

Perspectives on Tehillim Chapter 145

We recite our beloved *Tehillim* chapter 145 (which makes up the majority of the *Ashrei* prayer) three times daily, which led Shelomo Goitein to dub it the “*Shema* of the Psalms.”²²⁷ It is the only psalm that begins *tehillah*, praise,²²⁸ and Amos Chakham suggests that perhaps the Sages named the book “*Tehillim*” after this psalm.²²⁹ In this essay we consider different perspectives on this psalm as a chapter in *Tanakh* and then as part of our liturgy.

R. Aviyah Ha-Kohen: Alternation between Calls to Praise and Praise

R. Aviyah Ha-Kohen offers several ways of structuring the psalm.²³⁰ The most convincing frames *Tehillim* chapter 145 as alternating between calls to praise and actual praise. The psalm would be set up as follows:

Call to praise:

I will extol You, my God and king, and bless Your name forever and ever.²³¹
Every day will I bless You and praise Your name forever and ever.

Praise:

Great is the Lord and much acclaimed; His greatness cannot be fathomed.

Call to praise:

One generation shall laud Your works to another and declare Your mighty acts.
The glorious majesty of Your splendor and Your wondrous acts will I recite.
Men shall talk of the might of Your awesome deeds, and I will recount Your greatness.
They shall celebrate Your abundant goodness, and sing joyously of Your beneficence.

Praise:

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.
The Lord is good to all, and His mercy is upon all His works.

Call to praise:

All Your works shall praise You, O Lord, and Your faithful ones shall bless You.
They shall talk of the majesty of Your kingship, and speak of Your might.
To make His mighty acts known among men and the majestic glory of His kingship.

Praise:

Your kingship is an eternal kingship; Your dominion is for all generations.
The Lord supports all who stumble, and makes all who are bent stand straight.
The eyes of all look to You expectantly, and You give them their food when it is due.

²²⁷. Shelomo D. Goitein, *Biblical Studies* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1957), 228.

²²⁸. In contrast, fifty-seven psalms contain the word *mizmor* in their opening verses.

²²⁹. Amos Chakham, *Da'at Mikra: Tehillim vol. 2* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1979), 570, n. 2.

²³⁰. Aviyah Ha-Kohen, *Tefillah Le-Kel Chai: The Journey of the Soul and the Spirit of the Song in the Book of Psalms* (Hebrew) (Ein Tzurim: Yeshivat Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Dati, 2007), 93–111.

²³¹. Translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).

You give it openhandedly, feeding every creature to its heart's content.
The Lord is beneficent in all His ways and faithful in all His works.
The Lord is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him with sincerity.
He fulfills the wishes of those who fear Him; He hears their cry and delivers them.
The Lord watches over all who love Him, but all the wicked He will destroy.

Summary call:

My mouth shall utter the praise of the Lord, and all creatures shall bless His holy name forever and ever.

In this structure, there is a growing trend of praise. The first round of praise is one verse, the second is two verses, and the third is eight verses. The first call to praise has the psalmist referring to himself: "I will extol You...and [I] will bless...I bless You and [I] praise Your name forever and ever." The second call combines the psalmist as an individual with a group: "One generation shall laud...will I recite...men shall talk...I will recount...they shall celebrate." The third call is to the collective, rather than the individual: "All Your works shall praise You...Your faithful ones shall bless You...They shall talk...and speak." The psalm thus moves outward from the psalmist himself, to his joining the community in prayer, to focusing entirely on the community. A similar progression occurs with the root *b-r-kh* (bless). In verses 1–2, the psalmist will bless God. Verse 10 states that the righteous bless God. Verse 21 expands to the longing that all people should bless God.²³² The final verse teaches that although individuals form a community through prayer, each individual retains his or her voice: "My mouth shall utter."²³³

The psalm's final verse anticipates the day when "all creatures shall bless His holy name forever and ever." The individual will "bless Your name forever and ever," omitting "holy." God's name is referred to as "holy" with communal prayer, anticipating the concept of *devarim she-bi-kedushah* that requires a quorum to praise God publicly (*Megillah* 23b). By coming together as a community, people have the power to sanctify God's name.

Potei'ach et Yadekha: You Give it Openhandedly

Rabbi Yose [also] said: May my portion be of those who recite the entire *Hallel* every day. But that is not so, for a Master said: He who reads *Hallel* every day blasphemes and reproaches [the Divine Name]? We refer to the Verses of Song (*Pesukei De-Zimrah*). (*Shabbat* 118b)²³⁴

Why would someone who recites the *Hallel* (Psalms 113–118) each day be considered a blasphemer? R. Yitzchak Etshalom²³⁵ quotes R. Joseph Soloveitchik, who taught that the *Hallel* includes praise for God for His miracles. We risk lessening the impact of God's acts if we equate all miracles – daily and supernatural. Daily recital of *Hallel* would be a form of blasphemy. In contrast, *Tehillim* chapters 145–150 praise God for daily miracles such as sustaining creation and natural phenomena. R. Yose wishes that his portion would be among those who sing God's praises for the miracles we enjoy and appreciate every day.

Similarly, the Talmud suggests that the optimal praises of God bless Him for the mundane:

Rabbi Eleazar b. Avina says: Whoever recites [the psalm] Praise of David (*Tehillim* 145) three times daily, is sure to inherit the World to Come. What is the reason? Shall I say it is because it has an alphabetical arrangement? Then let him recite, Happy are they that are upright in the way (*Tehillim* 119), which has an eightfold alphabetical arrangement. Again, is it because it contains [the verse], You open Your hand [*potei'ach et yadekha*]? Then let

²³². Nahum M. Sarna et al. (*Olam Ha-Tanakh: Tehillim* vol. 2 [Hebrew] [Tel Aviv: Dodson-Iti, 1999], 267) notes that *Tehillim* chapters 146–150 present the community praising God rather than the individual, and suggests that one may view chapters 145–150 as a unit where the individual calls on others to praise God in chapter 145, and the following five psalms respond to that call.

²³³. Cf. Benjamin Gesundheit and Reuven Kimelman, "A Praise of David: Structure and Meaning" (Hebrew), *Megadim* 49 (2008), 61–62. A similar progression from the individual to the community occurs in Psalm 103, and that psalm also concludes with the voice of the individual still present.

²³⁴. Soncino translation. Rashi understands the *Pesukei De-Zimrah* as referring specifically to *Tehillim* chapters 148 and 150, which feature the word "hallelu." Most others understand this passage as referring to all of *Tehillim* chapters 145–150, which are recited in the daily liturgy (Rif; Rambam *Hilkhot Tefillah* 7:12; *Soferim* 18:1). *Halakhah* codifies *Tehillim* chapters 145–150 as the "daily *Hallel*" but if someone comes late to services and does not have time to recite them all, we follow Rashi in giving priority to chapters 148 and 150 (*Shulchan Arukh O.C.* 52:1).

²³⁵. Yitzchak Etshalom, <http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra/5762/hagim/Hallel1.pdf>.

him recite the great *Hallel* (*Tehillim* 136), where it is written: Who gives food to all flesh! (136:25). Rather, [the reason is] because it contains both. (*Berakhot* 4b)

Replete with praise for God for the Creation and Exodus, chapter 136 receives honorable mention for its penultimate verse that praises God for day-to-day sustenance. Human nature revels in the supernatural and finds little to get excited about in the mundane. In contrast, Jewish thought gives primacy to the miracles of every day, rather than the extraordinary. The *Tur* (*O.C.* 51) explains that the verse “*potei’ach et yadekha*” is the primary reason that the Sages mandated reading *Tehillim* chapter 145 each day. The *Shulchan Arukh* rules that if one does not have proper intention when reading this verse, he should return to recite it again (*O.C.* 51:7).

R. Elchanan Samet²³⁶ further observes similarities between *Tehillim* chapter 145 and *Tehillim* chapter 104:

<i>Tehillim</i> 145	<i>Tehillim</i> 104
15: The eyes of all look to You expectantly, and You give them their food when it is due (<i>enei kol eilekha yesabeiru, ve-atah notein lahem et okhlam be-ito</i>).	27: All of them look to You to give them their food when it is due (<i>kulam eilekha yesabeirun, la-teit okhlam be-ito</i>).
16: You give it openhandedly, feeding every creature to its heart’s content (<i>potei’ach et yadekha u-masbi’a le-khol chai ratzon</i>).	28–29: Give it to them, they gather it up; open Your hand, they are well satisfied (<i>tiftach yadekha yisbe’un tov</i>); hide Your face, they are terrified; take away their breath, they perish and turn again into dust.

Both psalms stress the dependence of all creatures on God’s sustenance. However, chapter 104 notes that while God takes care of all creation, not every individual creature receives what it needs. Chapter 145, in contrast, is purely positive. The psalmist celebrates how God sustains all creatures without further qualification.

The Acrostic and the Missing Nun

Chapter 145 is an acrostic, illustrating a complete praise of God from *aleph* to *tav*. In the words of Adele Berlin:

The poet praises God with everything from A to Z; his praise is all-inclusive. More than that, the entire alphabet, the source of all words, is marshalled in praise of God. One cannot actually use all of the words in a language, but by using the alphabet one uses all potential words.²³⁷

The psalm also is a literary inclusio that begins and ends with similar formulations. It begins “*tehillah*” – a song of “praise,” and ends “*tehillat Hashem yedaber pi*” – “my mouth shall utter the praise of the Lord.” It begins “*va-avarekha shimka le-olam va-ed*” – “I will bless Your name forever and ever,” and ends “*vi-yvareikh kol basar sheim kodsho le-olam va-ed*” – “and all creatures shall bless His holy name forever and ever.” Psalms that begin and end with the same wording are a sign of completeness, and the Talmud considers psalms with inclusios to be special (*Berakhot* 9b–10a, cf. *Tosafot* s.v. *kol*). Another element of completeness in the psalm is its frequent use of the term “*kol*” – “all.” “*Kol*” appears seventeen times, including sixteen from verses 9–21. Adele Berlin suggests that this theme teaches that God does good to all, and therefore all always should praise Him.²³⁸

Chapter 145 contains verses beginning with each letter of the *aleph-bet* with the exception of *nun*. The Talmud offers a midrashic explanation which connects it to *Amos*:

²³⁶. Elchanan Samet, at <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/tehillim70/51tehillim.htm>.

²³⁷. Adele Berlin, “The Rhetoric of Psalm 145,” in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry*, ed. Ann Kort and Scott Morschauer (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 18.

²³⁸. *Ibid.*, 19.

Rabbi Yochanan says: Why is there no *nun* in *Ashrei*? Because the fall of Israel's enemies (i.e., Israel) begins with it. For it is written: Fallen is the virgin of Israel, she shall no more rise (*Amos* 5:2)... Rabbi Nachman ben Yitzchak says: Even so, David refers to it by inspiration and promises them an uplifting. For it is written: The Lord upholds all that fall (*Tehillim* 145:14). (*Berakhot* 4b)

In this passage, the Sages homiletically link chapter 145 to *Amos* 5:2 to explain that although Amos prophesied that Israel shall rise no more, God raises *all* who fall – which would include Israel.

However, this is not a *peshat* explanation for the absence of the *nun*. Radak and Me'iri (on *Tehillim* 145:1) therefore state that we do not know the reason for the omission of the *nun*²³⁹ and the talmudic passage is a *derekh ha-derash* comment. Some acrostics in Psalms use the entire *aleph-bet*, whereas others such as 25 and 34 omit letters (*Kohelet Rabbah* 1:13).²⁴⁰ We do not know why some are complete while others are not.²⁴¹

In the Septuagint Greek translation of *Tanakh* (LXX), there is a verse that reflects the reading “*ne’eman*.” The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls provided a Hebrew version of the verse: “*Ne’eman Elokim bi-devarav ve-chasid be-khol ma’asav*.”²⁴² Methodologically speaking, it is possible that the original psalm omitted a verse beginning with *nun*. A later writer was troubled by that omission, and added this verse to complete the *aleph-bet*. From this vantage point, our Masoretic Text (MT) contains the original version.

Alternatively, it is possible that the original psalm contained the verse beginning with *nun*, but a scribe accidentally omitted it. From this vantage point, the MT does not contain the original version and the LXX and DSS preserve the more authentic text.

Contemporary scholars debate which of these alternatives is more likely.²⁴³ The best arguments in favor of the authenticity of the *nun* verse are: (1) it contains a new idea from the rest of the psalm; and (2) the first blessing we recite after *haftarat* is “*ha-Kel ha-ne’eman be-khol devarav*,” which is strikingly similar to the wording of this *nun* verse. Perhaps the formula of the blessing originates from this verse.²⁴⁴

The best arguments against the authenticity of the *nun* verse are: (1) Other acrostics in *Tehillim* (e.g., 25, 34, 37) also are incomplete, so the missing *nun* in 145 is not surprising. While true, this is not an argument against the *nun* as much as one demonstrating the plausibility of a -missing letter in an acrostic. (2) The *nun* verse sounds suspiciously similar to verse 17, “*tzaddik Hashem be-khol derakhav ve-chasid be-khol ma’asav*.” Perhaps this similarity suggests that a later author copied a nearby verse in a feeble effort to supply a verse beginning with *nun*. However, there are other repetitions in *Tehillim* that serve as a chorus (e.g., 24:7, 9; 67:4, 6), so the near-repetition of a verse is plausible here as well. (3) It is more likely for a later writer or translator to smooth out a difficulty than for a scribe to accidentally omit a verse. (4) *Berakhot* 4b already attests to the absence of a *nun*, so this omission is ancient. Given that we recite the psalm regularly in our liturgy, an accidental omission of the *nun* becomes less likely. Overall, it appears more likely that the MT contains the original text, whereas the LXX and DSS reflect a later addition.

In his introduction to *Vayikra*, R. David Zvi Hoffmann addresses the general issue of variant texts. While he grants the possibility of scribal errors in *Tanakh*, as a matter of religious policy we should not emend biblical texts or it will open a Pandora's box that cannot be closed. It would be very difficult to learn *Tanakh* religiously if we never could be certain about the authenticity of the text. Therefore, in practice we treat the MT as the original, even when we know of plausible variants.²⁴⁵

²³⁹. Uriel Simon (*Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: from Saadiah Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra*, trans. Lenn. J. Schramm [New York: SUNY Press, 1991], 104, n. 45) quotes the tenth-century Karaite Yefet ben Ali, who speculated that the omission of the *nun* verse suggests that it is impossible to fully praise God. While a nice idea homiletically, there are acrostics in *Tehillim* (111, 112, and 119) that do complete the *aleph-bet* so Yefet's explanation is inadequate at the level of *peshat*.

²⁴⁰. Gesundheit and Kimelman (“A Praise of David,” 64, n. 19) quote Yaakov Bazak who observes that the acrostics ascribed to David (25, 34, 37, 145) omit letters whereas those not ascribed to David (111, 112, 119) have complete *aleph-bet* acrostics.

²⁴¹. For further discussion, see Ronald Benun, “Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6:5 (2006).

²⁴². The Greek reflects the reading, “*Ne’eman Hashem be-khol devarav ve-chasid be-khol ma’asav*.”

²⁴³. See Sarna et al., *Olam Ha-Tanakh: Tehillim* vol. 2, pp. 268–269, for a summary of both sides of the argument.

²⁴⁴. Reuven Kimelman (“Psalm 145: Theme, Structure, and Impact,” *JBL* 113 [1994], 50) argues that a later writer drew from the blessing of the *Haftarah* and added it to the text of the psalm, rather than the reverse.

²⁴⁵. For a survey of rabbinic responses to instances where the MT appears to reflect different readings from the Talmud, see Yeshayahu Maori, “Rabbinic Midrash as Evidence for Textual Variants in the Hebrew Bible: History and Practice,” trans. Hayyim Angel, in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc. Orthodox Forum Series, 1996), 101–129.

Universalism and Particularism in *Tehillim* Chapters 145–150

The themes of universalism and particularism run throughout all *Tanakh*. *Tehillim* chapters 145–150, which comprise the heart of the morning *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, reflect those two themes as well.²⁴⁶ Chapter 145 is purely universalistic, as God sustains all creation. There is no special mention of Israel in this psalm.

In contrast, chapters 146–149 contain elements of God’s special relationship with Israel. Chapter 146 refers to God as the God of Yaakov (146:5), and the concluding verse likewise mentions Israel: “The Lord shall reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Hallelujah” (146:10). Although the rest of the psalm applies to Jews and non-Jews alike, these verses add a distinctly Israelite element. While much of 147 praises God in nature, it also highlights Israel:

The Lord rebuilds Jerusalem; He gathers in the exiles of Israel. (147:2)

He issued His commands to Jacob, His statutes and rules to Israel. He did not do so for any other nation; of such rules they know nothing. Hallelujah. (147:19–20).

Chapter 148 resembles universalistic psalms such as 8 and 104, which praise God as the Creator of the cosmos. Its closing verse, however, stresses the special God-Israel relationship: “He has exalted the horn of His people for the glory of all His faithful ones, Israel, the people close to Him. Hallelujah” (148:14). Chapter 149 contrasts Israel and her foes: “Let Israel rejoice in its maker; let the children of Zion exult in their king” (149:2). The psalm then focuses on God’s future retribution against Israel’s enemies.

Finally, chapter 150 returns to universalism: “Let all that breathes praise the Lord. Hallelujah” (150:6). The bookends of these six psalms are universalistic, whereas the middle four psalms contain more particularistic elements as well.

Tehillim Chapter 145 as Liturgy

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 4b) teaches that “whoever recites [the psalm] Praise of David three times daily, is sure to inherit the World to Come.” Amos Chakham²⁴⁷ notes that our printed text is not the original talmudic text. The original passage read, “whoever recites [the psalm] Praise of David daily.” R. Amram Ga’on had the original version in his *Siddur* (c. 875 CE). In the geonic period, the practice developed to recite this psalm three times daily to increase the odds of saying it at least once (*Shibbolei Ha-Leket*, 7). Evidently, this new practice crept into the text of the Talmud. The daily practice reflects the psalm’s second verse, “*-be-khol yom avarakheka*” – “every day will I bless You.”

In addition to the completion that the psalm exhibits with its acrostic and inclusio, our tradition to append verses at the beginning and end of the psalm adds a new dimension of completion. Prior to the psalm, we open with *Tehillim* 84:5 and 144:15, which begin with the word “*ashrei*.” At the conclusion of the psalm, we add 115:18, which ends in “Hallelujah.” In the liturgical form that we recite it, chapter 145 now begins with the first word of *Tehillim*, and ends with the final word in *Tehillim*. By reading *Tehillim* 145, we symbolically read the entire *Tehillim*.

Tosafot (*Berakhot* 32b, s.v. *kodem*) suggest that 84:5, “*ashrei yoshevei beitekha*” – “happy are those who dwell in Your house,” was added to refer to the idea that the saintly people of old used to prepare themselves for one hour before prayer. By reciting that verse, we symbolically use chapter 145 as our preparation for prayer.

Additionally, by adding the verses at the beginning and end of the psalm, we shift the universalistic psalm to a more Israel-centered focus. “Happy the people who have it so; happy the people whose God is the Lord” (144:15) prefaces chapter 145 with Israel’s joy in serving God. The psalm concludes by longing for all humanity to serve God: “all creatures shall bless His holy name forever and ever” (145:21). We follow that with an expression that we currently do so: “But we will bless the Lord now and forever. Hallelujah” (115:18).²⁴⁸ Finally, R. Amram Ga’on explained that adding 115:18 to the end of chapter 145 has it conclude with “-Hallelujah” in order to connect it to the following five psalms of *Pesukei De-Zimrah* that begin and end with “Hallelujah” (*Tur O.C.* 51).

The array of perspectives on this beloved psalm is not -surprising. Its love of God and its ability to move the individual into a -growing -community of worshippers who accept God’s kingship have indeed made it into the “*Shema* of the psalms.”

²⁴⁶. See also Sarna et al., *Olam Ha-Tanakh: Tehillim* vol. 2, 267.

²⁴⁷. Chakham, *Da’at Mikra: Tehillim* vol. 2, p. 579. Cf. R. Akiva Eiger (*Gilyon Ha-Shas* on *Berakhot* 4b), who notes that Rosh, *Tur*, and *Rokei’ach* likewise did not have “three times” in their versions.

²⁴⁸. Cf. Chakham, *Da’at Mikra*, 580; Gesundheit and Kimelman, “A Praise of David,” 68.