

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER TEHILLIM

**Shiur #09: Psalm 91 – (continued)
By Rav Elchanan Samet**

H. Why is our psalm presented as a drama?

In a previous shiur, we addressed why such an unusual model is chosen to express the idea of our psalm. Many chapters of *Tehillim* deal with the subject of trust in God, but are not molded in dramatic form; they express their through monologue.¹

The answer to this question is important for an understanding of the uniqueness of our psalm, in terms of its content.

Other chapters of *Tehillim* that speak of trust and deliverance usually address a danger that is familiar and manifest: Sometimes it involves enemies and war (as in Psalms 24, 27, and 31); at other times it concerns illness (as in Psalm 41). In some psalms, a few of the dangers mentioned above appear together, while in other instances the danger described serves as a metaphor for the psalmist's inner distress. In any event, the danger is always **present**, and the worshipper's trust in God's deliverance stands him in good stead and brings about his salvation.

In these psalms there is indeed no need for a dramatic presentation. It is usually most appropriate for such chapters to be uttered in the first person – as the person himself speaking.

What makes our psalm unique is that it does not speak of present, immediate threats; rather, it describes the various types of dangers that attack a person in this world. In the case of most of these dangers, the person is not aware of their presence before they strike.

Let us illustrate this point:

(1) “That He will deliver you from the snare (*pach yakush*)” – a snare is laid to trap animals. What is the meaning of this image when applied to a person? The answer is to be found in *Kohelet* 9:12 - “Likewise, man does not know his time: like the fish that are caught in the evil net, and like the birds that are trapped in the snare (*pach*), so people are ensnared

¹ For example, the well-known Psalm 27 is spoken in its entirety by the person who trusts in God, in the first person.

(*yukshim*) at an evil time, when it suddenly befalls them.”

Thus, the snare in our psalm is a metaphor for a sudden catastrophe that befalls a person, without any prior warning, just as the bird has no idea that innocently stepping into the snare will cause it to be trapped.

(2) “He will deliver you... from the pestilence that afflicts” - pestilence is disastrous. It is a plague that suddenly overtakes towns and even whole countries, claiming many victims. This, too, is an unexpected and sudden form of disaster.

(3) “You shall not fear the terror at night” – the terror that grips a person at night arises from his blindness in the dark, and hence his inability to anticipate, prepare himself, and protect himself from whatever might attack him.

(4) “...Nor the arrow that flies by day” – the archer shoots his arrows by day, when he is able to see and to aim his bow. The victim, however, is usually unaware that he is the target. Thus, he is hit suddenly, with no possibility of defending himself.

(5) “...(Nor) of the pestilence that goes about in darkness, (nor) of destruction that wreaks waste at noon” – Leaving aside for a moment the question of which “pestilence” the verse is referring to (pestilence appeared already in verse 3), and what sort of “destruction” is meant here, it is clear that these are further types of disasters: one attacks “in darkness” – secretly, without anyone noticing its appearance, while the other attacks openly, in broad daylight, cutting down all in its path.

Destructive forces of various origins – natural and man-made – threaten a person’s life in this world. How can he develop an awareness that can deal with the perpetual danger facing him at every step and at every moment of his life?

There are some people who live in constant fear of all sorts of unexpected disasters that may befall them and ruin their tranquil lives. They realize the curse as described in the Torah:

“Your life shall hang in doubt before you, and you shall fear night and day, and shall have no faith in your life.” (*Devarim* 28:66)

On the other hand, there are many – especially young people, full of self-confidence and lacking in experience – who ignore the fact that the world is such a dangerous place, and feel no threat to their carefree lives. Their inner voice tempts them to believe that nothing will happen to them; they feel immune to all threats.

Our psalm contains a didactic theme: it guides the person – especially if he is young – to the proper awareness that should accompany him with regard to the various dangers that lurk in his life. The advice here follows neither the first trend nor the second: a person must be aware of the existential dangers that surround him; he should not live under the false illusion that the world is a tranquil, safe place. On the other hand, this awareness should not embitter him or cause him to live in constant fear. Admittedly, the world is full of all sorts of dangers, but it is not ownerless: God watches over His creatures and treats each according to its needs. A person who trusts in God and makes Him his abode and his refuge will enjoy His protection from all of the dangers in the world. As his trust in God and closeness to Him grow, so God’s Divine patronage in his regard will assume deeper and broader significance.

Who are the people who will be harmed by the evils and dangers that are present in the world? It is the wicked who will be affected; those whom the person who trusts in God will see falling and suffering their punishment: “Only with your eyes shall you look and see the recompense of the wicked” (verse 8).

It is the didactic purpose of our psalm that demands its dramatic molding. At the center of the psalm stands the young disciple, who trusts in God. His trust is the fruit of his education, and may perhaps also arise from a vague intuition that God is his refuge and fortress in this world with all its dangers. As to what all these dangers may be – the disciple is ignorant; he lacks the life experience that would bring him familiarity with the world and its problems. He is still young; he perceives the world as a straight path. Obviously, he is unaware of the far-reaching results of his trust in God: the protection that he enjoys from a multitude of evils that threaten him day and night.

To learn all of this, the disciple needs the guidance of his teacher – the other character in this drama, who is older and more experienced, who is familiar with the world and its threats, and who recognizes the Divine protection enjoyed by the disciple. The teacher’s words to the disciple are mind-opening, causing the disciple to see things differently. It is specifically because the physical eyes are unlikely to perceive the world as the teacher is describing it – as a place full of hidden dangers, but also a place in which one who trusts in God is protected from all of them – that the disciple needs this guidance, coming from the life experience and authority of the teacher.

The vivid, detailed descriptions of the various calamities from which God delivers us, uttered with captivating poetic pathos, lead the disciple to identify with and internalize his teacher’s words; they lead him to feel that all of this indeed applies to him personally. He understands and senses that, at every moment of his life, he enjoys God’s hidden protection from all of the agents of harm which constantly lurk around him, and of which he has been unaware until now. As he absorbs all of this, the disciple cannot hold back a fervent cry of praise to God: “For You, O Lord, are my refuge!” This cry invites a further

monologue from the teacher, elaborating on his previous words and providing deeper insight into God's concern for those who place their trust in Him.

The spiritual stance of the reader of the psalm is assumed to be that of the disciple: he is assumed to maintain a general feeling of trust in God, even where there is no specific danger threatening him. Thus, the reader – just like the disciple who represents him – needs the moral and religious lesson that are addressed to him in the second person, exposing a hidden world that goes on behind the everyday reality: a world of hidden threats and dangers, on one hand, and of covert protection for those who trust in God, on the other. This exposure, coming from a source of authority and knowledge, is meant to increase and intensify the reader's trust in God, by catalyzing a development similar to – and in identification with – that undergone by the disciple.

I. God's words at the conclusion of the psalm

Among the questions we posed about the dramatic nature of our psalm, we are left with one that has not yet been addressed: what is the purpose of God's word that appears at the conclusion? Why are these words not uttered by the teacher, as part of his second monologue (with the appropriate alterations, obviously)?

The answer to this question arises from what we said above. We described the uniqueness of our psalm and the didactic, educational challenge facing the psalmist: to bring the disciple/reader to an accurate and proper perception of reality, with an awareness of the many pitfalls and dangers facing him, and to know that God protects and delivers those who trust in Him. We noted that it is this intention and purpose that finds expression in the dramatic molding of the psalm. God's concluding words, at the end of the psalm, are likewise related to this unique aim.

The teacher's words to the disciple, in each of the two dialogue cycles, while emanating from someone with authority and life experience, are still limited by virtue of their human source. The task of opening the disciple's eyes to the reality that is hidden behind what he sees has been accomplished successfully, but still requires objective confirmation – God's "stamp of approval," as it were. This confirmation is provided, for the benefit of the reader, in the form of God's word in support and elaboration of what the teacher has said.

The objective nature of God's word is expressed specifically in the fact that the Divine voice does not participate in the preceding dialogue. God does not address His words to the disciple ("For *he* has set his delight in Me," not "For *you* have set..."), nor does He address the teacher or anyone else. He says this to Himself, as it were, in the highest heavens, and only we – the readers of the psalm – merit to "overhear" this Divine confirmation of all that has been said previously. This in no way spoils the dramatic presentation, since God speaks in

the first person, such that an additional “voice” is added to the two that have engaged in the dialogue thus far.

We noted previously that both God’s concluding words at the end of the psalm and the opening verse – “He who dwells in the secret places of the most high...” – speak of the person who trusts in God in the third person, and that this “outside” perspective on him is absent from the rest of the psalm. These two observations concerning the person who trusts in God create a literary envelope for the verses in between, and a comparison between them will serve to reveal the development that takes place over the course of the psalm.

In both parts of the envelope, the verse concerning the trusting person, in the third person, represents a sort of objective statement about him. However, at the beginning of the psalm it is the psalmist who presents this character in an objective fashion, thereby setting down a thematic heading for the psalm, while at the end it is God Who speaks, thereby confirming and summarizing what has been said over the course of the psalm.

Furthermore, the beginning of the psalm describes the trusting person who finds his refuge in God, but there is no mention of reward for this trust. The conclusion, in contrast, while also speaking about the same person (“For he has set his delight in Me,” “he has known My Name,” “he shall call upon Me”), mainly describes his reward from God. This reward is expressed in seven verbs that depict how God acts for the benefit of the person who trusts in Him: 1. I shall deliver him; 2. I will lift him up; 3. I shall answer him; 4. I will deliver him; 5. I will honor him; 6. I will satisfy him; 7. I will show him.

Finally, it should be noted that God’s statement at the end includes three types of expressions:

One is suited to the first monologue of the teacher (verses 3-8), and is meant as confirmation of it.

The second is suited to the teacher’s second monologue (verses 9b-13) and is meant to confirm it.

The third is not directly related to either the first or the second monologue of the teacher, but rather contains new messages that have not yet been voiced.

The following schematic presentation, in three different script styles, shows verses 14-16 divided into the three types of expressions, and in the footnotes we address the relationship between each of God’s statements and the words of the teacher in each of the dialogue-cycles.

(14) "For he has set his delight in Me – therefore I shall deliver him;²
*I will lift him up, for he has known My Name.*³
(15) He shall call upon Me and I shall answer him; I am with him in
distress,⁴
I will deliver him *and I will honor him.*⁵
(16) I will satisfy him with long life and show him My salvation."⁶

Translated by Kaeren Fish

² "I shall deliver him" – from the trouble in which he finds himself. This corresponds to the words of the teacher in verse 3, "He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler."

³ "For he has known My Name" – corresponding to the disciple's cry in verse 9, "For You, O Lord" – a direct appeal to God, using His Name.

"I shall lift him up" – corresponding to the words of the teacher in response to the disciple: (12) "They shall bear you on their hands."

⁴ Situations of "distress," requiring deliverance, are the theme of the teacher's first monologue.

⁵ This line appears in two different styles. The first part – "I will save him (*achaltzehu*)" – refers to the distress in which the trusting person finds himself; this expression is synonymous with the "I shall deliver him" (*afaltehu*) at the beginning of God's words, and with the teacher's words in verse 3 – "He will deliver you (*yatzilkha*)." The second expression, "I will honor him" (*achabdehu*) is on a higher level than "I will deliver him." This "honor" is described in verses 11-12: "For He shall charge His angels over you... they shall bear you upon their hands."

⁶ The message of this verse has no parallel in the dialogue cycles that precede it; it represents an innovative addition to all that has been said in the body of the psalm in relation to the person who trusts in God. While both the disciple and the teacher spoke about the past and the present, this verse addresses his personal (and perhaps also national) future. It is with this significant message that the psalm concludes.