

Alexander Massey

Ashrei Yohshvei Veitecha

Psalm 84:5

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Ashrei Yoshvei Veitecha

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Siddurim (prayerbooks) place the *Ashrei* in various different places in the sequences of morning and afternoon prayer. For me, emotionally, it feels good to open *davenen* (praying) with just its first verse:

Ashrei yoshvei veitecha; od y'hal'lucha.

“Happy are they who dwell in Your house; they praise You forever.” (Ps 84:5)

What makes this such a good verse to sit with in meditation? For one thing, the word here for ‘dwell’ is *yashav*, which also means ‘sit’. But the verse also reminds us just to be. In the Talmud, the Rabbis tell us:

“One who says the *T'fillah* [daily prayer] should wait [sit] an hour before his prayer and an hour after his prayer. Whence do we know [that he should wait] before his prayer? Because it says: ‘Happy are they that dwell in Thy house’. [Ps 84:5] Whence after his prayer? Because it says, ‘Surely the righteous shall give thanks unto Thy name, the upright shall dwell in Thy presence’. [Ps 140:14]” (Berakhot 32b)

Prayer is not something to be rushed. It must be savoured. We can give more to prayer, and receive more through it, if we slow it down. If we slow it down enough, we come to know the truth of Psalm 34:8 – “O taste and see that the Lord is good.” George Herbert (1593–1633), in his poem called ‘Prayer’, wrote that prayer is: “... God's breath in man returning to his birth, The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage, ... Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss, ... the soul's blood, The land of spices; something understood.” And our task – our opportunity – is to reach for understanding in all four kabbalistic worlds: the spiritual, the intellectual, the emotional, and the physical.

“Happy are they who dwell in Your house; they praise You forever.” What can we draw from this verse? To live a life steeped in Torah values is both a way of metaphorically living in God’s house, and a form of praise. To praise and give thanks is an integral part of living a good life; by doing so, we metaphorically live in God’s house. To realise that Creation is a house of God’s making, that our body is a house of God’s making, and that we live in both, can fill us with such awe and joy that we feel a deep desire to praise and give thanks.

We are told in the Tanhuma that “God, may He be exalted, has a desire for a dwelling (Heb. *dira*) among the lower beings.” [Behukotai 3 (5); Naso 16] God told Moses: “I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God.” (Ex. 29:45) And God explained how this was to come about. The Israelites built the *mishkan*, the portable Tabernacle in the desert, as a ‘dwelling’ for the *Shechinah*, the in-dwelling Presence of God; and when it was completed, “the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.” (Ex. 40:34).

But there is no Tabernacle now, and no Temple. What can we do? We can sit, breathe, empty ourselves so that we can recognise the fullness of life, and the Source of life. We can sit, knowing that all life has its home in *HaMakom*, the ‘Place’, one of our sacred names for God. We can sit, praying, chanting the *Ashrei*, expanding our holy awareness. And in reaching to find our home in God, a beautiful transformation can take place: we find we have made a home for God in

ourselves. God makes room for us, and we make room for God. As Heschel wrote: “To pray ... means to bring God back into the world.”¹

Background

The *Ashrei* is a sequence of verses recited three times daily (Berachot 4b), twice at *Shacharit* - morning -, and once at *Mincha* - afternoon prayer. The main substance of the *Ashrei* is Psalm 145, each verse starting with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet (except *nun*), praising God. The *Ashrei* ends with Ps 115:18 – “We will bless the LORD from this time forth and for ever. Hallelujah.” The *Ashrei* begins with two other verses, Ps 84:5 (which is the verse used in this chant) and Ps 144:15 – “Happy are the people for whom this is so; happy are the people whose God is the Lord.” These opening two verses, both start with the word *ashrei* (‘happy’), from which the prayer gets its name. The Rabbis of the Talmud thought very highly of this prayer: “Whoever sings the praises [of God] in this world merits the world-to-come, as it says, ‘Happy are they who dwell in Your house, they will praise You yet again, Selah.’” [Sanhedrin 91b]

¹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua (1954) Man’s Quest for God, , copyright Susannah Heschel 1996, p.62

Ashrei Yoshvei Veitecha

אשרי

Music: Alexander Massey
Words: Psalm 84:5 & 144:15

Spacious $\text{♩} = 84$

The musical score is written for two staves in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of three systems of music. The first system (measures 1-5) is marked with a box 'A' and includes a repeat sign. The second system (measures 6-11) is marked with a box 'B'. The third system (measures 12-15) includes first and second endings. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some words split across lines. The tempo is marked 'Spacious' with a quarter note equal to 84 beats per minute.

Ash - rei yosh - vei vei - te - cha od
Ash - rei yosh - vei vei - te - cha od

6 y'-ha - l' - lu - cha. Ash - rei ha' - am sh' - ka - chah
y'-ha - l' - lu - cha. Ash - rei ha' - am sh' - ka - chah

12 lo; ash - rei ha' - am sh'-a - do - nai e - lo - hav. Ash - hav.
lo; ash - rei ha' - am sh'-a - do - nai e - lo - hav. Ash - hav.

Happy are they who dwell in your house;
may they always praise you.

אשרי, יושבי ביתך,
עוד, יהללוך.

Happy the people on whom such blessing falls;
happy the people whose God is the Eternal One.

אשרי העם, שפכה לו;
אשרי העם, שיהוה אלהיו.