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בס"ד

On the Linkage of Psalm 104 and Genesis 1

Psalm 104, בְּרַכֵּי נַפְשִׁי אֱת ה' ("Bless Hashem, O my soul"), is a hymn of praise to the Creator that expresses awe and adoration of Him as well as wonder and appreciation for the world He brought into being. It particularly focuses on the interrelationship of the various components of creation and the wisdom of the Creator reflected thereby. It is clearly related to Genesis 1; indeed, it views the world through the categories and sequence of the Genesis account of creation and uses it as a frame of reference throughout. But whereas Genesis 1 is framed as an account of creation brought about in distinctive, individual stages, the psalm describes the world as a functioning entity and notes the coordinated activity that is ever taking place among its parts. In contrast to the sublime simplicity of Genesis 1 and its focus on categories, the psalm gives free reign to imaginative expansion and specific examples.

The praises to Hashem in verse 1, גִּדְלָתָּ מְאֹד (literally, "You have become exceedingly great," meaning that He has manifested an exceeding degree of greatness) and הוֹדוּ וְהִקְדַּרְתָּ לְבָשֶׁת ("You clothed Yourself in glory and majesty"), imply that He has done something extraordinary, in this case referring to His great act of creation. This is an introduction and corresponds to the first verse of Genesis. In verse 2, the psalm speaks of His wrapping Himself with אֹר (light) as with a garment and stretching forth שָׁמַיִם (the heavens) as a curtain. This imagery parallels the creation of light on the first day and the firmament (termed שָׁמַיִם in Gen. 1:4) on the second day. The following psalm verse depicts Him as having established the beams of His upper chambers in water (or with water, depending on how to translate the "ב"). This is reminiscent of the Genesis 1 account of His having separated the waters beneath the firmament from those above it, an act that prompts the reader to think of supporting beams in the heavens.

While the psalm is focused on the activity of the second day, before the creation of life, in verse 4 it admires the natural phenomena of clouds, winds and

fire, seeing them as G-d's chariot as well as His angels. (In Gen. Rab. 3:8, this psalm verse is cited as the source for Rabbi Yohanan's statement that G-d created the angels on the second day.)

In verses 5 and 6 the psalm turns to the earth and its waters: "He had established the earth on its foundation that it not totter forevermore" and "covered it with the *tehom* (great waters) as with a garment," such that even "upon the mountains the waters stood." Use of the words אֶרֶץ, מַיִם and תְּהוֹמוֹת immediately following אֹר , שָׁמַיִם and רוּחַ recalls the first few verses of Genesis in which all these words appear, most of them multiple times. The imagery recalls the primordial *tehom* of the *tohu vabohu* stage when the waters covered the earth (Gen. 1:2) before G-d assigned the waters their new locations.

Verses 7-9 relate that at G-d's shout (a poetic description of a command that causes the effect being described) the waters fled in all directions, going up mountains and down into valleys, to whichever place He designated for them. He established boundaries that they may not cross that they not return to cover the land. This account reflects the Genesis description of G-d ordering the waters to gather into one place causing the land to appear in the beginning of Day 3 activity (Gen. 1:9-10). (There apparently is here polemicizing against a popular ancient Near Eastern mythological belief that ascribed divinity and independence to the *tehom*. The "shout" seems to allude to G-d's overcoming the water's initial resistance to His command and the revolt of the sea.)

Although generally following the chronology of Genesis, the psalmist views the world from his perspective. He describes it from the standpoint of the positive impact its various components have on each other and on life, recognizing the interrelationships within the natural order. Thus, after enriching the account of G-d's separating the water from the land by His directing it through springs and rivers, the next several verses portray the great benefit the waters provide.

Thus, in verses 11 and 12 we read of the waterways furnishing drink to the beasts of the field, the wild asses slaking their thirst by the riverside, while birds are singing in the foliage above the waters. Use of the term *חַיְתוֹ אֲרָץ* (beasts of the field) recalls *חַיְתוֹ שָׂדֵי* (Gen. 1:24) and *חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה* (2:19). In verse 13, the psalmist imagines G-d watering the mountains from His upper chambers, satiating the earth *מִפְּרֵי מַעֲשֵׂיךָ* “from the fruit of Your works,” an extremely unusual usage. It appears to be a play on the *עֲשֵׂה פְרֵי* that is attested twice in regard to trees in Genesis 1:11-12, a term “borrowed” in the psalm for deployment at the spot where it is turning to the Day 3 creation of vegetation.

The psalm continues with the elaboration of the second part of Day 3 activities: G-d causes grass to sprout for animals and vegetation for man to labor upon, that he may bring forth bread from the earth. The assonantal verb-noun phrase of verse 14a, *מַצְמִיחַ הַצִּיָּר* (He makes grass sprout), corresponds to the assonantal verb-noun phrase of *תִּדְשֵׂא הָאָרֶץ דֶּשֶׂא* (Gen. 1:11), with which it is almost synonymous. Both phrases introduce the vegetation category and both are immediately followed by *עֵשֶׂב* (another nuance of vegetation).

Once again, the psalmist turns to the life around him. One cannot speak of the general category of vegetation without appreciating the great benefits it provides: the wine that gladdens the heart of man, the shine that oil renders to one’s countenance and the bread that sustains the heart of man. All are included in verse 15.

Verse 16 extends the description of G-d’s activities associated with vegetation, depicting the great trees He planted, the cedars of Lebanon, being satiated [with water], completing the references to the Day 3 *צִיָּב-עֵשֶׂב-עֵץ* grouping of Gen 1:11. Verse 17 describes a function of these trees: they provide a place for birds to make their nests, where the stork has its home. The succeeding verse continues the concept of domicile, depicting the high mountains where the wild goats abide, the rocks that are a refuge for the conies.

In verse 19 the psalmist turns to G-d’s Day 4 activity. He created the moon which provides “times,” and the sun, which “knows its setting.” Use of *מוֹעֲדִים* (times) is common to this verse and to Genesis 1:14, while the “sun knows its setting” is a poetic parallel to the

Genesis statement that G-d limited its rule to the day. In the four following verses, the psalmist elaborates with wonder on the impact the day-night cycle has on the lives of wild animals and man, how darkness and daylight allow each to function in their respective spheres. This is the spot where appreciation of the *וַיְהִי בֹקֶר וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר* (“and it was evening and it was morning”) refrain of Genesis 1 is at its peak. The following verse (24) constitutes an expression of awe at the multitudinousness of G-d’s doings, and all with wisdom.

Verse 25 proceeds to the creations of Day 5, specifically sea life. Contemplating “the great, wide sea,” one is overwhelmed by the enormity of what is out there: “countless *רַמְשׁוֹת* and *חַיֵּי* small and large.” The “countless” designation for this category reflects the fact that in Genesis 1 the plural *לְמִינֵיהֶם* (“to their species”) is only used with sea life *הַרְמָשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר שָׂרְצוּ הַמַּיִם* (“the stirring creatures which the waters had swarmed forth”), implying “to their very many species.” Verse 26 continues with the description of the sea, appreciating the fact that it affords man the possibility of water travel. It then recognizes the presence of the Leviathan. The latter requires comment.

A literary feature of this psalm is illustrating a general assertion with a specific example (such as the cedars of Lebanon of v. 16 and the stork of v. 17). Consistent with this, verse 26 singles out one particular creature from those of the sea: “This Leviathan that You formed to sport with.” In Genesis 1, however, G-d’s creative activity is described in generalities; no particular species of tree, sea creature, bird or animal is cited there except for *הַתַּנִּינִים הַגְּדֹלִים* (the great sea monsters, v. 21). In our psalm, although many creatures are mentioned, the Leviathan is the only one specifically described as created by G-d. This follows the precedent of Genesis, as the Leviathan is the parallel of the great tanninim, a linkage alluded to elsewhere in Tanakh. Psalms 74:13-14, describing G-d’s victories of old, reads: “You...smashed the heads of the tanninim in the waters...crushed the heads of Leviathan.” Isaiah 27:1, regarding G-d’s judgment day, states: “G-d will punish Leviathan...and slay the Tannin of the sea.”

M. D. Cassuto and others explain that the reason tanninim were singled out in Genesis was to combat the idolatrous beliefs current at the time of the Torah-

giving, as Near Eastern mythology attributed divinity to these sea monsters. Thus, Genesis 1 states specifically that G-d created them and following that precedent our psalm emphasizes the point regarding the Leviathan.

The verse's continuation supports this understanding. It gives the reason for Leviathan's creation as לְשִׂחָק בּוֹ, which seems to mean, as Rab explained (*b. 'Abod. Zar.* 3b), "for G-d to sport with." Such unusual imagery would deride the belief that attributes divinity to this creature. This is consistent with Job 40:29, where G-d, in challenging Job, refers to the Leviathan, הֲתִשְׁחָק בּוֹ כְּצִפּוֹר ("Can you play with him as with a bird?") The Aggadah further develops these metaphoric images of Leviathan.

Verse 27 begins a discussion related to Day 6. As the psalm spoke throughout about animals and man as beneficiaries of various aspects of creation, it does not now elaborate on their creation. (This also explains why birds were not mentioned in the segment corresponding to Day 5, as they had been depicted earlier.) Rather, it expands on G-d's Day 6 declaration that He provides all living creatures their sustenance (Gen. 1:29-30). Thus, verses 27-30 articulate the great dependence of all living creatures on G-d and on His ultimate control of life for their sustenance. They lead to an apex proclaimed in verse 31, which begins the psalm's conclusion.

Verse 31a recognizes all the foregoing as a manifestation of Divine glory and expresses the wish that it should always be so recognized, while 31b contains the hope that "Hashem should rejoice in His works." This latter phrase corresponds with the end of Day 6 where the Torah states that upon viewing all that He had made, G-d saw that it was very good (Gen. 1:31), prompting the thought that He was happy with everything.

What about earthquakes and volcanoes? Verse 32 may be bringing them into the picture. It expresses reverence for G-d "Who looks down upon the earth and it trembles, Who touches the mountains and they smoke." He manifests His awesome power through such events.

In verses 33 and 34, as a result of the foregoing insights, the psalmist resolves to sing G-d's praises as

long as he lives. He expresses the hope that his musings will be acceptable to Him and that he may rejoice in Him.

In the final verse, after contemplating the magnificent panorama of creation with the infinite wisdom of the Creator manifest in it, the psalmist experiences a sense of dismay at the evil people of the world. Without stating the discordant thought of how they ruin His creation, he prays that they (or, as some take it, their sinning) be eliminated from the land and that evil people be no more. He then repeats the refrain he began the psalm with, "Bless Hashem, O my soul.

The psalmist does not explicitly refer to Shabbat despite the fact that in the Genesis account Shabbat brings the Six Days to their denouement. He is deeply disturbed by the sinners, yet Shabbat is the potent vehicle for promoting social justice throughout the land and is the entity designed to restore the lost harmony to the world. It commemorates G-d's creation and prompts the thoughts that we must fulfill His will and that He has the power to punish the wicked when He deems the time appropriate.

However, it should be borne in mind that this latter notion is a central theme of Psalm 92, which has as its heading מְזִמּוֹר שִׁיר לְיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת ("A psalm, a song for the day of Shabbat"). It is the only psalm dedicated to Shabbat. Referring to G-d's creation, it states "You have caused me to rejoice, Hashem, by your accomplishments, at the works of Your hand I cheer. How great are Your works, Hashem, Your thoughts are very deep...when the wicked sprout like grass and the evildoers flourish, it is only so that they will be destroyed forever...Your enemies shall perish, all doers of evil shall crumble" (Ps. 92:5-10). Thus, the psalm for Shabbat speaks about the great joy derived from contemplating Hashem's creation and then focuses on the problem of the evildoers, celebrating their elimination.

Accordingly, it is likely that Psalm 104 follows that pattern, indeed, it may be viewed as an expansion of Psalm 92, and the prayer for the elimination of the wicked in the last verse corresponds to an essential theme of the Shabbat commandment.