

Widdūy: Confession, Guilt Trip, or Acknowledgement?

Today, I want to speak about Psalm 90, one of the better-known psalms, as we read it every Shabbat and holiday morning in the early part of the service called the zemirot. Even though many of you may know this psalm by heart in Hebrew, it is sometimes more confronting to read it in English. As Biblical Hebrew can often be translated in various ways, in some cases I have translated it differently from what is printed in most prayer books and Bibles.

(Psalm 90) A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

Lord, You have been our refuge in every generation.
Before the mountains came into being.

2. Before You brought forth the earth and the whole world,
from eternity to eternity, You were already God.
3. You want man to return even if he is crushed. You say: **“Return, o people!”**
4. For in your sight, a thousand years, are like a day that just passed,
like when one briefly woke up in the middle of the night.
5. They become overwhelmed and fall back asleep.
In the morning, they are like grass that sprouts afresh.
6. In the morning, it flourishes and sprouts; by evening it withers and dries up.
7. We are consumed by Your anger; terror-struck by Your fury.
8. For You have set our iniquities before You;
our hidden sins in the light of your presence.
9. All our days pass away before You; We spend our lifetime like a sigh.

10. Our days may come to seventy years, or – given the strength – to eighty.
The best of them are spent in trouble and sorrow.
They pass by quickly, and we fly away.
11. Who knows how much Your anger is evoked ? We fear You as we pass before You.
12. Teach us to count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart.
13. **Return**, O Lord! How long? Show compassion on your servants.
14. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love.
That we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
15. Give us joy for as long as we were afflicted,
for the years we have seen hardship.
16. Show your servants how You act! Let their children see your splendor!
17. May the favor of the Lord, our God, be with us.

Establish the work of our hands! May you establish the work of our hands!

Your first thought after hearing these words may be: “Moses must have been quite depressed when he wrote this!”

And, true... it is not the most cheerful psalm. You wouldn't choose it for a wedding service for example, or for a bar mitzwa celebration. However, after further reflection, it contains some truly interesting and meaningful messages.

Let me first address the -in my eyes- most bothersome theme, the one of fear for God's anger:

“We are consumed by Your anger; terror-struck by Your fury. For You have set

our iniquities before You; our hidden sins in the light of your presence. Who knows how much Your anger is evoked ? We fear You as we pass before You.”

These thoughts do not seem very enticing. Who wants to come closer to someone or something that is scary and intimidating? If God is frightening, who wants to even deal with Him?

Maimonides, and many other Jewish philosophers, explain that any description of God as having human emotions (such as anger) are meant metaphorically. Therefore, perhaps we can redefine this notion of divine fury. Phrased in modern lingo, it tells us that there are consequences to our actions.

Fears come in different kinds.

There is an unhealthy kind of fear, like phobias, or paralyzing fears, that do not benefit us at all.

But there is also a healthy type of fear, fear in the Biblical sense.

Being “Godfearing” means being afraid, or rather uncomfortable, to cross certain boundaries. Some people only refrain from doing certain things when they fear being caught. They dread the shame or the punishment. If they are certain that no one is watching, they may not have any scruples about their acts. An important effect of police officers being out on the streets is to deter potential criminals from committing crimes. Even lacking a pure conscience, they still fear the long arm of the law. Cameras on the street have enhanced that effect, for better or for worse. Being Godfearing means that, although there is no one around to catch me, I am aware of God, who knows all my actions, even the hidden ones. When we evolve to an even higher level, we will have integrated

this to the point that we don't need such fear anymore. Even without the threat of punishment, we want to do the right thing.

In short, when we say: "We are God-fearing", it means that we respect our proper boundaries, and if we ever crossed them, we feel uncomfortable about it.

Then, there is another theme in the psalm that certainly stands out: a reflection on how brief and transitory life is...

Even many years, the psalm says 1000 years, after they have passed, seem like just a single day. We are like grass that is fresh in the morning but has dried up by the end of the day. Life seems like just a sigh. Our years pass so quickly.

This seems so true. You see a young child in a stroller, you turn your head, and when you look again, she is engaged to get married. Our years rush by, says the Psalm... And we fly away...

When you are young, a year seems endless.

When you get older, a year feels like a day.

Scripture says that for God, 1000 years are like a single day.

On a positive note, it seems that we are gradually becoming more God-like...

This transitory character of life should not make us sad. Instead it should teach us that life is precious and that we should use our time well. The psalm says:

"Teach us to count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart"

Every day is a gift, and opportunity, also this Day of Atonement.

Here we are again. Another year comes to a closing. Another Yom Kippur has arrived, and it feels just like the blink of an eye since last year.

Again, we have the opportunity to reflect on ourselves, to disengage from our flaws and to identify with our better potential.

Do we feel we made any progress towards that goal? It may not be very encouraging that, no matter how hard we try, each year we end up saying in our *widdūy*:

אשמנו, בגדנו, גזלנו, דברנו דופי

We have been guilty, we have betrayed, we have stolen, we have spoken insult....

Do we feel we can become better people if it is already written in stone that next year – given life and health – we will say these same words again?

I believe these words are meant to be a safeguard against becoming self-content, and not feeling the need to work on ourselves. On the other hand, putting ourselves down as if we are no good, and we have not accomplished anything but sin and failure is just as paralyzing.

There is an alternative *widdūy* circulating on the internet, that I believe can balance out the standard, traditional one. Like the one in our prayer book, it sums up an action by each word of the alphabet, but with a positive spin.

אָבֵהֵנוּ, בִּירְכָנוּ, גָּדַלְנוּ, דִּבְרָנוּ יוֹפִי, הִעֲלִינוּ, וְחִסָּנוּ, זִרְזָנוּ, חָמַלְנוּ, טִפַּחְנוּ אֱמֶת,
 יַעֲצָנוּ עֲצוֹת טוֹבוֹת, כִּבְדָנוּ, לְמַדָּנוּ, מְחַלְנוּ, נְחַמָּנוּ, סָלַלְנוּ, עוֹרְרָנוּ, פָּעַלְנוּ,
 צִדְקָנוּ, קוֹיְנוּ לְאֶרֶץ, רַחֲמָנוּ, שְׂקַדָּנוּ, תְּמַכָּנוּ, תְּרַמְּנוּ, וְתַקְּנוּ.

We have loved, we have blessed, we have grown, we have spoken positively, we have raised up, we have shown compassion, we have acted with enthusiasm, we have been empathetic, we have cultivated truth, we have given good advice, we have respected, we

have learned, we have forgiven, we have comforted, we have built, we have stirred, we have endeavored, we have been just, we have longed for our land, we have been merciful, we have been diligent, we have supported, we have contributed, we have repaired.

“You have set our iniquities before us” says Psalm 90. But also, our efforts, our good deeds, and our personal growth. And we should too when we make up a balance of our lives.

With verse 13 we say: “**Return**, O Lord!” (vs 16) “Show your servants how You act!”

In verse 3, God says: “**Return**, o people!”

We will return to Him and we will show Him our actions.

We will continue to improve ourselves, and the world around us.

“May the favor of the Lord, our God, be with us.

Establish the work of our hands! May HE establish the work of our hands!”