YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Tehillim* (Series II)**

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**Introduction**

### Introduction to series II of *shiurim* on the book of *Tehillim*

For it is the duty of all creatures in Your presence, O Lord, our God and God of our fathers, to thank, praise, laud, glorify, extol, bless, exalt, and adore You even beyond all words of song and praise of David the son of Yishai, Your servant and anointed. (Conclusion of *Nishmat Kol Chai* prayer)

The book of *Tehillim*, "the words of song and praise of David the son of Yishai," has been the Jewish People's book of prayers from ancient times until today. In addition to "words of song and praise," it also includes words of supplication, words of complaint, words of gratitude, and words of wisdom that relate to the life of the individual and the life of the nation. The entire spectrum of man's prayers finds expression in the psalms of *Tehillim.*

Around half of the psalms found in the book of *Tehillim* have been incorporated in our prayer books and are recited on different occasions. Some are recited daily, others are recited on Shabbatand *Yom Tov*, some are recited on particular days over the course of the year, and others are recited at various events in a person's life. Many people are accustomed to read the book of *Tehillim* on a regular basis or on occasion, and in that way they encounter the part of the book that has not become part of the regular liturgy.

It is therefore appropriate that the book of *Tehillim,* the Jewish People's book of prayers, be the subject of systematic study and serious examination. The recitation of its psalms should be accompanied by a proper understanding of the contents of each psalm and an internalization of its ideas. Indeed, the book of *Tehillim* itself, as well as *Chazal*,draw a comparison between studying the Torah and studying the book of *Tehillim*. *Midrash Tehillim* (Psalm 1) states: "Moshe gave Israel the five books of the Torah, and David gave them the five books of *Tehillim*." Regarding the verse, "Give ear, O My people, to My Torah; incline your ears to the words of My mouth" (*Tehillim* 78:1), *Midrash Tehillim* states: "Let nobody say to you: The psalms are not Torah; rather, they are Torah."

The psalms of *Tehillim* are Torah, and like the words of the Torah, they require study. But to understand the full depth of their meaning, an explanation of the words does not suffice, nor even a verse by verse commentary. We must explain each psalm as a complete unit, with the aim of uncovering its theme and purpose.

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In 5768, we presented our [first series](http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/tehillim-advanced) of *shiurim* on the book of *Tehillim* in the framework of the Virtual Beit Midrash. Over the course of that year, we studied nineteen psalms. In the winter of 5772, those studies (with the exception of one) were published as *Iyyunim Be-Mizmorei Tehillim* (published by Yediot Books), after undergoing modification and thorough editing.

This series of *shiurim*, written eight years after the previous series, follows the same methodology adopted in the first series and is based on the same foundations that we laid at that time. The analytical method used in these studies is based both on the traditional commentaries and on the analytical tools and interpretations introduced in recent generations. Using the tools of literary analysis in the study of a psalm in the books of *Tehillim* brings us to a deeper understanding of the psalm, and sometimes sheds new light on it.

This series of *shiurim* is designed even for those who are not familiar with the first series. In the introductory *shiur* below, we will outline some of the principles of the analytical method that we adopted in the past and that we will use in this series as well, and we will explain some of the terms that we will encounter relatively frequently over the course of the coming *shiurim*. These remarks appear in the introduction to my book; here they will be presented in a slightly different and updated version.

Over the course of this series of *shiurim*,there will be many references to our previous studies. These references will be to the book (and not to the internet version).

### Introduction

### Several principles of our analtyical method

### I. Arranging the psalm as a poem

The psalms in the book of *Tehillim* are poems. The form of writing used for poetry differs from the form of writing used for prose. This is reflected in the traditional writing form used for several biblical poems – for example, the Song of the Sea and the Song of *Ha'azinu*. These poems are written in short lines, which underscore their poetic nature. But regarding most of the poetic passages in the Bible, the *Mesora* has not dictated that they must be written in poetic form. Accordingly, in many editions of the Bible, they are printed in long, uninterrupted lines, in the same manner as prose.

A poem's written form is not merely a technical issue; it determines the way in which the poem reaches the reader's consciousness. Just as the poem's letters and words bear its meaning, and without them there can be no communication between the poet and the listener or reader, so too the division of the poem into short lines and stanzas is critical for the way that the poem reaches the reader's consciousness. For this reason, poets consider and focus on the visual design of their books and poems.

Poems written as prose do not stop being poems, but their prose form places a barrier before the reader, which may prevent him from taking in the poem as was intended by the author who created it.

It is reasonable to assume that when the psalms of *Tehillim* were sung, their poetic form was maintained in the singing. Each short line of the psalm was sounded as a unit, and a break was made between the stanzas, so that the division of the psalm into lines and stanzas was evident to the listener.[[1]](#footnote-1)

One who studies the book of *Tehillim* in our time must overcome the barrier created by the prose form in which the psalms are printed. He must restore the psalm's poetic form by re-writing the psalm in the way that a poem is written – with short lines and with breaks between the stanzas. This task requires interpretative judgment. This reconstruction will at times be accompanied by dilemmas, and of course there may be various proposals as to the proper way of writing a particular psalm.

Arranging a psalm in poetic form involves an initial interpretation of the psalm, but at the same time it is the foundation for continuing its literary analysis, for clarifying its structure, and for understanding its meaning.

Therefore, at the beginning of each study in this series, we will arrange the psalm under discussion in that study in poetic form. Arranging the psalm as a poem is an essential tool for the student. It serves the student both in his initial reading of the psalm, before he becomes involved in the study itself, and when he returns to the psalm from time to time over the course of his study.

In our arrangement of the psalm, we will not limit ourselves to dividing the psalm into short lines (as was done in several editions of the Bible); we will also try to match the arrangement of each psalm to its structure. We will therefore also present the larger units of the psalm – the stanzas and the halves. Dividing the psalm into stanzas and dividing it into halves are the next steps in the analysis of the psalm; below, we will describe the way to identify them. But first we must discuss how to divide the psalm into lines, which is connected to the parallelism that characterizes biblical poetry.

### II. DIviding a psalm into lines: Parallelism in Biblical poetry

The most striking feature of biblical poetry, which distinguishes it from biblical prose, is parallelism.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is the poem's parallelism that generally determines the way in which the poem is divided into short lines, each component in the parallel structure constituting a line.

While the prevalent form of expression in biblical prose strives for utmost brevity, the form of expression in biblical poetry is characterized by systematic doublings and repetitions in the framework of parallelism. Poetic expression in the Bible, particularly in lyrical poetry, seeks to offer a faithful and accurate description of the poetic mood, with all its variations and internal development, and parallelism is a valuable tool for this manner of expression.

We will discuss parallelism of varied types in many places in these studies. The terms that are used to define the various types of parallelism are not uniform in the research literature, and we therefore must clarify the terms and notations that we will be using.[[3]](#footnote-3)

There are different types of parallel relationships between parallel components. Every parallel structure can be classified according to three different parameters, two of them structural and one related to content.

### 1. THe first parameter: the order of the syntactic components in the two parallel clauses

### A. Direct parallelism

When the order of the syntactic components is the same in the two units, the parallelism is **"direct parallelism,"** and we will indicate the parallel components with vertical lines:

19:8: The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul

The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.

Direct parallelism is a structural-syntactical definition and does not require substantive identity between the two parallel components. Even parallelism whose components express antithetical content (“antithetical parallelism”) can be direct parallelism (for an example, see below 3b).

### B. Chiastic parallelism

When the syntactical order in the second unit is the reverse of the syntactical order in the first unit, the parallelism is **"chiastic parallelism,"** and we will indicated this phenomena with intersecting lines:

82:3: Judge the case of the poor and fatherless

The afflicted and needy vindicate.

Chiastic parallelism can appear in a more sophisticated structure as well:

19:2: The heavens declare the glory of God

And His handiwork is proclaimed by the firmament.

Two parallel units can also be governed by complex parallelism, in which some of the parallel components are in direct parallelism, while others are in chiastic parallelism.

### 2. The second parameter: the completeness of the components in the parallel units

### A. complete parallelism

When the two parallel units are comprised of syntactical components that fully parallel each other, this is **"complete parallelism."** All of the parallel structures cited above are in complete parallelism, as each word or phrase in the one unit has a parallel word or phrase in the second unit.

### B. incomplete parallelism

The nature of parallelism allows for an abridgment of one of the units, based on reliance on the other unit. The abridgement is usually intended to maintain a fixed meter in the parallel units, but also for other reasons. It is usually the second unit that is abbreviated, but the first unit can also be abbreviated, and it falls upon the reader to mentally fill in what is missing from the full unit to the unit that is deficient. Parallelism of this type is called **"incomplete parallelism,"** and we will mark it with an arrow that indicates the direction of transfer from the full unit to the unit that is deficient:

114:3: The sea saw it and fled;

The Jordan \_\_\_\_ was driven back.

Here is an example of incomplete parallelism in which the two units fill in what is missing in the other:

*Yeshaya* 1:3: *Yada shor \_\_\_\_ koneihu* (The ox knows his owner)

*Va-chamor \_\_\_\_ eivus be'alav* (and the ass his master's crib)

Of course, both complete parallelism and incomplete parallelism can be either direct or chiastic.

### 3. The third parameter: the relationship of the contents between the parallel components

### A. Synonymous parallelism

When the two parallel components express the same content using different, parallel wording, this is **"synonymous parallelism."** All of the examples brought thus far are instances of synonymous parallelism.

### B. ANtithetical parallelism

Frequently the two parallel units express antithetical content, in which case the parallelism is **"antithetical parallelism."** We will mark this phenomenon with double arrows connecting the antithetical components.

Direct antithetical parallelism:

20:8: They are bowed down and fallen;

But we are risen and stand upright.

Chiastic antithetical parallelism:

126:5: Those who sow in tears

In joy shall reap

When the antithetical parallelism is also incomplete, we must fill in the incomplete unit with a word or phrase that is antithetical to the parallel component in the complete unit:

30:6: *Ba-erev yalin bekhi* (Weeping may endure for a night)

*Ve-la-boker [takum] rina* (but joy comes in the morning)

### 4. Other Types of parallelism: three notes

To conclude the discussion, let us add three notes:

* All that has been said with regard to parallelism between two units is also valid with regard to parallelism between three or more units. In such a case, the type of parallelism between the first and second unit might differ from the type of parallelism between the second and third units, and so forth.
* There are verses comprised of two or more components in biblical poetry, for which these parameters do not apply. Sometimes the verse is constructed out of two components with similar meter, which comprise a single rhythmic unit, but between the two components there is no real parallelism, but rather conceptual development. It is doubtful whether this can be called parallelism. Nevertheless, it is clear that even these verses were cast in the mold of the verses of biblical poetry.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* Another type of special parallelism in biblical poetry is called "climactic parallelism," wherein the beginning of the second unit repeats literally the beginning of the first unit, but in the continuation, the second unit adds something new that has no parallel in the first unit, and in this way the parallelism reaches a climax.[[5]](#footnote-5) The formula of this parallelism is:

A B

A C

### III. Dividing the psalm into stanzas

A. L. Strauss, one of the pioneers of the literary approach to the study of *Tehillim* and under whose influence we have adopted the method of arranging the psalms as poems,[[6]](#footnote-6) defined what a "stanza" is in a psalm in *Tehillim*. At the end of his short introduction to his work, "*Al Shelosha Mizmorim Be-Sefer Tehillim*," he writes:

I have applied the term "stanza" to any rhythmic unit that is comprised of more than one line – generally to a pair of parallel lines, but sometimes also three or four lines – which constitute a closed rhythmic picture.

Strauss, who studied prosody (the study of the metrical structure of poetry), applied his expertise in this area to his study of the psalms of *Tehillim*, and with it defined what a "stanza" is.

We will expand his definition from the rhythmic realm to the substantive and stylistic realm: A "stanza" is a combination of at least two lines of poetry, but sometimes also three or four lines, which comprise a consolidated statement, a single idea, that is expressed in words and phrases that give the stanza stylistic uniqueness. Sometimes these words or phrases are repeated more than once in the same stanza, but in any case there is manifest semantic closeness between the words that make up the stanza.

Strauss recorded his definition in the introduction to a work in which he analyzed three short psalms in the book of *Tehillim* (23, 124, 131). Indeed, his definition of a "stanza" is well suited for those short psalms and others like them. In those psalms, the "stanzas," according to his definition, are the building blocks out of which the psalm as a whole is built.

However, in the longer psalms in the book of *Tehillim*, comprised of about twenty verses, the Psalmist is prone to "deeper breaths." Dividing the psalm into tiny stanzas of two to four lines, while also valid in relation to them, is not useful for examining the structure of the whole psalm. In such psalms, each of the consolidated ideas spans a combination of several tiny stanzas that together constitute a section within the poem. In the studies dealing with such psalms, we have generally used the term "section" to describe the larger units of the whole poem.

In our presentation of the psalms at the beginning of each study, we will as a rule mark the division into stanzas (in the shorter psalms) or into sections (in the longer psalms) by way of a large bold number that indicates the number of the stanza or section.

### IV. the structure of the psalm as a whole

### 1. Division into halves

A psalm in the book of *Tehillim*, inasmuch as it is a poem, has an artistic structure. The structure of the poem (its composition) is the manner in which its various parts are connected. The structure expresses the psalm's "writing plan," and through it the psalm's underlying idea finds clearest expression. Uncovering the structure of the psalm is therefore essential for understanding its intention. Reconstructing the psalm's poetic form and dividing it into stanzas and sections are meant, among other things, to help uncover this structure.

As will become clear to those who read our studies, most of the psalms that will be discussed in this framework are built in the same way. Usually, **the psalm is divided into two halves of equal length.** The distinction between the two halves of such a psalm is readily apparent. Sometimes, the topic under discussion in the psalm changes dramatically (Psalms 19 and 127). In some cases, the beginning of the second half is marked by a repetition of the opening of the first half of the psalm, and it seems as if the psalm repeats itself in the two halves (Psalms 91 and 128). The ways in which the two halves are distinguished one from the other vary from one psalm to the next, but the result is usually the same: The reader is faced with the two main parts of the psalm, similar in length, and sometimes even precisely equal in the number of words.

This compositional principle, "the principle of halves," is not unique to the psalms of *Tehillim.* It is prevalent in all the literary genres in the Bible. I have already illustrated this principle in literary units of different types, and I have also demonstrated its great importance for the literary analysis of those units.[[7]](#footnote-7)

### 2. Parallelism of the halves

What purpose is served by this compositional principle – the principle of halves – on the basis of which the literary unit in the Bible is divided into two halves? What need does this division meet?

The answer to this question is exceedingly important: This method serves **the principle of parallelism**. The statement expressed in the biblical literary unit as a whole is not exhausted by the words and sentences explicitly stated in it, but rather it is hidden in the connections and parallels between its parts. These parallels sometimes reveal a hidden meaning, which does not emerge from any explicit statement. The way to reveal this hidden message is to compare the two halves, to understand the relationship between them and the system of parallels between their components. In this way, the meaning of the unit as a whole is revealed.

In the book of *Tehillim* and in biblical poetry in general, the principle of parallelism is reflected not only in the psalm as a whole, but even at the level of the isolated verse, which is usually built with a parallel structure, as explained above. As we have explained, the parallelism in the isolated verse serves the Psalmist's poetic needs inasmuch as it allows him to sharpen his formulations, describe his feelings and the musings of his heart with precision, and make a statement that reflects inner development.

The same poetic needs that are reflected in the parallelism found in the isolated verse are found also in the parallelism of the two halves of the psalm. The composition of the psalm as a whole is but an expansion of the principle of parallelism in the isolated verse, which rules the style of biblical poetry. Just as there are different types of parallelism in the isolated verse, there are different types of parallelism between the two halves of the whole psalm.

A comparison drawn between the two halves of a psalm can lead us to the conclusion that the halves are subject to synonymous parallelism by virtue of their content, and then it seems that the second half of the psalm is merely repeating the first half in different words. (In such a case, the parallelism between the two halves is usually direct parallelism by virtue of the order of the components in each half). And just as with respect to synonymous parallelism we do not accept the assumption that we are dealing with "a repetition of the matter in different words," but rather we must search for the inner development between the two units of the parallelism, this is similarly true, and even more so, with respect to the two halves of a psalm. The student must carefully compare the two halves that are similar in content and reveal the hidden or manifest advancement in the second half in relation to the first. Only by understanding this development over the course of the psalm can we uncover the meaning of the psalm as a whole.

The parallelism between the two halves of the psalm can be antithetical, and then too it falls upon the student to carefully compare the two halves of the psalm in order to understand the scope and depth of the contrasts between them. In this case as well, only a comparison of the halves will allow the student to understand the intent and the theme of the psalm as a whole.

Just as we find parallelism between three clauses that parallel each other, there are psalms that do not divide into two halves, but rather into three parts (e.g., Psalms 47 and 112, which are discussed in my book). However, even in these rare cases, the revelation of the three-part structure of the psalm is meant only to draw the parallels between them, and in that way understand the similarity and difference between them and the advancement of the psalm's theme from one part to the next to its completion at the end of the psalm.

Sometimes, there is no synonymous parallelism between the two halves of the psalm, nor is there antithetical parallelism between them, but rather there is conceptual development – for example, a relationship of cause and effect. A similar phenomenon is found in the isolated verse built in parallel style, as noted above at the end of section II. Sometimes, there is not even conceptual development between the two halves of the psalm, but rather a sharp shift to a new theme. Even in such cases, a comparison between the two halves is necessary in order to understand the nature of the connection between them and in order to identify the development of the theme of the psalm as a whole and reveal its significance (see our study of Psalm 19).

### 3. Unique components in the structure of the psalm: central axis, conclusion, opening

Finally, let us note a phenomenon connected to the structure of the psalm as a whole that is not found in the parallelism in an isolated verse. Sometimes, the psalm contains a component that belongs to neither half, but plays a unique rule in the structure of the psalm. Such components are found also in biblical prose.

When that component is situated **between** the two halves of a psalm, we refer to it as a "central axis." The role of the central axis is to serve as a transitional link between the first and second halves (for examples of different types of central axes, see Psalms 6, 127 and 137). This phenomenon is quite rare in the psalms of *Tehillim*, although it is common in the biblical story.

When this additional component is situated at the end of the psalm, we refer to it as a "coda." Codas of different types are found in many psalms, but are rare in the biblical story. The conclusion belongs to neither half of the psalm, but rather stands on its own. Sometimes it serves as a shared summary of the two halves, and sometimes it deals with a new topic. We must consider the reason for each coda in the context of the psalm in which it is found. (We expanded on the matter of codas in the psalms in our study of Psalm 130 and in additional studies as well).

An even rarer phenomenon in the book of *Tehillim* (and also in the biblical story) is a "preface" that introduces the two halves of the psalm. We refer not to the heading of a psalm (which is not part of the body of the psalm), but rather to a component that is part of the body of the psalm itself. This component, however, belongs to neither half, but rather prefaces the two of them. (An example of this phenomenon is found in Psalm 111. Another example, which was not discussed in my book, is Psalm 49, which has a preface of four verses; another is Psalm 142, which will be discussed in one of the coming studies.)

A psalm can, of course, contain more than one of these components, and there are rare instances of psalms containing all three components (e.g., Psalm 145).

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Traces of this have been preserved in the manner in which the chapters of *Hallel* are supposed to be recited according to the Talmud (*Sukka* 38b), and as they are recited to this day by the Yemenite community. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Megilla Ve-Chanuka* 3:12-13). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yosef Even (*Milon Munachei Ha-Siporet*) defines parallelism as follows: "Parallelism is a symmetrical form built out of two groups of words or two sentences that parallel each other semantically and syntactically." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We have adopted the terms for the various types of parallelism proposed by Bat-Sheva Brosh, "*Hora'at Ha-Tikbolet Be-Shira Ha-Mikra'it*," *Al Ha-Perek* 1 (1984), pp. 51-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bat-Sheva Brosh (see note 2) proposed to call this "conceptual complementary parallelism," a somewhat unwieldly term. Here is an example of this type of "parallelism" that she brings: "I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously / the horse and his rider has He thrown into the sea" (*Shemot* 15:1). In the book of *Tehillim*, there are psalms in which most of the verses are built in this manner – for example, most of the Songs of Ascent. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Two examples:

   29:1: Ascribe to the Lord, O you mighty;

   Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

   113:1: Give praise, O servants of the Lord,

   Give praise to the name of the Lord.

   Verses such as these could have been formulated as simple, three-part prose sentences: "O you mighty, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength"; "O servants of the Lord, give praise to the name of the Lord." However, because of its psalm's poetic nature, each of these sentences was taken apart, and its middle component was turned into the opening component of two parallel units. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For his work, see our study of Psalm 131 in our book. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See my books, *Iyyunim Be-Parashat ha-Shavua*, *Pirkei Eliyahu*, and *Pirkei Elisha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)