

"LET EVERY LIVING BREATH PRAISE G-D":

The Finale of Sefer Tehillim

Shmuel Grunfeld

The essay that follows is based upon the source provided below:

Haleluyah! Praise the L-rd in His Sanctuary; praise Him in the firmament of His power.

Praise Him for His mighty acts; praise Him according to His abundant greatness.

Praise Him with the sound of the *shofar*; praise Him with harp and lyre.

Praise Him with timbrel and dance; praise Him with flutes and pipe.

Praise Him with resounding cymbals; praise Him with crashing cymbals.

Let every living breath praise G-d. *Haleluyah!*

(Tehillim 150)

1. INTRODUCTION

It is interesting to ponder why King David chose to close Sefer Tehillim with this list of musical instruments. Why were these instruments mentioned and not others that also appear in Tehillim? What is their significance as the grand finale of humanity's supreme book of praises to G-d?

A clue is provided by the last mishnah in *Seder Kodashim*:

Said R. Yehoshua: This is as [the sages] said [of the ram]. When it is alive, its sound is one, but when it is dead, its sound is sevenfold. How is its sound sevenfold? Its two horns are [made into] two trumpets, its two thighs [into] two flutes, its hide into a timbrel, its large intestines into harp [strings], and its entrails into lyre [strings]....

(*Kinnim* 3:6)

In striking parallel, the musical instruments mentioned in the *mishnah* all appear in Mizmor 150: "*Its two horns are [made into] two trumpets*"¹ corresponds to "*praise Him with the sound of the shofar*" (ibid. 150:3); "*its two thighs [into] two flutes*" corresponds to "*praise Him with flutes*" (ibid. 150:4); "*its hide into a timbrel*" corresponds to "*praise Him with [the] timbrel*" (ibid.); and "*its large intestines into harp [strings], and its entrails into lyre [strings]*" corresponds to "*praise Him with harp and lyre*" (ibid. 150:3). The *mishnah* seems to be based on — and perhaps even a commentary on — our *mizmor*. By understanding the symbolism of the *mishnah*, we may begin to fathom the depth of these closing words of Sefer Tehillim.

2. SINGING TO THE VERY END — AND EVEN BEYOND

What is the *mishnah's* point in its parable of the ram's sound becoming sevenfold in death? Just when the ram would seem to be lost to the world and least valuable — in death — it actually becomes the basis of great creativity. In the same vein, in fact, the *mishnah* continues:

...R. Shimon b. Akashya says: The elderly among the ignorant, as they age, become increasingly confused of mind, as it is said, "*He removes the speech of orators, and the sense of elders He takes away*" (Iyyov 12:20). But with elderly Torah scholars, this is not the case. On the contrary, as they age, they become increasingly composed of mind, as it is said, "*With the aged is wisdom, and length of days [brings] understanding*" (ibid. 12:12).

(*Kinnim*, loc. cit.)

As a scholar grows old and feeble, one would expect his intellect to follow suit. Yet, like the sound of the ram, it grows only stronger and more valuable.

Reading Mizmor 150 in light of this *mishnah*, we can appreciate King David's concluding message to us. While the ram may appear to be dead and gone, it still, in a way, sings G-d's praises. People, too, can sing praises to G-d, no matter how desperate or lost their situation. Indeed, the true fruition of the ram's song comes only after its death.

Our *mizmor* concludes, "...praise Him with crashing cymbals. Let every living breath praise G-d. Haleluyah!" (ibid. 150:5-6). The call to "praise Him with *crashing cymbals*" is rendered by the Targum, "praise Him with *cymbals of alarm*": We must praise G-d even in times of alarm and anguish. Ultimately, there is not a moment that is unfit for glorifying G-d. Thus, R. Me'ir expounds the closing verse, "Let every living breath (כל הנשמה) praise G-d": "For each and every breath (כל נשימה ונשימה) that a person takes, he is obligated to extol his Creator" (*Dev.R.* 2:37).²

3. THE ALL-EMBRACING SONG OF PRAISE

In the midst of all the musical instruments listed in our *mizmor*, King David includes "dance": "Praise Him with timbrel *and dance*" (ibid. 150:4). This suggests that we should utilize all our energies in praising G-d. First, the *mizmor* specifies praising G-d with "the sound of the *shofar*" (ibid. 150:3), an act of great skill and know-how,³ which employs the mouth and lungs. It then speaks of praising G-d with "harp and lyre ... [and] with timbrel" (ibid. 150:3-4), instruments played by hand. Finally, it introduces "dance" as a means to praise G-d with the legs and body, as it is said, "And David was *leaping about with all his might* before G-d" (*Shemu'el II* 6:14).

Ultimately, it is not even man alone who is thus engrossed in praising G-d. The Targum identifies the "pipe (עגב)" (*Tehillim* 150:4) as the "*abuv*," which is made not from animal bone but from a mere plant — and not from cedar or any other fine wood at that, but from a simple reed.⁴ Likewise, "resounding cymbals" (ibid. 150:5) are cymbals made of copper,⁵ an inanimate material. The musical instruments in Mizmor 150 derive, then, from diverse sources: the realms of the animal, the plant, and the inanimate. Every aspect of Creation is swept up in the singing of G-d's praises.

Furthermore, perfection is no prerequisite of this singing. Apropos of the "pipe" and the "resounding cymbals" of our *mizmor*, Chazal comment:

The pipe in the Temple was smooth and thin and made of a reed, and it was from the days of Mosheh, and its sound was pleasant. [By] the king's command, it was overlaid with gold, and its sound was no longer pleasant. They removed the [gold] overlay, and its sound was as pleasant as it had been.

The cymbal in the Temple was of copper, and it was from the days of Mosheh, and its sound was pleasant, and it became impaired. The sages sent for craftsmen who came from Alexandria of Mitzrayim, and they repaired it, but its sound was no longer pleasant. They undid the repair, and its sound was as pleasant as it had been.

(*Arachin* 10b)⁶

The simplicity of the pipe and the flaw of the cymbal were integral parts of the unique songs they sang to G-d. By extension, even the flawed personality has the capacity to praise G-d — a praise that may be warmly received and treasured by the Holy One Blessed be He.

4. CONCLUSION

Each of the instruments mentioned in our *mizmor* features some negative connotation: The source of "the *shofar* ... harp and lyre ... timbrel ... [and] flutes" is the ram's carcass; the source of the "pipe" is an unadorned reed; and the "impaired" copper cymbal is a cymbal of "alarm." Indeed, "for

each and every breath" — at every turn and with all of one's vitality and being — it is fitting to praise G-d, in times of joy as well as in times of sorrow. Every person, animal, plant, and inanimate object can and must sing G-d's praises. Perhaps for this reason King David, the "sweet singer of Yisra'el" (Shemu'el II 23:1), chose to end Sefer Tehillim with this *mizmor*. As humanity's supreme book of praises to G-d draws to a close, this is the message with which it leaves us. Never should we feel that the time is unripe or that we are unworthy to sing the praises of G-d. On the contrary, "*Let every living breath praise G-d. Haleluyah!*"

NOTES

1. The *mishnah*'s reference to "trumpets" from the ram's horns is clearly to the *shofar*. (See com. On the *mishnah*, loc. cit.).
2. See also *BeR.R.* 14:9.
3. See *Rosh HaShanah* 29b.
4. See *Arachin* 10b, quoted in the text, below.
5. *Yal. HaMachiri*, loc. cit., seems to identify the "resounding cymbals" of our *mizmor* with "the cymbal in the Temple," which "was of copper" (see *Tos. Arachin* 2:2 and *Arachin* 10b, quoted in the text, below).
6. See also *Tos. Arachin* 2:2.