YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**Lecture 32:**

**"indeed, for your sake we are being killed all the day"**

**Psalm 44 (part V)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

### IX. Conclusion

### 1. How is it possible that the book of *Tehilim* includes psalms of complaint?

Psalm 89 is a psalm of pointed complaint regarding what the psalmist sees as a breach of God's covenant with and oath to David and his descendants.[[1]](#footnote-1) At the beginning of his commentary to this psalm, Ibn Ezra relates a short but surprising story:

There was in Spain a great and pious sage who had difficulty with this psalm. He would not recite it, nor was he able to hear it, because the psalmist speaks harshly against the venerable God.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This anecdote finely exemplifies the problematic nature of the psalms of complaint in the book of *Tehilim.*

On the one hand, eyebrows may be raised regarding this "great and pious sage": According to accepted tradition from ancient times, the psalms in the book of *Tehilim* were written under the influence of *ru'ach ha-kodesh*, the holy spirit. What this means is that a Divine seal of truth is attached to each and every psalm. How, then, is it possible to entertain reservations about the psalmist's words in any psalm whatsoever, and to exclude a particular psalm from the corpus of psalms that are to be recited and heard?

On the other hand, finding a psalm of complaint such as ours or psalm 89 in the book of *Tehilim* does indeed give rise to a serious question: Is it possible that man should stand before God as a prosecutor, accusing Him of actions marked by injustice, and nevertheless his words are included in the book of *Tehilim* as having been spoken through the holy spirit? Surely it is stated in the song of *Ha'azinu* (*Devarim* 32:4):

He is the rock, His work is perfect;

For all His ways are justice:

A God of truth and without iniquity,

Just and right is He.

Complaints about Divine injustice can indeed be found elsewhere in Scripture, but, in most instances, answers to the charges appear alongside. In our psalm, and in other psalms of complaint in the book of *Tehilim*, the complaints leveled by the individual or the nation are left without God's response. This follows from the nature of the book of *Tehilim*, which is not a book of prophecies in which God utters His words to man, but rather it is a book in which man sounds his words to God, by way of praise, supplication, excitement, and also… complaint.[[3]](#footnote-3)

How then are we to understand that a complaint against God, that cannot be reconciled with His description as "a God of truth and without iniquity," and that finds no resolution in our book, should be found worthy of being included in it as words written through the holy spirit?

### "The prophets know that the God is truthful and do not Flatter him"

The key to the solution of this problem is found in the words of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi recorded in *Yoma* 69b:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Why were they [=the leaders of Israel from the time of the return from the Babylonian exile and on] called "*Anshei Keneset ha-Gedola*" ("Men of the Great Assembly")? For they returned the crown to its original state.

That is to say, the greatness of the "Men of the Great Assembly" – Israel's leadership during the first half of the second Temple period – lay in the fact that they rehabilitated the great praise of God that existed in times of old, but had become impaired through the destruction of the first Temple and the ensuing exile. With the return of the people to its land and the construction of the second Temple, the Men of the Great Assembly restored the praise to its original state.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi continues by explaining the nature of God's "crown" that was restored by the Men of the Great Assembly:

Moshe came and said [in his oration in *Devarim* 10:17]: "A great God, mighty and fearful" [and thus determined that descriptions of God that we are permitted to use in our prayers].[[4]](#footnote-4)

[The prophet] Yirmiya came and said: Strangers dance in His sanctuary [= destroying His Temple]; where is His fearfulness. He omitted "the fearful" [from his prayer in *Yirmiyahu* 32:18].[[5]](#footnote-5)

Daniel came and said: Strangers subjugate His children [in their exile]; where is His might? He omitted "the mighty" [from his prayer in *Daniel* 9:4].[[6]](#footnote-6)

They came and said: On the contrary, this is the might of His might, for He conquers His inclination, and demonstrates long-suffering to the wicked.[[7]](#footnote-7)

And this is His fearfulness, for were it not for the fear of the Holy One, blessed be He, how can [this] one nation survive among the nations?[[8]](#footnote-8)

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's words prompt the Gemara to ask:

And our Sages [= Yirmiya and Daniel] – how did they act in this manner, uprooting an ordinance established by Moshe [= omitting some of the praise with which Moshe had praised God]?

Rabbi Elazar said: Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, is truthful,[[9]](#footnote-9) therefore they did not lie about Him!

In the parallel passages in the *Yerushalmi* (*Megila*, end of chap. 3; *Berakhot* 7:3), the Gemara's last answer is formulated in a slightly different manner:

Rabbi Yitzchak bar Lazar said: The prophets know that their God is truthful and do not flatter Him.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The following issue must still be clarified: How is it that the Men of the Great Assembly understood that which Yirmiya and Daniel failed to understand? The Maharsha answers this question in his *Chidushei Halakhot ve-Agadot* to this passage:

They [= Yirmiya, Daniel and the Men of the Great Assembly] certainly do not disagree, only that each one added and detracted from [God's] strengths and appellations in accordance with his time and what he saw of God's abilities and strengths. They all said "great" – for His greatness is known at all times from the creation of the world.

**Moshe** in his time, who saw the might and awe in the wondrous acts that the Holy One, blessed be He, performed in Egypt and against Sichon and Og, and the other miracles in the wilderness, added "the mighty and the fearful."

**Yirmiyahu came** and saw in his time and generation strangers dancing in His sanctuary. He said: ‘Where is His fearfulness?’ and therefore omitted saying "the fearful." This was at the beginning of the exile, at the time of the destruction of the Temple, when Israel had not yet been subjugated to idolaters, and therefore he would still say "the mighty."

**Until Daniel came**, who was in exile in Babylonia, and witnessed the subjugation of the exile. He therefore said: Where is His might, and omitted saying "the mighty." But he would say "the fearful," for he had not seen the destruction of the Temple with idolaters dancing, etc.

**Until the Men of the Great Assembly**, who lived at the end of the seventy years of the Babylonian exile and during those years witnessed Israel being saved from various troubles… once against said… this is His might… this is His fearfulness… And this is what [he means when] he concludes: "They knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, is truthful, therefore they did not lie about Him." **Each of them refrained from lying about Him, in accordance with his time and generation!**

This citation from the Talmud and its commentators is exceedingly incisive: man is a product of his time and generation; he can only describe God's actions as they reveal themselves in his day, as he himself experiences them. God might reveal Himself in a particular generation in such a way that the people of that generation experience Him and His actions as contradicting truths regarding God's attributes handed down to them from previous generations. Must they repeat those truths when their hearts do not agree with their mouths? "For a hypocrite shall not come before Him" (*Iyov* 13:16) – a person is forbidden to lie about God who is truthful and desires that only the truth be spoken. It is true that human truth is perforce the product of a person's narrow understanding in his own generation, but nevertheless, it is only this truth that man is permitted to express when He appears before God.

It is possible that several generations later the perspective will change, and that a later generation will understand something that the earlier generation did not understand regarding past events. That later generation will then emend the historical perception of the earlier generation, as did the Men of the Great Assembly regarding the events surrounding the destruction of the Temple and the exile. They were able to do this, because they were already living in Eretz Israel after the years of exile had come to an end, and therefore their vantage point on past events was different and more embracing.

Nevertheless the prayers voiced by Yirmiyahu and Daniel remained in place as prayers written by way of the holy spirit. They were included in the various biblical books, because their truth had come from the upright hearts of holy people who uttered their words by way of the holy spirit in accordance with their times.

### A complaint for its time that is needed also for later generations

Let us now return to our question regarding the psalms of complaint found in the book of *Tehilim*. The author of our psalm (or the author of the *Tehilim* 89) knows that God is the "God of truth and without iniquity." But what should he do when the experience of his generation and even his own experience does not accord with this knowledge? Should he decree silence upon himself, when his heart is bursting because of his failure to understand the ways of God? Is he not permitted, and even obligated, to address his bitter complaint to God? A servant of the God of Truth knows that even when he levels harsh accusations at Him that contradict the accepted truth but express the truth of his own life, his words will find favor before Him who knows the secrets of the heart, "for a hypocrite shall not come before Him."

Those responsible for the canonization of Scripture gave us the book of *Tehilim* together with the harsh psalms of complaint included therein, thereby expressing their recognition that even the bitter complaints, which were liable to put off the pious of later generations, were written by way of the holy spirit. According to their understanding, even sharp complaint is worthy of inclusion in the holy writings of the people of Israel and of serving later generations. Such complaint might answer the needs of later generations and give expression to their own difficulties. The seal of Divine truth was imprinted on the prayers of the holy psalmists, even when their hearts were filled with bitterness and the love of their people and of their God brought them to stand before God and speak from their hearts.

A person living in our generation, who comes to study *Tehilim* 44 sixty years after the Holocaust, cannot but see in this psalm an expression of what our parents' generation experienced in those dark days. Were they not permitted to express their bitter complaints in those times? Indeed, complaints were sounded, though little has survived of what was said.

I wish to bring here a relatively unknown passage of complaint that was transcribed by the writer Shalom Streit, *z"l*, and published in 1945 immediately following the end of that terrible war.[[11]](#footnote-11) The similarity between the words of the *dayan* of Radautz, R. Katriel Kave, and our psalm is clear.

The pure and upright R. Katriel Kave of Radautz, who was sent off with his brothers in misery to Transnistria, where he lost his wife and children and his entire family, remaining all alone in the world, was asked a wise question by one of the orphaned survivors of his community: "Does it perhaps fall upon us to repent, in the sense of ‘Let us search and try our ways, and turn back to the Lord,’ so that He will have mercy and compassion upon the remnant of our people, so that the lamp not be lost to the holy congregation, a city and mother in Israel?" The *dayan*, R. Katriel Kave, who was known in the entire area as the humblest of men (he scorned every invitation to serve in the rabbinate), answered as follows: "No, you merciful people, sons of merciful people, it falls not upon us, but upon the Holy One, blessed be He, to repent. For why were we visited with this ruin of the wicked? Why did our holy and righteous men die? Babes and infants who never tasted sin – why were they pitilessly torn to shreds before their mothers' eyes? How was the world suddenly left without rule and order, and where was the master of the manor? Is there really no law and no judge? Was the fool in *Tehilim*, God forbid, right when he said: 'There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works' (*Tehilim* 14:1)? Surely on my own flesh, I had seen His wonders and acts of lovingkindness at all times. Did He now harden His heart and shut His ears from hearing the cries of the downtrodden? What happened to Him, what happened here? My world has been turned over, I cannot understand. In any event, I see no reason for us to repent, for what is our iniquity and sin that we should be obligated to beat our hearts, saying: 'For the sin that we committed'? Alas, we have lost all! Our righteous fathers, our pure and holy brothers and sisters, our precious and innocent children, our modest and worthy women of valor – how have all our delights been removed, so that we stand like empty vessels? We know that nothing will be restored from our majestic past, for everything has gone down the road of no return. Iyov in his time, who like us had lost everything – in the end of his days, sevenfold was returned to him. But the Gemara states: Iyov never existed; he was merely a parable. Iyov was a parable, but we, stricken up to our necks with the calamities that befell Iyov; we are real; we are not a dream or a parable. My God, my God, what have You done to us, and why has this dreadful calamity come upon us? And in what form have You brought this calamity upon us! Shame covers our faces… How did You stand at a distance and close Your eyes so that You not encounter Your flock being led to slaughter, to assault and to humiliation!

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The commentators disagree about the event upon which this psalm is based. Among the various opinions, we favor the view that identifies this event with the death of Yoshiyahu in his war against Pharaoh Nekho in Megido. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. a. Ibn Ezra writes in the continuation: "And the Gaon (= Rav Sa'adya) did not mention in the commentary (= that he wrote to the book of *Tehilim*) a way to reconcile this psalm (= i.e., he did not explain the psalm in a way that would answer the question of the Spanish sage). And Rabbi Moshe he-Kohen (= Gikatilla) wrote at length about this, and I examined his book several times, but I was unable to understand what he is saying." In the end, Ibn Ezra attempts to explain the psalm and to reconcile it.

   b. Why didn't this "great and pious sage" relate to our psalm in the same way that he related to psalm 89? The reason might be that in our psalm, the complaint, as bitter as it is, is not stated in explicit terms, and therefore the psalmist is not "speaking harshly against the venerable God." In psalm 89, on the other hand, the psalmist presents, in the first part of the psalm, the covenant that God had made with David (the vision of Natan in II *Shmuel* 7), and in the second part he describes in almost explicit words how this covenant had been broken. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In one psalm of complaint in our book, Psalm 73, an answer to the psalmist's complaint about the evil that befalls a righteous man and the good that happens to a wicked person is given in the second half of the psalm. But this answer is not the answer of God, but rather the answer that the psalmist reached on his own when he entered "the sanctuary of God" (beginning in verse 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In *Berakhot* 33b it is related about a prayer leader who went down before R. Chanina and said: "O God, the great, the mighty, the fearful, the majestic, the powerful, the awful, the strong, the fearless, the sure and the honored. He (R. Chanina) waited till he had finished, and when he had finished he said to him: Have you concluded all the praise of your Master (God)? Why do we want all this? Even with these three that we do say (the great, the mighty, and the fearful), had not Moshe our Master mentioned them in the Torah and had not the Men of the Great Assembly come and inserted them in the prayer, we should not have been able to mention them, and you say all these and still go on! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In his prayer in *Yirmiyahu* 32:18, it says: "O great and mighty God! The Lord of hosts is His name." The term "the fearful" means "that people fear Him." But if strangers dance in His sanctuary, this shows that they do not fear Him.

   But when Yirmiyahu offered this prayer, when he was shut up in the court of the guard during the time of the siege, the Temple had not yet been destroyed, but it was about to happen: "Behold the siege works are come to the city to take it; and the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans that fight against it… and behold, you see it" (v. 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In his prayer in *Daniel* 9:4, it says: "O Lord, **the great and fearful God**, keeping covenant and truth…." Daniel offers this prayer in the first year of Darius the Mede, after the fall of Babylonia, but before the Babylonian exile had come to an end: "I, Daniel, considered in the books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Yirmiya the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem" (v. 2), and he pleads in his prayer that the people of Israel be remembered and redeemed.

   God's might expresses itself in His ability to redeem His sons from among the nations. But when they continue to remain in subjugation, and the redemption tarries, "where is His might?" [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A conceptual parallel to these words is found in the *agadot* regarding the destruction in *Gittin* 56b: Titus, upon entering the Temple, blasphemed against God and committed the most heinous offenses against Him. Two sages reacted as follows: "Abba Chanan said: 'Who is a mighty one like You, O Lord?' (*Tehilim* 89:9) - Who is like You, mighty in self-restraint, that hear the blaspheming and insults of that wicked man and keep silent? In the school of Rabbi Yishmael it was taught; 'Who is like You among the gods [*elim*]?' (*Shemot* 15:11) - Who is like You among the mute [*ilemim*]." [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rashi explains these two answers in accordance with the objections of Yirmiyahu and Daniel (though the answers appear in the reverse order of the objections), and has difficulty reconciling the matter.

   According to the simple understanding, however, it seems that the Men of the Great Assembly answered one objection with the other: When strangers dance in His sanctuary, even though His fearfulness is not evident, the "might of His might" is in fact evident – His self-control and silence in the face of these actions (see previous note); and when strangers subjugate His sons, even though His might is not evident, His fearfulness is evident there, for it is only owing to the fear of God that the nations allow Israel to live among them like sheep among the wolves.

   It turns out, then, that the destruction of the Temple and the exile that followed in its wake testify both to the might and to the fearfulness of God. Only that Yirmiyahu said what he said in the face of the approaching destruction, without seeing the exile that would follow it, in which the answer to his objection would be found. And Daniel saw the exile before Him, but had not been present at the time of the destruction of the Temple, where the answer to his objection could have been found.

   Where did the Men of the Great Assembly restore the full praise that Moshe had voiced, "A great God, mighty and fearful"? The commentators note the prayer of the Levites in *Nechemya* 9:32: "Now, therefore, our God, **the great, the mighty, and the fearful God**, who keeps the covenant and truth…." It is possible, however, that the reference is to the fact that the Men of the Great Assembly fixed the wording of the *Amida* prayer and included God's full praise in the first blessing. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rashi explains: "Agrees with the truth and hates falsehood." [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The *Korban ha-Eida* explains: "And they say the truth, 'for a hypocrite shall not come before Him' (*Iyov* 13:16)." [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I found this passage in a small book of prose and poetry that was sent by writers in Eretz Israel to the survivors still in Europe immediately following the Holocaust. The book was misplaced, and I don't even remember its name; all that I have is this passage which I had photocopied. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)