
Living in God

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Of all the people in the world—and especially of all the world’s non-Jews—who would have any response at all if they were to be challenged to cite a phrase or two from the Book of Psalms, I’d think about 99 percent of them would come up with a few words from the twenty-third psalm. But as famous as it is, it’s still a peculiar candidate for that kind of renown. Able to complete his poem in only six verses, the first three of which bear only the most subtle connection to the last three, the poet writes as David, the shepherd-king of Israel. But, as so many psalmists do, he then proceeds to ignore his own words and writes, not as David at all, but as a sheep . . . or perhaps as a lamb.

Now being ovine means, no doubt among other things, knowing what sheep want from their masters and the poet isn’t at all sheepish about listing his needs as he compliments the shepherd who satisfies them: food (“he pastures me in grassy fields”), water (“leads me by still waters”), rest (“my soul is at rest”) and exercise (“[and] he drives me around—presumably around the meadow—in perfect circles”).¹ As we come to the end of the first half of the poem, we have the very portrait of a happy sheep, the charge of a competent shepherd.

The only detail that distinguishes this catalogue of needs fulfilled from the opening paragraph or two in any shepherd’s manual, in fact, is the poet’s opening remark that the shepherd is not David anymore than is the sheep himself, but God. The Almighty is his shepherd.² And he doth not want.³

So who precisely is this lamb? I suppose one could argue that he is one of David’s flock and that the remark about the Lord being his shepherd is simply the sheep’s pious admission that although David—whom biblical tradition does indeed portray as a shepherd lad in his youth—appears to be providing for the needs of his flock, the more profound truth is that God made the pasture land and the flowing stream and deserves, therefore, to be acknowledged as the ultimate Provider of the needs of the sheep.⁴ Alter-

nately, one could follow the lead of the traditional commentators, who suggest that the opening remark is simply an example of the psalmist writing in the style of the many other biblical authors who refer to Israel as a lamb or a sheep and that then, having started within that specific metaphoric range, the poet simply continues writing *as though* he really were an animal.⁵ But if you ask me, this isn't just *any* sheep, metaphoric or otherwise, pressing pen to parchment: this is the Temple we're talking about and the lamb is tomorrow morning's *tamid* sacrifice.⁶

There are, after all, a peculiar amount of Temple words in those six verses. The grassy meadow, for example, is the Hebrew *ne'ot*, a perfectly good word for pasture land, but one used repeated in Scripture to refer to the Temple.⁷ The still waters, for further example, are the Hebrew *me menuhot*, an expression highly reminiscent of the term *bet menuhah* (or, more precisely, *bet menuhah la'aron brit hashem*) that appears in Scripture as a designation of the Temple.⁸ Even the perfect circles in which the skilled shepherd gets his flock to exercise—the slightly obscure *ma'aglei tzedek*—are reminiscent of the name *neveh tzedek* used of the Temple by Jeremiah, who indeed spoke of Israel as a little lost lamb.⁹

I wonder if the Levitical singers—the choristers whose hymnal is our Psalter—didn't feel a certain kinship to the sacrificial animals they saw offered up daily in the Temple. In their own hymns, after all, they refer to themselves as the equals of their priestly overlords, but what can that have meant if the priests thought of their Levitical colleagues as little more than slaves? After all, the Torah, written almost exclusively from a priestly point of view, says as much not once but several different times.¹⁰ And neither was the fear of physical violence, even murder, far from the Levites' hearts: the theme of terror in the face of violent enemies is almost the only theme that runs more or less through the entire Book of Psalms and unites its disparate elements.¹¹ Were there fanatic elements within the priesthood that the Levites feared? Their songs never really identify their enemies precisely . . . but the author of the sixteenth psalm does tip his hand at the same time he makes a virtue of his silence by writing "I will have no part of their bloody libations / nor will their names pass my lips." Moreover, if the kind of neo-prophetic spirituality that runs through the psalms was seen as a kind of repudiation of the *quid pro quo* spirituality of the priests—or at least as a kind of challenge to that specific brand of ancient Jewish religion—then why could it not have been the priests—or some sacerdotal sub-group—who were as hostile as *some specific class of people* in old Jerusalem appears to have been?¹² The priestly Torah does, after all, sentence false prophets to death.¹³

At any rate, the poet closes with the wish that he might be allowed to live forever in the Temple and the reason tomorrow morning's *tamid*, writing during his nighttime vigil in the Temple's holding pen, would harbor that wish is obvious enough.¹⁴ But that all too reasonable sentiment is another way to identify the Levite in sheep's clothing whose song became our psalm:

a key item on the Levites' wish list was that they too might be allowed to live—not merely to work, but actually to dwell—in the Temple.¹⁵

The idea is probably best known to most Jewish readers from the twenty-seventh psalm, the poem designated for twice-daily recitation throughout the High Holiday season. There, for example, the psalmist could not be more clear: he declares openly that he only wishes for one thing in his life, then proceeds to list three different things that he wants and leaves us to realize on our own that they are all reflections of the same basic concept: to live permanently in the Temple, to experience visual communion with the beauty of the divine form, and to be allowed to seek that very experience within (as opposed to outside) the sacred precincts.¹⁶

The author of the fifteenth psalm, for further example, wonders aloud precisely what one would have to do to be allowed to dwell in God's tent or on God's holy mountain, both synonyms for the Temple.¹⁷ Similarly, the author of the sixty-first psalm sings out *'agurah be'ohalekhab 'olamim* (JPS: O that I might dwell in Your tent forever), then explains precisely what that implies: that he might be permitted to take refuge beneath the sheltering presence of God's wings—that is, that he might experience not merely faith in God or a sense of God's presence in his life, but the ongoing, sensually palpable, empirically perceptible experience of the divine within the confines of the sanctuary.¹⁸

The author of the ninety-first psalm must have had a similar idea in mind when he intertwined this notion with the theme the fear of persecution, denunciation and physical punishment by one's personal enemies—and asserted, rather hopefully, that only those birds who somehow merit actually to dwell in the Temple of God will be truly, permanently safe from the fowler's trap.¹⁹ As must also have had the author of the next poem in the book, who talks about those who seek sensual communion with God as though they were trees planted in the Temple's forecourts.²⁰

This yearning to dwell within the Temple compound had its own precedents within tradition.

When, for example, Scripture turns to the establishment of the original tent called *'ohel mo'ed*, the text suggests (obliquely, but probably unmistakably) that it was Moses' own tent that he set up outside the camp to provide a permanent spot for his own face-to-face communion with God (“as one individual might speak to another”).²¹ Now Scripture can hardly expect us to imagine that Moses, a married man with children, continued to live in the tent after it became the setting for ongoing prophetic communion with God, but that is precisely why we are told that his young servant, the lad Joshua, never left the tent: *somebody* needed to live there so that it never be unguarded lest nobody be there to listen should God wish to talk. (Indeed the fact that this latter tradition—that Joshua was never to leave the tent—can obviously not be taken literally only makes its presence in Scripture all the more telling.)

It wasn't only little Joshua who lived in the sanctuary, however. The young

Samuel lived in the Shiloh temple as well, not merely serving there as Eli's assistant in the daytime, but actually sleeping there at night.²² For that matter, Eli appears to have slept there as well: when God called out to the sleeping Samuel, the latter took it to be his master calling him from his own bed.²³

Indeed, it is just in this context that we need to understand the odd injunction issued to Aaron and his (remaining) sons after the death of Nadab and Abihu that the three of them are to remain permanently in the Tabernacle.²⁴ Despite the ancient and medieval efforts to limit this prohibition to a particular halakhic context, the simpler way to understand it is in the context of the general tendency of the priestly Torah to take over the institutions and appurtenances of prophecy: the prophet's *'ohel mo'ed* tent becomes the priests' tabernacle, the prophets themselves become priests who both speak to God (through the medium of the Urim and Thummim) and through whom God speaks to the people (from between the cherubs' wings). And just as Joshua lived in Moses' tent and Samuel in his temple, so must Aaron and his sons remain in their tabernacle.²⁵

It seems likely to me that the Levites of the Second Temple period would have found these stories about non-priests like the Ephraimites Joshua and Samuel living in the their respective sanctuaries deeply satisfying.²⁶ Night-time, after all, was the ideal time to seek visual and auditory communion with the divine and this idea too comes through over and over in the Psalter.²⁷ Even the author of the third psalm was probably thinking of a nocturnal experience of the divine when he writes about how he entered the Temple of God ("His holy mountain"), cried out that God should speak to him, lay down to sleep and was awakened by a palpable sense of the divine presence.²⁸ But although the priests, at least while on duty, lived in the Temple—according to tradition in the House of the Hearth located at the northwest corner of the Court of the Priests—the Levites, far more numerous than the priests, lived elsewhere and only spent the night in the Temple when they were on guard duty.²⁹ To the extent, at any rate, that the physical embodiment of this kind of communion with the divine realm was described, probably not metaphorically, as the experience of seeing the divine light (or, as it was called, the light of God's face or, even more provocatively, simply the face of God) shining out from within the innermost sanctum into the Temple courtyard, it was almost of necessity a nocturnal experience, something to be savored in the relative privacy of a courtyard given over for the night solely to its musical guards.³⁰

Although the *torah* of the priests ended up as our Torah and the *torah* of the (Levitical, neo-prophetic) psalmists ended up as a book of poems at the back of the Bible, it would be an enormous error, I think, to assume that the latter book has only liturgical or ancillary importance for a modern trying to develop his or her spirituality against the background of the biblical text. The Torah, of course, presents many examples of men and women who, with all their character flaws—or perhaps because of them—can serve as meaningful, deeply resonant role models for moderns. For me, however, the image that

beckons even more irresistibly is the one of that anonymous Levite standing on guard outside the priests' dormitory while the *kobanim* sleep the night away and the night is still, the quiet punctuated only by the occasional bleat from the Chamber of the Lambs next door. That Levite represents, at least for me, the longing for sensual, ongoing communion with God. Not for knowing *of*, but for knowing. Not for hearing *of*, but for hearing. And seeing. For experiencing the light of the divine face, for seeing the divine face, for seeing God. And, yes, for hearing the voice of God as well. He—the guard—and his colleagues wait until the night is dark and completely noiseless, they gather surreptitiously at an agreed-upon spot in the courtyard. Of their precise techniques, they have left us only the occasional hint in one or another of their hymns. But of their goal, they have written more openly . . . if only metaphorically. One thing they asked of God, for only one thing did they yearn: to live in the Temple all the days of their lives . . . and, in so doing, to hear God's voice, to see the light of God's face, to commune with God face to face and mouth to mouth in the easy way individuals speak to each other.

NOTES

1. Quotations from the twenty-third psalm are as follow: he pastures me in grassy fields: verse 2; he leads me by still waters: *ibid.*; my soul is at rest: verse 3; [and] he drives me along in perfect circles: *ibid.*

2. Psalm 23:1. I refer to the psalmists' as men although neither their identity or gender is known. In light of 1 Chronicles 25:5–6, however, it certainly seems reasonable to imagine that some of the psalms were written by women.

3. *Ibid.*

4. David as a shepherd in his youth: 1 Samuel 16:11.

5. See Rashi to Psalm 23:2, s.v. *bin'ot deshe'*, or the comments of the Meiri to those same words (ed. Hokohen, p. 55). Israel as a sheep: Micah 2:12, Jeremiah 50:17, Ezekiel 34:1–31; Psalm 95:7, Psalm 100:3 and many other passages.

6. The *tamid* was a twice-daily sacrifice offered up morning and evening, cf. Numbers 28:3–6.

7. E.g. at Psalm 83:13, cf. Rashi's comment *ad locum*, or at Lamentations 2:2. (The singular form, *na'ah*, does not actually appear anywhere in Scripture.) An alternate form, *naveh*, is used to refer to the Temple in many different places in Scripture, e.g. Exodus 15:13 (where it is preceded by the verb *nibel*, which follows it in Psalm 23 almost immediately) or Jeremiah 31:23. Rashi makes the point that *na'ah* and *naveh* are synonyms (or rather, alternate forms of the same word) both in his comment to Jeremiah 9:9, s.v. *ve'al ne'ot midbar*, and his comment to Psalm 93:5, s.v. *na'avah*, yet another form of the word.

8. 1 Chronicles 28:2.

9. *Neveh tzedek*: Jeremiah 31:23. Note that Jeremiah uses the expression *neveh tzedek* to refer to God Himself at Jeremiah 50:7. Is the expression *vesbilam nevat tzidkekhan* at Job 8:6 a pun?

10. Equals of the priests: on the assumption that the phrase *yir'ei hashem* refers to the Levites at Psalms 115:9–11 or 118:2–4. And cf. the references to the Levites as the slaves of the priests at Numbers 3:9, 8:16 and 19 and 18:6 and cf. 1 Chronicles 6:33.

11. There are countless references to the fear of denunciation and violent attack by enemies in the Psalms, fewer to the fear of being murdered *per se*. Cf., however, passages like Psalm 7:2–3 (“ . . . deliver me from all of them who pursue me and save me / lest they tear me to shreds as would a lion its prey . . . ”), 10:8 (“ . . . in secret places, he—the foe—murders the innocent . . . ”) or 36:25 (“ . . . let them not say, ‘We have destroyed him’ ”), in which the fear

of being killed seems quite real. The poet actually uses the word *retzah* (“murder”) in connection with his fear of the enemy at Psalm 42:11.

12. Psalm 16:4. The differences between the spirituality of the priests, as exemplified and set forth in the Torah, and the spirituality of the Levites as described in the Psalter is the subject of my book, *Travels on the Road Not Taken: Towards a Bible-Based Theory of Jewish Spirituality* (London [Ontario], 1997.) I hope to return to the question of the identity of the psalmists’ enemies in a later essay.

13. Deuteronomy 18:20.

14. The Mishnah notes at M. Tamid 3:3 that a stock of lambs was kept in a special room called The Chamber of Lambs that was in the northwest corner of the Court of the Priests, which was also where the priests’ dormitory chamber was. Regarding this latter chamber, see below.

15. The fact that both the Chamber of the Lambs (*lishkat hatela'im*) and the priests’ dormitory called the House of the Hearth (*bet hamoked*) were in the same corner of the Temple courtyard must have made his identification with the lamb even clearer, or at least more reasonable, in the psalmist’s mind.

16. Psalm 27:4, translating *levaker* in light of 2 Kings 16:15.

17. Psalm 15:1.

18. Psalm 61:4.

19. Psalm 91:1, taking *seter* as a name for the Temple in light of Psalms 27:5 and 61:5, both psalms cited above. The author of Psalm 91 returns to this theme in verse 9.

20. Psalm 92:14. The Psalter uses the term *tzaddikim* as a technical term for seekers of sensual communion with God in many places, e.g. Psalm 140:14, where the term is used as a synonym for *yesharim* who dwell (!) with God.

21. Exodus 33:7–11. For the tradition that the tent the text refers to as “the” tent was Moses’ own, see Rashi to Exodus 33:7, s.v. *yikah. 'et ha'obel*. “As one individual might speak to another”: Exodus 33:11.

22. 1 Samuel 3:3.

23. 1 Samuel 3:5. Note that 1 Samuel 3:15 implies that Samuel, who slept by the ark, could get to Eli without having to open the front doors of the sanctuary. If Scripture makes a point of saying (at 1 Samuel 3:3) that Samuel slept “in the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was,” then the unstated implication is probably that Eli slept in an adjacent chamber somewhere close by. The note at 1 Samuel 2:22 that Eli was “very old” probably means to suggest that he was a widower who slept alone.

24. Leviticus 10:7.

25. Prophetic tent becomes priestly tabernacle: cf. Exodus 40:17–38 with 33:7–11; priests speak to God through the Urim and Thummim: Exodus 28:30; God to speak to people from between the cherubs wings: cf. Exodus 25:22 with Numbers 7:89; ancient attempt to limit meaning of Leviticus 10:7 to specific halakhic context: *Tosefta* Sanhedrin 4:1 in the name of Rabbi Judah; medieval effort: Ramban *ad locum*, s.v. *pen tamutu*.

26. Joshua as an Ephraimite: Joshua 24:30; Samuel as an Ephraimite: 1 Samuel 1:1, but cf. 1 Chronicles 6:18–22, where Samuel is provided with a levitical pedigree after all.

27. Examples of nighttime experiences of the divine in the Psalms are as follows: Psalms 16:7, 17:3, 32:4, 77:3, 88:2, 119:55 and 119:62, and 134:1.

28. Psalm 3:5–6, taking *yismekheni* to refer to the sensually perceptible presence of God, as, e.g. at Psalm 51:14. The rather obscure remark at Psalm 4:5 about God hearing when the faithful call out and then lie silent on their beds is probably rooted in that same experiential context.

29. Priests living in the *bet hamoked*: M. Tamid 1:1 and Middot 1:6–8. Levites on guard duty in the Temple: M. Middot 1:1, cf. 1:9, where it is specifically noted that a Levite always spent the night sleeping right outside the priests’ dormitory in the *bet hamoked* and cf. also Ezra 2:42 (=Nehemiah 7:45, with a slightly different total). The specific location of the *bet hamoked* is noted at M. Tamid 3:3. The reference to the sound of the *magrefah* at M. Tamid 5:6 suggests that the Levites slept somewhere nearby, however.

30. Examples of references to seeing God's face in the Psalms can be found at Psalms 17:15, 27:8 or 105:5. Examples of references to seeing the light of God's face may be found at Psalms 31:17 or 80:4. Whether the references within the Psalter actually to seeing God, e.g. those at Psalms 27:4 or 63:2–3, are specifically to this experience or to another is unclear.

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