

Ashrei, the Great & Holy Psalm

Based on the Kabbalistic Commentary of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero

As Explained by Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

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*In beloved memory of Moshe Ben Chaim Alter (z"l),
dedicated by his son Mr. Michael Alter*

Long ago, our Sages recognized the great value of reciting Psalm 145 as a prayer of praise. So important is its meditative power that the Talmud (Berakhot 4b) records that one who recites it three times a day will receive great reward from Heaven. It has indeed become part of daily Jewish liturgy to be recited twice during the morning service and once during the afternoon service.

In traditional Jewish format, Psalm 145 is introduced by the verses, one from Psalm 84:5 and one from Psalm 144:15. These two verses set the tone to for recitation and all the meditative meanings and Kabbalistic secrets that the psalm contains.

One of the great Kabbalists of the Safed era was Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, also known the the RaMaK. In his commentary to the Jewish prayer-book (the Siddur) he enumerated many of the secrets about this holy Psalm. With the help of Heaven, we shall turn to his words for insights and elaborate on them to open up to us some of the secrets contained within Psalm 145.

May Heaven bless us to embrace these treasures and to put them into practice with our own daily recitations of this special Psalm, referred to in all Hebraic literature by the first word of the recitation, Ashrei.

RAMAK: "We have the tradition to recite prior to Tehilah L'David (Psalm 145) two verses, which begin with [the words] *Asrei Yoshvei Beiteykha*. This is because these verses speak about the high level of this Psalm and how reciting it enables the Shekhina to descend upon Israel. For they are essentially sitting within the Shekhina who is called "house." This is why the verse says, "Happy are those who dwell in Your house." And this is why it says, "I will dwell in the house of HaShem" to gaze upon the pleasantries of HaShem meaning (the contemplations of the sefirah) Binah and from there grasping it. And being that (this comes about through the recitation of) Psalms it comes and says, "They shall continue to praise You, Selah."



Psalm 84:5***Ashrei Yoshvei Beyteykha Ohd Y'hal'lukha Selah******Happy are those who dwell in Your house, they will praise You forevermore, Selah.***

The word “Ashrei” (happy) here signifies the sefirah Binah (understanding). For those who merit to acquire this achieve true happiness. “They will praise You forevermore” indicates the flow of spiritual radiance from (the sefirah) Binah to (the sefirah) Tiferet, from the source called the “Ancient Place” (the sefirah Keter).

Psalm 144:15***Ashrei HaAm SheKaKa Lo, Ashrei HaAm SheHaShem Elohav.******Happy in the nation for whom this is true. Happy is the nation that has HaShem as their G-d.***

RAMAK: “Happy they are from Binah and the Shekhina is called “Kak” (for whom). Happy they are also from the Keter in that they grasp the Holy Name Y-H-V-H for their G-d is the Shekhina. There is a secret in the recitation of Psalm 145. Each and every verse follows the order of the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse draws from Binah above and brings down Divine radiance to Tiferet below and from there to Malkhut.”

With these words and this sacred insight we begin our exploration of the great Psalm 145 traditionally referred to in Jewish circles by its first word Ashrei. Like Rabbis before him and after him, Rabbi Cordovero reveals to us an ancient Biblical secret. Psalms are not merely words of inspirational poetry. They are far more than this. Psalms were written in a meditative state by their respective authors, most notably David, King of Israel.

Psalms were more than pretty words, they are actually channeled literature whose very Hebrew structure reveals profound secrets about the order of the universe and the paths to be used in Biblical/Prophetic meditation that enable the mind of the reciter of these words to transcend the limits of this physical world and to ascend on high to gaze upon the Heavenly glory (Kavod HaShamayim).

Words are far more than mere sounds articulated by the mouth. Words are forms for thoughts. Words express the desires of the heart. As such words are merely vessels for what the mind contemplates and what the heart experiences. When merged together as one, mind, heart and word, we create a powerful tool that leads to the accomplishment of great deeds. This is the spiritual union (yichud) spoken of in Biblical and later Kabbalistic literature, wherein which the power of the soul unite with the power of the spirit to manifest and materialize through the power of word tremendous deeds.

In order to fully appreciate this, we will go step by step, verse by verse through the entire Psalm and these two introductory verses that were placed before it to be recited daily in Jewish liturgy. We will soon discover that we have a powerful tool for spiritual advancement in our hands. My prayer is that we shall all learn to use it and be inspired by it to do great things.

In his commentary to the opening two verses, RaMaK introduces us to a subtle movement of spiritual energy that occurs when these verses are recited. In Psalm 85:15, he states that the flow of spiritual radiance (shefa) is from Binah to Keter. And although it is not said, it is understood that the flow also returns from Keter to Binah. Binah is the first of the three domains (sefirot) of the mind. Binah is the rational intellect, the conscious mind. It is here that all prayer starts, for any prayers offered without thinking and without intent (kavana) is really no prayer at all.

This Psalm with these two introductory verses set the stage enabling our minds to mentally focus on a passage of spiritual energy (shefa). This will take us from our normal state of intellectual thought and into the highest of the sefirotic domains, Keter, which essentially lies deep within the realms of the unconscious. Although we can never be consciously aware of such a mental penetration, we can nevertheless acknowledge the concept and simply allow it to happen in our minds. This is the classical “surrender of self” (bitul hayesh) spoke of in Kabbalistic and later Hasidic literature.

Mental surrender is not something that can be physically done. It is rather a matter of the mind, wherein which the conscious intellect acknowledges the existence of a higher part of self. Although the higher self (neshama) is unknown and unknowable, nevertheless the conscious mind surrenders to the great unknown in the great act of faith (emunah). This act of surrender to one's higher-self enables one to connect with the Presence of G-d, the Shekhina.

Unconsciously, this contact is experienced with the greatest of joy. It is a home-coming for the soul. Although not consciously felt, this happiness deep inside the unconscious ascends somewhat to conscious attention. For some reason, unknown and unexplainable, the individual begins to feel a sense that everything really is alright with the world. The mind begins to relax and is enabled to feel some type of sensation as the remainder of the Psalm is recited. This is RaMaK's meaning when he recited that, *“Each verse draws from Binah above and brings down Divine radiance to Tiferet below and from there to Malkhut.”*

Binah is the mind. Tiferet is the heart. Malkhut is the body. Binah touches the great unknowable source of Keter and channels that unconscious insight through itself and down into the heart, the set of the emotions. On the Sefirotic Tree of Life, Keter and Tiferet are both in the center column. Keter is directly above Tiferet. Therefore, Keter naturally flows into Tiferet. However, here we first detour the flow into Binah, and why? Because the unconscious Keter cannot be understood directly by Tiferet. If Tiferet were to receive the direct flow from Keter, it would not be perceived or recognized. As the Kabbalah teaches, its light would remain concealed inside the vessel. The detour through Binah therefore becomes essential as this is the process and path of actual intellectual awakening.

These two verses recited before the Psalm itself therefore set the stage for that which is to follow. Each verse of Psalm 145 is constructed to perform this dual flow of energy. First Binah ascends into Keter and establishes there a link. Through this simple mental act of surrender to the higher unknown, an unknowable spark of that unknown comes back down into Binah. This “unknown” is experienced as a conscious acknowledgment of the process the mind is now performing. With this acknowledgment in mind, next is aroused the slightest emotional awareness that everything is really good. This inner sense of peace is experienced when Binah (mind) flows into Tiferet (heart).

What was concealed in the mind is now experienced in the heart. Now, with an emotional spark, one continues to act upon this charge through the remained of one's day after prayer is completed. This is the channeling of Tiferet into Malkhut. We essentially transform the spark of Keter into proper action and behavior here in the physical world. Thus we are indeed “happy” knowing that we are doing the right things. And by doing such right things, we are indeed “the people of HaShem.”

With the help of Heaven, we shall continue in this series in the lessons to follow.