

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER TEHILLIM

Shiur #10: Psalm 127: The Difference Between “In Vain” (*shav*) and “Tranquility” (*shena*)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

(1) A Song of Degrees, for Shlomo:

1. Unless God builds the house,
Its builders toil in vain (*shav*).
2. Unless God watches over the city,
The watchman stays awake in vain (*shav*).
3. (2) It is vain (*shav*) for you to awaken early,
To sit up late,
To eat the bread of toil
– For to His beloved He gives tranquility (*shena*).
4. (3) Behold, children are the heritage of God,
And fruit of the womb – reward.
5. (4) Like arrows in the hand of a mighty one,
So are the children of one’s youth.
6. (5) Happy is the man
Who has filled his quiver with them;
7. They shall not be put to shame,
When they speak with their enemies at the gate.”

A. Two obvious difficulties

Chapter 127 of *Sefer Tehillim* (like the following one – 128) belongs to a relatively small group of psalms that may be referred to as “wisdom psalms.” Their aim is to educate towards a proper world-view, to inculcate biblical life-experience in the reader – like *Sefer Mishlei* and other books of wisdom. While the great majority of the psalms address the relationship between man and God, these “psalms of wisdom” deal with guidance for life (the assumption being, needless to say, that one’s life is always centered around God). While most of the psalms reflect a “vertical” relationship, between man and God, the “psalms of wisdom” (and the biblical literature of wisdom in general) is “horizontal” – i.e., inter-personal.¹

¹ Aside from psalms 127 and 128, we may note the following examples: 1, (34), 37, 45, 49, (78), 112, 133. The chapters in parentheses are those which cannot be unequivocally categorized. In his book, “Sheki’ei Chokhma be-Sefer Tehillim” (Magnes, Jerusalem 5751), Prof. Avi Horwitz discusses the identification of “wisdom psalms” in *Sefer Tehillim* from a linguistic perspective. In the first chapter of his book he presents a critical review of the approaches proposed by scholars who preceded him in this field of inquiry, and of their scope. On p. 128 of his book he presents a synoptic table comparing ten different views, dating from the 1930’s until the present. The table shows that there is consensus among eight or more scholars concerning only five psalms: 1, 34, 37, 49, and 112. Some of the scholars identify as many as fourteen “psalms of wisdom”; others count a total that is much smaller (five or six).

The list of psalms at the beginning of this note does not follow any particular approach, nor have we involved ourselves deeply in the methodological question of identifying the “wisdom psalms”. Our criteria were, firstly, the “audience” to whom the psalm is addressed – God or man – and secondly, the content and style of the psalm.

The topic is itself worthy of thorough discussion, and I do not pretend to do it justice here. Therefore, the list here should be regarded as no more than an initial impression arising from these psalms.

The psalm is presented above as a poem should be written in brief lines and divided into stanzas.² From the point of view of literal exegesis, it seems straightforward and presents little difficulty.³ However, even upon the most superficial initial reading, two questions immediately present themselves concerning the structure of the psalm and its thematic integrity:

The first question pertains to the psalm as a whole. We see that it is comprised of two halves, each addressing a different subject and each with a different atmosphere. Stanzas 1-3 express one idea: that man's efforts alone will not bear fruit if God is not a partner to his efforts. The atmosphere here is a negative one, as expressed in the thrice-repeated negation – "*shav*" (in vain) concerning the three examples cited to illustrate the main idea: the building of a house, the guarding of a city, and hard work in order to make a living. The same idea could be expressed in a positive way: "When God desires a man's ways, his endeavors will succeed", or "It is God Who gives person strength to build a house and to guard a city." However, our psalm chooses the negative formulation: in the absence of God's partnership in man's actions, all of his endeavors will amount to nothing.

The second half of the psalm (stanzas 4-7), in contrast, has a different subject: the blessing that comes to a man who has "children of his youth."

The stanzas of each of the two halves are united around the same subject, and we note an inner development in each of them. However, we are left with the question: What is the connection between the two halves of the psalm? Is there one single idea which the psalm as a whole is trying to express? In other words, is our psalm an integral whole? Is it built in a manner that serves to mold a single idea, or is it a composite of two independent parts under the same heading ("A Song of Degrees for Shlomo"), brought together for reasons which remain to be discovered?

The second obvious difficulty in our psalm concerns the words at the end of verse 2: "For to those who love Him He will give tranquility." Even on the level of literal meaning, the intention here is not clear: what is the meaning of the first word, "*ken*"? Does it mean "so", or "such", such that this verse stands in comparison to something that appeared previously? If so – what, and what is the significance of the comparison? Or, perhaps "*ken*" means "indeed"? The word "*shena*" (tranquility) likewise presents some difficulty. Does this mean "rest" ('*shena*' spelled with a '*heh*' at the end), as some of the earlier commentators suggest? If so, we must ask why the word here ends with an "*alef*." And what does the phrase mean, as a whole? Perhaps this word has some other meaning. If so – what is it?

The greatest difficulty here concerns the place of these words: Do they belong to the

It should further be noted that Psalm 91, which we analyzed in previous *shiurim*, also possesses some of the distinctive characteristics of a "wisdom psalm," and indeed one of the ten scholars included in Horwitz's survey does include it in his list.

² In our analysis of Psalm 130 (*mi-ma'amakim*) we discussed the importance of presenting the psalms in *Sefer Tehillim* in a manner that highlights their lyrical character.

³ "The bread of toil" (*lechem ha-atzabim*) means bread eaten in sorrow. The idea here is that the worker is so exhausted by his intensive and prolonged labor that he eats not in a relaxed frame of mind, but rather in sorrow. This hints to God's words to Adam (*Bereishit* 3:17), "Cursed is the land because of you; you shall eat of it in sorrow (*be-itzavon*)," and further on (verse 19), "you shall eat bread by the sweat of your brow". However, the meaning in our psalm is slightly different: here the verse is talking about the bread that accompanies man's hard labor. We deduce this from the parallel between the words "*mashkimei*" "*me'acharei*" "*ochlei*," all of which describe human action and effort, not its results.

The words "For to His beloved He gives tranquility" will be discussed below.

"The children of one's youth" means that children who are born to a person while he is still young. Similarly, "*eshet ne'urim*" means a woman whom a man marries in his youth.

third stanza and the first part of the psalm?⁴ This seems unlikely since, as we have pointed out, the atmosphere of the first half is negative, while these words – no matter how we interpret them – are unquestionably formulated in a positive manner. There is some sort of positive gift that God is bestowing on those who love Him. This being the case, perhaps these words are meant to serve as an introduction to the second half? The problem is that the subject of this half is the blessing of children that comes to man from God. The phrase in question seems to have nothing to do with this theme.

Since we are initially unable to decide where these words belong, we leave them for the meantime in a section of their own, in between the third and fourth stanzas – or, between the two halves of the psalm.

In the next *shiurim* we will attempt to analyze the psalm in an orderly manner, with the hope of finding answers to our questions above.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁴ As we must conclude if the word '*ken*' is understood to mean "thus" or "so".