

# The Inner Meaning of Tehillim

Adapted from a shiur by Rabbi Tuvia Vinitsky, MMC Dean

Tilim, Sefer Tehillim, Psalms. However you say it, the sacred book of Dovid HaMelech’s writings conjures up powerful mental images. Bubbies with their small tear stained Tehillim books. Anxious soldiers holding an Uzi in one hand and a Tehillim in the other. Worried relatives standing at a bedside, eyes half closed, reciting Tehillim over and over. Desperate parents fervently saying Tehillim in hopes of being blessed with a child. Teachers writing the names of *cholim* on a blackboard for children to keep in mind while reciting Tehillim. Throngs of Jews at the Kosel saying Tehillim for the entire nation in desperate times.

We all know that for thousands of years we have said Tehillim in our greatest time of need. We all realize that Tehillim is there for us to use as a special way of beseeching Hashem in our greatest times of need. We all recognize that Dovid HaMelech gave us Tehillim for us to reach for when we need a special *yeshua* (salvation) or *refuah* (healing). We all know it.

We all know it, but it is not really accurate.

When we view Tehillim as our special tefilah to be taken out of the drawer in an *eis tzar* (time of need), we miss the essence of Dovid HaMelech’s gift.

Tehillim is far more than that.

Dovid HaMelech was one of the most enigmatic people in Jewish history. We know a lot about him yet at the same time we know very *little* about him.

Few have set themselves such lofty goals as Dovid, who longed only to be close to his Creator. And fewer still have come as close to perfection in their goal as Dovid. Yet we do not know exactly how he did it. How at the age of 21 was he ready to lead the Jewish nation?

To try and understand Tehillim without learning about Dovid himself is almost impossible. Since the giving of the Torah there has never been a period of time like that of the kingdom of Dovid. He conquered all the enemies of Klal Yisroel, and there was tremendous Torah learning, prosperity, and justice during his reign. It can be truly said that Klal Yisroel achieved the pinnacle of living in the land of Israel.

The story of Dovid HaMelech actually starts earlier in history - much earlier. It starts with Adam HaRishon.

When Adam HaRishon was expelled from Gan Eden, he asked Hashem to let him see all his future descendants. He wanted to look for somebody who could make up for his failure, and lead the people back to a spiritual level that would enable them to re-enter Gan Eden. He found one person with that ability - Dovid. But he was immediately disappointed, for he saw that Dovid was destined to die as a baby.

Adam HaRishon then asked Hashem to take 70 years from his life and give them to Dovid, so Dovid could have a chance to achieve what Adam had not. Hashem granted his request. And so it was. Dovid lived until the age of 70, and Adam HaRishon, originally destined to live 1000 years, died at the age of 930.

But not everyone saw right away what Adam HaRishon saw with *ruach hakodesh*. When the prophet Shmuel came to see which of Yishai’s sons was destined to become king, Yishai did not even call in Dovid. How could this boy with the ruddy complexion, who liked his job as a shepherd, be the next king of Klal Yisroel? When Yishai finally sent for Dovid, even the prophet initially did not think it was possible that Dovid was Hashem’s anointed king.

But Dovid was a shepherd for a reason. He spent his first 21 years contemplating Hashem and trying to appreciate the world that Hashem had created. Not just a world of people and politics, but a world of beauty, a world of amazement, and a world of complexity. For being a king is not an easy task. Shaul HaMelech was a tremendous tzaddik, yet he failed as a king. In fact, not everyone initially accepted Dovid as king. He was first the king only in Chevron, amongst his own tribe of Yehudah. He was a descendant of *Moav* on his mother’s side thru Rus. How was he fit to be King? Why not a king who was a direct descendant of Moshe Rabbenu?

But Hashem’s plans for the world are complex and not easily discernable. Shaul failed because he could not suppress his desire for mercy. He could not summon the steel will necessary to do some of the things a king must do. But Dovid, with his partial Moabite background, was able to combine mercy with strength. His ruddy look, scary to Shmuel, was part of Hashem’s hidden plan. There were those throughout Dovid’s reign who could never reconcile themselves to having a king of such lineage. Dovid *davened* constantly for those people to see the will of Hashem clearly.

Were that all there was to Dovid, it would be enough. But it is just the start.

Dovid had a special appeal to the people, and that appeal enabled him to lead them to great accomplishments. What was this special appeal? Why did the people instinctively flock to him? Whatever kind of person you were, Dovid was your champion. If you were a tzaddik, Dovid was an exceptional tzaddik. If you were a talmid chacham, Dovid was the rosh yeshiva. If you were an artist, Dovid was the best artisan. If you were a shepherd, Dovid made being a shepherd respectable and desirable. If you were a soldier, Dovid’s personal faith and bravery were legendary. The Rambam tells us that the heart of a king is the heart of all Klal Yisroel. In Dovid’s case, it was more than just the heart. Dovid was of the people, by the people, and for the people. He was one of the people, and he was our king.

Hashem tested Dovid at every opportunity - per Dovid’s request. Dovid wanted the opportunity to grow and become closer to Hashem, and he experienced oppression and tzarros that would fall the mightiest men of emunah. Yet he never wavered. When Bavel’s evil king Nevuchanezzar saw Channanya, Mishael, and Azarya miraculously saved, he prepared to write songs of praise to Hashem as great as those of Dovid HaMelech. Only the intervention of a *malach* (angel) sent from Heaven stopped him. How could a *rasha* (wicked man) responsible for the deaths of multitudes of Jews write anything comparable to Dovid HaMelech’s Tehillim? Chazal tell us that writing out of happiness is not difficult. Writing through the ups and downs of a most difficult life? Only Dovid could do that.

Dovid had a fiery intensity that never wavered despite his trials, He taught us how to truly want something. Not want, but yearn. He yearned for himself and for all his people to reach spiritual perfection and be as close to Hashem as possible. Dovid was a child driven to know his Father, to become closer to Avinu Sh’b’shamayim. But it was not to be.

Dovid definitely saw great achievements in his lifetime. Both the spiritual and material success of the nation was tremendous. In fact, during Dovid’s reign the Sanhedrin had to make a temporary edict barring all converts to Judaism. It was so good to be a Jew that even the Sanhedrin could not determine whether a prospective convert was motivated by a sincere desire to serve Hashem, or simply wanted to be part of the most successful nation in the world.

But Dovid wanted even more. Just as he himself was close to perfection in his service to Hashem, he wanted all his people to be equally close to Hashem. But that he could not accomplish.

Dovid was not exactly the type of person who gave up on a goal easily. If he could not bring the people to spiritual perfection now, he could do the next best thing — he could leave them instructions on how they could do it themselves after he was gone. He might not see it, but satisfying his ego was never something Dovid cared about. He would leave them the blueprints, and they would use them to build a house of spiritual perfection. Just as he prepared the blueprints for the Beis HaMikdash to be built after he was gone, he prepared Tehillim as the blueprints for his people to follow after he was gone.

One hundred and fifty lessons in how to be a good Jews. *That* is Sefer Tehillim.

Each chapter a window into how Dovid wanted us to better ourselves. Written with *ruach hakodesh* as a gift from Hashem, Tehillim were the only songs ever sung in the Beis HaMikdash. It was fitting that Dovid’s songs for how to serve Hashem were sung in Hashem’s house — a house that was built from Dovid’s blueprints. He took the essence of what made him worthy of being a king and role model and he distilled it into 150 hopes and dreams. He shared with us his successes — and his failures. He put display every day in the songs the Levi’im sang from HaMikdash. Tehillim is the heart of Dovid. But even more, Tehillim is Dovid’s soul lay bare for all to see, for all to use, and for all to benefit from. Dovid did not just carry his people in his heart. He tore out his heart, lay bare his soul, and gave it to his people in 150 chapters.

Certainly there have been great men of spirituality in our history. But Chazal tell us only three people have the ability to bring the entire nation to the ultimate level of service to Hashem. Remember it by the acronym אָדָם - דָּוִד - מֹשֶׁה : Adam HaRishon, Dovid HaMelech, and Mashiach Tzidkenu. Dovid’s gift to us of Tehillim elevated him to the ranks of a very small and elite group. Adam HaRishon was made by the hand of Hashem Himself, k'v'yachol. Moshiach is endowed by Hashem with the ability to bring to a close the history of mankind, and open a new chapter in the history of the world. To this group of two people we add a third — Dovid HaMelech. His Tehillim is our voice for speaking to Hashem. This group of three people is not open to new additions. Until the arrival of Moshiach, our guide for serving Hashem and His Torah can be found in Dovid’s blueprint, Sefer Tehillim.

But these 150 lessons will not jump off the page and into our hearts. They will not fly out of the drawer by themselves. On the shelf they are words on the page. It is incumbent upon us to make Tehillim what Dovid intended. A source of tefilah in an *eis tzar* most definitely. But more than that, **much more than that**, it is our daily guide to life. Of course Tehillim would be appropriate for an *eis tzar*, because we already have it out and in hand all the time. There is not an occasion or circumstance in life, be it little or large, that is not spoken of in Tehillim. We must learn what Dovid meant, we must have his words at our fingertips, and we must have our Tehillim worn with daily use.

All of us want to be successful cooks. So we strive to improve. In the kitchen we keep recipe books to help us become better cooks. We learn from the recipes and instructions how the ingredients mix together, how spicy this one seems to be, how bland this one tastes. Does the family think the frozen desserts go better with Friday night or Shabbos day? How can I make this Yom Tov especially memorable? Check the book for suggestions on this and or that. Consciously or unconsciously we are using that recipe book to become better cooks.

The *mashal* is perhaps too obvious, but is there nonetheless: Dovid gave us a recipe book for a better life. We need to incorporate it into our conscious and subconscious by constant learning and recitation. We need to accept the gift the same way Dovid gave it: with mesiras nefesh and an unwavering commitment. Then when Moshiach comes, we can stand and say, “The gift your ancestor Dovid gave us? Look and see, we have put it to good use. We are ready for you, and ready for Hashem’s name to be one in the world.”

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