

# THE HAPPY MAN OF PSALM 1

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People wax lyrical when they describe the Psalter. Rowland E. Prothero calls it "the whole music of the heart of man."<sup>1</sup> Solomon B. Freehof's view is: "The Psalms embody the highest ideas of biblical literature . . . (with) a uniqueness of mood and expression."<sup>2</sup> W.O.E. Oesterley calls the Psalms "poetry and religion . . . hand in hand."<sup>3</sup> Over and above psalms that seem to make music, there are – scattered through the Book of Psalms – Wisdom poems which neither praise, celebrate, nor even complain, but reflect on the meaning of life. Their themes – righteousness, reflection and resolution – are typical of Wisdom literature as a whole. We recognise Wisdom psalms by their vocabulary (*wise, happy, blessed, good*), by their contrasts and comparisons (especially the wicked as against the righteous), and by their themes (for example, the benefits of practical morality). Their authors are philosophers as well as poets. They weave together the spiritual quest and the search for moral foundations. These psalms join the books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as examples of Wisdom literature in the Bible.

## WHY BEGIN WITH *ASHREI*?

There may have been a feeling that the Book of Psalms should begin with an *aleph* – the first letter of the alphabet. The Midrash (Gen. R. 1:10; cf. TB *Hag.* 11b) states that the Torah itself would have begun with an *aleph* had a *bet* not been preferred for theological reasons. Later, the Decalogue (Ex. 20:2, Deut. 5:6) does open with the *aleph* of *anokhi*, "I." Retelling the history of mankind from the beginning, Chronicles starts with a large *aleph*. Even if it was considered significant that the Psalter begins with the letter *aleph*, this does not yet explain why the specific word chosen was *ashrei*. According to *Yalkut Shimoni* on the first verse of this psalm, David, the traditional author of Psalms, wanted to begin his book where Moses had left off in the Torah. Moses said, *ashrekha Yisra'el* (*Fortunate are you, O Israel*; Deut. 33:29); here David begins with the words *ashrei ha-ish*.

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However, it seems that there is a more fundamental reason to begin Psalms with this particular *ashrei*. This psalm is a Wisdom poem, and beginning the Book of Psalms in this way, prioritizing a Wisdom poem, bolstered the case for the *hakham*, the sage and scholar, as against the *hasid*, the holy pietist, placing study and contemplation above cultic and private devotions. It may have been part of an ancient struggle to define the ideal Jewish type. This is not necessarily a revolt against religion but a debate within it. Wisdom and piety are both important, and the question is which has priority. The rabbis assert, *An ignorant person cannot be pious* (*Avot* 2:8), wisdom is the path to piety.

The happy man of Psalm 1 chooses a life in the Torah (verse 2), studying it in both his active and his restful hours: *He contemplates his Law day and night*. According to Rashi's commentary the "his" refers in the first instance to God, but once the happy man engages with the Torah it becomes his own. We presume he prays and follows regular pietistic practices, but his real priority is his study of God's word.

#### THE MEANING OF ASHREI HA-ISH

*Happy is the man* is probably the most common English rendering of *ashrei ha-ish*. *Ashrei* appears to denote the contented state of being that comes from the directed life. The root of *ashrei* is *aleph-shin-resh*, which opens up an array of possible connections with words featuring the same root. Rashi supports the linking of *aleph-shin-resh* with *ashur*, meaning *a step*. He notes that Psalm 1:1 uses a series of verbs connected with stepping or moving: *walk*, *stand* and *sit*. Complementing but complicating this approach with questionable etymology, Samson Raphael Hirsch<sup>5</sup> translates *ashrei ha-ish* as "forward strides the man." *Aleph-shin-resh* thus connotes action, not a mere state of being. This approach is found elsewhere in the Bible, for example: *al te'asher be-derekh ra'im* (*Walk not in the way of evil men*; Prov. 4:14), *ishru be-derekh binah* (*Walk in the way of understanding*; Prov. 9:6), and *asheru hamotz* (*Straighten the oppressed*; Isa. 1:17). This would indicate that the happy man of this psalm is a man of action. What sort of activities is he engaged in?

Some psalms are more emotional and spiritual, with heroes who throb with emotion, with ecstasy as well as agony. Psalm 16:11, for one, speaks of *sova*

*semahot et panekha* (Fullness of joy in Your presence), and *ne'imot bi-yminakha netzah* (Bliss at Your right hand for ever), but it does not use the word *ashrei*. Psalm 1 does not rule out a happy man bounding with delight, but the more probable picture is of a man who is calm and at ease, content with values that have brought him stability and well-being: a state of mind, not an excited "high." It is not his heart which rejoices as much as his mind and soul. He has chosen the path of wisdom. His happiness is a state of being. Isidore Epstein<sup>6</sup> explains that the happiness in this psalm is not ecstatic, but rather indicates a life of "inspiration and consecration, a call to service and action – the *doing* of righteousness."

For Martin Buber,<sup>7</sup> Psalm 1 is the paradigm of the man often delineated in Wisdom literature. Buber's notion of *ha-ish* is more active than Epstein's vague characterization of "the doing of righteousness." For him, the message of Psalm 1 is that the happy man has a "way", a direction, which brings him benefit – *all that he does shall prosper* – while *the way of the wicked peters out* (*toved*; verses 3-6). Happiness is the reward given for attaining righteousness: in most cases, righteousness is understood as a set of values chosen by the recipient (generally an individual but sometimes the people as a whole). Some values are ethical (charity, justice, etc.). Others are spiritual (atonement, piety, etc.). Like the happy man of Psalm 1, the recipients of Divine blessing keep away from evil and contemplate the Divine law. The common thread is, in Buber's terms, that they lead directed lives. What is their happiness? Not singing and dancing, not ecstasy and excitement, but contentment and satisfaction.

In rabbinic Hebrew *aleph-shin-resh* means *to confirm, attest, validate*, as seen in the Talmudic saying, *Havrakh mit, asher* (with an *aleph*); *itasher* (with an *ayin*, meaning wealth), *lo te'asher* – "If people say your friend is dead, credit it; if they say he has become rich, don't credit it" (TB *Gittin* 30b). The happy man lives a validated life, a life of substance and activity.

#### SUMMARY: HA-ISH AS A REAL PERSON?

The Midrash on Psalms wonders whether the happy man of Psalm 1 is a mere typology or a real person. Anachronistically, it identifies him as King David, whom it sees as a Torah sage: rabbinic thinking often depicts biblical figures as rabbis and claims the prophets as halakhists.<sup>8</sup> Midrashic literature proposes other biblical characters as candidates for the happy man in this

psalm. However, it is more likely that the happy man is not any particular individual, but a type. Wisdom literature seems more interested in moral philosophy than history. The first psalm is a description of the happy, content and thoughtful man often portrayed in Wisdom literature.

The Talmud (TB *Berakhot* 9b-10a) teaches that Psalms 1 and 2 were originally one. Psalm 1 begins and Psalm 2 ends with *ashrei*. Both believe that God and the righteous will finally prevail over the opposition of the wicked.

#### NOTES

1. Rowland E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life* (London: John Murray, 1903) p. 1.
2. Solomon B. Freehof, *The Book of Psalms: A Commentary* (Cincinnati: U.A.H.C., 1938) p. 3.
3. W.O.E. Oesterley, *The Psalms* (London: S.P.C.K., 1962) p. 1.
4. Brown, Driver & Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957 ed.) p. 80.
5. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Psalms*, English trans. Gertrude Hirschler (Jerusalem/New York: Feldheim, 1978) p. 1; Hebrew trans. Yehi'el Ze'ev Lifschitz, (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1961) p. 15.
6. Isidore Epstein, "The Psalms and the Modern World", *Jewish Affairs* (Johannesburg: South African Jewish Board of Deputies), September 1952.
7. Martin Buber, *Right and Wrong: An Interpretation of Some Psalms*, English trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: S.C.M. Press, 1952) pp. 53-62.
8. Z.H. Chajes, *Student's Guide Through the Talmud*, trans. J. Schachter (London: East & West Library, 1952).