



WHY WOULD MORDECHAI RECITE THE PSALM FOR CHANUKAH?

“MIZMOR SHIR CHANUKAT HABAYIT” AND THE SUDDEN REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

As with most mitzvot, the primary obligation of reading the Megilah occurs during the daytime of the holiday.¹ Still, though the Mishnah does not mention a nighttime reading, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi teaches (*Megilah* 4a) that there is also an obligation to pre-read the Megilah on the night of Purim as well. The Talmud explains a possible basis for this teaching from the familiar verse in Mizmor Shir, Psalm 30, recited daily: “So that he will sing to You — honor — and not be silent; Hashem is my G-d, forever I will praise you!” Rashi explains: “Sing to You honor — by day,” and “not be silent — by night”; thus the verse proves that the Megilah is also read the night before, as we both sing its praises to G-d in the daytime, and are also not silent of praise the night before.

This derivation is shocking for two reasons. First, the verse only spoke about a doubled praise — singing G-d’s praises and not being silent



— but mentioned nothing about daytime and nighttime! Second, the verse comes from Tehilim 30, a psalm disconnected entirely from the holiday of Purim!² This essay will unpack the connection between this verse, the holiday, and the times of night and day, and in the process deepen our understanding both about an important prayer that we recite every day and also about our reading of the Megilah and our celebration of Purim.³

When seeking to explain different scriptural derivations for laws in the Talmud, we should take the approach that the drasha of the Talmud does, indeed, reflect a simple reading of the text, the *pshuto shel mikra*, or

something close to it, even if we do not yet appreciate or understand the connection between the verse and the law in question. In this case, we have reason to further suspect that there is more to the link between Purim and this chapter of Tehilim, as *Esther Rabba* 10:5 argues that the characters of the Megilah, from Mordechai to Esther to Haman, all recited parts of this chapter of Tehilim while Mordechai was paraded through the city of Shushan on the king’s horse. We are clearly missing something if the Talmud and Midrash both connect this chapter to the Purim holiday, yet we cannot see the slightest connection.

Maimonides students study *Bei’urei Ha-tefilah*, the meanings of the prayers, and have done so since the school’s founding under Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav z”l, decades ago. They learn to inspect the morning psalm, Mizmor Shir, and realize that its central message is not about the Temple mentioned in its introductory

verse, but rather about G-d's ability to save those in need — and thus bears much greater closeness to the holiday of Purim than we first imagined.

Mizmor Shir contains many elements that are typical of other chapters of Tehilim: a prayer uttered in difficult moments (30:9), a depiction of Hashem's salvation (30:3-4, in this case healing from potential death), praise of Hashem because of the salvation (30:2, 5, 13), and even a section explaining why David was confident that he would be saved (30:6, because Hashem is angry for only a short time, 30:10, because the living praise G-d and not the dead). What makes it stand unique from the other psalms is how it describes four reversals that accompany G-d's sudden redemption.

“At night, tears sleep — but in the morning are songs of praise” captures two reversals: At night, David went to sleep crying, worried and suspecting that because of his illness he might not wake up the next morning — but in an instant felt healed the following morning, so much so that he turned to praise! Night turns to morning and tears to happy song, as the speaker's situation is reversed overnight! The penultimate passuk adds two more reversals, “you have opened my sackcloth,” a sign of mourning (Esther 4:1-3), and “You tied upon me a belt⁴ of happiness”; and also that eulogy turns to a happy dance! This chapter uniquely captures a sense that G-d's salvation can come almost in an instant, and totally reverse our fortunes in the blink of an eye.

This dimension of sudden reversal is captured by the first word of the penultimate passuk, a word familiar to anyone come Purim time: “*hafachta*” — You have reversed it, which is echoed by a key word of Megilat Esther (9:1, 22): “*ve-nahapoch hu.*” We start to see a greater connection between this psalm and the holiday of Purim now that we realize that they are each about the idea of G-d's wondrous and sudden reversal of our fortunes. Indeed, if we were to ask which Biblical figure went to sleep one night wearing sackcloth and woke up the next morning wearing a belt of joy the clear answer would be Mordechai in the Megilah.

To return to our initial questions, though the short quote of Psalm 30 quoted by the Gemara does

The Talmud teaches that the Megilah must be read twice, in order to ensure we have ample time and space to highlight both the sorrowful feelings of tragedy and also the joyous feelings of salvation. It is too much to read the Megilah once and expect to feel both aspects at the same time, so better to read it twice.

not reference either Purim or the daytime and nighttime readings, we can now understand that the Gemara actually used a shorthand to show that the *entire* chapter is really about reversals like Purim, and how so often, those reversals come with sorrow at nighttime and salvation in the morning.⁵ Indeed, Jews have had the practice of reciting this psalm both at night as a way to plea for protection in worrisome times,⁶ and in the morning in appreciation of the salvation of the new day.⁷ The prayer and the praise are two sides of the same coin, as the difficult situation of the past becomes the salvation of the new morning.

The Megilah is read first at night to highlight the urgent mourning, tears, sackcloth (4:3) and even eulogy of the Jews of Shushan when the king first made his decree against the Jews. The reader of the Megilah is fasting, and the tune of Eicha brings the congregation to tears when the words capture the dread felt by the Jews at the time. And then the same words are read in the morning — but this time highlighting the praise, song, dance, and happiness after salvation. Thus the Talmud really teaches that the Megilah must be read twice, in order to ensure we have ample time and space to highlight both the sorrowful feelings of tragedy and also the joyous feelings of salvation. It is too much to read the Megilah once and expect to feel both aspects at the same time, so better to read it twice, and capture both the feelings of night (not being silent) and the feelings of day (singing praise).

The holiday of Purim is the holiday of reversals, and Megilat Esther is the scroll that tells the story of instantaneous reversals. We experience this ourselves each year as we go through the holiday, feeling



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at first the sad feelings of sorrow, and then turn to the happy feelings of joy when the text is re-read the next morning.

May we all feel these complex emotions at this year's Purim as well; and may the one-year anniversary of the sorrow for many in our communities reverse itself and turn into feelings of, "the month that turned for them from agony to happiness and from mourning into holiday."

Endnotes

1. See Tosafot Ha-Rosh *Megilah* 4a, and stated less strongly in the Tosafot on the page to *Megilah* 4a. This carries implications for those who will only attend one of the two readings of the *Megilah* — that it is preferable to attend the daytime reading and not the nighttime one. This also explains why the She-hechyanu is repeated during the day, though it was already recited the night before, since the daytime reading is more crucial. [Some misunderstand *Magen Avraham* 692:1 as arguing that the daytime She-hechyanu exists primarily to apply to the mitzvot of the day, but careful inspection of his language reveals the bracha primarily applies to the main *Megilah* reading, the one of the daytime.] A third proof that the major reading is in the daytime is the fact that our status for Purim of the 14th and 15th is set based on our location in the morning of Purim not the evening (Rashi, *Megilah* 19a). Finally, some note that the reading of the *Megilah* early on the *yom ha-kenisah* may have been limited to the morning reading only (*Or Zarua* 2:369), because it is the primary mitzvah.

2. The psalm is more connected to Chanukah than it is to Purim, and it is the supplementary psalm recited on each day of Chanukah, according to *Mesechet Sofrim* (18). Commentaries struggle to determine the larger connection between the heading of the psalm "A song on the occasion of 'Chanukat Ha-bayit,'" its subject that involves death and healing, and its author David. The best interpretation may be the one offered by

Rabbi Reuven Margoliot in *Ha-Mikra Ve-Ha-Mesorah* (16–20), who says the song is "On the occasion of the groundbreaking of the temple," and includes David's reflections on the groundbreaking of the temple in the final chapter of Shmuel Bet, after the nation was healed from a tremendous plague.

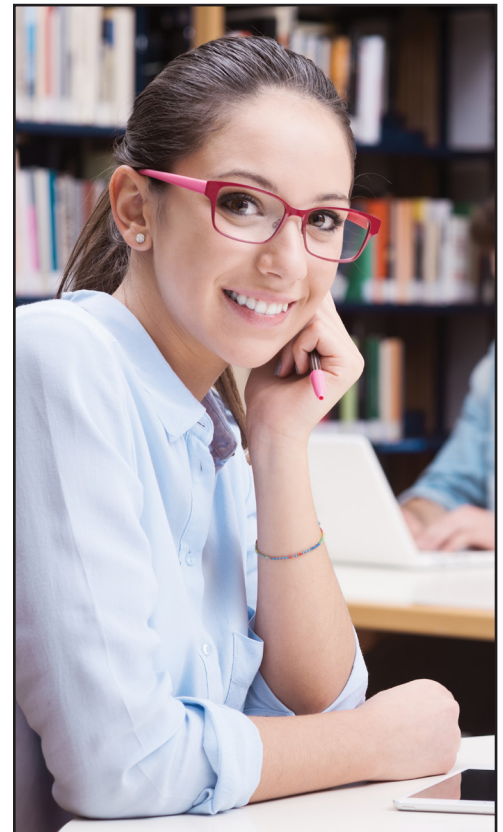
3. A second derivation comes from Psalm 22. This psalm begins with a description of day and night (22:3), so it is easier to see its connection to *Megilat Esther*. It is also titled "*Al Ayelet Ha-Shachar*," or morning star (Radak), which is the Hebrew translation of Esther's name according to Targum Sheini to Esther 2:7 (from Persian "Setareh," etymologically related to the Greek word "Aster," the Latin "Stella," and ultimately the English word "Star"). It is also one of the only Tehilim to feature the word *kelev*, or dog, (17, 21), which may allude to the Persian kings, see *Rosh Hashanah* 4a, and my observation in Frame et al. *A Common Cultural Heritage* (2011), 192. Psalm 22 is connected to *Megilat Esther* across Rabbinic literature (*Midrash Tehilim* 22, *Yoma* 29a, *Megilah* 15b).

4. "Vate'azreini" coming from the root a.z.r, meaning to tie a belt as in the morning blessing "*Ozer Yisrael Be-Gevurah*." It is often misunderstood as coming from ' .z.r., to aid or assist.

5. I would even go so far as to suggest that if this psalm is recited on Chanukah, it is because then, too, the Jews went to sleep in sorrow thinking that the oil had been used up, and awoke to joy when it was still left; it is not recited just because of the word "chanukah" in the title of the Psalm.

6. *Semag*, end of Positive Commandment 18, based on what appears to be a different version of *Shavuot* 15b. Our siddurim include the other psalms of *Shavuot* 15b — Psalm 3 and Psalm 91 — in the nighttime Shema service, but not Psalm 30.

7. Mizmor Shir was only added to the morning tefilah in the 17th century, but it is now standard in most siddurim. However, it is incorrectly dubbed part of Psukei Dezimrah. Since it appears before Baruch She-amar and since it is a Psalm of petition more than praise, it should be understood as a Psalm recited upon rising, parallel to its recitation before sleep (see previous note), not as the "introductory Psalm to Psukei Dezimrah."



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