

Psalm 119:1-24

Psalm 117 was the shortest chapter in the entire Old Testament; **Psalm 119**, at 176 verses, is by far the longest - more than double the length of the next longest psalm. It consists of twenty two parts, each section is represented by a letter of the alphabet and includes eight verses, and the first word of each verse begins with that letter.

Each Hebrew letter (like Roman numerals) contains a numerical value. This is used in Jewish numerology (*gammetria*) for comparisons between words and phrases and names.

Jewish tradition calls this psalm the Great Alphabet.

Interestingly, we're reading this psalm during the season of Hanukkah, which emphasizes the eight days of the miracle of the oil. The Hebrew word for the number eight is "*shemona*", and it has the word "*shemen*," meaning "oil," as its root. Circumcision is on the eighth day. The eighth day of Tabernacles, like the eighth day of a Jewish wedding, is the time of intimate communion of the Bridegroom with His Bride.

While seven is the number of completion, eight represents the resurrection - an existence after or outside of linear time.

By basing the psalm on the alphabet, David is saying this is all-inclusive. In English, if something is covered "from A to Z," that means nothing is left out. But the Hebrew alphabet includes a much deeper meaning than that.

The Jews noted that 22 was significant in not just being the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet but also the number of generations from Adam to Jacob (Israel), the number of works of creation, and the number of books in the Jewish canon of the Bible. (Sources: Josephus; the book of Jubilees 2.23; cf. Kabbalah)

Acrostic passages occur in the following Psalms:

Psalm 9	2 verses for each of the 22 Hebrew consonants
Psalm 10	2 verses each
Psalm 25	1 verse each
Psalm 34	1 verse each
Psalm 37	2 verses each
Psalm 111	½ verse each
Psalm 112	½ verse each
Psalm 119	8 verses each
Psalm 145	1 verse each

Lamentations and **Proverbs 31** also employ this alphabetical arrangement.

The Hebrew alphabet contained deep mystical significance to Jews. A secret expanded alphabet of 72 letters was believed to compose the hidden Name of God:

"Rabbi Yose entered a cave and found in it a book which was stuck into a cleft in the rock at the far end of a cave. He brought it out, and when he opened it, he saw the shapes of seventy-two letters which were given to Adam the first man, and through which Adam knew all the wisdom of the Supernal Holy Beings and of all those who [sit] behind the millstones that turn behind the Veil of the Supernal Lights, and [knew] all the things that were to come to pass in the world until the day when a cloud that is on the west side would arise and cast darkness upon the world. Rabbi Yose called Rabbi Y'huda, and they began to study the book. But as soon as they had studied two or three pages of those letters, they found themselves looking at that Supernal Wisdom. When they came to delve into the mysteries of the book, and began to discuss them among themselves, a fiery flame and a gust of wind came and struck their hands, and the book disappeared. Rabbi Yose wept and said: "Perhaps, God forbid, we are guilty of sin, or is it that we are not worthy to know these things?" When they came to Rabbi Shim'on and told him what had happened, he said to them: "Perhaps you were trying to learn about the Messianic end from those letters?" They said to him: "That we do not know, for we have forgotten all of it." Rabbi Shim'on said to them: it is not the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, that too much be revealed to the world. But when the days of the Messiah approach, even the children of the world will be able to discover secrets of wisdom, and to know through them the Ends and the Calculations, and in that time it will be revealed to all..." (Zohar 1:117b-118a)
 -- "The Messiah Texts" by Raphael Patai, page 63

In this psalm the Name of God, YHWH, occurs 22 times - the same number as the letters of the alphabet.

A key scripture is **Psalm 119:18** - "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."

The author, possibly David, is a young man who finds himself in a situation which is clearly described: he is derided, oppressed, persecuted by those who despise the divine word (apostasy is all around him), and more particularly by a government hostile to the true religion. He seems to be arrested, expecting death. In the center of the psalm, the urgency of his prayer for ultimate deliverance intensifies in the 11th section under the letter Kaph to an urgent "how long!"

Of course, as in so many of the other psalms, this could describe the thoughts and emotions of Christ facing the cross.

The rabbis find deep meaning even in the shape of the letters of the alphabet.

See https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/137068/jewish/Letters-of-Light.htm

ALEPH

The design of an Alef is actually made up of three different letters: the letter yud or dot above; a yud or dot below; and a diagonal vav, or line suspended in between.

The yud above represents God, Who is above (or beyond) our comprehension. In comparison to His true essence, our understanding is like a mere dot.

The yud below represents a Yid or Yehudim — Jewish people who dwell here on earth. The only way that we can grasp God's wisdom — to the extent that a person is capable — is by humility. When we realize that we are but a dot or a speck compared to the All-Mighty and All-Powerful God, we become a vessel to receive His Divine wisdom.

The diagonal vav represents a Jew's faith — which unites him with God.

The vertical line in the vav indicates the submission of a subject to his king.

Psalm 119:1 - "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD."

Jewish translation: "Praiseworthy are those whose way is perfect, who walk with the law of the Lord."

"undefiled" = *tamiym* - without blemish, without spot, perfect, whole, sound, having integrity, upright in conduct

Used to describe Noah and Job:

- **Genesis 6:9** - "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God."

- **Job 1:1** - "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil."

Abraham was instructed to be "*tamiym*" in almost the same terminology:

- **Genesis 17:1** - "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty. Walk before Me and be blameless."

"law" = *torah* - The first 5 books of the Old Testament, but also generally the teaching or instruction or word from God

"Torah" can even sometimes refer to the whole Old Testament writings:

- **John 10:34** - "Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?" (from Psalm 82:6)

But Paul says the human race has no ability to achieve this:

- **Romans 3:10-11** - "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God."

- **Ecclesiastes 7:20** - "There is not a just man upon earth that sinneth not."

When God looked at Noah and Job and Abraham, because of their faith He saw His Son.

Only Christ walked completely undefiled or "perfect in the way" of the law of the Lord, so much so that He identified Himself with it:

- **John 14:6** - "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

If we believe in Him, then we also amazingly become part of the Way:

- **Acts 9:1-2** - "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out threats and murder against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest to ask for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any men or women belonging to the Way, he could bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem."

This is what is meant by John:

- **1 John 3:9** - "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."

And yet:

- **1 John 2:1** - "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous"

This can only mean that the Way is a continual walking in repentance and humility.

Psalm 119:2-3 - "Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart. They also do no iniquity: they walk in his ways."

To seek with the whole heart points back to the command of the Shema,

- **Deuteronomy 6:5** - "And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

i.e. this is your deepest desire, and your heart is not divided.

Rashi - Although they committed no injustice, their reward is incomplete unless they walked in His ways. And so he says (Psalm 43:15): "Shun evil and do good." Even though you shun evil, everything is not complete unless you do good. (Midrash Aggadah).

In fact the only way this is achieved is by getting a new heart, becoming a new person.

- **Psalm 51:10** - "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."

- **Ezekiel 11:19** - "And I will give them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh"

The gospel fulfills this in us. We cast off the old man Adam and put on the new man, Christ.

"precepts" = *piquwd* - directions which relate to special conduct, from a word meaning "to inspect."

Generally:

1) law - the first five books of the Old Testament; the Torah; the Pentateuch (Psalm 119:44)

2) testimonies - ordinances; God's standard of conduct according to the Ten Commandments (Psalm 119:2)

3) way - the pattern of life required by God's law (Psalm 119:30)

4) precepts - injunction; requirement; commandment (Psalm 119:69)

5) statutes - things inscribed; enacted laws (Psalm 119:8)

6) commandments - a distinct, authoritative order (Psalm 119:166)

7) judgments - a binding law; judicial decision (Psalm 119:7)

8) word - a general term for God's revelation (Psalm 119:11)

See <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/28517/what-is-the-difference-between-commandments-testimonies-statutes-precepts-ju>

Psalm 119:5 - "O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!"

"directed" = *kuwn* - directed, established

- **Proverbs 4:25-27** - "Let your eyes look forward; fix your gaze straight ahead. Make level paths for your feet, and all your ways will be sure (*kuwn*). Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your feet away from evil"

Psalm 119:6 - "Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments."

"ashamed" = *buwsh* - be ashamed, disappointed, defeated, to fail, to be confounded

and confused, troubled in mind

Possibly referring to the resurrection:

- **Daniel 12:2** - "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Psalm 119:7 - "I will praise thee with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned thy righteous judgments."

"uprightness" = *yosher* - straightness, uprightness, rightly or in the right manner, evenness (not up and down or intermittently)

This is the verse that relates to the Torah reading for the week:

- **Deuteronomy 9:5** - "Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness (*yosher*) of thine heart, dost thou go to possess their land: but for the wickedness of these nations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee, and that he may perform the word which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Psalm 119:8 - "I will keep thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly!"

David knows that without God's presence and strength he will not be able to keep His statutes.

This cry punctuates the end of the ALEPH portion. It recalls for us the cry of Jesus on the Cross, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" (**Matthew 27:46**)

BETH (Bet or Vet, also pronounced Bais)

The meaning of beis is bayis, which is Hebrew for "home." Why did G-d create the world? The Midrash tells us that God desired a home. By living the letter beis we make ourselves a dwelling place for God.

The three lines of the shape of beis are often interpreted as representing the three pillars on which the world stands: Torah, prayer, and charity (including good deeds)

The design of the beis is similar to the path of the sun, which rises in the east and sets in the west. The Midrash states that the letter beis is similar to the construction of the world.

"The letter Bet entered and said to the Creator: "Maker of the world, it would be good to create the world by me, as by me You are blessed Above and below. For Bet is *Berachah* (blessing)." The Creator replied to Bet: "Of course, I will create the world by you, and you shall be the basis of the world!"

Thus Genesis begins with "*Bereshit...*" In the beginning...

The design of the beis, the second letter of the alef-beis, comprises three lines: two horizontal and one vertical. These three lines represent the directions east, south, and west. The horizontal line on top represents the east. The vertical line is the south, and the horizontal line below is the west. But the "north" is not represented.

North represents evil, as it states: "From the north the evil will be released upon all the inhabitants of the land" (**Jeremiah 1:14**). Babylon, the nation that destroyed the First Holy Temple, in fact, attacked from the north.

This "open" exposed side exists within us, too. In a person, this is called the *yetzer hara* – the evil inclination, which tempts and cajoles us to sin.

Psalm 119:9 - "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word."

Or, "By what means can a young man purify his way, so as to keep it according to Thy word?"

Psalm 119:10 - "With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments."

To wander like a sheep, who unthinkingly gets further and further away from the shepherd and the flock, one blade of grass at a time, until he can't find his way back.

Psalm 119:11 - "Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee."

"word" = *'imrah* - not the usual word *dabar*. The feminine form of a root used poetically of God's speech, discourse or word.

To hide His word in your heart is to hear it, understand it, receive it, mix it with faith by submitting to it, and to store it away in your memory, preserved as a choice treasure. In times of trouble, it will serve as a comfort. When temptation comes it can be wielded against the Evil One as Jesus did in the wilderness (**Luke 4**).

Psalm 119:12-13 - "Blessed art thou, O LORD: teach me thy statutes. With my lips have I declared all the judgments of thy mouth."

Once hidden in the heart, God's word can then come forth through our words and our deeds, manifest to the world.

Psalm 119:14 - "I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies, as much as in all riches."

The word of God, once hidden in the heart and manifest through our life, brings great joy "above all riches."

Psalm 119:15 - "I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways."

"meditate" = *siyach* - talk of, meditate on, ponder, commune with oneself about, to germinate and put forth shoots, to sing.

We return again and again to find new meaning and applications of God's word, like an animal chewing the cud to get every last bit of nourishment. This leads to new life, and creativity resulting on song and further praise.

Psalm 119:16 - "I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word."

This ends the section under the letter BETH

GIMMEL

Gimmel has several meanings. One is to nourish until ripe, which the midrash relates to the budding of Aaron's rod (**Numbers 17:17-24**). Another meaning of gimmel is similar, "to be weaned."

The design of the letter gimmel is explained in the Talmud as a rich man running to give charity to a poor person. According to Kabbalah, the design of the gimmel is composed of two letters. The first is a vav, representing man, because he stands upright. To the man's left side is the second letter, a yud, which signifies both the foot and the act of giving.

The meaning is, your money doesn't really belong to you; God loaned it to you so that when a poor person comes along, you can give him his money. You even have an obligation to run after him and "return" the money; it never belonged to you in the first place. This is stewardship, not really "charity" as we think of it.

The greatest level of charity is to set a person on his feet, nourish him until he's ripe, and then wean him so that he never has to ask for money again.

(The letter's shape looks like a camel, and is similar to the Hebrew word for camel, gamal. The word also is similar to gomel, to be kind or benevolent.)

The numerical value of gimmel is three. The Talmud says that the number three represents the Torah, which was given to the Jewish people in the third month of the year (Sivan) to our teacher Moses (the third of three children) on the third day of separation between husband and wife (the prohibition of marital relations, as instructed by G-d). The Torah was issued to a people of three groups: the Kohanim, the Levites and the Israelites. Finally, the Torah itself is divided into three segments: the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets and the Scriptures. The power of the number three is its ability to combine two contrasting forces—to bring about integration.

The word gimmel in Aramaic is gamla, or bridge. Just as the gimmel signifies the

connection between the poor and the wealthy person, so does it represent the merger, the bridge, between the material world and the reality of God.

Psalm 119:17 - "Deal bountifully with thy servant, that I may live, and keep thy word."

Targum: "render good" - by grace, in the same way the charitable help the poor.

Psalm 119:18 - "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."

"open" = *galah* - uncover, strip off clothing to make naked, reveal

We are all blind to spiritual revelation unless God opens or "uncovers" our eyes.

- **2 Kings 6:17** - "And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha."

Paul prays "that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know the hope of His calling, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and the surpassing greatness of His power to us who believe." (**Ephesians 1:18**)

Psalm 119:19-20 - "I am a stranger in the earth: hide not thy commandments from me. My soul breaketh for the longing that it hath unto thy judgments at all times."

"stranger" = *ger* - stranger, alien, foreigner, sojourner, a person living out of his own country

- **Exodus 22:21** - "Thou shalt neither vex a stranger nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."

We are all strangers in a strange land, pilgrims passing through.

- **1 Chronicles 29:15** - "For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding."

Because we are strangers, we need His commandments to remind us of our true citizenship in heaven (**Philippians 3:20**).

Psalm 119:21 - "Thou hast rebuked the proud that are cursed, which do err from thy commandments."

The proud, like Lucifer who desired to be like God, and the fallen angels, who kept not their first estate, or Pharaoh who asked "who is the Lord that we should obey him?" Or the scribes and Pharisees who gnashed their teeth at Jesus, vowing to have him killed.

Or any of us, who in a similar manner puff ourselves up and rebel against God.

- **Matthew 25:41** - "Then He will say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'"

Psalm 119:22 - "Remove from me reproach and contempt; for I have kept thy testimonies."

"remove" = *galal* - roll off, remove

- **Joshua 5:9** - "And the LORD said unto Joshua, This day have I rolled away (*galal*) the reproach of Egypt from off you."

Psalm 119:23 - "Princes also did sit and speak against me: but thy servant did meditate in thy statutes."

Like Jesus before Herod and Pilate.

- **Matthew 10:19** - "And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak."

Psalm 119:24 - "Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counsellors."

The Gospel is the whole counsel of God relating to salvation, with Christ as the wonderful counsellor.

- **Isaiah 9:6** - "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

This ends the section under GIMMEL.