

Out of the Depths I Call: Five Psalms for the Physician in the Hour of Doubt – a Meditation on Faith in the Self, the Patient, and the System (Psalms 13, 22, 73, 88, 130)

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“The physician who has never doubted has never truly stood at a bedside.”

Introduction: The Physician at the Edge of His Faith

There is a particular darkness that visits the physician, and it is not the darkness of the patient. It is the darkness of the one who is supposed to hold the light. It arrives, usually, in the small hours—after the death that should not have happened, after the diagnosis missed, after the system has once again ground a human being into a billing code, after the thousandth time a body has refused to obey what the textbooks promised. It is the moment when the practitioner of medicine, who has spent a lifetime learning to read the body as a text, discovers that he can no longer read his own. He is besieged: by enemies real and imagined, by colleagues and administrators, by the litigious culture and the actuarial logic of capital, and—most corrosively—by doubt. Doubt in his own competence. Doubt in the recoverability of his patients. Doubt in the very system whose servant he has agreed to be.

This essay is written for that hour. It does not offer the false consolation that such hours can be avoided, nor the cheaper consolation that they are merely problems of “resilience” to

be solved by a wellness module and a yoga class. It proposes instead that the most precise, most unflinching, and most theologically honest literature ever composed about the experience of being abandoned while still calling out is the Hebrew Psalter—and that five psalms in particular constitute a kind of clinical liturgy for the believing physician who has lost, or fears he will lose, his faith.

The five are Psalm 13, Psalm 22, Psalm 73, Psalm 88, and Psalm 130. They are not chosen for their comfort. Three of them are among the most desolate texts in the Bible; one (Psalm 88) is famous precisely because it offers no resolution at all, ending in darkness. They are chosen because they map, with uncanny accuracy, the three theaters of a physician’s faith: faith in himself, faith in his patients, and faith in the system within which the two of them meet. And they are chosen because the tradition of their interpretation—from the Anchor Bible commentaries of Mitchell Dahood, through the literary readings of Robert Alter, the inner-biblical exegesis of Michael Fishbane, the philological labors of David Noel Freedman and

Umberto Cassuto, and the luminous theology of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook—offers a way of holding desolation that neither denies it nor drowns in it.

The method here is the one I have called hermeneutic medicine: the conviction that the patient is a sacred text requiring interpretive wisdom, that the clinical encounter is structured by a *tzimtzum*—a self-contraction of the physician that makes room for the patient’s agency—and that healing is a phenomenology of presence rather than a transaction of repair. But the physician who would practice this must himself be read. He too is a text, and in the hour of doubt he is a text that has gone dark, a *hester panim*, a hiding of the face. The Psalms are the literature of the hidden face that still speaks. That is why they are the right companions.

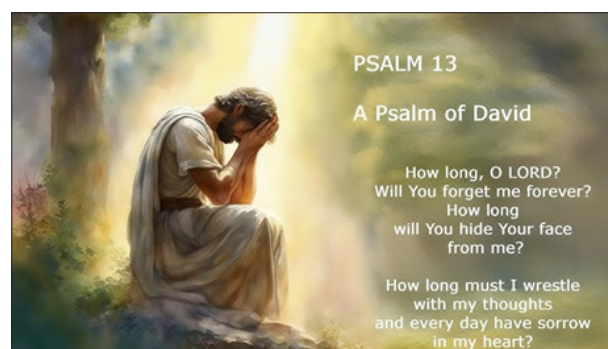
I have organized the essay around the five psalms in an order that traces a movement—not a guaranteed cure, but a possible arc—from the cry of abandonment (Psalm 13), through the besieged and forsaken self (Psalm 22), into the crisis of the system and its justice (Psalm 73), down into the unrelieved darkness of the patient who will not recover and the night that will not end (Psalm 88), and finally up, tentatively, from the depths toward a chastened and waiting hope (Psalm 130). Each psalm is read first on its own terms, with attention to the philological and literary scholarship that has clarified it and then applied to the three theaters of clinical faith. A concluding section gathers the threads into a theology of doubt for the practicing physician.

On the Choice of Commentators

A word on the guides I have chosen to read these psalms with, for the choice is not arbitrary. **Mitchell Dahood’s** three-volume Anchor Bible Psalms commentary remains, for all the controversy of its heavy reliance on Ugaritic parallels, the most philologically daring sustained engagement with the Hebrew of the Psalter—and its very willingness to push the language to its Northwest Semitic roots recovers, again and again, the concrete physicality of the psalmists’ distress that more cautious translations smooth away. **Robert Alter’s** translation and commentary, by contrast, attend to the Psalms as poetry—to the semantic parallelism, the rhythms, the deliberate architecture of image and line—and recover the literary power that centuries of liturgical familiarity have dulled.

Michael Fishbane teaches us to read the Psalms within the great inner-biblical conversation, as texts that absorb, transform, and are themselves transformed by the tradition that received them—and his Sacred Attunement offers a Jewish theology of interpretation that is itself a kind of hermeneutic medicine for the soul. **David Noel Freedman’s** prosodic and structural analyses recover the deliberate craft of the Hebrew poets, the way meaning is carried by repetition, doubling, and the careful disposition of lines. **Umberto Cassuto**, standing against the atomizing source-criticism of his day, insisted on the literary unity and intentional design of biblical compositions—a stance that lets us read each psalm as a whole architecture rather than a heap of fragments.

And over all of them I have set **Rav Avraham Yitzchak ha-Cohen Kook**, whose theology of *teshuvah*, of the ascending unity of all things, of the holiness hidden in the very turbulence of the doubting soul, provides the framework within which the desolation of these psalms becomes not the negation of faith but its deepening. Where the philologists and literary critics clarify *what the psalms say*, Kook illuminates *what it means for a soul to say them*—and it is the soul of the physician, in the hour of doubt, that this essay finally serves.



Psalm 13: “How Long?” — The Physician’s Doubt in Himself

Ad-anah Adonai tishkacheni netzach?

“How long, O LORD; will You forget me forever?” — Psalm 13:2

Psalms Chapter 13 תהלים	
א למנצח. מזמור לדוד.	1 For the Leader. A Psalm of David.
ב עד-אנה יהוה. תשכחני נצח: עד-אנה תסתיר את-פניך ממני.	2 How long, O LORD, wilt Thou forget me for ever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?
ג עד-אנה אשית עצות. בנפשי. יגן בלבבי יקום: עד-אנה ירום איבי עלי.	3 How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart by day? (N) How long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?
ד הביטה עוני יהוה אליה: האירה עיני. פן-אישן הקנות.	4 Behold Thou, and answer me, O LORD my God; lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death;
ה פן-יאמר איבי וקלתי: צרי יגילי. כי אמוט.	5 Lest mine enemy say: 'I have prevailed against him'; lest mine adversaries rejoice when I am moved.
ו ואני. בהסדך בטחתי. יגל לבי. בישועתך: אשירה ליהוה. כי גמל עלי.	6 But as for me, in Thy mercy do I trust; my heart shall rejoice in Thy salvation. (N) I will sing unto the LORD, because He hath dealt bountifully with me. (P)

The Text and Its Structure

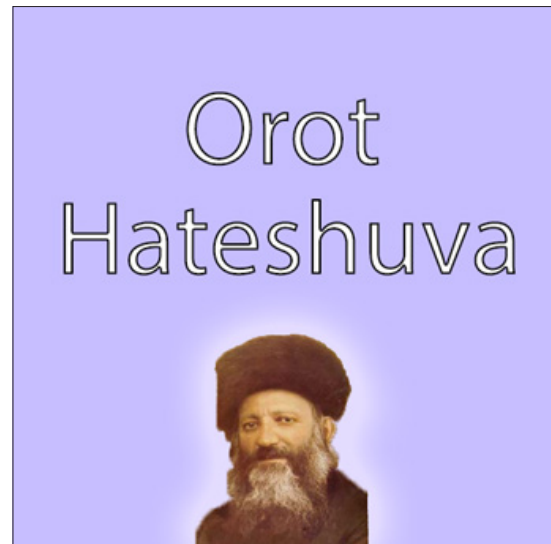
Psalm 13 is the shortest of the laments, and its brevity is its genius. Robert Alter notes in his translation of the Psalms that the poem achieves its devastating effect through the fourfold hammer-blow of the opening: “how long” (*ad-anah*) repeated four times in two verses, an anaphora that enacts the very experience of time stretching unbearably under suffering. The Hebrew *ad-anah* does not merely ask for information; it is the grammar of someone who has lost the ability to measure time, for whom every hour has become an eternity of waiting for a response that does not come.

Mitchell Dahood, in the first volume of his *Anchor Bible* Psalms commentary, draws on Ugaritic parallels to argue that the language of “forgetting” and “hiding the face” in verses 2–3 belongs to a Northwest Semitic vocabulary of divine absence that is juridical as much as emotional—the petitioner experiences himself as a litigant whose case has been indefinitely tabled. The face that is hidden (*tastir et-panekha*) is the face of a judge who will not convene the court. This is the *hester panim* that runs as a leitmotif through the whole Psalter and through post-Holocaust Jewish theology alike.

The structure is classically tripartite, as form-critical scholarship since Gunkel has recognized: complaint (vv. 2–3), petition (vv. 4–5), and an astonishing turn to trust (vv. 6). What is theologically remarkable—and what Alter emphasizes—is that nothing in the petitioner’s external circumstances has changed between verse 5 and verse 6. The enemy still threatens; the night still presses. Yet the final couplet declares: “But I in Your kindness do trust, my heart exults in Your rescue.” The trust is not earned by a change in conditions. It is, as Fishbane might say, an act of the liturgical imagination that reconstitutes the self in the very act of address.

The Doubt in the Self

Apply this to the physician who has begun to doubt himself. The first theater of clinical faith is the most intimate: the faith a practitioner must have that his judgment is sound, that his hands are steady, that the years of training have deposited in him something trustworthy. This faith is fragile and easily shattered—by a single bad outcome, by the second-guessing of a morbidity-and-mortality conference, by the slow accumulation of cases that did not go as they should. The physician in this state begins to ask his own version of *ad-anah*: how long must I carry the weight of decisions I am no longer sure I can make? How long before the next error? How long will the face of my own competence remain hidden from me?



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlpHmEkrddI>

Psalm 13 teaches something crucial here, and it is a teaching that Rav Kook makes explicit in his *Orot ha-Teshuvah*: that the experience of inner darkness is not the opposite of spiritual vitality but frequently its precondition. Kook writes of the “groaning” of the soul that has lost its sense of itself as the necessary turbulence preceding renewal—that the very capacity to cry *ad-anah* is evidence that the relationship is alive, that the self has not yet surrendered to numbness. The physician who can still ask “how long” is not yet lost. The one truly in danger is the one who has stopped asking, who has retreated into the technical proceduralism that no longer feels the weight of the bodies it touches.

The turn in verse 6 is instructive for the doubting physician precisely because it is unearned. The psalmist does not wait for proof before trusting; he performs trust as a discipline, almost as a clinical decision made under uncertainty. This is the daily reality of medicine: one must act before the evidence is complete, commit before the outcome is known, hold the patient’s hand while privately uncertain whether the hand can heal. Faith in oneself, for the physician, is not the absence of doubt but the willingness to act faithfully within it. Psalm 13 ratifies this. It does not resolve the doubt; it shows a self-choosing to exult while the doubt is still present.

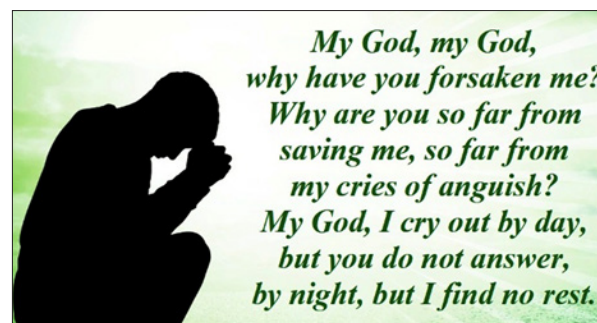
David Noel Freedman, whose work on the structure and prosody of Hebrew poetry transformed the field, observed that the brevity of Psalm 13 forces a compression of the whole spiritual drama into a span that can be spoken in a single breath. For the physician this is a gift: it can be prayed, or merely thought, in the seconds between rooms, in the elevator, in the car before walking into the house where the family waits. It is portable theology for the besieged. The *tzimtzum* the physician must perform for the patient—the contraction of the ego that makes room for the other—requires first that the physician survive his own contraction, his own sense of being diminished and forgotten. Psalm 13 is the prayer of survival within that contraction.

The Discipline of the Unearned Turn

It is worth dwelling longer on the mechanics of verse 6, because it contains the whole psychology of clinical faith. The Hebrew reads *va-ani be-hasdekha vatahti*—"but I in Your kindness trust." The *va-ani*, "but I," is the pronoun of self-assertion against the surrounding darkness, and Alter observes that this emphatic first-person construction recurs at the hinge of lament after lament in the Psalter. It is the grammatical gesture by which the self refuses to be wholly defined by its affliction. The physician knows this gesture intimately. It is the moment, after a catastrophic night, when one nevertheless rises, washes, and walks back into the hospital—the but I by which the self-reconstitutes itself for another day of decisions made under irreducible uncertainty.

The trust of verse 6 is not a feeling; it is a commitment of the will that precedes and may never be accompanied by the feeling. This distinction is the difference between a sentimental religiosity that collapses when the emotions fail and a mature faith that can operate in their absence. Medicine, too, runs on commitments of the will that precede the confirming feelings. The surgeon does not wait to feel confident before incising; the intensivist does not wait to feel hopeful before titrating the pressors. One commits, and the feeling, if it comes, comes after—or does not come, and one commits anyway. Psalm 13 sanctifies this structure of action. It shows that faith, like clinical judgment, is something one does before one feels, and that the doing is not hypocrisy but discipline.

Rav Kook would add that this unearned turn is the deepest expression of *emunah*—a word too easily flattened into "belief" but better rendered as "faithfulness" or even "steadfastness," from the same root as *amen* and *oman*, the craftsman. *Emunah* is the loyalty of the artisan to his craft through the long hours when the work resists him. The physician's faith in himself is, in this sense, an *emunah*—a steadfastness toward his vocation that holds even when the confirming successes are withheld. Psalm 13, prayed in the seconds between rooms, is the renewal of that craftsman's loyalty: I do not feel competent, but I in Your kindness trust, and I will walk into the next room and do the work.



Psalm 22: "My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?" — The Besieged Self

Eli, Eli, lamah azavtani?
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" — Psalm 22:2

Psalms Chapter 22 תהלים	
א למנצח. על אילת השחר: מזמור לדוד.	1 For the Leader; upon Aljeleth ha-Shahar. A Psalm of David.
ב אלי-אלי. למה עזבתני: רחוק מישועתי. דברי שאגתי.	2 My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me, and art far from my help at the words of my cry?
ג אלהי-אקרא יומם. ולא תענה: ולילה. ולא דמינה לי.	3 O my God, I call by day, but Thou answerest not; and at night, and there is no surcease for me.
ד ואתה קדוש-- יושב תהלות ישראל.	4 Yet Thou art holy, O Thou that art enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
ה בך. בטרם אבותינו: בטרם. ותפלשמו.	5 In Thee did our fathers trust: they trusted, and Thou didst deliver them.
ו אליהם זעקו ונמלטו: בך בטרם ולא בושו.	6 Unto Thee they cried, and escaped; in Thee did they trust, and were not ashamed.
ז ואנכי תולעת ולא אדם: תרפת אדם. ובזוי עם.	7 But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people.
ח כל-ראי. ילענו לי: ופטריו בקשקה. יגיעו ראש.	8 All they that see me laugh me to scorn; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head:
ט גל אל-יהוה ופלטהו: יצילהו. כי תפץ בו.	9 'Let him commit himself unto the LORD! let Him rescue him; let Him deliver him, seeing He delighteth in him.'
י כי-אתה גחתי מבטן: מבטני. על-שדי אמי.	10 For Thou art He that took me out of the womb; Thou madest me trust when I was upon my mother's breasts.
יא עליך. השלכתי מרחם: מבטן אמי. אלי אתה.	11 Upon Thee I have been cast from my birth; Thou art my God from my mother's womb.
יב אל-תרחק ממני. כי-צרה קרובה: כי-אין עזר.	12 Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help.
יג סבבוני. פרים רבים: אבירי קשן בחרוני.	13 Many bulls have encompassed me; strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round.
יד פצו עלי פיהם: אריה. טרף ושנא.	14 They open wide their mouth against me, as a ravening and a roaring lion.
טו כמים נשפכתי-- והתפרדו. כל-עצמותי: היה לבי. בדונו: נמס. בתוך טעי.	15 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; (N) my heart is become like wax; it is melted in mine inmost parts.

טו יבש כתרש. כחי. ולשוני. מדבק מלקוחי. ולעפר מות חשפתי.	16 My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my throat; and Thou layest me in the dust of death.
זו כי סבבתי. כלבים: עדת טרפים. השיפונו. קארי. נדי ונקלי.	17 For dogs have encompassed me; a company of evil-doers have inclosed me; like a lion, they are at my hands and my feet.
יח אספר כל עצמותי. הקח ובישו. יראו-בי.	18 I may count all my bones; they look and gloat over me.
יט יחלקו בגדי להם. ועל לבושי. יפילו מולי.	19 They part my garments among them, and for my vesture do they cast lots.
כ ואתה יהוה. אל-תרחק: אלויתי. לעזרתי חשה.	20 But Thou, O LORD, be not far off; O Thou my strength, hasten to help me.
כא הצילה מתורב נפשי: מיד-כלב. וחייתי.	21 Deliver my soul from the sword; mine only one from the power of the dog.
כב הושיעני. מפי אריה: ומקרני רמים שניתי.	22 Save me from the lion's mouth; yea, from the horns of the wild-oxen do Thou answer me.
כג אספרה שמך לאחי: בתוך קהל אהללה.	23 I will declare Thy name unto my brethren; in the midst of the congregation will I praise Thee.
כד יראי יהוה. הללוהו: כל-זרע ישקב בקדוהו: וטורו מקטו. כל-זרע ישראל.	24 'Ye that fear the LORD, praise Him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify Him; (N) and stand in awe of Him, all ye the seed of Israel.
כה כי לא-בזה ולא שפץ. ענות עני: ולא הסתיר פניו מקטו: ובשועו אליו שמע.	25 For He hath not despised nor abhorred the lowliness of the poor; neither hath He hid His face from him; (N) but when he cried unto Him, He heard.'
כו מאתה. תהלה: בקהל רב-גדרי אשלם. נד יראיו.	26 From Thee cometh my praise in the great congregation; I will pay my vows before them that fear Him.
כז יאכלו עניים. וישבעו: יהללו יהוה. דרשיו: וחי לבקבם לעד.	27 Let the humble eat and be satisfied; let them praise the LORD that seek after Him; (N) may your heart be quickened for ever!
כח יזכרו. וישבו אל-יהוה: כל-אפסי-ארץ: וישתחוו לפניך. כל-משפחות-גוים.	28 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn unto the LORD; (N) and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before Thee.
כט כי ליהוה המלוכה: ומשל. בגוים.	29 For the kingdom is the LORD'S; and He is the ruler over the nations.
ל אכלו וישתחוו. כל-דשני-ארץ: לפני יקרעו. כל-יורדי עפר: ונפש. לא תהיה.	30 All the fat ones of the earth shall eat and worship; all they that go down to the dust shall kneel before Him, (N) even he that cannot keep his soul alive.
לא זרע יעבדנו: יספר לאדני לדור.	31 A seed shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord unto the next generation.
לב יבאו. ויגידו צדקתו: לשם נולה. כי עשה.	32 They shall come and shall declare His righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that He hath done it. (P)

The Text and Its Reception

Psalms 22 is the great psalm of the besieged. Its opening cry is among the most quoted verses in all of Scripture, and Robert Alter notes the rawness of the Hebrew *lamah azavtani*—"why have You abandoned me"—a verb of desertion ordinarily used of a husband abandoning a wife or a soldier deserting his post. This is not gentle estrangement; it is the language of betrayal. The psalmist experiences not the absence of God but the active withdrawal of God, which is far worse, for it implies a relationship that once held and has now been severed.

Michael Fishbane's work on inner-biblical exegesis is illuminating here, for Psalm 22 is a tissue of bodily imagery that later tradition would mine relentlessly: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are wracked" (v. 15); "my strength is dried up like a potsherd, my tongue cleaves to my palate" (v. 16). The psalmist catalogs his own dissolution with a clinician's precision. The body is coming apart, and the poem refuses to look away. Cassuto, whose attention to the literary unity of biblical texts resisted the atomizing tendencies of source criticism, would have us read this catalog not as a random list of afflictions but as a deliberate anatomy of the besieged self—a body rendered as a battlefield, surrounded by "bulls of Bashan" and "dogs" and a "pack of evildoers" (vv. 13, 17).

The structural pivot of Psalm 22 is one of the most dramatic in the Psalter. After twenty-one verses of unrelieved anguish, verse 22 turns—"From the horns of the oxen You answered me"—and the remainder of the psalm becomes a great public thanksgiving, expanding outward until it embraces "all the ends of the earth" and even "generations yet to come" (vv. 28, 31). Dahood's philological work on the difficult verb in verse 22 (rendered variously as "You answered me" or "You rescued me") confirms that the turn is grammatically as well as theologically a hinge: the besieged self, having descended to the dust of death (v. 16), is lifted into a liturgy that outlasts its own lifetime.

The Besieged Physician

The physician knows what it is to be besieged. The enemies are not metaphorical. There is the malpractice attorney; there is the administrator counting RVUs; there is the insurance reviewer who has never seen the patient denying the treatment the physician has prescribed; there is the electronic health record that consumes two hours of documentation for every hour of care; there is the patient's family, frightened and angry, looking for someone to blame. The "bulls of Bashan" and the "pack of dogs" are not poetic exaggerations to the doctor who has been deposed, reviewed, audited, and sued. The body that is "poured out like water" is the body of the physician at hour fourteen of a shift, depleted, depersonalized, watching his own competence dry up "like a potsherd."

What Psalm 22 offers the besieged physician is not deliverance from the siege but a grammar for naming it without shame. The psalm legitimates the cry of abandonment as an act of faith rather than its betrayal. This is the paradox that Rav Kook understood so deeply: that the most anguished protest is addressed to God and is therefore already a form of relationship. The physician who cries *lamah azavtani*—who asks why the system, the profession, even the God of healing he once believed in, has abandoned him—is not an apostate. He is a psalmist. The address itself is the faith.

There is, too, the matter of the catalog of bodily dissolution. The physician spends his days reading the bodies of others coming apart. Psalm 22 turns that gaze inward and gives the physician permission to acknowledge his own dissolution under siege—the burnout that is not weakness but injury, the moral distress that is the predictable wound of being asked to heal within a system designed for throughput rather than care. To name this in the language of Psalm 22 is to dignify it. The physician's suffering is not a personal failing to be hidden from the M&M conference; it is a recognizable biblical condition, the condition of the righteous sufferer besieged on every side.

And then there is the turn. The thanksgiving that follows the abandonment is communal and intergenerational—it reaches “generations yet to come.” For the physician, this points toward the only durable consolation available within a fractured system: the patients healed, the students taught, the small acts of presence that propagate beyond the visible horizon of a single career. The besieged self of verses 2–21 is redeemed not by the lifting of the siege but by being incorporated into something that outlasts it. The physician who has poured himself out like water has also, unknowingly, watered generations he will never meet.

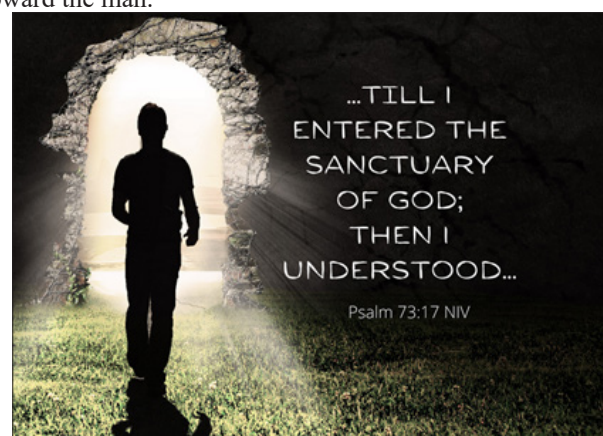
“I Am a Worm and Not a Man”: The Dignity of the Diminished

Verse 7 contains one of the most extreme self-descriptions in the Bible: *ve-anokhi tola’at ve-lo ish*—“But I am a worm and not a man.” Alter notes the shocking force of the image: the psalmist has been reduced below the human, to the level of the thing trodden underfoot, the creature without standing or voice. Cassuto’s attentiveness to the deliberate architecture of biblical poems would have us read this not as hyperbole but as the precise nadir of the psalm’s descent—the lowest point, from which the eventual ascent to “all the ends of the earth” will be measured. The depth of the worm is the necessary counterweight to the height of the universal thanksgiving.

The physician under siege experiences exactly this reduction below the human. The modern medical system has an extraordinary capacity to make the practitioner feel like a worm and not a man: a provider-unit, an interchangeable resource, a cost-center, a name on a productivity dashboard. The depersonalization that the burnout literature measures is, in the language of Psalm 22, the experience of being made a worm—trodden, voiceless, stripped of the standing that the vocation once conferred. And patients, in their fear and pain,

sometimes complete the reduction, treating the physician as a vending machine for relief rather than a person bearing the weight of their care.

What Psalm 22 does with the worm is the decisive thing. It does not deny the reduction; it speaks it, fully, in the first person—and in speaking it, paradoxically reclaims the very humanity the reduction denied. For only a person can say “I am a worm.” The worm cannot speak; the moment of articulation is itself the refutation of the despair it articulates. This is the deep logic of lament that Fishbane’s work illuminates: the act of structured complaint is simultaneously an act of self-recovery, because it reasserts the speaking subject in the very content of his self-abasement. The physician who can name his own reduction—who can say, in whatever idiom, “this system has made me a worm”—has, in the naming, already begun to climb back toward the man.



Psalm 73: The Prosperity of the Wicked — The Crisis of Faith in the System

Akh tov le-Yisra'el Elohim, le-varei levav.

“Yet God is good to Israel, to those pure of heart.” — Psalm 73:1

Psalms Chapter 73 תהלים	
א מְזֹמֶר. לְאַחַד:	1 A Psalm of Asaph. (N)
אֵךְ טוֹב לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֱלֹהִים. לְבָרִי לֵבָב.	Surely God is good to Israel, even to such as are pure in heart.
ב נָאֲנִי--בְּמַעַט. נִטְוִי רַגְלִי: כְּאִין שִׁכַּחַת שִׁבְבוֹ אֲשֶׁרִי.	2 But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.
ג כִּי-בִגְנָתִי. בְּהוֹלִלִים: שְׁלוֹם רָשָׁעִים אֲרָאָה.	3 For I was envious at the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
ד כִּי אֵין חַרְצָבוֹת לְמוֹתָם: וּבְרִיא אוֹלָם.	4 For there are no pangs at their death, and their body is sound.
ה בְּעַמַל אָנוּשׁ אֵינָמוּ: וְעַם-אָדָם. לֹא יִנְעָנוּ.	5 In the trouble of man they are not; neither are they plagued like men.
ו לֵבָן. שֶׁנִּקְחָמוּ נֶאֱנָה: יִשְׁתַּחֲ-שִׁית חֹסֶם לָמוּ.	6 Therefore pride is as a chain about their neck; violence covereth them as a garment.
ז יָצָא. מִחֶלֶב עֵינָמוּ: עֲקָרוּ מִשְׂבִּיּוֹת לֵבָב.	7 Their eyes stand forth from fatness; they are gone beyond the imaginations of their heart.
ח יִמְיָקוּ. וַיִּדְבְּרוּ בְרַע עֲשָׂק: מְטָרוֹם יִדְבְּרוּ.	8 They scoff, and in wickedness utter oppression; they speak as if there were none on high.
ט שִׁתּוּ בְשָׁמַיִם פִּיהֶם: וּלְשׁוֹנָם תִּהְלַךְ בָּאָרֶץ.	9 They have set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth.
י לֵבָן. יֹשִׁיב יָשׁוּב עֲמוֹ הֵלֵם: וְכִי מָלֵא יִמְצֹו לָמוּ.	10 Therefore His people return hither; and waters of fullness are drained out by them.
יא וְאָמְרוּ. אֵיכָה יֵדַע-אֵל: וְיֵשׁ דַּעַת בְּעֲלִיּוֹן.	11 And they say: 'How doth God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?'
יב הִנֵּה-אֱלֹהֵי רָשָׁעִים: וְשִׁלְנִי עוֹלָם. הַשְׁגֹּ-הִיל.	12 Behold, such are the wicked; and they that are always at ease increase riches.
יג אֶךְ-רִיעַ. וְזִכְרִי לִבָּבִי: וְאֲדַחֵן בְּנִסְיוֹן כָּפִי.	13 Surely in vain have I cleansed my heart, and washed my hands in innocency;
יד וְאֵהִי נָגוּעַ. כָּל-הַיּוֹם: וְחוֹכְחָתִי. לְבָקָרִים.	14 For all the day have I been plagued, and my chastisement came every morning.
טו אִם-אָמַרְתִּי. אֶכְפֹּרָה כִּמוֹ: הִנֵּה דוֹר בְּנֵיךְ בְּגֵדִי.	15 If I had said: 'I will speak thus', behold, I had been faithless to the generation of Thy children.
טז וְאֶחְשָׁבֶת. לִדְעַת זֹאת: עָמַל הִיא הָיָא בְּעֵינִי.	16 And when I pondered how I might know this, it was wearisome in mine eyes;
יז עַד-אָבֹא. אֶל-מִקְדָּשׁ-אֵל: אֲבִיקָה. לְאַחֲרֵיהֶם.	17 Until I entered into the sanctuary of God, and considered their end.
יח אֵךְ בַּחֲלָפוֹת. תִּשִּׁית לָמוּ. הַפִּלְתָם. לְמִשְׁאוֹת.	18 Surely Thou settest them in slippery places; Thou hurlest them down to utter ruin.

יח אֵךְ בַּהֲלָקוֹת תָּשִׁית לָמוֹ; הַפְּלִתָּם לְמַשׁוּאוֹת.	18 Surely Thou settest them in slippery places; Thou hurlest them down to utter ruin.
יט אֵךְ הֵיוּ לְשִׁמָּה כְּרָגֶנּוּ; כִּפּוֹ חֲמוּ מִן-בִּלְהוֹת.	19 How are they become a desolation in a moment! They are wholly consumed by terrors.
כ בְּחִלּוֹם מִהִקִּיץ-- אֲדֹנָי, בְּעִיר צִלְמֵם תִּבְנוּ.	20 As a dream when one awaketh, so, O Lord, when Thou arousest Thyself, Thou wilt despise their semblance.
כא כִּי יִתְחַמֵּץ לִבִּי; וְכִלְיוֹתַי אֲשַׁחֲזֶנּוּ.	21 For my heart was in a ferment, and I was pricked in my reins.
כב וְאֲנִי-בֶעֱר, וְלֹא אָדָע; בַּחֲמוֹת הָיִיתִי עִמָּךְ.	22 But I was brutish, and ignorant; I was as a beast before Thee.
כג וְאֲנִי תָמִיד עִמָּךְ; אֲחֻזָּתְךָ בְּיָמִינִי.	23 Nevertheless I am continually with Thee; Thou holdest my right hand.
כד בְּעֲצָתְךָ תְּנַחֵנִי; וְאַחֲרַי קְבוֹד תִּשְׁחִנֵּנִי.	24 Thou wilt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterward receive me with glory.
כה מִי-לִי בַשָּׁמַיִם; וְעִמָּךְ, לֹא-הִפְצִיתִי בָאָרֶץ.	25 Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And beside Thee I desire none upon earth.
כו קִלְה שְׂאֵרִי, וּלְבָבִי; צוּר-לִבִּי וְחִלְקִי--אֱלֹהִים לְעוֹלָם.	26 My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the rock of my heart and my portion for ever.
כז כִּי-יִהְיֶה רִחְקֶיךָ יֹאבְדוּ; הַצִּמְתָּת, כָּל-זֹנֶה מִמֶּךָ.	27 For, lo, they that go far from Thee shall perish; Thou dost destroy all them that go astray from Thee.
כח וְאֲנִי, קִרְבַּת אֱלֹהִים-- לִי-טוֹב; שְׁחִי בְּאֲדֹנָי יְהוִה מִחִסִּי, לְסִפְרִי, כָּל-מַלְאכֹתֶיךָ.	28 But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; {N} I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Thy works. {P}

The Text and Its Argument

Psalms 73 is the great theodicy psalm of the Psalter, and Robert Alter calls it one of the most philosophically searching poems in the Bible. It is attributed to Asaph, and it opens with a confession that is really a struggle: the psalmist almost lost his footing, “my feet had nearly slipped” (v. 2), because he saw “the well-being of the wicked” (v. 3). The body of the poem is a bitter catalog of the prosperity of the unrighteous—they are “sound and fat” (v. 4), they are not troubled like other men, violence wraps them like a garment, and they say openly, “How could God know?” (v. 11). The psalmist looks at this and concludes, with terrible candor, that he has kept his heart pure in vain (v. 13).

The turning point comes in verse 17: “until I came into the sanctuaries of God, then I understood their end.” Fishbane’s analysis of the wisdom traditions embedded in the Psalter helps us see that this is not a cheap *deus ex machina* but a genuine epistemological shift—the psalmist moves from a calculus of immediate outcomes to a longer and deeper vision available only within the sacred frame. What he understands is not that the wicked will be punished tomorrow, but that their prosperity is built on a “slippery place” (v. 18), that it lacks foundation, that it is a dream from which one wakes (v. 20).

And then comes the verse that Cassuto and others have regarded as the theological summit of the entire poem, verse 25: “Whom else have I in the heavens, and beside You I want nothing on earth.” The psalmist has moved from envy of the wicked to a radical reorientation in which the relationship with God is itself the reward, independent of outcomes. Verse 26 makes this almost unbearably poignant: “My flesh and my heart waste away—the rock of my heart and my portion is God forever.” Alter notes the deliberate juxtaposition: the body fails (*kalah she’eri*), and precisely in that failure the psalmist locates an enduring “portion” that the body’s collapse cannot touch.

The System and Its Injustices

Here is the psalm for the physician’s third and most political theater of faith: faith in the system. Every honest practitioner eventually confronts the spectacle of Psalm 73 in clinical dress. The system rewards the wrong things. The administrator who has never touched a patient prospers; the executive who optimizes for shareholder value is “sound and fat”; the practices that game the metrics flourish while the physician who spends

an extra twenty minutes with a frightened patient falls behind on his quotas. The capitalist reorganization of medicine—which I have criticized at length elsewhere—produces exactly the moral vertigo of Asaph: the feeling that one has kept one’s heart pure in vain, that integrity is a competitive disadvantage, that the wicked, by the system’s own scoring, are winning.

Psalms 73 does not deny this. This is its first and greatest gift: it validates the perception. The prosperity of the unrighteous is real; the psalmist does not gaslight himself into pretending the system is just. What changes is not the data but the frame. The “sanctuaries of God” in verse 17 are, for the physician, whatever practices restore the longer vision—the bedside itself as sanctuary, the moment of genuine encounter that the metrics cannot measure and the market cannot price. In the language of hermeneutic medicine, the sanctuary is the clinical encounter understood sacramentally: the place where the physician remembers that the worth of his work is not denominated in the currency the system uses to keep score.

Rav Kook offers a crucial supplement here. In his vision, the apparent triumph of the lower, materialist order is never the final word, because reality is structured toward an ascending unity (*achdut*) in which the fragments will be gathered. The physician laboring within a broken system is, in Kook’s terms, engaged in *tikkun*—repair—and the brokenness of the system is precisely the *shevirat ha-kelim*, the shattering of the vessels, that makes repair both necessary and possible. The sparks of holiness are scattered in the most unholy administrative structures, waiting to be raised. This reframes the physician’s relation to the system: not naive loyalty, not cynical exit, but the patient, unglamorous work of gathering sparks within a fractured order.

The psalm’s final movement is the model. Verse 28: “As for me, the nearness of God is my good.” The physician’s faith in the system cannot, finally, rest on the system, which will disappoint him as surely as the prosperity of the wicked disappointed Asaph. It must rest on the “nearness” that the system cannot supply or remove—the irreducible good of the encounter itself. This is not quietism. The psalmist still names the injustice; the physician still advocates, still resists, still works for reform. But his faith is anchored elsewhere, and so it cannot be destroyed when the reform is slow and the metrics keep lying. “The rock of my heart and my portion is

God forever” is the only foundation that the actuarial logic of capital cannot foreclose.

“I Was a Brute Beast”: Envy, Moral Injury, and the Recovery of Vision

There is a confession buried in Psalm 73 that the physician should not pass over, in verses 21–22: “When my heart was embittered, and my conscience was pierced, I was a brute and knew nothing—I was a beast toward You.” Alter notes that the Hebrew behemot here—“beasts” in an intensive form—marks the psalmist’s recognition that his envy of the wicked had reduced him to a sub-rational state, a creature driven by resentment rather than understanding. This is a remarkable moment of self-criticism: the psalmist does not merely lament the injustice of the system; he acknowledges that his obsession with that injustice had deformed him, embittered his heart, narrowed his vision to the single grievance.

The physician who broods on the injustice of the system is in real danger of exactly this deformation. Moral injury—the wound of being forced to act against one’s deepest values by a system one cannot change—is real and must be named. But there is a failure mode in which the legitimate grievance metastasizes into a bitterness that consumes the practitioner, a resentment that becomes the whole content of his inner life, that crowds out the patients and the craft and leaves only the grievance. Psalm 73 names this danger with unflinching honesty: the embittered heart becomes a brute, and the brute “knows nothing.” The capacity for vision—for the longer view available in the sanctuary—is precisely what bitterness destroys.

The recovery in verses 23–24 is therefore not a recovery of optimism but a recovery of vision: “Yet I was always with You, You grasped my right hand. You guided me with Your counsel.” The hand that was clenched in resentment is now grasped, held. Rav Kook’s teaching on the transformation

of negative energies (birur, the sifting and elevation of the lower drives) is precisely apposite: the very bitterness, once acknowledged and surrendered, becomes the occasion for a deeper grasp of the relationship. The physician who has passed through moral injury and come out the other side—who has named the system’s injustice without letting it turn him into a brute—returns with a vision the untested practitioner cannot have: he knows what the system is, and he serves the patient anyway, eyes open, hand grasped, vision restored.



Psalm 88: The Psalm Without Dawn — Faith When the Patient Will Not Recover

Adonai Elohei yeshu'ati, yom tza'aqti va-laylah negdekha.
“O LORD, God of my rescue, by day I cried out, by night, before You.” — Psalm 88:2

Psalms Chapter 88 תהלים		
א שיר מזמור. לבני־כרח: מַסְכִּיל. לְהַיְטִן הָאֲזַחְרִי.	1 A Song, a Psalm of the sons of Korah; (N) for the Leader; upon Mahalath Leannoth, Maschil of Heman the Ezrahite.	
ב יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁעָתִי— יוֹם־צַעֲקָתִי בַלַּיְלָה נִגְדָּךְ.	2 O LORD, God of my salvation, what time I cry in the night before Thee,	
ג תְּבֹא לִפְנֵיךְ. תִּפְלְתִי: הִשָּׂה אָזְנוֹךְ. לְרַעֲתִי.	3 Let my prayer come before Thee, incline Thine ear unto my cry.	
ד כִּי־טָבַעַה בְּרַעוֹת נַפְשִׁי: וְחַיִּי לְשֹׂאֵל הַיָּעוֹר.	4 For my soul is sated with troubles, and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.	
ה נִחְשַׁבְתִּי עִם־יֹרְדֵי בֹרֶ: הֵייתִי כְּקֹבֶר אִין־אֵל.	5 I am counted with them that go down into the pit; I am become as a man that hath no help;	
ו בְּמֵתִים תִּפְשִׁי: כְּמֹת חַלְלִים שִׁכְבִּי קֶבֶר-- אֲשֶׁר לֹא זָכְרָתָם עוֹד; וְהִקוּהוּ מִיָּדְךָ נִגְזְרוּ.	6 Set apart among the dead, (N) like the slain that lie in the grave, whom Thou rememberest no more; (N) and they are cut off from Thy hand.	
ז שִׁתָּנִּי בְּבוֹר תַּחְתִּיתִי: בְּמַעְצָלוֹת.	7 Thou hast laid me in the nethermost pit, in dark places, in the deeps.	
ח עָלִי טָבַעַת חֲמָתְךָ: וְכָל־מַשְׁבְּרֶיךָ עָנִיתָ סֵלָה.	8 Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and all Thy waves Thou pressest down. Selah	
ט הִרְחַקְתָּ מִיָּדְעִי מִנְּעִי: שִׁתָּנִּי חֻשְׁבוֹת לְמוֹ: קָלָא וְלֹא אֲנִי.	9 Thou hast put mine acquaintance far from me; Thou hast made me an abomination unto them; I am shut up, and I cannot come forth.	
י עֵינֵי דָאֲבָת. מִנ־עֵנִי: קִרְאִיתִךְ יְהוָה בְּכָל־יוֹם: שִׁמְחֵתִי אֱלֹהִיךָ כִּסִּי.	10 Mine eye languisheth by reason of affliction; (N) I have called upon Thee, O LORD, every day, I have spread forth my hands unto Thee.	
יא הֲלֹמֹתִים תַּעֲשֶׂה־סֵלָה: אִם־תִּפְאֹרִם יִקְוּ יוֹרְדֵי סֵלָה.	11 Wilt Thou work wonders for the dead? Or shall the shades arise and give Thee thanks? Selah	
יב הֲיִסְפֹּר בְּקֶבֶר חֲסִידֶיךָ: אֲמִינִתְּךָ בְּאִבְדּוֹן.	12 Shall Thy mercy be declared in the grave? or Thy faithfulness in destruction?	
יג הֲיִנָּדַע בְּחֹשֶׁךְ פִּלְאֶיךָ: וְצִדְקָתְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ נִשְׁיָה.	13 Shall Thy wonders be known in the dark? and Thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?	
יד וְאֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה שִׁוְעָתִי: וּבִבְקָר. תִּפְלְתִי תִקְדָּמְךָ.	14 But as for me, unto Thee, O LORD, do I cry, and in the morning doth my prayer come to meet Thee.	

טו למה יהיה. תגנח נפשי. תסתיר פניך ממני.	15 LORD, why castest Thou off my soul? Why hidest Thou Thy face from me?
טז עני אני וגוע מנער. נשאתי אסיד אפוני.	16 I am afflicted and at the point of death from my youth up; I have borne Thy terrors, I am distracted.
יז עלי עברו חרונך. בעותך צמחתי.	17 Thy fierce wrath is gone over me; Thy terrors have cut me off.
יח סבני כמים. כל-היום. הקיפו עלי יחד.	18 They came round about me like water all the day; they compassed me about together.
יט הרחקת ממני. אהב נרע. מידעי מחשך.	19 Friend and companion hast Thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness. (2)

The Darkest Psalm

Psalm 88 is unique in the Psalter. Robert Alter calls it the bleakest of all the psalms, and the only lament that offers no turn toward hope, no resolution, no thanksgiving—it begins in darkness and ends in darkness. Its final word in the Hebrew is *machshakh*, “darkness”: “You distanced lover and neighbor from me—my intimates are darkness.” There is no verse 6 of Psalm 13 here, no turn at verse 22 as in Psalm 22, no “nearness of God” as in Psalm 73. The psalm simply stops, in the dark.

Scholars have long been struck by this. Dahood’s Anchor Bible commentary catalogs the relentless vocabulary of death and the Pit (*sheol*, *bor*, *abaddon*) that saturates the poem, noting that the psalmist describes himself as already among the dead—“free among the dead” (v. 6), a phrase whose bitter irony Alter captures: the only freedom available is the freedom of the corpse, released from life because abandoned by it. The psalmist asks a sequence of unanswerable questions in verses 11–13—do the dead rise to praise You? is Your kindness recounted in the grave? are Your wonders known in the darkness?—and the implied answer to each is no. This is theology pressed to its absolute limit, the limit at which praise itself seems to fail.

And yet—this is the crux—the psalm is a prayer. Fishbane and others have noted the profound paradox: the most despairing text in the Bible is cast entirely in the second person, addressed throughout to God. “By day I cried out, by night, before You.” The darkness is spoken to someone. The abandonment is reported to the one accused of abandoning. Even when hope has failed, address has not. This is why the rabbinic tradition did not excise Psalm 88, did not soften it, but preserved it in the canon and the liturgy as a permanent acknowledgment that there are nights without dawn, and that faith is sometimes nothing more—and nothing less—than continuing to speak into the dark.

The Patient Who Will Not Recover

Every physician needs Psalm 88, because every physician has patients who do not recover. The literature of medicine is saturated with the rhetoric of victory—the war on cancer, the battle against disease, the triumph of intervention. But the daily truth of clinical life, and especially of neurology, is that much cannot be fixed. The neurodegenerative disease progresses. The stroke leaves its deficit. The child does not wake. Faith in one’s patients—the second theater—is tested most severely not by the ones who recover but by the ones who do not, and by the temptation to withdraw from them, to spend less time in the room where nothing can be done, to let the dying become “free among the dead” in the sense of being abandoned by the living who can no longer bear to witness.

Psalm 88 is the refusal of that abandonment. It models a presence that does not require a happy ending in order to remain present. The psalmist stays in relationship through the unrelieved darkness; he keeps speaking even when there is nothing hopeful to say. This is, precisely, the discipline of palliative presence—the willingness to remain at the bedside of the dying, to keep addressing the patient as a person (before You) even when the body is descending into the Pit, to refuse the abandonment that the prognosis seems to license. The physician who has internalized Psalm 88 knows that his faith in his patient is not contingent on the patient’s recovery. He can sit in the dark room and not flee.

This connects to what I have elsewhere called the Dark Shekhinah—the divine presence that dwells not in light but in the place of greatest brokenness, the *hester panim* that is paradoxically a mode of accompaniment. The *vav ketia*, the fractured *vav*, is the letter broken in the middle of the word, and it is the sign of a presence that is present as broken. Psalm 88 is the liturgy of the Dark Shekhinah: God present in the room precisely as the One addressed in the darkness, not as the One who removes it. For the physician at the deathbed, this is the only honest theology. He cannot promise the dawn. He can only promise not to leave, and to keep the patient addressed, named, accompanied—before You—until the end.

There is, finally, a consolation in the very existence of Psalm 88 that is easy to miss. Its presence in the canon means that the tradition refused to lie. It did not insist that every night ends in dawn, that every illness has a redemptive meaning, that suffering is always pedagogical. The Piaseczner Rebbe, writing from within the Warsaw Ghetto, understood that there is a suffering so great that God Himself, as it were, weeps in the hidden chambers—that the proper response to certain darknesses is not theodicy but accompaniment. Psalm 88 gives the physician permission to abandon the compulsion to make the patient’s suffering mean something, and to offer instead the harder and truer gift of staying. The patient who will not recover does not need his physician to explain the darkness. He needs his physician not to leave him alone in it.

Why the Tradition Kept the Dark Psalm

It is worth asking why Psalm 88 survives at all. A tradition bent on consolation, on theodicy, on the tidy moral that suffering is always redemptive, would have suppressed it or appended a hopeful coda. The rabbis did neither. They preserved this psalm, with its terminal *machshakh*, in the canon and assigned it a place in the liturgy. Fishbane’s work on the way Israel’s tradents handled their inherited texts suggests that this preservation was a deliberate theological act: an acknowledgment, written into the very structure of sacred speech, that the life of faith includes nights that do not end, and that to deny them would

be to falsify the relationship and to abandon those who dwell in them.

For the physician this canonical decision is itself a teaching. Medicine, like a consolation-bent religion, is forever tempted to suppress its Psalm 88—to hide the deaths in the morbidity statistics, to reframe every catastrophe as a learning opportunity, to insist that the suffering of patients must mean something, must teach something, must redeem itself. The hospice movement and the best of palliative care represent, in effect, medicine's decision to keep its Psalm 88: to make a place, within the house of healing, for the patient who will not be healed, and to refuse to abandon him to the darkness merely because the darkness cannot be dispelled.

Elliot Wolfson's meditations on the apophatic—on the God known precisely in unknowing, present precisely in absence—offer the deepest frame for Psalm 88. The psalm is an apophatic prayer: it strips away every consolation, every positive attribute of divine help, until nothing remains but the bare fact of address into the dark. And in Wolfson's reading, this stripping is not the failure of the relationship but its most naked form—the hester

panim that is not the absence of the face but its presence as hidden, the darkness that is itself a mode of the divine. The physician at the deathbed, who has nothing left to offer but his presence, who can say no comforting word that would not be a lie, enacts this apophatic faith. His silence in the dark room, his refusal to leave, is the machshakh of Psalm 88 transfigured into accompaniment—the last and truest form of care.



Psalm 130: “Out of the Depths” — The Return from Doubt

Mi-ma'amaqim qeratikha, Adonai.

“Out of the depths I called You, O LORD.” — Psalm 130:1

Psalms Chapter 130 תהלים	
א שיר המעלות:	1 A Song of Ascents. (N)
משהמקום קראתיך יהוה.	Out of the depths have I called Thee, O LORD.
ב אדני שמעה בקולי:	2 Lord, hearken unto my voice; (N)
תהינה אזניך קשובות לקול התנוני.	let Thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.
ג אם עונות תשקור יהוה אדני מי יעמד.	3 If Thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O LORD, who could stand?
ד כי עמך הסליחה למען תנצח.	4 For with Thee there is forgiveness, that Thou mayest be feared.
ה קויתי יהוה קויתה נפשי ולדבריו הוהלת.	5 I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in His word do I hope.
ו נפשי לאדני משקרים לבקר משקרים לבקר.	6 My soul waiteth for the Lord, more than watchmen for the morning; yea, more than watchmen for the morning.
ז יהל ישראל אל יהוה כי עם יהוה החסד והרחבה עמו פדות.	7 O Israel, hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption.
ח והוא יפדה את ישראל מכל עונותיו.	8 And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. (P)

The De Profundis

Psalm 130, the De Profundis, is the sixth of the seven penitential psalms and one of the fifteen Songs of Ascents. Robert Alter notes the spatial drama encoded in its very first word: ma'amaqim, “depths,” the deep waters that throughout the Psalter figure mortal danger and the chaos that threatens to engulf the self. The psalmist cries from the depths—not after climbing out of them, but while still submerged. This is the same theological grammar we have traced through all five psalms: the cry that is uttered within the affliction, not after it.

But Psalm 130 introduces a new and decisive note: waiting. “I hoped for the LORD, my being hoped, and for His word I waited. My being for the Master—more than the dawn-watchers watch for the dawn” (vv. 5–6). David Noel Freedman's prosodic analysis draws attention to the doubling in verse 6—“more than the dawn-watchers for the dawn” repeated—as a deliberate intensification, a poetic enactment of the straining toward a morning that has not yet come. Unlike Psalm 88, this psalm believes in the dawn. But crucially, it has not yet arrived. The psalmist is the watchman on the night shift, certain the sun will rise, scanning the eastern horizon, but still in the dark.

Fishbane's attention to the liturgical afterlife of biblical texts is relevant here, for Psalm 130 became, in Jewish practice,

a psalm of the Days of Awe and of moments of communal crisis—the psalm one says when standing at the edge. Its theology of seliḥah (forgiveness) in verse 4 is striking: “For with You is forgiveness, so that You may be feared.” Cassuto's sensitivity to the paradoxes of biblical theology would note the strangeness—forgiveness produces fear, reverence, awe. It is precisely the experience of being forgiven, of being met in the depths, that reconstitutes the relationship in its proper proportion. The depths are not the end of the relationship; they are where it is re-founded.

The Return

Psalm 130 is the psalm of return—the movement back from doubt that does not pretend the doubt never happened. It is the right psalm to end on, because it does not offer the false dawn of a problem solved. It offers instead the posture of the watchman: faithful waiting within continuing darkness, oriented toward a light that is certain but not yet visible. For the physician returning from the hour of doubt, this is the achievable form of restored faith. He does not get back the naive confidence of the first-year resident. He gets something better and harder: a chastened hope that has passed through the depths and learned to wait.

This is the arc of teshuvah as Rav Kook understood it—not a return to a prior innocence but an ascent through the very darkness to a higher integration. Kook insisted that the soul that has known the depths returns with a capacity for compassion and depth that the soul which never fell could not possess. The physician who has doubted himself, who has been besieged, who has raged at the system and sat in the dark with the dying—that physician, if he returns, returns as a deeper healer. His tzimtzum is now real, purchased at the price of his own contraction. He can make room for the patient's suffering because he has inhabited his own. The depths have become the source of his presence.

And the final verses of Psalm 130 turn outward, as the deepest psalms always do. The individual's cry from the depths becomes a word to the whole community: "Wait, O Israel, for the LORD, for with the LORD is steadfast kindness, and great redemption is with Him" (vv. 7–8). The physician who has returned from doubt does not keep the return to himself. He becomes, for his patients and his students and his colleagues, the dawn-watcher who can stand in the dark and say, with the authority of one who has been there: wait. The light is coming. I have learned to watch for it. Watch with me.

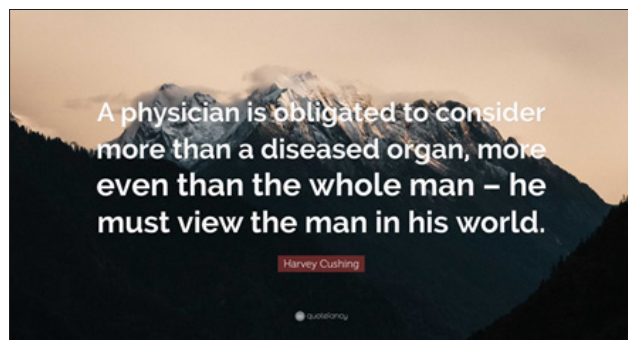
The Watchmen for the Morning

The image of verse 6 deserves its own meditation, for it is the most precise emblem of restored clinical faith in the entire Psalter: "My being for the Master—more than watchmen for the morning, watchmen for the morning." The shomerim la-boqer, the watchmen for the morning, are those who keep vigil through the last and darkest watch of the night, the watch just before dawn when the cold is deepest and the temptation to sleep is strongest. Freedman's prosodic eye caught the deliberate epizeuxis—the immediate repetition of the phrase—as a poetic enactment of the straining repetition of the watchman's own waiting, scanning the horizon again, and again, for the first grey light.

No image speaks more directly to the physician who keeps the night watch over the sick. The literal night shift is one of the loneliest precincts of medical life: the long hours when the body wants sleep and the patients are most fragile and death does its quiet work in the small rooms. But the deeper night watch is the vigil the physician keeps over patients and over his own faith through the protracted darkness of doubt—the months and years when the confirming dawns are withheld and one must simply keep watching, keep scanning the horizon, keep believing in a morning one cannot yet see.

Psalm 130 makes the watchman the very model of faith—and notice that the psalmist says his hope exceeds even the watchman's: "more than watchmen for the morning." The watchman is certain the dawn will come; it is the most reliable thing in his world. The psalmist's hope for the LORD is meant to exceed even that certainty. For the physician, this sets the bar of restored faith: not a tentative wish that things might improve, but a hope as structurally certain as the sunrise, grounded not in the prognosis but in the *hesed* and *pedut*—

the steadfast kindness and the great redemption—that the final verses promise. The dawn is not in doubt. Only its hour is hidden. And the physician's task, in the meantime, is the watchman's task: to stay awake, to keep the vigil, and to be the one who, when the first light finally breaks, is already watching to see it.



A Theology of Doubt for the Practicing Physician

Five psalms, three theaters, one arc. Let me gather the threads. The first thing these psalms establish, severally and together, is that doubt is not the opposite of faith but one of its grammatical moods. Every one of these psalms is addressed to God; every one of them is, formally, an act of relationship. The ad-anah of Psalm 13, the lamah azavtani of Psalm 22, the near-apostasy of Psalm 73, the unrelieved darkness of Psalm 88, the cry from the depths of Psalm 130—all of these are spoken to the One whose absence they protest. This is the single most important thing the Psalter teaches the doubting physician: that the protest itself is the faith, that the cry into the dark is the relationship continuing under conditions of *hester panim*. The physician who doubts himself, his patients, and his system is not thereby faithless. He is praying Psalm 13, Psalm 22, Psalm 73, Psalm 88, and Psalm 130, whether he knows it or not.

The second thing is that these psalms refuse the false consolations that the medical-industrial complex offers in place of theology. They do not promise that every night ends in dawn (Psalm 88 forbids it). They do not promise that the just are rewarded and the wicked punished in any timeframe the physician can see (Psalm 73 forbids it). They do not promise that the siege will lift (Psalm 22 holds the siege and the thanksgiving in unresolved tension). What they offer instead is harder and more durable: a relationship that survives the failure of outcomes, a presence that does not require resolution, a portion that the system cannot price or foreclose.

The third thing is the structural insight at the heart of hermeneutic medicine: that the physician, no less than the patient, is a sacred text, and that in the hour of doubt he is a text gone dark, awaiting interpretation. The Psalms are the interpretive tradition that can read him. They give him the vocabulary for his own dissolution (Psalm 22), his own waiting (Psalm 130), his own rage at injustice (Psalm 73), his own accompaniment of the dying (Psalm 88), and his own unearned turn to trust (Psalm 13). To pray these psalms is to submit oneself to be read by a tradition that has held darkness before and knows how to hold it without being destroyed by it.

The three theaters map onto the psalms with a precision that I do not think is accidental. Faith in the self is the work of Psalm 13 (“how long?”) and Psalm 22 (the besieged, dissolving body): the physician learning to act faithfully within doubt, to perform trust as a clinical discipline, to dignify his own injury as the recognizable condition of the righteous sufferer rather than a private failing.

Faith in the patient is the work of Psalm 88: the refusal to abandon the one who will not recover, the discipline of palliative presence, the willingness to keep the dying addressed and named before You in the dark room, the theology of the Dark Shekhinah that locates the divine presence not in cure but in accompaniment.

Faith in the system is the work of Psalm 73: the validation of the perception that the system rewards the wrong things, followed by the reorientation in the “sanctuary” toward a good the system cannot supply or remove—the bedside encounter as the place where the physician’s worth is denominated in a currency the market does not use. And Psalm 130 is the work of return across all three theaters: the chastened hope of the dawn-watcher, the teshuvah that does not erase the depths but ascends through them, the physician who comes back from doubt as a deeper healer.

The Three Theaters Are One

It would be a mistake to treat the three theaters of clinical faith as fully separable. They interpenetrate. The physician’s doubt in himself is fed by the system that reduces him to a worm; his faith in his patients is corroded when the system denies them the care they need; his despair at the system is sharpened every time a patient he could have helped is failed by it. The five psalms know this interpenetration, which is why their imagery bleeds across the boundaries: the besieged self of Psalm 22 is besieged by enemies who are also the unjust order of Psalm 73; the darkness of Psalm 88 is at once the darkness of the dying patient and the darkness of the physician’s own faith; the depths of Psalm 130 are the depths of all three theaters at once.

This is why the deepest frame is finally theological rather than merely psychological or political. The Lurianic vision I have drawn on throughout—*tzimtzum*, the divine self-contraction; *shevirat ha-kelim*, the shattering of the vessels; *tikkun*, the gathering of the sparks—offers a single account that holds all three theaters together. The physician’s self-doubt, his patients’ suffering, and the system’s brokenness are all instances of *shevirat ha-kelim*, the cosmic shattering in which sparks of holiness are scattered into the most broken places. The physician’s vocation, rightly understood, is *tikkun*—the patient, unglamorous, often invisible work of gathering those sparks: from his own fractured confidence, from the bodies of the suffering, from the rubble of an unjust order. And the *tzimtzum* he must perform—the contraction of his own ego to make room for the patient—is possible only because he has himself been contracted, diminished, emptied out, in the very hour of doubt these psalms address. The wound is the qualification. The depths are the source.

Read this way, the hour of doubt is not an interruption of the physician’s vocation but a deepening of it—the necessary descent without which the ascent would be shallow, the contraction without which there would be no room for the other, the breaking without which there could be no repair. The five psalms are the liturgy of that descent. They do not promise to shorten it. They promise only that it is survivable, that it has been survived before, that the cry from within it is heard, and that the one who emerges—chastened, fractured, watching for a dawn he cannot yet see—emerges as a deeper healer than the one who descended.

And so I return, at the last, to the image that has organized this entire essay: the *vav ketia*, the fractured *vav*, the letter broken in the middle. The *vav* is the letter of connection, the conjunction “and,” the hook that joins. When it is fractured, the connection is wounded—and yet it remains a *vav*, remains a connector, joins precisely as broken. This is the condition of the believing physician in the hour of doubt. He is the fractured connector: wounded in his faith in himself, his patients, and his system, and yet still joining—still standing in the room, still holding the hand, still addressing the darkness. The five psalms do not heal the fracture. They teach him that the fractured *vav* is still a *vav*, that the broken connector still connects, that the cry from the depths is already, and always, a form of and—a refusal to let the relationship end, a reaching across the break.

“Out of the depths I called You.” That is the whole of it. Not from the heights, not after the rescue, but out of the depths—from within the abandonment, the siege, the injustice, the unrelieved dark. The physician who can still call, still address, still speak the *ad-anah* and the *lamah* and the *mi-ma’amaqim*—that physician has not lost his faith. He has found the only faith that survives a clinical life: the faith that is a cry, and the cry that is, against all evidence, addressed.



Coda: A Liturgy for the Hour of Doubt

Let me end not with argument but with a practice. These five psalms can be carried, and the physician in the hour of doubt may find it useful to carry them as a small and portable liturgy, each one assigned to its theater and its moment.

When the doubt is in himself—after the missed diagnosis, the bad outcome, the M&M that left him questioning his own

hands—let him pray Psalm 13. Let him say ad-anah, how long, and let the saying of it be the proof that the relationship is still alive. And let him reach, unearned, for the va-ani, the “but I,” and walk back into the next room, performing the trust before he feels it, the craftsman renewing his loyalty to the craft.

When he is besieged—by the attorney, the administrator, the reviewer, the exhaustion that pours him out like water—let him pray Psalm 22. Let him name the bulls and the dogs without shame, let him confess that the system has made him a worm, and let the naming itself begin to reclaim the man. And let him remember the turn at verse 22, the thanksgiving that reaches generations he will never meet, the patients watered by a self-poured out.

When he despairs of the system—when the prosperity of the wicked has nearly made his feet slip—let him pray Psalm 73. Let him refuse to gaslight himself: the injustice is real. But let him also refuse to become the brute beast that bitterness would make of him, and let him return to the sanctuary, the bedside, the encounter the market cannot price, and find there the nearness that is his good.

When the patient will not recover—when there is no dawn to promise and nothing to do but stay—let him pray Psalm 88. Let him keep the dying addressed, named, accompanied before You in the dark room. Let him offer not the lie of meaning but the truth of presence, the apophatic faith of the one who will not leave.

And when he is climbing back—when the doubt is passing but the naive confidence is gone for good—let him pray Psalm 130. Let him be the watchman for the morning, certain of the dawn he cannot yet see, waiting with a hope that exceeds even the sunrise’s certainty, and let him turn at last to his patients and his students and his colleagues and say: wait. The light is coming. I have learned to watch for it. Watch with me.

This is the faith that survives a clinical life. Not the faith that never doubts, but the faith that doubts and still addresses; not the faith that is spared the depths, but the faith that calls from them; not the unbroken vessel, but the vav ketia, the fractured connector that joins precisely as broken. “Out of the depths I called You, O LORD.” May every physician in the hour of doubt find, in the calling itself, the answer he feared was withheld.

And may he find, too, what Asaph found in the sanctuary and the watchman found at the edge of the night: that the *hesed* he served when he could not feel it was serving him all along; that the patients he could not heal were healing something in him; that the system that ground him down could not reach the portion that was his forever; and that the God whose face was hidden was, in the hiding, never once absent from the room. “With the LORD is steadfast kindness, and great redemption is with Him.” The dawn-watcher keeps his watch. The fractured vav still joins. And out of the depths, the call goes up—and is answered, as it has always been answered, by the One who is nearest in the dark.

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