YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***TEHILLIM* (SERIES II)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Shiur #19: Psalm 22 -**

**"My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me"**

**Complaint, Supplication, and Thanksgiving[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

1 To the chief Musician upon Ayelet-Hashachar. A psalm of David.

I 2 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are You far from my salvation, from the words of my cry?

3 O my God, I cry in the daytime, but You answer not;

And in the night season, and I have no repose.

II 4 But You are holy,

O You that are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.

5 Our fathers trusted in You:

They trusted, and You did deliver them.

6 They cried to You, and were delivered;

They trusted in You, and were not confounded.

III 7 But I am a worm, and no man;

A reproach of men, and despised of the people.

8 All that see me, laugh me to scorn:

They shout out the lip, they shake the head.

IV 9 Trust in the Lord, let Him deliver him,

Let Him save him, for He delights in him.

10 But You are He that took me out of the womb:

You did make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts.

11 I was cast upon You from the womb:

You are my God from my mother's belly.

V 12 Be not far from me;

For trouble is near;

For there is none to help.

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VI 13 Many bulls have compassed me:

Strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round.

14 They gape upon me with their mouths,

Like a ravening and a roaring lion.

VII 15 I am poured out like water,

And all my bones are out of joint:

My heart is become like wax;

It is melted in the midst of my bowels.

16 My strength is dried up like a potsherd;

And my tongue cleaves to my jaws;

And You lay me down in the dust of death.

VIII 17 For dogs have compassed me:

The assembly of the wicked have enclosed me:

They seize my hands and my feet like a lion.

IX 18 I can count all my bones:

They look and stare upon me.

19 They part my garments among them,

And cast lots upon my vesture.

X 20 But, You, O Lord, be not far from me.

O my strength, haste You to help me.

21 Deliver my life from the sword;

My only one from the power of the dog.

22 Save me from the lion's mouth:

And answer me from the horns of the wild oxen.

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XI 23 I will declare Your name to my brethren:

In the midst of the congregation I will praise You.

24 You who fear the lord, praise him:

All you the seed of Yaakov, glorify Him;

And fear Him, all the seed of Israel.

25 For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted;

Nor has He hid His face from him;

But when he cried to Him, He heard.

XII 26 My praise shall be of You in the great congregation:

I will pay my vows before those who fear Him.

27 The meek shall eat and be satisfied;

Those who seek Him shall praise the Lord.

May your heart forever revive!

XIII 28 All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord:

And all the families of the nations shall worship before You.

29 For the kingdom is the Lord's:

And He is ruler over the nations.

30 All the fat ones of the earth shall eat and worship:

All they that go down to the dust shall bow before Him,

And he that cannot keep alive his own soul.

XIV 31 Their seed shall serve Him;

It shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation.

32 They shall come, and shall declare His righteousness to a people that shall be born, that He has done this.

### Introduction

Already upon our first reading of this long and complex psalm, a dynamic mental process reveals itself before us. The psalm begins with a **complaint**: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" It continues with a **supplication**: "Be not far from me" (12), "But be not You far from me, O Lord" (20). And it closes with a broad and emotional **thanksgiving**: "I will declare Your name to my brethren" (23).[[2]](#footnote-2)

These three stages in the psychological and religious process through which the petitioner passes determine the structure of the psalm. The psalm is not divided into the usual two halves, but rather is divided, on the basis of the three aforementioned stages, into three parts – three thirds of similar length:[[3]](#footnote-3)

1) Verses 2-12 – complaint

2) Verses 13-22 – supplication

3) Verses 23-32 – thanksgiving

In the introduction to this series of studies, we noted (at the end of section III) that in long psalms such as our psalm, dividing the psalm into short "stanzas," as we ordinarily do with short psalms, is not very helpful for examining the structure of the psalm as a whole. In a long psalm such as ours, the psalmist has greater stamina, and every consolidated idea in the psalm usually spreads out over several stanzas, which together form a section of the psalm. Therefore, in our transcription of the psalm above, and similarly in the discussion of the psalm below, we indicate with Roman numerals the **sections** of which the psalm is comprised, rather than the shorter stanzas. Nevertheless, in the transcription of the psalm, we indicate the stanzas within a section with a space inserted between one stanza and the next.

The next three sections of this study are dedicated to the three thirds of the psalm, one section for each third. We will explain each section, justify its borders, clarify its structure, and try to understand its unique content.

### I. The first third – Complaint

### 1. Section I

2 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are You so far from helping me from the words of my loud complaint?

3 O my God, I cry in the daytime, but You answer not;

And in the night season, and I have no repose.

The cry of complaint with which our psalm opens, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" is shocking in its intensity, and appears to be unparalleled in the book of *Tehilim*, and perhaps in all of the Bible, in its expression of the sense of abandonment felt by one who had put his trust in God.

Immediately after these clear and loaded words comes the second clause, which is somewhat obscure: "Far from my salvation, the words of my cry." What or whom is the subject of this clause? The commentators disagree about the matter.

According to the Ibn Ezra and the Meiri, the subject of the clause is "the words of my cry": "Each of the words of my cry – that is to say, my prayers – is far from my salvation – that is to say, my prayers are not being heard" (Meiri).

According to this understanding, there is no parallelism between the two clauses of verse 2, and the relationship between them seems to be as follows: After the "cry" of disappointment in the first clause, the petitioner retreats within himself, as if he were saying to himself: My cries have not helped, as they are far from being heard. This retreat further amplifies and intensifies the feeling of despair that found expression in the opening cry.

Other commentators – Rashi, Radak, and Rabbeinu Yeshaya – explain that the hidden subject of the clause is God, and that the verse must be filled in as follows: "[You are] far from my salvation, [and] from the words of my cry" (Rabbeinu Yeshaya).

According to this explanation, the two clauses can be understood as standing in parallelism, as was explained by the Radak: "Why have You abandoned me? **And why are You** distant from my salvation **when You hear** the words of my cry?"

Although this interpretation, according to both variations, requires filling in certain missing words, it would appear from the rest of the psalm that this explanation is correct. When the psalmist moves on from complaint to supplication, he opens his request with the words, "**Be not far** from me" (v. 12), and close to the end of his supplication he once again beseeches God, "**But be not You far from me,** O Lord" (v. 20). This twofold request undoubtedly corresponds to the complaint at the beginning of the psalm: **"[You are]** **far** from my salvation…."

In the second verse of section I (v. 3), the psalmist continues with an illustration of his detachment and separation from God:

O my God, I cry in the daytime, but You answer not;

And in the night season, and I have no repose (*dumiya*).

The commentators understood the word *dumiya* in its usual sense of "quiet."[[4]](#footnote-4) According to this, the words, "and I have no repose," parallel "I cry" in the first clause, and they expand upon the argument: "I do not cry only for a moment and then become silent, but rather I have no repose" (Ibn Ezra). This interpretation requires that we complete the second clause with the words, "but you answer not," found in the first clause, as these words constitute the main argument in the verse. The parallelism between the two clauses according to this explanation is complicated:

O my God, I cry in the daytime, but You answer not;

And in the night season, and I have no repose, [but you answer not].

However, the structure of the verse alludes to a different, simpler parallelism between the two clauses:

I cry in the daytime, but You answer not;

And [I cry] in the night season, and I have no repose (*dumiya*).

But what kind of parallelism can there be between the words "*dumiya*" and "answer"?

Dr. Moshe Zeidel teaches us in his book, *Chikrei Lashon*,as follows:[[5]](#footnote-5)

The root *dalet-vav-mem*, which usually means "be silent," can also bear the meaning of "speak"… According to this, the verse, "*Lekha dumiya tehilla*" (*Tehilim* 65:2) means, "To you praise is spoken"… And according to this, "*Diminu Elokim chasdekha be-kerev heikhalekha*" (*Tehillim* 48:10) means, "We praised Your love, O God, in the midst of Your Temple"… In most cases, this speech is whispered speech. In this sense, we find also the root *dalet-mem-mem.* Compare, "*Kol demama daka*" (I *Melakhim* 19:12), which Yonatan renders: "A voice that praises in a whisper." *Demama* – praise.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Zeidel brings additional examples of this usage for the roots *dalet-vav-mem*, *dalet-mem-heh*, *dalet-mem-mem*, both in Biblical and in Rabbinic Hebrew, and even from later Hebrew. In note 18 he adds:

Perhaps we should explain in this sense also *Tehillim* 22:3: "*Ekra yomam…*" – **that is to say, I will not hear a whispering voice in answer to my cry.**

This explanation is supported by the parallelism in the structure of the verse, as we transcribed it above. And further support: A whispered response – *dumiya* – is appropriate for the night. According to this explanation, the petitioner intensifies his complaint about the absence of God's response in the second clause in relation to what he argued in the first clause, as if saying: I do not hear Your voice during the day, nor even your whispers at night – that is, You do not answer me at all!

### 2. Section II

4 But You are holy,

O You that are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.

5 Our fathers trusted in You:

They trusted, and You did deliver them.

6 They cried to You, and were delivered;

They trusted in You, and were not confounded.

In several psalms of complaint in the book of *Tehillim*, the psalmist prefaces his complaint with an introduction, in which he relates **the positive past** with respect to the relationship between God and His people. Thus, in Psalm 44, the first third (verses 2-9) is devoted to an account of the period of the conquest of *Eretz* *Yisrael* and the victories over the nations at that time, as the background of the bitter complaint put forward later in the psalm concerning the drastic change in God's relationship to His people, when He brings upon them utter defeat and oppresses them in a cruel exile. Similarly, in Psalm 80, the psalmist prefaces his complaint with a wonderful account of the period of the conquest and settlement of *Eretz* *Yisrael*, when "You brought a vine out of Egypt…" (verses 9-12), this serving as the background for the penetrating question in the continuation: "Why have You broken down her fences, so that all they who pass by the way do pluck the fruit?…" (13-14). And in Psalm 89, most of the psalm (until verse 38) is dedicated to an account of the covenant that God lovingly made with David and His descendants, as an introduction to a bitter complaint about the breach of this covenant.

The reason for these prefaces is clear: The complaint is always about some unexplained change in God's attitude toward Israel. Against the backdrop of the shining period in the past, the complaint about the dark period in the present becomes all that much stronger.

Similarly, in our psalm, the psalmist spells out the shining past – but in a different order in comparison to the other psalms mentioned above. The psalmist first opens the psalm with a bitter complaint (section I), and only then does he go back in two different sections (section II and section IV) to describe periods in the past when God shined His face on those in in need of His salvation. Here too, the objective of this account is to emphasize against the background of the shining past the bitter cry regarding the present, "Why have You forsaken me?"[[7]](#footnote-7)

This section is the first that deals with the past. It does not describe a particular period, but rather relates to the past in general terms:

4 But You are holy,

O You that are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.

The letter *vav* at the beginning of the verse introduces a contrast: **But You** are holy; You are enthroned among the praises of Israel, who praise You in frequent manner for having saved them from their troubles. Why then have You abandoned me at this point?

5 Our fathers **trusted** in You:

They **trusted**, and You did deliver them.

6 They cried to You, and were delivered;

They **trusted** in You, and were not confounded.

The verb *batchu*, "they trusted," appears three times in these two verses. Since our fathers "trusted in You," "they cried to You," just as I cry out to you from my afflictions today. But "they cried to you, **and were delivered";** they "trusted, **and You did deliver them";** "they trusted in You, and **were not confounded"** regarding that trust. And when You delivered them from their trouble, they praised Your name, to the point that You became "enthroned upon the praises of Israel." Why is it, then, that I, who trusts in You as did my fathers and who cries out to You as they did, have not been delivered from my troubles so that I can praise You?[[8]](#footnote-8)

Section IV also describes a shining period from the past, a period which we will discuss below.

### 3. Section III

7 But I am a worm, and no man;

A reproach of men, and despised of the people.

8 All that see me, laugh me to scorn:

They shout out the lip, they shake the head.

It is clear from the opening sections of the psalm, sections I and II, that the psalm's speaker is in dire straits and that his prayer to God that He rescue him from his trouble has not yet been answered. But what is the trouble that brings him to such a bitter complaint?

This third of our psalm is devoted primarily to the complaint. A live and detailed account of his trouble, from various perspectives, will only be given in the second third of the psalm, in the framework of the petitioner's supplication to God that He save him from this trouble. At this stage, the psalmist stands in confrontation with God, feeling that God has abandoned him. The distress expressed in this third is that God fails to answer His incessant cries. A detailed account of his trouble would shift the center of gravity from his present distress to his struggle with his enemies.

But it would be impossible not to mention his trouble at all. In order for his complaint to have some comprehensible background, the psalmist dedicates section III to a partial account of his trouble. This account does not yet offer a full picture of his trouble, but one can feel from it the magnitude of the distress in which he finds himself, and precisely from a social and psychological perspective.

Like the previous section, this section opens with the oppositional *vav* – "But I." But I – in contrast to whom?[[9]](#footnote-9) It is clear that "but I" is intended here to contrast with "our fathers," who were mentioned at the end of the previous section. "They trusted **and were not confounded** (*lo boshu*)." *Lo boshu* here means "they were not disappointed by their trust in You." When our fathers cried to God in their trouble and were answered, their honor was preserved, and *lo boshu*, literally, "they were not embarrassed." "But I," in contrast to them, am in severe distress, and I call out to God, but I am not answered; I live in shame and humiliation. My enemies relate to me as "a worm, not a man," and I suffer from the reproach and scorn of many people. Anyone who sees me opens his mouth and scoffs at me, shaking his head in scorn.[[10]](#footnote-10)

### 4. Section IV

9 Trust in the Lord, let Him deliver him,

Let Him save him, for He delights in him.

10 But You are He that took me out of the womb:

You did make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts.

11 I was cast upon You from the womb:

You are my God from my mother's belly.

We already noted that in section IV, the psalmist returns to his shining past. In this section, we joined together two stanzas that differ stylistically and substantively, but share an essential common denominator.

The first stanza in section IV stands in chiastic parallelism:

Trust (*gol*) in the Lord,[[11]](#footnote-11) let Him deliver him!

Let Him save him, for He delights in him.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In this stanza, there is a grammatical change; God is not addressed in second person, but is rather spoken about in third person. This change led several commentators to explain this stanza as the words of the enemies uttered in their scorn for the petitioner.

The Malbim was the first among the Hebrew commentators to explain the verse in this fashion: "Let us see whether He delivers him… thus they say in scorn." Other commentators followed in his path.[[13]](#footnote-13)

According to this view, verse 9 is connected to the verse that precedes it, as it illustrates what was stated in verse 8: "'All that see me, laugh me to scorn: They shout out the lip, they shake the head.' What do they say in their scorn? 'He trusts in the Lord, that He will deliver him.'"[[14]](#footnote-14)

This interpretation is untenable, as a verse similar to our verse appears elsewhere in the book of *Tehillim*:

*Tehillim* 37:5: Commit (*gol*) your way to the Lord; trust also in Him, and He will bring it to pass.

Again in the book of Mishlei, we find a very similar verse:

*Mishlei* 16:3: Commit (*gol*) your works to the Lord, and your plans shall be established.

These three verses appear to be similar versions of a well-known saying, counsel, or instruction that a person should commit his works to the Lord, on the promise that God will take care of his needs. It is totally unreasonable that the petitioner's wicked enemies would cite a religious saying filled with faith and trust belonging to the world of the petitioner.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Furthermore, if these are the enemies' scornful words for the petitioner, why don't they address him in second person: "Trust in the Lord, **let Him deliver you, let him save you…**"?[[16]](#footnote-16)

Therefore, the most convincing explanation of our verse is that the petitioner himself refers to this statement of faith based on his memory, from what he had learned earlier.[[17]](#footnote-17) By citing this saying, he means to say as follows: Surely this is what I learned in my youth, and so it is known and accepted, that if one puts his trust in God, God will save him.

The two verses that we cited from *Tehillim* and *Mishlei* and are similar to our verse reinforce this idea that we are dealing here with a well-known adage cited by the petitioner. The fact that the verse is formulated in the third person accords with this assumption as well. The third person formulation bestows upon the saying general validity, and it is therefore fitting to be recited precisely here, in opposition to the present state of the psalmist, who is wondering to himself: Why is what is stated in this saying not being fulfilled in me?[[18]](#footnote-18)

The Radak explains our verse in similar fashion:

**This we saw and heard several times,** that one who turns his ways and prayers to God, He will deliver him. If so, why do You not deliver us, seeing that we have turned to You?[[19]](#footnote-19)

In continuation of the saying of faith that he had learned in the past, and which he now cites in the framework of his complaint, the petitioner brings another precedent from the past for the fact that God shines His face upon one who is in need of help – and this time, the example is taken from the life of the psalmist himself:

10 But You are He that took me out of the womb:

You did make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts.

11 I was cast upon You from the womb:

You are my God from my mother's belly.

Thus, not only "our fathers," the people of Israel as a whole, trusted in God and merited His deliverance when they needed it, but even I myself merited God's rescuing me, from the moment that I came into this world. It is You who took me out from my mother's womb, it is You who secured my existence as an infant sucking at his mother's breasts, and from the time that I emerged from my mother's womb, You are my God.

Now it becomes evident why we joined verse 9 to verses 10-11 in one section. In both of these stanzas, the petitioner returns to his past in order to prove his claim against God that He has abandoned him in the present. He raising the saying of faith from what he had learned in his youth, whereas the description of his birth and of his existence as an infant is based on what he himself had experienced.

The arguments sounded in section IV relate to God's relationship with the individual, with the petitioner himself, whereas the argument sounded in section II relates to the web of collective relationships between God and His people, the people of Israel as a whole – "our fathers." Nevertheless, these two sections, II and IV, share the same goal: To paint a backdrop from the past that stands in contrast to the petitioner's situation in the present.

This common function is reflected in the repetition of two roots in these two sections:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Section II | Section IV |
| **"Trust"** (*bitchu*) – three times  (*kal* conjugation – our fathers in relation to God) | "You **did make me hope** (*mavtichi*) when I was upon my mother's breasts"  (*Hif'il* conjugation – God in relation to the petitioner) |
| **"And You did deliver (*va-tefalteimo*) them"** | **"Let Him deliver (*yefalteihu*) him"** |

### 5. Section V

12 Be not far from me;

For trouble is near;

For there is none to help.

The first third of our psalm, which is primarily a complaint, ends with a short section comprised of only one stanza with three clauses, containing a vigorous supplication for a change in the situation.

We already noted in our study of Psalm 13 (at the beginning of section II) that every complaint in the book of *Tehillim* is followed by a supplication. A complaint in the book of *Tehillim* is not an objective in itself, but rather a means to change the bitter reality in which the petitioner is living. Once the petitioner rids himself of his load of complaints, it is time for him to beseech God to change the situation.

Among the modern commentators who understood the structure of the psalm in a manner similar to the path that we have followed – that is to say, who divided the psalm into three sections – there is one who viewed verse 12 as the introduction to the second third of the psalm.[[20]](#footnote-20) The titles that we gave the first two thirds of the psalm – "complaint," "supplication" – seem to support this division. Verses 1-11 are "pure" complaint, with no trace of "supplication," whereas the "supplication third" begins in verse 12, which contains a supplication, and ends in verses 20-22, which also contain a supplication, when in between the two supplications, there is an account of the trouble from which the psalmist pleads for deliverance.

Nevertheless, we propose to include verse 12 in the first third of our psalm as its conclusion. The essence of this part of the psalm is indeed the psalmist's bitter complaint directed at God for having deserted him, but it concludes with a short but vigorous supplication for a change in his situation. This supplication constitutes the conclusion of the complaint that preceded it, and its role is to move us into the second third, in which the petitioner will spell out his trouble at length and conclude with a long and detailed supplication for deliverance from the trouble in which he is found.

This division that we are proposing has several structural advantages.

First of all, this division preserves the balance in length between the first two thirds.[[21]](#footnote-21) Second, if we include verse 12 in the first third, it turns out that this third has a clear and manifest independent chiastic structure, as we will explain in the next sub-section.

Third, this division highlights two structural principles that repeat themselves in all three thirds of our psalm and create overall unity in the psalm.

The first principle is the principle of framework. At the end of each third, we find key words from the beginning of that third, which create a closure for that part of the psalm.[[22]](#footnote-22) We will demonstrate this principle when we discuss the structure of each third.

Another structural principle that repeats itself in the psalm is the principle of linkage. The last words in each third serve as a link connecting that third to the third that follows, and they allude to the content of the next third.

The supplication that concludes the first third, "Be not far from me," has a double rationale: **"For** trouble is near, **for** there is none to help." These words serve as an introduction and a heading for the description of the trouble found at the beginning of the second third, which extends across verses 13-19 (the greater part of the second third). This description indeed spells out these two features of the petitioner's trouble. Corresponding to the words, "for **trouble is near,"** an account is given of the urgency of saving the petitioner, for the danger of his falling into the hands of his enemies is concrete and near.[[23]](#footnote-23) Corresponding to the words, "for **there is none to help,"** an account is given of the petitioner's loneliness, as he is surrounded by many strong enemies from whom there is no escape.

In the continuation of our study, we will see how this principle of linkage is found also in the transition from the second third to the third third.

### 6. The structure of the first third

As we shall see throughout this study, each of the three large parts of the psalm has a unique structure.

The first third is without a doubt built with a chiastic structure. The opening complaint in section I and the closing supplication in section V parallel each other linguistically and substantively, and create a clear framework for this part of the psalm:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Beginning | Conclusion |
| 2 **My God, my God,** why have you forsaken me? | 11 **You are my God** from my mother's belly[[24]](#footnote-24) |
| Why are You **far** from my salvation | 12 **Be not far** from me |

The complaint is the psalmist's point of departure, and the short supplication is, as stated, the purpose of the complaint. The use of words taken from the complaint that opens the third in the supplication that closes it somewhat sweetens the bitter complaint, by way of a supplication that offers hope for change. It turns out that from the beginning of this third until its end, the petitioner undergoes a mental change. The inner process that brings him to this change is connected to the inner parts of the third.

In the more inner parts of the third, there is a parallelism between sections II and IV, which give strength and validity to the harsh complaint uttered by the psalmist:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Section II | Section IV |
| 4 But You are holy,  O You that are enthroned upon the praises of Israel. | 9 Trust in the Lord, let Him deliver him,  Let Him save him, for He delights in him. |
| 5 Our fathers trusted in You:  They trusted, and You did deliver them. | 10 But You are He that took me out of the womb:  You did make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts. |
| 6 They cried to You, and were delivered;  They trusted in You, and were not confounded. | 11 I was cast upon You from the womb:  You are my God from my mother's belly. |

We already noted at the end of sub-section 4 the common role played by these two passages in supporting the complaint in the first third. Both of them serve as contrasting backdrop from the past to the petitioner's situation in the present. In the past, God shined His fact on "our fathers," and even on the petitioner himself when he entered the world. Now, in contrast, He has abandoned him and does not save and deliver him as He had done in the past.

At the end of sub-section 4, we also noted the verbal connections between the two passages: *bitchu* – *mavtichi*; *va-tefalteimo* – *yefalteihu*. Let us add here two more parallels: "But **You** are holy" – "But **You** are He that took me out of the womb"; "They cried **to You** (*eilekha*), and were delivered" - "I was cast **upon You** (*alekha*) from the womb."

There is progress between section II and section IV. Section IV intensifies the wonder about God's abandonment of the petitioner at this time, as it deals with the individual and with the petitioner himself, and it paints a contrast between God's sympathetic attitude toward the petitioner at the time of his birth and his ignoring him at this time.

Even though the objective of sections II and IV is to ground the complaint at the beginning of the psalm, they paradoxically strengthen the petitioner's hope that God will answer his cries. At the very same time that he raises his shiny past as part of his complaint, this past becomes a source of hope. Just as God had answered his forefathers, and just as He had worried about him from the time that he was born, so will He answer his prayers, and save him in the present.

The petitioner draws more hope from his account in section IV than from his account in section II, for **he himself** had internalized that one who puts His trust in God will be delivered by God from his troubles, and **he himself** benefited from God's mercy and love from the time of his birth.

Therefore, it is section IV that in the end paves the way from complaint to supplication. When he remembered that "You are my God from my mother's belly," the hope ripened within him that his prayer would indeed be heard, and he pleads with God: "Be not far from me."[[25]](#footnote-25)

In the center of the first third is section III, in which the petitioner describes his suffering. In this section, the psalmist alludes that his troubles stem from his enemies' attitude toward him, but the essence of this section lies in his description of his enormous personal suffering – the humiliation that he experiences owing to his enemies' scornful and belittling attitude toward him.

It is clear from the complaint in section I that the psalmist finds himself in serious trouble, and so too in the short supplication in section V he explicitly relates to his trouble with the words: "For trouble is near; for there is none to help." But it is difficult to identify with his complaint when no account is given of the distress that brought him to voice it.

Section III is then the central axis of the first third. It is what drives the entire complaint, and without it the petitioner's complaint against God for having abandoned him and for not answering his prayers would remain a complaint with nothing real standing behind it.

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. \* According to the custom of many Jewish communities, Psalm 22 is recited on Purim. In the appendix to our study, we will discuss the various customs regarding its recitation, their scope, their sources, and their reasons – in other words, the connection between our psalm and the events described in the book of *Esther*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The petitioner in Psalm 13, the subject of our previous study, underwent a similar mental process. It too is divided into three parts of complaint, supplication, and thanksgiving. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the first third, 11 verses and 79 words; in the second third, 10 verses and 74 words; in the third third, 10 verses and 91 words. In Psalm 12, the parts are not equal in length, but rather become gradually shorter. Even though the general framework of the two psalms is similar, each psalm stems from a different inner and outer reality, and so the literary design and means of expression in the two psalms are different.

   Several commentators divided our psalm into only two parts: 1-22 (supplication) and 23-32 (thanksgiving). The commentators who followed this path include Amos Chakham in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary and Meir Malul in *Olam Ha-Tanakh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. So the Aramaic translation: *Ve-let shetikuta li*, I have no quiet. This is also the explanation of the Ibn Ezra, Radak, the Meiri and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Chikrei Lashon* (Mossad HaRav Kook, Jerusalem 5746), pp. 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See our book, *Pirkei Eliyahu*, pp. 295-296. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It would appear that the reason for the change in order in our psalm as compared to the psalms mentioned above is that in those psalms the complainant is the people of Israel, God's partner in the covenant, so that the complaint has a sort of legal basis, since the change in attitude toward them is like a breach of the covenant. Setting down the past before presenting the complaint regarding God's attitude toward the people of Israel in the present is setting down the legal groundwork to the complaint itself, and is an inseparable part of the complaint. But in our psalm we are dealing with the complaint of an individual. The individual cannot come in the name of a Divine commitment that had been given him, and mentioning the past is meant only to present a contrasting background to the present situation. It is therefore appropriate to open our psalm with the petitioner's dramatic cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," and only afterwards make mention of the past, for the sake of contrast. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. These verses allude to the petitioner's desire to praise God when He will deliver him from his trouble. In the third third, he will realize this hope and praise God together with "all the seed of Israel." [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The contrast is not between the words "But I" and the words "But You" at the beginning of the previous section. The psalmist's description of himself, "but I am a worm, and no man," is not a show of modesty and self-effacement in relation to God. This is noted by the Ibn Ezra: "It is far-fetched that a man of reason should say about himself that he is not 'a man.' He is speaking about his enemies, that **they** scorn him, he being considered as nothing in their eyes." The Ibn Ezra's critique of the interpretation of verse 7 as words of modesty is apparently directed at the exposition of R. Elazar ben R. Yose HaGalili in *Chullin* 89a: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: I love you because even when I bestow greatness upon you, you humble yourselves before me. I bestowed greatness upon Avraham, yet he said to Me: 'I am but dust and ashes'; upon Moshe and Aharon, yet they said: 'And we are nothing'; upon David, yet he said: 'But I am a worm, and no man.'" This exposition sees the words of Moshe and Aharon and the words of David in our psalm as words of modesty, this by taking them out of their context. The Ibn Ezra interprets the verse in our psalm in its context, and therefore in accordance with its plain sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For shaking the head as an expression of scorn, see, for example, *Yeshayahu* 37:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “The word *gol*, 'trust,' is a singular imperative *kal* from the root *gimmel-lamed-lamed*, 'to roll': Roll and pass on to God your wishes and worries, and place your trust in Him" (Amos Chakham in his commentary to the verse). But the Ibn Ezra explains: “*Gol* – an adjective… having the form of 'hot (*chom*) bread' (I *Shemuel* 21:7)." According to this, the verse means: "One who rolls his trust on to God – He saves him" (*Metzudot*). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Who delights in whom? Radak: "For the Lord delights in him and hears his prayer; alternatively: For the psalmist delights in the Lord." The chiastic parallelism in the verse supports the second explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Tz. P. Chajes: "These are the words of his scorners: Why are you sad? Surely God will save you. Trust in Him and He will save you." Amos Chakham in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary: "These are the words of scorn uttered by the psalmist's enemies when they see him in his distress… Here is someone who fulfilled the dictum, 'trust in the Lord.' Let the Lord now come and deliver him…" This is also the understanding of A. S. Hartum in his commentary, and that of Meir Malul in *Olam Ha-Tanakh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In their division of the psalm into sections, Tz. P. Chajes and Meir Malul include verses 7-9 in one section. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Amos Chakham noted this difficulty and related to it in his commentary: "The words, 'trust in the Lord,' are words of wisdom that teach faith in God, but the psalmist's enemies have turned them into a taunt." It is far-fetched to say that the enemies were familiar with this wise adage, and used it in its original form as a taunt. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Tz. P. Chajes raised this question, and this is his answer: "The psalmist used third person to teach us that every one of his scorners will say this to his fellow." Other commentators followed in his path (Amos Chakham, Hartum). But this is forced. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In our study of Psalm 121, we explained verse 2 of that psalm, "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth," in a similar way. See there, section II and note 17. A similar phenomenon is found in several places in the Bible, and awareness of it is the key to explaining several obscure verses. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Had the saying been formulated in second person, the reader might have been led to the mistaken conclusion that these are the words of the enemies who scorn the petitioner. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A similar understanding follows from the explanations of the other early commentators, i.e., Rashi, Ibn Ezra, R. Yeshaya of Trani, and Meiri (who explicitly explains the verse along the lines of the Radak). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. So writes Tz. P. Chajes in the introduction to his commentary on our psalm. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The difference between the first and second thirds according to our division is only five words, but if we move verse 12 to the second third, the difference between them will be 13 words. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This principle is valid in the second third even according to those who assign verse 12 to the second third, as noted by Tz. P. Chajes (see note 24): "The beginning of the unit [what we call a “third”], 'Be not far' (verse 12), and so too the beginning of section IV [the fourth section, which concludes that third, according to Chajes], 'But be not You far from me, O Lord' (verse 20)."

    According to our division, the second third has a different framework, as we will explain in the section devoted to it. The linguistic connection noted by Chajes indicates, according to the division that we are proposing, a parallelism between the end of the first third and the end of the second third:

    |  |  |
    | --- | --- |
    | End of the first third | End of the second third |
    | **You are my God**…  **Be not far** from me;  For trouble is near; for there is none **to help.** | But, **You, O Lord,**  **be not far** from me.  O my strength, haste You **to help** me. |

    [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The clear and imminent danger finds expression in his description of his enemies in verse 19: "They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture" – the petitioner's imminent demise brings his enemies to plan how they will divide up his clothing after his death. It also finds expression in the supplication that closes the second third, in verse 20: "**Haste** You to help me." [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In order to compare the beginning and the end of the first third, we joined the closing words of section IV to the opening words of section V. See next note. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Because of this connection between the end of section IV and the beginning of section V, we joined them together above: "You are my God from my mother's belly. Be not far from me…." See previous note. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)