

Bringing the Psalms to Life

Daniel Polish

Our history is full of tales of risk-taking. Midrash teaches us about the life-saving acts of Shifra and Puah, midwives in Egypt who refused to obey Pharaoh's harsh and cruel ruling. Yochanan Ben Zakai and his students risked their lives leaving Jerusalem in 70 C.E. to establish the academy at Yavneh, where the continuation of the Jewish people was assured. And while early Zionist pioneers, the chalutzim, lived under extraordinarily dangerous conditions, we are now witnessing the leaders of Israel making enormously critical decisions. We are asking them to be risk-takers on behalf of the Jewish people.

When beset with anxiety, Jews turn to tehilim, the psalms, for comfort and guidance. Rabbi Daniel Polish's new book, Bringing the Psalms to Life, offers a new and expanded understanding of these poetic verses.

Human emotions are real and vibrant in the psalms, and so is the living presence of God. The psalms present us with a vivid sense of God's nearness. The nature of the experience of God in psalms is congruent with the experience that most of us have in our own lives. In Torah and Prophets the story is almost always about God reaching out to people, something most of us do not experience directly most of the time. The psalms are about people reaching out to God, which is what we do experience, or what we can aspire to do. The psalms are a model for us of what our relationship with God can be. They show the close intimacy we can develop.

From another perspective, psalms present a compelling image of God. The God of the psalms is close at hand, listens, and is *chasid* – steadfast, reliable. The God of the psalms is a God who cares. We are assured that God cares about God's people (111:9) and that God cares about individuals. Religiously, this is the most compelling aspect of the psalms. God not only cares about the people as a whole, the great leaders, and the religious teachers, but also about individuals, average ordinary people, and perhaps especially those who are cast down and hurting.

Much has been written about the relationship of religion and magic. It has often been noted that there is a continuum that runs between the realm of the strictly religious and the realm of the "magical." Any specific act, under differing circumstances, can be placed at different points along that continuum. The great Chasidic teacher, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov,

made special use of the psalms in a way that tends toward the magical side of the spectrum. One of Nachman's teachings was the *Tikkun C'lali* – the complete or all-purpose remedy. Nachman prescribed his remedy for people afflicted by impure thoughts. He

taught that such people had only to recite ten designated psalms on the same day as the impure occurrence, and the sin would be completely rectified. It is possible that such recitation of ten psalms had less to do with the content of those psalms (16, 32, 41, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, and 150) than with some protective quality associated with the very act of reciting them.

Even without the more magical approach, Jews have always looked to psalms for the help they offer. More than any other part of the Bible, psalms touch the reality of our day-to-day existence and have the power to enrich the spiritual quality of our lives. They can be woven into the tapestry of every moment and give perspective and meaning to every experience. They help us get in touch with ourselves, our emotional reactions to the events of our lives, and our needs. They aid us in finding solace, strength, and hope. They assist us at every moment as we reach out to God, the eternal Thou and Answerer of our needs.

Rabbi Daniel Polish is the Director of The UAHC's Commission on Social Action. This excerpt, reprinted with permission from Jewish Lights Publishing, is from Bringing Psalms to Life: How to Understand and Use the Book of Psalms. To order Rabbi Polish's book call (800) 962-4544.

*God cares not
only about the
people as a
whole, but also
about ordinary
individuals.*



The concept of an *apikorus*, a person who openly rejects fundamental beliefs of Judaism, is itself polemical and problematic. It presumes a singular interpretation of what God demands of us as Jews, a dogma that has been shattered by modernity. It sets up an "us" versus "them" paradigm that hinders any ability to truly respond to an individual.

Knowing *what* (*mah*) to answer (*tashiv*) the *apikorus* should not be our goal; rather, our focus should be on knowing *how* to respond to those who understand Judaism differently. Answering assumes a moral priority of one's own position without the possibility of any modification. Responding necessitates that we first listen to the other and try to rethink our own position in light of the other's perspective. It requires cultivating a disposition toward openness. Responding entails a constructive engagement of the other and is characterized by mutual respect and reciprocity.

Lisa Soleymani Lehmann is an Instructor in Medicine and Medical Ethics at Harvard Medical School.

In fact, one might dispute the whole premise of the modern-day *apikorus*. The most celebrated Talmudic example of an *apikorus* was *Acher*, better known as Elisha ben Avuya, a great scholar who later went astray. Following in this vein, the Talmud says that the *apikorus* is one "who knows His father in heaven and whose purpose it is to rebel against Him."

But living in a Godless age, where materialism is rampant and authentic spirituality difficult to find, how many really "know their Father in heaven?" Can we really consider an entire generation of Jews who, through no fault of their own, have never had a Jewish education, have only experienced the empty rituals of the synagogue service in an obligatory and semi-coercive manner, and whose faith in God's goodness and election of the Jewish people has been seriously eroded by the Holocaust, to be *apikorsim*? Can you really be considered a denier of the faith when you have never even been exposed to it?

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach is founder and dean of the L'Chaim Society. Author of eleven books, including the international best sellers *Kosher Sex and Dating Secrets of the Ten Commandments*, Rabbi Boteach's writings are featured in a wide range of publications. Rabbi Boteach lives in New York with his wife and their six young children.

I am deeply moved by Rabbi Avi Weiss's heartfelt interest in opening up a dialogue with Jews with whom he disagrees theologically. It is wonderful to find traditional Jews who are nonjudgmental and open to discussion.

Unfortunately, the way in which he defines *apikorsim* leads me to be skeptical about the possibilities of dialogue. To truly be open to "meeting," we must approach each other as equals. But seeing those who disagree with the concept of a personal God or with Maimonides' principles of faith as "wrongdoers" who have "gone astray" is troubling.

The *apikorus* is not invited to the discussion as an equal partner, but rather as someone who is being treated kindly in order to be convinced of the error of his or her ways. I know that for Rabbi Weiss, even the willingness to be open to talking to *apikorsim* is a risk. But when the goal of discussion is already a foregone conclusion, the conversation really isn't very risky.

Rabbi Rebecca T. Alpert is the Co-Director of the Women's Studies Program and Assistant Professor of Religion and Women's Studies at Temple University. She is the author of *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (Columbia University Press 1997) and editor of *Voices of the Religious Left: A Contemporary Sourcebook* (Temple University Press 2000).

רבי אלעזר אומר: ודע מה שתשיב לאפיקורוס

פרקי אבות ב:יד

Rabbi Elazar taught: Know what to answer a heretic.

Pirke Avot 2:14

How does one respond to an *apikorus*, someone, as Maimonides writes, who denies a personal God or denies any of his thirteen principles of faith? Rav Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook, in his *Igrot*, tells a rabbi whose children had left Judaism "not to throw stones on these befallen ones, but to befriend them." And *Hazon Ish* adds that today, when harsh reaction to those who do not believe is counterproductive, we must reach out with "bonds of love" to those who have strayed.

Note the words of our text: *Da*, to know, in the biblical sense means to love. In other words, react to the *apikorus* with love. *Ma*, of course, means what. When dealing with an *apikorus*, one ought to listen closely and respectfully to his or her questions. *Sh* as a prefix asks us to pause. *Tashiv* can be related to the word *teshuvah*, which from a mystical perspective means to encourage the wrongdoer to return to the inner good that he or she possesses. The prefix *Lamed* of *l'apikorus* denotes that one is to have a direct I-thou encounter with the person who has gone astray.

Of course, wisdom and Torah knowledge are crucial in order to respond to an *apikorus*. Still, the approach should be one of endless love, using persuasive rather than coercive arguments. To those who have challenged a nonjudgmental approach to an *apikorus*, suggesting that it leads to a situation wherein there is neither *tzaddik* nor *rasha*, I would argue that with regard to one's relationship to God, God must be that judge.

Rabbi Avi Weiss, President of AMCHA — the Coalition for Jewish Concerns — is Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and Dean of the newly established modern Orthodox rabbinical school Yeshivat Chovevei Torah.

*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."