

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER TEHILLIM

Shiur #13: 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.”

D. “For to His beloved He gives tranquility” – the conventional interpretation and its difficulties

We now come to the most problematic verse in our psalm: “For to His beloved He gives tranquility.” The English translation here is just one of several possibilities; the literal meaning of the verse is not clear, and its connection with the preceding and following verses likewise demands some explanation.

The classical commentators, along with most modern scholars, understand the word “*shena*” (which we have translated thus far as “tranquility”) as though it ended with a ‘*heh*’ instead of an ‘*alef*’ – in other words, “sleep.” This interpretation serves to link this phrase with the preceding stanza, which spoke about people who arise early in the morning and settle to sleep late, all because of their work. Our verse depicts a contrasting picture of God granting to “His beloved” the “sleep” that they need. What is the significance of this contrast?

1. Rabbi Menachem ha-Meiri

The Meiri provides the following explanation of the contrast between the

third stanza and the phrase that follows it:¹

“It is vain for you to awaken early” – for work; “to settle late” – meaning, you people who engage in work from early in the morning and who continue to engage in it until it is already nearly night, to the point where you eat your bread in sadness and toil.

“Thus” – meaning, all that you earn with all of your efforts and toil

“He gives to His beloved” – meaning, whomever He desires

“at rest” – meaning, while they are in a state of rest rather than in toil.”

Let us analyze this interpretation more closely. The Meiri understands the first word of the phrase, “*khen*,” as an association – “thus.” The association is to the profit which the workers referred to in the previous stanza obtain through their strenuous efforts.

This interpretation presents difficulties in terms of both style and content. Stylistically, we note that there is actually no mention of any profit in the third stanza.² How can our verse allude to something that was not previously stated?

In terms of content, the labor of the workers in the third stanza is described as being “in vain” – i.e., there is no point to it. Thus, the third stanza negates the value of any profit earned by these workers. How, then, can the psalm go on to promise this same doubtful, “vain” profit, to God’s “beloved,” whom He desires?

Let us analyze further the words of the Meiri. He explains “*shena*” (in the sense of “sleep” or “rest”) not as the **object** that God gives as a gift to His beloved, but rather as a **description** of the way in which God gives His gift to His beloved. However, to achieve this meaning the Meiri is forced to add the letter ‘*bet*’ at the beginning of the word “*shena*” – “*be-shena*.” In other words, God’s beloved will receive His gift while in a state of sleep or rest.

Aside from the linguistic problem of adding a prefix to the word, the interpretation of the Meiri is quite audacious in terms of its message. According to his explanation, our psalm nullifies the value of human action and the need for human effort, declaring that there is no need for them: whoever is beloved by God can lie upon his bed, while other people – of lesser spiritual nobility – are out working from early morning until night, and God will take care of his sustenance and ensure his livelihood even while he himself sleeps!

¹ Rabbi Yishayahu Detrani preceded the Meiri with a similar explanation, but the Meiri is easier to understand.

² Unless we posit that the “bread of toil” is itself the profit in question, instead of our assumption that the eating of the bread in such oppressive conditions is part of the description of the efforts expended by those who toil in vain.

If this is the intention of the third stanza, we must revisit the first and second stanzas and view them in the same light: there is no need for the builders of a house to invest all their efforts, nor for the watchman to remain alert. All of these people can simply sleep in their beds, while God will take care of building the house and guarding the city – if they are worthy of His gift. If they are not worthy, then their efforts will in any case be “in vain.”³

We have already discussed this possible interpretation, concluding that it goes against common sense and intuition, as well as against the ubiquitous biblical acknowledgment of the need for human effort. (In fact, as cited in the first *shiur* on this psalm, the Meiri himself is a most vociferous opponent of such an outlook!)

Indeed, the Meiri senses the problematic nature of his explanation and tries to offset it, in two ways. First – exegetically: he interprets the word “*shena*” not in the literal sense, but rather as “in a state of rest, rather than in toil.” In other words, even God’s beloved is required to exert effort and to work, but in moderation. He will not arise early nor toil until late, but God will ensure him profit equal to that achieved through hard labor on the part of one who is not God’s beloved.

However, we must question this interpretation of the word “*shena*,” which unquestionably denotes a state of passivity; it is not a word that is suited to describe moderate work.⁴

The second method that the Meiri adopts to dispel the “mistaken interpretation” is his insertion of a brief note at the end of his commentary on verse 2 (cited in full in a previous *shiur*): “All of this is meant not to discourage effort, for you will not find a single wise person who denounces effort and praises sloth...”

However, the Meiri’s apologetic efforts serve only to highlight the ideological difficulty of the verse as it stands, according to his interpretation. In any event, as discussed above, his interpretation seems forced in several respects.

³ While there are certainly some religious approaches that support such a view – including among Jews – it would certainly be quite astonishing to find such extreme expression of such a view in one of the psalms of *Sefer Tehillim!*

⁴ We might explain, based on the Meiri (and perhaps this is his intention) that the “*shena*” that is referred to is at the appropriate times – i.e., from the beginning of the night to the end of the night, times which the workers referred to previously would spend in their labors (arising early, before the dawn, and returning late, after nightfall). The beloved of God, according to this view, need toil only during the hours reasonably suited for work, and sleep at night, and God will nevertheless provide full profit. (This is closer to the interpretation proposed by R. Yishayahu Detrani.) The problem with this explanation arises when we compare the “praise of sleep” with the lessons conveyed in *Sefer Mishlei* – see below.

2. Amos Chakham, “Da’at Mikra” commentary

Amos Chakham offers a slightly different interpretation of the phrase in question:

“*Khen*” (indeed) – for reinforcement. The matter is true.

“He gives rest to His beloved” – God gives sleep to his beloved, and does not require him to remain awake for long hours, for He blesses the work of his hands, and he has time to sleep as much as he needs and to work enough to ensure his sustenance.”

From the point of view of linguistics, this interpretation avoids the pitfalls discussed above in relation to the Meiri,⁵ while in terms of content the two explanations are rather similar.

However, this explanation presents a new difficulty, which Chakham addresses (*ibid.*, n. 4):

“In the Proverbs of Shlomo there are many warnings against excessive sleep, which causes man to neglect his work. For example (*Mishlei* 6:9), “For how long will you sleep, O sluggard; when will you arise from your sleep?”;⁶ (*Mishlei* 20:13), “Do not love sleep, lest you become impoverished; open your eyes and you will be satisfied with bread.” This verse seems to be saying the very opposite of our psalm: “Those who eat the bread of toil – thus shall He give to His beloved (in) tranquility.”⁷

He answers as follows:

“However, in truth the messages are compatible. What they mean is that one should sleep in the measure needed for a person’s health. Concerning one who adds (sleep) to this, it is written, “Do not love sleep...,” while concerning one who subtracts from it, it says, “It is vain for you to awaken early... for He shall give to His beloved tranquility.” This wise man means to say... that a person should not exceed the proper measure: sloth is an evil trait; in contrast, industriousness is a trait that is praiseworthy, but a person who is excessively conscientious in his work

⁵ The word “*khen*” is not understood as an allusion or association with something else. We note that there is some question as to his interpretation of the word in the sense of “indeed,” since if this were the intention, the word order should rather have been, “Indeed, He gives sleep...” (*khen, yiten li-yedido shena*).

⁶ The verse continues: “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of hands to retire” – meaning, if a lazy person tells himself that he wants just “a little sleep,” etc., then “so your poverty will come like a marauder and your want (will proceed before you) like an armed man”. The same message is repeated again in *Mishlei* 24:33-34.

⁷ What Chakham is saying is that in *Mishlei*, sleep is a contrast to being satisfied with bread, while in our psalm it is the getting up early that turns the bread into “bread of toil,” while one who sleeps long will eat bread in tranquility.

and consumes all his bodily strength with his hard labor, is not counted as one who is diligent and praiseworthy, but rather among the scorned who “eat the bread of toil.””

The contradiction between our psalm and *Sefer Mishlei* concerning the relationship between diligence and sleep is resolved by proposing that *Mishlei* refers to a person who sleeps too much and works too little, while *Tehillim* describes the opposite phenomenon – those who sleep too little and work too much. Both earn disapproval.

However, according to Chakham’s explanation, the subject of the third stanza has imperceptibly been altered, and is no longer the same message that was addressed in the first two stanzas. There, the psalmist was not talking about the proper ratio of hard work to sleep and rest. While this is an important subject in its own right, and certainly worthy of being addressed in the “wisdom literature,” it is not the subject of our psalm. Our psalm is discussing the relationship between human effort and God’s involvement and partnership in those efforts. It comes to teach us that if God is not party to man’s initiatives, none of his labor will amount to anything.

In the previous *shiur* we took pains to show that this is also the subject of the third stanza, which we showed to be a continuation of its predecessors: “It is vain for you, who arise early...” is not a rebuke of people who invest too much time and effort in their hard labor, but rather a rebuke directed towards those who believe that their sustenance is dependence solely on their work, with no understanding that without God’s will to provide them with bread, their efforts will be in vain.⁸ This understanding arises both from the word “*shav*,” which reappears (for the third time) at the beginning of the third stanza and – apparently – with the same meaning as in the two previous stanzas, and from the literary parallel between the third stanza and the previous two.

What is it that causes Amos Chakham to “slip” into a different interpretation for the third stanza? The answer is, of course, the contrast between the praise of rest (in the verse, “So/thus shall He give rest to His beloved...”) and the denunciation of hard work (“It is vain for you, who arise early...”).

If his interpretation of the words, “Indeed, He shall give rest to His beloved,” is correct, then his explanation of the previous stanza (c) makes sense. But the rest of this is a change of subject in the third stanza: instead of the **religious message** with which the psalm begins, the third stanza presents **practical guidance** as to the proper balance between work and rest!

⁸ Thus, there is no contradiction of the messages in praise of diligence and conscientiousness in *Sefer Mishlei*. Even from our psalm one might conclude that if God gives a person sustenance, then it is proper that he arise early and labor until late, just as it is proper for builders to toil over building a house, and for the watchman to remain alert at his watch.

All of this leads us to seek a new and different interpretation of the phrase in question.

(To be continued)

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