

**SEFER TEHILLIM**

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**Shiur #03: “From the Depths I Call to You” – Psalm 130 (continued)  
By Rav Elchanan Samet**

(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 were to mark sins, Lord,  
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.

**E. The two halves of the psalm**

With the psalm now in front of us in the form of a poem, let us see whether its four stanzas are based on some structural principle.

We previously demonstrated that many biblical literary units are divided into two halves of similar length, indicating to the reader that they should be viewed as parallels; this often sheds light on the significance of the literary unit as a whole. This literary principle applies to almost all of the literary genres that appear in Tanakh, including many of the psalms.

Is our psalm composed of two equal halves?

The transition from one half of a literary unit to the other is usually some sort of dramatic change.<sup>1</sup> In a narrative unit, this usually takes the form of prominent turning-point

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the transition begins with what looks like a repetition of the first half; thus, the second half stands as a parallel to the first. This technique is fairly common in *Sefer Tehillim*.

in the plot. In a psalm it is more difficult to identify this change, since it takes place not in some external event (as in a narrative) but rather in the psalmist's own inner world.

Can we point to some "dramatic turning point" in our case? Since the psalm as a whole deals with the relationship between man and God, the turning point must be sought in this realm. Obviously, it must be as objectively clear as possible, and not dependent on the subjective interpretation of the reader.

Such a turning point does indeed exist. In the first two stanzas the worshipper addresses God in the second person: "I call out to you"; "Hear," "Your ears," "if You were to mark," "with You," "that You may be feared." At the beginning of the third stanza there is a clear change, and the worshipper now speaks **about** God, in the third person: "I wait for the Lord" (not "for You, Lord"); "With God is kindness / and great redemption is with Him."<sup>2</sup>

What is the meaning of this transition between the second and third person in relation to God – a transition that serves to define the two halves of our psalm?<sup>3</sup>

At this point we shall analyze and explain the psalm, stanza by stanza, so as to clarify the connection between the stanzas and the progression of the psalm's main idea from one stanza to the next, and from the first half to the second.

## F. The first stanza

"From the depths I cry out to You, O God" – The expression "from the depths" (*mi-ma'amakim*) is fairly unusual; what is its significance?

Similar expressions are to be found in only three other places in Tanakh:

- *Yishayahu* 51:10 – "Is it not you (God's arm) that dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep,

Making the depths of the sea (*ma'ama'kei yam*) a pathway for the ransomed to pass."

- *Yechezkel* 27:34 – "Now you (Tzor) are broken by the seas, in the depths of the waters (*be-ma'ama'kei mayim*);

Your wares and all of your company have fallen in your midst."

- *Tehillim* 69:2-3 – "Save me, O God, for the waters have come as far as my soul. I sink in deep mire, with nowhere to stand;

I have entered deep waters (*be-ma'ama'kei yam*), and the flood has washed over me...

(15) Deliver from the mire, and let me not sink

Let me be delivered from those who hate me and from the deep waters (*u-mi-ma'ama'kei mayim*)."

In the first two sources (*Yishayahu* and *Yechezkel*), the "deep waters" are meant literally. In *Tehillim*, on the other hand, "deep water" is a metaphor for the situation of the worshipper, surrounded by many enemies and filled with a sense that unless God intervenes quickly, the metaphorical water - which has already "come as far as my soul"<sup>4</sup> – will wash over him and he will drown.

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<sup>2</sup> Note the parallel between the words "with **You** is forgiveness" (first half; stanza b.), and "**with God** is kindness and much redemption is **with Him**" (second half).

<sup>3</sup> We hardly need mention that the two halves are exactly equal: each comprises two stanzas, seven short lines, and twenty-three words.

<sup>4</sup> Here, as in other places in Tanakh, "*nefesh*" (usually translated as "soul") actually means "throat". What the psalmist mean is that if the waters rise any higher, he will no longer be able to breathe, and he will die.

It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that in our case, too, the expression “from the depths” connotes “deep water”<sup>5</sup>, and that this is a metaphor for the dire straits in which the worshipper finds himself. He feels that he is about to drown; thus, God’s aid is a vital and immediate need. All of the terror that a person feels as the floodwaters are rising and his life is in danger is expressed in the metaphor of “from the depths.” Hence the urgency and the desperation of the psalmist’s cry: “Hear my voice; let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.”

In stanza a. we must also consider the expression, “hear my voice.” Throughout Tanakh, the expression “*lishmo’a be-kol*” (literally, “listening to a voice”) means obeying; doing as the speaker says (much as the English term “listening” can have a connotation of obedience). In our case, this interpretation makes no sense. The worshipper has not yet asked anything specific concerning which he seeks an actual response from God. Clearly, his request at this stage is merely that God hear to his desperate cry and not ignore him. This is confirmed by the parallel:

“hear”	“my voice” ( <i>be-koli</i> )
“let Your ears be attentive”	“to the voice of my supplications” ( <i>le-kol tachanunai</i> )

Why, then, does the psalmist ask, “*shema be-koli*,” rather than “*shema le-koli*,” which would make the parallel more exact, or even just “*shema koli*”?

There seems to be special significance to this. There are times when hearing the **words** of one who is crying out is not enough. One has to listen to that which is expressed not through words, but through the **voice** itself.

A person who is in deep water and feels that his life is slipping away cannot spare many words. He asks of God that He hear in his voice the tone of urgency; the sound of his desperation and helplessness.

In light of all of the above, we arrive at a more fundamental question that arises from stanza a: what is it that has caused the worshipper to feel that he is in deep water, close to drowning, and to appeal to God with such desperation?<sup>6</sup> The answer would seem to lie in stanza b.

## G. The second stanza

“If You, Lord, were to mark sins” – (The Hebrew here is in the future tense: “If You... (will) mark sins... who will (be able to) stand.”

The word “*tishmor*” may be understood as meaning “to remember,” but its more usual meaning is “to keep,” “to maintain.” In other words: “If You, Lord, will maintain sins in existence, not permitting them to be erased.”

“My God – who could stand?” – “*mi ya’amod*” means, idiomatically, “who could endure?” However, it may also be understood in the literal sense - “who can stand” – as a continuation of the metaphor of drowning in the depths of the sea. The drowning man’s demise begins at the moment when he no longer feels the ground under his feet.

<sup>5</sup> Our explanation for stanza b. will reinforce this assumption further.

<sup>6</sup> In psalm 69, for example, it is clear that the psalmist’s sense of drowning reflects the reality of being surrounded by many enemies.

Further support for this connection between “not standing” and drowning in “the deep waters” can be found in *Tehillim* 69:3 –

“I sink in deep mire, with **nowhere to stand**;  
I have entered **deep waters**, and the flood has washed over me.”

In any event, what this stanza teaches us is that the “depths” in which the worshipper finds himself, and from whence he called to God, are a metaphor for his sins. He feels himself sinking into them and almost losing the possibility of existing because of them. His desperate cry to God is that He save him from them through forgiveness, since “with You is forgiveness.”

The expression “with You is forgiveness” is worthy of our attention. The worshipper does not assert, “You will forgive” (as a contrast to “if you will mark sins”). Forgiveness here is not depicted as an action performed by God, but rather as an independent entity that exists “with Him” – i.e., as one of His attributes. This description of forgiveness expresses the psalmist’s confidence that it will come to be: as an act, forgiveness may take place or it may not; as one of God’s attributes, it will unquestionably be manifest.

Stanza b. is built on the contrast between its first two and last two lines. In the first two lines we still hear about the distress and the urgent appeal of stanza a: “Who can stand?!” These lines also explain retroactively the source of the distress and the threat to the worshipper who is calling out from the depths: his sins.

Nevertheless, these two lines already hint to a slight easing of the situation. Stanza b. opens with the conditional “if,” suggesting that God does not necessarily preserve man’s sins. Furthermore, the possibility of sins being kept and of man consequently being unable to “stand” (exist) is not expressed by the psalmist in the first person. He does not say, “If you keep my sins, I will not be able to stand.” He speaks in terms of all of humanity, as a general truth. And this truth eases his **personal** distress, as expressed in stanza a.

The final two lines of stanza b. brighten the horizon considerably. “For (indeed) with You is forgiveness”: “You do not keep and preserve man’s sins. Certainly, then, my cry from the depths will be heard, and there is hope of being saved from these depths through forgiveness, which is one of Your attributes.” It would seem that the danger of drowning has passed, and the ground under his feet is a little firmer.

Let us now contrast the two halves of stanza b. with each other:

If You will keep sins, Lord	For with You is forgiveness
My God, who could stand	in order that You may be feared

The contrast between the two parts in the first line is clear. But is there also a contrast in the lower line, between the results for man of the two possible courses of action mentioned in connection with God?

“In order that You may be feared” – first of all, we need to explain the logic of this conclusion. Does God’s forgiveness of man’s sins lead to fear of God? Would it not seem that the opposite is the case?

Indeed, the possibility does exist that forgiveness may lead a person to improper results; therefore, “One who says, ‘I shall sin and then repent, and then sin and repent’ – he will not manage to truly repent” (*Mishna Yoma* 8:9). However, for a person who is genuinely

repentant and who awaits God's forgiveness – his fear of God will certainly increase when he achieves the longed-for forgiveness, since "in the place where the penitents stand, even the completely righteous do not stand" (*Berakhot* 34b). True repentance uplifts a person, instilling in him both a closer relationship with God and greater fear of Him than he experienced prior to his sin.

To return to our question, what is the contrast between "who could stand" and "in order that You may be feared"? This is the contrast between death, on one hand, and a life of closeness to God and fear of Him, on the other. "Who could stand" means, "who could exist." The preservation of man's sins would mean his destruction. Forgiveness, on the other hand, not only allows him to "stand," but also imbues his life with meaning and fear of God.

This idea, of death being the opposite of a life of closeness to God, and God therefore desiring life rather than death, is expressed in several places in *Sefer Tehillim*. To cite just one example:

(30:10) "What profit is there in my blood when I go down to the pit?  
Shall dust then praise You? Shall it declare Your truth?"

In summary, we may say that the great distress which the worshipper suffered in stanza a. is eased somewhat once he has given thought, in stanza b., to the well-known truth that "with God is forgiveness." Now he is certain that God has indeed heard his voice and has listened to his supplications.

In the next lesson we will examine the second half of the psalm and its relation to the first half.

Translated by Kaeren Fish