

Walk thru David HaMelech's T'hilim

with Rabbi David Walk

Perek 81

DAY FIVE: THUNDEROUS UNCERTAINTY

Please, forgive me as I reminisce about my misguided youth. Growing up I loved comics books. You know, sort of like action movies that don't move. My favorite was The Mighty Thor. Thank you Stan Lee a"h. So, now that I'm writing about Thursday (Thor's Day), I feel right at home. Even the Psalm chosen by our Sages for YOM CHAMISHI cooperates with my youthful predilections, but more on that later.

The choice of chapter 81 as the Day 5 Psalm is not immediately obvious. The famous Talmudic statement about the daily Psalms (Rosh HaShana 31a), explains that the fifth day of Creation saw the emergence of birds and fish. Rashi then comments that these denizens of air and sea are so beautiful and awesome that we earthbound humans can't help but burst into song, or as the Singer of our Psalm declares: Sing joyously to God, our

strength; raise a shout for the God of Jacob. Take up the song, sound the timbrel, the melodious lyre and harp. Blow the horn on the new moon, on the full moon for our feast day (T'hilim 81:2-4).

But there's a lot more going on than just a happy song for Thursday, and, in our tradition, this Psalm has other roles. This Psalm is the Song for Rosh HaShana and Day 6 of Sukkot according to the custom of the Vilna Gaon. The blowing of the horn, SHOFAR, clearly references Rosh HaShana, and 'the feast day' (CHAGEINU) can be assumed to be Sukkot, which is called CHAG by the Torah and our Sages.

Only after this joyous opening does our Singer (Maybe Assaf) get more serious. The Psalm describes the various Mitzvot which God has ordained. We have CHUKIM (decrees we don't fathom), MISHPATIM (laws for society, which we would have legislated if God hadn't) and EIDUT (testimonies, commemorations like CHAGIM and Shabbat). At his point our Psalm reviews the Jews' historic relationship with God. We begin with God removing the yoke of servitude ('I relieved his shoulder of the burden', verse 7) back in Egypt. According to most authorities, this relief from the burdens of bondage

also took place on Rosh HaShana. This began the six month program of Ten Plagues, resulting in the Exodus on Pesach. It also previously referenced Yosef, who was released from prison on Rosh HaShana.

With our relationship with God clearly delineated, our Father in heaven begins to warn us that everything will be fine if we only can eschew idolatry and remain loyal to God, who brought us up out of Egypt (MA'ALCHA). This is a variant on the more usual 'took us out (Y'TZI'A) of Egypt'. We are recognizing that the Exodus experience raised this slave people up and transformed them into a great nation.

Hidden in verse 8 is the Thor reference. God tells us that, 'I answered you from the thunder's hiding place'. God's voice is like thunder. Forgetting about Norse mythology, thunder is both exciting and scary. Just as the Jews experienced it at Mt. Sinai. We're, therefore, also referring to Shavuot, as we paraphrase the first two Commandments in verses 10 and 11, just in reversed order.

This moves the Psalm into the arena of MUSAR, or ethical motivation. God continues speaking to the Jewish people and warns us 'there shall no foreign god with you... I alone am your God.' But God shares with us the

sad reality that we Jews don't listen. Then we are left to our own resources, and that leaves us open to the vicissitudes of history. This could spell our doom, because we only survive the storm tides of the centuries with Divine intervention.

Clearly, this is again a Rosh HaShana theme. I believe that it's also a Thursday matter. On the fifth day of the week, the Jewish courts traditionally sat (along with Mondays), and we feel the pressure of judgment. We also feel a certain sense of the week winding down towards Shabbat. Has this week been one of accomplishments? Will I enter Shabat with a feeling of content and fulfillment? Judgment comes in many forms. Our Psalm motivates us to self-judgment. Are we living up to God's expectations? And our own?

As our poem moves into its final phase, there is almost a lament: If only My nation would heed Me! God would vanquish our foes, and in a final burst of poetic splendor, we are assured that God would 'feed us from the fat of the wheat, and honey from the very rocks (verse 17). Our Divine Patron can make the simplest of items into ambrosia if we just allow God into our lives.

Psalm 81 alludes to Rosh HaShana, Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot. But its

greatest achievement is its encouragement to get us through the trying week by inviting God and Jewish tradition into our lives. Each Thursday can help us move peacefully towards Shabbat by listening carefully for God's hidden thunder. It's there in the daily mitzvot we perform. 🎵