

ספר תהילים נג | Tehillim / Psalms 53

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The Beginning of Wisdom

This week's study is from *Tehillim / Psalms 53:1-6*, the psalm opens saying, א לְמַנְצֵחַ עַל-מִחְלַת מְשָׁפִיל, *For the choir director; according to Mahalath. A Maskil of David. (NASB)* David opens making the statement, ב אָמַר נָבֵל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹהִים הַשְׁחִיתוּ וְהִתְעִיבוּ עָוֹל אֵין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב: *53:1 The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God,' They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; There is no one who does good. (NASB)* The concept here is that the person who says God does not exist, he is filled with injustice and abominations. Why do you think a person who denies the existence of God would be filled with these things? He continues saying, ג אֱלֹהִים מְשָׁמִים הַשְׁקִיף עַל-בְּנֵי אָדָם לְרְאוֹת הַיֵּשׁ מְשָׁפִיל דְרִשׁ אֶת-אֱלֹהִים: *53:2 God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men To see if there is anyone who understands, Who seeks after God. 53:3 Every one of them has turned aside; together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one. (NASB)* Based on David's understanding of the Lord from the Torah, the Lord looks down upon man not for destruction, but to see who upon this earth is seeking Him. The conclusion is that none have what the Lord is looking for. What is the Lord looking for in our lives? David continues saying, ה הֲלֹא יָדְעוּ פְעֻלֵי אָנוֹן אֲכָלִי עֲמִי, *53:4 Have the workers of wickedness no knowledge, Who eat up My people as though they ate bread And have not called upon God? (NASB)* Note the word poaly (פְעֻלֵי) is a reference to those who work iniquity outwardly as opposed to those who work iniquity inwardly. Is there such a thing as working iniquity inwardly? He continues saying, ו שָׁם פָּחַדוּ-פָחַד לֹא-הָיָה פָחַד כִּי-אֱלֹהִים פָּנָר עֲצָמוֹת הַנָּהָד, *53:5 There they were in great fear where no fear had been; For God scattered the bones of him who encamped against you; You put them to shame, because God had rejected them. (NASB)* David gives an example of the unrighteous who encamp to make war against God's people. The Psalm concludes saying, ז מִי-יִתֵּן מִצִּיּוֹן יִשְׁעוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשׁוֹב אֱלֹהִים שְׁבוֹת עֲמוֹ יִגַּל יַעֲקֹב יִשְׂרָאֵל: *53:6 Oh, that the salvation of Israel would come out of Zion! When God restores His captive people, Let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad. (NASB)* Note how the Lord is the One who causes the salvation of His people. The Lord is the One who brings salvation by His power and by His Spirit. How does the Lord bring victory and salvation by His Spirit? One possibility may be that the Lord, by His Spirit, has an effect in the hearts of men. Many examples may be given from the Torah, one such example may be taken from how the Lord dealt with Abimelech, Abraham, and Sarah his wife.

עברית Hebrew	ארמי Aramaic	ελληνικός Greek
ספר תהלים פרק נג	סמר טוביה פרק נג	ΨΑΛΜΟΙ 53
א לְמַנְצֵחַ עַל-מִחְלַת מְשָׁפִיל לְדָוִד: ב אָמַר נָבֵל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹהִים הַשְׁחִיתוּ וְהִתְעִיבוּ עָוֹל אֵין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב: ג אֱלֹהִים מְשָׁמִים הַשְׁקִיף עַל-בְּנֵי אָדָם לְרְאוֹת הַיֵּשׁ מְשָׁפִיל דְרִשׁ אֶת-אֱלֹהִים: ד פְּלוֹ סָג יַחְדָּו נֶאֱלָחוּ אֵין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב אֵין גַּם אָחַד:	לשבחא על פורענות רשיעיא דיא מפסין שמא דקיריס שכלא טבא על יד דוד: ב אמר נבל בליביה לית אלהא פרע מיניה מטול היכנא חבילו רשיעיא אורחתהון רחיקו מן טבא דאישתכח בהון עילא לית דעביד טב:	53:1 εις το τέλος υπερ μαελεθ συνεσεως τῷ Δαυιδ ειπεν ἄφρων εν καρδια αυτου ουκ εστιν θεος διεφθαρσαν και εβδελυχθησαν εν ανομιας ουκ εστιν ποιων αγαθον 53:2 ο θεος εκ του ουρανου διεκυψεν επι τους υιους των ανθρωπων του ιδειν ει εστιν συνιων η εκζητων τον θεον 53:3 παντες εξεκλιναν ἅμα ηχρεωθησαν ουκ εστιν ποιων αγαθον ουκ εστιν εως ενος

<p>ה הלא ידעו פְּעֵלִי אָנוּן אֶכְלִי עֲמִי אֶכְלוּ לָחֶם אֱלֹהִים לֹא קָרְאוּ: ו שָׁם פָּחַדוּ-פָּחַד לֹא-הָיָה פָּחַד בְּי-אֱלֹהִים פָּנָה עֲצָמוֹת חֲנָה הִבְשָׁתָה בְּי-אֱלֹהִים מֵאָסָם: ז מִי-יִתֵּן מִצִּיּוֹן יִשְׁעוֹת יִשְׂ- רָאֵל בְּשׁוּב אֱלֹהִים שְׁבוֹת עִמּוֹ יִגַּל יַעֲקֹב יִשְׂמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p>	<p>ג ברם אלהא משמיא אודיק על בני אנשא למחמי האית די ישכיל באוריתא תבע אולפן מן קדם יהוה: ד כולהון זרו כחדא לאחורא איטנפו לית דעבד טב לית דעביד טב אפילו חד: ה הלא ידעון כל עבדי שקרא דמן קדמוי מתיהיב מזונא ומה דין אכלי עמי סעדון לחמא שמא דיהוה לא בריכו: ו תמן דלחו דלוחא מן פסיליהון דלית בהון צרוך למדלח למדחל ארום אלהא מבדר תקוף משירית חייביא בהיתתא יתהון ארום מימרא דיהוה רחיקינן: ז מן הוא די יהיב מן ציון פורקניא דישראל אילהין יהוה כד יחזור מימרא דיהוה גלות דעמיה ירנן דבית יעקב יחדי דבית ישראל:</p>	<p>53:4 οὐχὶ γνώσονται πάντες οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν οἱ ἔσθοντες τὸν λαόν μου βρώσει ἄρτου τὸν θεὸν οὐκ ἐπεκαλέσαντο 53:5 ἐκεῖ φοβηθήσονται φόβον οὐδ' οὐκ ἦν φόβος ὅτι ὁ θεὸς διεσκορπίσεν ὁστᾶ ἄνθρωπαρέσκων κατησχύνθησαν ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἐξουδένωσεν αὐτούς 53:6 τίς δώσει ἐκ Σιων τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ ἐν τῷ ἐπιστρέψαι κύριον τὴν αἰχμαλωσίαν τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀγαλλιάσεται Ἰακωβ καὶ εὐφρανθήσεται Ἰσραὴλ</p>
<p>Tehillim / Psalms 53 For the choir director; according to Mahalath. A Maskil of David. 53:1 The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God,’ They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; There is no one who does good. 53:2 God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men To see if there is anyone who understands, Who seeks after God. 53:3 Every one of them has turned aside; together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one. 53:4 Have the workers of wickedness no knowledge, Who eat up My people as though they ate bread And have not called upon God? 53:5 There they were in great fear where no fear had been; For God scattered the bones of him who encamped against you; You put them to shame, because God had rejected them. 53:6 Oh, that the salvation of Israel would come out of Zion! When God restores His captive people, Let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad. (NASB)</p>	<p>Toviyah / Psalms Chapter 53 53:1 For praise; on the punishment of the wicked who profane the name of the Lord; good teaching composed by David. 53:2 The fool said in his heart, ‘‘There is no God taking retribution’’; because of this the wicked have corrupted their ways; they have become estranged from goodness, for iniquity is found in them; there is none that does good. 53:3 Yet God looked down from heaven on the sons of men to see whether there is one who will grow wise in the Torah, seeking instruction from the presence of the Lord. 53:4 All of them alike have turned aside; they have fouled themselves, there is none that does good, not even one. 53:5 Do not all the doers of lies know that food is given from his presence? And why then have the eaters of my people dined on bread, [but] not blessed the name of the Lord? 53:6 There they were greatly afraid of their idols, in whom is nothing to fear, for God scatters the might of the army of sinners; you put them to shame, because the word of the Lord abhors them. 53:7 Who is it who gives the redemption of Israel from Zion but the Lord? When the word of the Lord brings back the exiles of his people, those of the house of Jacob will be glad, those of the house of Israel will rejoice. (EMC)</p>	<p>Psalmoi / Psalms 53 For the end, a Psalm of David upon Maeleth, of instruction. 53:1 The fool has said in his heart, There is no God. They have corrupted themselves, and become abominable in iniquities: there is none that does good. 53:2 God looked down from heaven upon the sons of men, to see if there were any that understood, or sought after God. 53:3 They have all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that does good, there is not even one. 53:4 Will none of the workers of iniquity know, who devour my people as they would eat bread? they have not called upon God. There were they greatly afraid, where there was no fear: 53:5 or God has scattered the bones of the men-pleasers; they were ashamed, for God despised them. 53:6 Who will bring the salvation of Israel out of Sion? When the Lord turns the captivity of his people, Jacob shall exult, and Israel shall be glad. (LXX)</p>

א לְמִנְצֵחַ עַל-מַחְלַת מְשֻׁכִּיל, א This week’s study is from *Tehillim / Psalms 53:1-6*, the psalm opens saying, *א לְמִנְצֵחַ עַל-מַחְלַת מְשֻׁכִּיל* : *For the choir director; according to Mahalath. A Maskil of David. (NASB)* Here we find the Hebrew word *מַחְלַת* (*Mahalath*) transliterated into English. According to the Strong’s Concordance, this word corresponds to the number H4257 which matches the Hebrew *מַחְלַת* (*machalath*), which occurs 2 times in the Hebrew bible according to the Hebrew concordance (*Tehillim / Psalms 53 and 88*).

Tehillim / Psalms 88:1

A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah. For the choir director; according to Mahalath Lean-

א שיר מזמור לבני קרח למנצח על-מחלת משכיל להימן האזרחי:

Note how in *Tehillim / Psalms 88:1*, the word Mahalath is juxtaposed to Leannoth (מחלת לענות) and the word maskil (משכיל) which we have discussed in earlier studies. Most lexicons translate Mahalath as “harp” or “stringed instrument.” The Septuagint translation of *Tehillim / Psalms 88:1 and 53:1* say the following:

Tehillim / Psalms 53:1

εις τὸ τέλος ὑπὲρ μαελεθ συνέσεως τῷ Δαυιδ εἶπεν ἄφρων ἐν καρδία αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν θεὸς διεφθάρησαν καὶ ἐβδελύχθησαν ἐν ἀνομίαις οὐκ ἔστιν ποιῶν ἀγαθόν

Tehillim / Psalms 88:1

ὡδὴ ψαλμοῦ τοῖς υἱοῖς Κορε εἰς τὸ τέλος ὑπὲρ μαελεθ τοῦ ἀποκριθῆναι συνέσεως Αἰμαν τῷ Ἰσραηλίτῃ κύριε ὁ θεὸς τῆς σωτηρίας μου ἡμέρας ἐκέκραξα καὶ ἐν νυκτὶ ἐναντίον σου

Isn't it interesting in the Septuagint, the word מחלת (Mahalath) transliterated is transliterated into Greek (μαελεθ). Is this the reason why this word is also transliterated into the English texts? Is this an indicator of the dependence the English translations have on the Septuagint translation? Based upon the Septuagint translation of *Tehillim / Psalms 53 and 88*, the rabbis who translated the Septuagint on this psalm wrote that this is “An ode of a psalm for the sons of Korach; for the director, by the harp, to respond for contemplation to Heman the Israelite” (*Tehillim / Psalms 88*). Based upon the Greek translation, the word Mahalath is transliterated and interpreted to mean “harp.” This might be the reason why most Hebrew Lexicons translate this word as “harp” or “stringed instrument.” The word makhal (מחל) means “forgive, erase, cancel” and Leannoth (לענות) is a verb meaning “to answer, reply, respond, consent, or testify.” One other place we find this word is from *Jeremiah 25:29*, כֹּחַ כִּי הִנֵּה בְעִיר אֲשֶׁר נִקְרָא שְׁמִי עָלֶיהָ אֲנֹכִי מַחֵל לְהָרַע וְאַתֶּם הַנִּזְקָה, 25:29 ‘For behold, I am beginning to work calamity in this city which is called by My name, and shall you be completely free from punishment? You will not be free from punishment; for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth,’ declares the Lord of hosts.’ (NASB) Note how this word is translated to mean “beginning” in *Jeremiah 25:29* suggesting that the root word is actually חל (khal) meaning “to begin, commence, or start.” The Septuagint translation of *Jeremiah 25:29* ὅτι ἐν πόλει ἐν ἧ ὀνομάσθη τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐπ’ αὐτήν ἐγὼ ἄρχομαι κακῶσαι καὶ ὑμεῖς καθάρσει οὐ μὴ καθαρισθῆτε ὅτι μάχαιραν ἐγὼ καλῶ ἐπὶ τοὺς καθημένους ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς statates “I begin to afflict” (ἐγὼ ἄρχομαι κακῶσαι) the city. Based upon the Septuagint translation, and the words Mahalath Maskil (מחלת משכיל), the title in *Tehillim / Psalm 53:1* may be rendered (translated) as “a song on the beginning of wisdom” (למנצח על-מחלת משכיל). This is very significant because David is teaching about wisdom in his psalm and therefore we need to pay careful attention to what he is trying to say regarding the beginning of wisdom. This is not just simply a song to be played with the harp. It is a bit disheartening to think that the translators of the English bible did not do diligence in finding the meaning of this word. However, based upon our analysis, David is speaking of the beginning of wisdom. David opens making the statement, ב 53:1 *The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God,’ They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; There is no one who does good.* (NASB) The title to the Psalm suggests that the beginning of wisdom is to believe that He (God) exists and to fear Him, to keep Him in high regard, including His word (the commandments and all of Scripture). Is this not consistent with what we know to be true regarding the beginning of wisdom? (*Tehillim / Psalms 111:10, Mishley / Proverbs 9:10*)

ב אָמַר נָבֵל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹהִים הִשְׁחִיתוּ וְהִתְעִיבוּ עוֹל אֵין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב:

53:1 טוֹב: *The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God,' They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; There is no one who does good. (NASB)* The concept here is that the person who says God does not exist, he is filled with injustice and abominations. Why do you think a person who denies the existence of God would be filled with these things? Note how David says that the one who says in his heart, “ein Elohim” (אֵין אֱלֹהִים) “there is no God” is הַשְׁחִיתוּ “to spoil, destroy, or behave immorally.” This word “heshkhitu” (הַשְׁחִיתוּ) reminds us of the Torah’s use of the word HaMashkhit (הַמְשַׁחֵת) from the Torah in Parashat Bo (*Shemot / Exodus 10:1-13:16*). According to *Shemot / Exodus 12:23*, we find the word הַמְשַׁחֵת that translates to mean “destroyer” according to the NASB. According to the Hebrew Scriptures we read, פֶּרַשְׁתָּ בְּאֵי סֵפֶר שְׁמוֹת פֶּרֶק יב פְּסוּק כג וְעָבַר יְהוָה לְנֹגֵף אֶת-מִצְרַיִם וְרָאָה אֶת-הַדָּם עַל-הַמַּשְׁקוֹף וְעַל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת: *12:23 'For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to come in to your houses to smite you. (NASB)* Based upon the Hebrew text, the Lord God Almighty is the one who sees the blood on the lintel (הַמַּשְׁקוֹף) and on the doorposts (הַמְּזוּזוֹת) and having seen the blood would not allow the destroyer (הַמְשַׁחֵת) to enter into the house and strike down the first born. The following English translations from the NIV, OJB, KJV, and CJB bibles agree with the NASB translation.

- **NIV:** *12:23 When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.*
- **OJB:** *12:23 For Hashem will pass through to strike the Mitzrayim; and when He seeth the dahm upon the mashkof, and on the two mezuzot, Hashem will pasach (pass over, spare, skip) the entrance, and will not permit the Mashkhit (Destroyer, i.e., Hashem’s emissary of judgment, [see Num 22:31 on the Malach Hashem]) to enter unto your batim to strike.*
- **KJV:** *12:23 For the LORD will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the LORD will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you.*
- **CJB:** *12:23 For ADONAI will pass through to kill the Egyptians; but when he sees the blood on the top and on the two sides, ADONAI will pass over the door and will not allow the Slaughterer to enter your houses and kill you.*

In addition to this, according to the Aramaic translations on *Shemot / Exodus 12:23* we find the Targum Onkelos translates הַמְשַׁחֵת as מְחַבְּלָא "לחבלא" meaning “destroyer” or “messenger of injury” according to Marcus Jastrow’s *Lexicon (A dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli, and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic literature)*. Targum Pseudo Jonathan states מְחַבְּלָא מְלַאכָא meaning “angel messenger of injury, or destroyer.” The Targum Neofiti translates like the Targum Onkelos using the word "למחבלא" and the marginal notes in the Targum Neofiti (*Neofiti Marginalia*) provide the translation מְחַבְּלָא מְלַאכָא “destroying angel” similar to Targum Pseudo Jonathan. Thus, according to the Aramaic translations, the word הַמְשַׁחֵת is understood to be the “angelic destroyer” or as we more commonly know him as the “angel of death.” Brown Driver and Briggs (BDB) *Lexicon* states that הַמְשַׁחֵת means “ruin, destruction” as it is used in *Shemot / Exodus 12:13* וְהָיָה הַדָּם לָכֶם לְאֵת עַל הַבְּתִיִּם אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם שָׂם וְרָאִיתִי אֶת-הַדָּם וּפָסַחְתִּי 12:13 *'The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. (NASB)* The Septuagint (LXX) does not provide any additional insights

to the translation for this text where the key word here in the Septuagint (LXX) is ὀλεθρεύοντα meaning “annihilating” having a consistent meaning with our psalm as “ruin and destruction.” The point is the one who says “ein Elohim” (אֵין אֱלֹהִים) “there is no God” may be compared to the Mashkhit (הַמְשַׁחֵת, the destroyer) by David’s use of the word הַשְׁחִיתוּ “to spoil, destroy, or behave immorally.” The one who believes that God does not exist, does not have an authority whereby he is accountable to. Where there is the belief that God does not exist, there is no law, there is no rule of living, there is no justice, no mercy, and no love. Remember that these are the things that are taught in the Torah, love for one another, justice, mercy, peace, and a trusting seeking life in the Lord God Almighty. The behavior of the person who says “ein Elohim” is for lustful ambition since such a person is not living for the Lord. The word הַשְׁחִיתוּ also has the meaning “to behave immorally.” David says because of this, there is none that do good. As a result of this, the Apostle Paul picked up on David’s understanding of the Psalm when he was writing to the Romans saying the following from *Romans 2:18-3:18*.

Romans 2:18-3:18

2:18 and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, 2:19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 2:20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, 2:21 you, therefore, who teach another; do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? 2:22 You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 2:23 You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? 2:24 For ‘the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,’ just as it is written. 2:25 For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 2:26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 2:27 And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? 2:28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 2:29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. 3:1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? 3:2 Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. 3:3 What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? 3:4 May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, ‘That You may be justified in Your words, And prevail when You are judged.’ 3:5 But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) 3:6 May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world? 3:7 But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? 3:8 And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), ‘Let us do evil that good may come’? Their condemnation is just. 3:9 What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; 3:10 as it is written, ‘There is none righteous, not even one; 3:11 There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God; 3:12 All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one.’ 3:13 ‘Their throat is an open grave, With their tongues they keep deceiving,’ ‘The poison of asps is under their lips’; 3:14 ‘Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness’; 3:15 ‘Their feet are swift to shed blood, 3:16 Destruction and misery are in their paths, 3:17 And the path of peace they have not known.’ 3:18 ‘There is no

fear of God before their eyes. (NASB)

Paul speaks of something that is essential that comes from being instructed in the Torah (Law), these essentials are approved by the will of God. These essentials lead the blind out of the darkness into the light (*remember light represents truth, righteousness, holiness, etc*). The concept he is putting forward here is that one is given the essentials of the faith by the instruction of the Torah (2:18-19), having these essentials we are to teach others. However, according to the narrative in Romans, something is not right because those who are instructed in the Torah are not instructing themselves, or living a disciplined life based on what is being taught to others. Paul makes a comparison to those who steal, practice adultery, idol worship, the people who boast in the Torah are themselves not observing the essentials that are supposed to be a light to the gentiles (or the lost). He then compares circumcision to obeying the Torah, to uncircumcision and not obeying the Torah, and then to the uncircumcision who obey the Torah. Paul is drawing in the idea of the flesh and the spirit, the connection to disobedience in the flesh, to the deeper uncleanness in the heart. According to *Romans 2:28-29*, circumcision is an outward sign of being Jewish. In the first century, to be known as Jewish, and to be in the covenant of God, one was to be circumcised of the flesh. The picture that Paul is putting together here is with respect to the chosen people of God. They are given the oracles of God, the essentials that come from being instructed in the Torah. Paul continues and asks the question of what advantage does circumcision have? He says there is great benefit in circumcision (3:2). The point being that the chosen people have been entrusted with the oracles of God (the essentials). Some people believed the word, and others did not believe (*e.g. in the wilderness*). Their unbelief did not nullify the faithfulness of God (3:3-4). Paul is directing the reader to understand that our Father in Heaven is faithful even in the midst of our unfaithfulness. He then argues that we are not to be unfaithful for the purpose of increasing the grace of God (3:8). Based upon Paul's letter to the Romans, there appears to be people who were claiming to do evil so that blessing would come when they turned from their evil works (*maasei hara*). The comparisons that Paul is making appears to be that between the Jew and Gentile (non-Jew), one group being better as compared to the other. He clarifies his statement by calling upon the Psalm of David saying:

3:9 What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; 3:10 as it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; 3:11 There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God; 3:12 All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one.' 3:13 'Their throat is an open grave, With their tongues they keep deceiving,' 'The poison of asps is under their lips'; 3:14 'Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness'; 3:15 'Their feet are swift to shed blood, 3:16 Destruction and misery are in their paths, 3:17 And the path of peace they have not known.' 3:18 'There is no fear of God before their eyes.' (NASB)

Notice the Torah concepts that he is drawing into the conversation with regard to those who are classified as the unrighteous according to David's statement of none doing good and all having turned aside. The essentials of the Torah is that God's people are to be a light to the nations, are to do righteousness, to speak blessings over others, to be innocent and truthful, to have feet that are quick to help, to take care of the poor and sick, to help your brother, to create justice and lead the nations to truth and life in the Messiah. (*This is the joy of the Torah!*) Notice how these things are antithetical to the unrighteous (the wicked). Note also that these things are taught in the Torah. This is the joy and the delight of being instructed in the essentials of the Law, and then living our lives according to those essentials. The Lord our Father in heaven is pleased (*1 Thessalonians 4:1*) with this as Paul says "*know His will and approve the things that are essential*" (*Romans 2:18*).

David's Psalm states, ג אלהים משמים השקיף על בני אדם לראות היש משכיל דרש את-אלהים: ד כלו סג
: 53:2 God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men To see if there is anyone who understands, Who seeks after God. 53:3 Every one of them has turned aside; together

they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one. (NASB) Based on these words, from a Torah perspective, the Lord looks down upon this earth and upon man not for destruction, but to see who is seeking Him. What is the Lord looking for in our lives? He is looking for the very thing that Paul is making is argument concerning righteousness, truth, innocence, justice, mercy, and love. The Lord sent His Messiah to deliver us from sin, and to empower us by His Spirit to live our lives for Him and to be a light to the nations.

David continues in his psalm saying, ה' הֲלֹא יִדְעוּ פְעֻלֵי אֲוֶן אֲכָלֵי עֵמִי אֲכָלוּ לֶחֶם אֱלֹהִים לֹא קָרְאוּ: 53:4 *Have the workers of wickedness no knowledge, Who eat up My people as though they ate bread And have not called upon God? (NASB)* Note the word “poaly” (פְעֻלֵי) is a reference to those who work iniquity outwardly as opposed to those who work iniquity inwardly. Is there such a thing as working iniquity inwardly? Based upon what we know thus far, there are physical and spiritual counterparts to everything we do. We are created to serve God, to be pleasing to Him, and by consequence everything we do has a spiritual counterpart. With this in mind, and based upon what David says here in *Tehillim / Psalms 53:4*, from the Hebrew text, regarding the differences between working iniquity externally verses working iniquity inwardly? According to the Apostolic Writings, Yeshua had a few things to say regarding this topic in *Matthew 23:11-39*.

Matthew 23:11-39

23:11 'But the greatest among you shall be your servant. 23:12 'Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. 23:13 'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. 23:14 ['Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.] 23:15 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. 23:16 'Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' 23:17 'You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? 23:18 'And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.' 23:19 'You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? 23:20 'Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. 23:21 'And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. 23:22 'And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it. 23:23 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 23:24 'You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! 23:25 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. 23:26 'You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. 23:27 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 23:28 'So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. 23:29 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 23:30 and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 23:31 'So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 23:32 'Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. 23:33 'You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? 23:34 'Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets

and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, 23:35 so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 23:36 'Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. 23:37 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. 23:38 'Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! 23:39 'For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' (NASB)

Yeshua speaks of being great by being a servant. Self exaltation is not what the Lord is looking for. He singles out the Scribes and the Pharisees because they know that something is true but because of their greed they make rulings that cause themselves to be prosperous. He provides examples by swearing on the temple verses the altar. They nullify what they swore by considering the weightiness of the temple verses the altar. He states that they neglect the weightier things of the Torah, which he says are *“justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.”* Notice here how the Torah is considered by Yeshua to teach justice, mercy, and faithfulness to God in heaven and to the people around us (*to serve, take care of, and provision e.g. for the poor*). Does this sound contrary to what is taught today regarding the Law of God? Yeshua goes on to say that they are like white washed tombs, beautiful on the outside but death is on the inside. He says in *Matthew 23:28* *‘So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (NASB)* Yeshua says that there is such a thing as an inward form of iniquity, lawlessness, and hypocrisy. The point is that there does appear to be a form of inward attitude, that is as significant as the outward actions of sin. What appears to be drawn out here is that the Lord wants outward actions, but He also wants us to have the right motivations, attitudes, and purpose for our actions. Or in other words, *“Why do you do what you do?”* We had discussed in a previous psalm study on the rabbinic midrash with regard to having the right motivation. The rabbis say that our motivation is as significant before God as our having actually performed the deed (*e.g. the sacrifices, charity, etc*). The Lord does appear to be very concerned with our motivations, according to the rabbis, just like Yeshua is saying here in *Matthew 23*. What is the meaning, the significance, and the purpose of our actions? If you are a believer in the Messiah, you know that there are many commands of the Lord, from the Torah, and the apostles teachings on the Torah that require overt action, physical activity, or some outward behavior or obedience. This is the very nature of listening and obeying the commandment. We also know that the ways of a faithful servant to walk in the footsteps of the Messiah, everything that we do is to be deeply meaningful and spiritual. We are to examine our ways, to walk in righteousness, all of these things involve the heart and the spirit. God doesn't want merely outward conformity to His commands. He also wants an inward obedience, a heart that responds and a mind that understands those commands. This is the meaning behind what I believe is called the *“spirit of the command.”* Having the right intentions, with an innocent heart, in purity, and truth, is the most important as compared to rigid adherence to a set procedure or tradition. Today though there are some who feel tradition is as important or even more important than Scripture. Is the Lord more concerned with tradition, than with faithful obedience with the right intention? What do you think about that?

ו שֵׁם פְּחָדוֹ-פְּחָד לֹא-הָיָה פְּחָד בֵּי-אֱלֹהִים פְּזַר עֲצָמוֹת הַנָּהָר הַבְּשֹׁתָהּ בֵּי-אֱלֹהִים, 53:5 *There they were in great fear where no fear had been; For God scattered the bones of him who encamped against you; You put them to shame, because God had rejected them. (NASB)* David gives an example of the unrighteous who encamp to make war against God's people. The rabbis translate this to say the following in the Aramaic Targum, תַּמְן דְּלַחוּ דְּלוּחָא מִן פְּסִילִיָּהוֹן דְּלִית בְּהוֹן צְרוּךְ לְמַדְלַח לְמַדְחַל, 53:6 *There they were greatly afraid of their idols, in whom is nothing to fear, for God scatters the might of the army of sinners;*

Rabbinic Commentary

The Rabbinic Commentary (Midrash) on *Tehillim / Psalms 53* has 2 parts. Reading through the Midrash we will be looking at Part 1 and 2. Let's begin by outlining *Midrash Tehillim Chapter 53, Part 1 and 2*.

Outline of Midrash Tehillim / Psalms, Chapter 53, Part 1 and 2

Part 1

- The Midrash introduces the Psalm with the **דיבור המתחיל** (Dibur Hamathil) saying “*To the Eternal God; upon Mahalath. Maschil of David. Nabal has said in his heart (Tehillim / Psalms 53:1).*”
- The **פתיחתא** (Petihta) the homiletic introduction to the midrash states, “*The word Mahalath is to be read in the light of the verse Whoso finds a wife finds a great good (Mishley / Proverbs 18:22).*”
- The **משל** (mashal) “*the parable,*” goes on to explain the **פתיחתא** (Petihta), the rabbis go on to discuss the opening words of the Psalm and with the interpretation of finding a good wife.
- The **נמשל** (Nimshal) “*expansion on the parable*” expands upon the **משל** (mashal), the rabbis expand upon the topic by providing examples of a good wife who supports her husband and his walk before God.
- The Concluding phrase says “*Another comment, What can dealt corruptly mean except that Nabal meditated idolatry in his heart? For here the verse says delt corruptly, and elsewhere Scripture says Lest you deal corruptly, and make you a graven image (Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:16). Hence, Nabal is called a base fellow, in the sense in which Scripture uses this phrase in Certain men, base fellows, are gone out, saying, Let us go and serve other gods (Devarim / Deuteronomy 13:14).*”

Part 2

- The Midrash introduces the Psalm with the **דיבור המתחיל** (Dibur Hamathil) saying “*Every one of them is as dross (Tehillim / Psalms 53:4).*”
- The **פתיחתא** (Petihta) “*the homiletic introduction*” to the Midrash says “*In the similarly worded Psalm, it is written, They are all gone aside (Tehillim / Psalms 14:3), that is, men who have gone aside from the road may yet return in repentance.*”
- The **משל** (mashal) the homiletic introduction to the midrash states, “*the parable,*” goes on to discuss the men who turn away from the Lord and the idea that there is none that does good.
- The **נמשל** (Nimshal) “*expansion on the parable*” expands upon the **משל** (mashal), the rabbis expand upon the discussion men who do not do good.
- The Concluding phrase says “*But was it not said long ago I will not reject them (Vayikra / Leviticus 26:44). To that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion. When God turns back the captivity of His people, then will Jacob rejoice and Israel will be glad (Tehillim / Psalms 53:7), but Esau and Ishmael will be vexed.*”

Midrash Tehillim 53, Part 1 opens with the **דיבור המתחיל** (Dibur Hamathil) saying “*To the Eternal God; upon Mahalath. Maschil of David. Nabal has said in his heart (Tehillim / Psalms 53:1).*” The homiletic introduction to the midrash states, “*The word Mahalath is to be read in the light of the verse Whoso finds a wife finds a great good (Mishley / Proverbs 18:22).*” The rabbis continue with the first verse of the Masoretic Text saying:

Endless is the good of a good woman. And even as the good of a good woman is endless, so

the evil of an evil woman is endless, as is said, I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets (Ecclesiastes 7:26). (Midrash Tehillim 53, Part 1)

It is interesting that the rabbis open with comments on a good wife verses an evil wife. Why do you think that the word מַחֲלַת (Mahalath) is equated to the man who finds a good wife? We had learned earlier that the Septuagint transliterates the word מַחֲלַת (Mahalath) in the Greek (μαελεθ) and most English lexicons translate this word to mean “harp” and we find this only twice in the Tanach, in *Tehillim / Psalms 53 and 88*. The Hebrew Scriptures however uses the word מחל elsewhere, according to *Jeremiah 25:29*, כֹּחַ כִּי הִנֵּה בָעִיר, אֲשֶׁר נִקְרָא-שְׁמִי עָלֶיהָ אֲנֹכִי מַחֲלָ לְהִרְעוֹ וְאַתֶּם הַנִּזְקָה תִּנְקוּ לֹא תִנְקוּ כִּי חָרַב אֲנִי קָרָא עַל-כָּל-יְשֵׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ נְאֻם יְהוָה: 25:29 *‘For behold, I am beginning to work calamity in this city which is called by My name, and shall you be completely free from punishment? You will not be free from punishment; for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth,’ declares the Lord of hosts.* (NASB) This word is translated to mean “beginning” in *Jeremiah 25:29* suggesting that the root word is actually חל (khal) meaning “to begin, commence, or start.” Closely examining the Septuagint translation, and the words Mahalath Maskil (מַחֲלַת מִשְׁכִּיל לְמִנְצִיחַ), the title in *Tehillim / Psalm 53:1* may be rendered as “a song on the beginning of wisdom” (עַל-מַחֲלַת מִשְׁכִּיל). This is very significant because David is teaching about wisdom in his psalm and therefore we need to pay careful attention to what he is trying to say regarding the beginning of wisdom. The beginning of wisdom is that we believe the Lord exists, have faith in His promises, and trust in His Messiah Yeshua. The rabbis equate this word indicating the beginning of wisdom is the man who wisely chooses a godly wife. Note in the Scriptures, from the book of Job, we read in the first two chapters that Job was a righteous man and HaSatan (the deceiver) accused Job before God and the Lord allowed him to strike Job and all that was his. He killed his children, caused thieves (Sabeans) to come and take all that was his and even his own body was stricken and broken out in soars. According to *Job 2:8-10*, Job scraped himself with a potsherd and sat in the ashes and his wife come to speak with him. She questioned his integrity and said why don’t you just curse God and die?

Job 2:8-10

2:8 And he took a potsherd to scrape himself while he was sitting among the ashes. 2:9 Then his wife said to him, ‘Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!’ 2:10 But he said to her, ‘You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips. (NASB)

ח וַיִּקַּח-לוֹ חֶרֶשׁ לְהִתְגַּרְדּוֹ בּוֹ וְהוּא יָשָׁב בְּתוֹךְ-הָאָפֶר: ט וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִשְׁתּוֹ עֲדָה מִחֲזִיק בְּתַמְתְּךָ בְּרָע אֱלֹהִים וְמָת: י וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ כְּדַבֵּר אַחַת הַנִּבְלֹת תִּדְבְּרִי גַם אֶת-הַטּוֹב נִקְבַּל מֵאַתְ הָאֱלֹהִים וְאַתְ-הִרְעוֹ לֹא נִקְבַּל בְּכָל-זֹאת לֹא-הִטָּא אִיּוֹב בְּשִׁפְתָיו:

The Scriptures say that he did not sin with his lips, and he remained a righteous man. What is interesting about this story is that Satan did not strike Job’s wife dead. Based upon her words, she does not appear to be a righteous woman, especially in her comment to just curse God and die. The Scriptures say on the other hand that Job was a righteous man. So one conclusion we can make is that a righteous man was married to an unrighteous woman. The reason Satan most likely did not strike Job’s wife dead was because she was an unrighteous woman, and we know that unrighteousness does not dwell well with righteousness. Job and his wife may have had difficulties in their marriage. Generally a husband and wife do not always see eye to eye on everything, and to be married to an unrighteous woman would only amplify such problems. In the midrash, the rabbis say how good it is to find a good woman, it is the beginning of wisdom. The reference is taken from the opening verse in *Tehillim / Psalms 53:1*, were the “beginning of wisdom” is to seek the one the Lord wants for your life, for righteousness sake, not for the fulfilling of lustful desires. For those who find themselves in the situation of being married to a good wife are truly blessed and as the rabbis say “the good

of a good woman is endless.” For those who find themselves in a marriage with an unrighteous woman can see the wisdom in finding a wise and righteous wife. I encourage perseverance, prayer, and love as much as possible for the sake of your wife and children.

The rabbis continue saying the following:

Rabbi Samuel taught, Abigail did more good for David than all the sacrifices in the world. For had David done that deed which he thought to do upon Nabal, then, even if David had brought all of the sacrifices in the world, they would not have atoned for him. But Abigail came to him and saved him. What she did for him is implied in the To the Eternal God; upon Mahalath, even as sacrifices bring about forgiveness, Abigail brought about forgiveness (me-hilah) for David. (Midrash Tehillim 53, Part 1)

Notice how the rabbis say that Abigail did more good for David than all the sacrifices in the world. To understand this we need to realize that Judaism regards the violation of any of the divine commandments to be a sin. Judaism teaches that sin is an act, and not a state of being. Humankind was not created with an inclination to do evil, rather that man has the inclination to do evil “*from his youth.*” Considering the liturgy of the Days of Awe (*the days preceding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*) prayer, repentance and tzedakah (*the dutiful giving of charity*) atone for sin, Judaism teaches that these things atone. Prayer alone however, cannot atone for wrongs done, without an honest sincere attempt to rectify any wrong done to the best of one’s ability, and the sincere intention to avoid repetition. Atonement according to Judaism means to repent and turn from sin. This is the meaning of the word “*Teshuvah*” meaning “*to return.*” Judaism is optimistic in that it always sees a way that a determined person may return to what is good, and that God waits for that day too. Now considering the animal sacrifices prescribed according to the Torah (five books of Moses) for atonement purposes, we are told that when one sins, one is to bring a sin-offering for sins, and a guilt offering for religious trespasses. The significance of the animal sacrifice is not expanded on at length in the Torah, though *Bereshit / Genesis 9:4* and *Vayikra / Leviticus 17* suggest that blood, life, and atonement are linked. Christians argue that Israel believed all the sacrifices were for the purpose of paying the debt for sins, or that only the sin offering and the guilt offering had this purpose. The disagreements between modern scholars of early Jewish history, often disagree and argue over the purpose of the sacrifice. Later Biblical prophets occasionally made statements to the effect that the hearts of the people were more important than their sacrifices, for example, “*Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams*” (*1 Samuel 15:22*), and “*For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings*” (*Hosea 6:6*), and David saying in the psalms, “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart*” (*Tehillim / Psalm 51:17*). See also *Isaiah 1:11* and *Tehillim / Psalm 40:6-8*. Even though the Scriptures say that animal sacrifices are prescribed for atonement, there is no place that states one must bring a sacrifice in order to find atonement. The reason being, during the many years when the temple and/or tabernacle is destroyed, man would have been unable to bring the prescribed sacrifices and the result would be the impossibility to receive atonement. If the sacrifices were designed specifically for the purpose of atonement, then the plan the Lord had laid out at Sinai falls woefully short. The purpose of the Sacrifices were to direct our attention to the Lord God in heaven, to show innocence taking the place of the guilty, and ultimately, to direct our attention to the Messiah Yeshua. Studying Judaism’s understanding of the sacrifices, there was more to the ritual of bring a sacrifice by route, than simply the act of bringing a sacrifice to receive atonement. One’s entire life needs to take a new direction (*Teshuvah*) and this is the kind of mindset that is in place when Rabbi Samuel taught that Abigail did more good for David than all the sacrifices in the world. She was being merciful toward David, taking her life into her own hands in disobedience to her husband, while at the same time she was doing what she could to keep her husband (Nabal) and all that she had from being destroyed by David because of her husband’s wickedness.

The rabbis continue saying that if David had killed Nabal, he would not have been able to bring atonement by sacrifice. Abigail however came and saved him by the sacrifice that she brought through her good

deeds. The rabbis say “*What she did for him is implied in the To the Eternal God; upon Mahalath, even as sacrifices bring about forgiveness, Abigail brought about forgiveness (mehilah) for David.*” Note earlier how the words Mahalath Maskil (מַחֲלַת מַשְׁכִּיל), the title in *Tehillim / Psalm 53:1* may be rendered as “*a song on the beginning of wisdom*” (לְמַנְצֵחַ עַל-מַחֲלַת מַשְׁכִּיל). This is very significant based upon what the rabbis are teaching here in the Midrash, the beginning of wisdom is to offer your life as a sacrifice to others. Is this not consistent with the Apostolic Writings?

The rabbis continue saying:

Abigail said to David, My lord king, if the following case were brought to you, what would you do? A poor man goes to his master and says, Show mercy unto me. Give me a morsel of bread. The master feels no obligation toward him and refuses his plea, so the poor man falls upon him and kills him. Now if such a case were brought to you for judgment, what would you do? You would feel as if gagged and would be unable to utter your judgment, for men would say Did not David do just such a thing to Nabal? When Scripture says, Let this not be unto you a gag (1 Samuel 25:31), it means that Abigail said, Do not put a gag in your mouth. Do not say, Because I am forgetful, be unto you a gag. There is one gag in your mouth already. Let that one be enough for you. What did Abigail mean by the words, Then remember your handmaid? She meant, do not forget me. I will be in your mind when such a case is brought before you, and as you judge it, may you say, Let her who so acted on my behalf that I did not incur the guilt of blood of remembered for blessing. David replied, not because of you am I not guilty. The Holy One blessed be He, sent you to me, as is said, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me (1 Samuel 25:32). Even so, you are worthy to be blessed, as is said Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you (1 Samuel 25:33).

It is a curious thing to read in *1 Samuel 25:31 this will not cause grief or a troubled heart to my lord, both by having shed blood without cause and by my lord having avenged himself. When the LORD deals well with my lord, then remember your maidservant. (NASB)* and try to figure out why the rabbis are referencing putting a gag into one’s mouth. The concept comes from the parable that is told concerning the poor man who requests bread from a rich man. David is the poor man and Nabal is the rich man. If the poor man kills the rich man because he would not share his bread, what righteousness is there in that? The gag comes when a similar case is brought up where David is the judge, he cannot make a ruling because he himself is guilty of the same thing. The rabbis say that these concepts are found within *1 Samuel 25:31* when Abigail asks David not to forget her. The midrash then draws in Scripture that states it is the Lord God of Israel who sent Abigail to meet with David so David would not do the thing he had put in his heart to do, to destroy Nabal and his house. Because of this, we are told Abigail is to be blessed because she was a willing servant of the Lord. This should be an example for our lives, to be willing servants of the Lord for the glory of God. This is very similar to the Apostle Paul’s words in *2 Timothy 2:24-26*.

2 Timothy 2:24-26

2:24 The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, 2:25 with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, 2:26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. (NASB)

Paul is teaching something here that applies very well to the midrash on David and Abigail. David had placed within his heart to do evil to Nabal because Nabal was a wicked man. Abigail came at the instruction of the Lord to save David from the evil intent in his heart. This is similar to what Paul is teaching to be kind, not quarrelsome, to come with teaching, instruction, and the truth, allowing others to come to repentance,

and by our peacefulness, and the Lord's Spirit, the one we go to for the purpose of instructing in righteousness, they will come to their senses and escape from the snare of the deceiver (the evil one). Like Abigail, Paul is saying that as servants of the Lord we are to live like Abigail did in her interaction with David, even for the sake of the wicked.

Midrash Tehillim 53, Part 1 concludes saying the following:

David escaped from iniquity, but Nabal entered into it, for, as it is said, Nabal has said in his heart, There is no God (Tehillim / Psalms 53:2). And what was in his heart? Deceit, as is said Deceit is in the heart of them that devise evil (Mishley / Proverbs 12:20). Nabal, with evil in his heart, claimed not to know David, as is said, Who is David? And who is the son of Jesse? (1 Samuel 25:10). Nabal also claimed not to know the Holy One blessed be He, as is said, Nabal has said in his heart, there is no God. What can the words in his heart mean except evil thoughts? And the words immediately following, dealt corruptly (Tehillim / Psalms 53:2), what do they allude to? To the corruption of the generation of the flood, of whom it is written All flesh had corrupted their way (Bereshit / Genesis 6:12). Like them, this Nabal committed acts of unchastity. These are alluded to in dealt corruptly. Therefore, Abigail said to David, Let not my lord, I pray you, regard this base fellow (1 Samuel 25:25). Why did she call him base fellow? Because he committed acts of unchastity. As Scripture says, The sons of Eli were base men, they lay with the women that did service at the door of the Tent of Meeting (1 Samuel 2:12, 22). Another comment, What can dealt corruptly mean except that Nabal meditated idolatry in his heart? For here the verse says dealt corruptly, and elsewhere Scripture says Lest you deal corruptly, and make you a graven image (Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:16). Hence, Nabal is called a base fellow, in the sense in which Scripture uses this phrase in Certain men, base fellows, are gone out, saying, Let us go and serve other gods (Devarim / Deuteronomy 13:14).

In this section of the midrash, the comment is made that “David escaped iniquity” whereas, “Nabal entered into it, for, as it is said, Nabal said in his heart, there is no God.” Again we find here the importance of the intention of the heart that leads to actions. In Nabal's case, deceit was in his heart because he pretended to not know who David was. Nabal's evil thoughts are paralleled to the corruption of the generation of the flood; the generation of the flood was involved in all sorts of sexual sin indicated by the wording of Parashat Noach on the giburim who took of the daughters of men, etc. This generation is also paralleled to Eli's sons by the Scripture that states they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (Ohel Moed). The evil thoughts of deceit and pretending to not know who David was, to the generation of the flood, to Eli's sons, these are all compared to the one who holds idolatry in his heart. Why do the rabbis compare all of these things to idolatry in the heart? The thing about idolatry is that in the ancient world, especially in Rome and Greece, we think of idolatry as massive temples with sacrifices, etc. However, in the Roman world, there was also what is known as “civilized idolatry” where one had an idol in the privacy of one's own home. We observe this in the Torah passages regarding Leah, Rachel, Jacob, and Laban. Laban made the claim that Jacob had stolen the household gods. (see *Bereshit / Genesis 31:19*) The idea that idolatry is a personal and private thing is well supported in the Scriptures and drives forward the significance of the midrashic comments regarding Nabal's idolatry in his heart. The prohibition against and rejection of idolatry is at the very core of Judaism and this is why we find idolatry in the heart as having a significant part of our own self examination and repentant attitude. The Scriptures say in *Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:39* “Know this day, and lay it in your heart, that the Lord is God, in the heavens above and on the earth below, there is none else.” We are to hold up in our hearts that the Lord in heaven is God and there is only One God. The place of the heart is to be holy before God. We know from the Apostolic Writings, that we receive the Holy Spirit whom dwells in our hearts. To hold deceit, wickedness, unrighteousness, corruption, lust (adulteries), or any sin within the heart is to put in place something that takes the place of the Lord God. This is the description of idolatry in the heart and is the thing Nabal did and later suffered the punishment for

by loosing his life. The conclusion of the midrash states “Hence, Nabal is called a base fellow, in the sense in which Scripture uses this phrase in Certain men, base fellows, are gone out, saying, Let us go and serve other gods (Devarim / Deuteronomy 13:14).” The reason being, he encouraged others to stray away from righteousness, truth, and justice. In our lives, we need to be very careful not to place idols in our hearts, and just as importantly, not to cause others to fall away, to lead astray from God’s way for our lives, to live in righteousness, truth, and justice towards all men.

Midrash Tehillim 53, Part 2 opens with the Dibur Hamathil (דיבור המתחיל) saying “Every one of them is as dross (Tehillim / Psalms 53:4).” The homiletic introduction” to the Midrash states, “In the similarly worded Psalm, it is written, They are all gone aside (Tehillim / Psalms 14:3), that is, men who have gone aside from the road may yet return in repentance.” The midrash opens with describing each man as “dross” which is a reference to “waste, rubbish; or impurity that forms on top of molten metal.” The midrash uses the word נאלחים meaning “dirty, filthy, scummy, corrupt, or to become infected.” The idea might be that in this world there are many things that heat us up, make us hot (e.g. cause us to become angry). The question is when and if we become angry, what is it that comes forth from us? When you become angry, do your lips send forth waste, impurity, foul, and reprobate language? The midrash says that though the men have gone aside from the road, there is the chance of repentance. The midrash continues saying:

In this Psalm, however, it is written that every one of them is as dross, that is, every one of them is debased. They are altogether become stinking (Tehillim / Psalms 53:4). They stink from without because they overflow with wickedness from within. Another comment on Every one of them is as dross, they are altogether neelahu (נאלחו). They are the men of Sodom who became so debased as to bring upon themselves their burning like braziers. The word neelahu is taken as stemming from the word ah as in the verse The brazier (ah) was burning before him (Jeremiah 36:22). There is none that does good, no, not one (Tehillim / Psalms 53:4) (Midrash Tehillim 53, Part 2)

The word “dross” is a reference to those who are debased. Such men are called *neelahu* (נאלחו) meaning to “be infected, contaminated, or spoiled.” These types of men are paralleled to the men of Sodom whose wickedness was so great that the Lord destroyed them all with fire. The rabbis continue saying the following:

Abraham’s name was not included among the men of Sodom; that Abraham’s is the one the verse refers to is shown by the words Abraham was the one (Ezekiel 33:24). It was then Abraham said, I have not sat with men of falsehood, I hate the gathering of the evil doers, and will not sit with the wicked (Tehillim / Psalms 26:4-5). Thereupon, Abraham journeyed from thence (Bereshit / Genesis 20:1). These words are to be read in the light of what Scripture says elsewhere, And surely the mountain falling crumbles away, and the rock is removed out of his place (Job 14:18). The mountain failing crumbles away refers to Sodom and its sister cities; and the rock of whom it is said, look unto the rock whence you were hewn, Look unto Abraham your father (Isaiah 51:1-2). Thereupon, Abraham journeyed from thence (Bereshit / Genesis 20:1), for the Holy One blessed be He, said, Abraham, you have no business with the men of Sodom, of whom it is said, God looked forth from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any man of understanding, that did seek after God. Every one of them is unclean (Tehillim / Psalms 53:3). (Midrash Tehillim 53, Part 2)

A contrast is being made between Abraham and these wicked men who are as dross. It is interesting that the rabbis compare Abraham to the one who was journeying and would not sit with wicked men. The wicked crumble as the falling mountain rocks crumble, and the rock we are to look towards is the one who was hewn, and the rabbis say it is Abraham who was hewn out of the rock (Isaiah 51:1-2). One of the most important concepts passed down from generation to generation in Israel is that of having Abrahamic descent.

In many cases throughout the Tanach, there were people who did not have a direct genetic connection to Abraham. In many cases however, there are those who did have genetic descendant of the Biblical Hebrew patriarchs. This tradition has been passed down, and it become so strong a belief on the importance of genetic desendency, that it was believed one needed to be a Jew in order to be saved in the Messiah Yeshua. This is the whole argument that broke out between the apostle Paul in Galatians and the Judaizers. In Midrash Tehillim 53, the rabbis say that Abraham was carved out of rock, and it is to him whom we are to look to. The concept of Abraham descendency become so significant that the one who was a proselyte (a ger tsedek) is given even today the name “____ son of Abraham,” to signify the conversion to Judaism and having become an adoptive son of the father of all the Jewish people. The idea is that we are to look to Abraham as our father in faith and righteousness. This same concept is brought forward into the Apostolic Writings, where the apostles consider Abraham to be the spiritual father of all those who have faith in the one true God because it was through Abraham that the promise of salvation was given (*Bereshit / Genesis 12:2-3*) and because it was Abraham who had faith in God that he would fulfill his promises, even when it seemed that he was being asked to sacrifice the promised fulfillment in his son Isaac. Abraham acted as the prototypical man according to *Hebrews 11:1* which states, “*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen. Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*” and *James 2:23*, which says he was “*strong in his faith,*” and therefore Abraham became the “*father of all who believe.*” Paul says to the Romans the following:

Romans 3:28-4:8

3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. 3:29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 3:30 since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. 3:31 Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law. 4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 4:2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 4:3 For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ 4:4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor; but as what is due. 4:5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, 4:6 just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 4:7 ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered. 4:8 ‘Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.’ (NASB)

The Apostle Paul also believed Abraham to be the one whom we look toward because of his faith. We know that the Scriptures say that Abraham believed God and taught his children the statutes and commands of God. The point is that walking in God’s ways follows our faith, it does not proceed our faith. This is how we establish the Torah in our lives by our faith and our love for the Lord. The Lord also enables us by His Spirit in the Messiah Yeshua to establish the Torah, truth, righteousness, and justice in our lives. The rabbis continue saying the following:

Another comment on neelahu. The word means that the men of Sodom became familiars in the secret mysteries of other gods. Thereupon, the Holy One blessed be He, said to the ministering angels, Go forth and see what the children of men are doing on earth, and ministering angels answered, There is none that does good. The workers of iniquity who knew not, they who eat up My people as they eat bread (Tehillim / Psalms 53:5), knew not that Israel is the Lord’s hallowed portion, All that devour him will be held guilty (Jeremiah 2:3). The iniquitous say, Even when a good thing comes, the Holy One blessed be He, is not the one who called it forth. This is the meaning of the workers of iniquity, call not upon God (Tehillim / Psalms 53:5). There were they in great fear (Tehillim / Psalms 53:6). The righteous were in

fear, for they saw Ahithophel in Gehenna, and they said, If God deals so much with such a righteous man, how much more strictly will he deal with us? When the Holy One blessed be He, gave Ahithophel his punishment, He let the righteous see his deeds and they were relived of fear. Hence, it is said, No fear was. And why not? Because God is with the righteous generation (Tehillim / Psalms 14:5). (Midrash Tehillim 53, Part 2)

The midrash speaks of a conversation between the Lord God Almighty and the angels, the Lord tells the angels to go forth and look to see what man is doing on the earth. The angels return saying that there is none that does good. The workers of lawlessness consume God's people and do not realize that all who devour Israel are held guilty before God. Does this suggest that those who devour anyone other than Israel are not guilty before God? The iniquitous (sinner) does not acknowledge when a good thing comes that it comes at the hand of the Lord, they do not even call upon the name of God to give Him glory. The righteous on the other hand fear the Lord. The reason the righteous fear the Lord is because they saw Ahithophel in Gehenna (Hell). Ahithophel is the Hebrew transliteration for אחיתופל meaning "Brother of Insipidity" or "Impiety." Ahithophel was a counselor of King David and a man greatly renowned for his advice. At the time of Absalom's revolt he deserted David (see *Tehillim / Psalm. 41:9 and 55:12-14*) and supported the cause of Absalom (see *2 Samuel 15:12*). The Talmud speaks of this counselor of David as "a man, like Balaam, whose great wisdom was not received in humility as a gift from heaven, and so became a stumbling-block to him" (*Midrash Rabba Bamidbar, Parashat 22*). He is regarded as "one of those who, while casting longing eyes upon things not belonging to them, lose also the things they possess" (*Talmud Bavli, Tosef., Soṭah, 4:19*). The rabbis parallel Ahithophel to Balaam and his desire to curse Israel for money. The idea is, according to the midrash, that Ahithophel was a righteous man and the people supposed that his choice to support Absalom was righteous and according to God's will. Remember this is all connected back to David's sin with BatSheva and Uriah. This however was not God's will, the people saw the Lord's dealings with Ahithophel and were in fear. For the truly righteous, there is no fear because the Lord God is with the righteous generation.

Midrash Tehillim 53, Part 2 concludes stating the following:

Another comment. The Holy One blessed be He, said, I declared that the children of Israel will pay taxes to the kingdoms, even as the gentiles pay them. By fear, I meant that you may impose the fear of excises upon them, but not that you may impose the fear of persecution upon them. Yet no fear was, for the children of Israel surrendered themselves to death, and those who remained were saved through the merit of those who were slain in the persecution, as is said God is with the righteous generation. In the similarly worded Psalm, in the verse You would put to shame the counsel of the afflicted, but the Lord is his refuge (Tehillim / Psalms 14:6), what is meant by the words of the counsel of the afflicted? Rabbi Judah said, They meant that the Holy One blessed be He said to the nations of the world, You built your houses of idolatry. But when I said to you, Let Jerusalem be guilt, you said Israel is to be afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not to be comforted (Isaiah 54:11). Hence, it is said, You would put to shame the counsel of the afflicted. And in this Psalm it is said Have you put them to shame because God has rejected them? (Tehillim / Psalms 53:6). That is, think you that the Lord has rejected them? But was it not said long ago I will not reject them (Vayikra / Leviticus 26:44). To that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion. When God turns back the captivity of His people, then will Jacob rejoice and Israel will be glad (Tehillim / Psalms 53:7), but Esau and Ishmael will be vexed. (Midrash Tehillim 53, Part 2)

This is an interesting comment because the rabbis say that the Lord "declared that the children of Israel will pay taxes to the kingdoms, even as the gentiles pay them." This is interesting because of the thought that taxes are bad. Are taxes bad? In what circumstances would taxes be a bad thing? What are taxes for? (*For administration costs of government, not to simply line the pockets of politicians.*) They continue saying "By

fear, I meant that you may impose the fear of excises upon them, but not that you may impose the fear of persecution upon them.” An excise or excise tax (*sometimes called a duty of excise special tax*) is an inland tax on the sale, or production for sale, of specific goods or a tax on a good produced for sale, or sold, within a country or licenses for specific activities. These kinds of taxes are not a bad thing. They support the local government, etc.

The rabbis continue saying that in any given generation, one may be surrounded by death (persecution), and that those who remained are saved through the merit of those who were slain in the persecution, God is with the righteous generation. What is the meaning of being saved through the merit of those who were slain in persecution? This is known as *Zechut avot* which is the concept of gaining benefit from the good deeds of those who came before us. *Zechut avot* also teaches in addition to our patriarchs, that one also benefit from the righteous deeds of the matriarchs. For instance, the Rabbis teach by Midrash that the Lord will return the exiles to Israel because of the merits of the matriarch Rachel. The merits of the forefathers is not a stagnant thing ending with the patriarchs and the matriarchs, this concept also extends grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, and mothers, etc. Each generation earns merits as a legacy for future generations. The idea is that God looks upon the righteous, their piety and sacrifice in the midst of persecution. Some people take persecution to doubt the Lord and to lay blame on Him and turn from righteousness. What is being taught here is that we are to preserve in the midst of persecution, we are to continue in God’s ways no matter what as an example for our children, and for future generations. The Lord looks down on His people and sees their faith and has compassion on the generations that follow. This doesn’t exempt the current generation from living righteously, but stands as an example for continuing in the faith. Remember, these things are thought of in the sense of being (remaining) in the covenant with God. In Yeshua the Messiah, we are in a covenant with God, and pertaining to the salvation of the soul, that is a completed work of the Messiah. This life should then reflect the love, mercy, and salvation that God has provided. The concept of *Zechut avot* is not about personal salvation in the sense of the soul being saved and bound for heaven. *Zechut avot* is for those who are already in a covenant with God, this is about life here on earth.

The rabbis conclude saying, *“To that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion. When God turns back the captivity of His people, then will Jacob rejoice and Israel will be glad (Tehillim / Psalms 53:7), but Esau and Ishmael will be vexed.”* The point of the midrash is that salvation is of the Lord. God is the one who causes the salvation of His people. The word calls, the word moves in a person’s heart, and the Lord convicts by His Spirit. The Lord is active and takes action in the life of a believer and in the lives of the unsaved to produce faith for salvation. The Lord accomplishes this by the power of His Spirit. Tying this back to the Psalm, this appears to be the understanding on the *“beginning of wisdom”* that David is proclaiming in the introduction to his psalm. In the concept of *Zechut avot*, faith and faithfulness are intimately connected, Faith and faithfulness are inseparable. The person who has *“faith,”* and shows that faith to his children are in the act of preserving a future generation by teaching his children God’s ways. This is the faithfulness of a man’s faith to teach his children all of the ways the Lord has worked and is working to save His people. Praise the Lord! Let’s Pray!

Heavenly Father,

We thank You for your mercies and the grace you show us each day. We know that the tongue is full of all kinds of evil, please have mercy on us for the words that we say that do not bring glory to Your name. Lord we know that our own righteousness is nothing but filthy rags and that we desire for Your righteousness, the righteousness that you credit to us because of our faith in the Messiah Yeshua. We ask Lord that you would increase our faith, and help us to bring glory to Your name! You have demonstrated the greatness of Your love for us in Your Son Yeshua the Messiah. Thank You Lord for sending Your son Yeshua that we may enter into the covenant of peace that You have promised to Your people. Help us to grow in our faith, to walk in the spirit, and apply these truths to our lives. We praise Your Holy Name and give You all of the

— Tehillim / Psalms 53 | ספר תהילים נג —
honor, and the glory, and the praise forever and ever.

In Yeshua's (Jesus') Name we pray! Amen!

Be Blessed in Yeshua, Christ our Messiah!

* * * * *

הללויה לאדוננו מורנו ורבינו ישוע מלך המשיח לעולם ועד:
Hallelujah for our Lord, our Teacher, our Rabbi,
“Yeshua” King Messiah forever and ever

Notes