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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Vayechi

One amazing verse in Jacob's deathbed blessing of his sons might well jar the reader, since it is so unexpected. Coming after the description of Dan, it is a line of prayer – the only such – in words so powerful and pregnant with meaning that we use them still:

“For Your salvation I wait, O Lord” Gen. 49:18 לישועתך קייתי ה'

The meaning of these words out of context seems clear. In every generation, we await God's saving power; each moment, we place our spirit in His hand. In context, the message is more mysterious. Why is it placed with the tribe of Dan? How does it speak to us? The tradition often connects Dan's blessing, the tribe's symbol of a snake, and this prayer to Samson, the tribe's most famous son.

Ramban, among others, views our verse as Jacob's spontaneous burst of prayer for God's salvation, on seeing, with prophetic insight, the tragedy of Samson's end:

No other judge fell into the hands of the enemy as Samson did.... And Samson was the last of the judges.... When [Jacob] saw that Samson's deliverance had come to an end, he said, “For Your salvation do I wait O Lord” – not for the salvation of a snake (symbolizing Samson), but in You is salvation and not the judge, for Your salvation is an eternal one.

What strikes Ramban about our prayer is its emphasis on the partial and temporary nature of human achievement. Samson, with all his divine gifts, could not ultimately change history or deliver Israel with his power. Nor, Ramban may be saying, can we. The help on which we can depend will come from Heaven, not from people – even from those with Heavenly gifts.

Reading our newspapers, worrying about the decisions of Israeli leaders, the effects of American politicians, the upturns and downturns of the economy, it is too easy to think only of the human actors. Watching, **apparently** in vain, for signs of Divine intervention to set things right, it is too tempting to give up the *bitachon*, the trust in God that real salvation is possible. Against these, in Ramban's view, Jacob's prayer warns us and directs us Heavenward.

Chazal understand Jacob's plea as a reference to Samson's **own** prayer when, despite his great strength, he was brought low by the forces of his enemies and his own ungovernable desires.

Rashi explains:

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“For Your salvation do I wait O Lord.” Jacob prophesied that the Philistines would pluck out [Samson’s] eyes, and that he would someday say, “O Lord God, remember me and strengthen me, only this once, O God.”

What strikes Rashi is the emphasis on *waiting*. Samson acknowledges in this prayer that only through God’s grace could his strength be restored; for that salvation he waited. We, too, wait, Rashi suggests. That for which we pray and hope will happen when God chooses; we cannot force His hand.

Waiting is difficult. To maintain a quiet, prayerful attitude when Israel is endangered, when your job or savings are disappearing, when your spiritual, emotional or physical world is challenged is no doubt saintly, but stressful for most. To work actively for Jewish and human causes is vital, but can lead to disappointment, even despair. Against these, in Rashi’s view, Jacob’s prayer shields us and gives us hope.

But another view, radically different, comes from the second explanation found in **Hizkuni**,

Another interpretation: “for your salvation” – that is, for what you yourself will perform, that you shall save Israel, as it is written: He will begin to save Israel from the Philistines.” (Judges 13:5)

What strikes Hizkuni, in the full knowledge that the second person suffix in the word *yeshuat’cha* traditionally refers to God - God’s salvation – is that it can also be addressed to Samson himself. Jacob is actually praying for Samson to arise and save Israel. This seems opposite to previous interpretations, which emphasize Divine rather than human activity. It is imperative for Samson not to wait, but to act.

But if this interpretation, this re-understanding of “your/Your salvation” can be accepted, what of the third word in the phrase, the Name of God? On this issue Hizkuni is silent. Still, one might respectfully make this suggestion.

As Hizkuni himself, in his first and primary interpretation, offers the traditional view that the salvation called for is God’s, perhaps in this second view, Hizkuni understands the saving process to have both Divine and human vectors. Samson is indeed called on to deliver Israel, but it is through his doing God’s will. Samson’s salvation is not entirely his own doing, but a working out of God’s salvation. And in this, Samson may be a paradigm for all of us. To read Hizkuni this way, *L’yeshuatcha kiviti Hashem- For your salvation I wait* – becomes a cry with two complementary implications.

We know and accept that our lives cannot be made whole, our world cannot be made perfect without God. We trust and wait for the light that shines beyond the events of the day, beyond our human efforts, however valiant. Though the way is long, we wait. We wait, for the light is certain.

But we also hear and accept that we are not only people who wait, but people for whom God’s world is waiting. Like Samson, we are called to do God’s will, despite temptations to turn

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aside. Though our deeds are less heroic than his, we have no less responsibility to find that way of *avodah* that is uniquely ours – those *mitzvot*, those acts of kindness, those moments of salvation, of *tikkun*, that only we can achieve.

L'yeshnatcha kiviti Hashem is a mirror. We look at the verse and at ourselves, and ask “have I waited expectantly for salvation?” And we ask as well, “have I done those things that I myself can perform, for which, if we could say such a thing, God waits?”

Shabbat Shalom!

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