

Psalm 121

- 1 A song for ascents.
I turn my eyes to the mountains;
from where will my help come?
- 2 My help comes from the LORD,
maker of heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot give way;
your guardian will not slumber;
- 4 See, the guardian of Israel
neither slumbers nor sleeps!
- 5 The LORD is your guardian,
the LORD is your protection
at your right hand.
- 6 By day the sun will not strike you,
nor the moon by night.
- 7 The LORD will guard you from all harm;
He will guard your life.
- 8 The LORD will guard your going and coming
now and forever.

This well-known psalm raises some interesting theological questions that I have recently been thinking about. The first question comes from the first verse and arises because in Biblical Hebrew there are no punctuation marks that distinguish questions from statements. Therefore, some translations - like the JPS translation above - phrase this verse as a question, while others suggest it is a statement: "I turn my eyes to the mountains, from where my help comes." The difference in these two readings is substantial! Do we know where our help comes from or not? If we are looking toward the mountains, but we do not know why, is that not also troubling? If the second verse seems to have the answer to the question, why pose the question at all?

The protection assured by this psalm raises still other questions. If we find that we have stumbled, or that we have fallen victim to sunburn, what does that say about God's protective powers? If verse 4 must state God's sleeplessness so emphatically, then, surely, there must be reason to worry that God does sleep on the job.

The certainty and uncertainty of this psalm are supposed to be intertwined. We know, and we do not know; we are confident, and we are unsure. We feel protected, and yet we worry. These are not just words: these are an apt psychological analysis of all of us. Without some concrete and indisputable experience of God, we are always in doubt. It seems that this psalm encourages a blind confidence, and, as a rationalist, blind confidence bothers me. On the other hand, the reminder that both confidence and doubt are part of our psyche reminds me that if we can just harness them, they can both serve us well. We always need confidence in the face of doubt because otherwise the doubt is paralyzing. And we need a little healthy doubt in the face of confidence, so that we make sure to double-check ourselves. President Reagan's "Trust but Verify" is good wisdom; but so is its converse.

Shavua Tov