Psalms in Scripture, Liturgy and Inner Work
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RB-INTD-508-E1
Fall 2015-2016
Elul 5775 [in preparation for Rosh Hashanah 5776]

There are three foci for this course: the Psalms in Scripture, in Liturgy, and as guides to inner work. The first focus will place the Psalms in biblical perspective, examining their relationship to Torah, Prophets, and other sacred Writings. We will also examine the central role of Psalms in liturgy and communal prayer life. Finally, we will have the opportunity to work with Psalms in our lives as vehicles of spiritual growth.

Hebrew Text: **Sefer Tehillim, meforash be-yedei Amos Hakham** (two vols.) Jerusalem, Mossad Harav Kook. [Daat Mikra Series]

Assignment. Please choose one psalm to work with during the period of our class. You are asked to read your psalm aloud, in Hebrew, once a day. Listen to the Hebrew: feel the vibrations in your vocal cavity, on your lips; send the sounds out into the world. Consider words and phrases, respond to meaning and silences. Turn to your Psalm as your first activity of the day, preferably before dawn, but in any case before accessing news media or electronic modes of communication (email, etc.)

Prepare for each class a very brief (one or two sentence) journal entry that you will be able to share with your classmates. (You may have other, more personal responses that you may journal for yourself but need not share with others.)

Select one psalm to translate into English; it may be the Psalm you are working with daily, or another one. For longer Psalms, you may focus on a section of six to eight verses. Explain the aims and methods of your translation and departures from standard translations such as NJPS.

You will be asked to prepare individual psalms for the next class with the assistance of the resources listed here, especially the *Daat Mikra* edition.

Suggested for purchase: *Sefer Tehillim meforash bi-yedei Amos Hakham* (2 volumes; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook), as well as starred items in bibliography below.
As a general introduction, please read the article “Psalms, Book of,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 13: 1303-1334 (by Nahum Sarna). Compare this to Roger T. Beckwith, “Factors Bearing on the Early History of the Psalter.”

Topic #1. Introduction. Psalms in canonical perspective: David, Jerusalem and the trajectory of biblical history from tenth to fifth century BCE. → Sinai and Zion. “extraterritorial no man’s land” vs. “cosmic mountain, paradise of beauty and perfection”; → The book of Ruth-- “Torah of Hesed”, giving voice to the personal, redemption of the past (Genesis) → Isaiah 1-39/40-66. Note esp. Isa. 55:3 ...I WILL MAKE YOU AN EVERLASTING COVENANT, THE ENDURING LOYALTY PROMISED TO DAVID יָדֹרֵם אֱלֹהֵינוּ וּבֵין שֶׁבֶטֶים. JSP: The promises made to David in 2 Sam. 7-8-16 are now extended to the nation as a whole—all its members will have royal status. → The Twelve Prophets—Zechariah and the “day of small things.” The two foci of the prophets: Mosaic Torah and eschatological reconciliation (Malachi 3)

- ‘Groups’ and ‘Types.’
- Introspection and interiority as counterpoint to the power of ritual action
- Embodied spirituality. Ps. 16:8-- **shiviti ...ki mi-yemini...**; 18:37—You have enlarged my steps. 25:15; 26:12 ; 31:9, 32:8 “I will wink at you” (Rashi); 36:8-13 (Divine wings vs. ‘foot of pride’); 38:17; 40:9—Torah in ‘meva’; 81:7; 94:18; 139.
- God treasures imperfection –Ps. 51:19 God’s sacrifices are a broken spirit...-- cf. Lev. 21:19.
- The Korahite Psalms (42-49, 84-85, 87-88). Compare Num. 16:32-33 with Num. 26:10-11. [Note Eleazar’s role in the Parah Adumah rite, Num. 19, and especially his gesture at Num. 19:4] Note especially Ps. 48: 34 --“TAKE NOTE OF ITS RAMPARTS; GO THROUGH ITS CITADELS, THAT YOU MAY RECOUNT IT TO A FUTURE AGE.
- Large liturgical units in Books 4 & 5 of Psalms—90-94, 95-99, 104, 107, 113-118 (Hallel), 120-134, 135-136, 145-150. [Book 1 (1-41); Book 2 (42-72); Book 3 (73-89); Book 4 (90-106); Book 5 (107-150)]
- Alphabetic Psalms. Lament, Thanksgiving, Praise. Psalms that review and retell biblical history (e.g 78, 105). Royal Psalms (e.g. 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132); Entrance Psalms (“Admission Torah”, e.g. 15, 24, 101). Wisdom Psalms. Nature Psalms.
- The devotional arc of the Book of Psalms as a whole in canonical context: cf. Isaiah, the Book of the Twelve.

Exploring polarities of Psalms:
Wisdom: Torah guides our way (Ps. 1, 119) ↔ Surrender (Ps 23)
‘ta’arokh lefanai shulhan’ as hospitality; see Da’at Mikra, s.v. neged tzorerai.
Wisdom ↔ piety: Ps. 33-34

God in speech and powerful sound ((Ps 29, 30) ↔ God in silence and stillness (Ps 4, 62; 65:2)
Topic #2. Yearning. Longing, Waiting (42; 63) ↔ Arrival, seeing God’s Face. (11:7; 17:15; 46:2; 140:14.)


Robert Capra’s “Tour de France,” in Heather McHugh.

All God’s creation alive with praise (65, 104) ↔ Humans the goal of creation (Ps 8)

[Levenson, *Creation*, ch. 5: “Creation without opposition: Psalm 104”, pp. 53-65]

Topic #3. Entry to the Holy Place for the righteous & upright (Ps 15; 101; 112 ↔ entry for sinners (51)

Zion the Sacred Center (48; 76; 84; 87; 122; 133) ↔ God in all places (66, 150)

Human frailty and transience. (31:11, 16; 39:6,13 [ger anokhi ba-aretz/toshav ke-khol avotai] 90; 103; 139) ↔ Quest for permanence and a lasting legacy (37, 91, 92, 103; 139)

On Ps. 90, see Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, pp. 121-124;


Wednesday: Ps. 94. Sarna, *Psalms*, pp. 190-203.

Thursday: Ps. 81.

Friday: Ps. 93 Sarna, *Psalms*, pp. 178-188.


Ps. 145. See Reuven Kimelman, “Psalm 145” in *JBL*.

Why is Ps. 145 called “Ashrei”? See b.Berakhot 32b, quoting Ps. 84:5 and Ps. 140:14.

Psalms in Talmudic Aggadah; Midrash Tehillim.

Psalms in popular piety


→ *Kedushat Levi Parashat Shemot*, s.v. Ve-zeh lekhah ha-ot ki anokhi shelatikha (Ex. 3:12)—Baal Shem Tov teaching on Ps. 48: 15 [almut]; R. Yehiel Michel of Zlotchev on Ps. 27:4 [ahat sha’alti...];


→ Baal Shem Tov on Ps. 121:5 (God as our ‘shadow’).

→ Psalm 121 *me-ayin yavo ezri*—Rabbi Dov Ber the Maggid of Mezrich, #30 (ed. Rivka Shatz-Uffenheimer); cf. Rabbi Yerahmiel Yisrael Yitzhak of Aleksander, *Yismah Yisrael* I: 56, s.v. *shir la-ma’alot...*


→Tiferet Shlomo (Radomsk) Va-Ethanan el Hashem: Dirshu Hashem ve-Uzo, Bakshu Panav Tamid (Ps. 105:4) --The unending quest for God after one has seen—darosh darash...

Topic #6. Translating the Psalms. Tehillim and inner work; resources for the life of the spirit.

Bibliography

**Alter, Robert. The Book of Psalms. Norton, 2007.**

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Anderson, Gary. “‘As We Have Heard So We Have Seen: The Iconography of Zion.”

Brown, William P. “The Transplanted Tree: Psalm 1 and the Psalter’s Threshold”


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“All Hmong poetry is sung…. (p. 228.)


**Levenson, Jon D. Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible. HarperSanFrancisco, 1987.**

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Medieval Period


Translations


Cohen, Martin Samuel. Our Haven and Our Strength: The Book of Psalms.

Dahood, Mitchel. The Anchor Bible: Psalms . Garden City, NY: Doubleday. [now published as part of Yale Anchor Bible Commentaries]


Psalms as Sacred Scripture


Music Selections

Rabbi Aaron Hamaoui, Psalm 104

Eti Ankari, “Yodukha” (Psalm 67, on CD ‘Milyonim’)

Yosef Karduner, Psalm 121, Esa Einai el he-harim