

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER TEHILLIM

Shiur #12: 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.”

C. Stanza 3 in comparison with its predecessors

The third stanza differs from its predecessors in several respects. Firstly, it lacks the negative conditional clause – “If God does not....” This could convey the impression that awakening early and settling late are negative in and of themselves, independently of the question of God’s partnership in the efforts of those who conduct themselves in this way.

Secondly, while both of the previous stanzas speak in the third person of people who exert effort in vain, here we find that the psalmist addresses them directly, in the second person: “It is vain for you....”

Thirdly, while the “vain” action in each of the previous stanzas was a single activity (building, guarding), described in a single line of poetry, the third stanza offers three different vain activities (arising early, settling late, eating), all carried out for a single purpose – apparently, to make a living – but this purpose is not mentioned in the text.¹ This stanza therefore consists entirely of the three actions whose heading is, “in vain.”

¹ The reason for its absence would seem to arise from the first difference that we noted above between the third stanza and the first two: previously, the purpose of the human activity – the building of the house or the guarding of the city – was noted in the conditional clause. However, since no conditional clause exists in the third stanza, there is no mention of the purpose of the activity that is carried out “in vain”, and we must conclude this from the nature of the activity that is described. Had

We must now ask, does the third stanza represent a smooth thematic continuation of its predecessors, or do the differences between them indicate that some new point is being made here?

Notwithstanding the differences set forth above, there are several decisive factors that place the third stanza as an unbroken continuation.

Firstly, the appearance of the word “*shav*” (“in vain”) at the outset represents the third repetition of this word, after it has appeared in each of the two previous stanzas. Apparently, the intention here is as it was in the previous stanzas: “There is no value to your actions unless God is party to them.”

Secondly, the types of human activity addressed previously – the building of a house and the guarding of a city – illustrate two typical areas of human existential endeavor: finding shelter and ensuring security. The third stanza seems to complement these by presenting another – even more prominent – typical existential area of effort: economic viability.

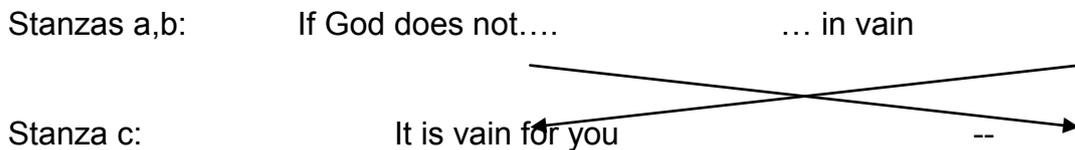
The three stanzas would therefore appear to represent a single idea that is broken down into three examples. It is therefore not reasonable to posit that the third stanza comes to present a new idea, different from the one expressed in the first two, without explaining its meaning.

What, then, is the meaning of the differences between the third stanza and its predecessors?

Let us first address the matter of the missing condition: “Unless God....” For this purpose we must go back to the parallel nature of the stanzas.

The third stanza itself is built as a parallel with three limbs.² Is there also a parallel between the third stanza and the previous two? (We have already seen that the first two stanzas maintain a clear parallel.)

The answer would seem to be clearly in the affirmative. The third stanza is a parallel in synonymous, chiasmic, incomplete³ form, as follows:



some conditional clause existed here, the verse would read, “If God does not provide food”, or the suchlike.

² The parallel here is synonymous, direct, and incomplete (see the footnotes of the previous *shiur* for an explanation of these terms), as follows:

“It is vain for you	to rise up	early	
	to settle		late
	to eat		the bread of toil.”

While the third stanza is not a complete parallel with the previous ones, it nevertheless expresses the same idea and with a similar word order.

³ See the footnotes of the previous *shiur* for an explanation of these terms.

Considering that the third stanza parallels the previous stanzas in terms of content (hence our definition of this as a “synonymous parallel”), we must ask why its structure is different (bringing the consequence to the beginning of the sentence, and thereby producing a chiasmic parallel), and why this stanza is lacking a part, requiring the intuition of its complement on the basis of the two previous stanzas (hence the definition as an “incomplete parallel”).

The answer to these questions is that all of the changes characterizing stanza c. in relation to its predecessors arise from the fact that this stanza concludes the first section of the psalm. I shall presently explain what this means.

When a chiasmic parallel follows a direct one, it is often meant to “wrap up” the statement that is being made. As in many other instances in Tanakh, the chiasm here expresses conclusion and confirmation.⁴ The third stanza concludes the first section of the psalm, and is therefore presented as a chiasmic parallel to the two preceding stanzas.

The fact that the parallel is incomplete arises from the length of the description, in this stanza, of actions that are “vain”: there is an enumeration of three actions instead of a single one as in the previous stanzas. Thus, the number of words in this stanza (9) is equal to the number in the previous stanzas. Had the conditional clause (“Unless God...”) been added here, the quantitative balance would have been lost, with the consequent implications for the rhythm which would have been similarly affected – along with aesthetic considerations.⁵

However, we may ask: why does the third stanza need to enumerate three different activities that are undertaken “in vain”, rather than sufficing with just one? The answer is, once again, that since this stanza “sums up” the message of the first part of the psalm, the idea of “vanity” is expressed here with greater intensity and with greater variation – and hence, necessarily, at greater length. I will explain this further.

We have already hinted above that the example of human effort in the quest for existential needs that is discussed in this third stanza – the toil to ensure

⁴ As discussed at length and in detail by A. Mirsky z”l in his work, “*Ha-Pissuk shel ha-Signon ha-Ivri*” (First Edition, Mossad ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem 5738; Second Edition published as “*Signon Ivri*,” Jerusalem 5759). Just two of the many examples that he cites are *Tehillim* 115:5-7 and 22:24.

⁵ The first three stanzas, comprising the first part of the psalm, are all of about the same length – 8-9 words. The length of the four stanzas comprising the second part are likewise of similar length – 6-7 words. To illustrate the literary reason for the difference in the parallel that appears in the third stanza, let us imagine how the text would read had the direct and complete parallel continued into this stanza:

“Unless God builds a house	its builders toil in vain.
Unless God guards a city	the guard watches in vain.
Unless God grows bread	those who awaken early and settle late do so in vain; those who work the ground eat the bread of toil.”

While the idea is expressed here more clearly than it is in the psalm as we have it, there can be no question that the literary and musical appeal is gone, and thus the whole moral and thematic power is lost.

economic viability, to obtain sustenance – is a more obvious example than either of the two preceding ones. Why is this so?

The building of a house lasts for a limited time. When the action is complete, the house stands firm, and its inhabitant has satisfied his existential need for shelter. The guarding of a city, in contrast, is an action that continues – every day and every night. However, this action is not one that every person engages in. The city guards are a small, defined group of people for whom guarding is a permanent, professional occupation. Furthermore, while guarding the city is unquestionably a position of great responsibility, it does not involve much physical effort – unlike many other human endeavors (such as building a house).

In a league of its own is the Sisyphean effort to make a living. This ongoing effort is the lot of every person, for all of his life. It requires that a person devote his days, from early in the morning until the evening, to hard work involving physical and mental exertion.

Thus, the message here is that it is not only the relatively brief endeavors (such as building a house) or professional specializations (like guarding) whose success depends on Divine involvement and help, but also – and especially – the endeavor that is most characteristic of the human condition, and the most demanding: making a living.

In light of this, the third stanza represents the most intensive expression of the idea set forth in the first part of the psalm. This also explains the extra enumeration of actions that are carried out “in vain” in this stanza – with ramifications for its structure and its parallel relationship with its predecessors.

The third stanza involves one further development: the psalmist addresses the people toiling to earn their bread in the second person: “It is vain for you...” This technique serves to intensify the tone of reproof that was already hinted at in the previous stanzas.

Previously, we noted that the formulation of the moral, religious message of our psalm in the negative (“Unless God builds... in vain”) alludes to the Divine retribution awaiting builders of the house and guards of the city who are not worthy of Divine partnership in their actions, and who will therefore see no success in their endeavors.

This note of rebuke becomes more tangible when the psalmist addresses people directly. The actions of these people, toiling endlessly to obtain sustenance, will not achieve anything if they are not blessed by God.

Thus, despite the differences between the third stanza and the two preceding ones – and by means of those differences – the third stanza turns out to represent a continuation and development of the same idea that they introduced.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish