

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
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SEFER TEHILLIM

**Shiur #02: “From the Depths I Call to You” – Psalm 130  
(Part 1)  
By Rav Elchanan Samet**

**A. Introduction**

This short psalm, familiar to most of us, is connected to the festivals of the month of Tishrei in various ways, depending on communal custom. Sefardim recite it at the end of their recitation of *selichot* during Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance, and on Yom Kippur this is one of the ten psalms about repentance that they add into *pesukei de-zimra*.<sup>1</sup> Apparently inspired by the Sefardic custom, Psalm 130 was adopted by Ashkenazic communities for recitation after “*Yishtabach*” during the Ten Days of Repentance from Rosh ha-Shana through Yom Kippur.<sup>2</sup>

The connection between this psalm and the month of Elul and the Days of Awe is made explicit in three of its verses. In verses 3-4 we read, “If You remember sins, O God, who can stand before You? For forgiveness is with You, that You may be feared.” Verse 8 states, “And He will redeem Israel from all of their sins.”

In this *shiur* and the following one, we will examine this psalm in its entirety, with the aim of understanding its meaning and the development of its ideas as a single organic whole. To this end, an explanation of the words and verses will not suffice; we must approach the psalm as an entire poem whose message arises from its composition, i.e., from the cumulative effect of its parts and the relationships between them.<sup>3</sup> Once we have clarified the significance of the various parts of the psalm, we shall come back to the question of how its meaning as a whole (and not just of the individual verses within it) is appropriate to the themes and experiences of Elul and the Days of Awe.

**B. Reconstruction of the lyrical form of the psalms**

The chapters of Sefer Tehillim, known as *mizmorim* (psalms), are written in poetic form, which differs from prose. The poems, or songs, of the Torah, such as the “Song of the Sea” and *Ha’azinu*, emphasize hemistiches (short lines) and caesurae (pauses or breaks), and thus the overall poetic structure, in their written

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<sup>1</sup> The earliest source for this custom is the *Seder R. Amram Gaon*. The Goldschmidt edition (p. 165) features a list of psalms enumerated in three variant manuscripts. See also the *siddur* of Avudraham, morning service for Yom Kippur (R.S. Yerushalmi edition, *Avudarham ha-Shalem*, p. 286): “The songs are read, as on Shabbat, and after ‘*yoshev be-seter elyom*’ twelve psalms are added: some of these [are included because they] reflect the theme of the day, while others [are included] because they are psalms of entreaty and supplication that are appropriate to the day”. They are then listed.

<sup>2</sup> The custom has its source in the tradition of the Ari (*Pri Etz Chaim*, Rosh ha-Shana, chapter 7).

<sup>3</sup> Obviously, our discussion of the psalm’s structure will also influence our interpretation of its component words and verses.

form. Concerning the other poetry in Tanakh, our tradition has no established tradition that they should be written in poetic form, and therefore they appear in most editions of Tanakh as prose.

The form in which a poem is written is not an extraneous to its content; rather, it is a most important factor influencing the way in which the poem enters the reader's consciousness. Just as the message of the poem is conveyed through its letters and words, without which there can be no communication between the poet and the reader or listener, so, too, the division into hemistiches which accumulate into verses is one of the essential elements of the poem's transmission. For this reason, many poets have devoted special effort to the graphic appearance of their works.

Although poems that are written in prose form do not cease to be poetry<sup>4</sup>, the prosaic appearance of the text presents an obstacle to the reader since it prevents him from perceiving and absorbing the poem in the manner that the poet intended it.

It may be assumed that when the chapters of Tehillim were recited as song, their poetic form was preserved: each hemistich was recited independently and caesurae were carefully emphasized, thus delineating the structure.

Hence, anyone in our times seeking to study Sefer Tehillim must, first and foremost, overcome the obstacle represented by the form in which the psalms appear in the great majority of Tanakh editions; he must restore their poetical form by rewriting them in the same way that poems are (still) written today – as alternating hemistiches and caesurae. However, recreating the original form requires the reader to exercise some degree of exegetical discretion, and there may well be considerations in favor of and against different possible renderings of each psalm.

Thus, rewriting the psalm as a poem represents the beginning of its interpretation. At the same time, it creates the basis for our analysis of the psalm in a way that will clarify its structure and its message.

How are we to delimit stanzas in each psalm? Our answer in this regard applies to those *mizmorim* which, like the one we shall be analyzing below, are comprised of only a few dozen words (less than ten verses). Examples include all of the "*shirei ha-ma'alot*" (with the exception of chapter 132), along with many others. It is possible that in longer psalms, comprising hundreds of words in dozens of verses, the definition of a stanza must be altered somewhat.

A stanza in a short psalm is made up of at least two (and usually no more than four or five) lines, which share a common subject or central idea. In general, a stanza is also characterized by key words that convey its idea, and which do not appear in the adjacent stanzas. Such words may occur more than once in a stanza.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the distinction between poetry and text that is not poetry, see Leah Goldberg's essay, "*Chamisha Perakim bi-Yesodot ha-Shira*," in "*Iyunim*," The Jewish Agency, Jerusalem 5717, p. 12.

Obviously, we are not dealing with an exact science, and there may well be some doubts or disagreements in applying this definition of a stanza. However, the presentation below of the psalm under discussion will demonstrate that sometimes the division is a simple matter that raises no special difficulty.

Here, then, is our psalm divided into short lines, gathered in turn in four stanzas. Further on we shall discuss our rationale for this division.

### C. The psalm as a poem

- (1) A song of ascents
- a. From the depths I cry out to you, O God.  
(2) My Lord, hear my voice  
Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.
- b. (3) If You, Lord, were to mark sins  
My God – who could stand?  
(4) But with You is forgiveness  
In order that You may be feared.
- c. (5) I wait for the Lord; my soul waits  
and for His word I hope.  
(6) My soul (waits) for my God  
(more) than those who watch for morning, (more than) watchmen for morning.
- d. (7) Israel – have hope in the Lord,  
for with God is kindness  
and great redemption is with Him.
  
- (8) And He will redeem Israel from all of their sins.

Our psalm consists of four stanzas, each three or four lines long, and a concluding verse. We shall first discuss the division into stanzas and then elaborate on the concluding verse – both in our specific psalm and in Sefer Tehillim in general.

Stanza a: The worshipper pleads with God to hear his cry from the depths. The principal words here are “call” and “voice” (twice), and correspondingly, “hear” and “attentiveness.”

Stanza b: God forgives man’s sins. This stanza is built around the contrast between “marking” sins and their results, and forgiveness and its results. (In reality, no such contrast exists: “If You were to mark sins... **But** with You is forgiveness.”) The primary words in this stanza are the contrasting pair, “sins” – “forgiveness.”

Stanza c: The worshipper waits for God and for His word. The important words here are the synonymous verbs “*k-v-h*” (twice) and “*y-ch-l*,” both meaning “to wait/hope,” the noun “*nefesh*” (soul), and the expression *shomrim la-boker* (“watch for the morning/watchmen for the morning”) which is repeated. We shall discuss this repetition later on, in our detailed analysis of each stanza.

Stanza d: an appeal to Israel to wait for and hope in God, and the reason.

The first line of this stanza is an elaboration of the previous stanza. There, the worshipper declared his hope for God's word; here, he commands Israel that they, too, should place their hope in God. The important words in this stanza are to be found in the justification for the command: "kindness" and "redemption." They parallel one another, in two different lines, and the parallel also includes the unusual expression, "with" God. (In stanza b. there is a similar expression – "with You is forgiveness.")

Let us now consider the four stanzas as a whole: is there any other basis for dividing the psalm into these four stanzas, other than the elements of content and style mentioned above?

Firstly, it is immediately apparent that in each stanza God's Names appear twice: there is some form of the Name Y-H-V-H, and there is the Name "A-donai." (The conclusion of the psalm, in verse 8, is distinct from the stanzas in this respect: there is no mention here of God's Name; the pronoun "He" is a substitute.)

Secondly, if we look at the length of each stanza, we see that the first and fourth consist of three lines, while the second and third consist of four. However, a word-count (in the Hebrew) reveals that they are almost identical in length: stanzas a. and d. consist of 11 words each; stanzas b. and c. consist of 12 words each.

Obviously, these two issues are not incidental; they serve to reinforce the division of the psalm as set forth above.

Let us now discuss the phenomenon of the "conclusion" in Sefer Tehillim, and the considerations that lead us to define verse 8 as the conclusion of our psalm, lying outside of the four-stanza structure.

#### **D. The "conclusion"**

As we know, the heading of a psalm ("*mizmor le-david*"; "*shir la-ma'a lot*," etc.) is not an integral part of it – even when the heading testifies to its author or to the circumstances surrounding its composition. Such headings are part of the editing of Sefer Tehillim, and their language, which differs from the language of the psalms, testifies to this.

There are some psalms where the conclusion is likewise not part of the body of the text, but here the matter is more complex. In a small number of instances, the conclusion is not connected at all to the body of the psalm, but is rather a part of the editing of Sefer Tehillim. Examples include the four psalms that conclude, respectively, the first four "books" that comprise Sefer Tehillim.<sup>5</sup>

There are other psalms in which the closing words are meant to conclude the psalm that precedes them, but the conclusion is still not connected in any way to the content of the psalm or to its structure. The purpose of such conclusions is, usually, to bring the psalm to a close on a positive, optimistic note. It is possible that these

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<sup>5</sup> See the concluding verses of chapters 41, 72, 89, 106.

conclusions – or at least some of them – likewise belong to the editing of Sefer Tehillim.

In contrast, there are “conclusions” which clearly “belong” to the psalms that precede them, and which for various reasons are chosen by the author as the closing verse.<sup>6</sup> Let us illustrate this concept by considering two examples:

Psalm 25 follows an alphabetical construction. After verse 21, which begins with the letter “tav,” there follows a conclusion: “God – redeem Israel from all of their enemies.” This verse is clearly not part of the alphabetical structure, and its content likewise differs from the rest of the psalm: all of the preceding verses are spoken by an individual worshipper who makes requests for himself, with no mention of all of Israel. It may be for this very reason that this concluding verse is appended.<sup>7</sup>

Psalm 34 is also alphabetical, and there, too, following what should seemingly be the final verse (22), we find this conclusion: “God redeems the soul of His servants, and all who trust in Him will not be condemned.” Despite the similarity between this conclusion and the one discussed above (both speaking of God’s redemption), the concluding verse of psalm 34 does seem to be connected to the body of the text, in terms of both content and style.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, this was appended by the author in order to avoid ending the psalm with verse 24, which speaks of the wicked and their punishment.

The attentive reader will no doubt have noted the similarity between the concluding verse of our psalm – “and He will redeem (*yifdeh*) Israel from all of their sins,” and the two concluding verses discussed above. To what extent, then, is this conclusion connected to the body of the psalm?

The connection is a strong and clear one. Almost every word of this psalm has already appeared previously in the psalm, especially in verse 4:

“and He” – the pronoun refers to **God**, mentioned twice in verse 4.

“will redeem” – “and great **redemption** is with Him”

“Israel” – “**Israel** – have hope”

“from all of their sins” – “if You, God, were to mark **sins**”

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<sup>6</sup> An example was psalm 27, which we discussed in the previous *shiur*. We showed that the concluding verse (14) is placed outside of the structure of the psalm to serve as a didactic conclusion to both parts.

<sup>7</sup> In *siddurim* where this psalm appears in the “*nefilat apayim*” (as in Sefardic and Chabad communities), this concluding verse is further reinforced with the addition of the words, “and He will redeem Israel from all of their sins” – the closing verse of psalm 130. The similarity between the two concluding verses is obvious, and the reason for the addition of the latter is equally clear: psalm 25 concludes with a request, “God – redeem Israel...,” while the additional verse expresses the same idea as a promise: “And He will redeem...”.

<sup>8</sup> In terms of content, this verse is similar to others that appear earlier in the psalm and express a similar idea – for example, verse 8: “God’s angel encamps around those who fear Him, and he delivers them.” In terms of style, the concluding verse represents a contrast to the preceding verse: “Those who hate the righteous **will be condemned**... all who trust in Him **will not be condemned**.”

We may then ask why this concluding verse is not integrated as part of verse 4, where it seems to belong. The answer is that there are two significant differences between the two.

Firstly, while in verse 4 the appeal to Israel is in the form of a command in the second person: "Israel, have hope," verse 8 speaks of Israel in the third person – "from all of their sins" (in the Hebrew, "Israel" is treated in the singular – "from all of his sins").

Secondly, verse 8 is formulated in the future: "He will redeem," and in this respect it is distinct from the rest of the psalm, in which the psalmist describes his situation in the present, as he is offering his prayer.<sup>9</sup>

These two factors suffice to prove that the conclusion of the psalm is not part of the very clearly defined structure of the psalm with its four stanzas. On the other hand, it is clear that this conclusion is not extraneous to the psalm; rather it is intimately bound to it, serving to round out its main idea.

What, then, is the role of the conclusion? We shall discuss this in our analysis of each different part of the psalm. After we explain the need for the conclusion and the reason for the differences noted above between it and the preceding verses, our claim as to the role of verse 8 as a conclusion to the four stanzas of the psalm will be greatly strengthened.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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<sup>9</sup> Often, in a biblical poem, the tense is clarified by the context: the expression, "*mi-ma'amakim keraticha*" looks like the past tense, but what it means here is, "I call out to You" – right now, in the present. This is borne out by the imperative form that appears further on: "Hear... let Your ears be...". Likewise, in verse 5, the expressions *kiviti* and *hochalti* ("I wait," "I hope") are past-tense constructions, but are meant in the present. However, the future tense expressed in verse 8 is indeed a reference to the future, which remains hidden for the time being.