YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SEFER TEHILLIM**

**Lecture 17: The difference between "Happy is everyone who fears the Lord" And "Thus Shall the Man be blessed who fears the Lord" - Psalm 128 (Part II)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

(1) A Song of Ascents.

1 Happy is everyone who fears the Lord,

who walks in His ways.

2 (2) If you eat the labor of your hands,

you will be happy and it will be well with you.

3 (3) Your wife will be like a fruitful vine

in the innermost parts of your house,

4 your children like olive saplings

around your table.

5 (4) Behold, thus shall the man be blessed

who fears the Lord.

6 (5) May the Lord bless you from Zion,

and may you see the good of Jerusalem

all the days of your life.

7 (6) And may you see your children's children.

Peace be upon Israel.

**III. THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALM – ITS TWO HALVES**

An important question that has not yet been raised is whether our psalm has a literary structure that corresponds to the structure that we find in other psalms. The common structuring principle, as we have pointed out in previous studies, is two halves similar in length and paralleling each other.[[1]](#footnote-1) From a substantive perspective, this parallelism can be contrasting (as we saw in our study of Psalm 127), or it can be incremental in nature, the second half continuing or developing the first half (as we saw in our study of Psalm 91). As for the inner structure of each of the two halves, the parallelism between them can be direct or chiastic.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Uncovering the structure of the psalm is likely not only to help us achieve an overall understanding of the psalm as an organic work of art, as a poem that gives expression to an idea, but also to resolve exegetical difficulties of various kinds. It is possible then that our inquiry into the structure of the psalm will assist us in resolving the difficulties that were raised in the previous section. It is also possible that the process will be just the opposite: one or more of the exegetical problems might allude to the psalm's structure.

In fact, in the case of our psalm the first problem raised in the previous section – the repeated changes in person over the course of this short psalm – is the key to understanding the psalm's overall structure. As readers may recall, a similar difficulty in Psalm 91 – the repeated change in person (there the change was from first person to second person) – is what marked out the division of that psalm into two halves (see Section 5 there).

Following this approach, we see that the first half of the psalm opens with a presentation of the God-fearing man in third person (stanza 1), and continues with an address to him in second person (stanzas 2-4). Stanza 5 opens the second half of the psalm, and this opening is similar to the opening of the first half, for stanza 5 also refers to the God-fearing man in third person ("thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord"). The continuation of the second half (like the continuation of the first half) turns to the God-fearing man in second person, and remains that way until the end of the psalm (stanzas 6-7).

Are the two halves of the psalm similar in length? The answer to this question is yes: the first half (stanzas 1-4) consists of 23 words and the second half (stanzas 5-7) consists of 22 words. This analysis of the two halves indicates the nature of the parallelism. This is direct parallelism: stanza 1 parallels stanza 5 (both being in third person) and stanzas 2-4 parallel stanzas 6-7 (second person). With regard to content as well, the two halves are similar to each other: both advance a series of descriptions of the good things that the God-fearing man will merit (which, of course, provokes us into asking how the second series advances the first).

We can, already now, answer the first two questions that were raised in section 2:

The change in person found in this psalm constitutes its structural "backbone": each half of the psalm opens with a description of the God-fearing man in third person and then addresses him in second person.

Stanza 5, "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord…," is not a summation of what was said previously, as it was understood by most of the commentators. Rather it serves as an opening to what follows in the second half in stanzas 6-7. The words, "*ki ken*," allude then to God's blessing from Zion that will fall upon the God-fearing man and to the rest of the blessings in the continuation.

The third question raised in section 2, regarding the interpretation and meaning of the clause "If you eat the labor of your hands," will have to wait for a more precise analysis of the parallelism between the two halves, an analysis that will clarify the development from the first half of the psalm to the second. It seems, however, that this question as well depends on an analysis of the psalm's structure.

**IV THE PARALLELISM BETWEEN THE TWO HALVES AND THE FUNDAMENTAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN THEM**

Let us present our psalm anew, in a manner that highlights its structure – the parallelism between the two halves:

1. A Song of Ascents.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1  2  3  4 | Happy is everyone who fears the Lord,  who walks in His ways.  (2) If you eat the labor of your hands,  You will be happy and it will be well with you.  (3) Your wife will be like a fruitful vine  in the innermost parts of your house.  Your children like olive saplings  Around your table. | 5  6  7 | (4) Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.  (5) May the Lord bless you from Zion,  and may you see the good of Jerusalem  all the days of your life.  (7) And may you see your children's children.  Peace be upon Israel. |

The parallels between the two halves are clear. Between stanzas 1 and 5: in both of them we find the expression "who fears the Lord," and in both of them he is referred to in the third person. Between stanzas 2 and 6: in both of them we find the term "*tov*" (well/good), only that in stanza 6 the personal good of stanza 2 ("it will be well with **you**") expands into national good ("the good of Jerusalem"). And between stanzas 4 and 7, the blessing regarding "your children" expands into a blessing regarding "your children's children."

At first glance, the second half seems to be but a continuation and development of the first half. To the blessings described in the first half, it adds blessings that expand the **scope** of the original blessings (from the personal to the national) and their **duration** (from seeing a second generation – "your children" – to seeing a third generation – "your children's children").

In truth, however, there is a fundamental difference between the two halves, which expresses itself in a hidden parallelism between them, to which we haven't yet paid any attention. It may be asked: Is there any word in the first half that can appropriately serve as a heading of that section? Only one word appears twice in this half, while all the other words appear only once. This word is "*ashrei*" ("happy"), which appears at the beginning of stanza 1 and relates to the subject discussed in this stanza in third person – "**Happy** is everyone who fears the Lord." This word appears a second time in stanza 2, and refers to the same subject (he who fears the Lord), but this time in the second person – "you will be **happy** and it will be well with you."

In the second half we find a parallel phenomenon, but with respect to a different root, the root *bet-resh-khof*, "bless": In stanza 5 which opens this half it is said about the man who fears the Lord in third person that he "**shall be blessed**," and, immediately afterwards, stanza 6 addresses him who fears the Lord in second person and says to him "May the Lord **bless you**."

It turns out, then, that in both halves the transition from third to second person is connected to a key word that appears twice, and that this transition finds expression in its repetition:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1  Happy  You will be happy | 2  He will be blessed  May the Lord bless you |

Accordingly, we can set the key word in each half as its appropriate heading, and based on this try to make a fundamental distinction between the two halves. Indeed, what is the difference between the happy man and the blessed man?

The word "*ashrei*" in its various forms appears 26 times in the book of *Tehilim* (out of 45 times in all of Scripture). The precise meaning of the root *alef-shin-resh* in connection with this word is not unequivocal,[[3]](#footnote-3) though the intention of the statement itself is clear: "Happy is the man – it is well with him, it is a praise to him."[[4]](#footnote-4) Indeed, in two places the verb *alef-shin-resh* parallels the root *heh-lamed-lamed* ("praise"):

*Mishlei* 31:28: "Her children rise up and **call her happy** (***va-ye'ashruha***); her husband also, and **he praises her** (***va-yehalela***)."

*Shir Ha-shirim* 6:9: "The daughters saw her **and called her happy** (*va-ye'ashruha*); and the queens and the concubines **praised her** (*va-yehaleluha*).

The verb, "*bet-resh-khof*," on the other hand, is a transitive verb that means: wish someone good or provide someone with good.

It turns out then that applying the term "*ashrei*" to a person comes to express his praise and the good that is found in him, whereas applying the term "*mevorakh*" to him is used to say that someone else has blessed him – wishing or bringing a blessing upon him.

And indeed, an examination of many verses containing the word "*ashrei*" teaches that these verses describe the good qualities and deeds of the person or persons praised in these verses. Some of these verses also describe the good lot of the praised person - though not necessarily the portion that was given to him in reward for his qualities and deeds, but rather the lot that stemmed from the essence of these qualities and deeds themselves. Here are several examples:

*Tehilim* 1:1-2:

**Happy** ("*ashrei*") is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,

And does not stand in the way of sinners,

And does not sit in the seat of the scornful.

But his desire is in the law of the Lord…

*Yeshayahu* 56:2:

**Happy** ("*ashrei*") is the man that *does* this,

And the son of man that lays hold on it;

That keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,

And keeps his hand from doing any evil.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*Tehilim* 144:12-19:

So that our sons will be like saplings

Raised in their youth,

Our daughters like cornerstones…

Our storehouses are full…

Our sheep bring forth thousands…

Our rams are stout.

There is no breach and there is no leaving,

And there is no outcry in our streets.

**Happy** ("*ashrei*") is the people that has this.

**Happy** ("*ashrei*") is the people whose God is the Lord.

In the first two cases, praise is showered upon the man who conducts his life in the appropriate manner, and there is no mention whatsoever of any reward that he is to receive.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the third case, an account is given of the good lot of the people of Israel, and the term "*ashrei*" comes at the end as a summation of the perfection that precedes it. The second "*ashrei*" comes to teach that all the good and praise stem from the fact that the Lord is the God of this people. This does not mean, however, that all this good is given to the people as a reward, but rather that this is the life of the people whose God is the Lord by its very nature.

What does all this mean with respect to the distinction that we are trying to make between the two halves of our psalm? What is means is that the first half does not deal at all with the blessing and reward that God will bestow upon the man who fears Him, but rather it describes his fitting lifestyle and his good portion in life owing to his choosing of this lifestyle. These are not two separate things, but rather a fitting lifestyle includes the person's satisfaction and happiness with his life.

It is only the second half that describes the blessing that **God** will bestow upon the man who fears Him, as a reward for being such a person. It is for this reason that in the second half the name of God appears as the source of these blessings[[7]](#footnote-7): "May the Lord bless you…." All of stanza 6 describes God's blessing, and it should be understood as follows: "May the Lord bless you from Zion, **that you should see** the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life." The word "*u-re'eh*" is repeated in the last stanza, and thus joins it to the previous stanza. That is to say, two "seeings" are included in God's blessing: "May you see the good of Jerusalem" and "may you see your children's children." It turns out, then, that the entire second half deals with the blessings that God will bestow upon the man who fears Him: Stanza 5 contains the heading "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord," and stanzas 6-7 specify the blessings of God alluded to in the heading.

The question that arises now is: what areas exemplify the lifestyle of the God-fearing man and his good lot in life, and what areas give expression to God’s blessing of him in reward for fearing Him? We can also ask why the examples brought in each half are appropriate for its unique subject. That is to say, how does the distinction between "happiness" and "blessing" at the beginning of each half find expression in the body of that half?

The sections that will follow will be devoted to an examination of each half of our psalm. In the course of these analyses, the answers to these questions will become clear, as will the exegetical ramifications of the distinction that was made between the two halves of the psalm.

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. S.D. Goitein (*Iyyunim be-Mikra*" [Tel-Aviv 5727], pp. 202-203) does not understand the structure of our psalm in this manner. Rather, he sees a linear structure that develops from the beginning of the psalm to its end. Here is part of what he says:

   "This man [= the God-fearing man who walks in His ways] is blessed with **four** blessings: The first – 'You will eat the labor of your hands' – **that you will merit to enjoy the fruit of your work –** [we already cited his comments on this matter].

   The second is the blessing of **family**: 'You wife will be like a fruitful vine in the innermost parts of your house'… 'your children like olive plants around your table'…

   The third blessing – **the blessing of the nation.** This is stated twice: In verse 5, 'May the Lord bless you from Zion, and may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life,' and at the end of the psalm… 'Peace be upon Israel.' Success in one's personal life is only complete when accompanied by peace upon the entire nation…

   The final blessing is **longevity**. The psalmist does not state this in simple and explicit fashion, but rather with the words, 'And may you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel.' Long life in itself has no value, but when accompanied by a blessing upon the family and a blessing upon the nation, there is no greater blessing.

   Work, family, nation, longevity – all these things are part of the good of this world, its most elementary values… [And from here] to the conclusion, that the most fundamental elements of life are also its supreme good." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All this is like the parallelism that can be found in an isolated verse of biblical poetry. I discussed the types of parallelism in the first section of our study of Psalm 127, notes 5-7. The expansion of the principle of parallelism in an isolated verse to an entire psalm was discussed in our study of Psalm 91, section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ben Yehuda, s.v. *asher*, note 2, brings two different Arabic roots that might parallel the Hebrew root *alef-shin-resh*: the root *yod-shin-resh,* which is sometimes used in the sense of success and riches; and the root *alef-tof-resh*, the sense of which is choose or give an advantage. He concludes by saying: "And some say that the Hebrew root *alef-shin-resh* combines two ancient Semitic roots, *alef-tof-resh* and *yod-shin-resh*." The word "*ashrei*" itself is always found in the plural and in a construct state with the person to which it relates: "*ashrei ha-ish*," *"ashrekha*," and the like. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is the way that Ben Yehuda explains this word, s.v. "*ashrei*." According to this, "*ashrekha"* and "*ve-tov lakh*" are essentially one and the same. The midrash, in its usual manner, tries to distinguish between the two, even though their meaning is the same: "'You will be happy' in this world, 'and it will be well with you' in the world to come" (*Avot* 4:1, *Berakhot* 8a, apparently under the influence of the mishna in *Avot*)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This verse, like many other verses containing the word "*ashrei*," only describes the good deeds and moral conduct of the praised person, without mentioning his good lot or the reward that God will give him. Here are some additional examples: *Tehilim* 32:1-2; 34:9; 40:5; 119:1-2. Even in the few verses that mention the reward of the praised person, the term "*ashrei*" refers to his deeds and qualities, and not to his reward. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Regarding psalm 1, see Meir Weiss, "*Le-Darkha shel Torah be-Mizmor Ashrei ha-Ish*," *Mikra'ot ke-Kavanatam*, pp. 111-134. According to his understanding, the gist of the psalm lies in its description of the essential qualities of the righteous and the wicked man, and the term "*ashrei*" refers to the essence of the righteous man, and not to his reward. Only in the last two verses (5-6) is mention made of the recompense of the righteous and the wicked man. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. God's name is not mentioned in the first half, except for in the opening line in the combination, "who fears the Lord." [↑](#footnote-ref-7)