

ב"ה
תהילים
פרק סא

TEHILLIM-PSALMS

PSALM 61

**Commentary on Psalm 61 by
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**Publication of this pamphlet made possible
through the generosity of
Dr. Richard and Shoshana Laub**

PREFACE

King David's Soul and the Cry of Exile

There are different views as to King David's intention in reciting this psalm:

According to Radak it was composed while he was fleeing from King Saul and found himself far away from home. The plea of a person who yearns to be back home in Jerusalem is a theme that runs through several of the Psalms, especially Psalm 63.

Alternatively, Radak writes, it was said as a way of describing the exile of the Jewish people. In other words, he was prophetically foreseeing the anguish of the Jewish nation in exile and expressing their pleas to be redeemed.

Perhaps the two explanations are complementary. King David saw in his own trial of exile, when he had to flee the wrath of King Saul, a foretaste and harbinger of the future exile of the Jewish nation. In his pain he saw the pain of Israel. And by crying out to G-d to help him in his personal trials and tribulations he was crying and pleading for the entire nation in their time of dire need.

In Kabbalah, King David's soul is associated with the Divine attribute of *malchut*. The source of all the souls of Israel, referred to as *Knesset Yisrael*, is likewise the divine attribute of *malchut*. All Jewish souls thus are connected to King David's soul. His sensitive soul thus reflected and echoed the needs, aspirations and requests of all of Israel.

Because of the intimate relationship all of Israel has with King David, these psalms resonate with each and every Jew who recites them in time of need.

The War against Aram

Other commentators (Sforno and Metzudot) understood this psalm to have been composed by King David when he waged war against Aram who threatened to conquer the eastern part of the land. King David makes reference to this later (verse three) when he states: “From the end of the land unto you I call...” That is where King David was when he said this psalm; “at the end of the land,” i.e., at the remote eastern boundary of the land. This interpretation would have this psalm tie in with the preceding one (Psalm 60), which mentions King David’s war against Aram.

Other Reasons for Psalm

According to Me’iri (a fourteenth century Talmudic sage from Provence), there is no specific theme or event that King David refers to in this Psalm, rather it is his expression of gratitude for being given the opportunity to maintain his throne.

Malbim divides the psalm in half. Some sections express King David’s pleas to G-d when he was in exile and some sections express His gratitude and praise for G-d when he was ensconced on his throne in Jerusalem.

The anonymous commentator who prefaced every psalm with a few descriptive words (printed in most editions of the Psalms) characterizes this psalm as follows:

“King David recited this prayer when he was fleeing from King Saul. King David’s thoughts and pleas were entirely about long life, not for the sake of enjoying this world, but to engage in the fear of heaven all the days of his life.”

א לְמִנְצֵחַ עַל-נְגִינָת לְדָוִד.

1. For the conductor, on Neginnat, by David.

The word *lamnatzei'ach* is usually translated as “For the conductor.” King David composed this psalm as he did many of the other psalms for the conductor of the choir of the Levites that sang and played instruments in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Certain psalms were selected to be sung with the accompaniment of specific instruments. This particular Psalm was composed for an instrument called “*Neginnat*.”

Me’iri maintains that this instrument is the same as *neginnot* mentioned often in the Psalms.

The fact that King David uses the expression “**on**” על נגינה the *neginnat*” instead of the more common “**with**” בנגינות the *neginnot*” prompted the Midrash Pesikta Rabboti (9:2) to translate the word *neginnas* as “a song,” and interprets this verse homiletically: [“King David sings] an eternal song [to express his gratitude to G-d] for [his ability to sing] songs [to G-d].”

In other words, King David was grateful to G-d that he had the opportunity to sing G-d’s praises. It is like us saying to G-d, “Thank you for giving me the opportunity to say thank you.” He

therefore dedicated an eternal song extolling G-d's beneficence. In this context, *Neginnat* means song as in the word *niggun*, and *Lamnatzei'ach*-“to the conductor” has as its root the word *netzach* which means eternal.

From this Midrash we see that there are two ways in which we sing praises to G-d: Most of the time we express our gratitude to G-d for all of the good He has wrought. But, a higher level is when we sing praise to thank G-d for our ability to sing praises to G-d.

The difference between these two forms of praise is that the standard praise is for the things we receive from G-d and the focus is on ourselves and what we receive from Him. The praise King David sings here, by contrast, has G-d as the focal point. King David seeks a “pretext” to praise G-d because he is thinking of Him and not himself.

There is an alternate way of translating *lamnatzei'ach* based on the Talmud (*Pesachim* 119a) on Psalm 4 which has a somewhat similar beginning to our psalm: “For the conductor a psalm of David.” – “Sing unto Him Who rejoices when His children emerge victorious over Him.” The Talmud explains: G-d rejoices when He makes a decree and we, through our prayers, cause His decree to be annulled.

From this translation we can gain a better understanding of the power of prayer in general and the recitation of the Psalms in particular. G-d's desires our prayers and, indeed, we praise Him as the one who rejoices because we are “victorious” over Him, as it were.

ב שְׁמָעָה אֱלֹהִים רִנָּתִי הִקְוִיבָה תִּפְלְתִי.

2. Hear, O G-d, my cry, listen to my prayer.

From the Lips and from the Heart

Ibn Ezra explains the difference between the words “my cry” and “my prayer.” “My cry” is “revealed” or verbal, while “my prayer” is in the heart, as in the prayer of Channah [the mother of the prophet Samuel who prayed fervently but silently for a child].

The question can be raised, why does the verse preface the verbal form of prayer before the one that comes from the heart? Isn't a prayer that comes from the heart superior to a mere movement of the lips?

One answer can be that King David approached G-d and asked Him to accept his verbal prayer. If that doesn't suffice, then, at least, listen to the prayer that emanates from the depths of my heart.

These two forms of prayer can be said to reflect the difference between the Biblical form of prayer and the rabbinical form.

According to Nachmanides, a person is Biblically required to pray only when they feel the need to do so. A prayer is said to demonstrate our total dependence on G-d to help us in our time of need. The rabbis instituted that, regardless of how we feel, we must pray thrice daily. Frequently, these “routine” prayers are said by

rote and are not permeated with heartfelt pleas because we do not feel that we are lacking. But, even such prayer has power. It has been compared to a key that can open a lock. The words of prayer that were composed by prophets were designed to open up the gates of heaven.

King David, therefore, says to G-d on behalf of all of us who pray routinely, that He should accept our prayers even if they do not emanate from the heart. Just saying the words that were composed by our prophets have the capacity to unlock the gates of heaven.

But, surely, King David continues, He should at least accept the prayers that are recited from the depths of our heart. If routine prayer can be likened to a key that can open the gates of heaven, a prayer that comes from the heart has been likened by the Ba'al Shem Tov to an ax that can break down any gate.

The model for this latter form of prayer is the prayer of Channah, as the Ibn Ezra indicates. Her desire for a child was so powerful and her fervor in prayer so intense, that Eli, the High Priest, thought she was intoxicated. As the Rebbe explains, he did not think that she had consumed alcohol, but that she was intoxicated with her desire for a child. This form of prayer can certainly break through any barriers.

Praise and Request

A question arises. Usually the word “*rinah*” indicates a joyous prayer or song. However, the context here seems to suggest that King David here is crying as many translations render the word here.

One commentator suggests that King David here refers to the dual structure of our daily prayers. Before we approach G-d with our requests in the Amidah prayer, we must “first ‘arrange’ His praise. These are the Pesukei d’zimrah-Verses of song that precede the Amidah, and are intended to help us appreciate G-d’s greatness.

In light of this explanation the foregoing verse should be retranslated as: “Hear O G-d my **song** [of praise]... rather than “my **cry**.”

With this novel way of understanding this verse, Ibn Ezra’s explanation can be better appreciated. As mentioned Ibn Ezra interprets the first part of the verse as a reference to verbal prayer and the second part of the verse refers to prayer from the heart as in the prayer of Channah.

This is entirely consistent with the understanding that the first part of the verse refers to the songs of praise. A song, by definition, is something that we vocalize. By contrast, Channah’s prayer alluded to in the second part of the verse corresponds to the Amidah, as the Talmud derives the laws of the Amidah from Channah’s prayer. The Amidah must be recited quietly as was Channah’s prayer. And while one must enunciate the words to oneself, the focus of the Amidah is not on the sound but on the feeling of the heart.

ג מקצה הארץ, אליה אקרא בעטרף לבי בצור ירום ממני
תנחני.

**3. From the end of the land unto You I call,
when my heart grows faint. To a rock which is
too high for me, lead me.**

“The End of the Land”

The words, “the end of the land” have been interpreted in several ways by the classic commentators:

According to Rashi, King David would send his people to remote places to wage war against their enemies. King David would stay home, but he prayed for their welfare at the “end of the land.”

This approach conforms to the Talmud’s description of the complementary role he and his general Yoab played in the execution of their wars against their enemies: King David and his general Yoab would praise one another for their role in winning their wars against their enemies. King David would say, “if not for Yoab who wages war on the battlefield, I could never stay home to study Torah.” Yoab would return the compliment and declare: “If not for King David who stayed home to study Torah, I could never prevail in my battles.”

From this passage it is clear that King David did not stay home because he did not care to contribute to the war effort, but,

that King David's Torah study was so powerful that it provided Yoab with the Divine assistance to defeat their enemies.

However, despite King David's participation in the war effort by way of studying Torah, he did not take his mind off those whom he had sent into battle. He prayed for their well being.

Ibn Ezra explains this verse expresses King David's feelings when he was at a very low point in his life. Despite his desperate situation, he expresses his hope that G-d will take him to a "high rock."

Radak, explains that "the end of the land" refers either to King David, when he was in exile in the Land of the Philistines, or to the Jewish people wherever they may be in exile. In the preface we explained how the two interpretations are intertwined. King David's own travail and his pleas to G-d for salvation was his way of seeing the needs and the pleas of the Jewish people for all times until the coming of Moshiach.

Metzudot also applies the reference to "the end of the land" to King David when he was far away waging war with Aram.

In short there are four different approaches to the words "the end of the land" in this verse:

(a) David prayed for the soldiers who were far away. (Rashi).

(b) David prayed for himself, when he was in a lowly state. (Ibn Ezra)

(c) David prayed for himself when he was in exile or at war far away from home. (Radak, Metzudot)

(d) David's prayer was on behalf of all the Jews who would, in the future, be in exile. (Radak).

Radak's interpretation that "the end of the land" refers to exile is based on the Midrash, that explains the relationship of the preceding verse with this one. In the preceding verse King David was alluding to the way the Jewish people always called out to G-d from the time they were in Egypt and G-d always answered their prayers. Now that they are in exile, King David and the Jewish people plead with G-d to answer their pleas.

The Midrash continues that G-d laments the fact that they did not call out to Him before they were exiled. But, nevertheless as Moses states in the Book of Deuteronomy (26): "When you are in distress... and you will seek G-d your G-d from there and you shall find Him."

Two Movements of the Soul

From the Kabbalistic and Chassidic perspective this verse has been explained in the following manner:

In a discourse the Rebbe delivered on his sixtieth birthday gathering (Farbrenge) the Rebbe explained this verse based on the premise that here are two movements of the soul. The first is called "*ratzo*," which means "advance" and the second is called "*shuv*," which means "retreat." When a person's soul is inspired to the extent that it wishes to leave this worldly existence to become one with G-d the soul is in a state of *ratzo*. This feeling must be tempered with and followed by the movement of "*shuv*," to

redirect the energy into the physical world. This we accomplish by living a physical life guided by the inspiration and direction of the *ratzo*.

Thus the reference by King David to “the end of the land” refers to the lowest point that exists within the physical and material realm from which place one’s soul is drawn to. And it is from this place that one must call out to G-d.

And in calling out to G-d, the Psalmist here does not use any of His names, but simply “unto **You** I call,” referring to G-d’s very essence, not just to G-d as He manifests Himself through His attributes.

The implication of this calling out to G-d even when one is at “the end of the land” is that just as the movement of *ratzo* must be tempered by a sense of *shuv*, that ultimately, it is G-d’s will to make the physical world a dwelling place for G-d, similarly—and even more so—when the world oriented state of *shuv* must be tempered by the movement of *ratzo*.

“When my heart grows faint”

“When my heart grows faint.” Rashi comments by adding the word: עליהם “On their account.” By this Rashi means that King David’s heart grew faint on account of the soldiers that he sent into battle. This is the sign of a true leader. When the people he sends in harms way are in distress, or even the fact that they are far away from their home and family, the leader’s heart grows faint because of the profound sense of empathy he had for them.

Moreover, there is a Halacha (see below commentary to verse 5) that if a person sends another on a mission and they are

harmful they bear responsibility for it. This explains why Jacob was so distressed when Joseph disappeared, since it was he who sent him to visit his brothers.

Radak translates the Hebrew word **בִּעֲטָף** as: “When my heart is enveloped [in prayer],” and explains that when one prays prolifically their prayer it is said that they are “enveloped in prayer.” This means that their prayer is not just words that come from the heart, but they completely envelop the person. Presumably, a person who is so engrossed in prayer will be completely oblivious to their surroundings when they pray.

According to Radak, taken in combination with Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of the first part of the verse, then, is that King David refers to three forms of prayer:

- (a) Vocalizing the words of prayer; singing praises to G-d.
- (b) Prayer that emanates from the heart
- (c) To be enveloped with prayer.

While Radak explains that King David was enveloped in prayer, Metzudot understands his “envelopment” as being enveloped in his misery.

“To a Rock which is too high for me”

Rashi explains that the phrase “To a rock which is too high for me” is part of King David’s request that he be taken to an inaccessible high place.”

This explanation needs to be understood, for Rashi had explained the first part of the verse as King David's pleas on behalf of the soldiers he had sent far away to wage war. Why he is he now asking for his own elevation to a high rock?

Perhaps, according to Rashi, King David is referring to the formidable enemies he has sent his soldiers to fight. King David, by asking G-d to ascend to a rock that is too high for me, is essentially asking G-d for the success of his soldiers in their battles.

Alternatively, King David was basing his plea for his soldiers that he has sent to battle on his trust in G-d who is likened to a rock in Biblical literature. And his request was to generate the trust in G-d that they will prevail. G-d is described by King David here as a "rock that is exalted from me," meaning that G-d is beyond his ability to grasp. His trust in G-d was therefore not based on his ability to comprehend Him and how He can save his soldiers in battle. It was sheer faith and trust in a G-d that transcends logic and can therefore help even when their salvation remains elusive.

As our Sages explain that true trust in G-d is when a drowning person does not have even a straw to save himself.

Radak who explained the first part of the verse that King David was far away from his own land when he was in exile amongst the Philistines, explains this last part of the verse as a reference to his desire to return to the land of Israel that he metaphorically describes as a High Rock. The same holds true, Radak says, for the interpretation that he was referring to the future exile of the Jewish people and his prayer for them to return.

Metzudot explains that King David was referring to his own involvement in battle with a formidable enemy that he characterizes as a “rock that is too high.” He prayed that he should prevail in his battles with them.

Jerusalem: The Rock

Other commentators explain that the rock refers to Jerusalem. And that the reason it is called “high” is because it is a spiritually exalted city. And instead of translating it as “too high for me” it should be translated as “exalted because of me.” In this context, the Jewish people or King David express their heartfelt desire to return to Jerusalem, the rock. Their return will make it so exalted.

If King David is referring to the Jewish people, then this phrase means to suggest that the exaltedness of Jerusalem is the fact that it comes from me, i.e., the Jewish people, as it says, “G-d builds Jerusalem and the cast away of Israel he gathers.” The city of Jerusalem realizes its exalted nature because of its Jewish inhabitants.

And if King David is referring to himself, then the meaning of the phrase “exalted because of me” is that Jerusalem is exalted because of the fact that it houses the Kings of the House of David, the progenitors of the Moshiach. This too is based on a verse in a later Psalm which describes Jerusalem as the seat of the house of David.

An analysis of the above yields the following observation:

Jerusalem is referred to as a “rock” because it is, on its own, a strong city, because it is the city in which the Divine

presence is revealed. And that is why it was chosen as Israel's capital and the eventual site of the Holy Temple. However, the city's holiness and importance is magnified when it becomes the place where all of the Jewish people converge, and when it houses the place where the King's of the House of David reside.

Endless Yearning

The Chassidic dimension of this verse, as was mentioned earlier, puts David in a low place so that his soul is in a state of yearning to advance (*ratzo*) to greater heights. Following this approach, the reference to the “rock that is too high for me” is that when one's soul is in a state of advance, they always see their goal as elusive. No matter how much their soul rises to greater heights they realize that there is much more to achieve.

ד כִּי הָיִיתָ מְחֹסָה לִּי מִגִּדְּל עֹז מִפְּנֵי אֹיִב

4. For You have been a refuge for me, a tower of strength in the enemy's face.

Continuation of Preceding Verse

The opening word “for” implies that this verse provides the rationale for King David's prayer expressed in the preceding verse.

Radak explains that King David is saying that because G-d was frequently a refuge for him. He therefore calls out to Him.

The implication here is that if there had been no precedent for G-d to have provided him with salvation, David would not have

called out to Him. This premise is hard to understand. The obligation to pray is not dependent on past successes. Even if G-d would have answered none of his earlier prayers there is still an obligation to cry out to G-d.

It is possible that King David was not rationalizing his prayers, but in his profound humility, King David is expressing amazement that G-d would save him. He would not have “expected” G-d to respond positively to his pleas based on his record of righteousness. However, since G-d had always provided him with refuge he was confident that He would come through for him now as well.

For G-d’s Sake

Sforno explains simply that King David is making a case for him to benefit from G-d’s continued protection from his enemies. For if G-d’s protection would cease, the enemies would ascribe that to the limited nature of G-d’s power. Hence, he asked for protection for G-d’s sake not for his own.

King David’s Sincerity

Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, explains that this verse is actually connected to the next verse, in which he speaks of himself dwelling in G-d’s tent and taking refuge in Him. Why would King David desire to dwell in G-d’s tent?

Ibn Ezra explains, it is because G-d had already been exposed to His protection and strength.

In other words, according to the Ibn Ezra King David did not need a justification for him to call out to G-d. Rather he was

providing a rationale for the sentiment he expresses in the **next** verse that he desires to dwell in G-d's house. How does one harbor a sincere desire to be in G-d's house? Wasn't it presumptuous for King David to claim that he desires to be in G-d's home and to take refuge in the shelter of His wings? Was David sincere in his request?

In response to this challenge, King David prefaces the fact that he had already "tasted" G-d's protective energy, and that has "whetted" his appetite for more. He did not claim that, on his own, he had become so inspired and G-dly. Rather it was G-d's initiative. By providing him with His protective energy in the past, King David knew what it was to be enveloped by Him and to be taken into His embrace.

Thus, his request for more was his response to G-d's initiative. It was the depth of humility in him that ascribed everything to G-d; even his desire to get closer to Him.

A Taste of the Future

The above can serve as a lesson for the current period that places us at the nexus of the exile and Redemption. We are expected to desire the Redemption not only for the material and physical benefits it will bring. We must also harbor an intense desire to want to dwell in G-d's house. The revelation of G-dly light in the Messianic Age should motivate us to ask for an end of exile and the ushering in of the geulah, the final Redemption.

However, our overextended stay in exile has numbed our senses and tainted our minds and hearts with the materialistic and hedonistic pleasures of exile life. How do we sincerely ask for

Moshiach and Redemption for the G-dly light that will be revealed then?

The answer is that G-d has already given us a foretaste of what is to come in the recent past. Our generation has seen the greatest miracles of all times with the collapse of the Soviet Union before our eyes and the survival from the sustained attacks against Israel from 1948 onward.

In addition, the masters of the Chassidic movement have revealed to us the Hidden knowledge of Judaism that represents a taste of the Torah teachings that Moshiach will reveal.

Since we have already tasted the spiritual taste of Moshiach, the world is in certain sense more spiritual than ever before. Our desire for the Age of Redemption and the closeness to G-d we will experience is entirely possible and sincere.

ה אָגוּרָה בְּאַהֲלֶיךָ עוֹלָמִים אֶחָסָה בְּיִסְתֵּר כְּנִפְיֶיךָ סֵלָה.

5. I shall dwell in your tent forever, take refuge in the shelter of Your wings, Selah.

Two Worlds

The precise translation of the word עולמים—*olamim* is “worlds.” Following this translation, Rashi renders this verse: “I shall dwell in your tent for **[both] worlds.**” King David requests of

G-d to endow him with two worlds, this physical world as well as the world-to-come.

Since Rashi applied this verse to David on behalf of the soldiers he sent far away, his request for G-d to grant him both worlds seems to be out of place. Why did David move away from praying for his soldiers to focus on his own welfare in this world and the next?

One answer to this question might be related to a law (See *Ba'er Hetev, Orach Chaim*, end of #603) that requires one to repent for sending someone on a mission that caused them harm. The person who sent them has to bear responsibility for any harm that befalls a person who was sent at his request. According to the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 84:13), Jacob would have bleeding ulcers every time he reminded himself of how he sent Joseph to seek out the welfare of his brothers that led to his disappearance. Jacob considered himself guilty.

According to the Rebbe (*Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 5 p. 391) the fear of sending his messengers to his brother Esau where they could have been hurt prompted Rashi to explain that Jacob sent angels, not human messengers to determine Esau's intentions.

Perhaps King David was concerned that he had lost both worlds because he was the cause of the loss of life of his soldiers. He therefore asks G-d to not deny him these worlds.

Radak: The Holy Temple

Radak translates the word עולמים-*olamim* as “for long periods.” King David is simply asking G-d to provide him with longevity in His “tent.”

The divergent translations of Rashi and Radak yield differences in the translation of “your tent” as well.

According to Rashi the word “tent” must be understood metaphorically as living in G-d’s domain. King David prayed that he is never alienated from Him.

By contrast, Radak interprets the words “your tent” literally as a reference to the portable sanctuary (i.e., the Temple in Shilo, Nob and Givon prior to the construction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem by his son King Solomon).

Alternatively, Radak writes, that if this psalm is King David’s prayer for the Jewish people in exile, the reference to “your tent” is to the permanent Temple. In other words, it is the wish of the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem to dwell in the Holy Temple.

Metzudot: G-d’s Protection

Metzudot interprets “your tent” metaphorically as a reference to G-d’s protective influence. Metzudot also translates the word “עולמים *olamim*” as “eternally.” King David is simply asking G-d to extend His protection to King David forever from his enemies whom he was fighting.

The second part of the verse “in the shelter of Your wings, Selah,” is obviously a metaphor for G-d’s protection as Metzudot explains. Metzudot considers this phrase a poetic repetition of the first part of the verse.

Talmudic Approach: King David Lives on Forever

The Talmud (Yevamot 96b) asks, “Is it possible for a person to live in two worlds?”

The wording of the Talmud’s question suggests that it translates the word “עולמים *olamim*” as “worlds”, the same as Rashi.

However, the Talmud’s question needs clarification. Why can’t a person dwell in two worlds? Any righteous person who has lived in this world goes on to dwell in the next world. The Talmud’s question would have been more appropriate if it followed the Metzudot translation as “eternal.” The Talmud could have then asked, “How can a person live forever?”

The Meharsha understood the reference to dwelling in two worlds as a hope to dwell in both worlds simultaneously. Based on this understanding, the Talmud asks, how can one be in both worlds at the same time? Aren’t both worlds mutually exclusive?

The Talmud answers: “This is what David meant. ‘Master of the world, may it be Your will that people will say things in my name in this world.’ For Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: ‘Any Torah scholar whose words are quoted in this world, his lips will move in his grave.’”

Thus, the words of Torah spoken by a Torah scholar give the scholar a voice in this physical world as well. And King David’s request of G-d was that his words of Torah shall be immortalized so that he should remain a force in this world.

The question could be asked why David sought that type of immortality. Why wasn't it enough for David to live on in the next world, the spiritual world of souls, referred to as *Gan Eden* or paradise?

Perhaps the answer ties in with the Chassidic interpretation of verse two that King David recognized that as much as his soul wanted to leave this world (*ratzo*-advance), his mission was to make this world a "dwelling place" for G-d and it was his duty to retreat into this world (*shuv*).

Continuing on this theme, King David revels in his ability to depart from a world infested with threatening forces and take refuge in G-d. And precisely when he realizes the blessing of being able to rise above this world, he quickly reverses his approach and pleads with G-d to allow him to be in **both** worlds. He wants to be able to escape this world; but at the same time, he wants to be able to be a part of this world, affect it and make it a dwelling place for G-d.

Indeed, King David's request has been heard by G-d. He lives on. Whenever we recite the Psalms King David's lips move. As we quote the Talmudic saying (Rosh Hashanah 25a) when we recite the monthly blessing on the moon: "דוד מלך ישראל חי וקיים" David, King of Israel, lives on forever!"

Torah in Two Stages

Based on the Talmudic approach to this verse, commentators explain the two parts of this verse as a reference to King David's desire to be in G-d's embrace, by way of Torah study. All of his requests to be able to stand up to his enemies is so

that he can devote his life to Torah study. But, Torah study itself has two stages that are reflected in the two segments of this verse:

The first part of the verse where David asks to “dwell in your tent forever,” the Hebrew term for “dwell” אגורה-*agurah* is cognate to the word *ger*, which means a stranger. Accordingly, this request to “dwell in your tent” refers to David’s desire to study Torah in this world, which is a transient world, in which we are strangers or sojourners. Yet he uses the plural *olamin* which implies two worlds. For even when we study in this world, the Torah reverberates in both worlds. Whenever anyone quotes King David’s words, he is here in this world with us, moving his own lips

In the second part of the verse, King David asks to “take refuge in the shelter of Your wings, Selah.” This refers to the next world, where he will continue to study Torah forever. The word *selah* expresses eternity as the Talmud states, “wherever the term *netzach*, *selah* or *va’ed* appears it [is an expression of something that] will never be interrupted.”

David’s Plea to Build the Temple

Returning to the first part of the verse in which he asks to “dwell in Your tent forever,” it may be suggested that King David is expressing his heartfelt desire to build the Holy Temple that is referred to as “the eternal house,” as opposed to the earlier Temples that were merely temporary Sanctuaries. His request was that he should dwell in the “tent” which would then “evolve” into a permanent home.

וּפִי-אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים שָׁמַעְתָּ לְנַדְרֵי נְתִתָּ גְרֻשָׁתִי, יִרְאֵי שְׁמֶךָ.

6. For You, O G-d, Have heard my vows; You have granted the heritage of those who fear Your name.

King David's Trust in G-d

Radak speaks of the many vows King David made to G-d when he was in exile if G-d would return him to his home. And even though, at the time that King David recited this psalm, G-d had not yet heard his vows and ranted David his request to return home. Yet King David's trust in G-d is so complete that in his eyes, it was as if G-d already gave David what he had wanted.

Alternatively, the Radak explains, King David speaks on behalf of the future exiled Jews who also make vows to G-d if He would liberate them from exile. This seems to suggest that one of the ways of bringing the Redemption is to make a vow that we will do something special when G-d returns us to Eretz Yisrael and rebuilds the Holy Temple.

Metzudot explains this verse as a reference to the vows that King David made repeatedly when he waged war against his enemies and he was able to conquer the lands of the enemies and render them the inheritance of those who Israel “who fear Your name.”

Vindicated!

Rashi previously explained that this psalm was composed for the sake of the soldiers King David sent to wage war against those who sought to take the Land of Israel away from the Jews.

Rashi addresses the second part of the verse in a manner that is consistent with his general thrust that G-d granted David his request and restored the cities of Israel that were captured through “my efforts.” Presumably, Rashi means by “my efforts” the wars that he initiated. By saying this, King David seems to be vindicating his decision to send soldiers in harms way.

It may also be possible that with this passage King David tried to provide a rationale for himself to build the Temple. As was noted before, he made reference to this aspiration in the preceding verse when he requests to “dwell in Your tent forever.”

However, the greatest obstacle to his role in building the Temple was his role in sending people into battle. Indeed, the reason given in the book of Chronicles as to why David was denied the privilege to build the Temple: “You have shed much blood.” This psalm might actually represent David making his “case.” By virtue of his waging war he restored the integrity of Israel’s cities and established security and stability to Israel. What better preparation can there be to the building of the permanent Sanctuary?

This ties in somewhat with the Alshich’s understanding that the vow David speaks of here is the vow he made that he would not rest until he found the proper site for the Temple.

Perhaps then, David is saying that since he kept his vow he therefore wants to be able to complete his life’s goal to actually build the Temple. Since he had facilitated the restoration of Israel to its people coupled with the fulfillment of his vows he is entitled to complete the task of building the Holy Temple.

Vow of Fasting?

Another way we can explain David's reference to a vow is based on the law that when soldiers go out to fight a war they must fast as a way of beseeching G-d to be victorious. However, there is another apparently contradictory law that prohibits fasting during battle so as not to weaken the fighters. How do we reconcile the two opposing imperatives?

According to Halacha, the soldiers themselves must not fast but rather make a vow to fast after the war. The vow itself is taken by G-d as if they fasted already and in that merit they will be victorious. Alternatively, those who do not go out in battle must fast for those who are fighting.

Hence, it may be proposed that King David, who was in relative safety and did not have to fight, made a vow to fast and in that merit G-d delivered the captured cities of the Land of Israel into the hands of the soldiers he had sent out to war.

ז יָמִים עַל-יָמֵי-מֶלֶךְ תּוֹסִיף שְׁנוֹתָיו כְּמוֹ-דֵר וְדָר.

7. May You add days on to the days of the king. May his years be like generation after generation.

Adding Years

According to Rashi, King David in this verse requests that his days shall be lengthened: "If it was decreed upon me to die

young, add days to my life so that my years reach the age of seventy as the normal lifespan of each generation.”

We must try to understand how this verse fits in to the preceding ones where, according to Rashi, King David was praying on behalf of the soldiers he sent to remote places to fight the enemy. What does his request to live long have to do with these soldiers?

It appears that King David was concerned that G-d may have decreed that he would die young as a punishment, “measure for measure,” for having cut short the lives of the young soldiers he sent out to battle. As can be seen from the preceding verses, David was sensitive to his role as the one who sends others to battle.

He thus invokes his title as king, to justify his right to have sent these soldiers into battle, for that is the prerogative of a monarch as was stipulated by the prophet Samuel when the institution of the monarchy was inaugurated.

Praying for Moshiach

Radak explains this verse consistent with the preceding ones that King David was praying for his own welfare from his vantage point in exile. And, indeed, his mentioning of “days of the king” supports the contention that he was praying for himself, inasmuch as he was a king.

Metzudot follows the approach of Radak with the added detail that he was praying for his own survival since he was personally engaged in battle. He was therefore asking G-d that he should not die by the hands of his enemies in battle. And even

though he refers to the “king,” he is referring to himself. Metzudot finds a parallel verse in Jeremiah (38) where Zidkiyahu refers to himself as the king.

Alternatively, Radak provides the second dimension of this psalm that it was said on behalf of the Jewish people in their future exile. However, unlike the preceding versus, this verse distinctly refers to a king. How then can it be interpreted as a reference to the Jewish people?

Radak therefore hastens to add that this verse was said for the longevity of Moshiach. The Radak’s interpretation that it is a reference to Moshiach is based on the Aramaic Targum who also applies this verse to Moshiach. And it echoes the request made by David in Psalm 21 (verse 5): “He asked life of You; You gave him length of days...” According to the Talmud (Sukkah 52a), this request was made on behalf of Moshiach:

“As soon as Moshiach ben David sees how Moshiach ben Yoseph was killed, he said to G-d, ‘Master of the world, I do not ask anything of You except for life.’ The Holy One Blessed be He replied, ‘Before you spoke, your father David already prophesied about you, as it says, He asked life of You; You gave him length of day.’”

Two Generations = Seventy Years

Yet Radak and Targum differ as to the translation of the latter part of the verse: “May his years be like generation after generation.” According to Radak it refers to two generations. In other words, David was asking to live the lifespan of two generations. Rashi also understands the “generation after generation” to refer to his request to live up to the age of seventy.

Targum, however, translates it as two worlds, this world and the world to come.

Obviously Radak is referring to the interpretation that it applies to King David, whereas Targum is referring to the interpretation that the verse speaks of Moshiach.

We must try to understand what King David meant when he asked for Moshiach to live in this world and in the next world? Doesn't every righteous person live in both worlds?

Presumably, Targum follows the view of the Ramban that Moshiach will not die, as opposed to the opinion of Rambam. Thus, he will make the transition from this world into the Messianic Age without dying in either. The world-to-come in this context refers to the future Messianic Age; particularly the period following the Resurrection of the Dead.

Other commentators (Seforno and others) explain that King David prayed for long life because kings were not known to live long. This is based on the Talmud (Pesachim 87b) that "royalty buries its occupants, for every prophet outlived four kings."

King David's Years: Adam's Donation

Pirkei d'Rabbi. Eliezer (19) interprets this verse which speaks of adding years to David's life as a reference to Adam's contribution of seventy years of his life to David who was destined not to live at all.

The Zohar (Vayishlach 168a) provides a different version of how David received his seventy years. It was a contribution from Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. Abraham was supposed to live 180 years, but lived only 175. Jacob was supposed to live 175 as Abraham, but only lived to the age of 147. Joseph was supposed to live as long as his father Jacob but only lived to the age of 110. The total number of years contributed was seventy.

Chida reconciles these two versions of the increase of years to David by claiming that David's life was as productive as double the lives of others who live to seventy since he hardly slept

Tzemach Tzedek reconciles the two versions according to the teachings of Kabbalah: David's soul was a reflection of the Divine attribute of *Malchut*, the last of the Ten Divine Sefirot (Attributes). This attribute is initially devoid of any character or form since it is the ultimate receptor to all of the higher emanations that it absorbs from the upper nine attributes. These upper attributes are themselves divided into two categories, the intellectual attributes and the emotional ones. Adam bequeathed to David only the more aloof intellectual level of *chochma*, whereas the Patriarchs invested his soul with the lower emotional attributes that they personified.

Likkutei Levi Yitzchak (a Kabbalistic commentary on the Zohar authored by the Rebbe's father) provides an alternative explanation:

The attribute of Malchut is a product of two processes. The first is the very "construction" of this attribute, which derives from the attribute of *chochma*. The second process is the union of Malchut with the upper six emotional attributes known in Kabbalah as *z'er anpin*—the Small Visage. Thus King David—who

personified the attribute of Malchut—needed the infusion of two sets of seventy years; the first which he received from Adam was to construct his soul and the second that he received from the Patriarchs was to enable his soul to connect and unite with the upper sefirot—z'er anpin.

The Rebbe reconciles both explanations by explaining how the construction of Malchut comes from Chochma, whereas the union of Malchut with the upper Sefirot involves its relationship with the emotional Sefirot.

The Rebbe then translates the Kabbalistic analysis into more down-to earth concepts that apply to each and every one of us:

Every Jew has at his very core the level of *Yechidah* which is totally united with and subordinated to G-d to the point that it is as if it doesn't exist. This is the level of soul that Moshiach, the descendent of David is said to possess. And since the Ba'al Shem Tov taught that every Jew possesses a spark of Moshiach's soul, we all have the capacity for total self-sacrifice and self-transcendence.

This explains the notion that King David was not destined to live. It is to be understood that his soul was so self-effacing and self-abnegating that it had no way to function as an independent being.

However, one cannot function as a human being and fulfill his or her mission to make this world the world G-d willed it to be in this state of total self-abnegation. One must therefore be given life; i.e., the ability to express the essence of our soul's within the parameters of our normal functions.

Towards this end there are two aspects: There is what we receive from Adam and that which we receive from the Patriarchs.

From Adam we receive the ability to exist and perform in a manner that involves the “external” aspects of our personalities. The Patriarchs provide us with the energy to have our souls’ essence manifest itself in the more spiritual “internal” aspects of our lives.

In addition, the inspiration we receive from the Patriarchs is for the “union of Malchut and the upper Sefirot.” In practical terms this means that the inspiration and life we receive from the Patriarchs is intended not only for our own personal spiritual existence, but also for the purpose of a procreative union that will give birth to others. Our spiritual lives must endeavor to affect others as well.

ה יֵשֶׁב עוֹלָם לְפָנַי אֱלֹהִים חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת מִן יִנְצְרֶהוּ.

8. May he sit before G-d forever. Appoint kindness and truth, that they may preserve him.

Who is the “he” in this verse? Who is David asking for?

Rashi adds: “the king.” Presumably, according to Rashi, King David meant himself, as Metzudot explained in the preceding verse that when David asked for the days of the “king” be lengthened he was referring to himself.

The question can be raised, why did David not refer to himself as the king until verses 7 and 8?

Perhaps, when King David was far away from his capital of Jerusalem, his status of monarch was compromised, as the Jerusalem Talmud states that in those six months that he was on the run, King David was stripped of his special legal status of king.

Hence, the beginning of the verse (as in the preceding verse) in which he asks to “sit before G-d forever” he was back in Jerusalem and firmly ensconced on his throne, and he could therefore be referred to as a king. Likewise in the preceding verse, David had already returned from his exile and has fully restored his status as king.

However this approach sits well with those commentators who maintain that David was in exile, either being hunted by King Saul or fighting his enemies. Rashi, however, interpreted this psalm as a prayer by David for his soldiers whom he had sent into battle. David’s status of king was not compromised in the least.

Perhaps, even according to Rashi’s interpretation that David was praying for his soldiers he was concerned that his life as king was jeopardized. A king is not a private person. All his G-d given power and authority derives from his people. Even when David was anointed by the prophet Samuel he did not automatically assume the monarchy. It took many years for David to prove himself to the people until they accepted him as their king.

This premise can help us understand the meaning of the phrase “Long live the king!” mentioned in Biblical literature. By

the nation making this declaration they were, in effect, not only accepting the king as their king, but, moreover, this declaration actually added life to the king as a king.

To explain: While on the one hand a king is an august leader who is aloof from his people, on the other hand our Sages tell us, that a “king is the heart of the Jewish people” and that “There is no king without a nation.” There is an organic relationship between a true monarch and his subjects.

When the people declare their desire for the king to live long they are essentially contributing life to him. (See *Sefer HaSichot*, 5748, Talk of 2nd of Nissan for sources and further elaboration of this concept.)

Hence, while King David was praying for his soldiers who were in harm’s way he was concerned that they were no longer loyal to him. And if they were lacking in their connection to him that would cause a twofold disaster: First as limbs of a body that were not connected to their heart, their situation was precarious. And as their relationship to David was weakening they could not contribute to his life as a king and David’s tenure as monarch was likewise precarious.

This will explain the two parts of this psalm. In the first few versus David is praying for the welfare of his people who he had sent far away to wage war. In the later versus, David is praying for his own welfare that his sending people on this dangerous mission should not ascribe guilt to himself (as explained above). And at the end of the psalm, king David specifically prays that his role as monarch should not be undermined.

Alternatively, Rashi may be referring to Moshiach when he says “the king.” David was praying for his royal descendent who will go through much travail that he should survive and succeed.

A Life of Torah Study

Radak explains David’s request to “sit before G-d” as a reference to “be engaged in the reverence of G-d through wisdom.”

This means that David did not want to spend his life as a typical monarch who is obsessed with power, nor did he want to be a military hero. All he wanted is to study G-d’s wisdom. And even this was not due to his desire to quench his thirst for knowledge. Rather it was motivated by his desire to develop a sense of respect, awe and reverence for G-d that one derives from studying His Torah.

No More War

According to Metzudot, King David’s request in this verse is to no longer need to go out in battle to fight his enemies.

But how would he prevail against them? The verse anticipates this question, according to Metzudot, and supplies the answer in the end of the psalm: “Appoint kindness and truth, that they may preserve him.”

King David was in effect saying to G-d: May Your kindness and the truth of Your commitments protect me from my enemies so that there would be no need to wage war.

It is clear that King David did not revel in his military career and exploits. War is a necessary evil and therefore he prayed to G-d to make war obsolete.

Drawing the Holiness into Our World

In Chassidic thought this verse is tied in with verse three which read: “From the end of the land unto You I call.” As explained earlier, King David’s call from the end of the land is an expression of his soul’s intense yearning to withdraw from the world and rise to be one with G-d. This attitude is called *ratzo* or advance. But, as discussed above, *ratzo* must be followed by the feeling of *shov*, which means retreat. One must “draw” down the inspiration from the soul’s ascent to the sublime into the lowliness of the world in which we are situated.

Chassidic thought proceeds to retranslate and interpret our verse: “May he sit before G-d forever...”

Sitting [“May he **sit**”] alludes to the process of bringing the highest G-dly energies into our world in a way that it not only does not elude our capacity to absorb it, but becomes totally internalized and “settled” (another translation of the Hebrew ישב *yeshev*) within the parameters of the world.

The Hebrew word “*olam* עולם” which has been translated as forever, can also be translated as “world” and is etymologically related to the word “העלם *helem*” which means concealment. The idea inherent in this translation is that we must introduce the most sublime spiritual energies into the parameters of an otherwise dark world, where G-dly light is obscured.

The words “before G-d” can be Kabbalistically interpreted to refer to a level of G-dly light that transcends the process of *tzimtzum*, the contraction of His infinite light. This process is represented by the name of G-d, *Elokim*, employed here in this verse. Hence, the full re-translation of this verse will yield the following:

“May the Infinite light of G-d that preceded and transcended the *tzimtzum* be introduced and internalized within the parameters of the otherwise concealed world.”

ט כן אֶזְמְרָה שְׁמֶךָ לְעַד לְשִׁלְמֵי נְדָרַי, יוֹם יוֹם.

9. Thus shall I praise Your Name forever, to fulfill my vows day after day.

Rashi’s Approach: No Contingency

Rashi explains that David was pledging to continually praise G-d by keeping his vows on a daily basis if G-d accedes to his current request.

On the surface it sounds as if David was making his offer to sing to G-d and fulfill his vows contingent on G-d granting him his request. This is hardly consistent with King David’s noble and altruistic character.

In truth, David was merely stating that if G-d grants him his request for long life dwelling in G-d’s home, he will devote those long years to continued praises of G-d. Moreover, in this concluding verse David explains why he wants long life; so that he can continually praise G-d and not for his own selfish reasons.

Radak's approach is slightly different from Rashi's David pledged to G-d that if He would grant him his request to make good on his vows on a daily basis in the Land of Israel (referred to in verse six) then, David promises that He will sing praises to His name for all the good that He has wrought.

Praising G-d in Times of Peace

Metzudot explains this verse in a similar fashion, in consonance with the interpretation of this entire psalm that it was recited as a prayer to prevail in his battles. King David now pledges to sing praises to G-d in the future if He would see to it that there he will no longer have to wage war.

Metzudot then explains the reference to paying his vows as his way of "convincing" G-d that it would be preferable for him to sing praises and pay his vows on a daily basis in a time of peace than to make vows during the war and beseeching G-d to be saved from his enemies.

In other words, a prayer and promise to G-d made in a time of crises and under duress does not carry the same weight as a prayer made in a time of peace when there is no compulsion to acknowledge G-d. Therefore, King David pleads to G-d to give him the opportunity to keep his promises and sing praises even in a time of peace.

We Want Moshiach Now!: Why?

The application to the modern day and age is that throughout Jewish history the belief in anticipation for Moshiach

was usually a product of the suffering we went through as a nation. The ideal way to desire Moshiach and Redemption is to appreciate the positive aspects of Redemption; the revelation of G-dly light and the ability for us to serve Him without any distractions.

Now that the Jewish nation is as free and prosperous as it has ever been since the days of King Solomon, we must make the transition from wanting and demanding Moshiach exclusively to take away our pain to wanting Moshiach to bring the world to the state of G-dly perfection.

The more Midrashic Aramaic Targum translation of this verse understands this verse as an explicit reference to the days of Moshiach: “I will thus praise Your name forever at such time when I will fulfill my vows on the day that Israel will be redeemed and on the day that Moshiach will rise to the position of king.”