Lesson 4 – Poetry and Parallelism in Tehillim

Goal: Students should be able to recognize poetic aspects of a verse in Tehillim and how those poetic aspects contribute to its meaning.

Activity:
1. *What is the difference between poetry and prose in general?* Poetry is a genre that pays careful attention to how language is used. While prose writing relies mostly on only the meanings of the words to convey a message, poetry also utilizes the forms and sounds of words to contribute meaning.
What are some techniques you are likely to find in poetry? (Think about English class.) Poetry uses rhyme, meter, alliteration, consonance, assonance, similies and metaphors. Although you can find these techniques also being used in prose, when we find a high concentration of them in one text, we call it poetry.
Why would a writer choose to write in poetic language rather than prose? Isn't it more effieicent to just say what you mean in plain language? Poetry has an ability to convey complex thoughts and emotions in a way that plain language cannot. Ask students for examples of poetry they have found to be effective, perhaps from English class or from the *siddur*.

2. *Break up into small groups. Scan a few Mizmorim of Tehillim looking for any of the poetic devices listed above or anything else that makes it feel like poetry*. Student should be able to at least notice that Tehillim does not use rhyme or meter regularly and has a different feel than English poetry.

3. *Go through examples on the source sheet. Ask a student to read and translate as best he can, and then identify the poetic aspects of that text.*

Text A (Mizmor 105:20-21): Help students point out the following:
- Notice the rhymes in both verses. Although rhyming is not common there are some examples of it.
- Each verset contains three words and thus three accents. This gives it a sense of rhythm.
- The verb שלח applies to both the frist and second versets of Pasuk 20. The same is true for the verb in Pasuk 21.
- Notice how the second verset of each Pasuk is parallel to the first. Point out the parallel words. מלך is parallel to משל עמים. Parallelsim, however, does not simply repeat the same word or an exact synonym. Usually, the second half will amplify or intensify the first half in some way. משל עמים is two words and is also grander than just מלך.
- ביתו in the first half of Pasuk 21 becomes בכל ביתו in the second half, which is two words and includes many more possessions.
- Notice parallelism between the two Pesukim with the word משל repeated in the second half of each.

Text B (Mizmor 29:5):

- ארזים in the first half becomes more the more specific ארזי הלבנון in the second. Cedar trees are known to be mighty but the cedars of Lebanon are especially strong.
- שבר in the first half is in בנין קל. וישבר in the second half is in בנין פיעל. *How would you translate these words?* The stronger Binyan makes the action more intense, from "break" to "smatter."

4. Summarize findings of the previous exercise:

While biblical poetry contains examples of all the poetic features lists earlier, the most ubiquitous and defining aspect of biblical poetry is parallelism. Parallelsim serves to emphasize the message and also offers an opportunity to bring out many aspects of the event or emotion being described. Parallellism usually occurs within a verse but can also occur from one verse to another. Parallelism does not simply repeat the exact same idea twice. Rather, the second verset will almost always deepen the imagery and message. Biblical poets state an idea in the first half of a verse and then repeat, negate, complete, elaborate, emphasize, or intensify it in the second half. This intensification can occur on both the semantic level (the meanings of the words) and the grammatical level. Here are some patterns to look out for:
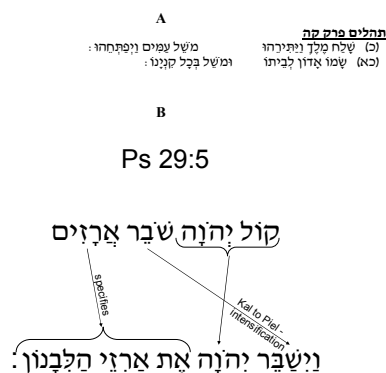
Semantic intensification:
      From general to specific
      From literal to figurative
      Counting up or zooming in

Grammatical intensification:
      From single to plural
      From past to future
      From Qal to Pi'el

For homework, have students look through Tehllim and find a few examples of parallelism to see if they fit into the system described above.

Poetry and Parallelism in Tehillim

A

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תהלים פרק קה

(כ) שָׁלַח מֶלֶךְ וַיַּתִּירֵהוּ   מֹשֵׁל עַמִּים וַיְפַתְּחֵהוּ :

(כא) שָׂמוֹ אָדוֹן לְבֵיתוֹ   וּמֹשֵׁל בְּכָל קִנְיָנוֹ :

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B

Ps 29:5

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קוֹל יְהֹוָה שֹׁבֵר אֲרָזִים

specifies   Kal to Pi'el Intensification

וַיְשַׁבֵּר יְהֹוָה אֶת אַרְזֵי הַלְּבָנוֹן :

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Bibliography:

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry.* Basic Books: New York, 1985.

Berlin, Adele. *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Kugel, James. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

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