**Remembering the Prophet-King David: A Psalm Activity**

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Psalms is titled *Tehillim --* songs of praise. Praise is the perfect word, since even though the psalms expressed every possible human emotion -- awe, joy, gratitude, fear, anger, and doubt -- they were, as a body, about the ultimately trusting faith of a faithful people.

The early Christian community read the Hebrew Bible in the Septuagint or Greek version in which the word “*psalmoi*” was used for this collection, referring to songs sung to the accompaniment of a zither-like stringed instrument called a psalterion (from where we get the word Psalter; *Kirk Saghmosatz or Saghmosaran* in Armenian*).*

The psalms may seem strikingly contemporary in the feelings they convey. However, they followed traditional Near Eastern forms and were probably used in a communal setting as prayers of worship, celebration, or lament to be sung or chanted; instructions for choirmasters and indications for the insertion of musical interludes appear throughout.

Many of the psalms are attributed to King David (c. 1000 B.C.) who is said to have composed and helped organize music for worship; others were written by those in his court or received from older oral tradition. The Early Church was profoundly influenced by synagogue worship in which psalms were read as Scripture, recited as prayers and sung as hymns and so, from the first, Christians treasured the Book of Psalms.

They are an important feature of Christian liturgy, including the Armenian Badarak and its daily and other services. Unfortunately, as we are not well versed in Scripture and our liturgical services are in a language we might not understand, the frequent psalm quotations are easily missed. During the Divine Liturgy, a poignant exchange occurs between the priest and the deacon when he is presenting the chalice to the priest (“Ov eh sa takavor parats? Der zorootyants.” Who is this king of glory? The Lord of hosts. “Sa inkn eh takavor parats!” *This* is the King of Glory!) A direct quotation from Psalm 24 attributed to David, this psalm might very well be alluding to the Ark of the Covenant as it was being brought into Jerusalem; these particular lines refer to God’s glorious presence among the worshipping faithful.

While reading the psalms, a simple commentary may be helpful to place each one in its original context. But they can be appreciated and deeply felt just by reading prayerfully and considering

* What it might have been expressing by and for the community.
* What it is saying about God in *your* life.

**Digging Deeper**

*Read Psalm 137 below. Armenians often feel a special sympathy with the emotions conveyed here: the sorrow and anger of a displaced people driven from their homeland. This would have been sung by the community while in exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C. What title would you give this psalm? What type of music would you choose to set it to? (Country, rap, jazz, classical, etc.) What musical instrument would you choose to accompany it?*

### Psalm 137

**1**By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
    when we remembered Zion.  
**2**There on the poplars  
    we hung our harps,  
**3**for there our captors asked us for songs,  
    our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
    they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

**4**How can we sing the songs of the Lord  
    while in a foreign land?  
**5**If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
    may my right hand forget its skill.  
**6**May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth  
    if I do not remember you,  
if I do not consider Jerusalem  
    my highest joy.

**7**Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did  
    on the day Jerusalem fell.  
“Tear it down,” they cried,  
    “tear it down to its foundations!”  
**8**Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
    happy is the one who repays you  
    according to what you have done to us.  
**9**Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
    and dashes them against the rocks.