

## **Shabbat Shalom - missing each and every one of you!**

We know what is on everybody's minds and there is much Torah from the Bayit and elsewhere referencing our current reality as well as addressing community needs and the power of how we answer those needs. I invite us all to take a step away and enter a world of beauty and rich imagery as we learn together about **Psalm 104: Barchi Nafshi**.

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I consider myself to be pretty fluent in Hebrew. Yet every month I find myself stumbling over the same Perek in Tehillim - Psalm 104 (Barchi Nafshi) that we recite every Rosh Chodesh. I never seem to finish it in time to keep up with the chazan. It is long and flowery with much poetic imagery. It seems to be rambling with many references to nature and animals.

And I wonder - why do we say this Mizmor on Rosh Chodesh?

This Shabbat is a special Shabbat. It is Shabbat Mevarchim when we announce the coming of Rosh Chodesh Nisan. It is also Parshat HaChodesh when we read about the first mitzvah given to Bnei Yisrael - to sanctify and announce the new month. Here's the best part which connects both of them: the very first month that we fulfilled this mitzvah as a nation was none other than Rosh Chodesh Nisan!

So it felt like a very good time to delve into this Mizmor and understand it better as well as uncovering its connection to Rosh Chodesh. What I discovered was a depth and richness to this Mizmor which resonated with me. I hope that this presentation will make it meaningful for you as well. Please read along with me as we follow the threads and themes in this psalm.

It can be found in the Koren siddur on **pp 190-193**, in the Artscroll siddur on **pp. 172-173**.

### **Introduction**

Rosh Chodesh is a "minor *chag*", coming once a month. The Sages instituted reciting this Mizmor on Rosh Chodesh, giving us an opportunity to stop for a few moments and reflect on how special Hashem's world is. The psalm includes clear references to the creation of the world and the wonder of God's creations. Man appears prominently, both as one of God's creations and as one who comments on God's handiwork. Through it all we see the glory and splendor of God through the lens of our world and the psalmist concludes with a fervent prayer that our world should forever be sustained.

## Creation

Robert Alter calls Psalm 104 “an ecstatic celebration of God’s dominion over the vast panorama of creation.” The psalmist evokes rich images of creation, reminding us that God created heaven and earth and all things in it: animate and inanimate, from mountains to rivers, from crops to trees, from animals to humans.

We see motifs of creation in key words and phrases in this Mizmor. Here are but a few<sup>1</sup>:

ב עֵטָה-אוֹר, כְּשֵׁלֶמָה; נוֹטָה שָׁמַיִם, כִּי־רִיעָה.  
ג הַמְקַרָּה בַּמַּיִם, עֲלִיּוֹתָיו, הַשָּׁם-עֲבִיבִים רְכוּבוֹ; הַמְהַלֵּךְ, עַל-כַּנְפֵי-רוּחַ.  
ה יִסַּד-אָרֶץ, עַל-מְכוּנֶיהָ; בַּל-תִּמוּט, עוֹלָם וָעֶד.  
ו תְּהוֹם, כָּלבוֹשׁ כְּסִיתוֹ; עַל-הַרִים, יַעֲמְדוּ מַיִם.  
כּה זֶה, הַיָּם גָּדוֹל-- וּרְחֵב יָדָיִם: שָׁם-רָמַשׁ, וְאִין מִסְפָּר; חַיּוֹת קִטְנוֹת, עִם-גְּדֻלוֹת.

2 Wrapped in **light** like a cloak, stretching out **heavens** like a tent cloth.

3 Setting beams for God’s lofts in the **waters**, making God’s chariot the **clouds**, God goes on the wings of the **wind**.

5 God founded **earth** on its solid base, not to be shaken forevermore.

6 With the **deep** You covered it like a garment, over **mountains** the **waters** stood.

25 This **sea** great and wide, where creatures beyond number stir, the **little beasts** and the **large**.

The psalmist deepens this description by highlighting the interconnection between all creations. Rabbi Bini Maryles offers these thoughts on the psalm, paraphrasing the verses:

“At God’s word, the waters separated and flowed within their established boundaries. Now the waters flow between mountains and provide a source from which the animals may drink. Birds perch on nearby branches and sing. God causes rain to fall on the mountains and God makes the ground sprout produce for man and beast alike. Among the produce that God causes to grow are the necessary ingredients of wine, oil and bread, which sustain and gladden people. God waters the trees that God created, such as the renowned cedars of Lebanon. Birds live in these trees, while other animals live in habitats suitable to their needs: goats like mountains; hyraxes like rocks. Even the expanse of the sea is full of a rich bounty of creatures.

God made the sun follow its regular cycle and God made the dark of night, when nocturnal animals are active. When the sun rises, the wild animals go back to their dens and human beings rule the daylight hours.”

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Robert Alter “The Hebrew Bible”

## Man's Role

Man appears in the psalm in a myriad of roles.

- ❖ As one of God's creations, Man has wisdom and insight which puts him above other living creatures. God created vegetation for God's creatures, food that is ready to be eaten. Man has the skill and knowledge to take the raw materials and turn them into food and drink that sustain him physically and bring joy into his life..

יָד מִצְמִיחַ חֲצִיר, לְבִהֶמָה, וְעֵשֶׂב, לְעֹבְדֵי הָאָדָם; לְהוֹצִיא לֶחֶם, מִן-הָאָרֶץ.  
טו וַיַּיֵּן, יִשְׂמַח לֵב-אָנוּשׁ-- לְהַצְהִיל פְּנִים מִשְׁמָן; וְלֶחֶם, לֵב-אָנוּשׁ יִסְעֵד.

**14** God makes the **hay sprout** for cattle, **grass** for the labor of humankind to bring forth **bread** from the earth **15** and **wine** that gladdens the heart of man to make faces shine brighter than **oil**, and **bread** that sustains the heart of man.

The large sea creatures may reside in the waters but Man can build ships to sail the seas and be near those creatures.

כּו שָׁם, אֲנִיּוֹת יַהֲלִיכּוּ; לַוַיֵּתָן, זֶה-יִצְרָתָ לְשִׁחֵק-בּוֹ.

**26** There the **ships** go, this Leviathan You fashioned to play with.

- ❖ In a secondary role, Man exists outside of God's creation and comments on God's great and wondrous handiwork:

א בָּרְכִי נַפְשִׁי, אֶת-ה' - ה' אֱלֹקֵי, גְּדֹלַת מְאֹד; הוֹד וְהַדָּר לְבִשְׁתָּ.

כד מִה-רַבּוּ מַעֲשֵׂיךָ, ה' -- כָּלֵם, בְּחִכְמָה עֲשִׂיתָ; מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ, קִנְיֵינְךָ.

**1** Bless, O my being, the Lord! Lord, my God, You are very great. Grandeur and glory You do.

**24** How many Your deeds, O Lord, all of them You do in wisdom. All the earth is filled with Your riches.

- ❖ Lastly - Man prays to God to sustain the world and turn away from the sinners and their evil deeds:

לג אֲשִׁירָה לַה' בְּחַיִּי; אֲזַמְרָה לְאֱלֹקֵי בְּעוֹדִי.

לד יַעֲרֹב עָלָיו שִׁיחִי; אֲנֹכִי, אֶשְׂמַח בֶּה'.

לה יִתְמוּ חַטָּאִים מִן-הָאָרֶץ, וּרְשָׁעִים עוֹד אֵינָם-- בָּרְכִי נַפְשִׁי, אֶת-ה'; הַלְלוּ-יְ-ה'.

**33** Let me sing to the Lord while I live, let me hymn to my God while I breathe. **34** Let my speech be sweet unto God. As for me, I rejoice in the Lord. **35** Let offenders vanish from earth and the wicked be no more. Bless O my being, the Lord, Hallelujah!

## Rosh Chodesh

Finally, we return to our question: why do we recite this psalm on Rosh Chodesh? Looking closely at the Mizmor, almost exactly in the middle verse are these words:

יֵט עָשָׂה יָרֵחַ, לְמוֹעֲדִים; שֶׁשֶׁשׁ, יָדַע מְבוֹאוֹ.

**19** God made the **moon** for the fixed seasons; the sun - God appointed its setting.

The earth cannot exist without the sun and the moon in the most basic physical sense: for light and for heat, for high and low tides. This verse highlights God's infinite wisdom in giving us the **moon** to regulate all of our holidays: major and minor. Much like the tide, setting the time and day of the New Month regulates the ebb and flow of our spiritual and religious year.

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We have tapped into some of the themes and ideas reflected in Psalm 104; an opening of windows into King David's thoughts and poetry.

Here are some thoughts to take with us for this Shabbat and for Rosh Chodesh Nisan which will happen this Wednesday night and Thursday:

1. Let us take some time to ponder the wonder and beauty of creation. It is an awesome tapestry of interconnectedness, woven and embroidered with God's many creations. We may not be as physically connected right now but there are invisible yet tangible threads that hold us together.
2. We exist as both part and parcel of God's creations but as Man we have the ability to stand back, appreciate the world and connect with God in prayer.
3. Rosh Chodesh offers us a chance to pause in our lives and reflect on the creation around us, our connection with it and the cadence of our life as it flows around the Jewish calendar.

May this Shabbat be peaceful and tranquil - in your homes and outside - and may we ever feel the connection with our families, friends and communities.

**Shabbat Shalom!**