

ARTICLE ON TEHILLIM GROUPS BY CHAYA BAUMWOLSPINER

To be honest I was rather surprised when Binah asked me to write about *Tehillim* groups for their *Shavuot* edition (for the *yahrzeit* of Dovid Hamelech no less). After all, *Binah* has its *choshuve* 'Rebbetzins', Horowitz, Twerski, Juravel and more. They surely didn't need me. But not to be outdone I *schlepped* down my dusty Artscroll *Tehillim* and re-read the Introduction, dialed the *Chazak* line and heard a few tapes on *Tehillim* and even called a friend who's a *Tehillim* teacher. If *Binah* wanted my insights on *Sefer Tehillim* then I wouldn't let them down.

But much as I looked for elevated words to capture the essence of the eternal psalmist and illuminate the sweetness of his songs, the symphony wouldn't come. What could I write about a *sefer* that's described as the 'music of the soul' without sounding somewhat off-key? What could I comment on the ultimate king of *Yisroel* who endured the worst of suffering and yet yearned to praise his Maker without appearing frivolous? What could I say *enough*? The topic seemed frighteningly lofty!

It was only after saying a couple of *kapitle* myself that it finally dawned on me that what *Binah* really wanted from me was my take on *Tehillim groups* (for the uninitiated, *groups* of women who come together to say *Tehillim*) and I could leave the *Tehillim* themselves to the experts. Now that was more my speed! So it was back to business as usual after all, and armed with notebook and pen I readily contacted Mrs. Shaindy Kappel of *Aneinu*, the popular *Tehillim* initiative, little knowing that she'd imbue me with a strong shot of the excitement and spirited inspiration I'd wanted to convey myself.

BINAH: Chochmas noshim bonsa baisa! (1.) We're told that the wise woman builds her house and throughout our history Jewish women have been wise enough to build their homes with prayer and supplication, so much so indeed that the stereotype Yiddishe mama and her well-worn Sefer Tehillim are often deemed inseparable. But the concept of the Tehillim group is relatively new. Women have been successfully saying Tehillim in their own kitchens for generations. What's the idea of asking them to say Tehillim in someone else's?

SHAINDY KAPPEL: Let me make clear that the Tehillim group should never be considered a replacement for the heartfelt tears that our Jewish women have always

spilled in private over *Sefer Tehillim*. Moreover, it is essentially *not* an entirely new idea since in earlier times when women were not fluent in *kria* (reading) they'd gather together with a *Tehillim zoger* (sayer) more learned than they and repeat the holy words of the psalms as she said them. In more recent times there have been large, even international *Tehillim* gatherings of women in times of danger or fear, as well as *Tehillim* said in unison before and after countless women's gatherings, large and small (2.). Our *Tehillim* are part of us!

So why did we need *Tehillim* groups? How they came about is in itself a clear manifestation of *Hashgocha Protis* (Divine Providence); how they grew and flourished is another. Their origin goes back some seventeen years when it became painfully evident that the *tzoras* (problems) of *Klal Yisroel* were spiraling out of control. Not only was there growing strife in *Eretz Yisroel* and an increasing numbers of *cholim* (sick people) at home, but the tragedies themselves were often bizarre. A tiny baby has a dreaded disease; a new father is felled in an accident; a healthy mother succumbs in her prime: something had to be done! I felt the pain intensely. Although I was still a young wife and mother I wanted to do something, anything to help my people, but what? Saying *Tehillim* with a few friends was an option, but could I be doing more?

An answer was not long in coming and it came from an unexpected source. As a result of attending a local parlor meeting (something I didn't regularly do) a neighborhood *Rov* and his *Rebbetzin* (whose *shul* we do *not* attend) insisted on driving me home (although the distance was really very short) and as a result I, a busy housewife with several children including a one-year old baby found myself telling the esteemed *Rabbi Dovid Weinberger shlita*, (*Rov* of Congregation *Shaarei Tefilla* in Lawrence, Long Island) that I wanted to 'save' *Klal Yisroel* from the terrible catastrophes that were suffering. My audacity was matched (surprisingly) by the *Rov's* credulity in my good intentions. The next day I found myself in his *shul* office where he outlined to me his vision of starting *Tehillim* groups for women using a collection of *Tehillim* booklets he'd received from *Eretz Yisroel* (another *Hashgocha Protis* story) that would allow the participants of the group to complete *Sefer Tehillim* together in a single session. Such groups, he envisaged, would continue this practice on a *regular* basis and not only in times of crisis, thereby

providing a *shemira* (protection) from problems before they even arose. It would be a boon to *Klal Yisroel*, not only for the present but also for the future.

I found the idea intriguing and I was bowled over by its potential. I suppose you can say that at that moment the seeds for *Aneinu* were sown.

Can you expand upon this for Binah readers? What are the dynamics of the Tehillim group and what are its advantages over the more traditional Tehillim gathering?

Practically speaking the format of a *Tehillim* group is very simple. With one hundred and fifty chapters of *Sefer Tehillim* divided into a number of booklets each containing several psalms, a participant takes a booklet or two, reads it at her own pace, and together with the other participants in her group completes *Sefer Tehillim* in a single session of about a half an hour (something that would normally take an individual at least a couple of hours) hereby gaining the merit of having (personally) completed the *sefer*, a tremendous *zechus*! The *Tehillim* are normally said on behalf of a list of *cholim*, those in need of *shidduchim* or any other worthy cause, often belonging to the neighborhood or known to the participants, and are usually read aloud during the session by the group leader (after which a *mi'shabeirach* can be made) (3). (While some groups also read an extended list comprised of people desperate for *refuos* (recovery) and *yeshuos* (salvation) internationally, many are unable to spend the extra time this takes) (4).

Such are the advantages of reciting *Tehillim* as a *group*. *Chazal* (5) state that the *Eiberster* finds greater favor in the prayer of the *tzibbur* (congregation) than the prayer of the individual and Rabbi Weinberger (who is our Rabbinic advisor) has explained that this refers to women who are praying together as well as to men. It's not just (the merit of their) *Tehillim*; it's the potency of prayer and the *mitzvos* of being *mevaker cholim* (literally visiting the sick) and *nosein b'ol* (feeling the pain of others) rolled into one (6). *This* is the unique beauty of the *Tehillim* group: we are harnessing the power of the *tzibbur* to the power of the immortal words of Dovid Hamelech and asking the *Eibershter* to bestow His Mercy (7) on *Klal Yisroel* in response (SIDEBAR 1). I would venture to say that while we can't begin to understand how this works, women sense that by joining a *Tehillim* group they're becoming part of something 'big'. The extraordinary growth of *Aneinu* and the *Tehillim* groups in its fold over the past seventeen years would seem to support this.

There are now literally thousands of Tehillim groups in every part of the world. What part has Aneinu played in their development?

I never intended to head an organization or to found an organization at all. As the mother of a large family I was simply looking for a way of helping *Klal Yisroel* on a local level, in my own community and perhaps in those nearby. But the *Eibershter* willed it differently. While we began with a single group of eight or nine people others heard about us and wanted to follow our example and this is how *Aneinu* started. (Publicity has never been our problem; word of mouth travels fast!). Initially I was able to provide them with extra sets of *Tehillim* booklets from *Eretz Yisroel*, the type we were using ourselves, but after about a year –and twenty sets on - no more were available. Fortuitously by that time I was already receiving the help and support of a selfless and talented young mother who was computer savvy (a novelty in those times) and it was due to her tireless efforts that we soon began to print booklets of our own. With painstaking skill and patience she divided *Sefer Tehillim* into twenty-four sections that would each take the same approximate time to recite, designed an attractive cover and found a *frum* printer and set him to work. The fruits of her labor are the beautiful *Tehillim Mechulak* that I have sent out to countless *Tehillim* groups and continue to send to this day (along with recommendations to assist those starting groups of their own and an occasional newsletter sharing inspirational stories derived from the power of saying *Tehillim*) (In recent years we have had the merit of providing other services too; *see* SIDEBAR 2). Although we are a very large organization I try to liaise with many of the groups, answering their questions, proffering advice, sharing their *nachas* and sometimes their sorrow. In more recent years we have had the merit of providing

Can you give us some examples of where Tehillim groups can be found?

Almost any place that there are Jews! Hong Kong, South Africa, Australia to name but a few. In some areas the density of *Tehillim* groups is staggering; neighbors on the bloc, teachers in the teachers' room and workers in an office, and often students in school and tenants in an apartment building too, sometimes many times over in one city or town. The Catskills in the summer has a high proportion of *Tehillim* groups, and some of these groups continue to the city year round. In other areas the number of *frum* Jews is always sparse, but they have their *Tehillim* groups all the same. I recently received a request for

two sets of booklets from a woman in Louisville, Kentucky (where there are only ten observant families in the entire state!) who assured me that she'd make sure that they'd be well used. And they are! I have to add that we have been printing our *Tehillim* with an English transliteration for many years, thereby making them accessible to women of more limited backgrounds. *Tehillim* speak to the heart! We live in troubled times; even those with scant affiliation to *mitzvos* are yearning to connect with the *Eibershter*. How else can we explain the flourishing *Tehillim* groups in far-flung places across the globe? (8). We're talking about thousands of women, many of whom have been attending their group on a regular basis –anything from once a week to every day –for five, ten or even fifteen years. Imagine how many *Tehillim* this means!

How do women manage to make such a long-term commitment? Life has its ups and downs which must sometimes make it difficult. How do they keep on coming?

Above all they recognize the importance of what they're doing; they feel themselves an indispensable part of a group. (Of course when numbers do not allow the completion of the entire *sefer*, the *Tehillim* still have great value). People who come to a group invariably vouch for the spiritual 'electricity' in the air; they experience a strong sense of connecting to one another (9) and of connecting to the *Eibershter* and they keep coming back because they want to have more.

Naturally women attend groups that best suit their schedules and their family needs so that there are *Tehillim* groups morning, afternoon and evening (10). Some groups meet on *Shabbos* afternoon, others meet at *Shalos Seudas* time and serve a delicious spread; some end with refreshments, others with *halochas* of *Shemiras Haloshon*. And it's certainly not unusual for women to bring their children along, encouraging them to play with their toys while the women say *Tehillim*. Credit must surely go to the wonderful hostesses who lead the groups and *always* have their homes ready to receive them (and sometimes their kids, mess and all) week after week. I am amazed by their endless perseverance and truly grateful for it. So much so indeed that while I don't seek publicity for *Aneinu* and have previously refused to be interviewed, I agreed to this feature to give thanks and praise to our leaders. They are true *noshim tzidkonios*! May they be blessed abundantly with real *Yiddishe nachas*!

I am surprised you didn't include 'success' as a major force that keeps the Tehillim groups afloat. What could be more encouraging to Tehillim groups than a hefty dose of Divine Favor in response to Tehillim that they say?

We wouldn't be human if we didn't experience pleasure when we see the *Eibershter* saying 'yes' to someone we *daven* for, and *Boruch Hashem* we have all witnessed tremendous *yeshuos* (gifts of salvation) in our lives and the lives of others. Health hazards have been healed, accidents averted, *shidduchim* sealed and *parnossa* provided; each one of us has her own personal stories. Indeed, members of groups started years ago continue to write me about the numerous *nissim* in their lives they attribute to their *Tehillim*. Clearly saying *Tehillim* creates a (spiritual) 'bank account' that accrues credit for the one who recites *Tehillim* as much as the one he recites for (11).

But this is not what keeps us going! We don't say *Tehillim* for the rewards. We say *Tehillim* because they give us *life*, a richer and more spiritual life than we could aspire to alone. Dovid Hamelech lived to come close to the *Eibershter* whether the answer was 'yes' or 'no', whether he saw His Favor or not. His whole life was a *song* to his Maker, a glorious testimony of the trust and faith with which he invested *all* his days. How fortunate are we that he has bequeathed to us the words of this song so we can aspire to do the same!

FOOTNOTES

1. *Mishlei* 14:1
2. In response to the massive threat to the security of *Eretz Yisroel* in the Gulf War, the suicide bombings and the Intifada (as well as problems at home) several women began promoting *Tehillim* awareness and *ahavas Yisroel* as individuals in the 1990s, largely through providing speakers (in conjunction with *Tehillim* recitation) to schools and *shuls* and arranging gatherings for *Tehillim* recitation in several localities. A large *Tehillim* gathering was planned in Brooklyn in 200, inexplicably postponed several times, and was finally called for a date in September. The date was September 11th. In spite (or because of) the tragic events of that day the organizers received the encouragement of the *Gedolim* to hold the event.

3. *Mi' shabeirah* , a prayer imploring for Divine Mercy is not said by all women's groups
4. For an international list of *cholim* call:201 837 0354, or e mail keytfilla@gmail.com
5. *Brochos* 8a
6. Heard from *HaRav* Zev Leff *shlita* (who also gave the organization its name *Aneinu*, answer us)
7. The *gemaria* (numerical value) of *tzibbur* is the same as the *gematria* of *rachamim* (mercy)
8. *Eretz Yisroel* maintains a separate organization of a similar nature. For information contact 011 972 2 537 8813
9. KEY, (not to be confused with *keytfilla* cited above) is a separate organization (unconnected to *Aneinu*) that includes *Tehillim* amongst its efforts to promote *achdus* (unity) within *Klal Yisroel* and can be contacted at 917 903 8293
10. Some authorities do not permit the recitation of *Tehillim* at night except when *cholim* are in an extreme state of emergency. Others do not permit *any Tehillim* to be said at night.
11. This writer randomly called a few *Tehillim* groups in her neighborhood to verify this contention. The first began last November and is comprised of single girls who meet weekly as a merit for *shidduchim* for themselves and their friends. Although none of the participants have been successful as yet, six of their friends have become engaged in the interim. The second, also weekly was set up two years ago as a merit for a girl with a chronic disease who has since enjoyed tremendous relief. And the third, now in its seventh year meeting daily (*Purim* and *erev Yom Kippur* included) attests to numerous *nissim* but, as the organizer adds "We don't take any credit. *Hakodosh Boruch Hu* does it all!"

SIDEBAR 1:

WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR TEHILLIM WHEN THE EIBERSHTER SAYS 'NO'?

People are often despondent when they fail to see their many hours of *Tehillim* yielding the results they seek. What happens to all those *Tehillim* they said for a *choleh* (sick

person) if the *choleh* appears not to recover in response? In answer to this question the *Steipler Gaon ztl* gave a fivefold answer:

The *tefilos* may reduce the suffering of the *choleh*

The *tefilos* may lengthen the life of the *choleh*

The *tefilos* may eventually bring the *choleh* a complete recovery

The *tefilos* will be a *zechus* for the *choleh* even if (*ch'v*) he does not recover since they were said on his account

The *tefilos* bring *yeshuos* to others in need.

SIDEBAR 2:

WHAT ELSE DOES ANEINU DO?

SHIURIM: *Tehillim* are recited together weekly through Teleconference, followed by an explanation of the verses by a prominent speaker. Additionally there is a *shiur* on *erev Rosh Chodesh* that is arranged by *Aneinu* and can be heard on *Kol Haloshon*. *Tehillim* are also recited periodically on Teleconference for urgent issues; sessions have been held for the boys in Japan and for Sholom Rabashkin..

TEHILLIM CARDS FOR CHUPPAHS AND BRISIM

Beautiful cards containing appropriate *Tehillim* for *chuppahs* and *brissim* can be obtained for personal use and for those interested in starting a small *gemach* in their homes. Cards are laminated and can be purchased with *ma'aser* money.

For more information on all the above contact Shaindy@aneinu.com or call 516 237 6083