

Alexander Massey

Trust In You

Midrash on Psalm 131
(voice & figured bass)

including an essay-commentary
on the text and music



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Midrash on Psalm 131

I am grateful to my storyteller friend Adele Moss for drawing my attention to Psalm 131, and encouraging me to spend time with it. Why was it written? What is it about? Adele's inspired suggestion is that it somehow resonates with the story of Joseph, a man who had a high opinion of himself, and had a long spiritual journey to discover humility and reconciliation with his brothers. With this imaginative starting point, I set about writing a lyric that might honour the Hebrew original of the psalm, at the same time as drawing out what the possible subtext might be.

Translation of the original:

"[1] Lord, my thoughts have not been too proud, nor have my eyes been too haughty, nor have I concerned myself [lit. 'walked around'] with things too great or wondrous for me. [2] No, rather I have calmed [lit. 'levelled'] and stilled myself [lit. my 'soul' or 'life force']. Like a weaned child with its mother, like that weaned child is my soul with me [meaning of this line is uncertain]. [3] Israel, wait for God [*EI*] the Compassionate One [*YHVH*] forever."

The emphatic use of *lo* ('not' or 'no') in so many of the lines suggests that the speaker is resisting suggestions that in fact, s/he has been too haughty and overstepped appropriate boundaries of behaviour or ambition. My sense in this psalm is that the speaker's – perhaps recently acquired - more humble sense of proportion has been hard won. This sets up in my mind the idea of the speaker wrestling to submit him/herself to the greater authority and power of God, who is directly addressed with the very first word of the Hebrew - *YHVH*.

YHVH, the unpronounceable name of God is traditionally used to indicate the compassionate aspect of God. And in the second verse, it is this aspect that the psalm now focuses on. The speaker compares him/herself to a weaned child; this would mean an infant that is in an especially vulnerable, limbo state, of not being completely contained physically and emotionally by the mother, but not necessarily fully able to fend for or comfort him/herself either.

What do we rely on in this life? Do we rest in the hands of God, or do we have a responsibility to look after ourselves? For me, one possible subtext of Psalm 131 is this uncertainty – who, between God and me, is responsible for what? From this subtext, I developed an English lyric suggesting the fragility and subtle anxiety that may stir below the surface of this psalm.

1. I think it matters what I do.
Does that mean I don't trust in You? ... trust in You, trust in You?
I've not dreamed bigger than I should,
Nor reached too far, but just for what I could.
My hope was not to change the world, but simply do some good.
Lai lai lai
2. I sometimes feel I must subdue
My wilful self and trust in You, ... trust in You, trust in You.

I've taught my heart to find some rest,
 Like an infant parted from its mother's breast.
 I must soothe myself at times, when I become distressed.
Lai lai lai

3. I think... I feel... what I must do...
 Is trust in me, and trust in You. ... Trust in me, and trust in You.

There is deliberately no clear tonal or harmonic centre to this song, reflecting the text's uncertainty of where we should find our emotional or existential anchor. God, others or ourselves? Whatever the message of the psalm, the last verse tells Israel (either 'one who wrestles with God' or 'one who goes straight to God') to wait for God forever – presumably therefore for however long it takes. In the context of the ambiguities within this psalm, it seems to me that 'wait' must mean 'wait with hope' or 'wait with some measure of trust', which is why, as I wrote, I found 'trust in You' becoming a pivotal idea. In the first verse of Psalm 131, the speaker addresses God, and then in the third verse addresses Israel, urging them (perhaps a little didactically?) to put their hope in God. In my lyric, God is addressed throughout, maintaining the intimacy of the beginning; the phrase 'trust in You' is at the heart of the song, and, perhaps not surprisingly, hovers around an unresolved harmonic moment.

After the first two lines, the musical phrases extend further each time, from 2 to 3, and then 4 bars, until we return to the quasi-refrain, which has 5 bars. For me, this echoes the singer searching and reaching for resolution to his/her uncertainty; there is perhaps an irony in these phrases growing ever longer, because the singer claims not to over-reach, but to have become less anxious and more self-contained. The 'lai lai lai' moment felt to me like the weaned child singing to comfort itself. There is an interesting harmonic shift at 'my hope was not': the major chord brings warmth, which hints that the singer may have hoped more than s/he would like to admit, but the harmonies quickly sink back to the darker colours. The same chord progression in the next verse coincides with the warm chord on the word 'soothe' and the fall to the darker chords on 'distressed'.

Song writing – composing lyrics and music – is often like solving a puzzle. Psalm 131 has two long verses and a much shorter third verse. How could this be handled in a modern musical *midrash*, such that the song felt it had a musical logic? I decided that the final psalm verse gave the clue to the motivation of the whole text, a desire to find some trust in God whilst stepping down from trying to have all the answers. So the final couplet of the lyric ('Trust in me, and trust in You') became an idea that could - with variations - appear at the beginning, middle, and end of the song, threading it together. This text/song could be used for times of spiritual challenge, a *Shoah* memorial, or *Parshat Va'yeshiv* (Joseph in the pit and in prison).

Performance notes:

1. The song can be sung quite simply, freely and slowly, with almost recitative-speech-style gestures, sparse accompaniment, and pauses between phrases; the word rhythms and emphases are important though.
2. At the end of the second line of each verse, the phrase 'trust in You' repeats, and listeners can join in with the singer at these points - and note the word change at the end of the song.
3. Guitar: I suggest a single strum for each chord symbol so the accompaniment is sparse. A capo on the 3rd fret puts the song into Gm (voice range A-D).

Trust in You

Music: Alexander Massey

Words: Alexander Massey

Midrash on Psalm 131

Freely ♩. = 54

1. I think it mat-ters what I do. Does that mean I don't trust in You?

...trust in You, trust in You? I've not dreamed big-ger than I should, Nor reached too far, but

just for what I could. My hope was not to change the world, but

simp - ly do some good. *hesitando* Lai lai lai, lai lai lai, lai lai lai lai

lai lai lai lai lai *mf* 2. I some - times feel I should sub-due my wil - ful self and

Trust in You

24 *a tempo* **D**

trust in You, trust in You, trust in You. I've taught my heart to find some rest, Like an

24 *mp* #

29

in - fant part - ed from its moth - er's breast. I must soothe my - self at times when

29 5#

34 **E**

I be - come dis - tressed. *legato* Lai lai lai, lai lai lai, lai lai lai lai

34

39 **F**

lai lai lai lai lai. *mf* 3. I think... I feel... what I must do... is trust in me, and

39 #

44

trust in You, trust in me, and trust in You.

44 #

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It features a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature. The score is divided into systems, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment line (bass clef). The lyrics are written below the vocal line. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, slurs, and dynamic markings. The tempo is marked 'a tempo' and the dynamics include 'mp' (mezzo-piano) and 'mf' (mezzo-forte). The score is numbered with measure numbers 24, 29, 34, 39, and 44. There are also chord symbols 'D', 'E', and 'F' in boxes above the vocal line. A sharp sign (#) appears below the piano line in measures 24, 39, and 44.