YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***TEHILLIM* (SERIES II)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Shiur #17: Psalm 13 -**

**"How long, O Lord… Look, and hear me…**

**I Will Sing to the Lord"**

**From Complaint to Supplication and From Prayer to Praise**

1 To the chief musician, A psalm of David.

I 2 How long will You forget me, O Lord? Forever?

How long will You hide Your face from me?

3 How long shall I take counsel in my soul,

Having sorrow in my heart daily?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

II 4 Look, and hear me, O Lord my God:

Lighten my eyes,

Lest I sleep the sleep of death;

5 Lest my enemy say, I have prevailed against him;

And those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved.

III 6 But I have trusted in Your mercy;

My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord, Because He has dealt bountifully with me.

### I. Introduction – A psalm comprised of three parts which become shorter and shorter

Most of the psalms that we have dealt with thus far (both in our book and in the present series) are built with a structure of two halves of similar or even identical length, with a certain parallelism between them. This structural model is widespread in all of the literary genres found in the Bible, as we have seen many times in our studies.

However, this common structure of a Biblical literary unit is not the only such structure. There are also other structural models, though they are less common. This is particularly true in the book of *Tehillim*, where we find a wide variety of structural models, even among those psalms built out of two halves.[[1]](#footnote-1) A minority of psalms in our book are based specifically on a division into three parts.

Among the psalms that are divided into three parts, some are divided into three thirds of similar length,[[2]](#footnote-2) while others are divided into three parts of unequal length. A rare example of this is Psalm 47 (see the study dedicated to this psalm in our book, pp. 153-163), which is divided into three parts that gradually shorten at a fixed ratio.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Our psalm, Psalm 13, is similarly built on this model of three parts that become shorter and shorter.

Our psalm is clearly divided into three parts, which are distinguished one from the other both in their content and in their style. We will call each of these three parts a "stanza."[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Stanza I,** verses 2-3, is the psalmist's bitter **complaint** about his bad situation. This stanza is comprised of four questions/complaints, each of which opens with the anaphora, "How long"?[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Stanza II,** verses 4-5, is the psalmist's **supplication** to God that He should change his situation. This stanza includes three requests of God formulated as imperatives: "Look," "hear me," "lighten." The last request is accompanied by two rationales, which also open with the anaphora, "lest."

**Stanza III,** verse 6, is the psalmist's **praise** for his salvation. In this stanza, the atmosphere of distress that characterized the two previous stanzas completely changes. At the beginning of the stanza, the psalmist expresses his trust in God's mercy, and in the continuation he expresses his joyous responses to the salvation that God will bring him.

As stated, the stanzas in our psalm become gradually shorter: Stanza I consists of 24 words; stanza II consists of 17 words (that is, seven words less than the previous stanza); and stanza III consists of 11 words (six words less than the one that preceded it).

What is the meaning of the gradual shortening of the stanzas in our psalm? What idea is expressed by way of this structure?

The priestly blessing (*Bamidbar* 6:24-26) is also divided into three parts with a fixed format, but there the parts gradually lengthen at a fixed ratio. In the first part, there are 3 words; in the second part, there are 5 words; and in the third part, there are 7 words. The idea expressed by way of this structure is that God's blessing gradually expands, and its effect on Israel, who receive that blessing, becomes gradually greater.

In Biblical poetry (and in lyrical poetry in general), shortening often serves to intensify the expression and to deepen the mental process that is expressed in the poem. In our psalm as well, it would appear that the three gradually shortening stanzas are like a tower, one story built upon the other. The base of the psalm, which stands on the ground, is broad and spelled out in detail, whereas its top, which reaches toward heaven, is narrow and concentrated. As he rises in the tower, the speaker in our psalm advances from the complaint sounded in stanza I to the supplication voiced in stanza II to the praise of stanza III.

In order to understand the process that passes over the psalmist, we must clarify the real-life background of the complaint in stanza I and the supplication in stanza II, and the background of the change that takes place in stanza III. Was there a change in the real-life background that led the psalmist to a change in this stanza?

In order to answer these questions, we will discuss each of the stanzas in our psalm separately. We will state our opinion regarding the substantive and structural connections between the three stanzas. It will then become clear that the description of the structure of the psalm as presented in this introduction does not suffice, and that we have not yet fully exposed the psalm's structure.

### II. Stanza I – complaint

We noted the characteristics of a psalm of complaint in the book of *Tehillim* in our book in our study of Psalm 44, the classic psalm of complaint in the book of *Tehillim.*[[6]](#footnote-6)Psalm 44 is a psalm of complaint sounded by **the people of Israel** against God, and there are other psalms like it in the book of *Tehillim*.[[7]](#footnote-7) The complaint sounded in stanza I in our psalm is the complaint of a single **individual.** Several other psalms in the book of *Tehillim* contain complaints sounded by individuals, although there is no psalm in the book that is dedicated entirely to the complaint of an individual.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The starting point of a complaint in the book of *Tehillim* (whether that of an individual and that of the nation) is some severe or continuous trouble befalling the petitioner, the justification for whose very arrival or seemingly endless continuation he does not understand, and about which he complains. Therefore, a complaint in the book of *Tehilim* is typically characterized by the piercing rhetorical question: "O God, **why** have You cast us off **forever?"** (74:1); "Awake, **why** do You sleep, O Lord? Arise, cast us not off **forever.** **Why** do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and our oppression?" (44:24-25); **"How long,** Lord? Will You be angry **forever?"** (79:5); and in our psalm: **"How long** will You forget me, O Lord? **Forever?**/ **How long** will You hide Your face from me?"

The repetition of the rhetorical question, "how long," four times in our psalm, teaches that what brings the speaker to complain to God is the prolonged continuation of the trouble that seems to be afflicting him "forever" – for an extended period of time with no end in sight. He therefore asks, "How long?"

Even though the question, "how long," opens four clauses in stanza I, there are really only three questions, which relate to three different aspects of the petitioner's trouble:

**1. God's attitude toward the petitioner**

2 How long O Lord will You forget me? Forever?

How long will You hide Your face from me?

The first aspect of the speaker's trouble about which he lodges a complaint is God's relationship with him – **God's hiding His face.** God hides his face from the petitioner and appears as if He has forgotten him for a long time – "forever." This, of course, is the root of his trouble, and therefore he opens his complaint with this aspect.

The importance of this aspect causes the psalmist to expand upon his complaint in this section, doubling his words with two parallel statements that stand in direct synonymous parallelism, as part of which the interrogative words, "how long," appear twice.

Since the complaint in this aspect deals with God's relationship with the petitioner, it is only here that we find a direct address of God: "How long, O Lord." Such an address is not found in the other complaints sounded in the continuation of stanza I.

**2. The petitioner's mental state**

3 How long shall I take counsel in my soul,

Having sorrow in my heart daily?

The second aspect of the trouble about which the speaker complains is his mental state. We do not know anything yet about the psalmist's actual problem, but we do know that he is suffering serious psychological distress. He "takes counsel with his soul" – he is engaged in a constant search for advice as how to escape from his trouble. Even during the day, when people are busy with their affairs and tend to forget the things that are bothering them, sorrow dwells in his heart.[[9]](#footnote-9) This sorrow is certainly the result of the trouble that is still hidden from us at this stage, but it is also because of the feeling described above that he has been forgotten by God, who has hidden His face from him.

This section of the complaint, in which the petitioner describes his ongoing personal distress, is three words shorter than the previous section, and the name of God does not appear in it. It too is built of two clauses that stand in general parallelism, but it is difficult to see the parallelism. The relationship between them can be called "complementary parallelism": The second clause complements the first in its description of the petitioner's psychological distress. The question/complaint, "how long," appears only once in this section, at the beginning.

**3. The actual trouble**

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

The third aspect of the trouble mentioned in the petitioner's complaint reveals all at once the actual trouble: his enemy exalts over him.[[10]](#footnote-10) Though he has not yet fallen into his enemy's hands, it would appear that his enemy is winning, and that the petitioner is in need of endless advice and schemes to save himself from him, as was explained in the previous section of his complaint. His enemy's exalting over him is not merely a practical problem for the petitioner, who needs counsel to escape from his enemy, but rather impacts upon him from a moral perspective as well. His enemy feels that he is in an elevated position in relation to the petitioner, and this fills the petitioner's heart with sorrow. The prolongation of this trouble is what brings the petitioner to feel that God has hidden His face from him.

This section is also three words shorter than the previous section, and this shortening also finds expression in the fact that it is built of only one clause. But this aspect of the trouble is the **practical** source of the other two sections, and therefore it too opens with the question/complaint, "How long."

It should be noted that each section of the complaint in stanza I has a different grammatical subject:

In section 1, the subject is God.

In section 2, the subject is "I" – the petitioner.

In section 3, the subject is the enemy.

The psalmist arranges his words from the spiritual source of his trouble until its most external revelation, while gradually shortening his complaint. He opens with an account of the religious-spiritual cause of his trouble – God's hiding His face from him – and he concludes by noting the concrete, external cause of his situation – his enemy's attitude toward him. In the middle he describes his mental distress, which is impacted by the two aspects of his trouble described before and afterwards.

It turns out that the structure of stanza I is like the structure of the psalm as a whole. Stanza I is comprised of three sections that contain three complaints beginning with the words, "how long," that relate to the various aspects of the petitioner's trouble, and these clauses gradually shorten by a fixed number of words: 11 words in the first section, 8 words in the second section, and 5 words in the third section.

Is the reason for the shortening within this stanza the same as the reasoning for the shortening within the psalm as a whole, as we explained it in the introduction to our study? This seems doubtful. It appears that the shortening here accords with the degree of importance that the petitioner attaches to each section of the complaint. God's relationship with the psalmist is the essential aspect which most disturbs the psalmist. He therefore devotes two parallel clauses to it in the first section. The psalmist's mental state also enjoys expanded discussion, but less importance, and therefore it is described in the second section with two clauses that do not stand in parallelism. And the actual trouble, which is the technical cause, does not merit an expanded account, but rather is merely mentioned as a fact in one clause in the third section. Nevertheless, this whole tapestry of complaints joins together in one stanza of the psalm by way of the repeated question, "how long."

### III. Stanza II – supplication

One feature that is consistently found in the psalms of complaint in the book of *Tehillim* is that following the complaint there comes a supplication. The complaint is not the objective in itself, but rather a means of changing the bitter reality in which the petitioner finds himself. Hence, after removing the load of complaints from his heart, the time arrives to pray for a change in the situation. Frequently, this transition signals a change in the speaker's mental state; the tone of despair in the complaint is replaced by an expression of hope that is conveyed through the very supplication. The question marks that close the rhetorical questions are replaced by cries for help and assistance, even though these cries still indicate a clear sense of urgency and distress.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This is the case in our psalm: After the three-sectioned complaint, which expresses the three aspects of the petitioner's trouble, there comes in stanza II the psalmist's supplication for a change in his situation. It should come as no surprise that his supplication as well is divided into three sections that match the three aspects around which the complaint revolved:

**1. God's attitude toward the petitioner**

4 Look, and hear me, O Lord my God:

Corresponding to the complaint about God's forgetting the petitioner and hiding His face from him, a request is made for connection and response. Just as at the beginning of his complaint in the parallel section, the petitioner turns to God by mentioning His name, "How long, **O Lord,"** so too at the beginning of the parallel prayer, we find the address, **"O Lord my God."** By referring to God with the possessive pronoun, "my God," we hear hope for God's closeness, which the petitioner now seeks, closeness which is the opposite of the hiding of God's face about which he complained in stanza I.

Similarly, the terms of beseeching that are used here, "look" and "hear me," correspond to the double complaint at the beginning of stanza I. Corresponding to the complaint, **"will You hide Your face** from me," there is the supplication, **"look,"** and corresponding to the complaint, "will **You forget me,"** the petitioner beseeches, **"hear me."**

**2. The petitioner's mental state**

Lighten my eyes,

Lest I sleep the sleep of death;

Corresponding to the psalmist's complaint about his extended psychological distress, we find in stanza II the supplication, "lighten my eyes." What is the meaning of this request? Amos Chakham writes:

Cast light upon my eyes. A sleeping person usually wakes up when his eyes are exposed to a strong light. Thus the psalmist continues: "Lest I sleep the sleep of death." Death is likened here to a deep sleep. The psalmist in his troubles compares himself to a drowsy person who is struggling to stay awake, for he fears that he is about to fall into the sleep of death, and not into a sleep of rest and regeneration.

The combination of "light," "eyes," and "sleep" supports his explanation. Indeed, our verse is integrated in a similar sense in the conclusion of the blessing recited before going to sleep (*Berakhot* 60b). In the conclusion of that blessing, a request is made that God should arouse us in the morning to life, together with the entire world: **"And lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.** Blessed are You, O Lord, who gives light to the whole world in Your glory."

However, the phrase, "light of the eyes," appears in six other places in the Bible; in none of these places does it mean "to wake up from sleep," but rather "to rejoice" or "to strengthen oneself":

In the sense of joy:

*Tehillim* 19:9: The statutes of the Lord are right, **rejoicing the heart;** the commandment of the Lord is pure, **enlightening the eyes.**

*Mishlei* 15:30: **The light of the eyes rejoices the heart,**[[12]](#footnote-12)and a good report makes the bones fat.

In the sense of strengthening oneself:

*Tehillim* 38:11: My heat palpitates, my strength fails me; as for **the light of my eyes,** it also is gone from me.[[13]](#footnote-13)

I *Shemuel* 14:29: See, I pray you, **how my eyes have brightened,** because I tasted a little of this honey.[[14]](#footnote-14)

*Ezra* 9:8: That our God may **lighten our eyes,** and give us a little reviving in our bondage.

"Illuminating eyes," or as we would say today, "bright eyes," are a sign of happiness and good health. Sickness and unhappiness are evident in a person's extinguished eyes.

The supplication in our psalm, "lighten my eyes," can also be understood in one of these senses (which are close in meaning): "make me happy" or "make me strong."

The petition, "lighten my eyes," is followed by the rationale, "lest I sleep death," which, as all the commentators point out, means: "lest I sleep **the sleep of** death." The petitioner is afraid of death, and he asks for the lighting of his eyes – for the joy and strength that will prevent his death.

If so, this request is meant to repair the psalmist's difficult mental state, about which he complained in the second section of his complaint: "How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?"

The second supplication can be paraphrased as follows: "Make me happy and strong, lest I die."[[15]](#footnote-15) But why does the petitioner think that he will die? The answer to this question is found in the third section of his petition.

**3. The actual trouble**

The petitioner raises a second rationale for his request, "lighten my eyes" (in addition to the previous rationale – his fear of death – "lest I sleep the sleep of death"). This rationale deals with the actual trouble that he is facing, and it corresponds to the third section of his complaint: "How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"

Lest my enemy say, I have prevailed against him;

And those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved.

This "lest" appears to be a direct continuation of the previous "lest," and an explanation of it. The petitioner's fear of death – "lest I sleep the sleep of death," is fear of death that will come at the hand of his enemy. If, indeed, his enemy succeeds to cause the petitioner's death, he will then say, "I have prevailed against him" – I have brought about his death – and those who trouble him will rejoice in that he was moved by his enemy.

It now becomes clear that the actual trouble that underlies the petitioner's complaint, and his prayer that comes in its wake, presents him with an **existential danger.** His enemy who is rising up against him might kill him if God does not hear his prayer and lighten his eyes.

(To be continued)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Many psalms include one or more components that are not part of these halves: an introduction, a central axis, or a conclusion. Some psalms are built of two parts of very different length; see our study of Psalm 44, p. 118 in our book (a short first part, about a third of the length of the psalm, and a longer second part, about two thirds of the psalm); as well as our study of Psalm 80, pp. 178-181 and pp. 203-204. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We saw an example of this in Psalm 112, pp. 311-312 in our book. In our next study, which will deal with Psalm 22, we will encounter a similar structure. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Among Biblical stories, we also find stories divided into three parts: The story of the battle at Mikhmash, for example, (I *Shemuel* 13:1-14:46) is divided into three equal parts: The two sides preparing for war (13:1-23); Yonatan's action and victory over the Pelishtim (14:1-23); the events that took place after the battle (14:24-46). The story of the birth of Shimshon (*Shofetim* 13:2-25), in contrast, is divided into three parts that become gradually longer: The angel informs the woman (2-7); the angel informs Manoach (8-14); the angel reveals to the two of them that he is an angel (15-23); verses 24-25 serve as a conclusion for the entire story. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. According to the terminology that we established at the beginning of this series, we should call each of the first two parts of our psalm a "section," as each of these parts is comprised of two stanzas and an additional line that stands on its own. Only the third part of the psalm (v. 6) comprises a "stanza" of three lines. However, owing to the clearly distinct character of each part of the psalm, which is reflected both in its content and in its style, we prefer to use the term "stanza" with respect to each of the three parts. We reached a similar decision in our analysis of Psalm 80, p. 180, and note 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An anaphora is a "word or phrase that repeats itself at the beginning of two or more consecutive lines… Anaphora has tonal, rhythmic and rhetorical effect" (Asher Rivlin, *Munachon Le-Sifrut*, p. 12. The first example brought there is stanza I of our psalm). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the introductory section to that study, pp. 116-117, we discussed the characteristics of a psalm of complaint in our book, and in the last section of that study, pp. 140-144, we discussed the theological question that arises from the inclusion of psalms of complaint in the Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Psalm 89, and to a certain degree also Psalms 74, 79, 80 and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The complaint of an individual is found in several psalms in the book of *Tehillim,* e.g., 22, 39, 88, and especially in the first half of Psalm 73. For the fundamental distinction between a complaint of the people and a complaint of an individual, see our study of Psalm 44, note 3 (p. 116). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Radak explains this as follows: "Even during the day, when a person engages himself in worldly matters and forgets his sorrow – I am not like that." [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In many of the psalms in the book of *Tehillim* in which the psalmist spells out his trouble, mention is made of his enemies and of their relationship with the petitioner. One frequently gets the impression that they are not the psalmist's real problem, but merely an additional layer of it. See our study of Psalm 6, p. 26, and note 8. But in our psalm, the structure of stanzas I and II teaches that the enemies are indeed the source of the psalmist's troubles from a realistic perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In the classical psalms of complaint in the book of *Tehillim*,the prayer section is frequently filled with despair, with the psalm ending on a pessimistic note. See the prayers at the end of Psalms 39, 44, 74, 88, and 89. See also our comments in our study of Psalm 44, p. 117, note 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The meaning here might be that the "light of the eyes" of a person looking at his fellow brings joy to that fellow. But this does not change the meaning that connects light of the eyes to happiness, for "as in water, face answers to face" (*Mishlei* 27:19). In *Mishlei* 29:3, the phrase, "lighting of the eyes," appears yet another time, but the meaning of that verse is somewhat unclear, and so we have not cited it here. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In this verse, the lack of "light of the eyes" means lack of strength, weakness. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Earlier it is related that Shaul adjured the people not to eat until the evening, and the result was (v. 28) "And the people were faint." But Yonatan who did not hear the oath, "And he put out the end of the rod that was in his hand, and dipped it in a honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth, and his eyes were brightened" (v. 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. "Lest I sleep death" is understood by all to mean, "Lest I sleep **the sleep of** death." The Ibn Ezra adds "that nouns are found in the cover of verbs." In other words, the noun "sleep" is found in the cover of the verb "I will sleep."

    The choice of the metaphor "sleep" for death (a common metaphor in the Bible) might be influenced by the request of lightening the eyes that preceded it. In any event, it would appear that the exegetical connection between the two phrases proposed by Amos Chakham ("rouse me from my sleep") is incorrect. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)