

A Modest Proposal regarding the Interface between Tehilim and the Siddur

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The Hypothesis

Have you ever noticed that a variety of prayers in the Siddur end with a quotation of a single verse from Tehilim? If you check the source of the verse, you will find that very often it is the last verse of a chapter from Tehilim. The question is: Why is the very last verse of a chapter from Tehilim attached to the end of a particular prayer in the Siddur?

Here is a simple example. Open up Tehilim to chapter 145, which you will immediately recognize as "Ashray." True, in the Siddur there are a couple of verses added to the beginning of the Psalm, but that it is not our concern. How does the Psalm end? Not like in the Siddur, where an extra verse is added. That verse is the last verse from Tehilim 115, from the *Hallel*. So, why did the editors of the Siddur add the last verse from Tehilim 115 to the end of Tehilim 145? This is the question that I would like to explore. Indeed, I will return to this very question in the second essay.

To answer this question, I propose the following: When the editors of the Siddur add the last verse from a particular chapter in Tehilim, they are asking us to think of the meaning and message of the entire chapter and to apply it to the prayer that we have just finished. It is as if the last verse brings with it the entire chapter and conjures up in our minds the association between its message and the prayer we have just said.

To prove this hypothesis, I offer three examples. The first is the closing "verse" of the *Shemonah Esray*. The second is the verse from Tehilim 115 that is used to end *Ashray*, and the third is end of Tehilim 20 that is attached to the end of *Yehi Chevod* that appears before *Ashray* on weekday mornings. In each case, it will be necessary to analyze the chapter from Tehilim in detail as well as the particular prayer and then to explain the connection between the two.

A Word about Biblical Poetry

The remarks that follow are based to a great extent upon an examination of the poetic elements and structure in the *Tehilah* (chapter of Tehilim). When added to the textual details that are the traditional province of the classical commentaries, these poetic elements open up new vistas of interpretation and understanding.

The telltale sign of Biblical poetry is textual parallelism. The basic poetic form is a verse that can be divided into two almost equal halves, where each half is parallel in content and in structure. Invariably, the two halves offer different expressions of the same idea. These differences are the source of the interpretation of the verse. From this basic form multiple variations emerge. Biblical poetry can also contain poetic elements such as rhyme, rhythm and alliteration that are more familiar to us.

Introducing Tehilim 19

Here is Tehilim 19. The translation does not exactly flow smoothly, because it tries to copy the rhythm of the Hebrew, which is a rather daunting task. Please read the *Tehilah*.

- א למנצח מזמור לדוד:
- 1 For the Leader: A Psalm of David.
- ב השמים מספרים כבוד אל ומעשה ידיו מגיד הרקיע:
- 2 The heavens declare the glory of God, and His handiwork is spoken of by the firmament;
- ג יום ליום יביע אמר ולילה ללילה יחזה דעת:
- 3 Day to day utters speech, and night to night expresses knowledge;
- ד אין אמר ואין דברים בלי נשמע קולם:
- 4 There is no speech, there are no words, without their voice being heard.
- ה בכל הארץ יצא קום ובקצה תבל מליהם לשמש שם אהל בהם:
- 5 Their line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them, He has set a tent for the sun,
- ו והוא כחתן יצא מחפתו ישיש כגבור לרוץ ארח:
- 6 And he is like a bridegroom coming out of his *Chuppah*; he rejoices like a strong man to run his course.
- ז מקצה השמים מוצאו ותקופתו על קצותם ואין נסתר מחמתו:
- 7 From the end of the heavens is his exit and his circuit to the ends of it; and there is nothing hid from the his heat.
- ח תורת ה' תמימה משיבת נפש עדות ה' נאמנה מחכימת פתי:
- 8 The Torah of God is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of God is faithful, making the simple wise.
- ט פקודי ה' ישרים משמחי לב מצות ה' ברה מאירת עינים:
- 9 The precepts of God are straight, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of God is pure, enlightening the eyes.
- י יראת ה' טהורה עומדת לעד משפט ה' אמת צדקו יחדו:
- 10 The fear of God is pure, enduring forever; the laws of God are true, they are righteous altogether;
- יא הנחמדים מזהב ומפז רב ומתוקים מדבש ונפת צופים:
- 11 They are more pleasant than gold, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
- יב גם עבדך נזהר בהם בשמרם עקב רב:
- 12 Your servant is careful with them; in keeping them there is great reward.
- יג שגיאות מי יבין מנסתרות נקני:
- 13 Who can understand errors? Cleanse me from hidden faults.
- יד גם מזדים חשך עבדך אל ומשלו בי אז איתם ונקיתי מפשע רב:
- 14 Keep your servant also from willful sins; they may not dominate me; then shall I be faultless, and I shall be cleansed from great transgression.
- טו יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך ה' צורי וגאלי:
- 15 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to You, O God, my rock, and my redeemer.

Structure

A quick look at the structure of the chapter will assist us in understanding its content. Even a cursory reading of the *Tehilah* reveals that the flow of the words changes as the content changes. Indeed, the change in content reveals the structure of the *Tehilah*:

Opening gambit: Verse 1— “For the Leader: A Psalm of David”

Part 1— The heavens sing God’s praises. The example is the sun.

Part 2— The Torah is perfect in so many ways

Part 3— Man tries his best

Closing thought— “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to You, O God, my rock, and my redeemer”

Part 1— The Heavens Sing God’s Praises

The first part of the chapter can be divided into two sections. The first section is a general description of how the heavens sing their praises to God. The second section focuses on the example of the sun. It is interesting that the third phrase in verse 5 is actually the beginning of the next sub-section, thus connecting the two. The poetic structure of these verses is as follows:

Section - 1a	
Chiastic	: <u>הַשָּׁמַיִם מְסַפְּרִים כְּבוֹד אֵל</u> // <u>וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו מְגִיד הַרְקִיעַ:</u> (ב)
Parallel	: <u>יּוֹם לְיוֹם יִבְיַע אֱמֶר</u> // <u>וּלְלַיְלָה לְלַיְלָה יַחֲוֶה דַעַת:</u> (ג)
Three Parallel Phrases	: <u>אֵין אֱמֶר</u> // <u>וְאֵין דְּבָרִים</u> // <u>בְּלִי נִשְׁמַע קוֹלָם:</u> (ד)
Parallel	: <u>בְּכֹל הָאָרֶץ יֵצֵא קוֹם</u> // <u>וּבְקֶצֶה תְּבַל מְלִיהֶם</u> (ה)

Verse two has a chiastic structure: The outer words are parallel and the inner words are parallel. הַשָּׁמַיִם is parallel to הַרְקִיעַ and so on. In the following three verses, the poetic structure is parallel. The chiastic structure creates a somewhat closer parallelism between the two halves of the verse by encasing the words and the meaning by placing the parallel words or phrases at the two ends.

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and His handiwork is spoken of by the firmament.” Both the Ibn Ezra and the Malbim explain that it is the very heavens (the sky filled with the stars) and the firmament (the elements of the weather) that do the talking. The two halves can be differentiated—according to the Malbim—in that the stars and the all the other astronomical bodies date back to creation, while the changing weather expresses the idea that God renews His creation every day. Either way, they sing out clearly in praise of God!

“Day to day utters speech, and night to night expresses knowledge.” The poetic parallelism tells us that despite the difference expression of the praise during the day vis-a-vie the night, the action is the same. The Malbim teaches that during the day, the heavens talk out loud, while during the quiet of the night the song is almost silent.

“There is no speech, there are no words, without their voice being heard.” In this verse there are three phrases. The repetition of the opening thought in the second phrase only

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emphasizes the startling idea that the praises sung by the heavens are actually heard. King David tells us that if you listen closely you can actually hear the heavens and the firmament speak and sing the praises of God. How can it be otherwise? If words are spoken, aren't they heard!?

To put in more prosaic terms, we must look at the movements of the stars and the changes in the weather from a different perspective: What we think of in astro-physical and meteorological terms is really something altogether different. It is a significant part of God's creation singing his praises.

"Their line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." Indeed, the songs of praise are broadcast throughout the entire world! They are there for everyone to see and especially to hear.

		Section—1b	
┌	לְשֶׁמֶשׁ שָׁם אֱהָל בָּהֶם :		
	Parallel	וְהוּא כִתְתוּ יֵצֵא מִחֶפְתּוֹ // יֵשִׁישׁ כְּגִבּוֹר לְרוּץ אֶרֶץ :	(1)
	Chiastic	// מִקְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם מוֹצֵאוֹ // וְתִקְוַפְתּוֹ עַל קְצוֹתֵם //	(2)
└	וְאֵין נִסְתָּר מִחֶמְתּוֹ :		

As mentioned above, the third phrase in verse 5 connects the first part of the section to the second part. "In them, He has set a tent for the sun." The awkwardness of the words belies the meaning of the phrase. According to Rashi, the words of praise are so many and so great, that God uses them to form a protective tent for the sun.

How can we "hear" the sun's song? "And he is like a bridegroom coming out of his *Chuppah*; he rejoices like a strong man to run his course." King David uses two metaphors. Imagine: What does a bridegroom look like when he emerges with his bride from the *Chuppah*? Think of how his face literally radiates joy. The sun bursts over the horizon every morning with the same expression of joy as he (the sun) begins a new day doing God's bidding.

Now think of a runner. Ever see a happy jogger? Ever see an Olympic runner smile with happiness as he barrels down the track? Well, the sun is just such an athlete, but he runs his daily course from dawn to dusk with great happiness.

"From the end of the heavens is his exit and his circuit to the ends of it." This verse contains a double chiastic structure. The first two phrases are chiastic and thus parallel in poetic structure to verse 2, the opening verse of this first third of the *Tehilah*. Then the closing phrase— "and there is nothing hid from the his sun"— creates a chiastic close to this sub-section. In addition, verse 7 is parallel to the preceding verse, 6. Whether it is his daily route— "From the end of the heavens" - or his annual/seasonal route— "his circuit," the sun sings his song as he follows moves through our sky. In the end, there is no hiding from his heat or his song!

Bottom line: The sun and all the other astronomical bodies and even the changing weather are all perfect servants of God. Indeed, as they fulfill His commands on a moment to moment, day to day basis, the even sing and speak His praises.

Part 2—The Torah Is Perfect

Beginning with verse 8, the *Tehilah* changes course completely. Instead of stars and the sun, the topic becomes Torah and *Mitzvot*. And here we see in three out of the four verses in this section an almost algebraic equation: If A of God is B, then together they create C. (X of God = Y, therefore = Z).

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X of God = Y, therefore = Z

(ח) תּוֹרַת ה' תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נֶפֶשׁ

עֵדוּת ה' נְאֻמָּנָה מְחַכֵּמַת פִּתֵּי:

(ט) פְּקוּדֵי ה' יִשְׂרָיִם מְשַׁמְּחֵי לֵב

מִצְוֹת ה' בְּרָה מְאִירַת עֵינָיִם:

(י) יִרְאֵת ה' טְהוֹרָה עוֹמְדַת לְעַד

מִשְׁפָּטֵי ה' אֱמֶת צְדָקוֹ יַחְדּוֹ:

(יא) הַנְּחֻמָּדִים מִזֶּהָב וּמִפָּז רַב // וּמִתּוֹקִים מִדְּבַשׁ וְנֹפֶת צִיפִּים : Parallel

These verses are open to a wide variety of explanations. It is possible to fill page after page of the different interpretations. Here are two sets that I particularly think are meaningful.

From the *Midrash Tehilim* (Buber edition, *Tehilim* 19, page 171):

Rabbi Tanchumah explained [these verses] as parallel to the six orders of the Mishnah.

“The Torah of God is perfect” is the order of *Nashim* (women’s law), and so it says, “You are all fair, my beloved, and there is no blemish in you” (*Shir HaShirim* 4:7, meaning the beloved is perfect just like God’s Torah is perfect).

“The testimony of God is faithful” is the order of *Zera’im* (agricultural law), for he (the farmer) believes in the Creator and plants his seeds.

“The precepts of God are straight, [rejoicing the heart]” is the order of *Mo’ed* (holiday law) that has the laws of *Sukkah* and *Lulav* and all the year’s holidays, as it is written concerning them, “rejoice in your holiday” (*Devarim* 16:14).

“The commandment of God is pure, enlightening the eyes” is the order of *Kodashim* (sacrifices) that enlighten the eyes of the sages.

“The fear of God is pure” is the order of *Taharot*, laws of purity and impurity.

“The laws of God are true” is the order of *Nezikin* for it has all of the laws.

The second set is from Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook (from *Olat Re’iyah*, p. 56):

תּוֹרַת יי תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נֶפֶשׁ

“The Torah of God is perfect, restoring the soul”

No matter how elevated and fine something might be, everything that occupies a person is to a certain extent flawed in the sense that it prevents the person from thinking of something else. Subconsciously, a person is aware of this and for this reason is never wholly comfortable or satisfied with what he or she is doing.

Only Torah, which comes from God, does not give a person this feeling, because God’s Torah is *Temimah* – whole, complete. Only Torah calms the soul and the mind.

עֵדוּת יי נְאֻמָּנָה מְחַכֵּמַת פִּתֵּי

“The testimony of God is faithful, making the simple wise”

An individual cannot give 100% completely true testimony. The truth is always flawed. “We only grasp the shadows of things, not their truth.” (Halacha recognizes this. If two witnesses offer the same exact testimony, without any variation, they are considered to be false witnesses.)

There is only one source that offers us the complete truth and that is Torah. Thus, Torah makes the ignorant person wise.

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פְּקוּדֵי ייִ שְׂרִים מְשֻׁמְחֵי לֵב

“The precepts of God are straight, rejoicing the heart”

A person’s heart is naturally “straight,” “loving things that are straight from the very depth of one’s inner, primary nature. However, one’s straightness is limited by the limits of one’s existence.” The small inner core of straightness of one’s heart is lost in the wider, greater outer world. The cure is God’s commands. God’s *Mitzvot* connect a person’s naturally straight heart with its divine source. This results in a happy heart.

מִצְוַת ייִ בְּרָה מְאִירַת עֵינַיִם

“The commandment of God is pure, enlightening the eyes”

A person’s sight is deficient. A person only sees shadows of spiritual reality mixed with the physical world that surrounds him. Therefore, a person requires a physical presence that he can actually see and then connect him to the real world. *Mitzvot* function as concrete acts that illuminate a person’s eyes with God’s light. *Mitzvot* “conquer all the shadows that darken the senses.” *Mitzvot* “connect the person with the source of all life.” “For with You is the source of life; through Your light, we see light” (Psalm 36:10).

יִרְאַת ייִ טְהוֹרָה עוֹמֶדֶת לְעַד

“The fear of God is pure”

The purity of *Yir’ah* (fear) works constantly on a person’s soul, whether one is conscious of this or not. “The higher *Yir’ah* (fear) hovers above one’s soul and it is only revealed according to the level of each individual, given the purity of his soul and the correctness of his values.” Nothing can soil or mar the essential purity of this *Yir’ah*. This characteristic is passed from generation to generation until ultimately the hope of our prayers will be realized: “All of Your creatures will fear You.”

מִשְׁפָּטֵי ה' אֵמֶת צְדָקוֹ יִחַדּוּ:

“The laws of God are true, they are righteous altogether”

“Truth stands in the highest of places, in the place where the highest thoughts and divine ideas reside in their essential clarity. Justice flows from the radiant light of truth, as its foundation is revealed through the action and the activated by man’s behavior as he relates to the world” especially through law and judgment. Over time, cracks appear in the citadel of man’s law. On the other hand, there is never any deficiency in God’s law, for divine justice is firmly rooted in divine truth. Indeed, this is most evident when we view the divine law as a unity that is continuously revealed throughout the generations.

The overall point is very straightforward: God’s Torah and *Mitzvot* are perfect in every which way! Indeed, “they are more pleasant than gold, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.” True perfection!

Part 3— Man Tries His Best

The poetic structure of parts one and two is classic in its elegance, its sophistication and its logic. Indeed, just as the content of each part points to perfection within God’s world, both physically—the astronomical bodies—and spiritually—the Torah and *Mitzvot*, so, too, the way the ideas are expressed is well-nigh perfect. All of this breaks down in the third part.

In this third section, the poetic structure is almost absent. The ideas are expressed in terms that hint at fear and even shame. The three verses can be divided into four lines of two phrases each. And there is a certain parallelism between the verses created by the repetition of certain

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words. Nevertheless, the lines lack the clear internal parallelism that we saw in the first part of the *Tehilah*.

	גַּם עֲבָדְךָ נִזְהָר בָּהֶם // בְּשִׁמְרָם עֲקֹב רַב:	(ב)
}	שְׂגִיאוֹת מִי יָבִין // מִנְּסֻתֹת נִקְנִי:	(ג)
	גַּם מִזֵּדִים חָשַׁךְ עֲבָדְךָ // אֵל יִמְשְׁלוּ בִי	(ד)
	אֲזַיְתֶם // וְנִקְיִתִי מִפֶּשַׁע רַב:	

"Your servant is careful with them; in keeping them there is great reward." King David begins his discussion of himself by saying, "Gosh, I try real hard to be a good, observant Jew." Then he continues by saying, "However, who can understand errors? [Please] cleanse me from hidden faults. Faults hidden from me, but not from You, God."

King David's problems don't end there. "Keep your servant also from willful sins; they may not dominate me; then shall I be faultless, and I shall be cleansed from great transgression." There seems to be no end to his problems. Unfortunately, King David is not perfect.

A Midrashic Solution to a Problem

How are we to reconcile the inclusion of this third section—an expression of human imperfection—along with the first two parts that demonstrate perfection in the heavens and in Torah?

The solution is found in a Midrash (*VaYikra Rabbah* 5:8):

Rabbi Shimon taught: What great artists are the Jews, that they know how to appease their Creator.

Rabbi Chanina said, "There is a tenant farmer who knows how to ask and there is a tenant farmer who does not know how to ask.

Rabbi Choni said: King David belonged to the first – better – group of "tenant farmers."

At first, he sang poetic praise, "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19).

He (God) said to him, "'The heavens...' Maybe you need something?"

He (King D.) continued to recite, "The firmament shows His handiwork."

He (God) said to him, "Maybe you need something?"

He (King D.) continued to recite, "Day to day utters speech, and night to night expresses knowledge."

He (God) said to him, "What do you want!?"

He (King D.) replied, "'Who can understand errors.' I seek forgiveness for my sins of error that I did before You."

He (God) said to him, "I forgive and I forget."

He (King D.) replied, "Cleanse me from hidden faults."

He (God) said to him, "I forgive and I forget."

He (King D.) replied, "Keep your servant from willful sins; they may not dominate me; then shall I be faultless, and I shall be cleansed from great transgression." King David said before God, "Master of the Universe, You are a great God and my sins are great. It is proper for a great God to forgive great sins!"

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“Everything is perfect,” says King David. “Everything is perfect except me. Yet I can do something perfect. I can sing the praises of God’s perfect world and His perfect Torah.” And so he does. In the end God hears his song and asks, “How shall I reward you?”

King David replies, “Cleanse me of my sins— the big ones along with the little ones— to make me perfect, too.”

King David stands there at night looking at the stars. He wraps his cloak a little tighter to fight off the evening’s chill. He clutches a book of Torah to his chest. He prays to God saying that he can hear the praise sung by the stars. He holds up the book and says that he sees clearly the complex perfection that is Torah and how it influences his very soul. He waits for God’s reply. He bows his head and utters one last prayer:

הֵיוּ לְרָצוֹן אִמְרֵי פִי וְהִגִּיוֹן לִבִּי לְפָנֶיךָ ה' צוּרִי וְגֹאֲלִי:

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to You,
O God, my rock, and my redeemer.”

As he closes his eyes and concentrates on this one last thought, God replies, “I forgive and I forget.”

Back to the Original Question

Why was this last verse of the *Tehilah* chosen as the very end of the *Shemonah Esray*? Indeed, *Chazal* quote Rabbi Yochanan twice (*Berachot* 4b and 9b) as saying that the *Shemonah Esray* ends with the recitation of this verse. Further on in *Berachot* (17a), the author of the closing paragraph of the *Shemonah Esray* also ends his short prayer with this verse. Even though the *Gemara* answers our question as to why (*Berachot* 9b), I would like to offer a different answer.

The *Shemonah Esray* is the ultimate *Tefilah*. It begins with praise, continues with petition and ends with thanks. No news there. However, which syllable is emphasized? The mere fact that the middle section contains 13 *Berachot* of petition and that the very last *Berachah* is also a petition (for Shalom), it would seem that the overall thrust of the *Shemonah Esray* is to ask God for all we need and all that *Am Yisra'el* needs.

Why should God give us anything for which we ask? What have we done to earn His assistance?

Our sages understood our predicament very well. And they offered a solution: Recite the last verse of Tehilim 19. Why? When you recite this verse you will think of the rest of the *Tehilah*. You will think— just as King David did— that the astronomical bodies are perfect in their obedience. You will think— just as King David did— that God’s Torah and *Mitzvot* are perfect. And you will think— just as King David did— that unfortunately you are not perfect. Nevertheless, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to You, O God, my rock, and my redeemer.” You will stand before God just as King David did and pray that God will answer you as well with “I forgive and I forget. And I will help you, too”