

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER TEHILLIM

Shiur #11: Psalm 127 - Continued

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.”

B. The parallel between stanzas a and b, and their hidden meaning

The first two stanzas of our psalm maintain a synonymous¹, direct², complete³ parallel, as follows:

¹ A synonymous parallel is one where the two limbs express identical or similar content. The opposite of a synonymous parallel is a contrasting parallel, for example: “A wise son makes his father joyful, but a foolish son is the grief of his mother” (*Mishlei* 10:1).

The terminology used here represents a translation of that set down in an article by Batsheva Brosh, “*Hora’at ha-Tikbolet be-Shira ha-Mikrait*”, published in *Al ha-Perek* 1, 1984, pp. 51-61.

² A direct parallel is one where structurally the two limbs are set out in the same order. The opposite of a direct parallel is a chiasmic parallel. These two terms have nothing to do with the content of the limbs in question: both a direct parallel and a chiasmic parallel may be either synonymous or contrasting, in terms of content (see previous note).

³ A complete parallel is where the same syntactical elements appear in both limbs. The opposite of a complete parallel is an incomplete parallel, where one of the limbs is missing some syntactical element which exists in the other limb, and this element must be added from one limb to the other (sometimes from the first limb to the second, at other times the other way around).

If God does not build a house its builders labor in vain.
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓
If God does not guard a city the guard stays awake in vain. ↓

There is a thematic development between the two hemistiches: the “city” is a collection of houses which have already been built and which now require security: they need a watchman.

In contrast to this broadening of the perspective in the second limb in relation to the first, we also find the opposite phenomenon: the building of the house, in the first limb, is carried out by a number of “builders,” while the guarding of the city (with its many houses) is carried out by a single “guard.” The reason for this linguistic difference would seem to be that the construction of a house does usually involve a number of workers (whether for the sake of finishing the work sooner or because a variety of artisans are needed for different tasks), whereas the city can be guarded by a single watchman looking out for approaching enemies from an observation post where he can see them while they are still far off and raise the alarm by sounding the *shofar* or by directly notifying the king.⁴

Is it the intention of these two stanzas to nullify the value of man’s efforts to build his house and to protect the security of his city? This cannot be possible; it would be an offense both to common sense and to the prevailing biblical view that a person must exert effort for the sake of securing his own existence.⁵ Indeed, those among the early commentators who interpret our psalm in its general human context (and not in relation to the building of the Temple)⁶ explain that it does not contradict common sense or the accepted biblical conventions concerning human effort. According to their interpretations, man’s own efforts are a necessary but insufficient condition, and in the absence of God’s hidden involvement, man’s efforts will not attain their objective.

⁴ An exact description of the role of the watchman is to be found in *Yechezkel* 33:1-6 (and further on, the role of the prophet is compared to that of the watchman). A description of the specific action performed by the watchman is to be found in *Shmuel* II 13:34, and in more detail in *Shmuel* II 18:24-27 and *Melakhim* II 9:17-20. In the three latter sources, the watchman fulfills his task by notifying the king of the approach of some (still distant) unidentified party. However, in each of these cases it turns out that the party in question is not an enemy coming to conquer the city.

Since the action of the watchman is not connected to physical activity, like that of the builders of the house, the word “*bo*” is absent from the second limb of the parallel.

⁵ The sources cited in the previous note suffice to show that guarding the city is regarded as an absolute obligation, and that anyone who is negligent in this regard is fully responsible for the consequences (see the description of the watchman in *Yechezkel* 33).

Similarly, a person’s obligation to work for his livelihood is likewise clear in Tanakh. For example, *Tehillim* 104:23: “Man goes out to his work and to his labor until evening.”

In *Sefer Mishlei* we find many recommendations for significant human effort and conscientiousness in work for the sake of making a living (as we will discuss further on), but concerning a person’s home we read in *Kohelet* 10:18 – “From sloth the beams collapse, and through idleness of the hands the house leaks”.

This subject is addressed at length (including a discussion of our psalm) in a book by Dr. Amos Frisch, “*Yegi’a Kapecha – Yachas ha-Mikra el ha-Avoda*”, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uchad, 5759.

⁶ Most of the commentators explain this psalm, taking a cue from its introductory words, as referring to the building of the Temple, whether by David – who exerted considerable effort but was unsuccessful, or by Shlomo – who finally did build it. Some of these commentators go on to explain it as referring to “people of the world” – i.e., they regard it as a “psalm of wisdom” that imparts a lesson to all of mankind. We will adopt this view in our study of the psalm.

Ibn Ezra explains:

Since (the verse) starts by mentioning building (of a house), which is a great need for people... and the meaning of (the words), “toil in vain” is – if God does not help them, or brings a strong wind that can destroy everything. Thus, (the verse) mentions the artisans – who are the builders, thereafter the watchmen of the building – who are the watchmen of the city... and then (in the third stanza), the merchants of the city.

The Meiri expresses the same idea somewhat more clearly:

(The psalm) says, as advice and guidance for people, that when they invest effort in their property, even though effort is good, one should not place one’s faith in his own efforts and not think, when he obtains his desire, that it was his effort that achieved this for him. Rather, everything is from the blessed God, and it is He Who inspired him to make the effort, and it is He Who brought him to achieve his desire. The Torah warns, in this regard (Devarim 8:17-18), “And you say in your heart, ‘My strength and the might of my hand have achieved all this wealth for me,’” up until “you shall remember the Lord your God, for is it He Who gives you strength to make wealth”.⁷

After completing his commentary on the first three stanzas of our psalm, he comes back to his original message:

And all of this (is meant) not to discourage one from investing effort – for you will find no wise person who denounces effort and praises sloth. Rather, (the message is that) one should not place all of his trust in it (i.e., human effort), and not believe, when he achieves (his aim), that he has achieved what he has by his own effort; rather, God has graciously given it to him.

Given the Meiri’s view that our psalm provides general moral and religious guidance for all people, it seems strange that the psalmist choose the negative formulation to teach this lesson (“Unless God builds a house...”), rather than a positive formulation (“Only if God...”). Hence, it would appear that our psalm is meant to serve as rebuke to people who act improperly and who believe that only through their own strength and might can they build themselves houses and cities⁸, and ensure their own security and livelihood. It is to these people that the psalmist declares that their efforts will be in vain, for God will not look with favor upon their actions, and they will not last if they are contrary to God’s will.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁷ It would seem that the Meiri cites the verses here from his memory. He misquotes verse 18 slightly; I have cited the correct version of the verse.

⁸ I am reminded of the builders of the Tower of Babel, who said (Bereishit 11:4), “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower...”. They disregarded the message of our psalm, concerned only with their own strength and their name. However, God “did not build” the city and the tower, but sought to halt their construction, and therefore (verse 8) “God dispersed them from there over all of the face of the earth, and they ceased to build the city.”