

Psalm 22 -- Some thought and sources, July 16, Temple Micah Psalms Group

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Psalm 22 and Liturgical uses:

- On the Fast of Esther
- On Purim (some traditions in the evening, some in the morning service)
- Verse 4 is part of "*Uva Letzion*." (see below)
- Verse 12 is recited during Selichot. [penitential prayers associated with the high holidays and fast days]
- Verse 26 is found in the repetition of the Amidah during Rosh Hashanah.
- Verse 29 is a part of the Song of the Sea (in Pesukei D'Zimra). Also Musaf on Rosh Hashanah.
-- Source: Wikipedia

Psalm 22 and Esther

Like many others, Ps. 22 can be read as an individual, or the nation, experiencing distress and then gratitude. Many commentaries link this psalm, via both readings, with the Book of Esther, through the theme of active peril in exile followed by rescue, as well as through Esther herself and royal imagery. (Also see addendum.) Here are two ancient sources relating the psalm to Esther and the Purim story:

In the verse "For the Leader; upon the hind of the dawn" (Ps. 22:1*), Scripture speaks of the generation of Mordecai and Esther, [a time that was more dark than] the night. For though it is night, one has the light of the moon, the stars, and the planets. Then when is it really dark? Just before dawn! After the moon sets and the stars set and the planets vanish, there is no darkness deeper than the hour before dawn, and in that hour the Holy One answers the world and all that is in it: out of the darkness, He brings forth the dawn and gives light to the world.

Then, too, why is Esther likened to the hind of the dawn? What is true of the light of dawn? Its light rays out as it rises; at the beginning, light comes little by little; then it spreads wider and wider, grows and increases; and at last it burst into shining glory. So, too, Israel's redemption through Esther came about little by little. At the beginning "Mordecai sat in the king's gate" (Esther 2:21); then "the king saw Esther the queen" (Esther 5:2); then "on that night the king could not sleep" (Esther 6:1); then "Haman took the apparel and the horse" (Esther 6:11); then... .. and at last "the Jews had light and gladness" (Esther 8:16).

R. Assi said: As the dawn ends the night, so all miracles [recorded in Scripture] ended with Esther.**
-- Bialik & Ravnitsky, 152:12 [bracketed material in B&R]; Sources: Midrash Tehillim 22:13, B. Yoma 29a

* More on "hind of dawn" below. ** The Talmud discussion (Yoma 29a) cited here goes on to explore if/how miracles in scripture ended with the Book of Esther, raising the example of Chanukah.

R. Levi said: [En route to the king, Esther] reached the chamber of the idols, and the Divine Presence left her. She said, *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me*.¹⁴ Dost thou perchance punish the inadvertent offence¹⁵ like the presumptuous one, or one done under compulsion like one done willingly? Or is it because I called him 'dog', as it says. *Deliver my soul from the sword, mine only one from the power of the dog?*¹⁶ She straightway retracted and called him lion, as it says. *Save me from the lion's mouth.*¹⁷ *And it was so when the king saw Esther the queen.*¹⁸

(14) Ps. 22:2 (15) In associating with Ahasuerus (16) Ps. 22:21 (17) Ps.22:22 (18) Esther 5:2
-- B. Talmud, Megillah 15b

22:1)

לְמִנְצַח עַל־אֵילַת הַשָּׁחַר מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:

For the leader; on **ayyeleth ha-shahar**. A psalm of David. (JPS 1985)

JPS 1917: For the leader; upon Aijeleth ha-Shahar. A psalm of David.

King James (1611): *To the chiefe Musician vpon Aijeleth Shahar. A Psalm of David.*

Alter (2007): To the leader, on **ayeleth hashahar**. Of David.

Talmud discussion (and later translation), as in examples above: **upon the hind of the dawn**

Greenberg: **upon witnessing a deer at dawn**

Koren: **on the strength of a new dawn**

Jerusalem Commentary says that some theorize "ayyelet hashahar" is "the name of the melody to which the psalm was to be sung," adding:

It is possible that this was the melody to which a well-known song was sung in those days, a song which referred to the planet Venus as "the hind of the morning," because the rays of light sent out by that planet are similar to the horns of a hind. Similarly, in rabbinic Hebrew the planet Venus as it rises in the east in the early hours of the morning is referred to by the term *ayyelet hashahar*.

[footnote:] Another explanation, עַל־אֵילַת הַשָּׁחַר, 'al-ayyelet hashahar -- this psalm was originally intended to be recited as a morning prayer, or as an accompaniment to the daily morning offering. According to this explanation, the word *ayyelet* denotes strength and might (see verse 20, and Rashi on Ex 15:8). The expression 'al-ayyelet hashahar refers to the hour when the sun rises, increases in intensity, and becomes evident to all -- the time of the morning sacrifice and the morning prayer service. If *ayyelet hashahar* refers to the planet Venus, then it can be argued that the psalm was not intended as a morning prayer, but as a pre-dawn prayer, like the Selihot service in our time....

[or perhaps it refers] to the morning itself, when the rays of the sun break through like the horns of a hind and light up the eastern sky before sunrise....

-- Hakham, Amos. *Jerusalem Commentary*, p. 156

For the Leader. Upon the hind of the dawn" (Ps. 22:1). R. Benjamin bar Japheth said in the name of R. Eleazar: Why is the prayer of the righteous compared to a hind? To tell you that as with the hind, whose antlers keep forming more and more branches every year as long as it grows, so with the righteous -- the more they pray, the more will their prayers be heard.

-- Bialik & Ravnitsky, 525:174 Source: B. Yom 29a

22:20)

וְאַתָּה יְהוָה, אַל-תִּרְחַק; אֵילוּתִי, לְעִזְרָתִי חוֹשֶׁה

But You, O LORD, be not far off; **my strength**, hasten to my aid. (JPS 1985)

אֵילוּת -- power, strength

a hapax legomenon in the Bible, occurring in Ps. 22:20 in the form אֵילוּתִי
and prob. meaning 'my power, my strength'

-- from Klein's Dictionary (via Sefaria.org)

It is possible that the heading of the psalm, עַל־אֵילַת הַשָּׁחַר, 'al-ayyelet hashahar, (which is also a unique expression) alludes to (or is a play on) the request: "O my strength, [אֵילוּתִי, *eyaluti*] hasten to my assistance."

-- *Jerusalem Commentary*, footnote, p.163

22:4) וְאַתָּה קָדוֹשׁ יוֹשֵׁב תְּהִלּוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל:
But You are the Holy One, enthroned, the Praise of Israel. (JPS 1985)

"*Uva Letzion*" is a prayer composed of bible verses, beginning with Isa 59:20, "And a redeemer will come to Zion...." The second set of verses includes Ps. 22:4, paired with Isa 6:3, "Holy Holy Holy is the LORD God of Hosts, the whole earth is filled with [God's] glory," and its Aramaic translation (from Targum Yonatan, similar to Targum Onkelos for Torah). "*Uva Letzion*" is recited in several traditions after the second Ashrei in weekday morning service (near the end of the service) and in minchah for Shabbat & Yom Tov (very near the start). Rashi teaches that this prayer is meant to link Torah study -- reading a translation is considered a form of study -- with the sanctification of God's name.

22:22) הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי מִפִּי אַרְיֵה וּמִקְרָנֵי רִמִּים עֲנִיתָנִי:
Deliver me from a lion's mouth; from the horns of **wild oxen** rescue me. (JPS 1985)

Most commentators read רִמִּים as a variant spelling of רִאֲמִים, see definitions immediately below. However, some traditional commentary reads *remim* as a different word, meaning an enormous horned creature, referenced in Genesis, Job, and Midrash Tehillim. See Jastrow and Bialik & Ravnitsky below.

רִאֲמִים

probably the great aurochs or wild bulls which are now extinct. The exact meaning is not known.
-- Github on-line dictionary (via Sefaria.org)

רִאֲמִים (also רִאֲמִים and רִמִּים) m.n. buffalo, wild ox.

[Related to Aram. רִמְמָא, רִמְמָא, רִמְמָא Syr. רִמְמָא (= wild ox, buffalo), Ugar. *rm*, Akka. *rīmu*, Arab. *ri'm* (= white antelope).]

-- Klein's Dictionary (via Sefaria.org)

רִאֲמִים *r'em*, wild-ox (v. Schr. KAT², p. 584) Gen. R. s. 31 'לא אכל וכו' the *r'em* did not enter (the ark) with him (Noah), but his whelps did; Yalk. Job 926, v. גור III. Midr. Till. to Ps. XCII, 11 'מה ר' 'מצא את הר' 'הזה וכו' as the *r'em* has high horns and gores in all directions &c. Midr. Till. to Ps. XXII 'אני ... כקרני הר' 'הזה וכו' he (David) found a *r.* asleep in the desert and thought it was a mountain; ib. 'כיון שראה הר' 'וכ' 'הזה I will build thee a Temple of one hundred cubits, as the horn of this *r.*; ib. 'וכ' 'הזה when the *r.* saw the lion, he was afraid and crouched &c.; Yalk. ib. 688; a. e.—Pl. רִאֲמִים. ib.

-- Jastrow's Dictionary (via Sefaria.org)

While David was tending sheep, he came upon the *re'em** asleep in the wilderness and, thinking it was a mountain, climbed upon it and continued to tend his sheep. The *re'em* woke up and arose, and David, astride its horns, was lifted up as high as the heavens [At that moment David prayed before the Holy One to bring him down from the horns of the *re'em*.] What did the Holy One do? He caused a lion to come toward the *re'em*, and when the *re'em* saw the lion, he was afraid of it and cringed before it, for the lion is the king of all animals and beasts. When David saw the lion, he also was afraid of it. Then the Holy One caused a gazelle to come along, and as the lion sprang after it, David descended and went his way. Hence David said, "Save me from the lion's mouth: for Thou hast answered me from the horns of the *remim*" [Ps. 22:22]

* A fabulous animal of giant proportions.

-- Bialik & Ravnitsky, 117:82; Source: Midrash Tehillim 22:28

Commentary on the entire psalm from Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hirsch Weinreb:

We typically think so little of ourselves that we pray for what is trivial, and fail to pray for what is really important. *Far from my salvation are the words of my salvation* [verse 2]...

The nineteenth-century hasidic sage Rabbi Yechezkel of Kuzmir (d. 1856) illustrated this point with a parable: There was a king whose son the prince rebelled against him. The king exiled him to a deep forest in a remote corner of the kingdom. There the prince remained for many long years. He apprenticed himself to a woodsman, and earned his keep by chopping wood. Eventually the king decided to inquire after his son's well-being. He dispatched a messenger to him, with the instructions to tell the exiled prince that any request he made would be granted. The son was thrilled by the prospect of having his wish fulfilled, but after all those years of chopping wood, all he wished for was a new and sharper hatchet. The messenger reported the request back to the king, who was dismayed. "How tragic," he exclaimed. "He has forgotten that he is a prince. He asked for a mere hatchet, when he could have asked to return home to the palace to regain his royal position."

Far from my salvation are the words of my salvation.

...

We "roar" for petty gifts, and thereby forfeit the gifts of salvation.

How fortunate we are that we can re-define our understanding of who we are, and in the process we can learn to pray for what is truly significant.

[Weinreb describes how the psalm follows the speaker's awareness from being a worm, to a baby, then noticing surroundings, finally feeling part of a collective, imagining a future, and eventually:] He recognizes that there is much potential to him, that he is likened unto *a people yet unborn*.

-- *Koren Tehillim*

Some related questions:

- Are our prayers -- on our own, others', or the world's behalf -- too small?
- Can prayer build up our sense of self?
- In the parable above, whose fault is it that the son has such a limited wish?
- People experiencing fear and deprivation struggle to learn, reason, and wish "well." Does Ps. 22 tell us anything about moving ourselves and others from such conditions, so as to wish "better"?

References:

Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms*, NY: Norton, 2007 (note: translation is identical in the new Tanakh publication)

Bialik, H.N and Y.H Ravnitzky. Wm. Braude, trans. *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah, Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. (NY: [Schocken Books](#), 1992). Originally published in 1908 by Dvir Publishing House; 2-volume Hebrew edition still available from the house Bialik founded (Tel Aviv: Dvir: 2000).

Greenberg, Pamela. *The Complete Psalms: The Book of Prayer Songs in a New Translation*. (forward by Susannah Heschel). NY: Bloomsbury, 2010. Greenberg is a poet, writer, and former rabbinical student with an M.A. in Jewish Studies. There is a reading guide and a video interview with the author on the Bloomsbury site.

Hakham, Amos. *The Jerusalem Commentary to the Psalms*. (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2003)

Weinreb, R. Dr. Tzvi Hersh. *Koren Tehillim*. Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2015

Addendum, Psalm 22 for Temple Micah, p.1

Note: You'll see different spellings of the Hebrew word for "liturgical poem," depending on style of publication quoted.

22:21)

הַצִּילָהּ מִחֶרֶב נַפְשִׁי; מִיַּד-כְּלָב, יְחִידָתִי

Save my life from the sword, **my precious soul** from those dogs. (Koren)

The word יְחִידָה, *yehidah*, "life," refers to the soul, that which is unique to each and every person. The same word is used elsewhere in a context very similar to that of our verse (Psalms 35:17): Rescue my soul from their destructions, my life (יְחִידָתִי, *yehidati*) from the young lions.

footnote: Nowhere else in the Bible does the word יְחִידָה, *yehidah*, designate the soul. We find in Bereshit Rabbah, regarding the verse (Genesis 2:7): "And the man became a living soul," that the rabbis enumerated five terms that designate the soul: *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshamah*, *chayyah*, and *yehidah*. [Hebrew characters included in original, but difficult to type here.] We find this also in many other midrashim and *piyyutim*, as in the *piyyut* for *Musaf* service on Yom Kippur, *Asher Eimatekha*** (according to the Ashkenazi rite). The philosophers and kabalists used these five terms to describe the five levels or parts of the human soul according to their respective systems (See, for example, Sa'adyah Gaon's *Emunot Vede'ot* [Beliefs and Opinions], part 6 [10th Century CE].) -- Jerusalem Commentary, pp.163-164

** *Asher Eimatekha*, according to the *Art Scroll Machzor*, focuses on "God's humility and mercy. Although God is dreaded and praised by the angels, [God] nevertheless desires the praise and loyalty of lowly human beings. The piyut follows a double alphabetical sequence and alternates between depictions of the lofty majesty of the angels and the puny frailty of human beings."

The poem, of "uncertain authorship," is a double-acrostic, with these initial and final sections:

Though Your dread is
נ Upon the faithful angels
נ Who are mightily powerful
כ Who are intermingled with ice,
כ Who are unique in their fierceness
– and Your awe is upon them!

Though your dread is
ש Upon those who are fiery flames
ש Who guide the paths of water
ת Who are in exalted heavens
ת Who are in lofty heights
– and Your awe is upon them!

Yet You desire praise
ל From clods of the earth,
ל Who dwell in a valley
ט Whose accomplishment is meager,
ט Whose works are poor
– and this is Your praise!

Yet You desire praise
from flesh and blood, from vanity and nothingness, from withering grass, from a passing shadow, from a fading blossom; from those whose soul [*nefesh*] becomes terminated, whose spirit [*ruach*] loats off, whose life [*chayyah*] flies away, whose soul [*neshamah*] flits away, whose unique soul [*yehidah*] is removed; who are heard in court, who die in judgment, who live through mercy, who give glory to You, O Life-Giver of the world
– and Your glory is upon them!

-- p. 526-529, *The Complete Artscroll Machzor: Yom Kippur*. Translation and commentary: Scherman, 1986.

The final paragraph is not set as verse but is not distinguished from verses in music versions I've found:

A) [Hadar nusach](#) version; B) [different a capella](#) version; C) same or similar tune as (B) but jazzier with [vocals and strings](#) from Beit Avi Chai; D) [third tune](#) from Talia Ashuri.

An Artscroll commentary on the *piyut* explains that "five different terms are used for the human soul, but not all of them are translatable into English." The explanation continues [I added the scripture quotes]:

The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 14:9) lists the five names and their implications, as follows:

Nefesh, the *lifeblood*, so to speak, since Scripture describes the power of life as residing in the blood (Deuteronomy 12:23)

Ruach, the *spirit* is the man's spiritual capability to rise up, but also to fall back down (see Ecclesiastes 3:21)

מי יודע, רוח בני האדם--העלה היא, למעלה; ורוח, הבהמה היורדת היא, למטה לארץ.
Who knows **the spirit of man** whether it goes upward, and the spirit of the beast whether it goes downward to the earth?
--Ecl 3:21

Chayyah, the soul can truly be called *life*, because man's body dies eventually, but the soul lives forever.

Neshamah, a man's higher *soul*; his intelligence and personality.

Yechidah, the soul's *uniqueness* among the many components of man, because virtually all of man's limbs and organs come in pairs--even the heart and brain have pairs of chambers--but there is only one soul.

רק חזק, לבלתי אכל הדם כי הדם, הוא הנפש; ולא תאכל הנפש, עם-הבשר.
Only be steadfast in not eating the blood; **for the blood is the life**; and thou shalt not eat the life with the flesh. --Deut 12:23

-- Complete Artscroll Machzor: Yom Kippur. Commentary, page 528

"*Yechidah*" is related to the Messiah in the tradition of Isaac Luria (1534-1572), as well as some older Jewish philosophy that dates back 500 or 600 years before Luria. Not sure how much older it might be. The "soul root" of *Yechidah* is *Moshiach*, and the soul root of *Nefesh* is King David. *Moshiach ben David* will be physically descended from David, who is associated with the lowest level of soul, but embody the highest level of soul; this will bring about the ultimate union of people with God. (I am not entirely sure of all this, and don't want to cite a bunch of non-egalitarian, non-pluralistic sources here. So, just leaving this sketchy outline here.)

Whatever the age those mystical ideas emerged, the theme of combining the lowliest and the highest in order to bring about Redemption is an old and important one, with *Asher Eimatekha* and Psalm 22 just two of its many reflections. King David's lineage includes outsiders, forbidden relationships, and incest -- and so even in the biblical narrative, the Messiah's line is one that brings together challenging seeds to grow Redemption.

As noted last time, I have mostly steered away from non-Jewish sources -- outside of historical notes, such as music background -- both to limit non-Jewish agenda in scholarship and teaching and to prevent misrepresentation of other faith perspectives. Notes for Psalm 8 included some of the ways in which that text is read by some Christians as fulfilling in the Gospels. Of course, most of the Hebrew scripture is read this way in some Christian traditions, but certain passages in Psalms resonate more "Christian" than others. Psalm 22 represents yet another level of shared-text complication.

Psalm 22 is closely associated with the crucifixion narrative. Some Christian Bibles add a second superscription that reads: "The Psalm of the Cross." Jesus is quoted as reciting Ps. 22:1 in Mt 27:46 and Mk 15:34, and some teachers say this is an indication that he recited the whole psalm. John 19:24 includes Ps. 22:18, and both Matthew and Mark include dividing up of clothes in the narrative. There are additional correspondences, and the *Annotated Jewish New Testament** says: "the psalm, which informs much of the description fo the crucifixion, ends on a triumphal note." (p.52, commentary on Mt 27:46)

*Levine, Amy-Jill and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010.