

**SEFER TEHILLIM**

**Shiur #07: Psalm 91 – The "Song to Counter Evil"  
(Part 2)  
By Rav Elchanan Samet**

**C. "Psalm 91 as a drama" – the assumption and the questions that arise from it**

In his article, "Psalm 91 as a drama",<sup>1</sup> Dr. Aryeh Strikovsky adopts the interpretation of Delitch, who regarded our psalm as a drama comprising three voices:

1. The narrator (psalmist) – the principal speaker: verses 1, 3-8, 9(b)-13.<sup>2</sup>
2. The righteous man – the worshipper speaks briefly in two places in the psalm – verse 2 and verse 9(a).
3. God – Who speaks at the end of the psalm, in verses 14-16.

Strikovsky notes that elsewhere in *Sefer Tehillim*<sup>3</sup> and in *Megillat Eikha*<sup>4</sup> there are further examples of an exchange of speakers within the same literary unit (the psalm or lamentation in question), and opines that there, too, the phenomenon should be understood as a dramatic exchange of different characters who speak over the course of the unit.

Strikovsky prefers this interpretation because it avoids the forced explanations of the other commentaries, especially the modern scholars, who find it necessary to alter the traditional wording of the psalm in order to unify it. However, his brief words make no mention of the many and difficult questions that arise from the interpretation of the psalm as a drama, and he offers no solution to them:

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in the previous *shiur*.

<sup>2</sup> Attributing verse 1 to the same speakers as verses 3-8 and 9(b)-13 raises an obvious difficulty: the speaker in verse 1 is talking about the righteous man, while in the other verses he is addressing him in the second person. It would seem that Delitch's view arises from his non-personal perception of the narrator: he is not a real participant in the drama, but rather provides background for the utterances of the participants – the righteous man and God. Thus, different forms of expression may be attributed to him, as required. However, our view is that the speaker here is actually a character with a specific personality, a full participant in the drama of this psalm, as we shall see further on. Verse 1 cannot be attributed to him, since this character maintains a dialogue with the righteous man, and no such dialogue exists in verse 1. In the previous *shiur* we addressed the meaning of the first verse and leaned towards the view that it serves as a sort of heading for the psalm by presenting the character who is its subject. Thus, only verse 1 can be attributed to the external "psalmist-narrator", while the other verses are spoken by a specific character, who will be identified later on.

<sup>3</sup> He lists the following chapters: 2, 24, 118, 121, 132, and asserts that there are more.

<sup>4</sup> He explains at length how chapters 1-2 of *Eikha* demonstrate exchanges of dramatic characters. The most blatant example is, of course, *Sefer Iyov*, but here the exchange of speakers is indicated explicitly in the text.

- Who is the “narrator”, and what is the nature of the relationship between him and the worshipper (the righteous man)? The assumption that there is a dramatic exchange between the speakers obliges us to assume further that there is some relationship between the different speakers and the words that they address to one another. What is the nature of this connection?
- Why is the principal dialogue of the psalm – between the righteous man and the “narrator” – repeated twice (first in verses 2-8 and then again in verses 9-13)? The similarity between these two dialogues is manifest; what is the point of the repetition?
- What is the role of God’s word as it appears at the conclusion of the psalm? Why are they not uttered by the narrator/psalmist as a continuation of his previous words, in verses 10-13?<sup>5</sup> *Sefer Tehillim* is not a book of prophecies, and wherever God appears here speaking for Himself we must find a literary explanation.
- *Sefer Tehillim* contains very few psalms of this type of dramatic form.<sup>6</sup> Why, then, is this special form chosen to express the idea of the psalm? Why could the same idea not be conveyed equally effectively through a single voice, as we find in so many other psalms dealing with the subject of faith in God and His system of reward and retribution?
- How does this dramatic presentation add to the structure of the psalm and to our understanding of the internal development of its central idea?

Below we shall analyze the psalm, proceeding from the assumption that it is indeed a dramatic text. We shall address the questions listed above and reach a new understanding of the dramatic exchange of speakers and its contribution to the psalm’s message.

#### **D. Who are the two participants in the dialogue?**

Let us begin with the question of the identity of the speakers of this psalm. Attention should be paid to the fact that in both of the dialogues, representing the thematic and structural majority of the psalm, the respective utterances of the two speakers are not of equal length. The person who has faith in God speaks very concisely (7 words in the first dialogue cycle and only 4 words in the second), while the person who is addressing him expounds at greater length (43 words in the first cycle, 32 in the second).

What is the meaning of this discrepancy? It seems that the answer to this question must be sought in the human relationship between the two speakers. The first speaker in each dialogue cycle speaks in a sort of outburst of passion, while the other responds in a didactic fashion: he lists at length all of the many sorts of dangers from which God will protect him, as one who knows the world and its lurking threats.

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<sup>5</sup> Obviously, the wording would then have had to be different: “For you have set your delight in Him, therefore He shall deliver you; He will lift you up for you have known His Name”, and so on until the end of the psalm.

<sup>6</sup> The examples that do exist usually have two participating voices, while our chapter has three (or perhaps four).

It seems, then, that the dialogue is taking place between the young person and an elder – or, more accurately, between a disciple and his teacher, or perhaps between a son and his father.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the “teacher” is not cast in the technical role of “narrator/psalmist” (as Delitch and Strikovsky would have it), but is rather a character with a specific personality, offering his *personal* responses to the words of the young disciple – didactic responses that are aimed at informing the disciple, who has faith in God, of the many dangers from which God will save him.

Only verse 1 can be attributed to the “narrator/psalmist”, who introduces the dramatic text by stating its subject: the person who dwells in the secret place of the Most High. This does not necessarily define our psalm as a drama with four participants, since the “title” spoken by the psalmist is not really part of the drama that follows – the dialogue between the teacher and his disciple.

### **E. Dramatic molding determines structure**

Let us now address the second question that we posed: why does the dialogue between the disciple and the teacher repeat itself, each of the dialogue cycles following the same structure (a brief and fiery exclamation by the disciple, followed by a long and detailed response by the teacher) and conveying the same idea – that “he who trusts in God – kindness will surround him”?

There is a phenomenon that is quite common in *Sefer Tehillim* (also occurring elsewhere in biblical narratives) whereby it seems that after a psalm has concluded its main idea, it begins to express it all over again. This happens around the middle of the psalm (often, it is precisely at the mid-point), indicating its division into halves that are similar or of equal length.

The parallel between the two halves, in this sort of psalm, is a direct one, and its aim is to show how the idea developed in the first half is enhanced and brought to completion in the second half. Thus, the parallel entails development and deepening.

This sort of structure is found in a great many psalms and is simply an extension of the idea of parallel within a single verse, which is characteristic of biblical poetry. In instances of simple parallel (*tikbolet*), too, the function of the second part is not to *rephrase* the first but rather to develop and complete it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The earliest source to interpret our psalm as a drama with three participants is the Aramaic translation, which identifies the speakers as David, Shlomo, and God. However, the division of roles among these three is presented quite differently from the exchange as we set it out in the previous *shiur*, and for this reason the Targum is not cited in the body of the *shiur* here. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that it is David the father and Shlomo the son who conduct the dialogue.

<sup>8</sup> In many verses this is clearly manifest, while in other instances it is difficult to identify. The Malbim, in his commentary on the poetical sections of Tanakh, goes about systematically proving this principle, verse after verse. In keeping with the nature of such an undertaking, his explanations are at times somewhat forced, but such instances are balanced by many illuminating interpretations.

Thus, the repetition of the dialogue between the disciple and the teacher in our psalm, starting from verse 9, indicates the beginning of the second half. The reader is thereby directed to carefully review the two halves in parallel.

Are the two halves indeed equal? A quick glance is enough to provide a positive response. Each half comprises 8 verses. However, upon closer inspection we find that the two halves are also equal in their number of words – exactly 56 words each. (The same phenomenon will be demonstrated in other psalms, in future *shiurim*, such that it cannot be regarded as coincidence.)<sup>9</sup>

This also answers the last question that we posed in Section C. above: How does the dramatic presentation of the psalm contribute to our understanding of its structure and of the internal development of its central idea? Indeed, the structure of the psalm and its thematic development turn out to be inextricably connected to its dramatic molding.

Let us now present our psalm in a way that will highlight its structure and the parallel between its two halves.

Each half includes three types of expressions in relation to the person who trusts in God:

1. something **about** him, in the third person
2. something that **he himself** states, in the first person
3. something said **to** this person, in the second person.

In setting down the psalm below we will use three different fonts to distinguish between the three speakers. The location of the two expressions describing the person who trusts in God in the third person, at the beginning of the psalm and at its conclusion, serves as a literary envelope for the psalm. They parallel each other (inversely) and display a development. However, the crux of the parallel in the psalm is a direct one, between the exclamation of the disciple in the first half and that in the second half, and between the respective responses of the teacher in each instance. Thus, we may rewrite the psalm in such a way as to emphasize its structure and its dramatic molding, which will make our literary analysis (in the following *shiurim*) far easier.

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|-----|--|------|--|
| (1) | <i>He who dwells in the secret places of the most High shall rest in the shadow of the Almighty.</i> |      |  |
| (2) | <b>I shall say of the Lord – (He is) my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I shall trust -</b>   | (9a) | <b>For You, O Lord, are my refuge;</b>       |
| (3) | That He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler, (and) from the pestilence that afflicts.      | (9b) | You have made the most High Your habitation. |
| (4) | He shall cover you with His  | (10) | No harm will come to you,                    |

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<sup>9</sup> Another, more sophisticated example of an equal number of words in two halves of a psalm is to be found in chapter 130, which we discussed over the course of the first 5 *shiurim* in this series.

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|------|---|------|---|
|      | pinions and under His wings you will find refuge His truth will be (your) shield and buckler.                             |      | nor will any evil come near your dwelling.  |
| (5)  | You shall not fear the terror at night, (nor) the arrow that flies by day,  | (11) | For He shall charge His angels over you, You guard you in all of your ways.               |
| (6)  | (nor) of the pestilence that goes about in darkness, (nor) of destruction that wreaks waste at noon.                      | (12) | They shall bear you on their hands, Lest you strike your foot on a stone.                 |
| (7)  | A thousand shall fall at your (left) side and ten thousand at your right; (but) it shall not come near to you.            | (13) | You shall tread upon the lion and the viper and trample the young lion and the crocodile. |
| (8)  | Only with your eyes shall you look and see the recompense of the wicked,  |      |   |
| (14) | <i>For he has set his delight in Me – therefore I shall deliver him; I will lift him up, for he has known My Name.</i>    |      |   |
| (15) | <i>He shall call upon Me, and I shall answer him; I am with him in distress; I will deliver him and I will honor him.</i> |      |   |
| (16) | <i>I will satisfy him with long life and show him My salvation.</i>   |      |   |