TEHILIM # 05: When a Jewish King prays

Like Israel today, David haMelekh had many enemies. Virtually in every border of his kingdom. David fought against the Syrians in the north and against the Moabites in the east (Jordan). But the biggest threat came from the west. From the Philistines, who lived in Gaza. The word Philistines means “invaders”. The Philistines are called by historians “The people of the Sea”. They had no culture or particular ethnicity. They were a mixed of various people mainly from the Mediterranean islands (Cyprus, Sicily, Crete) who got together to colonize the Middle East. They came with their wives and children, because they came to conquer and stay. They were extremely wild and dangerous, and they destroyed many empires and civilizations. The Hittites, the Minoans, the Mycenaeans, the Trojans and many other civilizations, all disappeared in the hands of the “People of the Sea”.

David knows that, same as today, Israel could not afford to lose a battle. For Israel wars are not about conquest but about survival. Every war Israel fights is an existential war.

David also knows that although the enemy is, unlike us, bloodthirsty, and more numerous than us, HaShem is in our side.

And in this Mizmor David requests help from God to defeat his enemies.

David mentions in this Psalm the morning (5:4), apparently because the army and the King were preparing themselves for battle in the morning. And it is possible that this was one of the Tefilot that were recited by the King and his soldiers in the morning before going the war.

In this Mizmor David prays to HaShem to protect him against the enemies, whom he describes (5:10) as wicked, bloodthirsty and deceitful

To me, the most touching part of this Psalm is the second and third pasuq, in which David describes three different types of prayers.

The first type of prayer is “amarai”, my words. That is a normal prayer which is said with words. A calm prayer. Probably the prayer King David and his army would say before battle, when one is able to convey his feelings with intelligible words.

The second level is “hagigi”, my thoughts. David haMelekh acknowledges that sometimes, in desperate situations like the middle of the battle, words might not come out of our mouths. All what is left is our raw, unspoken and perhaps chaotic thoughts. Anticipating those difficult times, David haMelekh rquests HaShem that if he would unable to articulate prayers, HaShem should attend David’s raw thoughts and feelings. In other words, David is asking HaShem to listen and pay close attention to him, if he cannot pray.

The third level of prayer is “shav’i”, my cry. Crying is a sign of desperation and sorrow. When the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt and suffered the miseries of slavery the Tora said that their cry reached God. Crying is the way a person in pain and anguish reaches out to God. In front of God, David does not describe himself as an invincible Hercules but as vulnerable human being. Admitting that he knows that he is at all times at HaShem’s mercy.

King David’s prayer was very far away from lip service. His prayers were coming from the depth of his heart, as words, as raw thoughts or sometimes as tears.