

Gretchen A. Shapiro
 Psalms
 Fall 2006

Psalm 94
The quest for justice

Theme: According to the *Oxford Annotated Bible*, the Psalm is “a prayer for deliverance from evil men.”

The *HarperCollins Study Bible* titles it as “G-d the avenger of the righteous,” and sees it as a prayer by an individual asking for help “whose present suffering at the hands of the powerful is representative of the larger community’s distress.”

Danziger says, by way of preface that “G-d has seen fit to administer the world in a way that leaves room for less perceptive people to doubt the reality of His providence. Nevertheless, we rest assured that goodness will prevail and evil will be punished, secure in the knowledge that G-d will champion Israel’s cause and deliver us from our enemies.”

Soncino titles the Psalm a “Plea for Divine Judgment.” It says that “a state of moral chaos prevails in which justice is denied to those who need its protection most.” Additionally, it tells us that there are two possible candidates for the oppressed and oppressors in this Psalm. “According to one interpretation foreign nations are acting ruthlessly against Israel; others hold that lawless Israelites deal unjustly with their brethren.” I see where each point of view can find support in the psalm.

Rabbi Hirsch says that the psalm “dwells very much upon the present time, which is still fraught with strife and sorrow. It attempts, first of all, to check the despondency which takes hold of many as they behold the apparent success of evil, and which causes them to doubt G-d’s Providence.”

94 G-d of retribution, L-RD,
 G-d of retribution, appear!

The first verse is translated by R’ Hirsch as “O G-d, Champion of justice,” rather than retribution. HarperCollins and Oxford translates “O L-rd, you G-d of vengeance.” Each has a different flavor. Is it justice, or retribution that the Psalmist is requesting? The DavkaWriter translation feature says the word means vengeance or retribution.

Vengeance, says Soncino, is plural (vengeances) to make it more intense. Soncino then says that retribution is a better word, because it is not about vindictiveness, but rather them getting their deserved punishment for their crimes.

²Rise up, judge of the earth,
give the arrogant their deserts!

The Psalmist asks for the true Judge to give the arrogant what is due. But the next verse makes clear, to my mind, that it is more than just arrogance. It is wicked people who are arrogant.

Soncino amplifies this, saying that it is “men who vaunt themselves in their high station and use it ruthlessly.” Perhaps the people in power are the wicked here.

³How long shall the wicked, O L-RD,
how long shall the wicked exult,
⁴shall they utter insolent speech,
shall all evildoers vaunt themselves?
⁵They crush Your people, O L-RD,
they afflict Your very own;
⁶they kill the widow and the stranger;
they murder the fatherless,
⁷thinking, “The L-RD does not see it,
the G-d of Jacob does not pay heed.”

The wicked oppress the weakest, most vulnerable members of society and they do so as if G-d can't see them. But the Psalmist wishes to remind them that He does. It is just a matter of time, sooner would be better than later (“how long...?”). Verse 5 is likely the verse that those wanting to say it is about all of Israel latch onto first, since it says “your people.” On the other hand, the specifics mentioned add support to the argument that it is about those among Israel who oppress their brethren.

Soncino says that the Psalmist is not questioning G-d's ability to end the violence, but instead asking why He delays.

R' Hirsch says that they “speak their minds; they fear nothing and make no secret of what they thing and of what they intend to carry out.” He also says that “they not only abuse the Jewish people, whose ways are opposed to their own, but they also have little regard for the rights of the widows, the strangers, and the orphans in their own midst, for the simple reason that these victims of circumstance are unable to speak up for what should rightfully be theirs.”

Here, R' Danzinger notices that the world the wicked are using for HaShem is just the yud and hey, not the full tetraramaton. It is as if they are saying His power is diminished and He is not paying heed.

- ⁸Take heed, you most brutish people;
fools, when will you get wisdom?
⁹Shall He who implants the ear not hear,
He who forms the eye not see?
¹⁰Shall He who disciplines nations not punish,
He who instructs men in knowledge?
¹¹The L-RD knows the designs of men to be futile.

Here, the Psalmist seems to be speaking directly to those doing the oppressing, be it a nation or individuals. His is not powerless or imperceptive.

Verse 9 is a direct rebuttal of vs. 7. Verse 11 reminds me of a song in the NCSY bentcher, "Rabbot machshavot, b'lev ish, v'attat HaShem, he'takoom." which they translate "Many ideas pass through a man's heart, but the L-rd's plan will endure."

- ¹²Happy is the man whom You discipline, O L-RD,
the man You instruct in Your teaching,
¹³to give him tranquility in times of misfortune,
until a pit be dug for the wicked.
¹⁴For the L-RD will not forsake His people;
He will not abandon His very own.
¹⁵Judgment shall again accord with justice
and all the upright shall rally to it.

Here, the Psalmist seems to be saying that the Jewish people are fortunate, that we will not be forsaken. This works whether the oppressed are all Israel or only the vulnerable among the nation.

R' Hirsch says that even the evil that G-d "seems to tolerate" can be a source of discipline, "helping to strengthen his moral fiber and to ennoble him." This type of discipline, he argues, are only given to those who can use it to improve.

This reminds me of a story in the Talmud (Berachot 5a and b) from one of R' Berger's classes about a person who was ill. The rabbi speaks about suffering and sin (atonement) or suffering of love (to educate, not out of punishment), but then each gets ill. The suffering is not related to atonement. Each sick person is asked by his visitors "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" The answer was, in each case "Neither they nor their reward." The result was the visitor saying something similar to "Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him." Basically, fluffing his pillow and holding his hand, providing comfort. You can evaluate your actions, but another should only provide comfort. And no matter how pious the person, suffering is not welcome.

Also, in our davening, there is a prayer before we go to bed that asks that "whatever sins I have done before you, may You blot out in your abundant mercies, but not through

suffering or bad illnesses.” Clearly, no one wants the discipline of this nature that will cause suffering, even if growth may result.

¹⁶Who will take my part against evil men?
Who will stand up for me against wrongdoers?

¹⁷Were not the L-RD my help,
I should soon dwell in silence.

¹⁸When I think my foot has given way,
Your faithfulness, O L-RD, supports me.

¹⁹When I am filled with cares,
Your assurance soothes my soul.

Here, the plea is personal, to my mind. The Psalmist is among the oppressed, the wronged. He asks if HaShem will not stand up for him... that without His help, he would collapse, possibly even die. The Psalmist seeks comfort from G-d when he is troubled.

R' Hirsch sees this as a plea for the Jewish people against “tyranny.” Eventually, justice will prevail, but until that day, says R' Hirsch, “Israel will have to suffer at the hands of violent, evil men” and so we will always need His help to “remain firm in spirit and not to succumb to the blows of fate.” Without G-d’s help, we would cease to exist as a nation.

²⁰Shall the seat of injustice be Your partner,
that frames mischief by statute?

²¹They band together to do away with the righteous;
they condemn the innocent to death.

Here, he asks G-d to distance himself from apparent partnership with injustice due to His apparent silence in the face of those who join together to kill the innocent.

Soncino sees this as an attack on unjust rulers. These should be helping the downtrodden, but seek legal pretext to exploit them instead. The psalmist asks G-d to distance Himself from those who thus pervert laws.

²²But the L-RD is my haven;
my G-d is my sheltering rock.

²³He will make their evil recoil upon them,
annihilate them through their own wickedness;
the L-RD our G-d will annihilate them.

1

What is the answer, HaShem provides a haven and eventually He will deliver mida k'neget mida, destroying them with their own wickedness.

Soncino says that the evil which they sought to do will cause them to perish.

¹ Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures : A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997, c1985). Ps 94:1.