

crots, congregation
Or Zarna, Sept 2000.

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The Importance of Psalm 27

As Jews, we are expected to notice differences, and choose between them. The most explicit statement of this particular way of seeing the world comes with nightfall at the end of Shabbat, in the blessings of Havdalah, where we thank Adonai for making differences, or separations:

"Blessed are you, Adonai our God, King of the Universe, who separates between holy and secular, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the six days of labor. Blessed are you, Adonai, who separates between holy and secular."

There's a lot to see in this little blessing. First, the blessing separates aspects of religious experience, the physical world, peoples, and periods of time into the special and the ordinary: holy, light, Israel, Shabbat on the one hand; secular, darkness, the nations, the other six days. In all but one case, we experience these differences in oscillation: we go from holy to secular and back again, from Shabbat to the six days and back again, from light to dark and back again. But, we do not go back and forth between Israel and the nations:

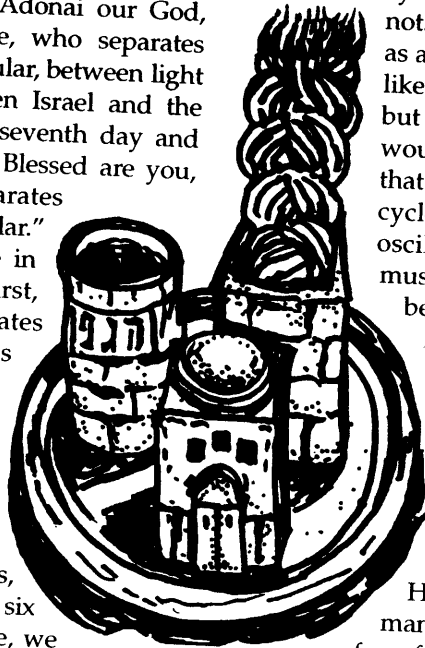
each of us is part of the nation Israel, for all the time we are alive.

So to be a Jew, then, must mean living though the cycles of life in a constant tension of a particular sort: everything important to us goes around in cycles; our religious obligations fit into those

cycles nicely, but our lives do not. Though we see the target as a set of circles, we must live like an arrow, trying to fly true, but always moving forward. It would not be bearable to live that way in isolation; one more cycle saves us. Our rituals oscillate between ones that must be carried out in private

between oneself and Adonai — the silent Amidah, for instance, or the Vidui — and ones that cannot be met alone, from saying Kaddish even for the memory of ones' own parent, to these High Holy Days that bring so many of us together if only for a few days each year.

Together here in our very different passages though life, we can experience this grand cycle of ritual obligation buoyed by the sense that even if one of us has shot past the mark, as a group we may yet give each other strength,



whether to atone for past mistakes or to and bear up under the pain of the moment's particular hardship. With this in mind, let's look at some of the cycles of time that we will be experiencing together.

The first, and longest, is of course the year itself. This time of year is the time of completion, of harvest. Therefore at the same time it is the period of less light and more darkness, and of that absolute precursor to renewal, our inescapable shadow, death. No surprise, then, that in the simplest terms of the yearly cycle, we don't have just one event, but a series to account for all these coordinate events. But because as Jews we are not ourselves cycling but rather living our lives in one direction, that series, though it occurs cyclically this time of year, is itself not the story of a repeating cycle of events, but the story of our history, told through ritual in a way that offers us if not certainty, then at least great hope for the future.

It's hard to see this unless one first frees oneself from the shorter version of this period so common in American Judaism, to allow the full range of events to be experienced as one long story. First we have the event we call the New Year. It is the beginning of the month of Tishrei, but its real significance lies in the notion that the Heavenly court begins an annual ten-day session on that evening, passing judgment on us all for the year past. The ten days that begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippor give us the chance to make our appeals, through repentance, prayer and study, before the decision is handed down.

Yom Kippor is the most intense of these days of Awe and atonement; it would be intense enough even without a total fast to help us slip past the distractions of the day to concentrate on these matters as the time of decision approaches.

Once Court is no longer in session, the rituals immediately shift – purposefully — to a week of harvest festival, complete with a Hoshannah remembrance of the dedication of first harvests at the Temple. Only then do we close the cycle of our religious year, with the completion of the annual reading of the Torah; that is followed by – at last – the joy of Simchat Torah. These weeks are not a cycle, but a straight line, full of hope. By confession and atonement they are meant to get us through the dark side of our worst secrets, so that we can enter into the next year with a heightened sense of the very distinctions that we – as Jews – need to have, for a chance for true redemption.

There is another straight line that punctuates our calendar of cycles to give us a story of hope and salvation, at the other side of the year. Unlike the one we are in now, it comes at a time of increasing light and decreasing darkness, and it is built at first around the family rather than the synagogue, and in place of confession and repentance it emphasizes teaching and learning. But otherwise it is remarkably similar to this cycle.

At Pesach we re-experience the slavery of Egypt and the miracle of our escape, then until Shavuot we mark the number of days and weeks [Shavuot] that pass, by reciting a blessing for the

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Omer, the gift of harvest grain to the Temple, reciting the Omer until Shavuot, when we simultaneously bring our first harvests to the Temple and also come to Sinai and re-experience the giving of the Torah.

The Greek for Shavuot is Pentecost, the word for fiftieth, which should tell us that this spring narrative takes at least fifty days. Tacking on the first day of Pesach, it actually takes fifty-one, which is preciously close to one-seventh of the year. In other words, the narrative, though linear, is also a shadow of the deepest cycle we have, the cycle between Shabbat and the six days of work: the Period Pesach-Shavuot is, in other words, a special seventh, a sort of Shabbat, for the year itself.

But, you might say, so what? That linear narrative takes fifty days or so, while the one we are in takes at most a month, from Rosh Hashanah though Simchat Torah. Not really, though: there is a ritual this time of year that also takes a bit more than fifty days. We have been reading a particular psalm that is not otherwise part of the siddur – psalm 27 — every morning and every night through

27 *Of David*

*The LORD is my light and my help;
whom should I fear?*

*The LORD is the stronghold of my life,
whom should I dread?*

²*When evil men assail me
"to devour my flesh"*

*it is they, my foes and my enemies,
who stumble and fall.*

the month of Elul, and we will continue this until Simchat Torah. Though 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 Pesach-Shavuot narrative, and give each year not one, but two special, sacred Sevenths.

So let's look carefully at it. There is no right or wrong way, only more or less interesting ways of understanding Psalm 27, or any other any 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 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. Anyone who wishes to share a different interpretation should not hesitate; perhaps that way next year we can have an anthology of different experiences of these Days.

How then do I read Psalm 27? Let's take a look.

כז לְדָוִד |
 יְהוָה | אֹרְחִי וַיִּשְׁעִי
 מִמֵּי אֵימָה
 יְהוָה מְעוֹז־חַיִּי
 מִמֵּי אֶפְחָד:
 בְּקִרְבַּי עָלִי | מְרַעִים
 לֹאכֵל אֶת־בְּשָׁרִי
 צָרִי וְאֵיבִי לִי
 הִמָּה כְּשִׁלּוֹ וְנָפְלוּ:

³Should an army besiege me,
my heart would have no fear;
should war beset me,
still would I be confident.

⁴One 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.

⁵He will shelter me in His pavilion
on an evil day,
grant me the protection of His tent,
raise me high upon a rock.

⁶Now 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.

⁷Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
have mercy on me, answer me.

^{8a}In Your behalf^b my heart says:
"Seek My face!"

O LORD, I seek Your face.

⁹Do 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.

¹⁰Though my father and mother abandon me,
the LORD will take me in.

¹¹Show me Your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path

^{a-1} Or "to slander me" cf. Dan. 3.8; 6:25

^{b-1} Meaning of Heb. uncertain

3 אִם-תַּחְנֶה עָלַי וּמַחְנֶה
לֹא-יִירָא לִבִּי
אִם-תִּקּוּם עָלַי מִלְחָמָה
בְּזֹאת אֲנִי בֹטָח:

4 אֶחֶת וּשְׁאֵלָתִי מֵאֵת-יְהוָה
אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ
שְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית-יְהוָה
כָּל-יְמֵי חַיִּי
לְחֹזֶת בְּנַעַם-יְהוָה
וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהִיכָלוֹ:

5 כִּי יִצְפְּנֵנִי וּבַסֶּכֶה
בַּיּוֹם רָעָה

יִסְתַּרְנִי בַסֶּתֶר אֱהָלוֹ
בְּצוּר יְרוּמַמְנֵנִי:

6 וְעַתָּה יְרוּם רֹאשִׁי
עַל אֵיבֵי סְבִיבוֹתַי

וְאֶזְבַּח בְּאֱהָלוֹ זִבְחֵי תְרוּעָה
אֲשִׁירָה וְאֶזְמָרָה לַיהוָה:

7 שְׁמַע-יְהוָה קוֹלִי אֲקֹרָא
וְחַנְּנֵנִי וְעַנְּנֵנִי:

8 לֵךְ וְאָמַר לִבִּי
בִקְשׁוּ פָנַי

אֶת-פְּנֵיךָ יְהוָה אֲבַקֵּשׁ:

9 אֶל-תִּסְתֵּר פְּנֵיךָ וּמִמְנֵנִי
אֶל-תִּטְ-בֹאֵף עַבְדְּךָ עֲזֵרְתִי הִיִּיתָ

אֶל-תִּטְשֵׁנִי וְאֶל-תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי
אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

10 כִּי-אֲבִי וְאִמִּי עֲזָבוּנִי
יְהוָה יֶאֱסָפֵנִי:

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because of my watchful foes.
¹²Do not subject me to the will of my foes,
 for false witnesses and unjust accusers
 have appeared against me.
¹³Had I not the assurance
 that I would enjoy the
 goodness of the LORD
 in the land of the living...

¹⁴Look to the LORD;
 be strong and of good courage!
 O look to the LORD!

11 הֲרַנִּי יְהוָה דָּרְבָךְ
 וְנַחֲנִי בְּאֶרֶץ מִישׁוֹר
 לְמַעַן שׂוֹרְרָי:
 12 אֶל־תִּתְּנֵנִי בְּנַפֶּשׁ צָרִי
 כִּי קְמוּרְבִי
 עַד־יִשְׁקַר וַיִּפַּח חֶמְס:
 13 לֹא־אֶ* הָאֲמַנְתִּי
 לְרֵאוֹת בְּטוֹב־יְהוָה
 בְּאֶרֶץ חַיִּים:

14 קוּה אֶל־יְהוָה
 חֹזֵק וַיֵּאֱמַץ לְבָבְךָ
 וְקוּה אֶל־יְהוָה:

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 in 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 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; its 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 the 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

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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 vi'shi, 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/'ekhol et-b'sarai'" ... they will stumble and fall." Devour my flesh? Maybe a hyperbole, maybe not; in any event, line 3 concludes that even so, "B'zot ani boteach/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 oi'vai s'vivotai/n^ow 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 in 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 read every morning at prayer even

today, we repeat that the Kohanim were to take the blood of the animal sacrificed at the Temple in Jerusalem and dash its "blood upon the Altar, all around/ Damo al ha'mizbeach 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'ami 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!

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 ha'emanutai lirot b'tuv-Adonai b'erezt 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'erezt 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 libecha, 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 Slichot through Simchat 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 the David, nor I, nor you, can know, nor need to know.

A last thought. David begins with boteach/trust, and ends in kavey/hope. The root of Kavey is also the root of Mikveh. Rabbi Wechsler explained to me that the words have this in common: the meaning of the triple-consonant root of both is to become close, whether to Adonai, to one's beloved, or of course, to both at once. This brings my interpretation to a close: the transition to kavey/hope is thus also the transition from a childish to a mature closeness to Adonai, and from childish to lasting optimism. May we all make that journey together in these days.

— ROBERT POLLACK