalm's description of the stages of *teshuvah* need not necessarily refer literally only to external enemies and foes, but rather, metaphorically to the internal struggles and challenges we face as we engage in introspection: our "foes" and "enemies" are our own transgressions, our own actions (or failure to act).

In his *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:12 Rambam (Rabbi Moses Maimonides, 1138-1204) describes three sources of evil, in ascending order of prevalence: the least prevalent are natural evils (such as earthquakes), more prevalent are social evils (such as wars), but most prevalent are personal evils (the harm we do to ourselves).

Despair, then, can be both a social and personal condition or mood. The 18th and 19th centuries promoted the optimistic hope in linear human progress.[6] The 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, however, are characterized by widespread despair on this point, after so many millions have been killed and outright murdered in two World Wars, the Shoah and other genocidal atrocities. Let us keep in mind that the Shoah was not perpetrated in some distant corner of the world, but by Germany, probably the most developed and advanced country in the world in the 1920s and 1930s, not only in technology, but in science, philosophy, education, music, etc. The first German institution to expel the Jews was the universities, and the leading philosopher in the western world in those days was Martin Heidegger, an avowed and enthusiastic Nazi from the very beginning (and unrepentant after the war). World War I was supposed to be "the war to end all wars" – but was the Shoah really the genocide to end all genocides (as we have seen in recent decades, there have been more genocides in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East).

So can we confidently believe that we, as individuals, and we as the human species, are better than those who came before us, and that we are capable of the true reform *teshuvah* is supposed to bring about?

In light of all this, we face two options: to give in to despair, individual and collective, or to continue to strive out of hope, as individuals, as members of the Jewish people, and as members of the human community. Is there any positive guarantee, any real assurance that on all three levels – individual, Jewish, and human – we are fundamentally capable of true *teshuvah*, of fundamentally changing and improving morally? We may not be able to believe naively in such a "positive guarantee" that our efforts will succeed. However, even if there is no (or is no longer) any "positive guarantee" we surely have a "negative guarantee" that if we do not strive for individual, national, and universal *teshuvah*, we will certainly find ourselves, in the words of the Mishnah Avot,[7] in a world in which "each person swallows his fellow alive," destroying each other, and ourselves.

As I understand it, this is the challenge Psalm 27 presents us: not to give in to despair and thereby ensure the "negative guarantee" of individual, national, and universal destruction. The psalm challenges each of us, despite all the difficulties and all of our failures, not to give up hope, and not to cease striving. There may not be any "positive guarantee" of success, but again in the words of the Mishnah Avot:[8]

> Rabbi Tarfon used to say: The day is short and the work is great . . . You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.

And so, even if we, unlike earlier modern generations, can no longer believe confidently in an inevitably better future on all three levels, the psalm says that "even if I do not believe that [I] will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of life, yet hope in the Lord, let your heart be strong and have courage, and hope in the Lord."

[1] In the Torah, Elul is the sixth month, and Rosh Ha-Shanah falls on "in the seventh month, on the first day of the month" and Yom Kippur "in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month" (Leviticus 23:24-27 Numbers 29:1-7).
[2] The custom is not mentioned in the classical code *Shul?an `Arukh* nor by Rabbi Moses Isserles (1530-1572) in his comments on it. The custom is mentioned in the "Mishnah Berurah" of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, called "the *?afetz ?ayyim*" (Laws of Rosh Ha-Shanah #581:1), noting that reciting Psalm 27 following the morning and evening services is the custom "in our countries."
[3] This and other explanations are mentioned in the entry "Elul" in *Otzar Dinim U-Minhagim* ("Digest of Jewish Laws and Customs"), ed. J.D. Eisenstein (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1917), pp. 16-17.
[4] For example, cf. Fleming Jones, *Thirty Psalmists* (New York: Seabury Press, 1938) and Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).
[5] Thus in Ezekiel 37:11 in the vision of the dry bones - ???? ?????? "our hope is lost." In "Ha-Tikvah" – the Jewish national anthem which became the anthem of the State of Israel – the phrase is reversed: ??? ?? ???? ?????? "our hope is not yet lost."
[6] This was a point on which Moses Mendelssohn sharply disagreed with his friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's belief in human progress from Judaism to Christianity to "the new eternal gospel" of rational religion in his "Education of the Human Race" (*Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, 1780). See the discussion in Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University of Alabama, 1973, pp. 540-542, and my "Moses Mendelssohn: A Medieval Modernist" in my *Jewish Philosophy: Foundations and Extensions: Vol. Two* (Lanham: University Press of America), pp. 226-227.
[7] Avot ("Sayings of the Fathers") 3:2, citing the deputy high-priest, Rabbi ?anina, who survived the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.
[8] Avot 2:20-21. Rabbi Tarfon was also of priestly descent.

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