YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Structure of and Meaning of the Daily Prayer**

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***Shiur* #08: *Pesukei De-Zimra***

We have now reached *Pesukei De-Zimra*, the psalms recited at the beginning of the daily prayer. It would be fair to say that we have finished at this point the introduction to the daily prayers and are now commencing the actual *Shacharit* service. Despite my efforts to explain the place of each section in the past, there was no real connection between the previous sections and the *Shacharit* prayer itself. They belonged more to the "order of the day" than to the ‘order of the prayer." As we shall see shortly, *Pesukei De-Zimra* is understood to be a necessary introduction to prayer itself. This is most easily exemplified by the *halakha* that one may not interrupt the prayers from the beginning of *Pesukei De-Zimra* until after the completion of the *Shemoneh Esrei*.

Two different Talmudic sources are cited as the source for the recitation of *Pesukei De-Zimra*, the "verses of song." The first is more explicit and uses the term we are familiar with;

R. Yossi said: May my lot be with those who finish the *Hallel* every day. Is that so? Did not the master teach: He who recites the *Hallel* every day is blaspheming and scoffing? [R. Yossi explained:] What I meant was ***Pesukei De-Zimra***. (*Shabbat* 118b)

There is no way to know from the text of the *gemara* what exactly is meant by “*Pesukei De-Zimra*.” Rashi explains that it refers to the two chapters in Psalms that begin with the word “*Hallelu*’ (which are two of the chapters we recite). Other *Rishonim* explain that it means the completing chapters of Psalms ("**finish** *hallel*") – *Ashrei* to the end. In any event, this corresponds with what we call *Pesukei De-Zimra.*

On the other hand, based on this source, we would draw two conclusions. The first is that this recitation is not obligatory. R. Yossi is merely recommending the practice. He expresses his hope to be someone who completes "*hallel*" every day. Second, it does not seem to have anything to do with the daily prayer. It is recommended as a desirable daily practice, but bears no hint of a connection to *Shacharit*. On the contrary, it sounds more or less like a custom to recite *Tehillim*, similar to what many people do on a regular basis.

The Rif cites a different source. The *gemara* in *Berakhot* 32a quotes R. Simlai, who said: "One should always arrange the praise of God and only afterwards pray." The Rif in his citation of this text connects it to two other statements in the Talmud;

R. Simlai taught: One should always arrange the praise of God and only afterwards pray. From whom [is this learned]? From Moshe, as is written: ‘*Hashem* God, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness etc.,” and [only] afterwards is it written, ‘Let me cross and see this good land, etc.”

And we read in the first chapter (of *Berakhot* [4b]): R. Elazar b. Avina said: He who recites *Tehilla Le-David* [i.e., *Ashrei*] every day three times is assured that he will merit the world to come.

And we read in the chapter *Kol Kitvei* (*Shabbat* 118a): Rav Yossi said: May my lot be with those who finish the *Hallel* every day. Is that so? Did not the master teach: He who recites the *Hallel* every day is blaspheming and scoffing? What I meant was *Pesukei De-Zimra*.

We say [It seems that the Rif had the next line in his *gemara* in *Shabbat*; it does not appear in our *gemarot*]: What are they? From *Tehila Le-David* until *kol ha-neshama tehallel K-ah*.

And the Rabbis enacted that one should recite a blessing before them and a blessing after them. What are they? *Baruch She-Amar* and *Yishtabach*. Therefore, a person must not interrupt from when he begins *Baruch She-Amar* until he finishes the *Shemoneh Esrei*.

The Rif is associating the *gemara* in *Shabbat* that speaks of reciting *Pesukei De-Zimra* daily with a requirement to precede prayer (meaning supplication, making requests) with praise. This places *Pesukei De-Zimra* firmly in the context of the daily prayer. It is a preliminary step before making requests of God, following in the footsteps of Moshe, who first praised God's might and glory and only afterwards presented his request to be allowed to enter the Land of Israel. The essential dictum is the one in *Berakhot* (the actual locus of the Rif) that one must precede request with praise. The Rif adds that the content should be *Ashrei* (because of the additional statement that it is a good idea to recite *Ashrei* every day), and then the chapters known as *Pesukei De-Zimra*, based on the recommendation of R. Yossi in *Massekhet* *Shabbat*. Aside from those recommendations, however, there is a binding rule that one should "always" precede prayer with some sort of praise.

The Rif's interpretation of the passage in *Berakhot* is not the only possibility. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 1;2) states that the structure of the *Shemona Esrei* – first praise, then requests, then thanks – is Biblically mandated. The *Kesef Mishne*, searching for a source, chooses this passage in *Berakhot*, which derives the rule of preceding prayer with praise from a verse in *Devarim* about Moshe. Accordingly, the passage is not about *Pesukei De-Zimra*, but about the first three blessings of the *Shemoneh Esrei*. In fact, the Rambam's reference to *Pesukei De-Zimra* (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 7;12) simply states, "The Sages praised one who reads songs from the Book of Psalms every day, from *Tehilla Le-David* until the end of the book." This is clearly a reference to R. Yossi's statement in *Shabbat* and preserves the **nonobligatory** nature of that recommendation. Apparently, the Rambam did not view the recitation of *Pesukei De-Zimra* as deriving from the passage in *Berachot*, and this supports the *Kesef Mishne*'s suggestion.

In short, according to the Rambam, *Pesukei De-Zimra* is a recommendation to recite psalms every day; according to the Rif, it is part of the protocol how to pray.

The idea that one must precede prayer with praise may strike modern man as unworthy, as though we believe that it is necessary to flatter God in order to get Him to do what we want. But the origins of this practice should be seen not in the practical art of sycophancy, but in the protocol of royalty and loyalty. God is not an ATM. We can appeal to him not because He gives things away to anyone who asks, but because we are His subjects and He is our King. All men are judged according to their just deserts. If you wish to ask for something more, if you wish to make an appeal, then it is because He is your King and it is to Him that His subjects turn to meet their needs. The praise before request is no more than a proclamation of loyalty, or - to use a more medieval word - fealty,. Indeed, we do have to turn back to a long-forgotten world of kings and allegiance to understand this relationship. It is a breach of protocol – it is simply impolite – to rush in to the king and enter straight into a list of requests, as one could do in a grocery store.

The view of the Rambam leaves more unexplained. Why is the recitation of Psalms or of portions of Psalms recommended so highly every day? What is the purpose of this recitation?

This question becomes even more perplexing when viewed in the context of the *gemara* in *Shabbat*. R. Yossi had praised those who complete the *Hallel* every day. The *gemara* then cites a statement that reciting *Hallel* daily is blasphemy. The answer is that here we do not mean *Hallel*, but *Pesukei De-Zimra*. But what is the difference? According to the Rif, the answer is the context. Independent recitation of praise is problematic; as an introduction to request, it is praiseworthy. But what is the distinguishing point according to the Rambam? It cannot just be that different chapters from the Book are Psalms are meant. There is no hint in the text which chapters are meant, and in any event, both selections, the *Hallel* and the psalms that we know to be the *Pesukei De-Zimra* (from *Tehilla Le-David* to the end) are basically general paeans of praise.

Rashi explains the negative appraisal of one who recites *Hallel* daily as follows:

He is blaspheming and scoffing: For the early prophets enacted that one should recite psalms for praise and thanksgiving, as we find in the chapter *Arvei Pesachim*, and this one who reads it regularly and not in its proper time is like one who sings a melody and jokes.

*Hallel* is a song of praise for God, enacted to celebrate special occasions, great miracles, or exceptional revelations of Divine presence and favor. To recite it daily is to superficialize the experience of God's presence in our lives. *Hallel* is meant to represent our response to the unusual, a reaction to an occurrence which impinges on our daily schedule and opens our eyes to the hidden yet ultimately true reality, to the special, to the uniqueness of the moment. Reciting it daily is the exact opposite; it turns it into a jingle, and hence a joke. If *Pesukei De-Zimra* is to be different, it must be because it is not trying to be a hymn of response to God's unexpected intrusion in our lives, but something else.

It is clear that according to the Rif, *Pesukei De-Zimra* is addressed to God. One is talking to God when one recites the psalms, just as Moshe spoke to God when he said: "*Hashem* God, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your mighty hand." One praises God before one beseeches Him. According to the Rambam, this is not necessarily true. One is told to finish "*Hallel*," but it is not clear why or what one is exactly doing. This opens the possibility that the difference between *Hallel* and *Pesukei De-Zimra* is that the first is addressed to God while the latter is self-reflexive; one reads these psalms in order to absorb their content and to affect oneself. *Hallel* is addressed to God; *Pesukei De-Zimra* is addressed to oneself. Reciting the first daily belittles its contents by making the extraordinary mundane. The second, a process of self-discovery and enlightenment, can only be more meaningful the more regular it becomes.

This point is the central theme of a lecture by Rav Soloveitchik printed in *Shiurim Le-Zecher Abba Mari*. Among other proofs, the Rav pointed out that the morning psalms are called *Pesukei De-Zimra* – **verses** of song – and not *Pirkei De-Zimra*. *Hallel* consists of whole chapters, for that is the nature of hymns, and also entails a requirement of formal recitation. *Pesukei De-Zimra*, on the other hand, is not an exercise in "The heavens recite the glory of God," but an experience of **learning**, a kind of *talmud Torah*. Learning can be done verse by verse, each individual one having something to convey. The Rav listed other differences between *Hallel* and *Pesukei De-Zimra*, including the blessing ("*Yehalelucha" vs. "Yishtabach*"), and it is highly recommended that you see the original article.

It makes a lot of sense that this exercise in learning about the greatness of God should come before prayer; not that it is a necessary preliminary to prayer, but in the sense that the general benefit of daily learning about God serves a purpose in preparing one for prayer. And so, although according to the Rambam's reading of the *gemara* in *Shabbat*, *Pesukei De-Zimra* is not an integral part of the order of prayer but part of the normal day, it is customary to recite it before praying. One should have a clearer idea of whom one is praying to before one prays to Him. And so, the Rambam writes:

The Sages praised one who reads songs from the Book of Psalms every day, from *Tehilla Le-David* until the end of the book. And it is already customary to read verses before them and after them, and (the Sages) enacted a blessing before the hymns, which is *Baruch She-amar* and a blessing after them, which is *Yishtabach*, and **afterwards he recites the blessings on the *Shma* and reads the *Shma***. (7,12)

The Ralbag explains the *gemara* in *Berakhot* in this manner, more or less. Commenting on Moshe's prayer, which serves as the basis for the *gemara*'s statement that one should precede prayer with praise, the Ralbag explains that prayer depends on one's relationship with God. According to the philosophic model to which the Ralbag subscribes, God's providence flows naturally to those who cleave unto God, and so prayer will be answered only if one has a close connection with God. Hence, he claims, before one prays and makes requests, one should improve one's inner relationship with God, and this is accomplished by "praise before request." Although there is a specific Aristotelian flavor to this theory that is not popular today (rightfully so), it does illustrate the approach the Rav described. Praise before prayer is an exercise is self-education, changing oneself to better be able to pray. Translating (and of course modifying) the Ralbag’s point into contemporary terms, prayer is not merely sending God a message, but rather an encounter. When one prays, one is in God's presence, not writing emails. It is undoubtedly helpful to come to this experience with a clear intellectual and emotional appreciation of the greatness of God and His providence, not only to be better informed, but to enable the encounter itself, to be one who is cleaving unto God when one begins to talk to Him.

There is an unfortunate but widespread tendency to come late to *tefilla*. The halakhic way to deal with the problem this creates for praying *be-tzibbur* is to skip parts of *Pesukei De-Zimra*. *In extremis*, the *halakha* is clear that one should skip **all** of *Pesukei De-Zimra* if there is no other way to join in with *tefila be-tzibbur*. I hope I have convinced you that that would be a great loss. A few minutes earlier in the morning is a small price to pay for a chance to approach God in full appreciation for the encounter that is about to take place.