



V'ZOT HABRACHA: MOSES' FAREWELL TO ISRAEL (PART III)

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat V'Zot Habracha!

If you haven't yet read *Vayeilech: Moses' Farewell to Israel (Part I)* and *Ha'azinu: Moses' Farewell to Israel (Part II)*, now's the time to take a look. The material in this guide builds upon them.

Let's begin this final leg in our journey through Psalm 90 by asking a theological question: do we have the power to change God's plan for history? In other words, if God has some sort of plan that needs to be realized in human history — is it possible for us to influence the Almighty, to change God's mind, so to speak, about how that plan comes about? Is prayer powerful enough to do that?

Our own instincts would have been to say 'no' — but that was before we read Psalm 90 carefully. Now, our answer to this question is a resounding 'yes': human beings *can* have this kind of almost-unimaginable influence on how God's plan for the world plays out in human history. We think that Psalm 90 offers us clear evidence of this.

Let us take you on a journey through that psalm. First, we'll try to understand the larger story that the psalm is telling. At the end, we'll circle back to this grand theological question and grapple, together, with the psalm's shocking implications.

Interpreting Psalm 90

The psalm begins with the words:

Psalms 90:1-3

תַּפְּלָה, לְמֹשֶׁה אִישׁ-הָאֱלֹקִים: אֶ-דְּנִי--מֵעוֹן אֲתָהּ, הַיֵּית לָנוּ; בְּדֹר וָדֹר. בְּטָרֶם, הָרִים יִלְדוּ--וַתַּחֲוֶלֶל אֶרֶץ וַתִּבֵּל; וּמֵעוֹלָם עַד-עוֹלָם, אֲתָהּ קַל. תֵּשֵׁב אָנוּשׁ,
עַד-יָבֵא; וַתֹּאמֶר, שׁוּבוּ בְנֵי-אָדָם.

A Prayer of Moses the man of God. Lord, You have been our dwelling-place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, and the foundations of the earth were formed, from before all time, You are God. You return man to dust; and say: 'Return, children of men.'

What are these verses all about?



INSTRUCTIONS

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life's biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That's why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we'll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

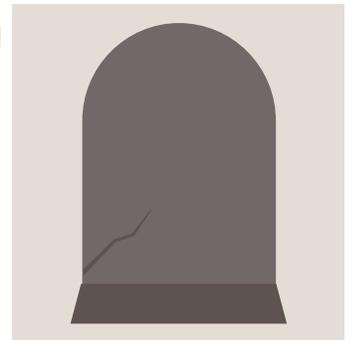
Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you're planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the "Source Sheet" for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, "Moses's Psalm – A Paradigm Of God Answering Prayer (Part 3)" (available for viewing at www.alephbeta.org). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

There really seem to be two distinct themes expressed here – and they're in tension with one another. At the start, the psalmist offers us a portrayal of God as the Infinite and Eternal Being, the Master of All. But at the end of this little excerpt, we hear about something quite different: about human beings, and how they are finite, limited, and mortal. About how we "return to dust" at the end of our lives. The psalmist seems to be saying that death is something of an impetus for us to get our affairs in order in this world, that without it, we would procrastinate forever and never get around to doing anything useful with our lives. Death is really God's way of saying: *Return to Me, you human beings, and live your life well – because you only get one chance.* The takeaway seems to be that there's a fundamental tension between the nature of God's existence and the nature of ours: God is eternal, while we are ephemeral.



Indeed, one of the most striking differences between God and humanity is how each experiences *time* – and that is precisely what the psalmist goes on to expound in the next set of verses:

Psalms 90:4-6

כִּי אֶלֶף שָׁנִים, בְּעֵינֶיךָ-- כִּיּוֹם אֶתְמוּל, כִּי יַעֲבֹר; וְאַשְׁמוּרָה בְּלִילָהּ. זְרֻמָּתָם, שָׁנָה יְהִיוּ; בַּבֹּקֶר, כְּחֹצֵר יִחְלֹף. בַּבֹּקֶר יֵצֵא וְחָלַף; לָעֶרֶב, יִמוּלֵל וְיָבֵשׁ.

For a thousand years are in Your eyes like yesterday, which passed, and a watch in the night. You carry them away as a flood; they are like a sleep; in the morning, like grass it passes away. In the morning, it blossoms and passes away; in the evening, it is cut off and withers.

The years of our lives feel so long, but it's like a dream: when we die, it all fades away. What feels like an eternity to us is merely the blink of God's eye. That's because God is *permanent*; God's existence spans eternity.

God v. Humankind

In this sense (and in so many others!), God and humankind are fundamentally different – and this tension between God’s infinitude and humankind’s finitude gives rise to the question: how can we bridge the chiasm that separates us and relate to God? For when we do try to reach out to God, or God to us, some real problems start to occur – and that is precisely what the psalmist goes on to explore in the next set of verses:



Psalms 90:7

כִּי-כָלֵינוּ בְּאַפְךָ; וּבַחֲמַתְךָ נִבְהָלֵנוּ.

For we are consumed by Your wrath, and from Your anger we are dismayed.

The problem that the psalmist seems to be raising here is: what if we sin, and God gets angry? How could we, finite beings, possibly be able to weather the *anger* of an infinite God? We’d be *consumed* by such anger. God might see the reaction as a justified display of anger – but we human beings are so fragile.

And while we’re at it, let’s talk about how we each *experience* that moment of human failing – because there’s a big difference depending on whether you’re looking at it from *our* perspective or *God’s* perspective. From our perspective, we sin one day – but the next day, we move on. But God is an infinite being. God looks at it differently. As the psalmist says in the very next verse:

Psalms 90:8

שֵׁת (שֵׁתָה) עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ לְנֶגְדְךָ; עֲלֵמֵנוּ, לְמֵאוֹר פְּנֶיךָ.

You have placed our iniquities before You, [the sins of] our youth [are illuminated] by the light of Your eternal gaze.

Our sin is always there for God to look at and remember. For us, the sin is in the past. But for God, there’s something quite permanent about it.

So where does that get us? The psalmist continues:

Psalms 90:9

כִּי כָל-יְמֵינוּ, פָּנוּ בְּעִבְרַתְךָ; כָּלֵינוּ שְׁנֵינוּ כְּמוֹ-הַגֶּהֱ.

For all our days have passed away in Your anger; we have consumed our years as a murmur.

God, the psalmist seems to say in this verse, there You are, up in Heaven, and You’re going to be angry at us, and it will seem to You like you’re angry for a reasonably short time – but for us, it’s our whole lives. God, is that really the way that You want it to be? Is this really how You want us to remember You? For these are the problems that come with the territory when an infinite being like You has to relate to finite, fragile beings like us.

Don't Be Angry Forever

Now, at this point in the psalm, remember that Psalm 90 is a *tefillah l'Moshe*, a “prayer of Moses.” As we attempted to show in Parts I and II of this essay, this whole psalm – this whole discussion of God’s infinitude and our finitude – is an attempt by the psalmist to imagine the kinds of things that Moses might have once said to God. Well, in the very next verse, it stops being hypothetical – because the next thing that we’ll see is the psalmist’s *paraphrase* of something that Moses did once say, as recorded in the Book of Exodus – in his prayer at the Golden Calf:¹

Psalms 90:13

שׁוּבָה יְקוּה, עַד-מָתַי; וְהִנַּחֵם, עַל-עֲבֹדֶיךָ.

Return, O Lord, for how long [do You really want to be angry]? And change Your mind about Your servants.

What is Moses, as interpreted by the psalmist, saying here?



Don't destroy the entire people because of this terrible sin of the Calf. And if You do allow them to survive, as I am begging You to, then please don't punish them forever. Don't allow Your anger to define Your relationship to generation after generation of Your servants.

In fact, if you look carefully at the language here, you’ll see something very beautiful and subtle going on. Moses implores God to “return”... but earlier in the psalm, that same word appeared, although the meaning was very different. The first time around, it was *God* who was saying “Return!” to us:

Psalms 90:13

תָּשֵׁב אֱנוֹשׁ, עַד-דָּכָא; וְתֹאמַר, שׁוּבוּ בְנֵי-אָדָם.

You return man to dust; and say: ‘Return, children of men.’

God was saying: *Human beings, you are mortal, you only get one chance to live your lives right, so live them with care.* But now Moses, in a daring kind of way, is actually taking God’s words and turning them on their head, saying: *You know, God, if we only get one life in this world, then it’s not just us who should return. You should return, too. After all, our lives are fleeting, and it would be a tragedy if You were angry at us for all 120 of our years in this world. Please reconsider. Don’t be angry.*

¹ As we pointed out in Part I of this essay, this seems to be a paraphrase of Moses’ actual prayer, as the Book of Exodus records it, at the Golden Calf: שׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפֶּיךָ, וְהִנַּחֵם עַל-הַרְעָה לְעַמְּךָ, “Return from Your fierce wrath, and change your mind about this evil that You’ve decreed against Your people” (Exodus 32:12).

One Final Allusion

That bring us to the psalm's great and unexpected climax:

Psalms 90:16-17

יִרְאֶה אֶל-עַבְדֶּיךָ פְּעֻלָּךְ; וְהִדְרָךְ, עַל-בְּנֵיהֶם. וַיְהִי, נֹעַם אֶ-דְּנִי אֶלְקִינוּ--עֲלֵינוּ; וּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ, בּוֹנְנָה עֲלֵינוּ; וּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ, בּוֹנְנָהוּ.

May Your works appear to Your servants, and Your beauty to their sons. And may the pleasantness of the Lord our God be upon us, and the work of our hands establish for us, and the work of our hands establish it.

What is the psalmist talking about here? What does this all mean? As it turns out, all of this language actually comes from somewhere else. The psalmist is making one, last intertextual leap, bringing us back to one other story in the Five Books of Moses. This time, it's from the Song at the Sea – the song of praise and gratitude that the people sang after Pharaoh's chariots were destroyed by the waves. Take a look at this excerpt from that song and you'll hear the echoes:



Exodus 15:17

תְּבַאֲמוּ, וְתִטְעֲמוּ בְהַר נְחֻלְתְּךָ--מִכּוֹן לְשִׁבְתְּךָ פְּעֻלָּתְךָ, יְקוּה; מִקְדָּשׁ, אֶ-דְּנִי בּוֹנְנוּ יְדִידְךָ.

You shall bring them and plant them on the mount of Your heritage, and **You will make** a place where You can reside, and this holy place, God - with **Your hands You will establish it.**

You can see that the same three words feature prominently in both verses:

<p>יִרְאֶה אֶל-עַבְדֶּיךָ פְּעֻלָּךְ; וְהִדְרָךְ, עַל-בְּנֵיהֶם. וַיְהִי, נֹעַם אֶ-דְּנִי אֶלְקִינוּ--עֲלֵינוּ; וּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ, בּוֹנְנָה עֲלֵינוּ; וּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ, בּוֹנְנָהוּ.</p>	<p>work/making - פֻּעַל</p>	<p>תְּבַאֲמוּ, וְתִטְעֲמוּ בְהַר נְחֻלְתְּךָ--מִכּוֹן לְשִׁבְתְּךָ פְּעֻלָּתְךָ, יְקוּה; מִקְדָּשׁ, אֶ-דְּנִי בּוֹנְנוּ יְדִידְךָ.</p>
<p>May Your works appear to Your servants, and Your beauty to their sons. And may the pleasantness of the Lord our God be upon us, and the work of our hands establish for us, and the work of</p>	<p>establish - בּוֹנֵן</p>	<p>You shall bring them and plant them on the mount of Your heritage, and You will make a place where You can reside, and this holy place, God - with Your hands</p>
<p>our hands establish it. (Psalms 90:16-17)</p>	<p>hands- יָדַיִם</p>	<p>You will establish it. (Exodus 15:17)</p>

Psalm 90 seems to be harking back to this verse from the Song at the Sea, but why? Well, what is this verse from the Song at the Sea trying to say? It's an expression that looks ahead to the future, anticipating a time when God will bring the people into its land and will build a *mikdash*, a holy Temple. But if you think about it, that vision of the future never quite came to be. Yes, there would be a time when God would bring the people into its land, when the Temple would be built – but it wouldn't be God who would build it. It would be human beings.

The plan that we read about in the Song at the Sea – that was the way that history *should* have unfolded. The Infinite Being was going to enter our finite world and make a place to rest the divine presence. That place would, like its divine creator, have an *infinite* sort of quality to it – insofar as it would endure from generation to generation. But somewhere along the way, the plan changed. When did it change, and why?

Change of Plans

That is precisely the question that the psalmist is answering. According to Psalm 90, the plan changed because Moses asked God to change it. And he did it in the aftermath of the Golden Calf. The psalmist takes these words from the end of the Song at the Sea - פֶּעַל, בּוֹנֵה, יְדִים - but he re-combines them and tacks them onto Moses' prayer at the Golden Calf. The words are the same, but re-combined, they have an entirely different meaning:

Psalms 90:16-17

יְרֵאָה אֶל-עַבְדְּךָ פֶּעַלְךָ; וְהִדְרָךְ, עַל-בְּנֵיהֶם. וַיְהִי, נֶעַם אֶל-דְּבַר אֱלֹקֵינוּ--עָלֵינוּ: וַיַּעַשׂה יְדִינוּ, בּוֹנֵה עָלֵינוּ; וַיַּעַשׂה יְדִינוּ, בּוֹנֵהוּ.

May Your works appear to Your servants, and Your beauty to their sons. And may the pleasantness of the Lord our God be upon us, and the work of our hands establish for us, and the work of our hands establish it.

Moses is saying: *God, allow us to see the realization of this grand 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, before God, that everything needs to change as a result of the Golden Calf. For human beings to be the ones who will build God's Temple – that is the solution to the problem that Moses, as the psalmist imagines him, *has spent the entire psalm describing:*

We built something with our hands, this terrible calf. It lasted for only a short time and then it was destroyed. But in Your eyes, God: You see it in infinite time, forever. It is always before Your eyes. And it degrades our relationship with You. If that vision of our sin will always be with You, if we can't ever erase it from Your gaze – then we need to do something that will be a counterweight to that sin. We need to build something else with our own hands, something beautiful, something righteous, something eternal. Please give us the opportunity to build for You a place to reside in our world.

That, according to the psalmist, is how it happened that we came to build the Tabernacle, and ultimately the Temple. It wasn't the original plan. God was supposed to build a place to rest the divine presence. Now, mere mortals would construct that place. The plan changed, all because of Moses' plea. It's an enduring testament to the unimaginable power of prayer.



Psalm 90, summarized:	
Verse(s)	Theme
1-12	Moses explores the tension between God's infinitude and humankind's ephemerality
13-15	Moses prays to God not to be forever angry at the people after the Golden Calf
16-17	Moses asks God to allow the people to build the Tabernacle/ Temple, to make up for their sin

And that brings us to the close of our expansive study of Psalm 90 and our whirlwind tour of Israelite history, from the middle of the Book of Exodus to the close of the Book of Deuteronomy. Back at the Golden Calf, when Moses was first the *Ish Elohim*, the man of God, he made a most brazen request before God. In doing so, he not only saved the people's lives, but allowed their relationship with God to remain warm and vibrant. And at the end of the Torah, in *V'Zot HaBracha*, that man of God 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, would endure – and their relationship with God would endure, too. It would not be dominated forever by the angry memories of the Calf. Instead, God would bring this people into Israel, its home – and once there, the people would make a home for the Master of the Universe.



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Thanks for understanding - we love you guys, too.

① Psalm 90: A Prayer of Moses:

Psalms 90

תהלים צ

1 A Prayer of Moses the man of God.
Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations.
2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God.
3 Thou turnest man to contrition; and sayest: 'Return, ye children of men.'
4 For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.
5 Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep; in the morning they are like grass which groweth up.
6 In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.
7 For we are consumed in Thine anger, and by Thy wrath are we hurried away.
8 Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance.
9 For all our days are passed away in Thy wrath; we bring our years to an end as a tale that is told.
10 The days of our years are threescore years and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore years; yet is their pride but travail and vanity; for it is speedily gone, and we fly away.
11 Who knoweth the power of Thine anger, and Thy wrath according to the fear that is due unto Thee?
12 So teach us to number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom.
13 Return, O LORD; how long? And let it repent Thee concerning Thy servants.
14 O satisfy us in the morning with Thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
15 Make us glad according to the days wherein Thou hast afflicted us, according to the years wherein we have seen evil.
16 Let Thy work appear unto Thy servants, and Thy glory upon their children.
17 And let the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us; establish Thou also upon us the work of our hands; yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it.

א תפלה, למשה איש-האלקים:
א-דני--מעון אתה, היית לנו; בדר ודר.
ב בטרם, הרים ילדו-- ותחולל ארץ ותבל;
ומעולם עד-עולם, אתה קל.
ג תשב אנוש, עד-דכא; ותאמר, שובו בני-אדם.
ד כי אֶלֶף שנים, בעיניך-- כיום אתמול, כי יעבר;
ואשמורה בלילה.
ה זרמתם, שנה יהיו; בבקה כחציר יחלף.
ו בבקה יציץ וחלף; לערב, ימולל ויבש.
ז כי-כלינו באפך; ובחמתך נבהלנו.
ח שת (שתה) עונתינו לנגדך; עלמנו למאור פניך.
ט כי כל-ימינו, פנו בעברתך; פלינו שנינו כמו-הגה.
י ימי-שנותינו בהם שבעים שנה, ואם בגבורת שמונים שנה--
ורחבם, עמל ואון;
כי-גז חיש, ונעפה.
יא מי-יודע, עז אפך; וכיראתך, עברתך.
יב למנות ימינו, כן הודע; ונבא, לבב חכמה.
יג שובה יקוה, עד-מתי; והנחם, על-עבדיך.
יד שבענו בבקר חסדך; ונרננה ונשמחה, בכל-ימינו.
טו שמחנו, כימות עניתנו: שנות, ראינו רעה.
טז יראה אל-עבדיך פעלך; והדרך, על-בניהם.
יז ויהי נעם א-דני אלקינו-- עלינו;
ומעשה ידינו, כוננה עלינו; ומעשה ידינו, כוננה.

② **Moses' Plea at the Golden Calf:**

Exodus 32:12

שמות לב:יב

12 Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, saying: For evil did He bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Return from Thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against Thy people.

יב לָמָּה יֹאמְרוּ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר, בְּרָעָה הוֹצִיאָם לְהָרֵג אֹתָם בְּהָרִים, וּלְכַלְתָּם, מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה; שׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפֶּךָ, וְהִנָּחֵם עַל-הָרָעָה לְעַמֶּךָ.

③ **Song at the Sea:**

Exodus 15:17

שמות טו:יז

17 You shall bring them and plant them on the mount of Your heritage, and You will make a place where You can reside, and this holy place, God - with Your hands You will establish it.

יז תְּבִאֲמוּ, וְתִטְעֲמוּ בְּהַר נַחֲלַתְךָ--מְכוּן לְשִׁבְתְּךָ פְּעֻלָּתִי, יְקוּהָ; מִקְדָּשׁ, אֲ-דֹנָי בּוֹנְנוּ יִדְיָךְ.