

Notes on Psalm 27. Temple Micah study group, 9/17/19  
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## NAMES OF GOD

The four-letter name, YHVH, appears 13 times throughout the psalm.

YHVH is modified with attributes in verse 1: “my light,” “my salvation,” and “fortress of my life.” Verse 9 speaks of “God [*Elohei*] of my salvation.”

## ECHOES

In addition to “my salvation” in vv. 1 and 9 (above), the first half has other echoes in the second half:

- “life (living),” verses 1 and 13;
- “my adversaries,” verses 2 and 12;
- “my heart,” verses 3 and 8;
- “arise,” verses 3 and 12;
- “seek,” verses 4 and 8; and
- “conceal,” verses 5 and 9.

Most of these repetitions involve similar images, but “conceal” is mirrored. It appears first in a protective image: God “will conceal me [*yastireini*] under the cover of His tent” (27:5); later, the same verb is used in the desperate “don’t conceal [*al-tasteir*] Your presence” (27:9).

## PROTECTION & FRAGILITY

A variety of dwelling words:

- בְּבֵית־יְהוָה [*beit YHVH* — house of God] (27:4)
- בְּהֵיכָלוֹ [*b’heichalo* — in His Temple] (27:4)
- בְּסֻכָּה [*b’sukkah* — in His “pavilion”] (27:5)
- בְּאֶהֱלוֹ [*b’oheilo* — in His tent] (27:6)

Commentary in *Machzor Lev Shalem* sees in these dwellings a “movement...to greater fragility,” from House and Temple to sukkah to tent. The machzor adds that repeated use of the word אַל (*al*) — **do not** hide (27:9), **do not** act angrily (27:9), **do not** forsake (27:9), **do not** abandon (27:9), and **do not** hand me over (27:10) — suggests “beneath the facade of confidence, great fear and feelings of abandonment are lurking.”  
-- *Machzor Lev Shalem*, p.44

In addition to dwellings, the psalmist finds refuge on a rock (27:5) and is taken in [to a home] (27:10).

(27:10) יֶאֱסָפֵנִי *ya'asafani*, taken in. *Jerusalem Commentary* notes that *asafi* refers to “someone whose parents have abandoned him, and who has been gathered by strangers into their home.”

## RECITATION

Some Sephardic communities recite Ps. 27 before the evening service year-round. Ashkenazi practice, going back at least 250 years, includes Ps. 27 for Elul, through the Days of Awe or the close of Sukkot. This is first credited to Rabbi Shabtai Rashkov (1655-1745), a pupil of the Baal Shem Tov (c.1698-1760, Poland), with the 1745 *Siddur Bet Yaakov* of Rabbi Ya’akov Emden (1697-1776) the first printed example.

RECITATION cont.

Explanations for the holiday-related recitations are sometimes tied to

- kabbalistic beliefs about the protective power of repeating YHVH 13 times,
- more straightforward links between the season and the psalm's fear and comfort themes, and
- additional holiday-associations in the language (below).

-- practice history from "[Why do we Recite Psalm 27](#) from Rosh Hodesh Elul until Hoshanah Rabbah?"  
*Responsa for Today*: Vol 4, No. 1, Oct '09 -- Rabbi David Golinkin (now pres emeritus of Schechter)  
<https://schechter.edu/why-do-we-recite-psalm-27-from-rosh-hodesh-elul-until-hoshanah-rabbah/>

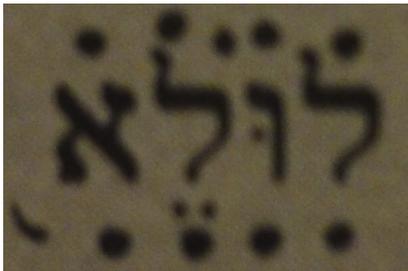
SEASONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Midrash Tehillim (c.1000-1400 CE, based on older teachings) says

- “The Lord is my light” on Rosh Hashanah
- “And my salvation” on Yom Kippur.
- Later teachers added Sukkot: "...shelter me in his Sukkah.”

In addition, Midrash Tehillim says:

Every day of the year [the Satan] has the authority to make accusations, except on Yom Kippur (and Rosh Hashanah). For this reason Israel said 'Should an army besiege me,' meaning the idolatrous nations, 'my heart would have no fear' [on these auspicious dates].



The Masoretic Text (codified 7th-10th Centuries CE) includes odd markings around the word, "לולא [lule -- had I not]," (v13). A common interpretation draws our attention to the fact that reading backwards yields *Elul* -- highlighting another link between this psalm and the season.

Another common teaching (not sure of origin) reads "ELUL" as an acronym for "Ani L'dodi V'dodi Li - I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (Song 6:3), marking Elul as a time for becoming nearer to God and for treating ourselves and those around us lovingly.

"ELUL" is also read (again, unsure of teaching's origin) as an acronym for "Ish l're'ehu u'matanot l'evyonim - Each person to their friend and gifts to those in need" (from Esther 9:22).

אני	איש	E
לדודי	לרעהו	L
ודודי	ומתנות	U
לי	לאביונים	L

Rabbi Jordan Braunig, Director of Tufts University Hillel, writes:

In a time of self-reflection and soul-accounting, we take the risk of focusing too squarely on our own stuff. [Esther 9:22] is a reminder that each of us must take time this month to focus on our relationships with others and on our responsibilities for the communities to which we belong.

-- from Elul daily email, 5779

## PRAYER AND STUDY

27:14) קְוֵה, אֶל־יְהוָה: חֲזַק, וַיִּצְמַח לִבְךָ; וְקוֹה, אֶל־יְהוָה

Wait on the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage and wait for the LORD.

This is Talmudic proof-text for appropriate attitudes in prayer and for the opinion that prayer requires “vigor” or “bolstering”...as do Torah, good deeds, and worldly occupation:

Rabbi Hama said in the name of R. Hanina: If one prays long his prayer does not pass unheeded. Whence do we know this? From Moses our Master; for it says, ‘And I prayed unto the Lord’ (Deut. 9:26-27) and it is written afterwards, ‘And the Lord hearkened unto me that time also’ (Deut 10:10).

But is that so? Has not R. Hiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Johanan: If one prays long and looks for the fulfillment of his prayer, in the end he will have vexation of heart, as it says, ‘Hope deferred maketh the heart sick’ (Prov 13:12).

What is his remedy? Let him study the Torah, as it says, ‘But desire fulfilled is a tree of life’ (Prov 13:13), and the tree of life is nought but the Torah, as it says, ‘She is a tree of life to them that lay hold on her!’ (Prov 3:18) — There is no contradiction: one statement speaks of a man who prays long and looks for the fulfillment of his prayer, the other of one who prays long without looking for the fulfillment of his prayer.

Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: A person who prayed and saw that he was not answered, [should] pray again, as it is stated: “Hope in the Lord, strengthen yourself, let your heart take courage, and hope in the Lord” (Psalms 27:14)

Our Rabbis taught: Four things require to be done with energy [vigor], namely, [study of] the Torah, good deeds, praying, and one’s worldly occupation. Whence do we know this of Torah and good deeds? Because it says, Only be strong and very courageous to observe to do according to all the law: ‘be strong’ in Torah, and ‘be courageous in good deeds. (Josh 1:7) Whence of prayer? Because it says, ‘Wait for the Lord, be strong and let thy heart take courage, yea, wait thou for the Lord’ [Ps. 27:14]. Whence of worldly occupation? Because it says, Be of good courage and let us prove strong for our people (2 Sam 10:12)

— B. Berakhot 32b (Soncino translation; I added line breaks for easier reading)

In other words, it seems: Pray long and/or pray and pray again, without expecting the prayer to be answered; and, if hope deferred is making the heart sick, engage in Torah study.

The subsequent discussion in Berakhot 32b speaks of how God will not forget us, even though we are bound to sin. Perhaps this is the “remedy” of Torah study in the context of the high holidays: avoid “vexation” of the heart, instead strengthening oneself and being courageous in the path of *teshuva*.

Langston Hughes’ musings on what happens to a dream deferred appear apt. While the “raisin in the sun” image is probably the most famous, the closing lines of the same poem also hint at what might happen to the promise of the season, the possibility of change, if we don’t act on it:

...

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

— Langston Hughes, “[Harlem](#),” 1951 (link is to full poem at PoetryFoundation.org)

### SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE

The first half of verse 8 begins in the psalmist's heart — “my heart said” [*amar livi*] — and is directed “to You” [*lecha*: masc. singular, 2nd person].

What the heart says, however, is a first-person expression, presumably from God: “Seek My face”

לְךָ, אָמַר לְבִי-בִקְשׁוּ פָנַי  
אֶת-פְּנֵיךָ יְהוָה אֲבַקֵּשׁ  
In Thy behalf my heart hath said: ‘Seek ye My face’;  
Thy face, LORD, will I seek.  
– 27:8, Old JPS translation

Another perspective shift, again involving the heart, occurs as the psalm closes: “Make your heart strong!” (addressing whom?)

### "SINGLE" REQUEST

27:4) שְׂאֵלָתִי | אַחַת -- One thing I ask

מֵאֵת יְהוָה אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ שְׁבִתִּי בְּבַיִת-יְהוָה כְּלַיְמֵי תַיִי לַחַזוֹת בְּנֶעָם-יְהוָה וּלְבַקֵּר\* בְּהִיכָלוֹ:  
of the LORD, only that do I seek: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon  
the beauty of the LORD, to frequent\* His temple. (JPS1985)

That "one thing" is actually composed of seven expressions with seven nouns and seven verbs:

**dwell** in the **house** of the lord  
 **behold** the **beauty** of the Lord  
 **contemplate\*** his **Temple**  
 **conceal me** in His **tabernacle** [*sukkah*, pavilion]  
 **hide me** me in the shelter of His **Tent**  
 **lift me** me up upon a **rock**  
 **offer** in His tent **sacrifices**  
— verses 4-6; see, e.g., p.206, *Jerusalem Commentary*

\* *Jerusalem Commentary* defines לְבַקֵּר, *l'vakker* as "to contemplate" or "to inquire," noting that the modern "to visit" is not found in biblical or rabbinic Hebrew. Rabbinic *bikkur holim* meant "inquiry into the welfare of the sick and concern for their needs." Another biblical reading of *l'vakker* relates to morning: "to visit every morning," and, therefore, "to frequent."

The seven-part “single request” intertwines actions the individual and God will take; this reflects thinning boundaries — as the fall holidays progress — between human and divine.

### THREE-PART HOLIDAY ARC

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (AKA “the Rav,” 1903-1993 ) notes that God’s attribute of *Gevura* [strength or severity] “makes a chronological journey during the holidays,” from Rosh Hashana through the close of Sukkot. The path the Rav describes, based on the *Zohar* is meant to show how we can

- enter the Days of Awe with Mercy tempering Judgement,
- seek atonement while the full weight of judgement is suppressed, and
- return to the mundane world with a renewed sense of what we can and cannot control.

THREE-PART HOLIDAY ARC cont.

I [Virginia, here] see a similar three-part call of the holiday period in Ps. 27:8 and the Rav's teachings. I summarize here and elaborate below:

1. from an initial wake up call at Rosh Hashana (“On Your behalf”)
2. through the internal work of teshuvah (“my heart says”), and
3. back out into the rest of the year, following Sukkot, with a fresh sense how much is required of us (“Seek My face!”)

**1) “On Your behalf”/Rosh Hashana**, recognizing the “You” of “Your behalf,” God as distant sovereign

- The Rav calls Rosh Hashana a time of “*hirhur teshuvah*” [the ‘stirrings’ of return or repentance],” as we recognize the Sovereign and how far we have drifted over the year;
- The “single request” of verses 4-7 (above), encompasses seven parts, three of which ask that God act directly: “keep me safe,” “hide me,” and “lift me on a rock.” This posture reflects a recognition of God as “You” and a desire for a closer relationship;
- The Days of Awe begin, the Rav says, with a call for “awakening from spiritual complacency.”

See “The Message of the Shofar” in *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified* (Edison, NJ: Ohr, 1998.)

**2) “my heart says”/selichot & Yom Kippur**, accepting our own responsibility for *teshuvah*/return, with God as source of direction and hope

- Yom Kippur offers a moment of nearness unique in the year, according to the Rav: “The closer His approach, the greater the *teshuvah* obligation...On Yom Kippur, Hashem knocks on the door of every Jew.”
- As Psalm 27 progresses, images of physical shelter, however precarious — tent, sukkah, rock — give way to less tangible forms of support: teaching, leading, faith. Verses 11-12 mark a turning point: “Were my father and my mother to forsake me, the LORD would take me in. Teach me Your way, LORD, and lead me on a level path...” (Koren/Sacks translation).
- It was on Yom Kippur that Moses descended from Mt. Sinai with the second tablets, the Rav notes, so Yom Kippur commemorates the giving of the Oral Law.

See *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*; “Rabbi Akiva’s Homily on Teshuvah” in *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified*.

**3) “Seek My face!”/Sukkot**, celebrating fragile plenty, leaving us with renewed awareness of partnership with God, Redeemer in exile with us

- The “single request” includes actions of the individual seeking God’s face: to dwell in the House, to gaze on the beauty, to worship in His Temple, and to “sacrifice...with shouts of joy.”
- During Sukkot, Kohelet reminds us that “No man has authority over the lifebreath” and “the lifebreath returns to God who bestowed it” (8:8, 12:7). From within a structure emphasizing the fragility and temporary nature of our lives, we request the “Divine Presence to rest among us” and seek to “unify the name of the Holy One” (a common sukkah meditation). *Ushpizin* [symbolic guests] are welcomed into the sukkah, linking biblical characters and attributes of God.
- The Rav notes that Sukkot, a holiday based primarily on oral traditions (what constitutes a sukkah, e.g.), celebrates the Oral Law. This is the on-going endeavor to bring God’s face into daily life...until the People and God are jointly redeemed.

See *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*

Jessica Minnen approaches fear, enemies, and preparing for the new year from the perspective of verse 2, “Evil ones draw near to me to consume my flesh”:

The zombie — now enjoying a resurgence in popular culture — is an amalgamation of West African and Haitian Creole mysticism that gained footing in western folklore during the 19th century. But it wasn't until George Romero's now-classic 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* that the idea of a flesh-eating zombie apocalypse became a sub-genre of the American consciousness.

Obviously Yaakov Emden [see historical note on recitation above] was not thinking about zombies when he included the Psalm in the daily liturgy during the season of repentance. Nor were the biblical authors thinking about zombies when they crafted [Psalm 27](#). Yet they use לֶאֱכֹל אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי (*l'ekhol et b'sari* [to eat up my flesh]) as an example of מִמִּי אֵירָא (*mimi ira'*) and מִמִּי אֶפְהָד (*mimi ephhad*), those whom we should fear and dread. It is a dramatic, nightmarish foil to the redemptive focus of the Psalm, God as אֱלֹהֵינוּ (Ohri v'yish'i), our light and help, our מְעוֹדֵנוּ (*Maoz Haiyai*), our stronghold. Still, every morning, I recite this Psalm and for a few desperate and distracted moments envision every fear, every flaw, and every failure of the past year coming to life as animated corpses, zombies hungry for my flesh.

And why shouldn't I? As I engage in *heshbon ha'nefesh*, the “accounting of the soul” before the High Holy Days, these fears, flaws, and failures eat away at me. It is a common enough expression in English — how often we describe our guilt, our jealousy, and our anger and say: It's eating me up inside! Biblical commentaries often explain this line as an allusion to slander, citing [Daniel 3](#) where the verb וְאֶכְלֶנּוּ (*va'akhalu*) is used to describe false accusations brought by the Chaldeans against the Jews, and [Daniel 6](#) when the men who slander Daniel are thrown into the lion's den along with their wives and children. The gruesome linguistic twist that those who “consume” Daniel with their words are in turn consumed by lions is no accident.

So too I believe that the language here, in our Psalm, should be understood as equally morbid and just as intentional....being called a zombie was the cultural equivalent of being called brainwashed or propagandized, a way of describing those who cannot or will not think for themselves. What could be more true? My enemy daily draws near to consume my flesh! My enemies are conformity, consumerism, and the quickness with which I cast aspersions on the character of my fellows simply so I can feel better about myself.

This Elul, I am trying to recite [Psalm 27](#) every day, and as I do, to allow myself to feel just what eats me up inside. It is precisely this discomfort that helps me turn to God and, with honest confidence, continue the Psalm:

**“YHVH, I seek Your face!”** (verse 8) -- [“Zombies, Elul and Psalms 27”](#) -- OpenSiddur.org

### Some musical settings

Shiyr Poets "[One Thing](#) (Psalm 27)" [English] -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9tiQI2Wcmw>

Chasidic tune [at Hadar](#) <https://www.hadar.org/tefillah-element/r-ma-achat-shaalti-psalm-27>

Tenor Gabi Sadeh (Carlebach tune), [Recorded Sound Archives](#) at Florida Atlantic University

[Chava Mirel](#) (contemporary setting) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxlyZBdMKeQ>

Few more versions [at Zemirot Database](#) <http://www.zemirotdatabase.org/>