

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER TEHILLIM

**Shiur #14: Psalm 127 – The Difference Between "In Vain" (*Shav*) and
"Tranquility" (*Shena*) (Part V)
By Rav Elchanan Samet**

- 1 (1) A Song of Degrees, for Shlomo:
Unless God builds the house,
Its builders toil in vain.
- 2 Unless God watches over the city,
The watchman stays awake in vain.
- 3 (2) It is vain 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.

V. EMERTON'S ARTICLE: "THE MEANING OF *SHENA* IN PSALM 127"

A new interpretation of the words, "For to His beloved He gives tranquility (*shena*)," was suggested by the Cambridge scholar, J.A. Emerton, in his article, "The Meaning of *Shena* in Psalm 127."¹

In the first part of his article, Emerton surveys the various explanations that had already been proposed for the word "*shena*." Regarding the suggestion that *shena* with an *alef* be understood as *shena* with a *heh* (the substitution of the *alef* for the *heh* under the influence of the Aramaic) - i.e., in the sense of "sleep" - Emerton raises objections similar to those that we ourselves raised in the previous section.² He then cites some of the other interpretations that have been proposed by biblical scholars, who understood the word *shena* in other ways, and not as "sleep," but argues that these interpretations lack all basis.

Later in his article, Emerton surveys the views of several scholars who

¹ The article was published in *Vetus Testamentum*, 24 (1974), pp. 15-31.

² Emerton discusses the explanations proposed by the modern biblical scholars who understood the word in this manner, whereas our discussion revolved around the explanations offered by the traditional Jewish commentators.

for a long time have argued for the existence of a root in Hebrew, *shin-nun-alef*, which means "to reach elevated status, or "to enjoy elevated status," or "to rise, shine"³ (there is, of course, a connection between elevation and sunshine/sunrise). A similar root is found in Syriac and in Arabic, and perhaps also in other Semitic languages (Amharic and Ugaritic).

The Syriac root SANA means to be elevated. In Arabic the root SANA means "shine, rise." The word SANIA in Arabic means "was at a height" or "rose to a height" – a person's own standing rose - or "raised the standing of another."

Over the course of the twentieth century more and more scholars recognized that this root is found in Scripture and in ancient Hebrew literature. The meaning of several biblical verses containing a similar root has long been unclear. Various scholars have suggested that these verses be understood on the basis of this explanation of the root *shin-nun-alef*, and some of these suggestions shed a whole new light on the verses in question.

I wish to present here several examples brought by different scholars, and I will try to add further foundation to these interpretations. Some of these interpretations were fully accepted by Emerton, while others he rejected owing to the uncertainty, even though to us they appear to be persuasive examples. Let us begin by presenting examples that appear as part of a parallel structure, in which the root in question parallels another root that means "light."

Mishlei 5:8-10:

8	Remove your way far from her (= another woman)	and do not come near the door of her house.
9	Lest you give your splendor (<i>hodkha</i>) to others,	and your years (<i>u-shenotekha</i>) to the cruel one.
10	Lest strangers be filled with your strength;	and your labors go to the house of a stranger.

The commentators understood the word "*shenotekha*" as "*ha-shanim shelkha*" – "your years." According to this understanding, however, there is no clear correspondence between the words "*hodkha*" and "*shenotekha*." According to the newly proposed interpretation,⁴ however, the noun "*shenotekha*" stems from the verb "*shana*" and it means "your light," or something similar, and the correspondence to the word "*hodkha*," "your splendor," is clear. The verse as a whole means that the sinner's "glory" will be given into the hands of the cruel husband of the other woman.⁵

³ Already in 1792, Michaelis suggested in his biblical dictionary that the biblical term "*shani*" be understood in light of a similar Arabic word meaning "splendor," and his suggestion was accepted by Gesenius and others.

⁴ This is the way the word was explained by Ehrlich in his German commentary to this verse (1913), where he relates the word "*shenotekha*" to the word "*shani*" and translates it into German as "your splendor."

⁵ It is interesting to note that as in our psalm, in these verses as well, there is an allusion to a (contrasting?) connection between "*shenotekha*" and "*atzavekha*" – your hard work.

Kohelet 8:1:

A man's wisdom and boldness	Makes his face to shine (<i>ta'ir</i>), brightens (<i>yeshune</i>) his face.
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Here, too, as in our psalm, we find the root "*shana*" with an *alef* at the end.

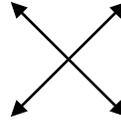
The commentators grappled with this verse and proposed various different interpretations. Structurally, "*yeshune*" parallels "*ta'ir*", and this fits in well with the meaning of the word "*shana*" in Arabic, "to rise, to shine." According to this, the parallelism in the verse is synonymous, incomplete and chiasmic in the concluding portions of each hemistich:

A man's face



and [a man's] boldness

makes shine his face,



his face brightens.⁶

The scholar who contributed most to this discussion and brought many examples of the use of the root *shin-nun-alef* in Scripture (and also in Ben Sira and in the Talmud) was D. Winston Thomas. Thomas returned to this issue in several articles that he authored between the thirties and the sixties of the twentieth century. I wish to present one of his examples:

Mishlei 14:17:

He that is soon angry acts foolishly:	and a man of wicked devices <i>yisane</i> .
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In general the commentators saw this verse as an example of synonymous parallelism⁷ and they understood the word *yisane* in accordance with its traditional vocalization in the sense of "hate."

The context of the verse, however, suggests contrasting parallelism.⁸ According to this, "*ish mezimot*" refers to a person who plans out his actions in

⁶ This explanation was suggested by I. Eitan in his book, "A Contribution to Biblical Lexicography" (New York, 1924), p. 10. Emerton cites this explanation with reservations, but it seems to me that this is one of the strongest proofs in Scripture to the existence of the root *shin-nun-alef*. It is interesting to note that Rashi, even though he understands the word "*yeshune*" in the sense of "*shoneh*," different, explains the verse as follows: "And boldness changes his face – from that of other people, to the point that people will be afraid to approach him, **because his face shines.**"

The *shuruk* and the cantillation note do not fit in so well with this understanding, but this stems from the fact that the Masoretes were not familiar with the meaning of the root *shin-nun-alef*.

⁷ "*Ish mezimot*" is understood as one who thinks "thoughts of evil counsel" (Rashi, and similarly Ibn Ezra).

⁸ In the surrounding verses we find similar parallels, and they are contrasting parallels: v. 15: simple man/prudent man; v. 16: wise man/fool; v. 18: the simple/the prudent.

advance, and stands in positive contrast to one who is "*ketzar apayim*," "short-faced", i.e., impetuous.⁹ Accordingly, "*yesune/yeshune*" should be understood in the sense of "will be respected, will achieve elevated standing."¹⁰

Other instances of the root *shin-nun-alef* include the following:

II *Melakhim* 25:29:

And he [Evil-Merodakh] *shina* his [Yehoyakhin's] prison garments...

While generally understood in the sense of "change," the word "*shina*" might mean that Evil-Merodakh "raised the status" of Yehoyakhin's prison garments, in a way that would honor their wearer.¹¹

Daniel 7:23:

The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom upon earth, which *tishne* from all kingdoms...

Though generally understood as saying that the fourth kingdom shall be different from all kingdoms, G.R. Driver proposes that the verse be translated as follows: "...shall be a fourth kingdom upon the earth, which shall be more elevated than all the kingdoms."¹²

After citing the earlier scholars and considering each of their examples, Emerton suggests that the clause in question in our psalm be understood in similar fashion: "For He gives His beloved honor, elevated standing."¹³

What are the ramifications of Emerton's explanation for understanding the verse under discussion, and for integrating it into the psalm as a whole?

First of all, we must define the "*shena*" – the realm in which the honor that God gives His beloved finds expression. In the context of our psalm, this should be understood as the success bestowed upon the efforts of God's

⁹ The root *zayin-mem-mem* is connected to thoughts, but not necessarily evil ones. As the Radak explains in his *Sefer ha-Shorashim*, s.v. *zamam*: "All instances of *zama* – thoughts, whether good or bad, each instance to be interpreted in accordance with its context."

¹⁰ According to this, the word should be read with a *shin*, and the traditional vocalization of the word with a *sin* stems from the fact that the Masoretes were not familiar with the root *shin-nun-alef* (see end of note 6).

¹¹ The biblical scholars do not bring this example (at least not those cited in Emerton's article). This verse brings to mind the verse in *Esther* 2:9: "And he moved her (*va-yeshaneha*) and her maids to the best place." Thomas brings this verse, suggesting that the word *va-yeshaneha* be understood as "he elevated her."

Thomas also suggests that this is the way to understand the words of Rav in *Shabbat* 10b: "A person should never *yeshaneh* one son among other sons" – he should never elevate and honor one son more than the rest of his sons.

¹² *Eikha* 4:1 reads: "How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold *yishne*." The connection between *shin-nun-alef* in the sense of "shine" accords well with gold, but the verse seems to be saying the very opposite: "*yishne*" parallels "*yu'am*," "become dimmed." Indeed, Rashi explains: "*Yishne* – its appearance will change." The matter requires further study.

¹³ Or perhaps: "a bright countenance," as an expression of the satisfaction felt by God's beloved with his successful actions.

beloved, in that he enjoys the fruits of his actions.

This indeed is the context of in our psalm: Will the efforts of a person toiling to achieve an essential objective meet with success? The first part of the psalm proclaims that without God's favor and participation, man's efforts are doomed to failure.

Since this assertion is made in a reproachful tone, it stands to reason that it should be understood as referring to people who do not merit God's help because of their actions or their negative outlook.¹⁴

And now comes the clause under discussion, and proclaims by way of contrast that to "His beloved" God will give honor and success. In the context in which this clause appears – following stanzas 1-3 - this means that the efforts of God's beloved will be crowned with success and his objective will be achieved. This success will come by virtue of God's participation and involvement, which will crown it with "*shena*."

What then is the meaning of the word "*ken*" standing at the beginning of the clause, according to this interpretation? This word should be understood as a demonstrative pronoun referring to one or more things mentioned earlier. This is the way it was understood by the Meiri, but since he interprets the word "*shena*" in the sense of sleep, the clause as a whole is understood as standing in contrast solely to stanza 3 (which deals with hard labor that allows for little sleep), and this gives rise to serious difficulties.

According to Emerton's explanation, on the other hand, the clause, "For to His beloved He gives...", stands in contrast to all three preceding clauses, and the word "*ken*" can allude to all the efforts described in these clauses which did **not** achieve results since they were made by people who are not the beloved of God: the building of a **house** that was in vain, the guarding of the **city** for which the watchman stayed awake in vain, and the efforts made to provide a living all of which were in vain.¹⁵ As opposed to all these – the efforts of God's beloved to build a house, to guard the city, and to bring forth bread from the earth will be successful because of God's participation in his efforts, and the beloved of God will merit the gift of "honor" from God.

Thus it follows that the clause under discussion is the key to the psalm, for it sets up a positive antithesis to the whole first part of the psalm! This clause clarifies that the lack of success described in stanzas 1-3 stems from the fact that the active characters in these three stanzas are not the beloved of God, and do not deserve that God should bestow success upon their efforts.

The most important thing about Emerton's proposal is that it "liberates" our psalm from the explanation that sees in it a discussion concerning the

¹⁴ The reproachful tone of stanzas 1-2 was noted above at the end of section 2, and the sharpening of this tone in stanza 3 was noted at the end of section 3.

¹⁵ According to this, the word "*ken*" alludes to what was explicitly mentioned in the previous stanzas: the toil of building, the guarding of the watchman, and the labor of the workers.

relationship between hard work and sleep, a discussion which is not found in either the first part or second part of our psalm. According to his explanation, the clause, "For to the beloved of God," completes by way of contrast the idea expressed in the first three stanzas of the psalm regarding the relationship between human effort and Divine blessing.

As stated above, according to Emerton's explanation, the function of the clause, "For to the beloved of God...," is not to serve as a footnote to stanza 3 (as follows from the other explanations), but rather to stand in contrast to the entire first part of the psalm. At the same time, however, this clause serves as a bridge to the second half of the psalm – the "positive" part, the atmosphere of which is entirely different than that of the first part. The person described throughout the second half of the psalm is undoubtedly God's "beloved," and therefore he merits Divine reward – fruit of the womb – and this is clearly expressed in the fourth stanza of the psalm.

It turns out then that the blessing of children described in the second half of the psalm is also included in the "*shena*" – in the honor and elevated standing which the beloved of God is given. This explanation opens the door to a discussion regarding the connection between the two halves of the psalm, something which we found difficult in the opening section of this study. The substantive connection between the two parts of the psalm will be discussed in the coming sections, but to conclude this section, I wish to discuss the structural connection between the two halves of the psalm, because this connection depends in large measure on the clause set between the two parts of psalm, the clause under discussion in this section.

According to our explanation, this clause serves as a bridge between the two halves of the psalm, while it itself is not an integral part of either the first half or the second half. The function of this clause is to "cross" the reader from the first half to the second, so that the contrast between them (mainly with respect to the atmosphere) is explained. The explanation arising from the "bridging clause" is that the two halves deal with different people: the first half deals with people who are undeserving of Divine blessing, whereas the second half deals with the beloved of God who merits God's inheritance and reward.

According to the terminology used in the structural analysis of literary units in Scripture, the element that is set in the middle of a literary unit and does not belong to either of its two halves, but serves as a transition from the first half to the second, is referred to as the "central axis" of the unit. The words, "For to the beloved of God He gives elevated standing," serve then as the central axis of our psalm.

Do the two parts of the psalm constitute two equally long halves of the entire psalm? Yes: the first half of the psalm is comprised of 26 words, whereas the second half is comprised of 27 words.¹⁶ The two equal halves of

¹⁶ In such a short psalm the equal length of the two halves is measured by the number of words, rather than the number of verses. The surplus of one word in the second half of the psalm will be discussed in the next *shiur*.

our psalm stand then in contrasting parallelism around its central axis.

Let us once again present our psalm in a manner that will best illustrate its structure:

(1) A Song of Degrees, for Shlomo:				
1	Unless God builds the house, its builders toil in vain.	For to His beloved He gives elevated standing.	4	(3) Behold, children are the heritage of God, And fruit of the womb – reward.
2	Unless God watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.		5	(4) Like arrows in the hand of a mighty one, so are the children of one's youth.
3	(2) It is vain for you to awaken early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of toil.		6	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.

(To be continued)

(Translated by David Strauss)