

PSALMS 37:25 AND 34:11 – AFTER-MEAL THEOLOGY

RAYMOND APPLE

Bir'kat HaMazon, the Grace After Meals, concludes with an appendix made up of Biblical verses about the bounty of the Creator. This article examines two verses that can be viewed as problematic - Psalms 37:25 and 34:11. Both verses are addressed from a theological and literary point of view.

PSALM 37:25

All versions of *Bir'kat HaMazon* acclaim God's generosity to mankind. That the Almighty feeds the whole universe is iterated and reiterated throughout the Grace. But the addendum makes a further claim which is tantamount to an assertion that hunger and starvation are staved off by piety. Psalm 37:25 says that the psalmist has not seen the *righteous man abandoned or his children seeking bread* (JPSA translation). The words *lo ra'iti* (literally, *I have not seen*), seem to contradict human experience. In response, many translations adjust the words so as to lessen or remove the presumed sting of the verse and its thinking. Hence the JPSA version gives the verb a future tense and says *I... have yet to see* righteous people suffering hunger. Some *bir'konim* (*Grace After Meals* booklets) offer alternatives such as, *I never overlooked a deserving man*; or *By the time I reach old age, I should see no righteous person abandoned*. Such versions ease the problem but distort the Hebrew, which is probably a simple past tense that says *I have not seen*.

I submit that there are two types of answer, theological and literary.

THE THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Ahad HaAm says, "*Thou art righteous, O Lord* – this, the Prophet cannot doubt, although his eyes tell him that *the way of the wicked prospereth* (Jer. 12:1)."¹ In relation to our verse, Ahad HaAm would be likely to remark that the psalmist appears to be saying something outrageous. Is it true that righteousness saves a person from hunger? Life doesn't work like that. Good peo-

Dr. Raymond Apple is emeritus rabbi of the Great Synagogue, Sydney, and a former president of the Australian and New Zealand orthodox rabbinate.

ple do not always get enough food. Their piety is no guarantee of protection from hunger or other deprivation. We can say with the Grace After Meals that God feeds the whole world, but sometimes the food is inadequate.

The Grace and its addendum constantly use the verb *h-s-r*, to *diminish or lack* (possibly connected with *h-s-l*, to *bare, scrape off, or finish*). The first sentence of the Grace says that through God's goodness, food *has not failed us and will not fail us*. Then comes a prayer that *we may never suffer any lack*. The question posed by the addendum is whether, and if so, why, the supply of food seems tied to our piety. Psalm 34:10-11 says: *Fear the Lord, you His consecrated ones, for those who fear Him lack nothing (ein mah'sor); lions have been reduced to starvation, but those who turn to the Lord shall not lack (lo yah'seru) any good* (JPSA translation). The word *good* probably does not denote luxuries but basic food.

Is it really true that belief in God protects a good person from want? Experience seems to doubt this. It doesn't help to say that some supposedly pious people are not really *tzaddikim g'murim*, *totally righteous*, since a person's degree of righteousness is hard to assess. Pain, affliction and hunger can befall the greatest paragon and escape the worst villain, without any apparent logic (TB *Berachot* 7a). If the evil we encounter is wrought by evil people, there is an enemy who can be blamed. But what about events which cannot be attributed to human cruelty? Rabbi Yannai says that the explanation "is not in our hands"; only God knows the answer (M. Avot 4:19). The question, echoed throughout history, seems to imply that events are random and God is capricious.

However, Jewish theology has a different approach, preferring to defend God's justice, saying, *Righteousness and justice are the base of Your throne* (Ps. 89:15). The *tzaddik* tends to believe that in time of trouble God will support him and say *immo anokhi b'tzarah, I will be with him in distress* (Ps. 91:15). He does not really feel let down, even when events go wrong. Objectively, he may be short of food or material comforts: subjectively, he probably cannot see or admit that there is anything missing. Maybe he doesn't even notice that there is a deprivation. If he does, he is not bowled over by it; he does not complain; he believes all is for the best; he possibly says, "These are *yissurim shel ahavah* – the chastenings of (Divine) love" (TB *Berachot* 5a, based on Proverbs 3:12: *Whom the Lord loves, He rebukes*). After all, it is the

righteous, according to the Midrash, whom God tries with *yissurim*, just as a potter double-tests the apparently perfect pieces of pottery he has made, but not the cracked ones (Cant. R. on 2:16).

Samson Raphael Hirsch avers that the situation will reverse itself and good people will one day have good fortune. Hirsch comments on Psalm 23, “*The Lord is my shepherd, therefore I suffer no want*. I do not miss what I do not have. I do not feel its lack, since it is God, my shepherd, who has seen fit to withhold it from me. He shows me His love by denying me that which I desire but which, were I to have it, would cause me harm”.²

Commenting on Psalm 37:25, Hirsch is certain that the pain will end. “The Lord will send him help, either directly or in the form of aid by people who do no more than their rightful duty when they offer him help”.³ In God’s good time all will be well (Psalm 92); the problem is not God’s nature but His timetable: *How long, O Lord?* (Psalm 94:3). In biblical literature the final reversal of fortunes, when the righteous are rewarded and the wicked punished, is earthly, not left for the after-life. In post-biblical literature, however, the Hereafter plays a large role as does the subject of reward and punishment (TB *Kidd.* 39b). The righteous might suffer pain in this world but will be rewarded in the Hereafter. R.H. Charles wrote a book titled *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, in Judaism and in Christianity*.⁴ For the present, the suffering of the righteous remains one of the mysteries of God.

Is the suffering a form of punishment? There is no evidence to prove this, though the Bible (e.g. Gen. 32:9, II Sam. 24:10, Psalm 106:6) urges sinners to face up to their sins and shoulder the blame, though the Talmud (BT *Berachot* 34b) warns that guilt and shame can be overdone, and a sinner can come to loathe himself. Self-condemnation and self-rejection can lead to self-torture, as is also the case when one goes to the other extreme, looking for someone else to blame (like Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 or El’azar ben Durdaya in BT *Avoda Zara* 17a). Neither extreme is necessarily a useful contribution to a troubling human situation.

The ability of “suffering servants” to transform their situation, is approached differently by the Midrash. Deuteronomy 2:7 says, *The Lord God has been with you these past forty years: you have lacked nothing (lo hasarta davar)*. *Davar* is “a thing”; it is also “a word”. God said to Israel, ‘You just

had to say a word. No more than a word was needed, and it was fulfilled'. Whatever the Israelites craved in their hearts was given to them" (Midrash to Psalm 23:1). The righteous do not feel deprived. The Torah means them when it says, *When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God* (Deut. 8:10). They think they have eaten their fill, so they praise God. They see no point in Arnold Wolf's question, "If the righteous suffer, why be righteous?"⁵

For them, goodness is its own reward, more valuable than gold and silver (Psalm 19:11). They do not feel they are suffering. Pain is an illusion, not that everyone sees it this way. It is not mere theory. It is real pain, felt by real people. It can crush a person (even a *tzaddik*), but it does not destroy them. Even if they are (however dimly) aware of the ache, they know the pain will go. Indeed, the more pain there is now, the greater will be the future reward. Bildad argues (Rashi on Job 8:7) "Whatever pain you have now, in future your lot will be so much greater". Malbim says, "God lets you suffer now so that one day you will prosper". He adds that Job is too young (Job 8:9) to see into the future.

THE LITERARY APPROACH

A second approach to the problem is literary. The theology is interesting, but rather academic. Psalm 37:25, when all is said and done, is not doctrine but

poetry - an opinion, not an article of faith, and no-one needs to be scandalized by or to blame normative Judaism for it. Whether or not I agree with the psalmist, is a personal judgment; I am not compelled to accept the psalmist's view or to reject it. This applies to other more personal passages in Tehillim. Many psalms are private reflections. The *lo ra'iti* psalm comes from the early part of the Psalter. It is a point of view and not a doctrinal tenet. A poet is speaking, not a priest, prophet or the nation as a whole..

Nonetheless, the poet might have had an ideological motivation and wanted his readers to be provoked to think about the connection of hunger and piety.

Another literary possibility is that – regardless of the content of the verse – the words *na'ar hayiti gam zakanti* are an ancient ditty, and the verse might be rendered in English, *Once I was young and now I am old; the pain of the pious did I never behold.*

PSALM 34:11

THE THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Psalm 34:11 shares with Psalm 37:25 the theme of deprivation. It contrasts young lions (*k'firim*) with believers: lions go hungry, believers don't. The contrast between believers and young lions arises from the literary-linguistic structure of Psalm 34. For the sake of its alphabetical acrostic, that psalm needed a *kaf* verse. The *yod* verse says, *Fear the Lord, you His consecrated ones, for those who fear Him lack nothing*. The *kaf* verse continues this theme, pitting *k'firim* who roam in search of food against God-fearers who *lack nothing*. Maybe *k'firim* are literally young lions, who are strong and agile but don't always catch their prey.⁶ *Tzaddikim*, however, can live with very little, and accept their disadvantages out of love of God.

Lions often appear in Tanakh. Psalm 104:21 says they *seek their food from God*, i.e. from any source. But since *k-f-r* has several meanings, including *to deny or disbelieve*, *k'firim* might be *kof'rim*, unbelievers. (The *rasha* of the Haggadah is a *kofer ba'ikkar*, a denier of a basic tenet). *K'firah* is heresy, contrasted in Psalm 34 with a God-fearer. Ibn Ezra knows but rejects this view of *k'firim*. Gordis and Hammer accept it.⁷

As an alternative translation, the LXX renders *k'firim* as “wealthy men”⁸, possibly denoting tycoons who seek power and property. This reading at least contrasts humans with humans, not with beasts. Maybe *young lions* should be taken metaphorically as bullies who intimidate the more gentle *tzaddikim*. RaDaK thinks David wrote Psalm 34 after living amongst Philistines who did not scare him because he felt God was with him.

In neither of the verses we have surveyed does the psalmist deny that *tzaddikim* and their children sometimes suffer, but he himself has not seen it. We noted earlier how some translators tried to face the problem by introducing a time factor, for instance *I have yet to see*. There is however no indication in the text that the author is not using *r-a-h* in the normal sense. He is also not talking about deliberate observation of the type Jonathan Sacks uses when he says, *I have not watched a righteous man forsaken*.⁹

We must consider, however, the possibility that *ra'ah*, generally translated “to see”, can also denote “enjoy” (Eccl. 2:1) or “gloat over” (Ps. 22:18, Jud. 16:27), though this might not apply in our case since elsewhere in Psalm 37

(verse 35), *r-a-h* indicates seeing in the normal sense. Verse 35 probably means to say quite literally, *I saw a wicked man...* In our verse, *Lo ra'iti* is not an empirical finding that follows an investigation of evidence. Instead, it is a personal observation, "I myself have not seen this phenomenon". The author says he is now aged, but Rashi doubts whether, if David wrote the psalm, he really could have been "old" as defined by Psalm 90:10 which says the human span is 70 or 80. Rashi thinks that the words may be linked with I Kings 21:5 which arises out of a mood of depression. Ibn Ezra thinks the author is being poetic, agonizing over a subject that has bothered him all his life. As well as poetry, Verse 25 might also be prophecy, and its message is, "The time will come when righteousness will be rewarded and no-one will go hungry".'

Instead of prophecy, Benjamin Segal¹⁰ thinks the verse might be part of history and might reflect a time when good people suffered for their beliefs. Fearing they might waver under persecution, the poet urges them to retain their faith and courage and be assured that in the long run they will emerge safely. In Segal's view the psalmist has in mind a Dead Sea pietistic group who are oppressed and victimized.

Eugene Borowitz says in *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought: A Partisan Guide*¹¹ that Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik "makes no direct claim that everyone must see what *he* sees" – which explains why Soloveitchik does not criticise the author of Psalm 34. The Bible as a whole does not always editorialize about an assertion of which it might not approve. Some Biblical works such as the Books of Chronicles¹² allow themselves to editorialize; but their critiques are not doctrinally significant.

THE LITERARY APPROACH

It is probably only the *na'ar hayiti* verse that bothers many who recite the Grace. Hence the custom of saying the words quietly because someone present might lack means or meals. The idea that believers do not go hungry is so contrary to general human experience that it is an embarrassment. As we have seen, it is possible that the verse is poetry, not doctrine; or the voice of a particular individual or era. On the other hand, translations in which the past tense of the verse is turned into future tense, or where "see" does not mean "see" but "enjoy" or "gloat", sound like apologetics.

The *theological* approach is that in the long run no-one except God knows all the answers. Deprivation is a fact of life but human beings lack the ability to explain it. If it occurs, believers don't always feel their deprivation but rise above it and insist that they have nothing to complain about.

The *literary* approach is that the problem reflects the structure of the Book of Tehillim. The controversial text is one of those early psalms which are personal reflections, propounding individual views and proffering provocative opinions, and are not necessarily doctrinal. No-one needs to feel embarrassed by the problem though everyone is entitled to feel puzzled.

NOTES

1. *Selected Essays of Ahad Ha-Am*, ed. Leon Simon (Pa.: JPSA, 1962), 133.
2. Gertrude Hirschler's translation of Hirsch (Jerus./NY: Feldheim, 1978), 170.
3. Hirschler translation of Hirsch, 277.
4. London, 1899; cited in Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), chapters 18 & 23.
5. Arnold J. Wolf, *What is Man?* (USA: B'nai B'rith, 1962), 6.
6. J.J.M. Roberts, "The Young Lions of Psalm 34:11", in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eerdmans, 2002), 262-265.
7. Robert Gordis, "Studies in the Relationship of Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew", in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (NY: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), 180; Reuven Hammer, *Or Chadash: A commentary on Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays* (NY: Rabbinical Assembly, 2008), 236.
8. *plousioi*, possibly indicating a Hebrew word *k'vedim*. The letters *hey* and *resh* look very similar.
9. Jonathan Sacks (ed.), *Authorised Daily Prayer Book* (Lond.: Collins, 2006), 771.
10. Benjamin Segal, *A New Psalm: The Psalms as Literature* (Jerus.: Schechter Institute/Gefen, 2013), 173.
11. Eugene Borowitz, *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought: A Partisan Guide* (NY: Berman, 1983), 228.
12. See for example Israel W. Slotki's preface to Chronicles in the *Soncino Books of the Bible*.