**A Song of David for the Dedication of the House**

**Rav Yehuda Shaviv**

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**A House of God**

Two people vowed to build a house for God: David and Ya’akov. Of David it is stated:

A song of ascents: God, remember for David all his affliction; how he swore to God and **vowed to the mighty one of Ya’akov:** “Surely I will not come into the tent of my house, nor go up into the bed that is spread for me; I will not give sleep to my eyes, nor slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for God, a dwelling for the mighty one of Ya’akov.” (*Tehillim* 132:1–5)

David’s forefather Ya’akov likewise vowed in Beit El: “And this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be a house of God” (*Bereishit* 28:22). This may shed light on David’s particular choice of words: “Vowed to the mighty one of Ya’akov.” Ya’akov was the first to coin that awesome phrase “house of God” (*Bereishit* 28:17), which, had Ya’akov himself not said it and had the Torah not recorded it, we never would have dared utter.

“A house of God”?! He fills the heavens and the earth; He surrounds and suffuses all worlds! Even Shlomo wondered on the day he dedicated that house: “But will God truly dwell on the earth? Behold, the heavens and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You; how much less this house that I have built” (*Melakhim* I 8:27).

David, moved by his heart’s deepest desires, vows to build such a house. However, God does not allow him to do so, sending him Natan the prophet to explain why:

You will not build Me a house to dwell in, for I have not dwelt in a house since the day that I brought up Israel until this day, but have gone from tent to tent and from tabernacle… And now, this you shall say to My servant David… I will appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, and they will dwell within it and be agitated no more; and children of wickedness will no longer waste them as at first… and I will subdue all your enemies, and I will tell you, **and God will build you a house.** And it will be when your days are completed to go be with your fathers, and I will set up your seed after you from your sons, and I will establish his kingdom. **He shall build Me a house,** and I will establish his throne forever. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 17:4–12)

What is contained in this message from God?

Only after God builds a house for man may man build a house for God. A house for God is the final stage; beforehand, man must establish himself, find peace and a sense of equanimity.

David himself did not even consider building such a house until God had delivered him from all of the enemies surrounding him (*Shmuel* II 7:1). From here the Talmud derives a rule that eradicating the seed of Amalek takes precedence over building the Temple (*Sanhedrin* 20b). This law is understood to be alluded to in the verses: “And He will give you rest from all your enemies round about… And it will be that the place that the Lord your God will choose to cause His name to dwell there” (*Devarim* 12:10–11).

But why is this the case?

It is so that man will never even entertain the notion that he is the one elevating God by creating a house for Him on earth. Believing that God needs man to build Him a home is not far from idolatry, in which man is the creator and sustainer of the idol, reflecting a kind of symbiosis between man and god.

Therefore, it is only after God provides for all of man’s needs, and man realizes how fully dependent he is on God, that man may build a house of God. This is what Ya’akov vowed to do:

If God will be with me, and will keep me on this way that I go, and give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and I return in peace to my father’s home… this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be a house of God… (*Bereishit* 28:20–22)

Now we can begin to understand the relationship between Psalm 30, which begins: “A song of David for the dedication of the House,” and the building of the Temple. In this psalm David recalls being at the gates of the netherworld, and he sings God’s praises and thanks Him for lifting him back up. Now he feels more acutely his dependence on God: “God, by Your will You have established my mountain as a stronghold; when You hid Your face, I was frightened.” He is imbued with a sense of “[my] life is at His will.” At this point, he feels that he is able to find “a place for God, a dwelling for the mighty one of Ya’akov.” This psalm of dependence is a song of dedication.

This song of praise and thanksgiving, of gratitude for being saved from annihilation, accompanies the inauguration of the Temple and is preserved for posterity:

Rabbi Pinchas and Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Yochanan say in the name of Rabbi Menachem of the Galilee: In the future all of these offerings will be abolished, but the thanksgiving-offering will never be abolished. All other expressions of thanks will be abolished, but the thanksgiving-offering will never be abolished. (*Tanchuma*, *Emor* 14)

This is expressed in the psalm: “So that glory may sing praise to You **and not be silent;** Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you **forever.**”

**“I exalt You, God, for You have lifted me up”**

The first stanza of the medieval hymn *Ma’oz Tzur* concludes: “So I will complete a song of dedication for the altar.” This is in accordance with the statement of the *Tur*:

For every occasion one recites a different psalm based on its content, such as *Barkhi Nafshi* [Psalm 104] on *Rosh Chodesh*, “As the deer longs for streams of water” [Psalm 42] on the intermediate days of Festivals, and “A song of David for the dedication of the House” [Psalm 30] on Chanuka. (*Tur* OC 133)

Why is this psalm read on Chanuka? The *Perisha* writes: “Because the dedication of the Temple was on Chanuka.” The *Or Zaru’a* explains that he is referring to the rededication of the altar in the time of the Hasmoneans.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Tractate *Soferim* (ch. 18) lists the psalms recited at various times of year. It states that on Chanuka, the psalm “I exalt You, God, [for You have lifted me up]” is recited. This emphasis of the second verse of the psalm as opposed to its title – “A song of David for the dedication of [*chanukat*] the House” – raises the question: Is there a relationship between Chanuka and the content of this psalm, aside from its title?

The festival of Chanuka commemorates the victory of the Torah over the philosophy and culture of Greece. One of the hallmarks of Greek culture is the tragedy: a cruel fate imposed upon man, who cannot escape it. In this psalm, by contrast, man is rescued from the gates of the netherworld. Even after his fate has apparently been sealed and the sentence carried out, hope is not yet lost; the gates of supplication are never closed.

Greek philosophy does not acknowledge the renewal of the world; rather, it views the world as existing in stasis. As it is now, so it has always been, and so it will always be. There is no room for repair or true change, let alone purpose – for that which lacks a beginning must certainly lack an end. Perhaps this is the notion that one embraces in more complacent moments: “And I had said in my equanimity: I shall never be shaken” (*Tehillim* 30:7). But when God conceals Himself for an instant, man panics, reminded that his life is entirely contingent on God’s grace. Night turns to morning, and renewal. Even at one’s loftiest moment, one is nevertheless completely reliant on God – “for You have lifted me up.” This sense of complete dependence – the necessary condition for building and dedicating the Temple – is the focal point of the struggle between the Hasmoneans and the Hellenists.

**Chanuka – Establishing the Eternal**

The *midrash* states:

[David] said to [God]: Why am I not the one to build it? God said to him: If you were to build it, it would stand and never be destroyed. (*Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shmuel* II, 145)

David embodies the spirit of eternity. “David, king of Israel, lives and endures” (*Rosh Hashana* 25a); so too, his endeavors remain forever. This is why the psalm is named for him, as it, too, is eternal. The house built by Shlomo was destroyed, but David’s dedication of the House remains forever.

Like the psalm of dedication, the festival of Chanuka is an eternal remnant of the devastated Temple:

“And it was on the day that Moshe completed… and the princes of Israel brought offerings”; and then: “Speak to Aharon… when you bring up the lamps”… You find earlier that eleven tribes brought offerings… but Aharon had not brought offerings with the princes, and he would say: Woe is me; is it on my account that God does not accept the tribe of Levi? God said the Moshe: Go tell Aharon: do not fear, for you are ordained for greater things… The offerings are brought only while the Temple stands, but the lamps will forever “give light before the *Menora*.” (*Bamidbar Rabba* 15:5)

This *midrash* brings to light that even after the Temple has been destroyed and the offerings are no longer sacrificed, the lamps nevertheless continue to burn. The Ramban raises a question on this point:

But it is known that when the Temple is not standing, and the offerings have ceased due to its destruction, the lamps are no longer lit either! (Ramban on *Bamidbar* 8:2)

Therefore, he explains:

But they are alluding to none other than the lamps of the Hasmoneans, which are lit even after the destruction, in our exile.

Chanuka involves the establishment of the eternal. It is never abolished; its light draws from that of the future Messiah. By reciting this psalm on Chanuka, we fulfill the statement of our Sages:

If one recites a verse at its proper time, he is considered to have built a new altar and brought an offering upon it. (*Soferim* 18a)

May we merit the dedication of the altar.

1. In fact, Rabbi Ya’akov Emden, in his book *Lechem Shamayim*, explains that he is referring to the dedication of the Second Temple, as the prophet Chaggai calls the twenty-fifth of Kislev “the day on which the Temple of God was established” (*Chaggai* 2:18). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)