

**SEFER TEHILLIM**

**Shiur #08: Psalm 91 – (continued)  
By Rav Elchanan Samet**

**F. Two exclamations by the disciple**

I shall now set out a detailed comparison between the two halves of the psalm.<sup>1</sup> First, I will compare the two exclamations of the disciple (verses 2 and 9a), and thereafter I will examine the two monologues of the teacher (verses 3-8 and 9b-13).

- (2) “I shall say of the Lord – (He is) my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I shall trust”
- (9a) “For You, O Lord, are my refuge”

The similarity between these two exclamations is clear:

In both cases the words are spoken in the first person; both testify to the speaker’s faith in God, and both feature the phrase, “*hashem machs*” (God is my refuge).

The second phrase is shorter than the first (4 words as opposed to 7), but this does not represent any sort of diminution or lessening; on the contrary, it conveys the message in a more compact and powerful form.

The most important difference between the two exclamations by the disciple is that the first is not a direct appeal to God. The somewhat ambiguous words “*omar la-shem*” here mean, “I shall say of God” (not “I shall say to God”) – as borne out by the end of verse 2: “My God, in *Him* I shall trust” (rather than, “In *You* I trust”).

In his second exclamation, the disciple addresses God directly, in the second person, as evidenced by the pronoun “You” at the outset (“For You, O Lord...”).

What is the significance of this development?

Seemingly, the difference arises from the words of the teacher to the disciple in the first half of the psalm. In his first exclamation, the disciple

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<sup>1</sup> In *shiur* no. 6 we presented the psalm way that highlights the two halves. Readers are encouraged to refer to that schematic presentation as they follow the material here.

expresses his faith in God on the basis of what he has learned and on the basis of his own feelings: God is his refuge and he trusts in Him.

The teacher confirms the words of the disciple by enumerating the many dangers from which God continually saves him. He refers to dangers of various types: natural disasters and predators as well as dangers arising from man; dangers that may be anticipated as well as those that present themselves suddenly; those that are known as well as those that are not.

When the disciple hears all of this, he utters a spontaneous exclamation, addressing God directly: “You, O Lord, are my refuge!”

The word “*kī*” (literally, “for”, or “because”) is used here in the sense of “indeed”. It testifies to the connection between the disciple’s exclamation and the preceding words of the teacher.

The disciple is now no longer expressing some general idea on the basis of what he has learned, as was the case in his first exclamation. His spontaneous exclamation here is an expression of his sense of security; he feels God’s closeness in a world that is so threatening that only God’s protection enables him to exist.

## **G. The two monologues of the teacher**

I attempted to highlight certain parallels in my presentation of the correspondence between the two monologues of the teacher, one in each dialogue cycle:

1. The teacher starts off, in each case, by describing the patronage encountered by the disciple who trusts in God. This description of safety and refuge serves as an introduction to the results, which follow.<sup>2</sup>

Verse 4: “He shall cover you with His pinions / And under His wings you will find refuge”

Verse 9(b): “You have made the most High your habitation”

The difference between these two descriptions turns on the question of the origin of that refuge: does it originate with God or with man?

In the first half, God is the active party: He “shall cover you”, and thus the person who trusts in God finds refuge under His wings. The metaphor in verse 7 compares God to a mother bird, protecting her chicks with her wings.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not exactly the case in the first half: there, before the teacher describes the refuge that the disciple finds in God (verse 4), he first says, “That He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler, (and) from the pestilence that afflicts”. This verse would seem to belong to the list of dangers that starts at verse 5.

In the second half, it is the trusting disciple who is active: “You, the disciple, have made the most High your habitation” – not like a baby bird, taking refuge under the protective wings of its mother, but rather as a free agent, choosing of his own will the place that he will enter in order to find some protection along his path.

What is the source of this difference? Obviously, it arises from the difference in the words of the disciple in the respective halves (as discussed above). The teacher adapts his metaphorical description to correspond with the disciple’s altered attitude towards God. In the second dialogue cycle, the disciple’s trust in and closeness to God has grown, and this development is reflected in the teacher’s response.

The disciple’s heartfelt exclamation and his direct appeal to God – “You, O Lord, are my refuge!” – is immediately “translated” by the teacher, who defines its significance: “You have made the most High your habitation”.

2. In illustrating God’s protection over the disciple who takes refuge in Him, the teacher introduces his words in each half with expressions formulated in the negative:

Verses 5-6: “You shall not fear the terror at night, (nor) the arrow that flies by day, (nor) of the pestilence that goes about in darkness, (nor) of destruction that wreaks waste at noon.”

Verse 10: “No harm will come to you, nor will any evil come near your dwelling”.

The difference here is clear: in the first half, there are real dangers facing the person, day and night, but someone who trusts in God will not fear them, since he knows that God is protecting him from them.

In the second half, the dangers are nullified altogether: no harm will come to the trusting person at all, nor will any evil (a general reference to the various types of illness and plague mentioned in the first half) befall him. Hence there is no need even to say that he will not fear these things; they do not threaten him in any way.

This development likewise arises from the change that has occurred in the perception of the disciple. Starting out as a “regular” believer in God, he has become a person who feels God’s protection in an immediate, personal way; he has “made the most High his habitation”.

3. Verse 11: “For He shall charge His angels over you, to guard you in all of your ways.”

Verse 12: “They shall bear you on their hands, lest you strike your foot on a stone.”

These verses have no parallel in the first half, since the first half describes only God's invisible protection from various types of danger. In the second half, the verses describe a remarkable closeness and intimacy between God and the person who trusts in Him: there is personal attention here; "carrying him on His wings", openly, and as an expression of love and concern.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the angel's protection of the person who trusts in God is not directed solely against the existential dangers that surround him (like those described in the first half); rather, it extends even to mundane obstacles that are not even considered dangerous: "Lest you strike your foot on a stone".

4. Verses 7-8: "A thousand shall fall at your (left) side, and ten thousand at your right; (but) it shall not come near to you. Only with your eyes shall you look, and see the recompense of the wicked."  
Verse 13: "You shall tread upon the lion and the viper and trample the young lion and the crocodile."

The salvation of the person who trusts in God, from all of the various enemies and dangers described in the first half, is a passive matter, from his point of view: he does nothing; "only with your eyes shall you look" – recalling Moshe's promise at the Reed Sea, "God will fight for you, and you shall remain silent."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The biblical character who epitomizes the realization of these verses is, of course, Yaakov – as described in the *parashot* of *Vayetze* and *Vayishlach*. Indeed, many *midrashim* understand these verses in our psalm as referring to Yaakov.

<sup>4</sup> We may counter this diminution of the salvation in the first half with the opposite argument: the fall of a thousand enemies on one side of this person and of ten thousand on his other side, amplifies considerably the number of the enemies described here, and recalls the words of the blessing in Sefer Vayikra (26:8): "Five of you shall pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you shall pursue ten thousand" (see also Devarim 32:30). Indeed, the early commentators sensed the seeming improbability of the verses describing such a huge victory over the enemies (far greater, quantitatively speaking, than that described in the verses of the blessing).

They offer three different solutions:

- a. Rashi and Rabbi Yishaya understand the verb "yipol" (shall fall) in the sense of "encampment" or "dwelling", as in Bereishit 25:18 – "He dwelled (*nafal*) in the presence of all his brothers". In other words, according to this view, what the verse is saying is, "Even if huge armies encamp at your sides, 'it shall not come near to you'."
- b. Radak and Rabbi Menachem ha-Meiri understand "yipol" in the regular sense – meaning, falling as casualties in battle – but not in a war waged by this person who trusts in God: " 'A thousand shall fall at your side' – in a war that will be waged by these people against those, and you shall have a pathway between them, and you shall see that there have been casualties to your left and to your right, but you shall pass between them in peace" (Radak).

In the second half, we find an active victory of the man who trusts in God over his cruel enemies (likened here to dangerous wild animals): he “treads” upon them and “tramples” them underfoot. This development parallels the one we discussed previously. The increased level of activity on his part brings about greater active involvement in his own deliverance.

In summary, as we have seen, the differences between the respective monologues of the teacher, in the first and second halves, arise from the development that has taken place within the disciple himself. This development, in turn, is the result of the teacher’s words in the first dialogue-cycle.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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- c. Ibn Ezra, along with some other commentators, maintains that the verses here are not talking about war at all; rather they refer to the plague of pestilence mentioned in the previous verse: “He will see that many have perished to his right and to his left, with the arrival of the pestilence”.

My explanation above could dovetail with Rashi’s interpretation, but according to his view I would have to add that the verses here are not talking about victory in battle – not even in the passive sense – but rather about deliverance of the man who trusts in God from the encampments surrounding him through **prevention** of the battle.