

Perspectives on Tehillim

Chapter 19

Recited by many communities every Shabbat morning, *Tehillim* chapter 19, which begins with the words “*la-mnatzei’ach mizmor le-David, ha-shamayim mesaperim kevod Kel,*” is straightforward on its surface. Verses 2–7 proclaim that God’s glory is revealed through nature. Verses 8–15 then praise God’s Torah and its effects on people. The relationship between the sections of the psalm has elicited various responses by *pashtanim* and Jewish thinkers throughout the ages. How one connects them reflects and affects one’s religious outlook in significant ways. In this essay we explore several facets of interpretation.

I.

R. Elchanan Samet divides the first half of the psalm into two subsections: heavens’ declaration of God’s glory (2–5a), and the daily activity of the sun (5b–7).²⁶⁷

⁽¹⁾For the leader. A psalm of David. ⁽²⁾The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork. ⁽³⁾Day to day makes utterance, night to night speaks out. ⁽⁴⁾There is no utterance, there are no words, whose sound goes unheard. ^(5a)Their voice carries throughout the earth, their words to the end of the world.²⁶⁸

Heavens speak, but without words. We need to pay special attention to hear the praises that the heavens utter. R. Samet quotes *Yoma* 20b: “Were it not for the sound of the tumult of Rome, the sound of the revolution of the sun would be heard.” It is possible to drown out the sounds of God’s glory with too much emphasis on day-to-day existence. The opening verses of this psalm describe the glory of God manifest throughout the cosmos, and how people need to direct their attentiveness in order to hear the beauty of nature and how it glorifies God.

The psalmist then praises the sun for its joyful obedience of God’s command. It perfectly fulfills its role to illuminate:

^(5b)He placed in them a tent for the sun, ⁽⁶⁾who is like a groom coming forth from the chamber, like a hero, eager to run his course. ⁽⁷⁾His rising-place is at one end of heaven, and his circuit reaches the other; nothing escapes his heat.

The section concludes, “*ve-ein nistar mei-chamato,*” translated by several commentators as “nothing escapes its heat.” R. Samet notes that everything else describing the sun is positive, and he therefore adopts the reading of R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, who explains that “*-chamato*” means God’s sun and not the sun’s heat. No place on earth is hidden from the sun’s light. Alternatively, Amos Chakham explains that nobody hides from the sun’s warmth and rays, also conveying a positive tone.²⁶⁹

Moving to the second half of the psalm, verses 8–11 praise the Torah, its commandments, and its influence on people. Verses 12–14 then are a prayer to God to save the psalmist from sin, and verse 15 concludes with a prayer that the psalmist’s words should be acceptable to God:

²⁶⁷. Elchanan Samet, at <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/tehillim70/61tehillim.htm>; <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/tehillim70/62tehillim.htm>; <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/tehillim70/63tehillim.htm>.

²⁶⁸. Translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).

²⁶⁹. Amos Chakham, *Da’at Mikra: Tehillim* vol. 1 [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1979), 99.

⁽⁸⁾The teaching of the Lord is perfect, renewing life; the decrees of the Lord are enduring, making the simple wise. ⁽⁹⁾The precepts of the Lord are just, rejoicing the heart; the instruction of the Lord is lucid, making the eyes light up. ⁽¹⁰⁾The fear of the Lord is pure, abiding forever; the judgments of the Lord are true, righteous -altogether, ⁽¹¹⁾more desirable than gold, than much fine gold; sweeter than honey, than drippings of the comb. ⁽¹²⁾Your servant pays them heed; in obeying them there is much reward. ⁽¹³⁾Who can be aware of errors? Clear me of unperceived guilt, ⁽¹⁴⁾and from willful sins keep Your servant; let them not dominate me; then shall I be blameless and clear of grave offense. ⁽¹⁵⁾May the words of my mouth and the prayer of my heart be acceptable to You, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Commentators adopt different strategies for linking the two halves of our chapter. Some see a similarity between the two halves. Within those who see the two halves as parallel, there is discussion whether the religious value of nature and Torah are different but equal ways of approaching God, or whether the psalm casts the Torah as a superior means of developing a relationship with God. Rashi (first view) and Amos Chakham²⁷⁰ parallel the two halves: just as the sun illuminates, so does the Torah. Similarly, Radak (second view) argues that just as the sun is necessary for physical existence, the Torah is vital for our souls. Ibn Ezra, Radak (first view), and Me'iri view the Torah as superior: we find testimony to God's greatness in nature, and the Torah is even greater testimony.

Other commentators view the two halves of the psalm as contrasting. Rashi (second view) interprets the final expression in the first half, "*ve-ein nistar mei-chamato*" – "nothing escapes his heat" (v. 7), as negative. The sun can burn, whereas the Torah heals and restores the soul. A more dramatic contrasting approach is found in R. Bechaye ben Asher's *Kad Ha-Kemach* in his entry on Torah. R. Bechaye quotes *Tehillim* 19:8–10, and then gives a detailed analysis of how each aspect of Torah is superior to some aspect of the sun. For example, one looking directly at the sun can be blinded, but the Torah brightens our eyes. The sun shines only during the day, whereas the Torah perpetually illuminates. As noted above, R. Samet disagrees with the reading of *ve-ein nistar mei-chamato* as negative. The first half of the psalm appears entirely positive in its praise of all nature, including the sun.

R. Samet explains that the heavens testify to God's greatness. The sun is the ideal model of the heavenly realm, serving God with perfection and enthusiasm. This paradigm is not identical in the human realm. The psalmist longs for the sun's perfection and enthusiasm in serving God, but knows that as a person he cannot be perfect. People are liable to error, and sometimes those errors are hidden ("*nistarot*") even from themselves. In contrast, nothing is hidden ("*nistar*") from the sun's light. The sun therefore rejoices like a bridegroom, whereas the religious person is worried. The parallel between the two halves of the psalm is that God created perfection in nature and in the Torah. The religious individual considers the sun as a role model in serving God, and prays that he or she will avoid error in the effort to likewise attain perfection in serving God through the Torah.

R. Samet notes that while the aforementioned medieval commentators did not interpret this psalm in this manner, *Sifrei Devarim* 306 explicitly expresses this idea:

"Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak" (*Devarim* 32:1) – The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Say to Israel: Look into the heavens that I created to serve you. Have they perhaps changed their ways? Did perhaps the sphere of the sun say: I shall not rise in the east and illuminate the entire world? Rather as it is stated, "The sun also rises, and the sun goes down" (*Kohelet* 1:5). And what is more, it is happy to do My will, as it is stated: "And it is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber" (*Tehillim* 19:6). Surely there is an *a fortiori* argument: If they who do not act for reward nor for loss – if they merit they do not receive reward, and if they sin they do receive punishment – and do not have compassion for their sons and daughters – if they do not change their ways, then you, who if you merit you receive reward, and if you sin you receive punishment, and you have compassion for your sons and for your daughters, all the more so you must not change your ways.

In this *midrash*, God views the sun as a model for humanity. As the sun always perfectly fulfills God's will, people should strive to do so all the more. When people use their free will properly in the service of God, then humanity is in harmony with the cosmos.

Amos Chakham observes that the blessings before the *Shema* follow this pattern, as well. The first blessing praises God as the Creator of the cosmos, whereas the second focuses on Israel's intimate personal relationship with God. Armed with both aspects, we can accept the yoke of Heaven by reciting the *Shema*.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰. Ibid., 102.

²⁷¹. Ibid., 102–103.

II.

Coming from a different faith tradition, J. Ross Wagner and Philip Nel offer additional insight into *Tehillim* chapter 19 by dividing it into three sections rather than two.²⁷² Wagner observes that verses 2–7 speak about nature as objectively awesome, and do not refer to people. These verses refer to God as “*Kel*,” in God’s capacity as the Creator of the cosmos. Verses 8–11 bring God closer to people, exulting in how God’s Torah benefits people. In these verses, the psalmist does not address God directly, but talks about Him using *sheim Havayah*, implying a more personal, intimate, covenantal relationship. Verses 12–15 bring God even closer, as the psalmist directly addresses God for the first time. The psalm’s seventh and final reference to *sheim Havayah* (v. 15) is the only time that the psalmist addresses God directly by name. The concluding address to God as “*Tzuri Ve-Go’ali*” – “my Rock and my Redeemer,” appeals to God’s intimate relationship with the psalmist and his nation. Thus, the psalmist is awed by the cosmos, then by the Torah, and then he -internalizes these means to shaping and transforming his own religious life. The psalmist wants to take his place in this infinite and eternal order in perfect service to God.

Adopting a different approach that also divides the psalm into three sections, Philip Nel argues that the cosmos (2–7) and Torah (8–11) both are perfect, whereas people are not (12–14). Rather than remaining mute, however, people can and should speak God’s praises and meditate on God’s greatness (15). We are inconstant but when we pray we join nature and the Torah in glorifying God.

III.

Combining Torah and *Madda*

Dr. Norman Lamm discusses an apparent conflict within Rambam’s writings.²⁷³ In his *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2) Rambam writes that one attains love of God through contemplating nature. He writes similarly in his *Moreh Nevukhim* (e.g., III:28; III:52). In his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* (positive commandment 3), however, Rambam includes both *mitzvah* observance and contemplation of nature as means to attaining love of God. Why is Rambam inconsistent?

Dr. Lamm adopts an approach common in Rambam scholarship, and distinguishes between the masses and the intellectual elite. The masses love God through observance of the *mitzvot*, whereas the philosophical elite love God through nature. The *Moreh Nevukhim* is elitist, whereas *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* was written as a popular work. What about the *Mishneh Torah*, a work similarly intended for everyone? Dr. Lamm answers that its opening chapters are philosophical, and therefore can be understood properly only by an exclusive elite.

One may question this solution. Even the simplest soul can be overwhelmed by the cosmos. Several psalms – *Tehillim* chapter 19 included – express that sentiment. Perhaps the discrepancy in Rambam’s writings has more to do with the context of each book. *Sefer -Ha-Mitzvot* teaches how Jews develop a love of God – through the Torah’s command-ments and through the contemplation of nature. In contrast, the opening chapters in *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide* focus on how any religious person attains the love and fear of God. Therefore, they highlight the universal aspects of God’s glory in nature.

In his book *Torah UMadda*,²⁷⁴ Dr. Lamm quotes *Pirkei Avot* 3:7: “Rabbi Yaakov used to say: One who is studying Torah as he walks by the way, and who interrupts his studies to say, ‘How beautiful is this tree,’ or ‘how beautiful is this furrow,’ it is as though he is guilty with his life.” Dr. Lamm adopts Rashi’s interpretation of the *mishnah*: nature certainly helps us appreciate God, but the Torah is God’s revealed word and therefore it has religious primacy. This interpretation of the *mishnah* is in line with Ibn Ezra, Radak (first view), and Me’iri we considered earlier, who view the Torah as superior to nature in *Tehillim* chapter 19.

R. Marc D. Angel pointed out to me an alternate interpretation of the *mishnah* in *Avot*. One who views nature as an *interruption* from Torah errs. One who perceives nature as part of a Torah worldview has a proper understanding. As *Tehillim* chapter 19 teaches, Torah and nature are different manifestations of God’s voice. Because they are different, the psalm separates them into two categories. However, they are two means of hearing God’s voice that work together in harmony. This interpretation is in line with that of Rashi (first view), Radak (second view), and Amos Chakham, who see the Torah and nature as parallel means of reaching God in *Tehillim* chapter 19.

Tehillim chapter 19 teaches that the Torah and nature are different manifestations of God’s voice. They are different, and the psalm therefore separates them. But they are two means of hearing God’s voice that work together

²⁷². J. Ross Wagner, “From the Heavens to the Heart: The Dynamics of Psalm 19 as Prayer,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 61 (1999): 245–261; Philip Nel, “Psalm 19: The Unbearable Lightness of Perfection,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 30 (2004): 103–117.

²⁷³. Norman Lamm, “Maimonides on the Love of God,” *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992–1993): 131–142.

²⁷⁴. Norman Lamm, *Torah UMadda: The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition* (Lanham, 2004), 146–147.

in harmony. The job of humanity is to perceive God's glory in nature and the Torah, and speak out God's praises. In this manner, all creation harmoniously unites in the service of God.