

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER TEHILLIM

**Shiur #15: 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 destroy their enemies at the gate.

**VI. THE CONTRASTING CONNECTION BETWEEN THE FIRST AND THE
SECOND HALVES OF THE PSALM**

The discussion regarding the connection between the two halves of Psalm 127 began already at the end of the previous section, where we demonstrated that our psalm has a clear structure typical of many psalms. It is divided into two halves, equal in length, which stand in contrasting parallelism to each other around a central axis serving as a bridge between the two contrasting halves.

The contrast between the two halves can be labeled as the contrast between "*shav*" and "*shena*,"¹ between human efforts that are made in vain and human efforts that are crowned with success and therefore bestow honor and elevated status upon those who make them.

This contrast stems from the implicit contrast between the people dealt with in the first half – whose endeavors are undeserving of God's blessing,

¹ The word "*shav*" represents the first half, whereas the word "*shena*," serves as a heading for the entire second half of the psalm, even though it is found only in the central axis, for the whole purpose of the central axis is to set up a contrast to the first half. Attention should be paid to the similarity between these two opposite words: both begin with a *shin* and end with an *alef*, and they differ only with regard to their middle letter.

and the man dealt with in the second half – who merits Divine reward because of the goodness of his actions and because he is God's beloved.

This twofold contrast also creates a contrast in the general atmosphere of the two halves, and perhaps also in the literary-educational function of each one. On the face of it, the first half opens with a theological declaration: "Unless God... in vain." But the very fact that this declaration is formulated in the negative indicates that it is directed at people who maintain the very opposite: that the construction of the house and the security of the city depend exclusively upon them and their own efforts. Thus, from the very beginning of the first half, the psalm alludes to its function – to serve **reproach** these misguided people. This allusion becomes explicit at the end of this half, in its third stanza, which is an open reproach of those who toil in vain: "It is vain **for you**...."²

In contrast, the second half of the psalm is an ode of praise to the man who conducts his life in a worthy manner, based on the religious outlook that the good things in his life are rewards from God and do not depend exclusively upon his own efforts. Praises of such people can be found in several psalms in the book of *Tehilim*, which proclaim about the praised person – "Ashrei...", "Happy is he."³ This very word appears also in the second half of our psalm (v. 5), though not at the beginning, but at a no less important location: in the precise center of this half – with thirteen words before it and thirteen words following it.⁴

We can now describe the contrast between the two halves in a slightly different manner than that proposed above: What characterizes the first half is the expression: "It is vain for you," whereas the second half is characterized by the expression: "Happy is the man."

We haven't yet dealt with the **substantive** connection between the two halves: What is the connection between the topics discussed in the first half – the toil of building a house; staying awake watching over a city; the exhausting endeavor of securing food – and the issue dealt with in the second half – the blessing of children? It seems that the answer peeps through already in the question.

This psalm, with its two halves, deals with the fundamental values of man's life, with his most basic existential needs: a roof over his head, a city to defend him from enemies, and food for the subsistence of himself and his **family**. The family is the crown of all the other values mentioned before it, and they all constitute conditions and preparations for its establishment. This is because family is not merely a necessary aid to the survival of its members, but rather, with the establishment of a family, a person realizes his most basic

² See the references in *shiur* #14, note 14.

³ For example, psalms 1, 112, 128.

⁴ This explains why it was necessary that there be an odd number of words in this half – 27 – and not 26, as in the first half.

human mission: to emerge from his solitariness⁵ and give rise to progeny⁶ who will perpetuate his existence over the course of the generations.

In various places in Scripture we find that there is a fixed and fitting order in which man is expected to conduct his life before he establishes a family. The Gemara in *Sota* 44a brings a Baraita, which derives this order from the words of the officers to the people going out to war (*Devarim* 20:5-7):

What man is there that has built a new house...
And what man is there that has planted a vineyard...
And what man is there that has betrothed a wife...

The Baraita states as follows:

The Torah teaches proper behavior: that a person should [first] build a house, [then] plant a vineyard, and afterwards take a wife.

The Rambam in *Hilkhot De'ot* 5:11 "translates" these actions in accordance with the circumstances of his time and place:

The sensible course is for a man first to choose an occupation that will give him a livelihood [= plant a vineyard], then buy himself a home [= build a house], and after that, take a wife.⁷

This order – house, vineyard, wife – appears in several other places in Scripture. Yirmiyahu turns to those who went into exile with Yehoyakhin and pleads with them that they should conduct themselves in a manner appropriate for a seventy-year period of exile:

Build houses, and dwell in them;
And plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them;
Take wives, and beget sons and daughters...⁸ (*Yirmiyahu* 29:5-6)

The arrangement of our psalm is also based on this order of actions that characterizes human life in Scripture. Stanzas 1-2 discuss the building of a house and the guarding of the city. As was already noted, a city is the aggregation of many houses, and therefore stanza 2 can be seen as a completion and expansion of stanza 1.⁹ Stanza 3 deals with livelihood (which parallels, according to the Rambam's "translation", the planting of a vine). And

⁵ "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a help to match him" (*Bereishit* 2:18).

⁶ "Be fruitful, and multiply, replenish the earth..." (*Bereishit* 1:28).

⁷ I discussed at length the Rambam's changing of the order of the first two actions from that found in the verses and in the Gemara in my article, "*Seder ha-Hitbasesus ba-Chayyim – Bayit, Kerem, Isha o Kerem, Bayit, Isha?*" in my book, *Yad la-Rambam*, Ma'aliyot:Jerusalem 5766, pp. 29-36.

⁸ See also the order of the *mitzvot* in *Parashat Ki-Tetze* (*Devarim* 22:8-13): "When you build a new house... You shall not sow your vineyard with diverse seeds... You shall not plough with an ox and an ass together... If any man take a wife." See also *Yeshayahu* 65:21-23.

⁹ See what we wrote at the beginning of section II. Owing to the connection between the two, the parallelism between these two stanzas is synonymous, direct and complete.

the second half of the psalm discusses the establishment of a family and the begetting of children.

Our psalm in its entirety describes adult life from the building of a house to the siring of children and their reaching adulthood, when they can already assist their father.

I wish now to comment on the four stanzas of the second half, and especially on the contrasting connections between the two halves.

STANZA 4

The second half opens in stanza 4 with a theological declaration that serves as a heading for the entire half: Children are a reward from God. This is stated in a verse that embraces an interesting parallelism:

Behold, the heritage of God – children
And reward - fruit of the womb.

*Hineh nachalat Ha-Shem - banim
sakhar – peri baten.*

This is an instance of synonymous, direct, and complete parallelism. Each clause is comprised of two elements, though the number of words in each element changes from one clause to the next as follows: 2-1 / 1-2. Rhythmically, the ear perceives chiasmic parallelism, but substantively the parallelism is direct.

The expression "*nachalat Ha-Shem*" should be understood in light of the parallel term "*sakhar*" – as a "heritage **from** God."

Here we can ask the question that was raised regarding stanzas 1-2: Does stanza 4 come to nullify the value of man's efforts to have children? The answer is, of course, the same: Obviously, in the absence of efforts made to get married (following the building of a house and planting of a vineyard so that he will be able to support a family), a person will not have children. And even after he has children, the efforts required of the father do not end. On the contrary – his responsibility to support and educate them obligate him to increase his efforts. However, even after he has done everything that he must do in order to establish a family, it is only God's participation in his efforts that can ensure fruit of the womb. And God will bestow this gift upon him as a reward, when he is fit for such reward.

Thus, there arises contrasting parallelism between this stanza and stanzas 1-2 in the first half: there it is stated in the negative that if God does not view a man's actions with favor, his efforts will not succeed, whereas in stanza 4 it is stated in the positive that when God views a man's actions with favor, his efforts to establish a family will merit fruit of the womb.

This contrast between the opening of the first half and the opening of the second half is not a substantive contrast: in both places expression is given to the same principle – that God's favor and blessing are conditions for the success of human actions, only that the application of this principle is exemplified in the two halves of the psalm in a contrasting manner.

STANZAS 5-7

The last three stanzas in our psalm constitute a single unit. Stanzas 5-6 revolve around a single metaphor – the children as arrows and the father as a warrior who fills his quiver with them. The words that connect the two stanzas are "*gibbor*" (mighty one) – "*gever*" (man); "*chitzim*" (arrows) – "*ashpa*" (quiver).

Alongside this metaphor, the psalm alludes to twofold advice regarding the establishment of a family. First, a father will receive maximum help from his children if they are "the children of his youth" – children born to him when he is young, and who, when they grow up, can be his partners in the maintenance of the family.¹⁰ The lesson to be learned from here is that it is fitting for a man to take a wife and have children when he is still young.

The second lesson is the blessing of having many children: "Happy is the man **who has filled his quiver with them.**" A man who has only a few children is like a warrior with limited weapons, who will have difficulty standing up to his enemies.

The image of children as arrows in the hand of a warrior can be explained in several directions. But the most immediate and natural direction is the security angle. When the enemy attacks the city in which the family lives, the father and sons go out to repel the enemies at the city gate, and they succeed in their mission: they destroy the enemy.

The contrast between stanza 7 and stanza 2 is very striking (even though it finds no expression on the linguistic level): a city whose inhabitants are not worthy in the eyes of God – their guarding of the city will be in vain, and the enemies will succeed in their attack. But he who is worthy in God's eyes, and merits Divine reward and establishes a family fathering many sons - happy is he and happy is his city. He and his sons will fight their enemies at the city gates, emerge victorious, and save their city.

The family described in the second half of our psalm is not merely a basic human goal that every person strives to achieve (and that is therefore considered God's heritage and reward). The family is also an existential human need: a solitary man, who has no sons, is powerless to stand alone against all of the tasks that life imposes upon him. The father of many sons, on the other hand, has many partners in life's tasks. Our psalm emphasizes the sons' partnership in the security realm. However, the contrasting parallelism to the first half implies that a man's sons are his partners in the

¹⁰ See *shiur* #10, note 3, regarding the expression, "the children of one's youth."

economic realm as well, and that a man with many sons can share the hard toil of bringing forth bread from the earth with the other members of his family.

To summarize, the contrast between the two halves of the psalm is multi-faceted, and this despite the fact that between the first and second halves an advance is made along the time line with respect to man's life, and the issue discussed in the second half – the establishment of a family – is an advanced stage not discussed at all in the first half.

What must yet be clarified is why the psalmist chose to express the contrast between those people in whose actions God is not a partner and the man who merits Divine reward, by dividing the examples between the two halves of the psalm in the way that he does. For, theoretically, he could have reversed the examples: in the "reproach" section he could have said that unless God desires the building of a person's family, the person's efforts in that direction will be in vain, whereas in the "happy" section, he could have said that a home, security, and livelihood are God's reward bestowed upon His "beloved."¹¹

More than one answer can be given to this question.

First, there is no separation between the examples, for those found in one half are equally valid in the other half as well. This is based on what we said at the beginning of this section that our psalm describes man's efforts in the most basic realms, and this in accordance with the accepted order: house, vineyard, wife.

Thus, when it is stated in the first half that a person's efforts to build his house, guard his city and earn a livelihood will be in vain, it is self-evident that such a person cannot establish a family, for the preparatory actions essential to the establishment of a family already failed!

The opposite is also true. When it is stated that one who is worthy of Divine reward will establish a family with many children who can be helpful to their father, the implication is that such a person already succeeded in building a house and establishing a livelihood that will support his family, for without these things he will not succeed in raising a family.¹²

And in fact, regarding such a person it is explicitly stated that all of his efforts preceding his establishment of a family were successful! This is stated in the psalm's "central axis": God's beloved, the subject of the second half, will

¹¹ Then, however, we would have had to reverse the order of the two halves, for we said in the previous section that the order of the examples corresponds to the order of a person's actions over the course of his life.

It is possible that in this itself lies the answer to the question raised above: Logic dictates that the principle discussed in the psalm first be formulated in the negative, and only afterwards that it be formulated in the positive, and this necessitates that the examples be divided in the manner that they appear in our psalm.

¹² The issue of security also concerns the man described in the second half of the psalm, for enemy attacks accompany a person through all stages of his life, only that the man in the second half succeeds in repelling his enemies with the help of his sons.

merit glory in that all of the efforts which failed for the "vain" people will succeed for him.¹³

In this way, all of the examples in our psalm move back and forth from one half to the other.

According to a second answer, the division of examples can be understood as follows: The reproach in the first half is directed at people who think that their achievements depend exclusively upon their own efforts, and fail to recognize that God's will is a condition for their success. The three realms through which our psalm illustrates this are realms characteristic of such an erroneous way of thinking. A person often thinks that his material existence, which includes a home, military power and economic wealth depend upon his own strength and abilities. It is for this reason that the reproach comes in these very realms in which this erroneous way of thinking is so prevalent.

Having and raising children, on the other hand, stands a person before tasks regarding which his limitations are clear and his dependence upon God's favor is evident.¹⁴ Accordingly, it was precisely this realm that was chosen to exemplify the opposite approach – that a man's children are a heritage from God, and the fruit of the womb is a reward that God bestows upon those who fear Him.

VII. APPENDIX: THE FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP: THREE VERSIONS

What is the ideal relationship between a father and his children according to our psalm? The three concluding stanzas of our psalm deal with this issue.

The father is portrayed in stanzas 5-6 as a warrior, and his sons – the children of youth – are like arrows in his hand. This image is liable to give the impression that the father sees his children as objects – an instrumental relationship - but this impression is corrected by stanza 7, the last stanza in our psalm:

They shall not be put to shame,
When they destroy their enemies at the gate.

Here we are dealing with a full and equal partnership between the father and his sons: They shall not be put to shame – neither the father, nor the sons, for together they shall destroy the enemies that threaten the peace of their city and their family. The father and his sons constitute a united human front, in which all act to further the common goal – the survival of the family. Needless to say, this relationship lacks any intergenerational tension or gap. The needs of the family – economic and security – allow for no such luxuries.

¹³ See the last part of section V.

¹⁴ The Ibn Ezra was sensitive to this in his commentary to verse 3.

A thousand years later, in the period of the Tannaim and Amoraim, fathers and sons no longer went out to defend the city gate from the enemy. The reality of life dramatically changed since biblical times: the Jewish people were no longer involved in wars, the most important value in the world of the rabbis was Torah study, and the lives of fathers and sons belonging to the circle of the Sages now revolved around the *Bet Midrash*.

In the extremely different reality of the period of *Chazal*, the plain sense of our psalm no longer offered an adequate description of the ideal relationship between a father and his sons. In order for the words of the psalm to fit their times, the Sages interpreted them in various ways.

The Gemara in *Kiddushin* 30b cites a Baraita that states:

"And you shall teach them' (*ve-shinantam*) (*Devarim* 6:7) – so that the words of the Torah be ever sharp (*mechudadim - meshunanim*) in your mouth. So that if a person ask you something, you need not hesitate in answering him, but rather you answer him immediately."

The image of the words of Torah as being "sharp" sees the words of the Torah as arrows – "sharp (*shenunim*)" arrows of the mighty" (*Tehilim* 120:4). The Baraita cites several additional verses in order to support this image of the words of Torah. One of the verses cited there is the verse from our psalm:

Like arrows in the hand of a mighty one,
So are the children of one's youth.
Happy is the man who has filled his quiver with them.

Rashi explains what the Baraita means when it cites this verse:

"Like arrows in the hand of a mighty one" – with which he fights against his enemies. "So are the children of one's youth" – a person's disciples are called his sons... (Rashi adduces proofs to this assertion).

According to this understanding, the war in the psalm is nothing but the war of Torah, and the fighters are not necessarily a father and his sons, but a master and his disciples, who are also called sons. The "enemy" is one who asks a Torah-related question, who raises an objection against what was taught in the *Bet Midrash*, and the disciples, who are fluent in the Torah and sharp in their studies, respond without hesitation, like sharpened arrows.

An even more amazing exposition of the verse in our psalm is found later in the same passage:

"They shall not be put to shame, when they speak with their enemies at the gate" – What is "with their enemies at the gate"? Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba says: Even a father and his son, a master and his disciple who occupy themselves with Torah at one gate – become enemies one to

the other, and do not move from there until they become friends one to the other...

The gate is no longer the biblical city gate, the weak point in its defense against the enemy, but rather the *Bet Midrash* – "the gates prominent for learned decisions." The enemies are no longer those who come to attack the city and endanger the lives of its inhabitants, but rather the father and son (!), the master and disciple, who become as enemies to each other in their talk as they fight each other with their arguments, objections and resolutions, and once again the war is the war of Torah.

The outside observer is liable to think that we are dealing here with war and animosity, but if he carefully considers what is happening, he will see that they "do not move from there until they become friends one to the other," for they are all united in their love of Torah and in their aspiration to reveal its truths.

See how the simple and practical partnership between a father and his sons, which was meant to ensure physical survival, turns, according to *Chazal*, into dialectic spiritual partnership between father and son who "fight" each other out of unity of spirit, mutual love, and a shared love of Torah.

From here to the poem of the modern Arab poet Gibran Khalil Gibran, "Friends," from his book, "The Prophet":

Friends

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts.
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit,
not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent
forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends
you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that
is stable.

What is left from that simple partnership between a father and his sons described in our psalm, or from that spiritual-ideal partnership described in the midrash of *Chazal*?

Children living with their parents are no longer a single human unit. Quite the contrary: "And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you... You may house their bodies but not their souls." What characterizes their mutual relationship is precisely the generation gap that cannot possibly be bridged in any manner.

The reason that we brought Gibran's poem is of course the fact that he too makes use of the image of parents as a bow and children as arrows: "You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth." However, the objective of using this image in Gibran's poem is precisely the opposite of that in our psalm: not to describe the functional unity of parents and children who are partners in ensuring the survival of the family, but to describe the distance and separation between parents and children, for the arrows-children "go swift and far," never returning to the bow, "for life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday."

Where precisely do we locate our relationships with our own children among these three possibilities?

(Translated by David Strauss)