

Introduction

Sometimes we feel despair. We might even feel ashamed for holding on to hope in God. Yet we recall the faith of our ancestors and gain inspiration from their belief. We pledge to praise God at the time of our redemption and to pass on this belief to the next generation.

For the leader; on ayyeleth ha-shahar. A psalm of David.

My God, my God, why have You abandoned me; why so far from delivering me and from my anguished roaring? My God, I cry by day—You answer not; by night, and have no respite. But You are the Holy One, enthroned, the Praise of Israel. In You our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and You rescued them. To You they cried out and they escaped; in You they trusted and were not disappointed. But I am a worm, less than human; scorned by everyone, despised by people. All who see me mock me; they curl their lips, they shake their heads. “Let him commit himself to God; let [God] rescue him, let [God] save him, for [God] is pleased with him.” You drew me from the womb, made me secure at my mother’s breast. I became Your charge at birth; from my mother’s womb You have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help. Many bulls surround me, mighty ones of Bashan encircle me. They open their mouths at me like tearing, roaring lions. My life ebbs away: all my bones are disjointed; my heart is like wax, melting within me; my vigor dries up like a shard; my tongue cleaves to my palate; You commit me to the dust of death. Dogs surround me; a pack of evil ones closes in on me, like lions [they maul] my hands and feet. I take the count of all my bones while they look on and gloat. They divide my clothes among themselves, casting lots for my garments. But You, Lord, be not far off; my strength, hasten to my aid. Save my life from the sword, my precious life from the clutches of a dog. Deliver me from a lion’s mouth; from the horns of wild oxen rescue me. Then will I proclaim Your fame to my kin, praise You in the congregation. You who fear God, give praise! All you offspring of Jacob, show honor! Be in dread, all you offspring of Israel! For [God] did not scorn, and did not spurn, the plea of anyone lowly; [God] did not turn away from them; when they cried out, [God] listened.

לְמַנְצַח עַל־אֵילַת הַשָּׁחַר מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד: אֵלֵי אֵלֵי אֵלֵי אֵלֵי לִמָּה עָזַבְתָּנִי רְחוֹק מִיִּשְׁוּעָתִי דְבַרִי שָׁאַגְתִּי: אֵלֵי לֵהִי אֶקְרָא יוֹמָם וְלֹא תַעֲנֶנּוּ וְלַיְלָה וְלֹא־דוֹמְיָה לִי: וְאַתָּה קְדוֹשׁ יוֹשֵׁב תְּהִלּוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל: בָּךְ בָּטְחוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בָּטְחוּ וַתִּפְלֹטְמוּ: אֵלֶיךָ זָעֲקוּ וְנִמְלָטוּ בָּךְ בָּטְחוּ וְלֹא־בוֹשׁוּ: וְאַנְכִי תוֹלַעַת וְלֹא־אִישׁ חֲרַפְתִּי אָדָם וּבְזוּי עָם: כְּלִרְאִי יִלְעָגוּ לִי יִפְטִירוּ בְשִׁפְהָ וְיִנְעוּ רֹאשׁ: גַּל אֶל י־הוּהוּ וַיִּפְלְטֵהוּ וַיִּצִלְהוּ כִּי חָפֵץ בּוֹ: כִּי־אַתָּה גַחִי מִבֶּטֶן מִבֶּטְחִי עַל־שִׁדֵי אֲמִי: עֲלֶיךָ הִשְׁלַכְתִּי מִרְחֹם מִבֶּטֶן אֲמִי אֵלֵי אֶתָּה: אֶל־תִּרְחַק מִמֶּנִּי כִּי־צָרָה קְרוּבָה כִּי־אִינוּ עוֹזֵר: סָבְבוּנִי פְרִים רַבִּים אֲבִירֵי בָשָׁן כְּתֵרוּנִי: פָּצוּ עָלַי פִּיהֶם אֲרִיֶה טֹרֵף וְשֹׂאֵג: כַּמִּים נִשְׁפַּכְתִּי וְהִתְפָּרְדוּ כָל־עַצְמוֹתַי הָיָה לִבִּי כַּדּוֹנָג נֶמֶס בְּתוֹךְ מַעֲי: יָבֵשׁ כְּחָרָשׁ כָּחִי וְלִשׁוֹנִי מִדְּבַק מִלְקוֹחִי וְלַעֲפָר־מוֹת תִּשְׁפָּתֵנִי: כִּי סָבְבוּנִי כָל־בָּלִים עֲדַת מְרַעִים הַקִּיפוּנִי כְּאֲרֵי יָדַי וְרַגְלֵי: אֶסְפֹּר כָל־עַצְמוֹתַי הֵמָּה וַיִּבִּטוּ יְרֹאוּבֵי: יִחַלְקוּ בְגָדֵי לָהֶם וְעַל־לְבוּשֵׁי יַפִּילוּ גוֹרֵל: וְאַתָּה י־הוּהוּ אֶל־תִּרְחַק אֵילוֹתַי לְעֹזְרֵתִי חוֹשֶׁה: הַצִּילָה מִחֶרֶב נַפְשִׁי מִיַּד־כָּל־בִּי יַחֲדָתִי: הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי מִפִּי אֲרִיֶה וּמִקֶּרְנֵי רַמִּים עֲנִיתָנִי: אֶסְפָּרָה שְׂמִיךְ לְאָחִי בְּתוֹךְ קָהֵל אֶהֱלֶלְךָ: יְרֹאֵי י־הוּהוּ הִלְלוּהוּ כָל־זֶרַע וְעַקְבֹּב כַּבְּדוּהוּ וְגוֹרוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ כָל־זֶרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל: כִּי לֹא־בָזָה וְלֹא שָׁקַץ עֲנוֹת עֲנִי וְלֹא־הִסְתִּיר פָּנָיו מִמֶּנּוּ וַיִּשְׁוּעוּ אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמַע: מֵאַתָּה תְּהִלָּתִי בְּקָהֵל רַב

Because of You I offer praise in the great congregation; I pay my vows in the presence of God's worshipers. Let the lowly eat and be satisfied; let all who seek God give praise. Always be of good cheer! Let all the ends of the earth pay heed and turn to God, and the peoples of all nations prostrate themselves before You; for sovereignty is God's, who rules the nations. All those in full vigor shall eat and prostrate themselves; all those at death's door, whose spirits flag, shall bend the knee in submission. Offspring shall serve [God]; the Sovereign's fame shall be proclaimed to the generation to come; they shall tell of the beneficence to people yet to be born, for [God] has acted.

נְדָרֵי אֲשֵׁלֵם נֶגֶד יְרֵאָיו : יֹאכְלוּ עַנְוִים וַיִּשְׂבְּעוּ
יִהְיֶה לָהֶם יְהוָה דְּרֹשָׁיו יַחֲי לְבַבְכֶם לְעַד : יִזְכְּרוּ
וַיִּשְׁבּוּ אֶל יְהוָה כָּל־אֲפֹסֵי־אָרֶץ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ
לְפָנָיִךְ כָּל־מִשְׁפָּחוֹת גּוֹיִם : כִּי לִי־הוּא הַמְּלוּכָה
וּמִשְׁלַל בְּגוֹיִם : אָכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ כָּל־דֹּשְׁנֵי־אָרֶץ
לְפָנָיו יִכְרְעוּ כָּל־יֹרְדֵי עֶפְר וְנִפְשׁוּ לֹא חַיָּה :
זָרַע יַעֲבֹדְנוּ יִסְפָּר לֹא־דָנִי לְדוֹר : יָבֹאוּ וַיִּגִּידוּ
צְדִיקְתּוֹ לְעַם נוֹלָד כִּי עָשָׂה : (תהלים כב)

The Psalm begins with a feeling of despair: “My God, My God, why have You abandoned me” (אֵל־לִי אֵל־לִי לָמָּה עֲזַבְתָּנִי)? The personal appeal to God reflects the sense of anguish from feeling unheard, in contrast to others who have their prayers answered. This creates a sense of worthlessness, “I am a worm, less than human” (וְאֲנֹכִי תוֹלַעַת וְלֹא־אִישׁ), alongside a feeling (perhaps imagined) that others are looking down on us. In this state, we can feel that life is “ebbing away” (כַּמַּיִם נִשְׁפָּכֶתִי), and that we are soon destined to become “dust of death” (וְלִעְפָּר־מֹת תִּשְׁפָּתֵנִי).

Yet precisely in this moment of despair, the Psalm gives us confidence both in ourselves and in God. “Hasten to my aid...deliver me...save me” (הַצִּילֵה) (לְעִזְרָתִי חוֹשָׁה... הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי... הַצִּילֵה), for God is in fact not so far away. God does not turn His face away from the afflicted. While we might have initially felt lowly, we feel empowered by being a part of the people who praise God and proclaim His goodness to the world. The chapter ends with a pledge to pass faith on to the next generation, the offspring who will continue to proclaim God’s righteousness, “the Sovereign’s fame shall be proclaimed to the generation to come. They shall tell of the beneficence to people yet to be born, for [God] has acted (זָרַע יַעֲבֹדְנוּ יִסְפָּר לֹא־דָנִי לְדוֹר יָבֹאוּ וַיִּגִּידוּ צְדִיקְתּוֹ לְעַם נוֹלָד כִּי עָשָׂה).

The Psalm is a powerful expression of the meaningfulness of being a part of a chain that transmits faith from one generation to the next. We are not alone, in part because God is never too far away, and in part because we bind ourselves to this multi-generational tradition of our ancestors and descendants.