

Walk thru David HaMelech's T'hilim

with Rabbi David Walk

Perek 126

COME, DREAM WITH ME

SHIR HAMAALOT, B'SHUV HASHEM...

In 1933, Yossele Rosenblatt, the world's most famous chazan, traveled from America to Eretz Yisrael. He never returned. The great chazan came to make a film about the Holy Land, then suffered a massive heart attack, and was buried on Har HaZeitim, accompanied by the largest funeral modern Jerusalem had ever seen. There is surviving footage of that trip, on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gsjm-KwgliE>

The end of the film shows the funeral with Chazan Rosenblatt's voice singing Shir HaMa'alot, Psalm 126, over the moving visuals. It concludes with a flapping Israeli flag, as the song, film and his journey end. Reb Yoselle would have loved that, because he believed that this Psalm should be the national anthem of the still unborn state.

This beautiful poem which we sing

before BIRKAT HaMAZON on all joyous days, days without TACHANUN, is an amazing paean to ALIYA. It's always a worthwhile read, but it's especially appropriate now because the Municipality of Jerusalem, aka TZIYON, is celebrating Olim and Aliya this week.

Before I try to explain the overall structure of the chapter, I'd like to focus on one famous word: CHOLMIM, 'dreamers'. There's some controversy about who these 'dreamers' are. Are they the new OLIM who are 'living the dream'? The Ibn Ezra suggests that 'a person never sees such wonders as these when awake, this remarkable feeling must be a dream.' However, many commentaries explain that we were dreamers during the long exile. Rav Steinzaltz explains, 'We were dreamers during the period of the exile, because life in exile is not normal, rather it's some form of terrifying dream.' Our Singer informs us that GALUT is a nightmare.

When we look at this chapter as a whole, it has a two-fold chronology issue. First of all, the two parts of the poem are not in tense synch. The first half (verses 1-3) is basically in the past, while the second half (4-6) is clearly in the future. The other question about the timing of the

poem is: What period of Jewish history does the poem refer to?

Let's deal with the problems one by one. The first three verses are discussing the wonderful sensations of those new OLIM. It feels great! 'Our mouths are filled with laughter; our tongues with songs of joy!' (verse 2). Even the formerly skeptical gentiles will proclaim, 'God has done great things for them!' We Jews will also agree that, indeed, God has done huge favors for us (verse 3).

Then, we seem to return to some previous age, when we were still praying and preparing for this great day. We beg God to 'Return our returnees, like flashfloods (AFIKIM) in the Negev (verse 4). Flashfloods are extremely dangerous. Walls of water appear suddenly in the driest of deserts, without any warning, because there's not a cloud in the sky. The heavy rains having fallen many miles away in the Judean Hills. We expect our people to return in a similar way: masses of our beloved brethren streaming to the Holy Land, totally unexpectedly.

Now we have a powerful agricultural metaphor. We compare the preparations for the great ALIYA to the back breaking labor of farmers preparing for the next harvest. For the pre-modern farmer, this was

extremely difficult both physically and emotionally. Every planting season the stressed planter had to decide how much seed to plant, and how many of those precious grains to keep for food. Hunger was a constant companion. That's the power of the phrases, 'they who sow in tears' (verse 5) and 'he walks along weeping bearing the seed bag' (verse 6).

Where did the joy of making Aliya go? There are many possibilities, but allow me to present two. One is simple: The reality of building of the Land was very arduous. The initial joy evaporated with the harsh realities of rebuilding the devastated Land. We can understand why not every Oleh made it in the Holy Land.

However, there's another approach, which addresses the second of my questions: What period of Jewish history is being described? There are various opinions from the time of the exile after the First Temple Period to a future vision of the Final Redemption. But I strongly believe that it's accurately describing Shivat Tziyon, the return to Eretz Yisrael in the period of Ezra and Nechemia. Then, all of the questions have clear answers. The great joy at the beginning of the poem reflected the overwhelming optimism of the first arrivals from Babylonian Exile, when

the Persian King Cyrus allowed and supported our return to our homeland. The second bitter half of the poem describes their devastating disappointment when so few actually answered the call.

Approximately 43,000 Jews returned to Eretz Yisrael, and they joined probably a similar number who survived that tragic period in the Holy Land. But that represented a mere fraction of the Jews left in Babylonia, not to mention the rest of the Persian Empire.

This most egregious missed opportunity is famously described by Rav Yehuda HaLevi at the end of his magnum opus, the Kuzari:

Divine Providence was ready to restore everything as it had been in the first Temple, if they had all consented to return. But only a portion did so, while the majority and the aristocracy remained in Babylon, preferring dependence and subjugation, and unwilling to leave their villas and their business affairs. The words, "I have put off my coat" (Shir HaShirim 2-4) refer to the people's slothfulness in consenting to return to Israel. The verse, "My beloved stretches forth his hand through the opening" may be interpreted as the urgent call of Ezra, Nechemiah, and the Prophets, until a portion of the

people grudgingly responded to their call. In accordance with their unwilling disposition, they did not receive full measure. Divine Providence only gives a person according to the preparedness to receive. Were we prepared to meet the God of our Forefathers with pure intent, we would have found the same salvation as our ancestors had in Egypt. When we chant, "Worship at His holy mountain - worship at His footstool, He who restores His glory to Zion" (T'hilim 99:9) and other prayers to this effect, it is but as the chattering of song birds.

But our Psalmist is ultimately an optimist. The poem ends with the faith that at the end of this interminable Diaspora, the toiling pioneer: will surely harvest with glad song bearing the fruits of the labor (verse 6). This week our eternal capital salutes those who have heeded the call, and to the recalcitrant exiles we say: Join us in our Dream and the Song of Ascent!

