

## Psalm 13

For the leader. A psalm of David.

- 2 How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever?  
How long will You hide Your face from me?
- 3 How long will I have cares on my mind,  
grief in my heart all day?  
How long will my enemy have the upper hand?
- 4 Look at me, answer me, O Lord, my God!  
Restore the luster to my eyes,  
lest I sleep the sleep of death;
- 5 lest my enemy say, “I have overcome him,”  
my foes exult when I totter.
- 6 But I trust in Your faithfulness,  
my heart will exult in Your deliverance.  
I will sing to the Lord,  
for He has been good to me.

After looking at two more familiar psalms, I thought it would be nice to pull out one that we see less often – or maybe not at all. Despite its absence from our liturgy, it speaks to many people on a deep level. Where many people come to the Book of Psalms to find spiritual guidance or emotional uplift, in this psalm those readers often find an echo of what they are already feeling. Although Psalm 13 was written, probably, in response to a particular moment in the poet’s life, its imagery can reflect what is problematic or broken in all of our lives. And I am sure that – without being too depressing – there is something about our lives right now that we would want improved.

Among the 150 psalms are several categories or genres, and we can identify certain features of each category. Psalm 13 is a lament: it is a psalm in which the speaker describes a complaint and a wish for the situation to improve. Almost all of each lament is devoted to describing the problem. At the very end, though, there is a turn toward a hopeful tone, showing that the speaker understands what may fix that problem – or who.

Psalm 13 opens with four lines of poetry that all begin with the same phrase: “How long.” This repetition, or anaphora, serves to emphasize the plight of the speaker. While we are not able to identify with any certainty what the speaker’s situation is, the repetition of that phrase gives us the impression that it has been going on for a while without a remedy. As far as the speaker is concerned, the LORD would be the source of that remedy, but instead the LORD’s face is hidden.

The LORD’s lack of attention is directly related to the speaker’s problem: cares on his mind and enemies taking advantage or being exalted over him. For many of us, God as omniscient and omnipresent cannot really forget us or hide from us. But this is not a rational theological treatise; this is a description of experience. When we are in the

depths of anguish, we often cannot see in a rational way. We do not consult the logic of how we know things are supposed to be because, fundamentally, the world is *not* working correctly.

In verses 4-5, we see the petition. The speaker asks for God to pay attention to him. This would involve some sort of healing. We see this in the fear at the end of verse 4 that were things to continue as they are, the speaker would end up dead. The expression, luster of the eyes, seems in other situations to refer to physical strength; a restoration of that luster is the change he needs to avert the end he fears. Verse 5 describes the social reflex of his problem. The enemies would rejoice in his misfortune.

There is some interesting structure to this psalm. The problem is described in verses 2-3 and the petition is in verses 4-5. Each of these sections may be broken into three, however, and the three parts in the description of the problem connect to the three parts in the petition. The first of the three is the theological: God is turned away, but the speaker asks God to turn back around. The second is personal: the cares and grief, perhaps over illness, are on the mind of the speaker. He asks for these to be taken care of. Third is the social component: how he relates to his enemies. While it may seem that each of these aspects describe a different problem and a different request, I see them as all the same. In poetry, we often can describe the same issue in multiple dimensions: consider how ancient mythology uses fighting gods to describe issues that are of concern to humans. On the other hand, so many of our own concerns can be expressed – even without poetry – on multiple levels. Indeed, a person's health may impact her standing among her peers.

Many of life's situations seem to be cast as competitions between individuals: one succeeds where the other fails, and *vice versa*. Certainly, there are plenty of examples where that is the case: sporting events, elections, etc. There are many others, however, where the competition is only implicit. Sure, in applying for a job, there may be many candidates, each hoping the others will botch the interview! But in a workplace, there may be conflict between employees who compete for projects, promotions, or the like. These days, we even have competition over groceries, hoping that we can find that last can of beans on the shelf before the other person. We have encapsulated this idea in pithy expressions we use to teach, such as, "Only the strong survive." Is life really a zero-sum game in which the only way to succeed is for others to fail? I hope not, but it often seems that way.

Verse 6 marks the hopeful tone that we see in most laments. It does not, however, reflect an actual change in the situation. The exultation and the singing are not because God has already turned back toward the speaker and repaired whatever was wrong. They are not celebratory – yet. He trusts in God's faithfulness. This is God's *hesed*, the kindness, the acts of love that God does for us because we are in relationship, because we are family. God, like our human parents, does *hesed* for us regardless of whether we deserve it. We have a whole history to look back on for examples of this. We also know that many good things have happened to us in our lives – large and small – that were not responses to something good that we have done. We hope that this continues, not because we do not deserve good things, but because we do not *always* deserve good things.

The speaker still hopes for that restoration but is singing praise of God already. This seems to be something of a paradox: both in deep despair and full of praise. In one way, this only increases the anguish. How much worse is it that God does not respond when we call out so plaintively and sing God's praise? That the LORD was good to him should be reassuring that the LORD will continue to be good to him, but there is clearly some doubt about it this time. Think about those movie situations where a child in need is ignored by her parent: it really pulls our heartstrings.

Our speaker, however, maintains the confidence at the end of the poem. The singing and the exultation require a mustering of emotional will. But changing our attitude or our emotional place – even if only superficially – can change our fortune. “Fake it ‘til you make it” is a powerful piece of advice. In the same way that we are happy *because* we are smiling, our singing and exultation of God can – almost by themselves – change our situations.

Sure, there are plenty of problems that we cannot just wish away, but there are so many that we can change. Think, for example, about those situations in life that are unnecessarily competitive. Must they be so? Must we put someone else down in order for us to succeed? Must we see their success as a downfall on our part? This is as much a state of mind as the wishful thinking I am talking about: both are tremendously powerful. When we accept this, we can look back at our world and see not whom we need to push down for our own success, but how many of us all need uplifting. In that case, is it really God who is turning away? We are wonderfully privileged to live in a country of plenty, where there are more than enough resources for everyone – so long as everyone has access. Consider, for example, how much food goes to waste in a year while people are hungry. Having enough to eat should not be a competition.

We can change how we think in order to break the zero-sum attitude toward life. By changing that attitude and how we behave, we can help to repair our situation and the situations of millions of others. We pray during Aleinu for God to repair the world. Let us start doing it ourselves.