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PSALM 22: THE RETRIEVAL OF FAITH

FOREWORD

In the beginning is clarity: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? . . .” (22:2). There is no equivocation, no subtlety, only abandonment, “. . . [why have You remained so] far from delivering me, [from] words of my crying out?” (22:2). In the end is diametrically opposed clarity: “For He has not scorned and He has not spurned the outcry of the afflicted, and He has not hidden His face from him, and in his crying out, He hears” (22:25).

Whence this radical transformation? In verse 2, God abandons, stands aloof. At the end of Psalm 22, God answers, delivers. Psalm 22 does an about-face. The commentator’s burden is to trace the transformation of the perception of the Psalmist, to understand his spiritual logic—his bold seizing of illumination and frightful recoil therefrom, until finally, after two critical turning points, his spiritual blockage gives way to exuberant faith.

The commentator’s method is to recover the unstated spiritual progress and regress between and within verses. The Psalmist’s poetry, compressed, finely etched, leaps from existential crisis or exultation to unpredictable heights and depths. Unpredictable, these developments seem, because their arrival is seldom indicated by the verses themselves. This is because the Psalmist’s inner life is too rich to reach complete expression in words. Often his verses are mere guideposts to subterranean rumblings and transformations of spirit. Crucial moments are not directly witnessed in words. It is for this reason that the biblical book of *Psalms* retains a hold over the imagination in spite of its literary logic, which often seems strained, sometimes even lacking coherence. *Psalms*’ strength derives from its spiritual logic, its hinting at a world of spiritual confluences and explosions too volatile to be reduced to satisfying coherence.

The penultimate draft of this article benefitted from an illuminating discussion with Rabbi Nathaniel Lauer, vice-principal of the Beth Jacob High School of Denver.

The unarticulated moments between and within verses are best approximated by respecting the Psalmist's bald meaning, including his abrupt shifts in tense, voice, and person. Seemingly disjunctive, the bald meaning actually serves, not just necessitates, reconstruction and interpretation. Take, for example, *vav*. It means (translators and critics remind us) "however," "yet," "but," and "when," in addition to its preponderant, literal *and*. Or, take the imperfect. It means, we are reminded, the jussive or optative, or a future, habitual, or desired action. What is overlooked in all this is that the ancient listener to *Psalms*, in hearing *vav* or imperfect, heard a single sound. If multiple meanings inhered therein, they registered only as mental adjustments to the one sound. Far from being loyal to the original Hebrew, the differentiated translation of *vav*, for example, robs *Psalms*' listeners (and readers) of the undifferentiated—the bald—communication of the original. In investigating *Psalms*, it is precisely by retaining the literal in meaning, voice, tense, and person that shifts in intention have the best chance of being read out of rather than into the text, for all shifts reside in the Hebrew as it stands. Burden of proof rests on the commentator who would alter the bald communication.

In the Musar movement, I was taught to locate the emotional-spiritual power of the Hebrew Bible's verses, particularly in *Psalms*; to allow verses to overcome my emotions and speak personally to my soul. Only from this intuitive, subjective level may I then proceed to poetic, historical, or commentatorial perspectives. The sign of the Musar approach is paradox. By initially establishing a subjective link to a psalm, I attune myself to its spiritual level of discourse, the precise nature of which will, under analysis, differentiate in ways sure to enlarge and possibly transcend (or even transgress) my initial response. Spurred by subjective attraction to particular verses in Psalm 22 (especially 2, 4, and 29), my commentary on the whole psalm is an attempt to achieve an enlarged perspective—to retrieve the unspoken spiritual itinerary of the Psalmist as he confronts and transcends God's abandonment.

I.

For one-and-one-half verses, the Psalmist sustains his unqualified, unyielding sense of abandonment. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me, [remained so] far from delivering me, [from] words of my crying out? My God, I call out by day and You do not answer . . ." (22:2–3). The second half of verse 3 begins in parallel to the first half, "and [I call out] by night"; we expect a parallel response, *and You do not answer*. But the parallelism breaks down.

The sense of abandonment falters. The Psalmist takes his first step on the long path to God's embrace. "And [I call out] by night, *and I have no silence*" (22:3).

Now it is not that I call out and God does not answer. It is that I call and *I have a problem*: "I have no silence." Silence—*dumiyyah*—is not the muteness of defiance, or unease; it is the muteness of praising ineffably. Psalm 65:2: "To You, silence (*dumiyyah*) is *tehillah*; silence is praise . . ." Having no *dumiyyah*, the Psalmist has no unarticulated, confident, sublime posture of praise before God. Originally feeling abandoned by God, the Psalmist comes to realize that the problem, ultimately, is his own. "I call out by day, say You do not answer; I call out by night, might wish to reiterate, *You do not answer*; but I can no longer defy. I retreat. I allow truth partially to break through: It is I who lack *dumiyyah*, I who am incapable of the silence that is praise."

I allow truth—the problem is I—to break through partially, but once given a foothold, truth thunders. Truth overwhelms. Truth temporarily breaks down all resistance. In surrender I blurt out: "And You are holy, sitting in receipt of praises—*tehillot*—of Israel" (22:4). Abjectly, as if in prostration, I acknowledge the truth: You God, holy, are the object of absolutely faithful, silent bodying forth of praises by the people of Israel.

Two verses and what a traversal! From absolute abandonment to absolute faith—or almost absolute. One critical element is missing. *I am abandoned*, the Psalmist maintains in verse 1; *I lack dumiyyah*, the Psalmist admits in verse 2. But *they* body forth praises that are *dumiyyah*, *their* praises God receives (22:3–4). *They*. Others. The faith that is praise the Psalmist can acknowledge, but not possess.

He has passed his first turning point, seized his first illumination. He has seen that God's abandonment is actually his own deficiency, and that others possess faith and transcend his deficiency. Now that he has seen this—brought himself confidently close to the ultimate truth of his own faith—he recoils.

II.

"In You our fathers trusted, they trusted and You delivered them" (22:5). *They*. Others. The Psalmist cannot seize his own faith. There *is* faith, he acknowledges; there is deliverance, he knows; but not for him. "To You they cried out and were rescued, in You they trusted and were not shamed" (22:6). Again, *they*. For two entire verses. Earlier (22:2–3), it took only one-and-one-half verses to dent the absolute confidence that God abandons, while here the Psalmist's

personal detachment from God stretches across two verses. Just because of this, perhaps, his second step on the path to faith explodes with no half-verse transition: "And I am a worm . . ." (22:7).

Now it is not others (with their praises) who come before God, it is *I*—the Psalmist himself—who surrenders before God. The Psalmist comes before Him in abject submission. Any full sense of Divine presence entails self-abnegation, but this is compounded here by the shift from sensing Divine abandonment to feeling Divine presence. Nothing to everything, pain to Presence: *I am a worm*.

If I am a worm—I am nothing—God is everything; if He is everything, He overwhelms; and if He overwhelms, I am not even human. "And I am a worm and not a person . . ." Before the Psalmist even completes this verse, he shifts still again. The second turning point reached, the second regression sets in.

III.

The Psalmist cannot tolerate the implications of his personal stand before God. He cannot undertake the spiritual development dictated by the existential truth of being in, and overwhelmed by, God's presence. Again he is diverted by *them*: this time, though, not by others who trusted and were delivered, but by others who mock the Psalmist's spiritual surrender. A worm in comparison to God, the Psalmist feels so weak in his faith—or, perhaps, so distressed by the radical reorientation it requires—that suddenly he is a worm in comparison to man: ". . . scorn of man and denigrated by people" (22:7).

First it was what God did for others that diverted the Psalmist; now it is what others do against him. Their actions nurture oscillations. The Psalmist swings to and from God, the flight to Him not so radical as his two brief moments of surrender before Him, the flight from Him not so radical as his original sense of abandonment. The Psalmist inches his way to sensing Divine concern.

Thus, as others divert him from faith, he hears in their contempt a reminder of faith: "All who see me will mock me, will open the lip, wag the head: 'Rely on Lord; He will deliver him, He will rescue him, for He delights in him'" (22:8–9). The Psalmist now turns to God less intensely than in his brief moments of surrender, but more enduringly. First he turns to God retrospectively, then currently: "For You drew me from womb, placed me securely on my mother's breasts. I was cast upon You from the birth, from belly of my mother You are my God" (22:10–11). Like a suckling secure in his dependence on someone else, the Psalmist is secure in God; not, however, secure

enough to be impervious to external threats: “Be not far from me, for trouble is near; for there is no helper” (22:12). As trouble intensifies, it is not God’s power to help but the trouble itself that looms large, indeed, that overwhelms. Oscillating, the Psalmist now turns from God.

Many bulls surrounded me; bulls of Bashan came as crown around me. They opened their mouths against me—ravens and roaring lion. Like the water I was poured out, and all my bones were out of joint; my heart was like wax, melting within my bowels. Dry like the potsherd is my strength, and my tongue is stuck to my jaws, and to the dust of death You will put me. For dogs surrounded me, pack of evil-doers enclosed me, like a lion [at] my hands and my feet. I shall count each of my bones; they will look, will stare at me. They will divide my garments among them, and they will cast lots for my clothing. (22:13–19)

IV.

If personal detachment from God, sustained across two full verses (22:4–5), could bottle up the Psalmist’s latent faith, compelling him to explode, “I am a worm and not a man,” we must expect a decisive turning point after *seven* verses of detachment from God, of attention to external threats (22:13–19). Earlier turning points were temporary; progress to faith no sooner came than it precipitated recoil. Yet, earlier progress indicated an irrepressible yearning for God’s concern, and now the sustained, seven-verse turning from God—the final oscillation—propels the yearning to realization. Suppressed for seven verses, the yearning can only unfold in stages, each one adding a layer to a commitment richer and more focused than anything the Psalmist hitherto imagined. The vivid, concrete language of the seven verses, especially the reference to impending assault from animals, colors the final stage of the Psalmist’s expression of faith.

First the Psalmist turns from external trouble to God, resuming his faith in God’s power to help, “And You, Lord, do not stand afar . . .” (22:20). Then the Psalmist advances to the crux: himself. “. . . my own strength, hasten to my aid” (22:20). *My*. Not *they*. Not others. Not even *You* (“You, Lord, do not stand afar”). It is *my* strength I must muster—with hastened assistance from Heaven, of course—but *my* strength. *My* aid. This critical threshold—“*eyaluti*, my own strength, hasten to my aid”—refracts the psalm’s otherwise baffling inscription—“*ayelet*, gazelle”—through a fresh prism: “Concerning *ayelet*—strength—of the morning” (22:1). “*Strength*”: my key to coming to faith; “*of the morning*”: the time

lucidly to pursue aspirations. With its hint of summoning personal strength to retrieve faith, the inscription sets the theme of the psalm.

The critical threshold now broached, the Psalmist finally attains permanent illumination, requests the right request, shows himself capable of removing the essential block to faith: “*Rescue from the sword of my soul, from dog-grip on my singularity*” (22:21).

The root of God’s abandonment: the sword of *my* soul; the vivid metaphor of the assault of dogs on *my* singularity. I lacked faith not because God abandoned but because I spurned; not because God could not hear but because I could not address Him—I savaged my soul with the sword of denial. I could not sustain earlier turnings to God because I allowed that the problem was outside me: God’s saving others or others’ threatening me, it was all the same. My vision was external, my problem internal: my own assault on my spiritual sensitivity, on my singularity. My options were to close or open myself to God. And I closed—but now I have opened. Now I know that God’s concern is mine to appropriate, if only I ask for it (“Do not stand afar, hasten my own strength, rescue from sword, dog-grip on my soul”). My sense of abandonment and fear of external threats no longer exist. Having achieved self-knowledge, hence Divine attention, I can only rhapsodize.

V.

A vibration of the seven verses of detachment from God moves the Psalmist’s tongue, as if his achievement of self-knowledge—his decisive transcendence of the personal block between him and Him—were too good to be true. The mind changed, the soul changed—the Psalmist changed—but the tongue moves as if by nerve spasm: “Deliver me from lion’s mouth . . .” (22:22). The spasm is brief, the Psalter *did* change. He coordinates tongue with soul: “. . . and from horns of *remim* You answered me” (22:22). At psalm’s opening the Psalmist did not sense God’s answering, but now, at long last, he receives God’s answer, concern, embrace. Whereupon, rhapsody.

The opening rhapsody is especially laden with meaning: “I shall tell Your name to my brothers, in the midst of society I shall praise You” (22:23). In the Psalmist’s eyes, the others—*they*—have become his brothers. They are not spiritually superior and inaccessible—separate senders of praises to God—because the Psalmist, too, now praises God. He even praises God publicly, “in the midst of society.” A transformation!

And more. The Psalmist no longer stares helplessly at others’ spiritual capacity to praise. He not only praises God amidst others,

he *instructs* them. Having pierced the barrier between God and himself, the Psalmist's spiritual confidence in God's accessibility to everyone, and his feeling God's majesty and awesomeness, veritably brim. He has learned that to fear God—to be in dread of Him—is to be ready to see His face and to hear Him: "Fearers of Lord, praise him; all seed of Jacob, honor him; and be in dread of Him, all seed of Israel. For He has not scorned and He has not spurned the outcry of the afflicted, and He has not hidden his face from him, and in his crying out, He hears" (22:24–25).

Still more: the Psalmist attains that unique level of praising which, at psalm's beginning, he could only momentarily discern—the unarticulated, sublime posture of praise. God sat in receipt of others' unarticulated praises (*tehillot*, 22:4); now He receive them from the Psalmist, too: "From You is my *tehillah*" (22:26)—my silent praise offered to You.

The Psalmist ascends still higher, attaining a level not even alluded to at psalm's beginning. He identifies and embodies a relationship between silent praise and an as yet unnamed corollary. Psalm 65:2: "To You, silence is praise . . . and it is to You that a vow will be paid." Duty to God is not exhausted by spiritual posture, by faith that ascends to silent, sublime praise. Duty also entails the discharge of specific obligations, such as vows. Thus, the Psalmist here (22:26): "From You is my *tehillah* . . . I shall complete my vows in the presence of all who fear Him."

The Psalmist has reached a summit of faith that is more than personal; the Psalmist entwines himself with community. Likewise, the corollary of faith—the discharge of specific obligations, such as vows—occurs in the presence of community. "From You is my *tehillah* among large society, I shall complete my vows in the presence of all who fear Him" (22:26). (Similarly, Psalm 65:2: "To You, silence is praise, God in Zion, and it is to You that a vow will be paid"; the God Who receives the praise of silence and to Whom a vow is paid is the God *in Zion*, amidst His people.)

VI.

From twists and turns in the Psalmist's tumultuous journey, a two-stage structure has emerged. It is set down, then reversed. When it is set down, the Psalmist first perceives God addressed silently, sublimely; then verbally, cryingly. First, "And you are holy, sitting in receipt of *silent* praises (*tehillot*) of Israel" (22:4); then, "To You they cried out and were rescued, in You they trusted and were not shamed" (22:6). The first address, in its silent sublimity, is spiritual

being; the second, in its example of unashamed crying out and rescue, is spiritual instruction. The first address values acceptance, being in God's presence; the second address values initiative, seeking God's presence. The first address is serene and private; the second, agonized and public. The first, in its sublimity, bequeaths beatitude; the second, in its pedagogy, implants responsibility.

At psalm's beginning the Psalmist looks in from the outside, observing others' faith progress from silence to instruction, from acceptance to initiative. At psalm's closing, when the Psalmist speaks from the inside, affirming his own faith, he follows the two-stage progression in reverse. First he instructs others, articulating his faith to his "brothers," to "society" (22:23-25); then he attains the sublime posture of praising silently (22:26). First he assumes responsibility, then achieves beatitude. While from the outside faith seems first to be passive, silent, private; from the inside it seems first to be active, verbal, communal. To the outsider, initiative within faith is its second level; to the insider, initiative within faith is its first level.

Why the change in the Psalmist's perception?

As the Psalmist attains faith, he achieves it initially by working his own internal revolution, seeking God's presence. He sees that faith on its first level is essentially initiative. "My own strength, hasten to my aid." Faith on its second level is essentially acceptance, being in God's presence. The power to praise silently derives from God. "From You is my *tehillah*." God elevates the seeker of faith only after he does his own work. Comprehensive beatitude is vouchsafed to the struggling faithful activist, not the sublimely faithful quietist.

VII.

The Psalmist's temporary, solitary, and abject submission before God has matured; his faith has become no longer temporary but sustained, no longer in solitude but in the community, no longer abject, compared to a worm, but serene and sublime. His own spiritual world in order, the Psalmist expands horizons. His own faith attained, he becomes rapturous over others' acceptance of God, optimistic about others' return to God, and assertive concerning the universal authority of God:

Humble people will eat and be sate, His seekers will praise Lord: may your hearts live eternally. They will remember and they will return to Lord, all ends

of earth; and they will bow down before You, all families of nations. For to the Lord belongs the sovereignty, and He rules over the nations. (22:27–29)

Spiritual fullness of God and physical prostration before Him precipitate a level of faith reaching beyond even acknowledgment of God's universal sovereignty. They precipitate the stark sensation that life—existence itself—depends on God.

All sate of the land ate and prostrated themselves, all descenders to dust will bow before Him; and none can keep alive his own soul. (22:30)

With faith fully realized, the Psalmist need make only one more point: transmission of faith to coming generations. He need not enumerate its channels of transmission, so certain he is of faith's power to sustain itself. His faith in faith is his ultimate conquest of anguish, as he himself becomes living testimony to the endurance of faith by declaring that faith will be declared.

Seed [of all families of nations] will serve Him; it will be declared of God unto the [future] generation. They will come and will tell His righteousness unto a people now born; for He has done. (22:31–32)

Who is “a people now born”? What is it that “He has done”?

A people now born is the future generation of faith existing in the Psalmist's imagination—a people of whose existence the Psalmist is absolutely certain.

He—God—has done this: He has led the Psalmist through every stage of faith, from anguish to flashes of insight to self-recognition to beatitude, for himself, his community, and all humanity, for now and for all generations.

AFTERWORD

Talmud's tractate *Megillah* locates the matrix of Psalm 22 in the mission of Esther, heroine of Purim. Verses in Psalm 22 both teach *halakhot* (laws) of Purim (*Megillah* 4a) and represent responses of Esther to certain events in the Purim story (*Megillah* 15b). I have read Psalm 22 wholly without reference to Esther, yet I accept the talmudic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible (including *Psalms*) as absolutely authoritative. Have I contradicted myself?

Psalm 62:12: “God spoke one, I heard two . . .” Talmud interprets this to mean that while no two biblical verses can teach one thing, one verse can teach many things (*Sanhedrin* 34a). Psalm 22 can convey both the authoritative teachings of the Book of Esther, and the existential itinerary delineated above. How so? Does it not

violate intellectual honesty to insist that one writer, living at one time (such as David the King and Psalmist), can cast extraordinarily different intentions and even temporally disjunctive frames of reference into his verses? Yes, this is intellectually dishonest, provided that the resources of the writer are exclusively his own. The resources of the authors of the Hebrew Bible's *Writings* (including *Psalms*), however, are not only their own intellect, but also the Divine intellect. *Writings'* authors are both active and passive; generators of their own inspiration and funnels for the Divine Inspiration; manufacturers of intentions and vessels for receiving the Divine intention. Hence their verses contain many intentions, including one or more beyond the authors' ken. These verses have two authors: an author and an Author.

Some non-Orthodox Jewish thinkers affirm this much. Where they depart from Orthodox Judaism is in insisting that all perceived intentions in verses are equally valid, or, are to be distinguished according to various criteria, any number of which can be authoritative, no one of which can be absolutely authoritative. This is consistent, for when any interpretation is latently authoritative, none can be absolutely authoritative. Orthodox Judaism affirms the Talmud's interpretation of the Hebrew Bible as absolutely authoritative. This both fixes the traditional commentator within definitive, Divine intentions (halakhic and aggadic), and liberates him to view verses through an interpretive prism cast at a variety (potentially an infinite variety) of angles. In interpreting Psalm 22, I have chosen one angle of interpretation—a Musar, existentialist one. Accepting the definitive, talmudic interpretation of Psalms, I am free to do so. God spoke one, I heard two.

THE 22ND PSALM

1. *La-Menatze'ah*. Concerning strength of the morning. A *mizmor* of David.

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me, [remained so] far from delivering me, [from] words of my crying out?

My God, I call out by day and You do not answer, and by night, and I have no silence.

And You are holy, sitting in receipt of praises of Israel.

5. In You our fathers trusted, they trusted and You delivered them. To You they cried out and were rescued, in You they trusted and were not shamed.

And I am a worm and not a person, scorn of man and denigrated by people.

All who see me will mock me, will open the lip, wag the head:
“Rely on Lord: He will deliver him, He will rescue him, for He
delights in him.”

10. For You drew me from womb, placed me securely on my
mother’s breasts.

I was cast upon You from the birth, from belly of my mother
You are my God.

Be not far from me, for trouble is near; for there is no helper.
Many bulls surrounded me; bulls of Bashan came as crown
around me.

They opened their mouths against me—ravening and roaring
lion.

15. Like the water I was poured out, and all my bones were out of
joint; my heart was like wax, melting within my bowels.

Dry like the potsherd is my strength, and my tongue is stuck to
my jaws, and to the dust of death You will put me.

For dogs surrounded me, pack of evil-doers enclosed me, like a
lion [at] my hands and my feet.

I shall count each of my bones; they will look, will stare at me.
They will divide my garments among them, and they will cast lots
for my clothing.

20. And You, Lord, do not stand afar; my own strength, hasten to
my aid.

Rescue from the sword of my soul, from dog-grip on my
singularity.

Deliver me from lion’s mouth, and from horns of *remim* You
answered me.

I shall tell Your name to my brothers, in the midst of society I
shall praise You.

Fearers of Lord, praise him; all seed of Jacob, honor him; and be
in dread of Him, all seed of Israel.

25. For He has not scorned and He has not spurned the outcry of
the afflicted, and He has not hidden His face from him, and in
his crying out, He hears.

From You is my praise among large society, I shall complete my
vows in the presence of all who fear Him.

Humble people will eat and be sate, His seekers will praise Lord;
may you hearts live eternally.

They will remember and they will return to Lord, all ends of
earth; and they will bow down before You, all families of
nations.

For to the Lord belongs the sovereignty, and He rules over the
nations.

30. All sate of the land ate and prostrated themselves, all descenders to dust will bow before Him; and none can keep alive his own soul.
Seed [of all families of nations] will serve Him; it will be declared of God unto the [future] generation.
They will come and will tell His righteousness unto a people now born; for He has done.