



Waiting for God: Expressing Frustration in Prayer

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Where is God in my life and why am I stuck in a difficult place? Will God ever intervene on my behalf, and help me—and all of us—come to a better place? What if I am skeptical if God can rescue at all? These are questions so often on the mind of those who pray. How do our prayer texts themselves give voice to some of these wonderings?

In the middle of Ya'akov's blessing to his children (between Dan and Gad), he interjects the following:

Genesis 49:18

I hope for Your salvation, O YHVH!

בראשית מט:יח

לישועתך קויתי ה':

Ya'akov, who was addressing his children, turns to speak directly to God, saying how he hopes for God's rescue (ישועה). The word קויתי is often translated as “I hope,” from the same root as the word “*tikvah* - hope.”¹ But it also means: “I wait.” Ya'akov says: I am waiting for your

¹ See, for instance, Jeremiah 31:16; Proverbs 11; Lamentations 3:29.



rescue, O God.² Hope is really an orientation toward waiting, emphasizing what is possible, but not yet here. At the end of the day, though, Ya'akov remains waiting, perhaps impatiently, for God's salvation.

Why does Ya'akov recite this line in between his blessing of Dan and Gad? One midrashic tradition has Ya'akov looking forward in time (which explains how his blessings of his children contain insights based on the future). As he watches the story of Dan's descendants, he sees the heroic and destructive final act of Shimshon, who kills himself along with many Philistines. Ya'akov's response to seeing this is to cry out to God for salvation.³

One version of this midrashic tradition indicates that Ya'akov had hoped that Shimshon was the final redeemer. Shimshon seemed invincible to Ya'akov. But once Ya'akov saw Shimshon die, his hopes were dashed:

Bereishit Rabbah 99:14, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1265

Ya'akov our father saw [Shimshon] and thought that he was the King Messiah. When he saw him die, he said: Even this one has died. "I wait for Your salvation, O YHVH!" (Genesis 49:18)

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) כ"ט צט

...היה אבינו יעקב רואה אותו וסבור בו שהוא המלך המשיח, כיון שראה אותו שמת אמר אף זה מת לישועתך קויתי ה'

The context of this interjection is one in which Ya'akov thought he had seen the end of suffering, and the new world emerging. Alas, he was wrong, and he blurts out: "I am still

² Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2019), vol. 1, p. 196, translates this verse as: "Your deliverance I await, O Lord." See also Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), vol. 2, p. 1082, who lists our verse as an example of "to wait for something."

³ Bereishit Rabbah 99:11, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1282; Aggadat Bereishit 83, ed. Buber, p. 161-2, ed. Kahalani, p. 658.



waiting for Your salvation, God.” There is a tinge of frustration and disappointment in Ya’akov’s words.

We recite a version of the line “I wait for Your salvation, O YHVH,” in the 15th blessing of the daily Amidah, which is a plea for the return of God’s Messiah, a descendant of David (not Dan):⁴

The sprout of David Your servant may You speedily sprout

את צמח דוד עבדך מהרה תצמיח

And his horn may You raise through Your salvation

וקרנו תרום בישועתך

For Your salvation we hope for all the day.

כי לישועתך קיינו כל היום

Blessed are You, YHVH, who sprouts the horn of salvation.

ברוך אתה ה' מצמיח קרן ישועה

The beginning of this blessing is focused on a particular human savior. But when we get to the middle of the blessing, we turn our attention to God’s direct salvation, not that of a human messenger. It is, perhaps, a brief enactment of the midrash’s understanding of Ya’akov’s experience—hoping in a person (Shimshon), but then being disappointed and turning focus toward God alone.⁵ Sometimes prayer is about recalibrating our hopes, and returning to God as the ultimate savior.

But what can we do with our frustrations? After all, we have been waiting so long and have seen many potential saviors like Shimshon come and go. There have been so many times when God could have brought final salvation but didn’t. How might we give expression to the

⁴ The link of Genesis 49:18 to this blessing is noted by R”I bar Yakar, ed. Yerushalmi, p. 57 and R. David Abudraham, ed. Braun, p. 230.

⁵ Uri Ehrlich, *Tefilat Ha-Amidah shel Yemot Ha-Hol* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2013), p. 205, n. 17, raises the possibility that the phrase **כי לישועתך קיינו כל היום**, which does not appear in older versions of the blessing, was added in order to emphasize that salvation comes from God, and not from David (or his descendent) alone.



difficulty of waiting in the words of prayer? The simple phrase “כל היום - all the day,” which is connected in our blessing to the phrase from Genesis 49:18, offers an answer.⁶

The phrase כל היום appears 48 times in the Tanakh. But for many of these, the use of כל היום is not just an indication of time (“all day long”), but also a sign of intense suffering and abandonment by God.⁷ Take, for example, these verses from Psalms:

Psalm 42:4,11

תהלים מב:ד,יא

My tears have been my food day and night; I am taunted **all the day** with, “Where is your God?”...

הִיִּתְהַלֵּלִי דִמְעוֹתַי לֶחֶם יוֹמָם וּלְלַיְלָה בְּאֶמֶר אֱלֹהֵי כָל־הַיּוֹם
אֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים יִקְרָא:....

Crushing my bones, my foes revile me, taunting me **all the day** with, “Where is your God?”

בְּרֹצַח | בְּעֲצֻמוֹתַי חֲרָפוּנִי צוֹרְרֵי בְּאֶמְרָם אֱלֹהֵי כָל־הַיּוֹם
אֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים יִקְרָא:

Psalm 44:16,23

תהלים מד:טז,כג

I am **all the day** aware of my disgrace; I am wholly covered with shame...

כָּל־הַיּוֹם כָּל־מַתִּי נִגְדִי וּבִשְׁת פְּנֵי
כִסְתִּנִּי:....

It is for Your sake that we are slain **all the day**, that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

כִּי־עָלֶיךָ הִרְגָנוּ כָּל־הַיּוֹם נַחֲשָׁבְנוּ כְצֹאן
טִבְחָה:

In these selections, the speaker cries out to God that his shame occurs “all the day” (כל היום) because God has not intervened to bring salvation. Day and night the Psalmist cries because his enemies mock him “all the day,” saying, “Where is your God?” (42:4,11). The Jewish people have been murdered “all the day” (44:23), a consequence of God’s failure to intervene. In fact, in Psalm 44, this verse is followed by an outburst calling on God to awake and

⁶ Although note Psalm 25:5, also cited by R”I bar Yakar, in which the elements of תקוה, ישועה, and כל היום are all present.

⁷ In addition to the selections from the two Psalms below, see Jeremiah 20:7-8; Psalm 38:13; 56:6; 74:22; 88:18; 102:9; Lamentations 1:13; 3:3,14,62.

intervene: “Rouse Yourself; why do You sleep, O Lord? Awaken, do not reject us forever! Why do You hide Your face, ignoring our affliction and distress?” (44:24-25). The frustration boils over.⁸

In some ways, then, the addition of כל היום in our blessing to the phrase, “we hope for Your salvation,” is a subtle reminder to God that all the days in which God does not come, we are suffering due to God’s inaction. We pay a price while we wait. Perhaps it is a goad to God to bring salvation, since our suffering has lasted “all the day.”

I want to acknowledge the difficulty of a stance in prayer that expects that God will eventually save us, even after all we have been through as a people. For me, on a rational level, waiting for this salvation feels absurd. For some, then, this blessing may be a reminder about the fleeting nature of human power. Ya’akov believes that Shimshon, a human being, will solve all the world’s problems and bring deliverance. But those hopes are dashed when his power dissipates.⁹ How often do we trust in certain humans to solve our issues only to be reminded of the folly of this stance. Ya’akov’s refocusing away from human salvation is an important model for us, even if the possibility of a God who saves sounds just as misguided.

And yet, if I am honest with myself, I still hope—and wait—for God’s deliverance. Indeed, I pray for it actively. This may not be theologically or historically defensible, but it is expressive of my emotional state in prayer. I find myself gravitating toward a stance of: “Why do You hide

⁸ As noted by Brevard Childs: “The formulation of obedient worship as ‘waiting for God’... denotes an attitude of eager expectancy of God’s promised salvation. Particularly in the Psalter, part of the worshipper’s intense sorrow lies in the perceived failure of its realization.” Brevard Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2001), p. 185.

⁹ See Sekhel Tov to Genesis 49:18, ed. Buber, p. 317: “...כיון שנסתכל יעקב אבינו שישועתו של זה ישועה עוברת היא... אמר לא לישועתו של זה אני מקוה, אלא לישעתך ה' קיויתי - When Yaakov our father saw that the saving power of this one [Shimshon] was fleeting... he said: Not for the salvation of this one do I wait, rather ‘For Your salvation, YHVH, I await.’”





Your face?” instead of completely giving up on the possibility of salvation. For me, moments of prayer can transcend the rational critique of an active God. In fact, hoping and praying are synonymous activities,¹⁰ and just as hoping does not always align with rational thinking, praying also is not ultimately limited by our rational beliefs.

Sometimes prayer is about thanking God for the blessings in our lives. But sometimes it is an opportunity to express our frustration at God’s inaction. Although subtle, this blessing makes room for some of that emotion. And I continue to wait—and hope—for God’s rescue, even as the waiting is sometimes excruciating.

¹⁰ Midrash Tehillim 25:7, ed. Buber, p. 106b, equates “קויתי - I hope” with “להתפלל - to pray.”

