

On Psalm 29

Earthquake in Pakistan, Tsunami in Indonesia, and Katrina and Rita in the Gulf of Mexico. Does God create those monsters, and if He does, is there a reason or is it just to exhibit His awesome power? Not a question that I am happy to ask. Just think of the enormous number of people who have died, who have been injured or become sick, who have been displaced by just those three catastrophes. Then add hurricanes Stan and Wilma to the mix. We will never know the total number of casualties, of money spent to restore living areas, of the amount of effort expended by people of good will as a result of these tragedies. And there were other natural tragedies this year, too.

Why do I bring this up?

I want to believe in a God who is compassionate, who brings harmony to His creations, who can be our guide without having to exercise this awesome power. But we worship a God who created the Flood, who, all by Himself and without the help or hindrance of any other gods, is the Master of nature.

Every Shabbat, when we place the Sefer Torah in the Ark, we sing a paean to God's awesome power, to His being the God of Violent Nature. Go to page 153 and read Psalm 29, not in the Hebrew, which we know and chant, but in the translation. But let me present a non-poetical rendition, so we can see what that Psalm is all about.

O you angels, ascribe to the Lord Kavod V'oz, Glory and Strength.

Ascribe to Him and acknowledge that it is His and not yours, the Kavod Shmo, the Glory of His name. Bow down to the Lord; worship Him in sacred splendor.

Here the poet beseeches the angels, the sons of the mighty, to renounce their claim to Glory and Strength, to Kavod V'oz, and to acknowledge that Glory and Strength, Kavod V'oz, are the Lord's, not theirs. They must render to the Lord that which is already His.

Now we go forward with seven references to the Voice of the Lord, Kol Adonai. And the Name, Adonai, is repeated eighteen times. Oh the sages had a field day with those numbers. In addition, Kavod is mentioned four times and Oz twice.

The Voice of the Lord is thunder, is nature unleashed, is awesome power. The voice is over the waters. The God of Glory thunders over the stormy waters. The Voice of the Lord is majesty. How about a tsunami?

The voice breaks cedars in Lebanon, coming from the North and West, and makes the mountains, Lebanon and Sirion-Mt Hermon, skip like rams: is this an earthquake? How else can we imagine seeing mountains skip like young wild oxen? How else are cedars broken up? We have the beginnings of a theophany, when the Deity appears out of a storm, as at Sinai.

The Voice kindles lightening, forks of flame.

The Voice convulses, shakes, stirs, the wilderness, the wilderness of Kadesh, b'midbar Kadesh, perhaps an area in the south of Judea or in the Negev desert or more likely, in the Sinai. God's voice shakes the entire area, every known part of the world, from the Lebanon to the desert. Might this be a sandstorm, an earthquake?

The voice cause hinds, deer, to calve and ewes to lamb, or better, causes oaks to tremble and strips forests bare, a windstorm.

So far we have imagined God, the Creator and Master of Violent Nature, as User of those extraordinary powers, and admired, worshipped, lauded for that power and that use.

All the while, during the Violence, the angels are in God's heavenly abode, His Heavenly Temple, saying "Kavod." That is, all the angels are gathered together speaking of his Glory. Apparently saying that the power over nature is at least an attribute of the Glory of God. At some point, in some unknown manner, the awesome power becomes controlled; He conquers chaos, and is enthroned. Imagine enthroned as sitting, watching the Flood as it wipes out the entire population of the world except for Noah and his passengers, no concern in this poem for the results of this exercise of power. He is relaxed, no storms or actual exercise of power. He is enthroned upon his throne, as He was at Creation, as He was at the time of the Flood, and as He is now and will forever be. Presumably willing to use this awesome power at a time and place of His choosing.

And then the denouement: The crescendo of the storm has passed and we enter a pianissimo, and behold a gentle, calm, peaceful, and beneficent God. This God of Goodness will give strength unto His people, He will bless them with peace, well-being. Adonai oz le amo yiten, Adonai y'varekh et amo va-shalom.

Of course, the various commentators have disagreed with one another, regularly; and the modern exegetes, the folks who write the translations for our Siddurim, also have their interpretations. Our Siddur omits the line, in English but not in Hebrew, about convulsing the earth to the Wilderness of Kadesh. The Gates of Prayer and the Artscroll both have the God of Glory thundering. Artscroll would have us compare the cedars in Lebanon being broken by God's Voice to alien kings who stood haughty until being broken by God into submission. There is a comment in the Soncino describing the grandeur of the Cedars, that they are majestic, lofty; they are to the world of vegetation as lions are to the animal world. The Voice of the Lord cleaving with shafts of fire, giving forth fire and lightening, is deemed a reference to a metaphor in the Midrash that when God pronounced the Ten Commandments the very words sprang forth like fire and cleaved themselves to the Tablets. Sacred Splendor, or beauty of Holiness, or majestic in holiness, can refer to His Temple in Jerusalem, in which case it would be people like you and me who say Kavod, and the world becomes calm, or as I set out before, His heavenly abode where the Angels abide. One comment says that Sacred Splendor means that the worshippers are dressed in their best finery, since all those who worship God must, as if we were priests in the Temple, be suitably attired.

Whatever the interpretation, it must be admitted that the poem describes and lauds the Eternal One for His awesome power, does not castigate Him for using it, interestingly enough does not express fear of the violence, and praises Him for His ultimate control of it.

Well, that's what the poem says. Why is it here? The reason that comes first to mind is that the giving of the Torah to Moses took place at Sinai. Exodus 20:15, in the Wilderness of Kadesh. Perhaps the poem describes not merely the awesome power of the Creator, but parallels the lightening and thunder at Sinai, the Theophany, where as Rashi says, Israel became kadosh, a holy nation.

The seven repetitions of “Kol Adonai” might represent the seven days of creation and thus it is an appropriate poem for Shabbat. Or the seven repetitions might represent the seven benedictions of the Amidah that we recite on Shabbat. The eighteen repetitions of Adonai represent the Shmonei Esrah, and Rashi apparently can locate a reference in the psalm to each of the 18 blessings. Perhaps that will assuage my need for a compassionate God, one who heals and brings peace and rebuilds Jerusalem and so on.

Incidentally we have the word kavod several times, three at the very beginning and bookended at the end, when all say it to God. And we have strength, Oz, also as an inclusio, bookends, at the very beginning where we beseech the Angels, children of the mighty, and at the end where God will bestow Strength upon us.

So, what will go through your mind when we recite the psalm in a few moments?