

5784 - Deuteronomy 33-34 – V'zot HaBerachah (This is the Blessing)

This is Rabbi David Fohrman ... welcome to *V'zot HaBerachah*.¹

So over these last couple of weeks we've been talking about Psalm 90 and I suggested to you that Psalm 90 resonates with this week's *Parsha*; *V'zot HaBerachah*.

The opening words of Psalm 90; (Moses, the man of G-d). The only time Moses is called that is in the beginning of *V'zot HaBerachah*. There were a number of other connections too. The theory that I'm going to sketch out to you is that Psalm 90 is a kind of portrayal of Moses almost in terms of what's going through his mind at the moment that he's blessing the people in *V'zot HaBerachah*. He's going to bless them and then ascend the mountain to die, to go up to G-d, and what gives him the strength to do that, to let go of his dream of taking the people into the land? He's able to do it because he looks back at a time not when he blessed the people but when he prayed for them in the aftermath of the Golden Calf. When he looks back on that sometimes he finds peace.

The Great Prayer of Moses

Let me begin this final leg in our journey through Psalm 90 by asking you a theological question. **Does man have the power to change the Divine plan for history?** If G-d has some sort of plan that's dear to His heart that He wants realized in human history, do we human beings have the influence the Almighty, to get Him to, so to speak, change His mind about how that plan comes about? **Is prayer powerful enough to do that?**

My own instincts on this matter would have been to say no, but that's before I read Psalm 90 carefully. What I want to suggest to you today is that **the answer to this question is in fact a resounding yes**, human beings can have that kind of almost unimaginable influence on nothing less than the way the Divine plan actually plays out in human history. **Where you see clear evidence of this, I think, is in how Psalm 90 portrays for us Moses' prayer to G-d in the aftermath of the Golden Calf, what that prayer was really all about and how G-d responded to it.**

Let me take you on a journey through this prayer, through this argument that Moses makes to G-d as Psalm 90 seems to articulate it.

Interpreting the Meaning of Psalm 90

The Psalm begins with the words ... G-d, You have been our habitation, our abode, the Being in whom we reside, from generation to generation, forever, going back all the way into the infinite recesses of time. So here in these first couple of verses we get this portrayal of G-d, the infinite Being,

the Master of all, who encompasses everything. But after this we hear about something very different, we hear about man, the finite, limited being, the being who dies ... You return us to the dust, G-d and in so doing You say in effect ... return O you children of men. In other words, **death is something of an impetus for us to get our affairs in order in this world**, without it we could procrastinate forever and forever and never get around to doing anything useful in our lives. Death really is G-d's way of saying ... return to Me, you children of men, live a good life, **you only get one chance**.

Okay, so right at the beginning of the Psalm we get the infinite nature of G-d and then we get the very finite and limited nature of human beings. Now the psalmist becomes interested in a problem, a kind of issue, which is **how do these two beings relate to one another, because they really are so very different**. One of the most striking differences between them perhaps is how each of them experiences time ... a thousand years G-d, in Your eyes, it's like yesterday. The flow of our whole life seems so long to us but it's like a dream, we die and then it just goes away. You see what's happening here? We're hearing about the contrast between the way You G-d, an infinite being, and us people, a finite being, experience everything. Existence might be permanent for You but not for us, a long time for us, it's a blink of an eye for You.

Okay, so now as the Psalm continues it's going to illustrate some problems that arise from this contrast. So, for example, let's talk about anger, G-d's anger at human misdeeds. So, G-d, what You might see as just a regular, ordinary display of justified anger, well guess what, we're more fragile than You are, we are consumed by Your anger, terrified by Your wrath. And, while we're at it, let's talk about how we each experience human failing. You see with us, you know we sin one day and the next day you move on, that's our human perspective, but You G-d, You're an infinite being, so You look at it differently.

You establish our sins before Your eyes ... our evil is illuminated by the eternal light of Your gaze. You see G-d, You're just too permanent a being for us, we do something in our finite realm and once it passes into Your infinite realm it's always there for You to look at and remember. When we committed the sin, we didn't experience it that way, we just did it and then we moved on. But that's not how You experience it, it's more permanent for You, after all in Your infinite world everything is permanent.

Therefore G-d, look where this gets us. There You are up in heaven and You're going to be angry and it will seem to You like You're angry for a reasonably short time, but for us it's our whole lives ... all of our days will pass in Your wrath, so is that really the way You want it to be, G-d, that our whole lifelong, 70, 80 years You were mad at us? Is this really how You want us to remember You? These are just the problems that come

¹ <https://members.alephbeta.org/video/psalm-of-moses-meaning/moses-psalm-90-commentary-study>

with the territory when an infinite being like You has to relate to finite, fragile beings like us.

Therefore G-d, Moses, as the psalmist portrays him, continues; I have some proposals I'd like to make. Here we get to the psalmist's paraphrase of Moses' final supplication at the Golden Calf. Return please ... how long do You really want to be angry for? Please change Your mind about Your servants, don't do away with them because of this terrible sin of the Calf. And if You do keep them around, as I request, then also don't allow Your anger at this sin to define Your relationship to generation after generation of Your servants.

If you really look at the language carefully here by the way, you'll see something very beautiful and subtle going on.

Moses Prays for Israel

The first verb in that line, *Return*, here it's something that Moses is asking G-d to do but earlier in the Psalm that same word got used differently. You see the first time around it was G-d who was saying "return" to mankind. Death was G-d's way of saying "return to Me." **You only get one chance you human beings, you better not mess it up.** Now Moses in a daring kind of way is actually taking G-d's words and turning them on their head. You know G-d if we only get one life around here, well then, it's not just us who should return, You should return too. As You Yourself said, **we only get one time around at this world**, it's all so fleeting our life, don't allow Your anger to define our whole experience of life. *Return please*, reconsider how You're relating to Your servants. Instead of just expressing anger ... satiate us with Your kindness G-d so that we can have some happiness in our lives.

Now we come to the Psalm's great, unexpected climax. Let Your work, let Your project be visible, be seen by Your servants—whatever this means, we'll explore it in a minute ... let Your pleasantness, let Your presence, descend upon us and establish the works of our hands. What does all this mean? What is the psalmist talking about here? Well, as it turns out, all of this language, it actually comes from somewhere; the psalmist is making one, last intertextual leap, bringing us back to one, last story in the Five Books of Moses. This time the story is the Song at the Sea after Pharaoh's chariots were destroyed by the waves.

Here, back in Psalm 90, look at these three elements which we just read ... the notion of G-d's works, what G-d has done, His project. Put that together with the idea of ... the works of one's hands being established. Take all of these three elements together, it's actually an echo of the very end of the Song at the Sea. After the song expresses thanks for the immediate triumph over the armies of Pharaoh it looks to the future and here's what it says. When You G-d, when You ultimately bring these people into the

land ... You're going to make a place for Yourself where You can reside ... this holy place G-d, You, Yourself, with Your hands, You will establish it. Those are the three words that get echoed again in Psalm 90. Psalm 90 is harking back to this, but why?

Well, if you think about the Song at the Sea it was actually painting a vision of the future that never came to be. The Song at the Sea suggested that the grand climax of the exodus from Egypt, when the people were going to be established in the land, was that after the people were established, G-d would establish a place for Himself. We call it the *Beit Hamikdash*—the Temple. Now if you think about the Song at the Sea and what it's really saying here, and you think about the construction of this place for G-d in this world, **what we're really talking about is the convergence of the finite and the infinite once more**, which has really been the whole theme of Psalm 90.

You see here was the plan that the Song at the Sea was talking about, the way history should have unfolded. **The infinite being was going to come into this finite world and make Himself a place that would have like an infinite quality to it. It would last, it would endure from generation to generation. That's Mikdash, G-d, that Your hands would build, You would establish it.** Do you see what's happening here? **G-d was supposed to make the Mikdash, that was the plan, but it's not what actually happened. The plan changed.** When did it change and why did it change?

God Answers Moses's Prayer

The psalmist tells you. **It changed because Moses asked G-d to change it.** He did that in the aftermath of the Golden Calf. The psalmist in Psalm number 90 takes all of those words from the end of the Song at the Sea and recombines them to form the end of the psalmist's elaboration of Moses' prayer. The words are the same but recombined they have an entirely different meaning ... G-d, allow us to see the realization of this grand, Divine, architectural project, but don't let it be something that You build ... we're going to make it for You. Let it be the works of our hands that You establish.

Moses is arguing that the Golden Calf changes everything. You might have had a nicer house G-d if You had built Yourself, but now, I have to ask You to settle for something else, allow us to be the ones to build Your home. Why? Why do You need to settle for that? It's the only solution to the problem I've been describing to You, G-d. Because we built something with our hands it only lasted a short time and it was destroyed, this terrible calf, but in Your eyes ... You see it in infinite time forever. It degrades our relationship with You. If that vision of the terrible thing we made will always infinitely be with You and I can't erase it from Your gaze, then I need to ask You to allow us to build something else with our own hands

that can be a counterweight to that vision in Your eyes. Give us the opportunity to make something else. Give us the opportunity to make something You love that You can always look at. Give us an opportunity to make a place for You and us. That was Moshe's plea.

So this is how it happened that we came to build the Tabernacle, and ultimately the Temple. It wasn't the original plan. Mere mortals would now build His house. It's an enduring testament to the unimaginable power of prayer.

I hope this series has given you a bit of an insight into what the study of the Book of Psalms can be like. It can illuminate the spiritual back-story of great, climactic events in the Torah in marvelous ways. As for Psalm 90, it in the end tells a story, it's the story of the "man of God" and his prayer. Back at the Golden Calf when Moses was first a man of G-d, **he had saved the people and he had done so by making a brazen request that G-d actually granted**, by asking G-d to let them build Him a home. And in so doing he not only saved the people, he allowed the relationship between G-d and the people to remain warm and vibrant.

Now in *V'zot HaBerachah* that man of G-d would part from the people, crossing into heaven even as they crossed into the land, but he would part from them knowing that his prayer was successful. The people arrayed as the stars of the heavens, they would endure and their relationship with G-d would endure too. It would not be dominated forever by the angry memories of the Calf, instead, G-d would bring this people into Israel, their home, and once there the people would make a home for the Master of the Universe Himself, the one who brought them there.

1. *Is prayer powerful enough to (change the Divine plan for history?) My own instincts on this matter would have been to say no, but that's before I read Psalm 90 carefully. What I want to suggest to you today is that the answer to this question is in fact a resounding yes, human beings can have that kind of almost unimaginable influence on nothing less than the way the Divine plan actually plays out in human history.*

a. Biblical prophecy regarding future events is not "history written in advance."

1) Jonah 3:1-5

¹Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah ... ²"Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." ³Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh ... ⁴Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "**Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.**" ⁵The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth ...

¹⁰When God saw what they did and how they turned from

their evil ways, **he relented** and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

b. 1Samuel 1:9-18

... ⁹Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the LORD's house. ¹⁰In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. ¹¹And she made a vow, saying, "LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

¹²As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth.

¹³Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was **drunk** ¹⁴and said to her ... "Put away your **wine.**" ¹⁵"Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking **wine or beer**; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. ¹⁶Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief." ¹⁷Eli answered, "Go in peace, and **may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.**" ¹⁸She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and **her face was no longer downcast.**

c. 1Chronicles 4:9-10

⁹Yavez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Yavez, saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." ¹⁰Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." **And God granted his request.**

d. Jeremiah 29:12-13

¹²Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

e. Psalm 69:33

³³The LORD hears the needy and does not despise his captive people.

f. James 5:16

¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. **The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.**

g. 1John 5:14

¹⁴This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

2. *Death really is G-d's way of saying ... return to Me, you children of men, live a good life, you only get one chance ... You only get one chance you*

human beings, you better not mess it up ... we only get one time around at this world.

a. 2Samuel 14:14

¹⁴Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die ...

b. Ecclesiastes 12:7

⁷and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

c. Hebrews 9:27

... ²⁷people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment ...

d. Job 33:28-30

²⁸God has delivered me from going down to the pit, and I shall live to enjoy the light of life.' ²⁹God does all these things to a person—twice, even three times—³⁰to turn them back from the pit, that the light of life may shine on them.

- 1) Reincarnation, a major tenet of Hinduism, is when the soul, which is seen as eternal and part of a spiritual realm, returns to the physical realm in a new body. The continuous cycle of reincarnation is called *samsara*—good intent and actions leads to a good future, bad intent and actions lead to a bad future, impacting how one reincarnates. **It is the way the “system” deals with the problem of evil since there is no deity who judges sin.**
- 2) In Judaism, the purpose of reincarnation is seen as a chance for a soul to **achieve a goal not achieved in a previous life** and as a chance to reward man for fulfilling the desires of his Creator. Reincarnation *has also been viewed* as a punishment for a sinner's previous deeds. For example, a rich man who abused his power may come back as poor.
- 3) **Although no overt reference is made in the scripture to the subject**, however the greatest Kabbalists—notably the Arizal² as quoted in the work *Shaar HaGilgulim* (Gate of Reincarnation), expound clearly its principles.³
 - a) Reincarnation is an esoteric belief within many streams of modern Judaism **but is not an essential tenet of traditional Judaism. It is not mentioned in classical sources such as the Hebrew Bible, the classical rabbinic works (Mishnah and**

2 Isaac ben Solomon Luria Ashkenazi (c. 1534–1572), commonly known ... as Arizal, was a leading rabbi and Jewish mystic in the community of Safed in the Galilee region of Ottoman Syria, now Israel. He is considered the father of contemporary Kabbalah, his teachings being referred to as Lurianic Kabbalah.

3 https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/361889/jewish/Reincarnation.htm

Talmud), or Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith. Kabbalah, however, teaches a belief in *gilgul*; hence, the belief is universal in Hasidic Judaism, which regards the Kabbalah as sacred and authoritative.⁴

3. *Okay, so right at the beginning of the Psalm we get the infinite nature of G-d and then we get the very finite and limited nature of human beings. Now the psalmist becomes interested in a problem, a kind of issue, which is how do these two beings relate to one another, because they really are so very different.*

a. John 17:20-26

²⁰My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, **just as you are in me and I am in you.** May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—²³**I in them and you in me**—so that they may be brought to complete unity ... ²⁵Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them **and that I myself may be in them.**"

4. *You see here was the plan that the Song at the Sea was talking about, the way history should have unfolded. The infinite being was going to come into this finite world and make Himself a place that would have like an infinite quality to it. It would last, it would endure from generation to generation.*

a. Exodus 25:8-9

⁸"Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. ⁹**Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.**

b. Acts 7:44

⁴⁴"Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, **according to the pattern he had seen.**

c. Hebrews 8:1-7 (CJB)

¹Here is the whole point of what we have been saying: we do have just such a *cohen gadol* as has been described. And he does sit at the right hand of *HaG'dulah* in heaven. ²There he serves in the Holy Place, that is, in the true Tent of Meeting, the one erected not by

4 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilgul#:~:text=Reincarnation%20is%20an%20esoteric%20belief,of%20the%20Ben%20Ish%20Hai>.

human beings but by *ADONAI*.³For every *cohen gadol* is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; so this *cohen gadol* too has to have something he can offer. ⁴Now if he were on earth, he wouldn't be a *cohen* at all, since there already are *cohanim* offering the gifts required by the *Torah*. ⁵But what **they are serving is only a copy and shadow of the heavenly original**; for when Moshe was about to erect the Tent, God warned him, "**See to it that you make everything according to the pattern you were shown on the mountain.**"⁶But now the work Yeshua has been given to do is far superior to theirs, just as the covenant he mediates is better. For this covenant has been given as *Torah* on the basis of better promises. ⁷Indeed, if the first covenant had not given ground for faultfinding, there would have been no need for a second one.

5. Now in *V'zot HaBerachah* that man of G-d would part from the people, crossing into heaven even as they crossed into the land, but he would part from them knowing that his prayer was successful.

a. Philippians 1:21-25

²¹For to me, to live is Messiah and **to die is gain**. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Messiah, which is better by far; ²⁴but **it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body**. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith ...