

Rav Kook on T'hilim

Ed. note: This is a new PhiloTorah column from an unpublished work by Rabbi Chanan Morrison.

Here is the third installment -

David's Song

“David's Song, when he fled from his son Avshalom” (T'hilim 3:1).

This psalm reflects King David's tribulations when his son Avshalom rebelled against him, taking over his palace and the capital. “How many are my enemies! So many rise up against me!” he cried out.

And yet – the title of the chapter is “David's Song”. A song? Is David content and lighthearted? “David's Lamentation” would be more appropriate!

The Talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon gave the following explanation:

“This is like a man in debt. Before paying back his debt, he is worried. But after he has paid it, he rejoices...

David was worried. ‘Perhaps I will be punished by a rebelling servant who will have no pity on me?’

But when he saw that it was his son Avshalom, he was relieved. That is why it is ‘David's Song’. David rejoiced, knowing that sons usually

have mercy on their fathers” (B'rachot 7b).

In short, Rabbi Shimon offered two answers:

A person is happy and relieved when he has paid his obligations.

The punishment was less severe than David had feared.

Why was it necessary to give two answers?

Divine Justice

Rav Kook explained that the first answer, the comparison to a man paying off a debt, does not suffice in David's case. David was a righteous tzadik who completely accepted Divine punishment for his mistakes. Such an upright and honest individual would not feel tremendous relief knowing that the “debt had been repaid” – certainly not enough to compose a song of joy.

It is Rabbi Shimon's second answer that completes the picture. David feared punishment at the hands of a cruel servant. His concern reflected his awareness of the extent of human freedom of choice. He knew that a messenger possessing free will is capable of inflicting more damage than was decreed by Heaven. In the end, all is accounted for. Nonetheless, there is a difference between willingly accepting the judgment of Heaven, and accepting extra perse-

cutions from the vehicle of God's retribution.

David rejoiced when he realized that he would be punished at the hands of his son. His soul broke out in song. He knew that sons are ordinarily compassionate, and any ordeals would be according to the precise measure of Divine justice.

We find that David expressed a similar concern on another occasion. After he had ordered a census of the people, contradicting God's will, the prophet allowed David to choose his punishment: seven years famine, three months of defeat at the hands of his enemies, or three days of pestilence.

David responded:

"I am very sorry [for what I did]. Let us fall in the hands of God, for His mercies are great. Just let me not fall in the hands of man!" (Sh'muel Bet 24:14)

(Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I, p. 35)