

REFLECTIONS

Be Strong, Be Trusting: Reading Psalm 27 in Elul

There is a ritual this time of year that takes a bit more than 50 days. We have been reading a particular psalm that is not otherwise part of the siddur—Psalm 27—every morning and every night through the month of Elul, and we will continue this until Simḥat Torah. Through our daily reading of Psalm 27—so like the daily counting of the Omer—we make this autumnal period, with its linear narrative of atonement, redemption, and the renewal of Torah, into a second version of the vernal Pesah-Shavuot narrative and give each year not one, but two special, sacred Sevenths.

There is no right or wrong way, only more or less interesting ways of understanding Psalm 27 or any other deep text. For example, in the eyes of the Anchor Bible, a work of serious scholarship from another tradition, this psalm's roots lie in earlier texts in other Semitic languages, and they show that it is entirely about the Afterlife, but that's not what I see. In sharing my interpretations here I intend only to share my way of experiencing these Holy Days. How then do I read Psalm 27? Let's take a look.

It is—first but not foremost—beautiful poetry. Having even a little Hebrew helps a lot, because the poetry that lies in the sounds, their resonance and dissonances, gets lost in translation. I'll transliterate the Hebrew where necessary; otherwise I'll refer to this translation from the Jewish Publication Society's 1999 Tanakh.

David was a King of many voices and moods. I read this entire psalm as a stream of thought in David's head, not as a spoken or written text, until the last line, 14, where I see and hear a vocal outburst that summarizes the whole psalm. To my eye the psalm breaks into five silent stanzas before then, each with its own emotional tone: lines 1-3, 4-6, 7-10, 11-12, and 13. The stanzas get shorter as the poet's introspective mood gets at once more agitated and elevated, so that when the last line comes, an astonishing optimism breaks

through the dark cloud of David's self-doubt.

In the silent, inner cycle that oscillates between the intensity of personal prayer and the relief of communal worship, Psalm 27 falls completely on the side of the personal; it is profoundly moving, even disturbing, in its ability to convey an inner voice in intimate communication with Adonai. Certainly it is the right time for us to be given this chance to hear David as he struggles. It is a daily reminder of this obligation we are all under, this time of year, to get past our cleverness and confess our hidden thoughts and secret actions to Adonai. As Moshe says in Parashat Ki Tavo [Devarim 29:28], "Ha'nistarot La'Adonai Eloheikhem / Concealed acts concern the Lord our God." Like confession at any other time of year, fully feeling the meaning of this psalm, while theoretically possible at another time, might just be too painful outside of this special seventh of the year.

1-3:

Here David is someone trying to convince himself of something he wishes he could believe. The very first words, the beginning of line 1, set a high standard for density and depth, even for a psalm of David: "Adonai ori veyish'i, mimi eera? / Adonai is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear?" Ori/eera; light/fear: it is a great example of the distinctions we are supposed to seek, and the words look and sound enough alike to make each illuminate the other. But then, in line 2, the fear breaks through: "When evil men assail me to devour my flesh / 'l'ekhol et-b'sarai" "... they will stumble and fall." Devour my flesh? Maybe a hyperbole, maybe not; in any event, line 3 concludes



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that even so, "B'zot ani boteah / In this I would still trust," that is, that David would trust in Adonai's salvation, no matter what.

4-6

Here David daydreams: He will live in the house of the Lord, Adonai will shelter him, raise him high. All will be well, better than well: "V'ata yarum roshi al oi'vai s'vivotai/norw my head is held high over my enemies surrounding me." How then will David rejoice? With "sacrifice in Adonai's tent with shouts of joy / V'ezbakha b'ahalo ziv'khai t'ruah," and with singing and chanting a hymn to Adonai. Three possessive words now snap into sharp focus: "B'sarai; S'vivotai; Ziv'khai / my flesh; surrounding me; my sacrifice." S'vivotai is the critical link: In Vayikra 1:11, intended to be read every morning at prayer even today, we repeat that the Kohanim were to take the blood of the animal sacrificed at the

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Temple in Jerusalem and dash it “upon the Altar, all around / Damo al ha’ mizbeah saviv.” The daydream teeters on the edge of a nightmare: Is David dreaming of being the sacrificer, or the sacrifice?

7-10

Another jump in the narrative. Away with the daydream, back to the reality: David calls to Adonai and cries that he is not sure his call is heard. And who of us does not know that feeling? Here the words in English and in Hebrew convey panic and fright with blunt force: “Do not forsake me, do not abandon me, do not hide your face from me;” nothing subtle here, nor particularly poetical. The worst fear breaks through in line 10: “Ki avi v’imi azvuni, va’Adonai ya’asfeni / though my father and mother abandon me, Adonai will take me in.” Given the previous two lines, do we really think David is certain of this? I am told by good friends that the root of ya’asfeni is to receive in order to guide or teach, and that the line should be read as saying that even if I am so rotten that my parents give up on me, Adonai will find a way for me to become a good person. I wish I could feel the force of that interpretation, but that is not the effect this line has on me. As I am an orphan, the simpler meaning overwhelms me.

11-12

David pulls himself together and tries to focus on difficulties at hand. False accusers surround him, and his head is not at all held high above them; he needs a way out and asks Adonai to show him that path, past his watchful foes. These two lines are reasonable, practical, and altogether different from anything that has come before. It is as if David has snapped to attention, seen that time is short, and gotten to the point. But, there is no answer!

(continued on page 10)

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|--|---|
| 1 The Lord is my light and my help; whom should I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; whom should I dread? | 1 לְדוֹד יי אֹרִי וְשַׁעִי מִמִּי אֶיֶרָא יי
מַעֲזוֹ חַיִּי מִמִּי אֶפְחָד: |
| 2 When evil men assail me to devour my flesh— it is they, my foes and my enemies, who stumble and fall. | 2 בְּקָרֵב עָלַי מְרַעִים לְאָכַל אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי
צָרִי וְאֵיבֵי לִי הֵמָּה כְּשֵׁלוֹ וְנָפְלוֹ: |
| 3 Should an army besiege me, my heart would have no fear; should war beset me, still would I be confident. | 3 אִם־תִּחְנֶנֶה עָלַי מִחֲנָה לֹא־יִירָא לְבִי
אִם־תִּקְוִים עָלַי מִלְחָמָה בְּזֹאת אֲנִי
בוֹטֵחַ: |
| 4 One thing I ask of the Lord, only that do I seek: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, to frequent His temple. | 4 אֶחַת שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֲתֵי אֹתְךָ
אֶבְקֵשׁ שְׁבִיתִי בְּבֵית־יְיָ כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי
לְחַזוֹת בְּנֹעַם־יְיָ וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהֵיכָל־יְיָ: |
| 5 He will shelter me in His pavilion on an evil day; grant me the protection of His tent; raise me high upon a rock. | 5 כִּי יִצְפְּנֵנִי בְּסֹכֵה בְּיוֹם רָעָה יִסְתַּרְנִי
בְּסֹתֵר אֶהְלֹו בְּצוּר יְרוּמָמֵנִי: |
| 6 Now is my head high over my enemies roundabout; I sacrifice in His tent with shouts of joy; singing and chanting a hymn to the Lord. | 6 וְעַתָּה יְרוּם רֹאשִׁי עַל אֵיבֵי
סָבִיבוֹתַי וְאֶזְבְּחָה בְּאֶהְלֹו זְבָחִי
תְּרוּעָה אֲשִׁירָה וְאֶזְמַרְךָ לֵי: |
| 7 Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, have mercy on me, answer me. | 7 שְׁמַע־יְיָ קוֹלִי אֶקְרָא וְחַנּוּנִי וַעֲנֵנִי: |
| 8 In Your behalf my heart says: “Seek My face!” O Lord, I seek Your face. | 8 לָךְ אָמַר לְבִי בְּקִשׁוֹ פָנָי אֶת־פָּנֶיךָ
יְיָ אֶבְקֵשׁ: |
| 9 Do not hide Your face from me; do not thrust aside Your servant in anger; You have ever been my help. Do not forsake me, do not abandon me, O God, my deliverer. | 9 אַל־תִּסְתַּר פְּנֵיךָ מִמֶּנִּי אֶל־תִּטְּבֵאֲךָ
עַבְדְּךָ עֲזַרְתִּי הֵייתָ אֶל־תִּטְּשֵׁנִי
וְאַל־תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁרָאֵל: |
| 10 Though my father and mother abandon me, the Lord will take me in. | 10 כִּי־אָבִי וְאִמִּי עֲזָבוּנִי וַיְיָ יִאֲסֹפֵנִי: |
| 11 Show me Your way, O Lord; and lead me on a level path, because of my watchful foes. | 11 הוֹרֵנִי יְיָ דֶרֶכְךָ וְנַחֲנֵנִי בְּאַרְחַ מִישׁוֹר
לְמַעַן שׁוֹרְרָי: |
| 12 Do not subject me to the will of my foes; for false witnesses and unjust accusers have appeared against me. | 12 אַל־תִּתְּנֵנִי בְּנִפְשׁ צָרִי כִּי קְמוּ־בִי
עֲדֵי־שֹׁקֵר וַיִּפְחַח חֲמָס: |
| 13 Had I not the assurance that I would enjoy the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living... | 13 לוֹלֵא הֲאֵמַנְתִּי לְרֵאוֹת בְּטוֹב־יְיָ
בְּאֶרֶץ חַיִּים: |
| 14 Look to the Lord; be strong, and of good courage! O look to the Lord! | 14 קוּה אֶל־יְיָ חֲזַק וְאַמְצָ לְבָבְךָ וְקוּה
אֶל־יְיָ: |

HEVRA KADISHA

Departures

On Thursday evening, May 27, 2010, as we headed toward Memorial Day weekend, the Hevra Kadisha held an event that was a departure from the meetings we ordinarily convene. Instead of the usual training sessions, educational classes, or recruitment efforts, we met on this stormy evening in the sanctuary to view a film. But not just any film. About 50 members gathered for a screening of an award-winning Japanese film called “Departures,” the 2009 Oscar winner for Best Foreign Language Film.

Chosen for its appropriate themes, the film portrays the reverence, dignity, empathy, and compassion of “encoffinment”—a Japanese ritual remarkably similar to our tahara. The story tells of a young musician, Daigo, whose career as a cellist ends when his struggling orchestra is forced to dissolve. In his search for new work upon leaving Tokyo and returning to his village, he unwittingly answers an ad for a job assisting in the ceremony of preparing the deceased (in front of the mourners) for



placement in the coffin. Facing his own personal struggles as well as the disapproving reactions of his wife and friends, Daigo travels a journey of self-revelation as he sees the

physical transformation of the deceased and the emotional transformations of the mourners—and eventually himself—through this dignified ritual. In the process, Daigo comes to terms with his own unresolved conflicts surrounding loss and emerges with a new perception of the meanings of living and passing.

Experiencing this beautiful, sensitive film, we were all overcome with floods of deep, multilayered emotions. We identified with

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the universal themes of our common traditions while we noted some of the distinctions. Through the beauty of the mountainous, wintry scenery, the gentle humor, the haunting score, and the powerful emotions, we processed the issues surrounding death and mourning that are at the very essence of our work with the Hevra Kadisha. After a group discussion of the meanings the film had for each of us, we left with a new, energized appreciation for the blessed opportunity we are given to do our work.

If you are interested in learning more about the Hevra Kadisha, please contact Liz Stone at 212-787-7600 x233 or estone@bj.org. ■

— Liz Stone

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13:

The strain of Adonai’s silence is too much; back to the daydream: “had I not the assurance that I would enjoy the goodness of Adonai in the land of the living ... / Lulei he’emanutai lir-ot b’tuv-Adonai b’eret Kha’yim... .” In the Hebrew, Lulei is surrounded by the sort of dots that mark of a word troublesome to the keepers of this text a thousand years ago, and rightly so; this is a wholly ambiguous line. The Anchor Bible translates Lulei as “The Victor,” based on linguistic overlaps with other cultures, but to me this line is simply David in a voice of great anxiety. What, for instance, are we to make of “b’eret Kha’yim / the land of the living?” Is that this world, the world to come, or—as the Artscroll commentary concludes—the land of Israel? David is as broken as this line is broken; he is not sure that he is going to survive this moment.

14:

The mood shifts again, dramatically: David will not give up and die. He remembers the b’rit between Adonai and his—and our—ancestors and knows he will prevail. Here comes the most powerful line in the psalm and perhaps the most dense line I have ever come across, anywhere. “Kavey el-Adonai, Khazak v’ya’ameitz libeha, v’kavey el-Adonai. / hope in Adonai, make yourself strong and give your heart courage, and hope in Adonai.” This line is all by itself a cycle, the tightest of the cycles I have come across in our ritual, the cycle that is the b’rit. From the very beginning of the Book of Joshua, Adonai tells Joshua “Khazak v’ematz / be strong and resolute” many times, and of course Joshua is, and so we are alive today as Jews. But do we really think that this strength is what won the day for Joshua, or for us?

Psalm 27 teaches us, instead, what the entire narrative of these days—from Selihot through Simhat Torah—teaches us: that as Jews we are to hope in Adonai; and then we are to do everything we can to strengthen ourselves as if we were wholly left to our own fates; and then we are to continue to hope in Adonai despite having acted as if we were wholly on our own. That’s all we can do for our side of the b’rit; Adonai will respond to us in ways neither David, nor I, nor you, can know, nor need to know. ■

— Robert Pollack

Professor Robert Pollack and his wife Amy have been members of BJ since 1994.