BIBLICAL PRAYERS AND RABBINIC RESPONSES:
BALANCING TRUTHFULNESS AND RESPECT BEFORE GOD

HAYYIM ANGEL

In this study, we will consider the diversity of response to two of the most sharply formulated prayers in the Bible. According to what appears to be the smoothest readings of the passages to be considered, Habakkuk accuses God of poor educational judgment by allowing the wicked Babylonians to conquer Judah, and then boldly demanded a response (Hab. 1:2-4, 2:1). Psalm 89 lashes out at God for abrogating the permanent covenant He had struck with the Davidic dynasty.

Traditional interpreters assume that everything in the Bible is Divinely inspired, and applicable to all later generations (see, e.g., Megillah 14a). At the same time, several midrashim and later exegetes are uncomfortable with the bluntness of these prayers, and therefore attempt to restrict their applicability. These commentators adopt variations of at least five interpretive options:

1. The prophet/psalmist acted religiously appropriately, and therefore we should emulate his prayer.
2. The prophet/psalmist acted religiously appropriately, but most people have not attained a sufficiently high spiritual level to emulate that kind of prayer. Therefore, they should speak more diffidently before God.
3. The prophet/psalmist was objectively wrong himself.
4. The prophet/psalmist was quoting someone else, rather than speaking for himself.
5. The text needs to be supplemented or re-interpreted in order to remove the sting of the more literal reading.

HABAKKUK

> *How long, O Lord, shall I cry out and You not listen, shall I shout to You, 'Violence!' And You not save? Why do You make me see*

Hayyim Angel is Rabbi at Congregation Shearith Israel of New York City (the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, founded in 1654) and teaches Tanakh at Yeshiva University. He has published articles on Tanakh in journals such as Tradition, Or HaMizrah, *and* Jewish Bible Quarterly. *Twenty of his biblical studies were collected in a book,* Through an Opaque Lens. *Another twenty studies were collected in a second book,* Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings.

> *iniquity* [why] *do You look upon wrong? – Raiding and violence are before me, strife continues and contention goes on. That is why decision fails and justice never emerges; for the villain hedges in the just man – therefore judgment emerges deformed* (Hab. 1:2-4).
>
> *I will stand on my watch, take up my station at the post, and wait to see what He will say to me, what He will reply to my complaint* (2:1).

Habakkuk's primary difficulty was with the favor God was to show the Babylonians at the time of the destruction of the Temple. Although Israel may have deserved punishment for her sins, it should not have come at the hands of a nation far more wicked (Abarbanel on 1:13). Habakkuk believed that the impending destruction of Jerusalem by the wicked Babylonians would reduce faithfulness, since people would conclude that there is no justice in the world (Ibn Ezra, Radak on 1:4). Additionally, Habakkuk expresses frustration that God had not yet responded to his prayers, suggesting a long history of protest prior to the opening of the biblical book.

One midrash is uncomfortable with Habakkuk's tone, and sharply criticizes him:

> *Keep your mouth from being rash* (Eccl. 5:1) . . . . When Habakkuk said *I will stand on my watch, Take up my station at the post* (Hab. 2:1) . . . . This teaches that he drew a form [*tzar tzurah*], and stood in its midst. He said "I will not move from here until You answer me" . . . . God replied, "You are not an ignoramus, but rather a Torah scholar!" . . . . When Habakkuk heard this, he fell on his face and supplicated. He said, "Master of the Universe! Do not judge me as a willful transgressor, but rather as an inadvertent sinner [*shogeg*]." This is what is written, *A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk. In the mode of Shigionoth* (Hab. 3:1) (*Midrash Psalms* 7:17).

This Midrash deems Habakkuk guilty of speaking rashly before God, emulating an ignoramus rather than a prophet. It proceeds to explain Habakkuk 3 – prefaced with "*al shigionoth*" (midrashically explained as deriving from *s-g-g* [error]) – as a psalm of repentance by the prophet.[1]

A different approach is espoused in the Talmud (*Ta'anit* 23a), where Habakkuk's story is likened to that of Honi the Circle Drawer: "[Honi] thereupon drew a circle and stood within it in the same way as the prophet Habakkuk had done." Both brazenly and successfully demanded responses from God. Habakkuk received his theological answer, and Honi got the rain he requested. In the Talmud, both figures are praised for their saintliness, and for God's positive responses. Despite Honi's legendary success, however, Shimon ben Shetah was deeply concerned with his conduct:

> If you were not Honi I would have excommunicated you . . . . But what can I do to you who acts petulantly before the Omnipresent and He grants your desire, as a son who acts petulantly before his father and he grants his desires . . . . Of you Scripture says, *Your father and mother will rejoice; She who bore you will exult* (Prov. 23:25) (*Ta'anit* 23a).

Shimon ben Shetah believed that it was religiously inappropriate to make such demands of God. Nevertheless, he recognized that Honi enjoyed a unique relationship with God. This talmudic passage appears to espouse the view that Habakkuk and Honi were objectively correct in their prayers. Shimon ben Shetah, concerned that others might emulate them, restricted the applicability of these prayers to an exclusive elite.[2]

On a related note, the Talmud (*Sotah* 47a, 48a) reports that there was a group of Levites in the Temple called *me'orerin* [rousers], who would recite Psalm 44:24: *Rouse Yourself; why do You sleep, O Lord? Awaken, do not reject us forever!* Nevertheless, Yohanan the High Priest abolished this practice, since the prayer seemed inappropriate to him – after all, *the guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps!* (Ps. 121:4). Coupled with Shimon ben Shetah's criticism of Honi (and Habakkuk by association), this is evidence of a constricting process within the liturgy, attempting to eliminate sharper elements of biblical prayer from widespread communal usage.[3]

Ibn Ezra (on Hab. 1:1, 12) adopts yet another response to Habakkuk's prayers. Rather than admit that a prophet spoke those words himself, Ibn Ezra asserts that Habakkuk was quoting others of his generation. Thus, Ibn Ezra avoids the need to ask whether this prophetic prayer may be used as a model or not; Habakkuk was not the originator of those words.

Then again, perhaps Habakkuk spoke for himself, deeply concerned about the religious ramifications the destruction likely would cause. Most commentators do not ascribe these words to other speakers, nor do they think Habakkuk was repenting in Chapter 3. Additionally, God responded directly to Habakkuk, without any tone of criticism. Therefore, Habakkuk's prayer may have been fully appropriate, and God's positive response supports this view.[4]

PSALM 89

> *Yet You have rejected, spurned, and become enraged at Your anointed. You have repudiated the covenant with Your servant; You have dragged his dignity in the dust. You have breached all his defenses, shattered his strongholds* (Ps. 89:39-41).

Psalm 89 is one of the most jarring of the psalms. For 38 verses, the psalmist speaks elatedly of God's eternal covenant with the Davidic monarchy. God swore that it would endure forever, like the sun, moon, and heavens. But then, the psalm turns abruptly in verses 39-52, as the psalmist explodes at the abrogation of the covenant when the monarchy ended. It appears that the psalmist is directly accusing God of violating His oath.

Rashi, Meiri, and Metzudat David attempt to mitigate the protest by inserting an admission of sin: "You have been meticulous with [David's] descendants to weigh their sins until You rejected and spurned them in the time of Zedekiah." From this point of view, the psalmist is shifting blame onto Israel, rather than accusing God. However, the flow of the psalm appears to militate against this reading. While the psalmist admits that sin would elicit punishment, the monarchy itself was supposed to endure:

> *I will establish his line forever, his throne, as long as the heavens last. If his sons forsake My Teaching and do not live by My rules; if they violate My laws, and do not observe My commands, I will punish their transgression with the rod, their iniquity with plagues. But I will not take away My steadfast love from him; I will not betray My faithfulness* (Ps. 89:30-34).

Nevertheless, one can appreciate why these commentators re-interpreted the verses. The plain sense of the text is sharp indeed.

Those who accept the simplest reading must confront this challenge directly. Ibn Ezra (on 89:2) quotes a Spanish sage who refused to say this psalm: "In Spain, there was a great and pious sage, and this psalm was difficult for him. He would not read it, nor was he able to listen to it since the psalmist speaks sharply against God . . . ." This anonymous sage considered the psalmist's protest blasphemous, and therefore censored the psalm. Ibn Ezra agrees that those verses are blasphemous, but is unwilling to entertain the possibility that an inspired biblical psalmist would speak inappropriately. Therefore, he asserts that the psalmist is quoting the words of the enemies of God who blaspheme.

Radak, in turn, censures the comments of the anonymous sage and Ibn Ezra:

> Many have expressed astonishment over how this psalmist could speak these words against God [he then quotes the anonymous sage and Ibn Ezra – *HA*] . . . . I am astonished by their astonishment, for the psalms were written through Divine inspiration, and it is unthinkable that something in them is untrue (Radak on 89:39)!

Isaiah of Trani and Amos Hakham likewise consider these words to be of the psalmist. The words are religiously acceptable by definition since they appear in the mouth of a Divinely-inspired writer. Providing a framework for these harsh words, Hakham quotes talmudic passages stating that the righteous do not flatter God. Rather, they stand honestly before their Creator, pouring out all their emotions.[5] Does this mean that everyone may emulate this style of prayer? That might be a matter of debate, as discussed in the case of Habakkuk (and Honi). In practice, Jewish liturgy did not include this psalm.

GOD INSISTS ON TRUTH

Ever sensitive to minor nuances, the Talmud compares the formulations of four biblical verses scattered throughout the Bible:

> *For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the* ***great****, the* ***mighty****, and the* ***awesome*** *God* (Deut. 10:17). *O* ***great*** *and* ***mighty*** *God whose name is Lord of Hosts* (Jer. 32:18). *O Lord,* ***great*** *and* ***awesome*** *God, who stays faithful to His covenant with those who love Him and keep His commandments!* (Dan. 9:4).

> *And now, our God,* ***great****,* ***mighty****, and* ***awesome*** *God, who stays faithful to His covenant* (Neh. 9:32).

Focusing on the fact that Moses had said *'the great, the mighty, and the awesome God,'* the sages recognized that Jeremiah and Daniel used only parts of that formulation, and that the leaders of the prayer in Nehemiah 9 returned to Moses' complete formula. Midrashically, they posited the following reasoning behind this development:

> Why were they called Men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown of Divine attributes to its ancient completeness. Moses had said, *the great, the mighty, and the awesome God*. Then Jeremiah came and said, Aliens are destroying His Temple! Where are His awesome deeds? Therefore he omitted "awesome." Daniel came and said, Aliens are enslaving His sons. Where are His mighty deeds? Therefore he omitted "mighty." But they came and said, On the contrary! He performs mighty deeds by suppressing His wrath . . . . He performs awesome deeds, since were it not for the fear of Him, how could one nation persist among the nations! But how could [Jeremiah and Daniel] abolish something established by Moses? R. Eleazar said: Since they know that the Holy One, blessed be He, insists on truth, they would not ascribe false [things] to Him (*Yoma* 69b).

This talmudic passage sensitively balances the tension of truthfulness and deferential respect before God. On the one hand, the Men of the Great Assembly are praised for their optimism and for restoring Moses' account of God's attributes to its original full form. Indeed, the Talmud gives them the final word, and the first benediction of the Amidah contains this complete formulation. At the same time, however, the Talmud applauds the profound religious integrity of Jeremiah and Daniel.

Throughout biblical tradition, the lions of faith have challenged God – already beginning with Abraham and Moses: *Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?* (Gen. 18:25). *Now, if You will forgive their sin* [well and good]*; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written!* (Ex. 32:32).

One talmudic passage captures the daring spirit of Moses' prayer:

> R. Abbahu said: Were it not explicitly written, it would be impossible to say such a thing: this teaches that Moses took hold of the Holy One, blessed be He, like a man who seizes his fellow by his garment and said before Him: Sovereign of the Universe, I will not let You go until You forgive and pardon them (*Berakhot* 32a).

Whether to pray for the manifestation of God's justice, or to intervene on Israel's behalf, prophets and other biblical writers often spoke brazenly before God. Precisely our spiritual heroes – who generally must be emulated – are those who enjoyed the most intimate relationships with God, affording them a certain comfort level that may be too great for most people. The diversity of rabbinic responses to these and related prayers attests to the power of this paradox, that likely never will be resolved.

NOTES

1. Rashi, Kara, and Metzudat David (on 3:1) adopt this midrashic reading. Abarbanel (on 2:4) also criticizes Habakkuk for speaking too sharply. For a survey of the dimmer views of Habakkuk's prayer, see A. Pinker, "Was Habakkuk Presumptuous?" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 32 (2004) pp. 27-34. As we will see below, there are indeed those who criticize Habakkuk for his prayer, but there are other means of responding as well.

2. Only two pages later in the Talmud, there is further criticism of speaking brazenly before God: "Levi ordained a fast but no rain fell. He thereupon exclaimed: Master of the Universe, You went up and took Your seat on high and have no mercy upon Your children. Rain fell but he became lame. R. Eleazar said: Let a man never address himself in a reproachful manner towards God, seeing that one great man did so and he became lame, and he is Levi" (*Ta'anit* 25a).

3. Cf. M. Greenberg's assessment: "These heroes of faith have achieved a standing with God that ordinary mortals do not enjoy. . . . Having nothing they are not prepared to lose, they can be reckless. The situation of the ordinary mortal is quite different. With neither a vocation to God's service nor the heroism of these figures of legend, self-assertiveness and autonomy in relation to God would be considered presumptuous . . . the storming of heaven by prophets hardly served as a model for the ordinary (or even the extraordinary) pious Israelite" ("On the Refinement of the Conception of Prayer in Hebrew Scriptures," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 1 [1976], p. 58).

4. F..I. Andersen (*Anchor Bible: Habakkuk* [New York: Doubleday, 2001], p. 133) observes that there are no instances in the Bible where God rebuked someone for questioning God's justice. In the Book of Job, God criticized Job's shortsightedness, but vindicated his justness as well. It is worth noting that one psalmist does rebuke those who question God's ways (Ps. 94:8-10), and that type of rebuke is unique in Psalms.

5. A. Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Psalms* vol. 2 (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1979) pp. 156-157. See, for example, J.T. *Berakhot* 7:4 (11c); B.T. *Yoma* 69b.