

אם אשכחך ירושלים תשכח ימיני - עיון במזמור קלז
IF I FORGET THEE, YERUSHALYIM -
ANALYSIS OF MIZMOR 137

by Yitzchak Etshalom

I

COMPOSITION OF MIZMOR 137

In our series on Hallel, we briefly sketched some of the issues relating to the date of the compilation of the book we refer to as “T’hillim” (or, according to some of the Rishonim, תהילות). Although we noted the conventional understanding of Davidic authorship (affirmed only by R. Sa’adiah Ga’on) - and one opinion in the Gemara that credits David with the final compilation (BT Bava Batra 14b-15a), we noted that there are numerous statements in Rabbinic literature that support a much later date of the final anthology. We noted the Midrash (Kohelet Rabbah 7:30 - parallel in Shir haShirim Rabbah 4:5) that dates composition of T’hillim as late as Ezra (5th c. BCE), as well as the Gemara (BT Pesahim 117a) that proposes that the chapters of Hallel Mitzrayim (113-118) were composed by any number of beneficiaries of G-d’s miracles, up to and including Mordekhai and Esther (c. 473 BCE). Among the Rishonim, we noted the opinion of R. Mosheh haKohen ibn Giqatila, quoted 150 times by Ibn Ezra in his commentary on T’hillim, who favored a “contemporary” (i.e. non-prophetic, rather Divinely inspired words reflecting contemporary events and reactions) approach to T’hillim and maintained that the various passages were composed reflecting current events. Among more recent traditionalists, R. Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (1809-1879) known by the acronym of his name, מלבי”ם, among the most prolific Biblical commentators of the past 400 years, also maintained that so long as the spirit of prophecy was “available”, T’hillim continued to be composed (again bringing us roughly to Ezra’s time).

Among the many passages in T’hillim that play a role in this age-old debate, our psalm provides one of the strongest arguments in favor of post-Davidic composition.

The Mizmor recalls the pain of exile in Babylon (597/586 BCE - 539 BCE), our defiant stand against our captors, an oath never to forget Yerushalayim and a prayer for swift and terrible vengeance against our despoilers. It is difficult to imagine the motivation for such a composition by David, mourning over the destruction of a city that has just been founded, bewailing the cessation of worship that had not yet begun and an erstwhile plea for punishment against a nation has not yet reared its head onto the stage of world politics (David died nearly four hundred years before the defeat of Assyria by Babylonia). Although there are a number of classical commentators who maintain that this Mizmor was composed prophetically (although not all of them specifically assign that prophecy to David - compare Radak at v. 8 and Me’iri at v. 1 with Metzudat David at v. 1; Rashi is silent on the issue), there is evidence in Rabbinic literature that points to a contemporary composition; i.e. written at the time of the events described herein. We will assay that evidence within the analysis.

Ibn Ezra notes ibn Giqatila’s approach here (as he did in his introduction to תהלים) that this psalm was composed by one of the poets in Babylon - it is unclear, from his rejoinder, which component of this approach he rejects.

Malbim avers, in his opening remark on this Mizmor: It was composed in the first year of Koresh (539 BCE). In other words, Malbim maintains that the Mizmor was written after the fact. Most modern commentators accept this late dating, but many of them propose that it was composed at the time of the event - i.e. by the rivers of Babylon - and not as a retrospective. At the conclusion of this essay, I will offer a different suggestion in this regard.

II

PURPOSE OF THE COMPOSITION

Although this issue is not addressed in either Rabbinic literature nor by the Rishonim, contemporary commentators debate the purpose and motivation behind the composition of this psalm. Those Rishonim who maintain that this psalm is prophetic would likely hold that it was composed exactly for that purpose - as a prophecy. Might it be that this prophecy was intended to frighten the people into doing Teshuvah to ward off such a terrible fate? That is difficult, as the worst of the exile is only alluded to and not spelled out. S'forno, in his introductory "caption" to the psalm, indicates that it served as a prayer for the destruction of Edom (see Fishler, below). In any case, attempting to reconstruct their opinions here is conjecture, as the early commentators did not address this aspect of the psalms.

Among recent commentators, some maintain that it is a religio-nationalistic poem. R. S.R. Hirsch introduces his commentary to the psalm as follows:

This psalm states that with the destruction of Tziyyon/Yerushalayim, with the loss of national independence and the Mikdash of Hashem, the passion of singing was muted and the tones of the lyre were dimmed. On the idolatrous soil the spring of the song of G-d does not well forth and the hearts of Yisrae'l are not open to any other types of rejoicing. Their spirit and words remain dedicated to Tziyyon/Yerushalayim which - contrary to what the enemies of Yisrae'l imagined who rejoiced at her defeat - did not find her absolute end with the external destruction... (Malbim makes a similar point)

Among contemporary approaches, we find those who maintain that the psalm was a dirge, composed at the rivers. Giger (Tarbiz 59, 3-4, pp. 507-508) points out that the image of composition of dirges near flowing water was common in ancient culture - even in the pagan world (as is the case with Achilles). Others suggest that it was the traumatic reaction to the exile (Zakovitch, in תשורה לשמואל, pp. 184-204). Yet a third approach, in which it is almost completely masked poem of anger and a call for retribution against the Edomites, has been proposed (Fishler, Beit Mikra 42a, pp. 52-56; ibid. 42d, pp. 384-386).

I will propose another response to this question at the conclusion of the essay.

III

MIZMOR 137

1. *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, we also wept, when we remembered Tziyyon.*
2. *We hung our lyres on the willows in its midst.*
3. *For there those who carried us away captive required of us a song; and those who tormented us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Tziyyon.*
4. *How shall we sing Hashem's song on foreign soil?*
5. *If I forget you, O Yerushalayim, let my right hand forget her cunning.*
6. *If I do not remember you, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I do not set Yerushalayim above my high-*

est joy.

7. Remember, Hashem, against the Edomites, the day of Yerushalayim; who said, Raze it, raze it, to its foundation.

8. O daughter of Babylon, you are to be destroyed! Happy shall he be, who repays you for what you have done to us!

9. Happy shall he be, who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

IV

STANZA 1: THE SETTING

על נהרות בבל שם ישבנו גם בכינו בזכרנו את ציון
על ערבים בתוכה תלינו כנרותינו

על נהרות בבל: Although the opening phrase is conventionally understood as part of the body of the text, there is good reason to read it as a superscription; read a colon (:) after the word Bavel instead of a comma (.). If it is read that way, the opening word might be understood as “regarding”; i.e. the entire Mizmor revolves around the image and setting of the rivers of Babylon.

That the first two verses comprise an independent stanza is born out (against Zakovitch, *ibid.* p. 185) by the *anaphora* על which opens each verse. In addition, these two verses alone describe the setting where the rest of the Mizmor - or at least the next two verses - are played out.

שם ישבנו The opening phrase is pastoral, evoking the image of the verdant and lush Mesopotamian river valley between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. The district is filled with streams and creeks that criss-cross the valley, rendering a green and fertile ground. We fully expect a reverie, perhaps a reflection on the great bounty and beauty of G-d's creation. Instead we are given a foreshadowing of a harsh reality with the next word שם - “there”. That green and peaceful river valley will always be “there” and we will e'er be strangers there.

ישבנו may mean “sat”, but it may allude to a permanence, to a “settling in”. We have settled in to Bavel, as per the directive of the prophet (see Yirmiyah 29).

גם בכינו: translating גם simply as the conjunctive (as rendered here) is awkward, unless we posit that the “sitting” by the rivers was itself an act of mourning. There is no indication in T'nakh that sitting by rivers implies an elegiac stance (in spite of Giger, above); just the opposite is the case (see, e.g. Yehezq'el 1, II Melakhim 2 and, famously, T'hilim 23:1-2). Therefore, it is recommended that we understand גם as “nevertheless” (as in Kohelet 6:7). In other words, **even though** we sat by the rivers (a serene picture), **nonetheless**, we cried.

The גם also rhymes with שם, which has both musical purposes and strengthens the sense that the שם is a source of sadness. Note also the image-blending; we sat by the flowing rivers as our tears flowed.

בזכרנו את ציון: Does this mean that we weren't constantly crying, or is the inverse the case - that we constantly sat and remembered ציון and, thus, were always weeping? This verse tells us little - but much will be revealed in the subsequent line.

At this point, we have no idea what event evoked the memory of ציון - which led to the weeping - nor do we

know who is speaking. Who is the “we” here?

Zakovitch points out that the choice of ציון (over Yehudah, Yerushalayim or הארץ) is deliberate and establishes apposition to the verdant image of the rivers. ציון is closely related, phonically, to the word ציה - parched wilderness. While we sat by the green flowing waters of Bavel, we longed for the parched earth of ציון.

This image-association continues in the second verse. The trees selected for hanging the lyres are willows - ערבים - which immediately evoke the word ערבה (desert plains - see Yeshayah 51:3).

על ערבים בתוכה The complete name for this tree is ערבי נהל (literally “river-willows” - Vayyikra 23:40), again associated with the river. As the willows remind us of Eretz Yisra’el (both by dint of the “Aravah” connection as well as the Mitzvah of the four species), the singers emphasize that they are בתוכה - still in the midst of שם, foreigners and outsiders.

תלינו כנרותינו Suddenly we are given a window through which to view the scene and its players. Those who normally play the lyre - the Levi'im, who used to accompany the sanctified music of the Mikdash with the various instruments - have hung up their instruments and refused to play.

R. Menahem haMe'iri maintains that that the “hanging” here does not imply a refusal to play; rather, it means stretching the strings for purposes of playing - his take on the scene is radically different than the conventional one as the Levi'im are playing here. The next few verses must be read in this light - but we will continue with the “mainstream” approach.

Zakovitch points out a curious irony here. Weapons are often hung up (or upside down - see Ramban at B'resheet 9:12) in times of peace and serenity (see Shir haShirim 4:4). On the other hand, these instruments of song are hung up - not on city walls but within the thickets of trees - at a time when that rejoicing has ceased and there is no serenity.

We have a much clearer picture of the scene - but still no clarity as to what has caused it. The Levi'im are settled in next to the many lush riversides of Bavel, feeling alien to the place and longing for the distant parched land of ציון, and have demonstrated their refusal to play their beloved lyres.

One of the elegant features of this psalm of exile is its slow revelation. As we purposefully follow the scenery as described, more and more of the harsh reality that stands as a counterpoint to the idyll of the riverside comes to the fore. One cannot understand pain nor can exile be grasped with a quick camera shot; much reflection and observation is needed to uncover the source of that pain and the depth of the exile.

Note that song, made up of two components (the words and the musical accompaniment) is deliberately stopped here. The words are muted by virtue of the weeping which has replaced it and the accompaniment is stilled with the stowing away of the lyres.

STANZA 2: THE “DIALOGUE”

כי שם שאלונו שובינו דברי שיר ותוללינו שמחה שירו לנו משיר ציון
איך נשיר את שיר ה' על אדמת נכר

These two verses comprise a dialogue - or, perhaps more accurately, a “dialogue” between the captors (who we have not yet met) and our Levi'im. There is good reason to suspect that this dialogue is a rhetorical tool and not one that actually took place - it would be dangerous and foolish to turn to our captors and belittle their land. T'nakh is replete with rhetorical dialogues (e.g. the first chapter of Malakhi) and this one certainly qualifies.

The opening word alerts us that we will now discover the reason for the weeping and stowing of the lyres. Again we are reminded of the essential foreignness we experience in Bavel שם. Note the alliteration שם שאלונו שובינו; we get the sense that, in spite of itself, this composition was written with performance in mind.

The scene is now expanded - there are captors, who we assume to be Babylonians, and they are making a demand of us that has caused the weeping and hanging up of the lyres. We now understand that the stowing of the instruments is not only an indication of cessation of music; it is rather a defiant refusal to accede to the request of the heartless captors.

ותוללינו שמחה. This is a difficult word and the commentators - classical, medieval and modern - are divided as to its meaning.

- 1) LXX and Peshitta understand it as “those who dragged us away”, and is a parallel to שובינו (our captors)
- 2) The Targum renders it as ובזזנא - our despoilers, reading תוללינו as שוללינו
- 3) Rashi suggests that it is the name of an instrument that is normally hung up, such that the demand of the captors was that we sing (דברי שיר) and play joyous tunes on these instruments.
- 4) Ibn Ezra, while agreeing with Rashi, cites ibn Giqatila who associates the word with יללה - wailing.
- 5) Malbim suggests that the word is a synonym for שאלנו - they requested/demanded of us.
- 6) Hakham (Da'at Mikra, T'hilim vol. 2, p. 521 - see also Weiser, OTL p. 793) prefers reading תוללינו as תהוללינו - those who scorn us; again, the word is a parallel of שובינו, but here the sense of helplessness and anger is intensified by noting that these are not only our captors, they are adding insult to injury by teasing us and making fun of our plight.

In sum, the word, which is a hapax legomenon and thus cannot be deciphered from another Biblical source, has a wide range of possible meanings. We will prefer the general direction taken by the versions (LXX, Peshitta, Targum) and the moderns - that תוללינו is another word to describe the Babylonian captors. Parenthetically, the approach taken by the Targum has an added touch of grace - although the שיין does not generally become a תיין in Hebrew, the psalmist is creating a word association with תלינו.

The cruelty of these captors is evidenced in their gross insensitivity to our station. As we sit weeping by the rivers, they are demanding songs of joy. Alternatively, we might read the entire first stanza as predicated on this demand - since they have requested that we sing joyous songs, we have conjured up the memory of ציון, hung up our instruments and refused to play, preferring to weep.

שירו לנו משיר ציון A point of reference here is very much in place, much as it has significant implication for us today. Although some have suggested that the songs they were asked to sing were songs about Yerushalayim - thus שיר ציון (Malbim), the response of the Levi'im in v. 4 indicates that the songs in question were songs of praise to G-d. Although we often make severe distinctions between the “songs of ציון” and the “songs of G-d”, from an external perspective they are one. However much Jews bear the illusion that we can achieve independence from our identity as G-d's people, history and the nations of the world consistently remind us that this is never the case. The song of ציון is the song of G-d.

איך נשיר את שיר ה' The response of the Levi'im begins with a word that is associated with Kinah (dirge) - Eikh is a shortened version of Eikhah - not the interrogative “how can we play?” in the sense of inability, rather the rhetorical “how is it possible to do such a thing?”

Nonetheless, the Midrash (Midrash T'hillim 137) reads it as an interrogative in frightening and heroic passage which fleshes out the scene at the river:

We hung our lyres on the willows in its midst. For there those who carried us away captive required of us a song; Nevukhadnezzar said to them: Why are you sitting and weeping? And he called to the tribe of Levi and said to them: Prepare yourselves, before we eat and drink, I request that you stand and play before me on your lyres, just as you used to play before your G-d. They looked at each other and said: It isn't bad enough that we destroyed His sanctuary, now are we to play before this midget? ...they all stood up and overcame themselves; they placed their thumbs in their mouths and crushed them. Sing to us a song of Tziyyon...their response was not “We will not sing”, rather how can we sing? - they showed their fingers and exclaimed: We were held in bondage and our fingers were cut off. At that moment, G-d swore to Yisra'el: You overcame yourselves and cut off the fingers of your right hand; I will, in kind, He has drawn back His right hand from before the enemy, and it will not return, rather, I will remember you, as it says: If I forget you, O Yerushalayim, let My right hand forget her cunning. R. Dosa explained: If I forget you, O Yerushalayim, let My right hand forget the ability to perform miracles.

In the first section of this essay, I claimed that there is evidence in Rabbinic literature that points to contemporary composition. Although an earlier passage in the same chapter of Midrash T'hillim explicitly credits this psalm to Davidic prophecy, this passage strongly suggests contemporary composition, as there is no reasonable way - theologically or textually - to read prophetic insight into this narrative. G-d's promise of reward in lieu of the bravery of the Levi'im can only be understood as the Divine response to the actual bravery. The gruesome sight of the Levi'im holding their mutilated hands turns the rhetorical איכ(ה) into a (somewhat disingenuous) question - how can we possibly play with these crushed fingers?

על אדמת נכר The implication here is greater than “foreign soil”, for that doesn't directly explain the refusal to sing. Read, rather, על אדמת אל נכר - on the soil of a foreign god. To wit, G-d's song belongs solely and wholly to His land.

The wordplay here is powerful - the כנר cannot be played on land that is נכר (letter inversion).

The theme of “singing” is overwhelming in this stanza - the word appears no less than five times in these two verses. In addition, the ש sound surrounds the entire stanza. This evokes the city whose name has not yet been

mentioned but whose vision and beauty is at the heart of the terrifying sadness that motivates the Levi'im and regarding which they will soon take an oath.

Although we argued for a division of these four verses into two independent stanzas, there is one structural component that unites them. The first verse begins with a mention of Bavel (the foreign land) and ends with an evocation of ציין. The second stanza is highlighted by the demand that we sing songs of ציין and concludes with a refusal on grounds that we are on foreign soil (Bavel). This forms a chiasmus that stresses the kind of relationships we have towards each of these places - the first, although lush and green, is foreign; the second, although parched and distant, is home and its songs are the songs of G-d.

VI STANZA 3: THE OATH

אם אשכחך ירושלם תשכח ימיני
תדבק לשוני לחכי אם לא אזכרכי אם לא אעלה את ירושלם על ראש שמחתי

There is an abrupt shift here - that great city whose name has hidden behind our tongues is suddenly explicated twice - **ירושלם!** Not only has her name been alluded to (ציין); the sound of her name has been yearning to be expressed - note all of the *sh* sounds in the previous verses.

There is an equally startling change here - the group-speak that informed the first two stanzas is replaced by a personal statement: *If I forget you...*

There is yet a third variation that must be noted. Until now, we have been privy to a narrative describing the “scene at the river” and the audience is, ostensibly, us. Suddenly the Levi'im turn to the city, isolated and lonely on a distant hill, and address her.

These three switches may be due to independent considerations, but it more likely that there is one explanation for all three. We will suggest what that may be at the conclusion of the essay.

אם אשכחך ירושלם תשכח ימיני The odd phrasing here is due to the unique rhetoric of oath phraseology in the T'nakh. Instead of a “straightforward” oath, in which the contested one avers that he will do X, in T'nakh, the challenged person swears (usually invoking G-d's Name) that “if I do not do X...” leaving (in most cases), the consequence of his non-fulfillment unstated. In this case, however, the person taking the oath expresses, quite clearly, the punishment that he is accepting should he fail to fulfill his oath.

This oath seems to be a response to the captors, but ignores their presence. They are demanding that we forget Yerushalayim and celebrate here - this we shall not do. Do not, however, mistake our hanging up the lyres for a deliberate excision of Yerushalayim from our consciousness. The opposite is the case - we have put our instruments away and refuse to sing because we refuse to forget.

The first consequence accepted in the oath is difficult to decipher and many approaches have been suggested.

1) Radak proposes that **אם אשכחך ימיני** means “may my right hand forget how to play the lyre” - (similarly, Me'iri

and ibn Yih'ya)

- 2) As noted above, the Midrash suggests that this oath, taken by G-d, implies the inability to perform miracles.
- 3) Malbim reckons that תשכח refers to a general inability to use the right hand (similarly, Hirsch and Metzudat David)
- 4) Ibn Ezra, quoting an anonymous commentator, raises the possibility that תשכח here may mean “will dry up” - which is how many English translations have it.
- 5) Tur-Sinai suggests a reading of תכחש (let it be weakened) or the more far-fetched תש כח (ebbing of strength).

It seems to us that the approach most in line with the straightforward meaning and context of the Mizmor is that put forth by Radak - and we will utilize that approach in assaying the rest of the oath.

לחכי אם לא אזכרכי תדבק לשוני לרוח המפהץ The tongue cleaving to the roof of the mouth implies an inability to speak or express one's self verbally. Following Radak, the Levi'im swear that if they forget ירושלם, their ability to sing and play the instruments will be lost. This is a beautiful example of “poetic justice” (מדה כנגד מדה); those same talents which the captors desire to enjoy will be permanently silenced if we accede to their demands.

Note the chiasmic structure of the oath, in which the commitment is placed at the bookends (אם אשכחך -> רכי אזכ) and the consequence in the middle.

אם לא אעלה את ירושלם על ראש שמחתי Is this a third oath, lacking an explicit consequence, or is it a continuation of the second one? This is unclear, although the simplest read here indicates that it is the conclusion of the second oath.

There is a powerful message embedded in this last phrase; once we uncover it, we may be better equipped to determine the “independent stature” of this third phrase.

There are two dangerous pulls that tempt us when tragedy strikes. On the one hand, it is easy to allow the lush valleys of Bavel to wipe the memories of Yerushalayim from our hearts. The antidote to this potential national disaster is the oath taken here. Conversely, however, there is the very real potential for becoming so totally mired in the depression of exile that life itself becomes unlivable. This is the gist of the conversation between R. Yehoshua and the P'rushim in the shadow of the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash in the 2nd century CE: (BT Bava Batra 60a)

Our Rabbis taught: When the Temple was destroyed for the second time, large numbers in Israel became ascetics, binding themselves neither to eat meat nor to drink wine. R. Yehoshua got into conversation with them and said to them: My sons, why do you not eat meat nor drink wine? They replied: Shall we eat flesh that used to be brought as an offering on the altar, now that this altar is in abeyance? Shall we drink wine that used to be poured as a libation on the altar, but now no longer? He said to them: If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the meal offerings have ceased. They said: [That is so, and] we can manage with fruit. We should not eat fruit either, [he said,] because there is no longer an offering of Bikkurim. Then we can manage with other fruits [they said]. But, [he said,] we should not drink water, because there is no longer any ceremony of the pouring of water. To this

they could find no answer, so he said to them: My sons, come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the blow has fallen. To mourn overmuch is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community a hardship that the majority cannot endure ... The Sages therefore have ordained thus. A man may stucco his house, but he should leave a little bare... A man can prepare a full-course banquet, but he should leave out an item or two... A woman can put on all her ornaments, but leave off one or two... For so it says, *If I forget you, O Yerushalayim, let my right hand forget, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I remember thee not, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.* What is meant by *my chief joy*? R. Isaac said: This is symbolized by the burnt ashes that we place on the head of a bridegroom. R. Papa asked Abaye: Where should they be placed? [He replied]: Just where the T'fillin is worn, as it says, *To appoint unto them that mourn in Tziyyon, to give them a garland [פאר] for ashes [פאר].*

Note that the prooftext for the “balanced life”, one that includes celebrations, weddings etc. but is muted by the sorrow of the destruction and that always maintains a commemoration of that great tragedy, is the end of our oath - *If I do not place Yerushalayim above my greatest joy* - which implies, *ipso facto*, that there are other joys that will be celebrated, albeit not in such a manner that Yerushalayim’s memory is erased or even endangered. (I am indebted to R. Elhanan Samet for pointing out this critical connection).

VII

STANZA 4: VENGEANCE AGAINST EDMOM

זכר ה' לבני אדום את יום ירושלם האמרים ערו ערו עד היסוד בה

The role of Edom here is a matter of no little confusion and consternation. Several general approaches have been proposed. Some reckon Edom here as a prophetic allusion to the “Edom of the Midrash” - i.e. Rome, and this is a reference to the destruction of the second Mikdash. As pointed out earlier, this direction is a difficult one to follow here. Y. Kolar (Sefer Braslavi pp. 315-322), in also trying to solve the difficult phrase Bat-Bavel in the next stanza, suggests that the entire psalm is directed at our hated cousins/neighbors, the Edomites, who harassed, persecuted and preyed on us throughout the generations (see, inter alia, Amos 1:11 and all of Sefer Ovadiah).

זכר ה' לבני אדום Remembering is the subtle theme of the entire Mizmor, as we weep when we remember ציון, we swear to remember ירושלם and we implore G-d to remember Edom’s hatred.

יום ירושלם clearly means “the day of the destruction of Yerushalayim” (how fortunate that we live in a generation with a very different יום ירושלים)

האמרים ערו ערו עד היסוד בה This is what the Edomites were saying, evidently to the conquering Babylonians. The word ערו means “strip” and the Edomite lackeys were encouraging the enemy to go further than their own plans, but to uproot the very foundation of the city.

The description of the Edomites as בני אדום (as opposed to בת-בבל) gives rise to the image of a group of men assaulting a helpless woman - and the words ערו ערו intensify that image.

The irony of the demands of our enemies is not lost on the psalmist; on the one hand, they desire to wipe out every memory and trace of our city, while demanding that we sing her sweet songs.

VIII

STANZA 5: VENGEANCE AGAINST BAVEL

בת בבל השדודה אשרי שישלם לך את גמולך שגמלת לנו
אשרי שיאחז ונפץ את עלליך אל הסלע

בת בבל השדודה Some read שדודה on a par with שתויה, i.e. שודדת (despoiling), while Kolar claims that this is not a reference to Bavel, rather to Edom, who is a daughter of Edom (perhaps an ally?).

אשרי שישלם לך את גמולך שגמלת לנו Here we are given some insight into the most terrifying and upsetting moments of our capture. The psalmist cannot bring himself to describe the events themselves, so he opens up this frightening window by offering praise to anyone who would pay Bavel (or Edom?) back for their terrible war crimes, measure for measure...

אשרי שיאחז ונפץ את עלליך אל הסלע Now we finally see the depths to which our enemies have sunk. In the ancient world, the two most morally bankrupt behaviors during war were the slicing open of pregnant women (see Amos 1:13) and dashing innocent and helpless babies on rocks. Although before 1939 we might have considered this call for vengeance a distant cry from an ancient world, this is, sadly, no longer the case. One needs look no further than the picture of 10-month old פס הי"ד שלהבת, to realize that, indeed, *plus ca change, plus c'est la même chose*.

IX

POSTSCRIPT

In our analysis, we have noted several difficulties with the composition, the abrupt shifts at the onset of the oath etc. I would like to propose a solution to the problem of composition that will allow us to solve these other challenges.

Although Zakovitch's observation regarding the immediate introduction of שם is appealing, there is an easier way to explain it. T'hillim were composed, chiefly and primarily, for singing in the Mikdash. Taking Malbim's proposal a bit further, I'd like to suggest that this Mizmor was composed by Levi'im in ירושלים who had returned with Sheshbazzar or Zerubavel (just after Koresh's declaration) to be sung in the Mikdash in commemoration of their successful return from Bavel (see Ramban at Sh'mot 12:1). That is why the meter, alliteration and repeating words are so significant - and why the Levi'im speak of שם - because it really is "there".

We now understand the change in person when coming to the oath. We all remember our courageous stand at the rivers, where we defied our captors, but the backbone behind that strength was the oath that each of us had already taken, an oath directed from each individual towards ירושלים and which we remembered when challenged to forget that we were in a lush exile. This also gives us an easier approach to the difficult word שדודה - indeed, by the time this was composed, Bavel had already been despoiled by the Persians and Medes (see Malbim ad loc.)

Even when we were in an exile that we had to maintain, including the normal joys of marriage and children (see Yirmiyah 29), we always placed ירושלים above our greatest (other) joys; that is the secret that kept us through our Galut and allowed us to return when the doors were, by the grace of G-d, opened again.