

“I Will Bless God at All Times” – Pesukei De-Zimrah on Shabbat and on Weekdays

I.

The core of the weekday *Pesukei De-Zimrah* is the recital of *Tehillim* chapter 145 (*Tehillah Le-David* preceded by the verse that begins “-*Ashrei yoshvei...*” and concluding with “-*va-anachnu nevareikh...hallelukah*”) and the subsequent chapters through the end of *Sefer Tehillim*.²⁷⁵ One merit of *Tehillim* chapter 145 is being written in alphabetical acrostic. Its other merit, teaches R. Elazar, which makes it superior to chapter 119, an eightfold alphabetical acrostic extolling the study of Torah, is that it also contains the verse “You open Your hand and satisfy all -living beings” (*Berakhot* 4b).

The alphabetical structure expresses a sense of poetic -completeness – from A to Z. When this form appears in *Tehillim* it is invariably what scholars call a “wisdom psalm,” not a lament, or a song of thanksgiving, but a poem contemplating how the world is and how one ought to live in it. In the eightfold chapter 119, the theme is the good life that is consummated in the study of Torah. Chapter 145 is one of these wisdom psalms. The speaker in the *mizmor* praises God and mentions that others do so as well: praise His deeds, His mercy, His kingship, the benefits God confers upon those who love Him and the rejection of the wicked. According to the *gemara*, this complete picture was chosen for everyday reading. It is the ideal choice because it includes not only the wisdom of God’s work, in alphabetical arrangement, but because it also contains a statement about God’s providing for all creatures. Thus *Pesukei De-Zimrah* grows out of this double sense: the contemplation of God’s acts and the acknowledgment of His providence for the world.

Note the wisdom themes that *Tehillah Le-David* does not feature. There is nothing about Jewish history per se, although this is certainly a suitable subject for praise. Except for the general statement about righteous and wicked at the end, there is nothing about what God does for human beings; certainly there is nothing about how individuals experience such favor. If these themes were favored, the alphabetical -chapters 111–112 would surely qualify. The providence that the *gemara* singles out is not even limited to humans. Some alphabetical *mizmorim* (see chs. 9–10; 37) deal with the sense of distress one experiences in the face of the prosperity of the wicked: *Tehillah Le-David* is not among them.

The chapters that follow *Tehillah Le-David* can be divided into those that praise God for His actions in the natural world and those that also, or primarily, emphasize His relations to Israel and to the righteous. Chapter 146 praises God for doing justice on behalf of the oppressed and counsels against relying on the high and mighty. The following chapter, 147, also combines the display of God’s power in nature with warnings against relying on worldly power. *Mizmor* 148, by contrast, calls upon the heavens to praise Him, and is entirely devoted to natural phenomena. Chapter 149 is wholly concerned with Israel and the righteous and God’s vindication of them. The concluding *mizmor*, 150, is a song of pure praise, a catalogue of musical instruments without detailing the subject of the praise.

Interesting is the halakhic ruling regarding which chapters should be read by a person who arrives late and must skip part of *Pesukei De-Zimrah* in order to continue the rest of *Shacharit* with the *tzibur*.²⁷⁶ -Chapters 146, 147, and 149 can be dispensed with; the latecomer should make an effort to recite 148 and 150. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik once explained the reason for this law: the primary theme of *Pesukei De-Zimrah* is to praise God as Creator of the natural universe as preparation for prayer proper. Therefore, after *Ashrei-Tehillah Le-David* chapters 148 and 150 deserve priority. This regulation thus reflects the content of *Tehillah Le-David*, by privileging, within the order of *Pesukei De-*

²⁷⁵. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefillah* 7:12 for this definition; and also see R. Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe*, O.C. II, responsum 16. It seems that Rashi (*Shabbat* 118b) separates *Tehillah Le-David* from *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, defining the latter as chapters 148 and 150.

²⁷⁶. O.C. 52 passim. This view is based on Rashi, who detaches *Pesukei De-Zimrah* from *mizmor* 145. Rambam and those who agree with him treat 146–150 as the continuation of 145. The insight regarding the greater thematic appropriateness of 148 and 150 would be valid according to Rambam as well. See also Rosh, *Berakhot* 1:6 and 5:6 and *Arukh Ha-Shulchan*, O.C. 52 for an overview.

Zimrah, the general themes of praise, as opposed to matters pertaining to social justice, or the destiny of the Jewish people.

II.

On Shabbat we recite an expanded version of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*. Let us leave aside the different customs about when to recite *Barukh She-Amar*, the blessing over *Pesukei De-Zimrah*: for the Sephardi practice, where *Barukh She-Amar* is postponed until after these additional -chapters of *Tehillim*, they are not really part of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, whereas for -Ashkenazim, who say *Barukh She-Amar* right at the beginning, the added text is more of a piece with the weekday recitation. All communities read chapter 19 (“The heavens proclaim God’s glory), chapter 34 (“When David changed his conduct before Avimelekh”), and also include -chapters 90–91, 135–136, 33, and 92–93.

Is there a common denominator that will help us understand why these *mizmorim* were added to the Shabbat *Pesukei De-Zimrah* or help us appropriate their message? According to *Levush* (section 281) their subject is “Creation or Torah,” because Creation was completed on Shabbat and the Torah was given on that day.²⁷⁷ His position is open to question on several fronts: To begin with, creation is also the subject of the weekday recital. How does the Shabbat liturgy differ in this respect? To this one might reply by distinguishing creation from the operations of nature. More particularly, Psalm 34 does not fit either category. -*Levush* copes with this problem by positing that the story about David and Avimelekh mentioned in the psalm’s superscription occurred on Shabbat.

Let us commence our investigation with that chapter. Chapter 34 shares one feature with *Tehillah Le-David*: they are both alphabetical. Given that the alphabetical structure is the first reason given by the *Gemara* for the centrality of chapter 145 in the daily liturgy, it may be useful to begin our inquiry by attending to this *mizmor* which appears second in the Shabbat *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, right after chapter 19.

Chapter 34 fits the description of “wisdom psalm.” Praise of God is central here, as it is in *Tehillah Le-David*. But there is a great deal in this song that is not in chapter 145. In *Tehillah Le-David*, we are told that all God’s creatures praise Him and, of course, the speaker himself leads off the praise. In chapter 34, by contrast, the focus is on human beings, and in particular on the community of the speaker. And in chapter 34, not only does David report the praise; he summons others to join him: “*Gadela-Shem iti*” – “magnify God with me.” He does not only describe the acts of praise; he preaches. His message is not only the call to praise. David also offers moral guidance: “Who is the man who desires life?... Preserve your tongue from evil, and your lips from deceit.” He praises God for -intervening to help those in need. All of these themes are downplayed or absent in -chapter 145. This makes chapter 34 a very different “wisdom psalm” from 145.

Chapter 19 opens the additional roster of *mizmorim* for Shabbat morning. *Levush* counts it under the creation rubric. In fact this *mizmor* has two main sections (setting aside the confession of sin at the end): the first celebrates the magnificent heavens that proclaim God’s glory; the second half moves from the book of nature to the book of Torah. “*Torat Hashem temimah*” – “God’s law is complete” (v. 8), sweeter than honey, bringing light to the eyes. Reading both parts together within one song, we are given to understand that the poetry of the heavens, for all its beauty and sublimity, is incomplete; the Torah offers a Divine wisdom that nature cannot.

Take these two *mizmorim* together, as they appear in our -*siddur* – they shift the focus of *Pesukei De-Zimrah* away from extolling the greatness of God as it is revealed in nature to the experience of God in His interaction with human beings. We may distinguish two ideas here. One is God’s action in responding to prayer and intervening on behalf of the oppressed. This idea is prominent in chapter 34. The other is the revelation of God through the Torah and the experience of God through the study of Torah. This is most explicit in chapter 19. Chapter 34, although it does not refer to the Torah, has a lot to say about the teaching of God’s way within the congregation.

One may regard these two chapters as paradigmatic because of their placement at the beginning of the Shabbat *Pesukei De-Zimrah* and, as we noted, because chapter 34 shares with 145 the -alphabetical -acrostic. We can also test our thesis as we did before: What is the law for the latecomer trying to catch up with the congregation? The -*Shulchan Arukh* does not rule on the subject. *Mishnah Berurah*, however, relying on the *Chayei Adam*, mandates priority for these two -chapters and for chapter 90, attributed to Moses, thus further confirming our hypothesis that they contain the special theme of the additional -*mizmorim* on Shabbat.²⁷⁸

An examination of the other chapters recited on Shabbat is consistent, overall, with our position. Chapters 90–91, noted above,²⁷⁹ reflect on the fragility and brevity of human existence and look to Divine intervention on our

²⁷⁷. See also *Yabi’a Omer* VI, 5, section 4.

²⁷⁸. *O.C.* 52 and *Chayei Adam* 19:4–6.

²⁷⁹. Since 91 does not have its own superscription, it is traditionally viewed as a continuation of 90.

behalf. Chapters 135–136 review history, from Creation through the Exodus.²⁸⁰ Chapter 33 also stresses God’s concern for the fate of the righteous. Lastly, chapter 92, the song of the Sabbath day, revolves around the brief flourishing of the wicked as opposed to the everlasting felicity of the righteous. All these texts sound wisdom themes, and all of them center on precisely those ideas that are not prominent in *Tehillah Le-David*. They are about God and man; God intervening in human history and God’s teaching to man, the Torah, and secondarily about the natural order that forms the background to the human.

III.

Why does this shift occur from the weekday *mizmorim* to those of Shabbat, from God in nature to God’s revelation to man under the categories of Divine providence and Torah? I recall the Rav proposing, in another context, that Shabbat is the day of Torah study.²⁸¹ He argued, if I recall correctly, from the fact that Shabbat has a longer reading from the Torah (and more *aliyot* than other days), and from the institution of the *derashah* (public study) on Shabbat afternoon, during which other religious activities were precluded.²⁸² If one were to extend this insight to our topic, it could be said that the weekday *Pesukei De-Zimrah* are devoted to preparation for prayer, and thus direct our attention to universal and natural themes – God as Creator and universal provider for all living beings. On Shabbat, where the service of God is more concentrated in the reading and study of the Torah, chapter 19 introduces the role of Torah as completing the experience of the Divine through the beauty and order of the creation. Chapter 34, as we have seen, includes the summons to communal Torah study – “Magnify God with me and let us exalt His Name together,” and preaches the proper use of the gift of language – “Preserve your tongue from falsehood...turn away from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it,” and also portrays God’s participation in the quest for justice.

We have set up a dichotomy between encountering God in nature, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Torah and God’s interaction with human beings. We have explained why Shabbat is connected to the Torah theme. What is the significance of the special attention given to God’s general concern for human welfare, His involvement in Jewish history and in the difficulties of human suffering?

One might say that Torah and its study represent a central manifestation of the more universal relationship between man and God. Both the experience of Torah and Divine intervention in human lives and in history share a common focus on the personal God. Preparation for the weekday prayer is enhanced through our perception of God as the Creator and Governor of the natural order, leading the worshipper to appreciate God as pure sovereignty over the universe. On Shabbat, the personal dimension most dramatically represented through the study of Torah and the singular engagement of Jewish history comes to the fore. Particularly in *Shacharit* we experience the Shabbat of *matan Torah*: “Moses rejoices in his portion” (“*Yismach Moshe*”), the keynote of the Shabbat morning *Amidah*, speaks not of the Sabbath of Creation but of the Sabbath of Sinai, which was not given to other nations. The corresponding *Pesukei De-Zimrah* is not only a preliminary to a day of study but also foreshadows the personal encounter between God and Israel.

Alternatively, consider the eschatological Shabbat reflected in the *Minchah Amidah* (“You are one and Your Name is one,” “*Atah Echad*”). At *Minchah* we single out neither the Sabbath of Creation nor that of revelation but the Shabbat that foreshadows the World to Come. This Shabbat is best captured in chapter 92: the song of the Sabbath day. This psalm has no immediate reference to Shabbat in the conventional sense that we know it. You can call it a “wisdom psalm,” and it deals with the fate of the righteous and the wicked. But whereas other chapters of theodicy – like 9–10 and 37, which we mentioned among the alpha-betical chapters, or 49 or 73, or all those that complain of the distress of the author or the nation Israel – have a dark quality about them, with the wicked prosperous and only the message of the *mizmor* to reassure us that their triumph is transitory, in chapter 92 the wicked barely emerge like grass before they are dismissed everlastingly. Chapter 92 speaks for the Sabbath of a redeemed world. One might then think of contemplating good and evil in the world, in the “gentle” manner exemplified by chapter 92, as a theme particularly suited to Shabbat. Nonetheless, chapter 92, unlike 19, 34, and 90, is not one of the “must say” psalms for the latecomer and this would lead us to prefer the first option.

²⁸⁰. On these chapters, see my “Between the *Hallel* of Entreaty and the *Hallel* of Satisfaction: *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* and *Hallel Ha-Gadol*,” in *Mitokh Ha-Ohel, From Within the Tent: Essays on the Holiday Prayers by the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman and Dr. Stuart W. Halpern, eds. (New Milford and Jerusalem).

²⁸¹. My assumption here is that the expanded *Pesukei De-Zimrah* originates with the Shabbat prayers and was carried over to other holidays or that the role of Torah study is sufficiently similar in all of them.

²⁸². See *Megillah* 23a. During the time set aside for public study the recitation of *Tehillim* was proscribed.