

Lesson 2 – Authorship

Goal:

Students should understand where the tradition of David as author of Tehillim comes from and should develop a more nuanced approach that takes into account the complex history of Sefer Tehillim. The issue of authorship and dating of the psalms will affect the way in which many of them will be interpreted (Ex. Are they all reflections of David's life, of exilic times, of universal emotions...).

Activity:

1. Ask: *Who wrote Sefer Tehillim?* They will answer that King David wrote it. *How do you know?* Students are likely to cite the name of David in Mizmor headings such as מזמור לדוד. More on this below. They should also cite what we know about David's poetic ability from Sefer Shemuel and other sources. See source sheet on this subject. Of course, just because David was a great musician and poet does not mean he wrote all of Tehillim, but it does make David a good candidate.

King David's Musical Qualities	
I. David As Musician	שמואל א פרק טז (יז) נִי אָמַר שְׂאוּל אֶל עֲבָדָיו כֹּהֵן נָא לִי אִישׁ מִיִּטִּיב לִגְנוֹן וְהִבִּיאֹתָם אֵלַי: (יח) וַיָּבֹאוּ אֲחֵד מֵהַנְּעָרִים נִי אָמַר הִנֵּה רָאִיתִי בֶן לְיִשַׁי בֵּית הַלְחָמִי יֵדַע גִּנּוֹן וְגִבּוֹר חַיִל וְאִישׁ מִלְחָמָה וְגִבּוֹן דָּבָר וְאִישׁ תֹּאֲרֵר אֶרֶץ יִדְן עָמוֹ: (יט) וַיִּשְׁלַח שְׂאוּל מַלְאָכִים אֶל יִשַׁי נִי אָמַר שְׁלַחָה אֵלַי אֶת דָּוִד בֶּנְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּצֹאֵן: (כ) וַיִּקְחָה יִשַׁי חֲמֹר לָהֶם וְגִ' אֲדָמִים וְגִ' עֲזִים אֲחֵד וַיִּשְׁלַח בְּיָד דָּוִד בְּנוֹ אֶל שְׂאוּל: (כא) וַיָּבֹא דָוִד אֶל שְׂאוּל וַיַּעֲמֵד לִפְנֵי וַיִּצְאָהֶם מֵאֵד וַיְהִי לוֹ בֵּן שֵׁשׁ כִּלִּים: (כב) וַיִּשְׁלַח שְׂאוּל אֶל יִשַׁי לֵאמֹר נֶעֱמֵד נָא דָוִד לִפְנֵי כִּי מִצָּא חֵן בְּעֵינַי: (כג) וַתְּהִי בְהֵיוֹת רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים אֶל שְׂאוּל וַלְקַח דָּוִד אֶת הַכֶּבֶד וַיָּבֹאוּ וַיִּכְנֹס לְשְׂאוּל וְטוֹב לוֹ וְסָכְרָה מִעֲלָיו רוּחַ הַקֶּדֶשׁ:
II. David As Poet	שמואל ב פרק א:יז וַיִּקֶּם בֶּן דָּוִד אֶת הַקִּינָה הַזֹּאת עַל שְׂאוּל וְעַל יְהוֹנָתָן בְּנוֹ: שמואל ב פרק ג:לג וַיִּקֶּם בֶּן הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל אֲבִנֵּר נִי אָמַר הַקְּמוֹת נָכַל יְמוֹת אֲבִנֵּר: שמואל ב פרק כג (א) וַאֲלֹהֵי דְבָרֵי דָוִד הַאֲחֵר נִים נָאֻם דָּוִד בֶּן יִשַׁי וְנָאֻם הַגִּבֹּר הַזֶּה עַל מִשִּׁיחַ אֱלֹהִים יִצְחָק בֶּן גִּזְעִים זִמְרוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ב) רוּחַ דָּוִד דָּבָר בִּי וּמִלְתּוֹ עַל לְשׁוֹנִי: (ג) אָמַר אֱלֹהִים יִשְׂרָאֵל לִי דָבָר צוּר יִשְׂרָאֵל:
III. David As Organizer of the Singers and Musicians	דברי הימים א פרק ו (טז) וַאֲלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר הִעֲמִיד דָּוִד עַל יְדֵי שִׁיר בֵּית דָּוִד מִמְנוֹחַ הָאָרוֹן: (יז) וַיְהִיו מִשְׁרָתֵיהֶם לִפְנֵי מִשְׁכַּן אֶתֶל מוֹעֵד בְּשִׁיר עַד בְּנוֹת שֵׁשׁ מ' הָאֵת בֵּית דָּוִד בִּירוּשָׁלַם וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ כַּמִּשְׁפָּטָם עַל עֲבֹדָתָם: (יח) וַאֲלֹהֵי הַמִּדִּים וּבְנֵיהֶם מִבְּנֵי הַקֹּהֲנִים הֵימָן הַמְשׁוֹרֵר בֶּן יוֹאֵל בֶּן שְׂמוּאֵל:
IV. David As Inventor of Instruments	עמוס ו:ה הִפְּרִיטִים עַל פִּי הַנָּבִל כְּדוֹדִי חֲשָׁבוּ לָהֶם כְּלֵי שִׁיר: דברי הימים א פרק כג (א) וְדָוִד וְזֶמְרָן וְשֹׁבַע יָמִים וַיִּמְלֶךְ אֶת שֵׁשׁ מ' הָ בְנוֹ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ב) וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶת כָּל שָׂרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהַפְּגִימִים וְהַלְוִיִּם: (ג) וַיִּסְפְּרוּ הַלְוִיִּם מִבְּנֵי שֵׁשׁ שָׁנָה וַיַּעֲמֵל וַיְהִי מִסְפָּרָם לְגִלְגָלָתָם לְגִבֹּרִים שֵׁשׁ וּשְׁמוֹנֶה אֲלֶף: (ד) מֵאֲלֵה לְנֶצַח עַל מִלְחָמַת בֵּית דָּוִד עֲשָׂרִים וְאַרְבַּעַת אֲלֶף וְשֵׁשׁ טָרִים וְשֵׁשׁ אֲלֶפֶס: (ה) וְאַרְבַּעַת אֲלֶפֶס שְׁעָרִים וְאַרְבַּעַת אֲלֶפֶס מִהַלְלִים לִידָד בְּכָלִים אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְהַלֵּל: דברי הימים ב פרק כט (כו) וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ הַלְוִיִּם בְּכָלִי דָוִד וְהַפְּגִימִים בְּחֹצֵצוֹת: (כז) נִי אָמַר חֲזַקְיָהוּ לְהַעֲלוֹת הַעֲלֵה לְהַמְנוֹחַם וַיַּעַתְהֵם הַחֵל הַעֲלֵה הַחֵל שִׁיר דָּוִד וְהַחֹצֵצוֹת וְעַל יְדֵי כָלִי דָוִד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

We will now analyze this question methodically analyzing evidence from Sefer Tehillim itself and opinions found in the Talmud, Midrashim, and Rishonim.

3. Headings

If you were presented with Sefer Tehillim for the first time, not knowing anything about it, (imagine that some archaeologist found Sefer Tehillim in a dig and nobody had ever seen it before) how would you go about figuring out who wrote it? In other words, is there any way to find the author of this book from internal evidence only forgetting our prior knowledge? The first thing we would look for is a title for the book. Mishle, for example does have a title which states its author. But this method does not help for Tehillim which is lacking any title at the beginning. However, most of the Mizmorim do have titles. *Who would you say was the author based on Mizmor titles?* It looks like David wrote a majority of them but others were written by Asaph, Bnei Korah, and many other individuals.

Even this is not certain however since the prefix ל as in מזמור לדוד can have many different meanings in Hebrew. Here is a list of possible meanings:

1. ascribed to, belonging to, by – See Habakuk 3:1 - תפלה לחבקוק; Shir haShirim 1:1 – אין מרעה לצאן אשר לעבדך. Gen 47:4 - שיר השירים אשר לשלמה.
2. written to, about, dedicated to, – 72:1 – לשלמה is a Mizmor about Shelomoh; 1 Kings 14:19 ספר דברי הימים למלכי ישראל.
3. for the use of – למנצח for use of the conductor (cf. 1 Chron 23:4).

The ל prefix can indicate authorship in some cases, but it can have these other meanings as well. The contents of each Mizmor can help us determine which meaning is best suited.

4. Content

After analyzing the headings we can move to the content of Tehillim. David's name appears number of times within Mizmorim. See 18:51; 89:4, 36, 50; 132: 1, 11, 17. Would David write his own name? Probably not. The most obvious example of a late Mizmor is 137. Have students read through it quickly. *What is this Mizmor about? What events does it describe? When do you think it was written?* This is about the Babylonian exile after 586BCE, four hundred years after David. It is possible that David wrote this prophetically, but that brings up questions about freewill and destiny (did Bnei Yisrael have to sin and go into exile?) and the purpose of prophecy (to rebuke the people, not to predict the future).

5. Talmud

This sugya discusses the order and authorship of all books of Tanakh. Ask one student to read the Gemara aloud while the class takes note of interesting or surprising points. *What's the first surprising thing in this sugya?* It has a different order for Ketubim. It places Ruth before Tehillim. *Why?* Ruth lived during the period of the Judges (Ruth 1:1) so its events are chronologically prior to the rest of Ketubim. Also, Ruth ends with a chronology from Yehudah down to David which, assuming David wrote Tehillim, forms a nice introduction to Tehillim. *What is the next interesting point which is relevant to David as author of Tehillim?* The Gemara makes a midrash on the name רות which

sounds like ריווה meaning to praise because she gave birth to David who praised God with songs. David is remembered here for his songwriting abilities. *What else is interesting regarding Tehillim?* The Gemara does not think that David wrote the entire Tehillim by himself. Rather, there were many authors of individual poems prior to David. David then incorporated those poems into Sefer Tehillim together with his own compositions. This helps explain headings which include names other than David.

Who Wrote Tehillim?
Evidence from the Talmud and Midrash

1. תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא בתרא דף יד עמוד ב

סידרן של כתובים: רות וספר תהלים, ואיוב ומשלי, קהלת, שיר השירים וקינוח, דניאל ומגילת אסתר, עזרא ודברי הימים. ולמ"ד: איוב בימי משה היה, ליקדמיה לאיוב ברישא! את חולי בפורענותא לא מתחלינן. רות נמי פורענות היא! פורענות דאית ליה אחרית; דאמר רבי יוחנן: למה נקרא שמה רות? שיצא ממנה דוד שריוהו להקב"ה בשירות ותושבחות. ומי כתבן? משה כתב ספרו ופרשת בלעם ואיוב; יהושע כתב ספרו ושמונה פסוקים שבתורה; שמואל כתב ספרו ושופטים ורות; דוד כתב ספר תהלים ע"י עשרה זקנים: ע"י אדם הראשון, על ידי מלכי צדק, ועל ידי אברהם, וע"י משה, ועל ידי הימן, וע"י ידותון, ועל ידי אסף, (טו.) ועל ידי שלשה בני קרח;

The order of the Hagiographa is Ruth, the Book of Psalms, Job, Prophets, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther, Ezra and Chronicles. Now on the view that Job lived in the days of Moses, should not the book of Job come first? — We do not begin with a record of suffering. But Ruth also is a record of suffering? — It is a suffering with a sequel [of happiness], as R. Johanan said: Why was her name called Ruth? — Because there issued from her David who replenished the Holy One, blessed be He, with hymns and praises. Who wrote the Scriptures? — Moses wrote his own book and the portion of Balaam and Job. Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and [the last] eight verses of the Pentateuch. Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the Book of Judges and Ruth. David wrote the Book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah.

2. שיר השירים רבה פרשה ד:ה

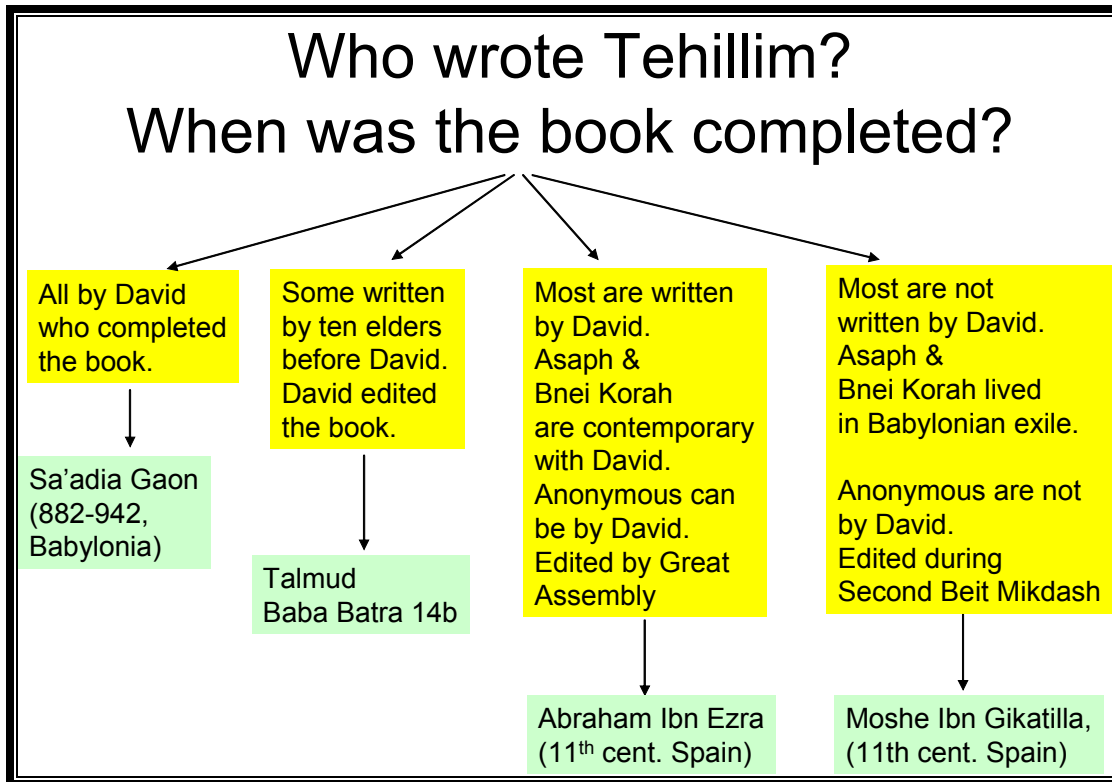
רבי הונא בשם ר' אחא אע"פ שעשרה בני אדם אמרו ספר תהלים מכלהון לא נאמר על שמותם אלא על ידי דוד מלך ישראל, משלו משל למה"ד לחבורה של אנשים שמבקשים לומר הימנו למלך, אמר להם המלך כלכם נעימים כלכם חסידים כלכם משבחין לומר הימנו לפני, אלא איש פלוני יאמר על ידי כלכם, למה שקולו ערב, כך בשעה שבקשו עשרה צדיקים לומר ספר תהלים אמר להם הקדוש ב"ה כלכם נעימים וחסידים ומשובחים לומר הימנו לפני אלא דוד יאמר על ידי כלכם, למה שקולו ערב הה"ד (שמואל ב' כ"ג) ונעים זמירות ישראל

R. Huna said in the name of R. Aha: Although ten persons composed the Book of Psalms, the only one of them to whom it is ascribed is David king of Israel. To illustrate this a comparison was made to a company of men who sought to sing an ode before the king. Said the king to them: 'You are all good singers, you are all loyal, you are all famous, and qualified to sing an ode before me. Still, let So-and-so say it on behalf of you all, because his voice is particularly sweet.' So when the ten righteous men sought to utter the book of Psalms, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, 'You are all of you poetical enough and pious enough and famous enough to sing an ode before Me; still, let David say it on behalf of you all. Why? Because his voice is sweet,' as it says, The sweet one of the Songs of Israel (II Sam. XXIII, 1). R. Huna explained this in the name of R. Aha: Who makes sweet (man'im) the songs of Israel? David son of Jesse.

If David did not write all of Tehillim, why is he generally known as the author of the book? This is explained in Shir haShirim Rabbah. Have another student read and explain the Midrash. Stop at the Mashal to make sure it is clear before going on to the Nimshal. Even though many parts of Tehillim were written by different authors, the entire book is ascribed to David because he was the most talented, famous, and beloved poet. To take a Mashal from modern times, since we don't have kings, many famous speeches are quoted in the name of the presidents who spoke them even though various speech writers actually authored those words. Still, we ascribe the words to the president because he performed them and gave them his authority. Einstein is known for having invented the theory of relativity even though many of the details of the theory were actually invented by others and even though his theory has been refined by others since. Einstein is still considered the inventor because he was able to gather what was known, add his own insights, and formulate the idea more clearly than anyone else.

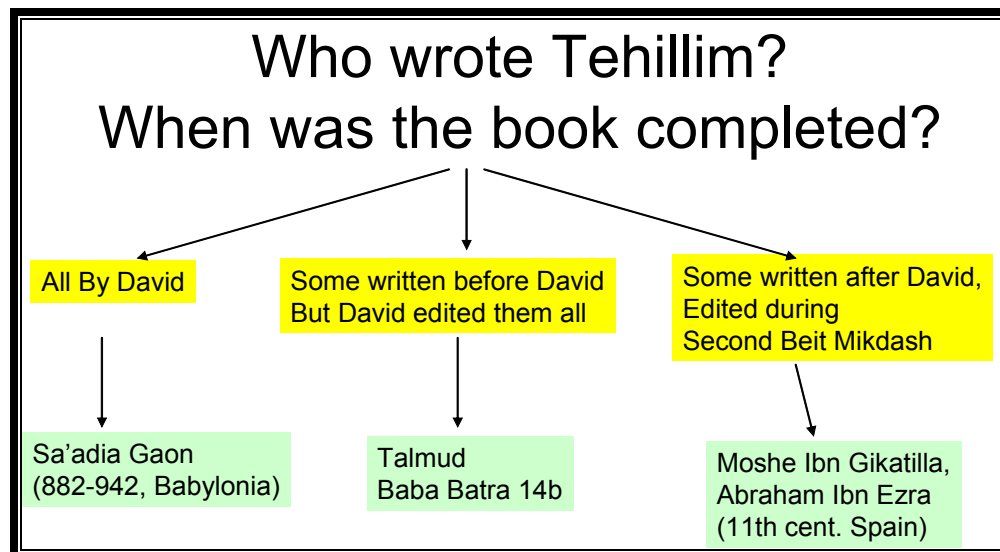
6. Geonim & Rishonim

The Geonim and Rishonim continued to argue about the authorship of individual Mizmorim as well as the editing of the book. Sa'adia Gaon (Babylonin, 882-942) thought that David wrote every single Mizmor. Even those Mizmorim with other names in the headings were written by David about or for those people. Mizmorim that refer to future events are said by David prophetically. Moshe Ibn Gikatilla (Spain, 11th cent.) argued that David did not write any Mizmorim which do not contain David in their title. Asaph and Bnei Korah were not contemporaries of David but rather writers living in the Babylonian exile. Ibn Ezra takes a middle position. He says that some Mizmorim are not written by David such as those by Asaph and Bnei Korah who were contemporaries of David. But we can assume that anonymous Mizmorim are written by David unless there is some reason to think otherwise. He does agree with Ibn Gikatilla that Tehillim was not finalized by David but rather by the Men of the Great Assembly.



[L2 - Authorship - Summary Chart.doc](#)

Try to explain these various opinions with the help of a chart on the board. Ask students which they find most convincing. For less advanced classes use a simplified chart like this:



For more advanced classes, hand out copies of Ibn Ezra's introduction to Tehillim (the second recension) in which he devotes one paragraph each summarizing the positions of Saadiah Gaon, Ibn Gikatilla (although he does not quote them by name), and his own.

The Hebrew and English for this text along with a detailed analysis of each opinion can be found in the excellent book: Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadia Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1991), pp. 330-333.

7. Conclusion

There is a wide range of opinion concerning authorship of Tehillim. Evidence from what we know about David as well as the predominance of David's name in headings points to David as having a key role in the creation of Tehillim. However, the names of other authors in the titles and inclusion of events that occurred after David indicate that there were other authors as well. As we saw in Lesson 1, duplicate Mizmorim, and the separation of Tehillim into five books based on groups with similar headings or based on use of God's name reflect a multi-layered development of the book rather than a single author writing at one time.

Whether or not David wrote a particular Mizmor should not detract from its importance and holiness. A Mizmor is equally worth reciting and studying if it was written by a prophet, a Levite in the Beit Mikdash, or any inspired poet, who was able to capture the aspirations and feelings of Bnei Yisrael in Hebrew verse. We can assume that many thousands of poems were written during the centuries of Israelite existence. But Sefer Tehillim only records those which spoke to generations of listeners and were deemed worthy of careful transmission. Questions about when, where, and by whom a Mizmor was written can still be important for assessing the background and events which inspired the Mizmor. But they do not affect the importance or sacredness of any Mizmor.