

## Parashat Vayelech

Rosh HaShanah is now past; Yom Kippur is just around the corner. That logically means that we must now be in the period of time that we call the Yomim Noraim - Days of Awe. According to our tradition, on Rosh HaShanah heavenly books are opened and each human's life and deeds are weighed in the balance, for the good for for bad, for life or for death. And yet God, in His graciousness, permits us ten days with which to mend our ways and potentially avert our pre-determined fate. Accordingly the Days of Awe are days of repentance, prayer and good deeds when we seek to put relationships right with each other. The books are then sealed on Yom Kippur and the divine verdicts upon our lives then become final. This being so it is little wonder that this time is called a time of Awe. Actually the Hebrew word is Noraim which can also mean 'terrible'. So in the Hebrew these are therefore 'terrible days,' or 'days of terror'! Perhaps this was what the writer to the Messianic Jews had in mind when he wrote that "it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God"? Given that this is so Jews have not unnaturally developed traditions whose purpose is to comfort and guide us through this difficult time. The twice daily reading of Tehillim 27 during the High Holy Days is a case in point. In fact Tehillim 27 is recited one hundred times by Ashkenazi Jews from the late summer to the early Autumn in preparation for this time of terror. On the surface this Psalm appears to offer great comfort and a sense of security to those who may be terrorised by the prospect of coming divine judgement. And yet as we dive deeper into the text we find that all isn't quite as it seems. Thus the Psalm opens with these tremendous words of reassurance, "Adonai is my light and salvation; whom do I need to fear? Adonai is the stronghold of my life; of whom should I be afraid?" This opening line would seem to justify the choice of this Psalm for daily reading in preparation for and during the High Holy Days. When one's eternal destiny apparently lies in the balance what more comforting and reassuring words could one wish for since it tells us that the one who judges us is also our light and our salvation. In asking whom I need to fear(?) the Psalm prompts us to consider that God is on our side. Certainly, it proceeds to declare, we need fear no human being. We find echoes perhaps of these opening lines of this Psalm in Rav Shaul's declaration that, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Indeed, Rav Shaul speaks further in this context of his supreme confidence that God will not bring a charge against his people on the day of judgement: "So who will bring a charge against God's chosen people? Certainly not God — he is the one who causes them to be considered righteous! Who punishes them? Certainly not the Messiah Yeshua, who died and — more than that — has been raised, is at the right hand of God and is actually pleading on our behalf! Who will separate us from the love of the Messiah? Trouble? Hardship? Persecution? Hunger? Poverty? Danger? War? As the Tanakh puts it, "For your sake we are being put to death all day long, we are considered sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are superconquerors, through the one who has loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers, neither what exists nor what is coming, neither powers above nor powers below, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God which comes to us through the Messiah Yeshua, our Lord." Sounds great doesn't it?! Indeed, Rav Shaul's remarks here are entirely in accord with those of the Psalm that accompanies us through this season

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of repentance. For as we read, "When evildoers assailed me to devour my flesh, my adversaries and foes, they stumbled and fell. If an army encamps against me, my heart will not fear; if war breaks out against me, even then I will keep trusting. Just one thing have I asked of Adonai; only this will I seek: to live in the house of Adonai all the days of my life, to see the beauty of Adonai and visit in his temple. For he will conceal me in his shelter on the day of trouble, he will hide me in the folds of his tent, he will set me high on a rock. Then my head will be lifted up above my surrounding foes, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing, sing praises to Adonai."

The confidence of the Psalmist is infectious and, as tradition has determined, this is intentionally so as we seek to navigate these High Holy Days since the Psalm reassures us of the fundamental goodness of God. The image here in the first part of the Psalm is of a suitably compassionate God who shelters and hides his children from all trouble and who also lifts them up so as to prevent them from drowning in a sea of trouble. This is such a reassuring picture of God, and is very welcome as we consider the meaning of these Days of Awe and the potentiality of divine judgement. And yet, as becomes apparent as we read on past verse 6, this supreme confidence of the Psalmist surprisingly makes way for elements of doubt. Indeed, when taken as a whole rather in isolation, it rather appears that the supreme confidence expressed in the first six verses are an attempt by the Psalmist to convince himself in the face of doubt. Thus, as we have heard, in the first six verses the Psalmist confidently declares his belief that God protects, delivers and saves us from all evil whether human, supernatural or divine. And yet then in verses seven through to nine the Psalmist appears to begin to entertain doubts about this: "Listen, Adonai, to my voice when I cry; show favour to me; and answer me. "My heart said of you, 'Seek my face.'" Your face, Adonai, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me, don't turn your servant away in anger. You are my help; don't abandon me; don't leave me, God my saviour." The presence of these lines is significant. When the Psalmist turns from the statement of faith that is effectively verses 1-6, and becomes more personal, moving from the third to the second person, and addresses God personally and individually, then the cut and dried, black and white confidence of verses 1-6 apparently dissipates and we see that doubts begin to arise in his heart. The phrases "Don't hide your face from me, don't turn your servant away in anger" stand in contrast to the strident doctrinal confidence of verses 1-6 in which we are told that "Adonai is my light and my salvation." and "of whom should I be afraid?" So too does the Psalmist's appeal that God not abandon him. "Don't abandon me; don't leave me, God my saviour", sounds very much like the words of a man who is indeed afraid that God would abandon and leave him and that he might not at all be saved from whatever unspecified situation he was facing. Indeed, in view of this doubts it seems that the Psalmist's statement of faith in verses 1-6 might in fact be the efforts of a worried man to convince himself of a truth that he feels he *must* believe in spite of his circumstances. If this is the case then the apparent hubris of the first six verses actually hide feelings of insecurity. But hasn't that always been so? Isn't it so for us too? As Shakespeare once wrote, "the lady doth protest too much, me thinks!" It is Hamlet's mother Queen Gertrude that utters these famous words in response to a play within the play that

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Hamlet had written in order to expose his uncle's guilt in murdering his father, the King of Denmark. As Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius and others watch the play-within-the-play, the Player Queen, representing Gertrude, declares in flowery language that she will never remarry if her husband dies. Hamlet then turns to his mother and asks her, "Madam, how like you this play?", to which she replies ironically "The lady doth protest too much, methinks", meaning that the Player Queen's protestations of love and fidelity are too excessive to be believed. In a similar way then, in the light of the doubts expressed by the Psalmist in verses 7-9, it is possible to read the doctrinal hubris of verses 1-6 as excessive protestations of faith. Me thinks the Psalmist doth protest too much! But then again perhaps that was the Psalmist's cunning intent from the very beginning? Perhaps it was written *precisely* to undermine naive expressions of faith that seek to impose overly rigid and inflexible doctrinal interpretations on life itself? To this effect the Psalm moves from the opening glorious assertion of confidence in God as our saviour in any and all situations, to a more nuanced approach which disputes the certainty of the first six verses and allows room for doubt. This according to renowned Torah scholar Professor Benjamin Sommers is the purpose of the Psalm. As he writes, "The movement from faith to doubt is the opposite of what many readers might have expected of a religious text. Our worshiper does not grow into a more conventional piety over the course of the psalm, casting aside doubts to take up the armor of faith. Rather, the worshiper sets aside a seemingly ideal faith to take on a more realistic one.... It is precisely when the worshiper first speaks directly to God that doubt becomes prominent. God is no longer something the worshiper claims to know all about; now God is a partner (though of course the senior partner) in a relationship, and relationships are slippery and unknowable in a way that does not conform to the simplistic faith of the first stanza. The direction of the psalm's movement is crucial, because it models the maturing of an authentic relationship with God. A simple faith that asks no questions and admits no anxieties is not the most religious faith. A relationship that can articulate anxiety about the beloved's distance is ultimately stronger." Moreover, he writes, "A faith that allows no doubt is hubris: when it claims to know for sure what God will and will not do, it denies God's freedom and invests far too much in the believer's impregnable security. Such a faith is the very opposite of true piety. The wavering faith of Psalm 27 is humbler and more honest. It is neither Pollyannish nor naive; it is realistic about the fact that God seems absent at times."

Indeed, isn't this gap between doctrine and reality what causes us, and as we see so many Biblical writers, this Psalmist included, spiritual, mental and emotional pain? When we come into faith we are so often told by our elders and betters that God will never let us down and that He will always protect us and defend us against any and all harm. In evangelical churches these doctrinal imperatives are reinforced by the learning by heart of what are called memory verses and others have so-called Promise Boxes where suitably positive passages of Scripture are plucked at random from their original context and applied to the individual believer. Passages such as this from Romans 8:28, "all things work together for good to those who love God" - a verse which some people think means that nothing but good can happen to you when you love God. Or how about this from Tehillim 121, "He will not let your foot slip —

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your guardian is not asleep. No, the guardian of Isra'el never slumbers or sleeps. Adonai is your guardian; at your right hand Adonai provides you with shade — the sun can't strike you during the day or even the moon at night. Adonai will guard you against all harm; he will guard your life. Adonai will guard your coming and going from now on and forever." The Memory Verse/Promise Box mentality encourages a naive understanding of faith in which if there is an apparent conflict between the doctrinal ideal and your reality then, whatever the circumstances, your perception of that reality must be changed to fit the doctrinal ideal. And yet as we have seen the Psalmist in Tehillim 27 challenges this view. As we have seen he juxtaposes the doctrinal ideal of God always rescuing, always saving with the reality of the absence of His presence. As Professor Benjamin Sommers has written, "[Professor Gerald] Blidstein [of Ben-Gurion University, Israel] argues that the psalm criticizes the simplistic faith of the first stanza, whose God he labels "an ersatz divinity, a facile projection of [the worshiper] himself." Similarly, Ellen Charry, maintains that in the first stanza, the worshiper thinks that "he has God in his pocket." While the faith of that section seems on the surface to be stronger, the truth is that in that section, the worshiper speaks of God — always in the third person — as something he knows about, but not someone whom he knows." And there's the rub! As Tehillim 27 demonstrates the ideal of how we can know God and how He interacts with us in this world is all fine and dandy but that ideal is ultimately found to be naive since it cannot survive prolonged contact with reality. A naive faith requires assent to theological ideals and consequently requires its adherents to repress or reject thoughts and feelings to the contrary - the kind of feelings that are expressed by the Psalmist in Tehillim 27. But as Ellen Charry, Professor of Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary writes, "[U]npleasant emotions are not to be repressed as untoward but to be healed through models that show how to handle them. Here, the psalmist gives permission to his audience to be emotionally conflicted in relation to God. He does not urge his hearers to 'grin and bear it' or 'put on a happy face,' and he does not disparage honest fear of God-abandonment..."

It perhaps because of this, and not necessarily because of the comforting theological certainty of its first stanza, that we Jews read Tehillim 27 so much in preparation for and during the High Holy Days. It teaches us that our purpose through these Days of Awe is not so much to aim at a faith that has been purified of all questions about and doubt in God but to grow into a mature faith where there is neither crippling fear nor naive confidence but where there is instead hope. This form of faith, writes Professor Sommers, is "quintessentially Jewish". After all, it was hope rather than certainty of doctrine that has sustained us as a people through thousands of terror filled years. The Promise Box believer declares that "He who watches Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps" but the reality of Auschwitz and the six million dead disputes this. We do not understand and yet hope in God yet sustains us. Is that not why our anthem is Hatikvah - the Hope? "Hope," writes Professor Sommers, "rather than perfect confidence characterizes the most mature Jewish faith: a readiness to admit one's fears, to look toward God expectantly while renouncing the claim to predict all God's actions. This faith is well displayed by Psalm 27's journey from simple, trusting piety in its first stanza, through doubt in the second, to hope in the third."

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