YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***TEHILLIM* (SERIES II)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Shiur #12: Psalm 11 - “How Can You Say To My Soul, Flee Like A Bird…”**

**A Theological and Practical Polemic in the Book of Tehillim**

1 To the chief musician, of David.

In the Lord I put my trust:

I How can you say to my soul,

Flee like a bird to your mountain?

II 2 For, lo, the wicked bend the bow,

They make ready their arrow upon the string,

That they may shoot in darkness at the upright in heart.

III 3 For when the foundations are destroyed,

What can the righteous do?

IV 4 The Lord in His holy Temple,

The Lord whose throne is in heaven,

Whose eyes behold,

Whose eyelids try, the children of men:

V 5 The Lord tries the righteous;

But the wicked and he who loves violence His soul hates.

VI 6 Upon the wicked He shall rain coals, fire and brimstone,

And a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.

VII 7 For the Lord is righteous,

He loves righteousness;

The upright shall behold His face.

### I. THe Introduction to the Psalm: A declaration of personal confidence: "In the Lord I put my trust"

Our psalm opens with a declaration of trust in God: "I the Lord I put my trust." These words serve as the psalmist's personal introductory declaration, and as such they are not part of stanza I, nor are they a component of the psalm's structure.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The personal tone of this introduction does not continue over the entire course of the psalm. In stanza I, we still hear the author of our psalm speaking in the first person: "How can you say to **my soul**?"[[2]](#footnote-2) But the later stanzas consist of a theoretical discussion regarding the actions of the wicked and of the righteous and God's attitude toward them, and the psalmist's personal connection is not evident in them. It is only because of the psalm's introduction – "In the Lord I put my trust" – and because of the psalmist's argument against those "who say to his soul" that we are expected to understand that the theoretical discussion regarding the actions and fate of the wicked and the righteous has ramifications for the psalmist's personal situation – for his trust in God and for his response to "those who say to his soul." In other words, the rest of the psalm provides a theoretical-religious basis for the psalmist's personal declaration of trust at the beginning of the psalm.

It turns out that the introduction notwithstanding, our psalm should not be defined as a "psalm of trust in God," as other psalms in the book of *Tehillim* that deal with this subject are defined.[[3]](#footnote-3) The subject of our psalm is **"God's providence over people and His attitude toward the wicked and the righteous."** However, as is generally the case regarding those psalms of *Tehillim* that deal with theological matters, the discussion of this issue does not remain on the purely theoretical level. Rather, it is linked to the psalmist's life, to his religious experience, and even to a practical question touching upon the way he lives his life, as is alluded to in stanza I, which we will explain below.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This definition of the subject of the psalm accounts for the fact that no appeal whatsoever is directed to God in our psalm. It is not a psalm of prayer, but rather a wisdom psalm. The psalmist shapes his meditations on the question of God's providence over the world, as befits poetry, in a dramatic manner (as we will see later in this study), and from a personal, religious starting point: "In the Lord I put my trust."

### II. Stanza I: THe counsel given to the psalmist: "Flee like a bird to your mountain"

How can you say to my soul,

Flee like a bird to your mountain?

Stanza I continues the declaration made in the introduction to the psalm, both stylistically and substantively.

Stylistically, as was already noted, in this stanza the psalmist continues to speak in the first person, as he did in the introduction. Afterwards, the psalmist's first person voice is never again heard in the psalm.

Substantively, stanza I is a continuation of the psalmist's opening declaration: Surely, "in the Lord I put my trust," and this being the case, "how can you say to my soul" what you say (the words cited in the continuation of stanza I)?[[5]](#footnote-5)

The psalmist's complaint to those present, "how can you say to my soul…," with the citation of the words that they said to him and his reservations about them, raises several questions:

* Who are the people being addressed by the psalmist, and what is their relationship to him?
* What is the meaning of their words cited by the psalmist: *Nudi harkhem tzipor*, which we translated as:"Flee like a bird to your mountain"?
* Where do their words end – at the end of stanza I, or perhaps their words continue into the next stanza or stanzas?
* Why do their words raise such vigorous reservation on the part of the psalmist: "How can you say…"?

The answers to these questions are, of course, interrelated and interdependent. In this section, we will not answer all of these questions, but only the second one. We will try to explain the difficult phrase uttered by those who say to the psalmist's soul: *Nudi harkhem tzipor.* In the coming sections, we will attempt to answer the other questions.

The three words that the psalmist cites from those "who say to his soul" are all understandable on their own.

* *Nudu* (according to the *ketiv*,the way the word is written) or *nudi* (according to the *keri*, theway the word is read) is the imperative for "fleeing."[[6]](#footnote-6)
* *Harkhem* means "your mountain."
* *Tzipor* refers to a bird.

But it is very difficult to understand the phrase as a whole.

First of all, it is not clear whether the clause is directed toward an individual: "Say to my soul, **Flee (*nudi*,**singular)… **bird,"** or toward a collective: "Say to my soul, **Flee (*nudu*,** plural) **your** (plural) **mountain."** Either way there is no grammatical correspondence between all the words in the verse, neither according to the way the words are read nor according to the way they are written.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In addition, the preposition that should follow the command *nudi*, flee, is missing. Should it be understood as "flee **from** your mountain," or "flee **to** your mountain"? Each of these possibilities is difficult. If we explain "**from** your mountain," the mountain is the place of those who are being commanded to flee, in which case the possessive pronoun "your" is appropriate. But why then do the speakers emphasize that that place is a mountain? If we explain "**to** your mountain," we understand why this is emphasized, as the mountain serves as a place of refuge (see below). But in that case, there is no justification for the possessive pronoun "your mountain." Surely the mountain does not belong to those fleeing! Rather, it is their destination.

And finally, the bird – how is it connected to the words that precede it?[[8]](#footnote-8)

The commentators struggle, each in his own way, to turn these words into a coherent sentence. Let us examine the Aramaic translation of *Tehillim* and clarify how it understands these words:

*Italtali le-tura[[9]](#footnote-9) hekh tzipra.*

The words that apparently stood before the Aramaic translator can be reconstructed as follows:

*Nudi har kemo tzipor*[[10]](#footnote-10) – Flee to the mountain like a bird.

If indeed this is the original reading of our verse, we can reconstruct the development of the reading before us. The *vav* fell from the word *kemo*, and the remaining letters, *kof* and *mem*, could not stand as an independent word; they were attached to the word *har*, since they could not be attached to the word *tzipor*. It was in this way that the difficult word, *harkhem*, came into being.

It is possible that this led to the reading, according to the *ketiv*, “*nudu*,” so that the two adjacent words should both be in the plural.[[11]](#footnote-11) In this way, the word *tzipor* was left orphaned, without a preposition.

Now we can well understand what those speaking to the psalmist wish to say. They are saying to his soul: *Nudi har –* flee to the mountain, a place which in the Bible serves as a refuge for those living in a valley or plain, who are searching for a protected place that will offer them safety. This is what the angels say to Lot: "Escape **to the mountain**, lest you be consumed" (*Bereishit* 19:17).[[12]](#footnote-12) But in our passage, this is not a critical warning to flee immediately, but rather sound advice to the psalmist that he leave his present place of living and flee to a new place. Therefore, they do not say to him, “*Himalti*,” but rather “*nudi*.”

The speakers illustrate the act of fleeing with the image of a bird. Other verses in the Bible expand upon this image of a bird fleeing its place.

*Mishlei* 27:8: **As a bird that wanders** (*nodedet*)from her nest, so is a man who **wanders** (*noded*) from his place.

*Tehillim* 55:7-8: Oh, that I had wings **like a dove!** For then I would fly away, and be at rest. Lo, then I would **wander** (*nedod*)far off….[[13]](#footnote-13)

No background is offered for this piece of advice that is given to the psalmist. Why do those "who say to him" counsel him to flee? Mentioning the mountain as the psalmist's destination intimates that in his present location, the psalmist is in some danger, and that it would be good for him to leave and flee to a more protected place – the mountain. The nature of this danger is not stated in stanza I and will only be clarified in stanza II.

### III. Stanzas II-III: The background for the advice: "For when the foundations are destroyed"

II 2 For, lo, the wicked bend the bow,

They make ready their arrow upon the string,

That they may shoot in darkness at the upright in heart.

III 3 For when the foundations are destroyed,

What can the righteous do?

At the beginning of the previous section we asked: Where does the citation of the words of those speaking to the psalmist's soul, and advising him to flee to the mountain like a bird, end – at the end of stanza I or later? At the end of the previous section, we noted that the advice given to the psalmist in stanza I lacks any explanation or background. It seems, therefore, that stanza II is a continuation of the citation of the words of those "speaking to the psalmist's soul," in which they explain to him the danger awaiting him in his present location. The words, *ki hineh*, "for, lo," should be understood as introducing an explanation: "Flee to the mountain, because…."

For, lo, the wicked bend the bow,

They make ready their arrow upon the string,

That they may shoot in darkness at the upright in heart.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The lives of "the upright in heart," among whom the psalmist is undoubtedly counted, are in constant danger in their present place, where the wicked are lying in wait for them, planning to take their lives through covert actions.

It is difficult to determine whether the description in stanza II of the wicked shooting at the upright in heart should be understood literally. Are they really plotting to kill the upright, or is this merely a metaphor for some other deliberate harm that they wish to bring upon them? In any event, this advice for the psalmist to flee from his place of danger to "the mountain," where he will find security, is connected to some constant and concealed potential danger to his life posed by the wicked, who are working against him in his place. It would appear that this danger is not directed at the psalmist personally, but is rather part of a general social struggle between the "wicked" and the "upright in heart." The wicked are making efforts to become the masters of society.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This advice coming from those "speaking to the psalmist's soul," to abandon his present location, leads to natural and understandable opposition. Leaving would involve submission to the wicked and surrender of the place to them without resistance! Would it not be the proper thing to do to remain in his current place and fight the wicked?

In order to counter this possible argument, those "speaking to the psalmist's soul" continue to lay out their position before him and try to persuade him to take their advice. Thus, even stanza III is part of their words:

For when the foundations (*ha-shatot*) are destroyed,

What can the righteous do?

First, we must explain the rare word, *shatot*. Ben-Yehuda understands this word as the plural form of the word *shet*, and he explains it as follows: "*Shet* – the bottom of something, or in the sense of the bottom of a person's body – the buttocks and thighs (*Yeshayahu* 20:4; II *Shemuel* 10:4)… and in many places in the sense of a building's foundations…." And here he cites our verse.[[16]](#footnote-16)

According to this, "*ha-shatot*" in our verse means, "the foundations." All of the commentators, medieval and modern, agree about this.[[17]](#footnote-17) The only question is – **what** are these foundations, and **who** will destroy them?

Amos Chakham explains our verse as follows:

The psalmist here compares the wicked to an enemy army that devastates conquered cities: "For the foundations (or pillars) of **the houses of the city** (or **the city walls**) are destroyed by the wicked."

Thus, the "foundations" are the physical foundations of "the city" – the foundations of its houses or of its walls – and it is the wicked who destroy them. According to Chakham, this is a metaphor for the destruction that the wicked bring upon the place where the psalmist is living, and this is a continuation of the previous stanza which describes the actions of the wicked in that place. (According to Amos Chakham, the description of the shooting is a metaphor for the actions of the wicked, and not a description of real shooting.)

Tz. P. Chajes offers a different explanation:

The explanation here is that **the pillars of society** will be destroyed, and there will be no order or regime. Jerome explains that this refers to the laws and statutes that are the foundation of society.

Both Chakham and Chajes understand that the verse refers to a metaphorical destruction of the social order on the part of the wicked. The difference between them is that Chajes explains the word *shatot* itself as a metaphor, as relating to the social order, whereas Chakham explains it literally, as the physical foundation of the city.

We must now discuss the second line of stanza III: "What can the righteous do?" It seems to mean as follows: How have the actions of the righteous man helped to prevent the social and moral destruction brought down by the wicked on society?

According to this, we can explain the word *ki* at the beginning of stanza III, not as it means at the beginning of stanza II (i.e., in the sense of "because" – introducing the reason for the instruction that preceded it: "Flee like a bird to your mountain"). The word *ki* at the beginning of stanza III means "when": When the foundations will be destroyed and society will be corrupted – how will the righteous man's presence help? This is a rhetorical question, the answer to which is clearly negative. The righteous man has no role in a society whose foundations have been destroyed by the wicked. This reinforces the counsel offered in stanza I, "Flee like a bird to your mountain," and answers the argument regarding how a righteous man can abandon his place and allow it to fall into the hands of the wicked while he flees elsewhere. In any event, he cannot help the situation!

The citation of the words of those who "speak to the psalmist's soul" thus spread across stanzas I-II-III. From stanza IV and on, as we shall see in the next section, we hear the words of the psalmist himself in response to the words of those "speaking to his soul."

Now we can answer the question of the identity of these speakers, whose words are cited at such great length across three stanzas of our psalm, and the nature of the relationship between them and the psalmist.

Their words in stanzas II and III clearly indicate that they are not wicked people; on the contrary, they distinguish very well between the "wicked" and the "upright in heart," and they are distressed by the fact that the wicked have taken control of society and are destroying its foundations.

Their attitude toward the psalmist is also positive. They seek his well-being and suggest to him that he flee from his place and take up residence on a more secure mountain. They believe that the wicked pose a constant threat to his life, and that his remaining in his place will bring no benefit to a society whose foundations have already been corrupted. These advisors have despaired from a society controlled by the wicked, and their advice to the psalmist stems from this despair.

This conclusion strengthens the fourth question that was raised above in section II. Why do the words of those "speaking to the psalmist's soul" give rise to such vigorous reservations on the part of the psalmist? After all, they seek his well-being! The psalmist states his reservations regarding their words from the very outset, even before citing them at great length, with a rebuke that he directs at them: "How can you say to my soul…." But the psalmist will reveal the reasons for his reservations only later, over the course of the second half of the psalm, starting with stanza IV. Accordingly, it is only in the coming sections that we will be able to answer this question.

To be continued next week.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Regarding psalms in the book of *Tehillim* that open with an introduction that is not part of the structure of the psalm, see the introductory study to this series, section IV. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Similarly, in the words of those "who say" in stanza I, there is a direct appeal to the psalmist, at least according to the *keri*: "Flee (*nudi*, singular) like a bird to your mountain." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Examples of psalms of trust in God in the book of *Tehillim*: Psalms 3; 27; 91. (The two latter psalms are discussed in our book.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. An example of a wisdom psalm that is based on a religious experience is Psalm 73, which deals with the issue of evil things happening to good people and good things happening to evil people based on an account of a tempestuous personal experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Despite this continuity between the psalm's introduction and its first stanza, the introduction should not be viewed as part of that stanza. This is for two reasons: First, the continuity between the introduction and stanza I requires explanation, as noted above, and it is far from evident upon the first reading. Second, the entire psalm from beginning to end is intended to explain the introductory declaration, and so that declaration belongs to the entire psalm. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The root *nun-vav-dalet* and the root *nun-dalet-dalet* interchange (like other similar pairs, e.g.: *resh-nun-nun* and *resh-vav-nun*; *chet-lamed-lamed* and *chet-vav-lamed*; *dalet-mem-mem* and *dalet-vav-mem*). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The very existence of the *ketiv* and the *keri* testifies here, as in other cases, to a certain confusion regarding the existing reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rashi understands the word "bird" as a metaphor that is connected to the word *nafshi*, "my soul": "*Tzipor* – it is missing the letter *kof* (like), as in: 'And he cried a lion (*vayikra aryeh*)' (*Yeshayahu* 21:8), which means 'like a lion.'" And similarly, Radak, R. Yeshaya of Trani, and Meiri. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The standard editions of the Aramaic translatio read *tura* in the singular, but the reading in the *Ha-Keter* edition is: *turei* – mountains. It is possible that *har* is understood as relating to a mountainous **region.** [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The other ancient translations – the Septuagint, the Peshita, and the Vulgate (as brought in Biblia Hebraica) – render the word as it is brought here, and so it would appear that they all relate to the same Hebrew version. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Ginzberg edition of the Bible notes that several medieval Hebrew manuscripts and early printings of the Bible do not distinguish between a *keri* and a *ketiv*, and just have *nudi*. Similarly, the Aramaic translation (see above), the Septuagint, the Peshitta, and the Vulgate all translate the word *nudi* in the singular. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. And in the continuation (*Bereishit* 19:30): "And Lot went up out of Tzo'ar, and dwelt in **the mountain…** for he feared to dwell in Tzo'ar." Similarly, Rachav instructs the spies (*Yehoshua* 2:16): "Get you to **the mountain**, lest the pursuers meet you, and hide yourselves there." See also *Bereishit* 14:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Some birds naturally migrate from place to place in search of a more comfortable climate or a more available food supply. Some birds that ordinarily remain in the same place, e.g., the dove, are forced in times of danger to leave their nests and fly to a more secure place, and when the danger passes, they return to their old nests: "As the doves to their windows" (*Yeshayahu* 60:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The first two clauses in this verse parallel each other: Bending the bow (pulling the string) and making them ready arrow upon the string (aiming) are two actions that prepare for the actual shooting. The third clause in the verse notes the objective of the preparatory actions in the previous clauses: "that they may shoot," and the target of the shooting: "at the upright in heart." The words, "in darkness," do not describe the time of the action – at night – for it is impossible to aim in the dark (and so it is stated in Psalm 91:5: "You shall not be afraid… nor of the arrow that flies **by day**"). Rather it means that the wicked act in secret, and not in broad daylight (Rashi, Radak, R. Yeshaya of Trani). The Meiri explains: "Covertly and in a treacherous manner." [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This nature of the danger is the reason that those speaking to the psalmist do not say to him, "Go (*lekh*) to the mountain," to hide there for a few days, as Rachav said to the spies, but rather tell him to move his residence to a different location: "**Flee** like a bird to your mountain" – "As a bird that wanders from her nest, so is a man who wanders from his place." [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Ben Yehuda's dictionary, vol. XV, p. 7488, s.v. *shet* I. The word *shetot* appears in the Bible, apart from in our psalm, in the prophecy of calamity regarding Egypt in *Yeshayahu* 19:10: "And its foundations (*shatoteha*) shall be broken; all that make dams shall be sad in their soul." But Ben Yehuda in his dictionary (ibid., p. 7489) treats the word in *Yeshayahu* as a separate dictionary entry (a craftsman, similar to those "that make dams" and the other craftsmen mentioned in the previous verses), unconnected to the *shetot* in *Tehilim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In Modern Hebrew, we find a parallel term derived from the same root: *tashtiyot*. In Rabbinic Hebrew, there are many nouns and verbs from the root *shin-taf-taf* or *shin-taf-heh* in this sense of base and foundation, and this is the way our verse was understood in *Midrash Tehilim* (ed. Buber, p. 98): "'For when the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do?' – if the righteous, who are the foundations (*she-hishtitu*) of your world, as it is written (*Mishlei* 10:25): 'The righteous is the foundation (*yesod*) of the world.'" See also the exposition of our verse in *Sanhedrin* 26b. Even the form appearing in our verse, "*shatot*," is found in Rabbinic literature: "I will knock down **the foundations** (*shetoteha*) of Edom and bring your redemption" (*Bamidbar Rabba* 14:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)