YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***TEHILLIM* (SERIES II)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Shiur #16: Psalm 121 - "I Will Lift Up My Eyes To The Mountains"**

**A Traveler's Blessing (continuation)**

1 A *Ma'alot* poem.

I I will lift up my eyes to the mountains.

From where will my help come?

II 2 My help comes from the Lord,

Who made heaven and earth.

III 3 He will not suffer your foot to stumble;

He who keeps you will not slumber.

IV 4 Behold, He shall neither slumber nor sleep,

He who keeps Israel.

V 5 The Lord is your keeper:

The Lord is your shade upon your right hand.

VI 6 The sun shall not smite you by day,

Nor the moon by night.

VII 7 The Lord shall preserve you from all evil:

He shall preserve your soul.

VIII 8 The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in

From this time forth, and for evermore.

### Stanza IV

Behold, He shall neither slumber nor sleep,

He who keeps Israel.

 In the previous section, we noted the change in speakers that takes place in stanza III. The person pronouncing the blessing is the speaker in stanza III, and he addresses the person who is about to embark on his journey, the speaker in stanzas I-II. We noted there that the person pronouncing the blessing continues to speak to the traveler in stanzas V-VIII (see section III, note 18).

 What about stanza IV? In this stanza, there is no unequivocal proof as to the identity of the speaker. No one speaks in first person (as in stanzas I-II), from which we could conclude that the speaker is the person embarking on a journey. And there is no address in the second person (as in stanza III), from which we could conclude that the speaker is the person blessing the traveler.

 Since stanza IV is "swallowed up" between stanza III and stanzas V-VIII, in which the speaker is without a doubt the person pronouncing the blessing, and since the linguistic materials out of which this stanza is constructed are the very same materials as those found in the stanzas that surround it, several commentators (from among those who noted the change in speakers in our psalm, such as Tz. P. Chajes) concluded that in stanza IV as well, the speaker is the person pronouncing the blessing. This hypothesis must be examined, and that is what we shall do in this section.

 What is most striking in stanza IV is the strong linguistic connection to the end of stanza III:

III:

He will not slumber He who keeps you.

IV:

Behold, he shall neither slumber nor sleep, He who keeps Israel.

 Stanza IV expands upon what was stated at the end of stanza III. Corresponding to **"He will not slumber,"** stanza IV doubles the negating verbs: **"He shall neither slumber nor sleep;"[[1]](#footnote-1)** corresponding to the personal **"He who keeps you,"** stanza IV expands the designation assigned to God: **"He who keeps Israel."**

Is this expansion executed by the person pronouncing the blessing, or perhaps by the person about to set off on a journey? In other words, is stanza IV a **continuation** of stanza III, the two of them being a consecutive citation of the words of the person pronouncing the blessing, who in stanza IV expands upon his previous words in stanza III? Or is stanza IV a **response** on the part of the traveler to the well-wisher's blessing in stanza III?

 Let us examine this question in light of two differences between stanzas III and IV:

a) Stanza IV is preceded by the word *hineh*, "behold." What does it mean? Amos Chakham explains: "The purpose of 'behold' is to strengthen and verify the statement: 'Indeed, it is true.'"

b) The person pronouncing the blessing in stanza III says: ***al*** *yanum*, whereas stanza IV says: ***lo*** *yanum* ***ve-lo*** *yishan*." What is the difference between these two negatives? Once again, let us consider the words of Amos Chakham (in note 2): "In verse 3, the psalmist says: *'May He* *not* (*al*) suffer… *May He not* (*al*) slumber,’ which is an expression of request and blessing, whereas in verse 4, he says, ‘He *neither* (*lo*) slumbers *nor* (*ve-lo*) sleeps,’ which is a statement of fact.”

 The combination of the differences between stanza III and stanza IV suggest that stanza IV is meant to express a solid truth that is known to all: "Indeed, God is the keeper of all of Israel; He will never slumber or sleep." Mentioning this accepted truth is not merely an expansion, but rather serves as a **confirmation** of the words of blessing in stanza III. To the hope and blessing, "He will not slumber," comes a response of confirmation: "Indeed, as we know, the keeper of Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep, and so there is reason to expect that the blessing will be fulfilled." It stands to reason, then, that this stanza is the response of the person setting out on a journey, who confirms the blessing, as if he were saying, “Amen,” based on a well-known and general truth.

 And so indeed explains Amos Chakham (as it follows from his previous comments cited above):

This verse (4) is the answer of the traveler to the good wishes expressed by the other speaker: I am certain that your blessing will be fulfilled and that my guardian will not slumber, for my guardian is the guardian of Israel, regarding whom the concept of slumber and sleep has no meaning. The well-wisher says: "He who guards you," and the person blessed answers: "He who guards Israel," thereby hinting that he includes himself among all Israel and trusts that the guardian of His people Israel will also guard him.

This truth that is known to all is formulated in stanza IV in a short, concise and generalized statement – "Behold, He shall neither slumber nor sleep, He who keeps Israel." Although it is difficult to adduce proof from another place in the Bible, this statement appears to be a popular adage, and not a new saying that the speaker invents here. If this is true, this adage joins with the previous adage, which was also uttered by the person setting out on a journey in stanza II: "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

 It seems that there is a general agreement between the two speakers in the psalm: "They helped everyone his neighbor, and every one said to his brother, Be of good courage" (*Yeshayahu* 41:6). The well-wisher in stanza III supports the words of his colleague setting off on a journey in stanza II, and the traveler with his words in stanza IV strengthens his colleague's blessing in stanza III.

 This mutual strengthening, however, does not require two people, two different voices in the psalm. The motif of help and guarding could have been developed in the words of a single speaker.[[2]](#footnote-2) The dramatic design of a psalm is necessary when there is a disparity between the speakers.[[3]](#footnote-3) The question that we raised at the end of section III we ask again now: What disparity is there between the two speakers in our psalm?

 The set of differences between the various stanzas leads us to the conclusion that the two speakers differ from each other with respect to their religious consciousness:

 The soon-to-be traveler opens our psalm with the cry: "From where will my help come," and he encourages himself by proclaiming the familiar saying that his help will come from the Lord who made heaven and earth. With this, he gives expression to an idea of collective Divine providence, from which even the individual can draw reassurance.

 The blessing of the well-wisher in stanza III represents a different understanding of providence, the unique qualities of which we discussed at the end of the previous section. The well-wisher gives expression to the idea that God's providence over man is **personal.** Instead of the designation of God found in the words of the traveler, "who made heaven and earth," the person pronouncing the blessing refers to him as "He who keeps you." This personal providence is total; it is reflected in the constant concern for the person being blessed. Therefore the person bestowing the blessing replaces the root *ayin*-*zayin*-*resh* with the root *shin-mem-resh*, and the guarding is executed both in the dimension of place and in the dimension of time – while he walks on the road and while he lies down to sleep.

 The Malbim took note of this important point. At the beginning of his commentary to our psalm, he defines its theme: "[The psalm] is based on **God's personal providence** over the righteous." At the beginning of his commentary to verse 3, "He will not suffer your foot to stumble," he writes:

He imagines that he hears a voice speaking to him:[[4]](#footnote-4) Why do you lift up your eyes in search of a place of help, as if it were something new now? Know that He who is above you never removed His providence from you for even a minute. And His providence is twofold: a) It clings to you – "He will not suffer your foot to stumble" – He supports your body itself so that you not fall. b) He watches over you from the outside; He is like a guard who stands by you to protect you from external harm… and His watching over you will not cease.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The difference in perception between the two might stem from a difference between them in age or life experience. The person embarking upon a journey appears to be a young man, whose religious thinking is the product of his education and training. The person blessing him, on the other hand, appears to be a more mature and experienced person (perhaps his father or his teacher), whose religious awareness is the fruit of his life experience and his inner religious experiences. In our study of Psalm 91, we encountered a similar difference between the two speakers in the psalm (see note 3).

Did the person about to embark on a journey understand the fundamental novelty in the words of the person bestowing the blessing? Did he internalize the religious consciousness of his well-wisher with all the spiritual strength that it can provide?

Let us examine his response to the words of the well-wisher, as it finds expression in stanza IV. Once again he (apparently) cites a common and familiar saying: "He shall neither slumber nor sleep, He who keeps Israel." This saying confirms and strengthens the two novelties in the words of the well-wisher in stanza III, which we discussed at the end of the previous section. First, he accepts the semantic change carried out by the well-wisher from *ezer* to *shemira*. Second, he accepts the notion of God as a guardian even in the dimension of time (and not just in the dimension of place mentioned in stanzas I-II). But has the person who is about to embark on a journey internalized the idea of the **personal providence** that God bestows upon a person?

In his response, the traveler expanded upon the words of his well-wisher, and we wish to repeat the words of Amos Chakham cited above: "The well-wisher says: 'He who guards you,' and the person blessed answers: 'He who guards Israel,' thereby hinting that he includes himself among all Israel." But this expansion from the individual to the collective implies a constriction regarding that which relates to the personal and unique.

It turns out that when he comes to confirm and expand upon the words of his well-wisher, bringing a popular saying in order to reinforce them, the traveler **misses** his colleague's most important novelty – his good wishes that God should watch over **him** personally, and not just because He is "the keeper of all of Israel," but precisely because of His concern for the particular individual, who needs His personal attention.

Will the well-wisher allow the person he blessed to miss this fundamental point, or will he perhaps express once again his notion of personal providence, which can allay the fears of the would-be traveler?

To answer this question, let us continue to read the next stanza.

### V. Stanza V

The Lord is your keeper:

The Lord is your shade upon your right hand.

 If stanza IV records the words of the traveler, it follows that in stanza V the speakers switch once again, and once again we hear the voice of the well-wisher. Now, one cannot avoid hearing the hidden argument taking place between the two speakers:

The well-wisher in stanza III: …**He who keeps you** will not slumber.

The person being blessed in stanza IV: He shall neither slumber… **He who keeps Israel.**

The well-wisher in stanza V: The Lord is **your keeper**.

 Neither party negates his colleague's words. On the contrary, it would appear that each party confirms his colleague's words, but nevertheless, a hidden argument is taking place here.[[6]](#footnote-6) The well-wisher says to his colleague, "May it be God's will that He who keeps you will not slumber," and the person being blessed answers him, "Certainly, we all know that the keeper of Israel will not slumber," and the well-wisher tells him once again, "What you say is correct, but pay attention to what I am saying: The Lord is your keeper – your personal keeper."

 The well-wisher does not allow the person being blessed to miss the main point in his words, and he repeats the message that he conveyed in stanza III. Now, however, he introduces several changes to reinforce and emphasize his message:

1. The word *shomrekha*, "He who keeps you," appears in stanza III and in stanza V. In stanza III, it serves as a **designation of God,** but God's name does not appear explicitly in that stanza. In stanza V, it describes **God's action,** and God's name precedes the description of his action: "**The Lord** is your keeper."
2. Stanza III is formulated as a wish for the future: **"He who keeps you will not slumber;"** stanza V is formulated as a fact, which is valid already now: **"The Lord is your keeper**" **–** already now.[[7]](#footnote-7)
3. In stanza III, the blessing relates to two defined areas: walking and sleeping; in stanza V God's protection of the person being blessed is general.

The second line in stanza V, "The Lord is your shade upon your right hand," expands upon the first line and illustrates it: "The Lord is your keeper – the Lord is your shade," which means: The Lord is your shelter, your defense. In the heat of *Eretz Yisrael*, shade symbolizes (among other things) a sheltered place. A person who is exposed to the hot sun always searches for shade that will protect him from it. Therefore, he who trusts in God "shall abide in the shade of the Almighty" (*Tehillim* 91:1).[[8]](#footnote-8)

 As for the words, "Upon your right hand," the commentators disagree whether they refer to the words that precede them: "The Lord is your shade (= your protection) upon your right hand" (Ibn Ezra, R. Yeshaya of Trani); or whether they stand on their own, and God's name must be added, so that the verse means: "[The Lord is] upon your right hand" (Radak, Amos Chakham). Either way, it is a fixed expression in the Bible that one who helps another person is found specifically on his right side and provides assistance to his right **hand,** a person's more active and important hand: "But I am continually with You; You hold **my right hand"** (*Tehillim* 73:23).

 In stanza VI, the use of possessive pronouns referring to the person being blessed reaches its climax: "your keeper," "your shade," "your right hand." This emphasizes even more strongly, even with respect to the tone, God's **personal** protection, which continually surrounds a person and protects him from all evil.

### VI. Stanza VI

The sun shall not smite you by day,

Nor the moon by night.

 Stanza VI as well contains the words of the traveler's well-wisher. The two clauses parallel each other with defective synonymous parallelism, as follows:

By day the sun shall not smite you,

And the moon by night [shall not injure you].

 That the sun "smites" a person exposed to its rays on a summer day, everyone knows from experience. And thus it is stated: "They shall not hunger nor thirst, **neither shall the neat nor sun smite them"** (*Yeshayahu* 49:10). But that the moon causes injury to those exposed to its rays at night is not confirmed by our experience, nor from our knowledge.

 However, this was the belief of the ancients, not only in Biblical times, but many generations afterwards. In the *gemara* in tractate *Pesachim*, in a passage dealing with various fears that a person should have regarding demons and spirits (beginning on 110a and on), we find the following (111a), unrelated to our psalm:

R. Yitzchak said: What is meant by the verse: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me" (*Tehillim* 23:4)? This refers to him who sleeps in the shadow of a single palm-tree **or in the shadow of the moon…**. As it was taught: He who sleeps in the shadow of a single palm-tree in a courtyard **and he who sleeps in the shadow of the moon, has his blood on his own head.**

A person who is found in a courtyard can go into his house and thus avoid sleeping in the shadow of the moon. If he decides to sleep outside in the shadow of the moon, his blood is on his head. But what should a person do if he is sleeping out in a field, and the moon shines upon him, and he has no way to hide from its rays? To such a person R. Yitzchak applies the verse: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death [= the shadow of the moon], I will fear no evil, for You are with me." God is such a person's "shade;" He protects him from the moon at night.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The commentators (Ibn Ezra, Radak, Meiri) correctly connected stanza VI to the previous stanza as cause and effect: Since God is **"your shade** upon your right hand," therefore: "The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night." It is the shade of God that will protect you from the damage that would otherwise be caused by the rays of the sun and the rays of the moon. This connection between the two stanzas does not necessitate a narrowing of the meaning of the metaphor, "The Lord is your shade," from the broad meaning that we assigned the expression in the previous section – God is your shelter, your protection. But stanza VI provides the metaphor in stanza V with concrete meaning that is close to the original field of meaning of the term "shade."[[10]](#footnote-10)

It turns out that stanza VI illustrates and specifies that which was stated in general terms in stanza V regarding God's protection of the traveler.

To conclude our discussion of stanzas V-VI, let us go back to the question that we raised with respect to stanza III. Are the blessings offered in these stanzas fit to be bestowed upon one who is about to embark upon a journey and his heart is filled with fears? Here too the answer is yes: These blessings are appropriate **specifically** for a traveler who is exposed in the open field to the sun by day and the moon at night. It is such a person who is in dire need of God's shade that will protect him from them. A person who is sitting in his house, suffering from some undefined affliction, does not need such blessings; in his house he can easily hide himself from the sun and the moon. The commentators who explain our psalm as relating to protection in general, and not in connection to travel, are forced to understand these blessings as general blessings, and thus they distance the verses from their plain meaning.[[11]](#footnote-11)

### VII. Stanza VII

The Lord shall preserve you from all evil:

He shall preserve your soul.

After describing the specific dangers from which God will protect the traveler in the previous stanza – the damage caused by the sun and the moon – stanza VII comes to wish the traveler protection also from sources of harm that were not mentioned thus far in our psalm: "The Lord shall preserve you **from all evil."** A traveler encounters many dangers, and they can't all be spelled out, and therefore this stanza comes to serve as a blessing for general protection from all that cannot be specified. The Ibn Ezra senses this objective and explains:

"From all evil" – that can befall a person from without [= external events] and from within [= events that stem from the person himself, e.g., illness].

The Radak, on the other hand, tries to spell out evils that have not yet been mentioned in the psalm:

"From all evil" – that people and the beasts of the field should not cause you injury.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This brings to mind the text of the Traveler's Prayer (based upon the formula established by *Chazal*, *Berakhot* 29b):

Save us from **every** enemy and ambush, from robbers and wild beasts on the trip, and **from all kinds** of punishments that rage and come to the world.

What does the second line of stanza VII – "He shall preserve your soul" – add to the previous line? The phrase "to preserve a soul" appears about ten times in the Bible, and usually it means to save a life.[[13]](#footnote-13) This, then, is a blessing for the most basic protection of all the protections mentioned thus far. This indeed is the way that the Radak explained it:

"He will preserve your soul" – that if you are overcome by illness… He will preserve your soul, so that you not die from the illness.

The meaning of the blessing included in stanza VII is then: God will protect your life in all circumstances. The connection between the two lines of the stanza is as follows: "The Lord shall preserve you **from all** evil," and even from the greatest evil, "He shall preserve your soul."

### Stanza VIII

The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in

from this time forth, and for evermore.

 This is the blessing that concludes the series of blessings that are bestowed in our psalm on a person embarking upon a journey. The phrase "to go out and to come in" appears about twenty times in the Bible, and it means "the totality of a person's movements," that is, all of his actions.[[14]](#footnote-14) According to this, the meaning of the concluding blessing is: The Lord shall preserve all of your actions and movements from this point on and for all the days of your life.

 Linguistic expressions almost always have a literal foundation, from which the meaning expands until it detaches itself from this original literal meaning. It stands to reason that the expression "going out and coming in" with respect to the entirety of man's actions, stems from the fact that a person usually performs his various actions from the time he goes out from his house until he returns home for rest and sleep.

 It is possible, then, that the expression here relates specifically to the original meaning of the expression: The Lord shall preserve **your going out from your house** to the road upon which you will be walking, **and your coming back into your house** from this journey.[[15]](#footnote-15)

 If indeed this is the meaning of the blessing that closes our psalm, what is the meaning of the final words, "from this time forth, and for evermore"? A person's going out on the road is "from this time forth," at this time, but his coming into his house, even if it will only take place in the future, will be at a particular time, and not "for evermore"!

 This question does not overturn our explanation, as there are two possible answers. First, our explanation does not negate the broad and prevalent meaning of the expression, "your going out and your coming in" – all your actions. Both meanings are included in this blessing, and with respect to the broader meaning, the words "from this time forth, and for evermore," are appropriate. Second, even with the constricted meaning of this blessing – with respect to this going out on the road – the well-wisher wishes to expand his blessing to other journeys that the person being blessed will make in the future.

 It is possible that the words, "from this time forth, and for evermore," were meant to conclude, by way of this common formulation, all the blessings mentioned in our psalm, and to express their validity not only for the present event, but for all similar events.

 Stanzas VII-VIII as well, as we have explained them, relate to a person embarking on a distant journey. They deal with two serious concerns nesting in the heart of the traveler: the fear that he will die in a foreign place, far from his family and city (and to counter this comes the blessing in stanza VII); and the fear that he will not manage to return to his home, but rather he will remain in exile and alone in a distant place (and to counter this comes the blessing in stanza VIII).

### IX. The structure of the psalm

 Tz. P. Chajes in his commentary to our psalm correctly noted that the eight verses/stanzas of our psalm divide up into four pairs. We will present the connection between the stanzas constituting each pair in accordance with the interpretation of the psalm that we have accepted in this study:

Stanzas I and II: Distress and response in the manner of a question and answer – both of which issue from the mouth of the would-be traveler.

Stanzas III and IV: The blessing of the well-wisher and the confirmation of the blessing on the part of the traveler.

Stanzas V and VI: The expanded blessing of the well-wisher: Its general formulation and its specifics (The Lord is your shade, and He protects you from the sun and from the moon).

Stanzas VII-VIII: Two additional blessings on the part of the well-wisher to counter the two deepest and severest fears of the traveler.

 In addition to this division, we propose to divide our psalm into two halves, equal in length and identical in their internal division:

**The first half:** Stanzas I-IV: 4 verses, 28 words (7-6-7-7).

**The second half:** Stanzas V-VIII: 4 verses, 28 words (7-6-7-7).

 In what way are the two halves distinguished one from the other?

 The two halves reflect a dramatic dialogue between the two speakers, each half reflecting the position of a different speaker:

 **In the first half,** the main speaker is the person about to set out on a journey. Three of the four stanzas in this half (I, II, IV) are spoken by him. The other speaker – the well-wisher – alludes in stanza III to a religious outlook that is slightly different from that of the traveler. By doing so, he stirs up the response on the part of the traveler in stanza IV. This response reveals agreement with some of the well-wisher's words, but misses the main and most important point in them.

 The person setting out to travel appears to be a young man, who fears the unknown in the journey before him. He invokes "trust sayings," well-known and general expressions that he remembers from what he had been taught in the past (stanza II and stanza IV).

 But the profound trust in the **personal protection** that God will bestow upon him while he is on the road, he does not absorb or internalize in the wake of the words of the well-wisher in stanza III. In order to instill this religious consciousness within him, the well-wisher proclaims his words of blessing in the second half of the psalm.

 **In the second half,** the well-wisher is the sole speaker. The four stanzas in this half are a development and expansion of the short blessing that he bestowed in the first half in stanza III. The two needs of the traveler that were spelled out in stanza III (the stability of his feet, protection during sleep) are expanded upon in the second half of the psalm and generalized (general protection, defense and shelter, protection from the rays of the sun and the moon, preservation of the soul, a blessing for the journey and for the return from it).[[16]](#footnote-16)

 The second half is distinguished by three stylistic phenomena:

* The name of God prominently appears in this half at the beginning of four clauses, the subject of which is God. In the first half, in contrast, the name of God appears only once, in the traveler's words in stanza II, and there it appears as the object of the clause.[[17]](#footnote-17)
* The verb *shin-mem-resh*, the subject of which is always God, also appears four times the entire length of the second half.[[18]](#footnote-18)
* The possessive second-person suffix, relating to the traveler, runs through the entire second half with eight appearances: "He who keeps you," "your shade," "your right hand," "shall smite you," "shall preserve you," "your soul," "your going out and your coming in." With this, the second half continues the style of stanza III – "your feet," "your keeper."

The content and stylistic design of the second half express the well-wisher's religious outlook in a strong and expansive manner: the deep trust in **the personal protection** that God will give the traveler, God's fatherly concern for the individual and for all of his vital needs when he sets out on a distant journey.

It turns out that stanza III is the foundation of the second half. Its "original" role in the first half was to strengthen and deepen the traveler's trust in God's personal protection. Since the well-wisher did not achieve full success, he develops his response, which extends over the entire length of the second half.

**The relationship between the two halves** expresses, then, the hidden disparity between the speakers, and it is what turns our psalm into a psalm containing a dramatic theological dialogue.

### X. Conclusion

We have explained our psalm as a dramatic psalm, which gives expression to a well-defined situation: A certain person is about to embark on a distant journey, and he is filled with fears about the unknown. Opposite him stands another, more mature person, with a solid religious outlook, who bestows upon him a series of blessings for a successful journey.

In all of this we have followed Amos Chakham's explanation of our psalm, and it would seem that in our closing remarks it falls upon us to emphasize the difference between his explanation and that which we are proposing in this study.

Amos Chakham did not discern any tension between the two speakers participating in the dialogue in our psalm; on the contrary, in his opinion, each of them supports the position of the other and there is total harmony between them.

The assumption that underlies our study, on the other hand, is that the dramatic design of the psalm as a dialogue between two speakers comes to express the disparity between them, to express two different outlooks. A careful study of **the style** of the words of the two speakers, of **the content** of their words, and of **the structure** of the psalm (as we presented it in the previous section) justifies our assumption. All of these serve the dramatic design that characterizes our psalm, and teach about a hidden conflict between the approach of the traveler and that of his well-wisher. The position of the traveler is the routine belief concerning general "help" and "protection," by virtue of which even the individual can find a certain relief of his tension. Against this stands the position of the well-wisher, who gives expression to the belief in God's personal relationship with and protection of His pious ones, like that of a father for his child, like God's attitude toward the patriarch Yaakov when he set out from his father's house on a long and distant journey.

As a framework for the delicate confrontation that takes place between the two speakers and between the two ideas that they represent regarding Divine providence, the psalmist chose a situation with typical psychological baggage: the eve of the traveler's embarking on his journey. Identifying the situation that constitutes the background for our psalm is of great importance for understanding the psalm, not only for the purpose of explaining its words, but also for understanding the disparity between its speakers, which is a result of this loaded situation.

The psychological tension experienced by the person who is about to set out on a journey and his need for help, as it finds expression in his cry of distress, "From where will my help come," is fertile ground for the planting of a new, complete, and inner religious awareness. It is precisely out of doubt and uncertainty that a strong faith in God's personal providence can grow. It is precisely through seeking that a religious consciousness can be built that is not rote faith based on commonplace truths, but rather a consciousness that is the fruit of a deep and personal religious experience.

The well-wisher enters into this special situation and instills the traveler with an awareness that will lift him and accompany him from this time forth and for evermore. In similar fashion, one who studies our psalm can lift himself up through it from a general, commonplace perception to a consciousness that is deep, personal and full of consolation.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In our opinion, there is no need to distinguish between the verbs "*yanum*" and "*yishan*." Rather, they are "two that are one" (hendiadys), the doubling coming only for the sake of emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Aharon Pollack (see end of section I and note 14 there) addressed this issue, proposing that that our psalm reflects a "farewell party" held in the home of the person about to set off on a journey who "invited guests to his house… so that they should escort him with their blessings and wish him a successful trip." According to him, our psalm "describes such a party, and establishes its arrangements for future generations in a clear and fixed manner." He adds that even today such parties are common among the Arabs. In our opinion, however, it is doubtful that the objective of our psalm is to reflect a common social reality. Even if Pollack is right regarding the social background of our psalm, this is just the general framework. The content of the psalm is a one-time creation, which comes to express something new, and not to reflect a fixed pattern of routine behavior. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In psalm 91, the disparity is between the young and passionate disciple who trusts in God, but is not fully aware of the meaning of his trust, and his more mature and experienced teacher, who shows his disciple the dangers and perils of the world from which God will save him. See our study of this psalm, pp. 231-232. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. With these words, the Malbim deals with the switch in speakers. According to him, the switch from first to second person reflects a dialogue that the psalmist conducts with an inner voice that addresses him in second person. The difference between real drama and an internal dialogue is not significant. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Malbim does not interpret our psalm as dealing with Divine protection bestowed upon a traveler, but rather with personal providence in general. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dialogues of this sort, in which each party appears to repeat the words of the other, when it fact they are in fundamental disagreement, are not uncommon in the Bible. Here are two examples:

The negotiations between Avraham and the children of Chet regarding the burial of Sara (*Bereishit* 23:3-18) consist of three similar stages, in which it would appeart that everybody is in agreement and that there is no difficulty that would justify the lengthy discussion. However, behind the polite talk that characterizes the various speakers stand serious reservations that each party has about the other's position. See our study of *Parashat Chayei Sara*, 2nd series, pp. 89-93.

In the negotiations between Moshe and the tribes of Gad and Reuven (*Bamidbar* 32), starting from the stage when the two tribes offer to go out armed before their brothers (v. 16), negotiations are conducted about this in three stages, in which each side seems to be repeating what the other side said, when in fact there is a fundamental disagreement between them on several points. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. If so, we cannot accept Amos Chakham's explanation: "'The Lord is your keeper' – This is a blessing: May God be your keeper!" From the context of the psalm as a whole, it may be concluded that stanza V as well consists of encouragement and good wishes that God will protect the traveler in the future, but his words in stanza V are formulated as a fact that is valid already at the present time. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. When Yehoshua and Kalev try to convince Israel that they can fight against the nations of Canaan, they say: **"Their shade (*tzilam*)** is departed from them, and the Lord is with us" (*Bamidbar* 14:9). Rashi's second explanation of this verse (which is not found in the manuscripts or in the first edition) draws the verse in the story of the spies very close to our verse: "The shade [protection] of the Omnipresent is departed from them." Support for this explanation is found in the continuation of the verse: "And the Lord is with us." But is should be noted that the verse does not read: "The shade of the Lord is departed from them," but rather: "Their shade" – "their shield and their strength" (Rashi). If so, the identification that "God is the shade of man" is common to both verses.

The Ibn Ezra (ad loc.) explains *tzilam* by way of metonymy as "their shield," in the sense of a vessel that protects its bearer, "because a warrior, if he has no shield to protect him **and to serve as his shade,** his heart will fear." According to this, the meaning of the verse in our psalm, "the Lord is your shade," is: The Lord is He who serves as your shield in your right hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. How is a modern person supposed to understand the words, "nor the moon by night"? This is what Amos Chakham says (in note 3a): "There is no need to ask whether these beliefs are validated by modern medical science, for it can be argued that 'the Bible speaks in the everyday language of men.'" Though it is indeed of interest to us to ask what medicine or physics has to say about this issue, Chakham is right that "the Bible speaks in the everyday language of men," i.e., of the people who lived at that time. For another example of verses that are based on a perception of reality that prevailed during the Biblical period, see our study of Psalm 104, p. 254, note 20, and the text there.

Among the medieval commentators, we find different approaches to explaining the words, "nor the moon by night": The semi-scientific approach of the Ibn Ezra: "It is known that the sun causes injury with its great heat, and the moon at night adds moisture that gives rise to illnesses. This is a clear and well-attested matter." The Radak cites the Ibn Ezra, but summarizes them: "Heat and **cold** are the cause of illnesses." That is to say, the moon denotes the cold part of the day, and it is **the cold** (and not the moon) that causes illnesses. R. Yeshaya of Trani explains that the sun and the moon denote the two halves of the day: "The demons that rule by day which is the time of the sun will not [injure you], nor the demons that rule by night, which is the time of the moon." [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As the Meiri writes: "Your shade upon your right hand – that is to say: To protect you, to bring you into his shade, to find protection under His wings. And **he continued the metaphor of 'your shade,' and said:** 'The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.'" [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For example, the Radak: "The Lord is upon your right hand – to help you **in all your actions"**; Meiri: "The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night – a metaphor, that **nothing** shall cause him harm." [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It should be recalled that neither the Ibn Ezra nor the Radak understands that our psalm is dealing with a person about to embark on a journey, but they both agree that it is dealing with a person in one kind of distress or another who is need of God's protection. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For example, *Tehillim* 25:20: "O preserve my soul and deliver me"; *Iyov* 2:6: "But preserve his life." [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Two examples: Moshe says to the people of Israel on the day of his death (*Devarim* 31:2): "I can no more come out or go in"; Shlomo says to God at Giv'on (I *Melakhim* 3:7): "And I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or to come in." [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. a. We already saw an example of this in our psalm: "The Lord is your shade" is a common metaphor in the Bible, and its meaning in stanza V is the same as its meaning in the Bible in general: The Lord is your protection. But in stanza VI, this metaphor is realized in its literal sense: Since the Lord is your shade, "the sun shall not smite you by day." See our comments in section VI.

b. According to what we have said, the expression "going out and coming in" can be understood both as a general expression, and also, as we have suggested, as relating to the person embarking on his journey. Therefore, we do not accept the argument of Pollack (see section I, note 14) that "this expression [the last verse in the psalm] serves as a hundred witnesses that indeed we are dealing with a person about to embark on a journey."

c. Support for our understanding can be brought from the verb that precedes the expression in question, "preserve." "Your going out and your coming in" in the sense "the totality of a person's actions" requires a verb like "He will bless" (see *Devarim* 28:6), "He will bring success to," or the like. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The well-wisher, throughout the psalm, discusses protection in two dimensions – place and time; in stanza II – both are mentioned; in stanza V – place; in stanza VI – time; in stanza VIII – place and time. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In the first half, several designations of God appear in place of His name: "Who made heaven and earth," "Your keeper," and "the keeper of Israel." [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In the first half, the root *shin-mem-resh* appears twice: Once in stanza III as a designation of God, in the words of the well-wisher, "He who keeps you will not slumber," and a second time in the words of the traveler in stanza IV, "the keeper of Israel." [↑](#footnote-ref-18)