YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SEFER TEHILLIM**

**Lecture 18: The difference between "Happy is everyone who fears the Lord" And "Thus Shall the Man be blessed who fears the Lord" - Psalm 128 (Part III)**

**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.

**V. THE FIRST HALF PRAISE OF THE WAYS OF THE GOD-FEARING MAN**

I already noted that the commentators disagree about the meaning of stanza 2.[[1]](#footnote-1) It would seem that the distinction that I proposed between the two halves of the psalm allows us to decide between the two understandings. We cannot accept the argument of Chajes, Goitein and other modern commentators regarding this stanza that "it is not a condition but a blessing" (Chajes), and that this stanza constitutes the first blessing with which the God-fearing man is blessed in our psalm, "that he will merit to enjoy the fruit of his work." "Blessings" are the substance of the second half of the psalm, whereas the first half is a characterization of the ways of the God-fearing man.

It is indeed a blessing that a person should eat the labor of his hands, and that it should not be lost to him owing to enemies or natural disaster, **and God** in fact **grants this blessing** to those who fear Him as reward for their good deeds, as is explained in the blessings in *Parashat Bechukotai* (*Vayikra* 26:3-5) and *Parashat Ki Tavo* (*Devarim* 28:1-5).[[2]](#footnote-2) This Divine blessing depends upon external factors over which a person has no control, and therefore it is altogether inappropriate for the first half of the psalm, which describes the ways of the man who walks in the paths of God and merits satisfaction in his life.

On the other hand, the understanding of *Chazal* and the medieval commentators that stanza 2 contains a conditional clause, and that the meaning of the word "*ki*" is "if" or "when," accords well with the first half of the psalm. The ideal life of the man who fears God and walks in His paths is to eat of the labor of his hands: to be satisfied with what he has and be happy with his portion, and not to live at the expense of other people. **When** the God-fearing man lives in this manner, **then** he is happy and it is well with him: he is happy and fit for praise.

This is also the way that to understand stanzas 3-4 which describe the family of the God-fearing man who walks in His paths: establishing a happy and successful family is such a person's life mission, and in its realization he finds satisfaction and happiness. This ideal family includes the father of the family who goes out to work and supports his wife and children by the labor of his own hands (stanza 2); his wife who, owing to her modesty, "conceals herself" in the innermost parts of the house, but is "like a fruitful vine" – giving birth to many children (stanza 3); and the children who are found in their father's house, planted around his table (stanza 4). This is the picture of the ideal family in ancient Israelite society.[[3]](#footnote-3)

An important note must be made here: In order for the God-fearing man to properly fulfill his life's missions and walk in the ways of God, he needs heavenly help. In order to eat from the labor of his hands, God must give him the strength to succeed in his labor; in order to establish a family together with a good God-fearing woman, he needs the grace of God to bring them together; and certainly the birth of many healthy children and their successful upbringing requires a great deal of Divine help. The basis for receiving such help, however, lies in the person's efforts to properly fulfill these human responsibilities – to walk in the paths of God. The perspective of the first half of our psalm relates to the ways of the man who walks in the paths of God, but it is understood by implication that a God-fearing man who chooses such a life will merit Divine assistance, for "He does not withhold good from those who walk uprightly" (*Tehilim* 84:12).

This understanding of the first half of our psalm is clearly formulated in the commentary of the Radak:

He praises the **ways** of the God-fearing man… He speaks of **the way that he manages his sustenance**, for the good is for him to live from his own labor, and not benefit from others… [The psalmist] says: This, too, is one of the **good practices** in this world, that you should command your wife that she be like a fruitful vine in the innermost parts of your house… that she be modest in the innermost parts of the house… And if your wife follows this path, your children will be like olive saplings… and they will always be around your table, not sent away, and not gluttonous or voracious, but rather they will only eat and drink at your table.

As stated above, the structural analysis of our psalm confirms this understanding, and rules out the interpretations of those who disagree with him, ancients and moderns.

**VI. THE METAPHOR OF THE FRUITFUL VINE AND THE METAPHOR OF THE OLIVE SAPLINGS**

To complete the discussion concerning the first half of the psalm, let us examine the parallelism between stanzas 3 and 4, and the meaning of the metaphors that they employ.

The parallelism between stanzas 3 and 4 is synonymous, direct, and complete,[[4]](#footnote-4) as follows:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Your wife | will be like a fruitful vine | in the innermost parts of your house |
| Your children | like olive plants | around your table |

Each clause is comprised of three parts arranged in the same order: 1) the family member(s) under discussion (wife/children); 2) the metaphor used for that element of the family, taken from the agricultural world (vine/olive saplings); 3) the location of that element of the family in the father's home (the innermost parts of the house/around the table).

Even though the parallelism is synonymous, it is clearly not parallelism involving "a repetition of the idea in different words," for the subject under discussion in each clause is different, the metaphor is different, and so too the location in the house is different. The difference regarding the third element in each clause even alludes to contrasting parallelism: the table around which the children sit is in the center of the house, whereas the wife's place is in the innermost parts of the house.

Now let us examine the differences between the two clauses:

There is a striking difference in the first element of the two clauses between the singular and the plural. This comes to teach us that the ideal family in Israel has one wife[[5]](#footnote-5) and many children.

The choice of two different metaphors taken from the plant world (both belonging to "the seven species") raises a question: Why doesn't the psalmist continue with the metaphor of the vine, likening the children, as might have been expected, to clusters of grapes – the fruit of the vine which expresses its fertility? S.D. Goitein answers as follows:[[6]](#footnote-6)

After likening the woman to a vine, a less gifted poet would liken the children to clusters of grapes. This, however, would be a poor metaphor, for grapes are eaten and consumed. The metaphor of olive plants, on the other hand, is appropriate, for new trees will grow from the olive saplings. This foreshadows the last verse, "And may you see your children's children."

This brings us to another question: Why does the psalmist need these metaphors of trees for the woman and the children? What would be missing had he simply said: "Your wife in the innermost parts of your house, your children around your table"?

A metaphor provides the reader with a live and familiar picture, and this picture casts some of its qualities on the object of the metaphor. Thus, a multifaceted and variegated statement is created with a single word. It is for this reason that metaphor is one of the most important poetic devices. It allows for much to be said in a mere few words – this being the essential quality of poetry – and it allows the poem to stir the reader's imagination and interpretation, turning him into an active partner in the creative process of the poem – the one who realizes its potential.

There is, however, one condition, namely, that the image that the poem sets before the reader be familiar to him. Superficial familiarity does not suffice; this familiarity must relate to the details of the picture, as well as to the context from which it is taken.

At times, this situation creates a barrier for the modern reader, preventing him from understanding the poetry of ancient times. The manners of modern man, the landscapes with which he is familiar, and the professions that he is likely to pursue are all very different than those of biblical man. Accordingly, some of the metaphors used in biblical poetry are not at all familiar to him, or at least not sufficiently familiar, and thus the added value that these metaphors provide the reader is impaired, as is his understanding of the poem.

Let us return now to our psalm: Even modern man, residing in a sprawling urban center and far as far can be from the agricultural life of our forefathers in the biblical period, knows what a vine is and what an olive tree it. But is this enough to understand what lies behind these two metaphors in our psalm? It seems that the answer is no. Here the reader needs the commentator who can bring the image to life before his eyes, and clarify the various possible ramifications of the image for the object of the metaphor.

Let us now consider the metaphor that likens a wife to the vine:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Your wife will be like a fruitful vine | in the innermost parts of your house. |

Are the words, "in the innermost parts of your house," connected to the vine in the image, or perhaps only to the wife's location in the house?

Anyone who visits an Arab or Druze village in Israel will easily discern a very common phenomenon found in many houses: the trunk of a grapevine emerging from the ground, behind the house, close to the corner of the building. Supported by the walls of the house, the trunk reaches the roof of the building. There it sends out its branches across a pergola built on the roof, shading the entire area. During the summer, the vine yields hundreds of heavy clusters of grapes, which hang from the pergola and are available to the members of the household for whom the roof is their place of rest during the hot summer days. This practice appears to have been the practice of our forefathers in the biblical and mishnaic periods.

Scripture is apparently referring to this phenomenon in the verse coming to describe peace and happiness (I *Melakhim* 5:5): "E**very man under his vine** and under his fig tree." The verse is not referring to a vine in a vineyard. The vineyard is a place of work, and not a place of rest. The man who is sitting under his vine is a man who is resting on his roof, under his grapevine, the only domestic grapevine growing in the innermost parts of his house.

The mishna in *Sukka* 1:4 seems also to be referring to a vine that shades the roof of a person's house:

If he trained the vine… and covered it with boughs, it is disqualified [because *sekhakh* must not be attached to the ground], but if the covering is larger in quantity or if he cut [the vine], it is a fit [*sukka*].

It was common for a person to build his *sukka* on the roof of his house, and therefore the mishna teaches us that the permanent *sukka* that stands all year long on the roof of his house, under the branches of the house vine, is disqualified, unless he cuts the branches of the vine.

What are the characteristics of this household vine that distinguish it from the vines growing in the vineyard?

It has several amazing traits:

First of all, the incomprehensible relationship between the weakness of the thin trunk and the enormous spread of its branches across the entire roof. To this may be added the abundance of fruit that one such vine yields – hundreds of kilograms of grapes, all of which receive their nurture from one thin trunk. The strength of this vine finds expression in the metaphor in the words "fruitful vine."

Second, the vine's ability to climb and reach the roof of the building is also amazing. Supported by the walls of the house, the thin and weak trunk rises without bounds.

Third, one who looks at the house from the front usually does not see the trunk of the vine, but only its many branches shading the roof, and it looks like a hanging garden. This finds expression in the metaphor in the words "in the innermost parts of your house."

Add to this the fact that the household vine provides a person with repose and shade when he comes home from work and rests in its shade, and its appearance and fruit invigorate his soul.

Which of these traits did the psalmist have in mind when he likened the good wife to a vine? Each of these traits appears to be appropriate, each one illuminating a different aspect of her personality. The commentators mention several of these traits, and I will leave this to the reader. I wish, however, to emphasize the second trait mentioned above, which was noted by the Malbim, who says as follows:

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine"… though it stands in the innermost parts of the house, it raises its branches until it reaches the roof, and shades from there the entire house. So too she [= the wife] is modest, dwelling in the innermost parts of the house, **but nevertheless watches over and provides cover to the entire house.**

This idea is also found in a verse describing the woman of valor in the book of *Mishlei* (31:27):

She watches over the ways of her household…

Let us move on to the second image in our psalm:

Your children like olive saplings around your table.

Like some other trees, the olive tree sends out tender shoots from the ground that derive their nourishment from the tree's roots (there are other trees that issue such shoots from the lower portion of their trunks). Usually the olive-grower removes these shoots so that they not interfere with the tree's growth. It sometimes happens, however, that these shoots are not removed, and it is a heart-warming sight: the many tender shoots growing from the ground in close proximity to the trunk completely surround the "father" tree. This is a most appropriate image for children surrounding their father who towers high above them. The fact that these shoots derive their nourishment from the roots of the father tree leads to the image of children sitting around their father's table.

In rabbinic Hebrew, these shoots are called "*benei zayit*" ("the children of the olive tree") or "*gerufiyot shel zayit*" ("the shoots of an olive tree"), and they are mentioned in several places in the Mishna, the Gemara and the midrashim.

Why does the olive-grower sometimes prefer to leave these shoots and not cut them?

The baraita in *Bava Kama* 80b-81a lists the ten stipulations laid down by Yehoshua when the land of Israel was divided up and settled, the purpose of which was to make it easier to work the land. The fourth stipulation is:

That shoots be permitted to be cut off [by all] in all places, with the exception of the shoots of olive trees.

What this means is that a person is permitted to cut off a tender shoot from a high-quality tree belonging to his neighbor (provided that he cause no damage to the tree or to its fruit), in order to root it in the ground or to graft it on a tree in his own field, and thus improve his orchard. Shoots of olive trees, however, may not be cut off. Why not? Commentators disagree both regarding the reality in question and the rationale for the law. According to one understanding, however, since the most efficient way to grow new olive trees is by way of these shoots (it is difficult to root an olive branch growing on the tree itself, but the shoots growing from the ground already have roots of their own, and they can be removed together with their roots). It may be assumed that the owner of the olive tree is planning to use the shoots to increase the size of his olive orchard, and one who cuts off the olive shoots belonging to another person causes him a loss.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Indeed, the psalmist appears to be referring to the shoots of an olive tree that are meant to give rise to new olive trees having the same high quality as their "father." This may be inferred from the fact that he calls these shoots by what will happen to them in the future, "*shetilei zaitim*," branches that will eventually be planted and that give rise to new trees.

This explanation teaches us how appropriate the metaphor in our psalm is for teaching about the sons of the ideal father: While they are young they are supported at their father's table, like the olive shoots that derive their nourishment from the tree's roots. This stage, however, serves as preparation for the more mature stage of these shoots – the man's children. At the mature stage, the shoots will be planted in the ground near the tree from which they issued forth, and thus the olive orchard will become expanded, the young olive trees being faithful successors to their father and bearers of his qualities.

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See the second half of section II. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The opposite is true in the curses: *Vayikra* 27:14-16; *Devarim* 28:20, 30-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is difficult not to note the opposite of the family described here – namely, the modern family. This family is engaged in an endless chase after a higher standard of living, and is not content with what it has from its own work. In such a family, the woman has a career and does not want more than one or two children, and the children leave home at an early age and detach themselves from their parents and upbringing. The author of our psalm would certainly have been shocked by the typical modern family. He would have grieved for him whose life is of this sort, and he would have deemed such a life as not walking in the paths of God.

   I do not wish to take a position on the question of the status of women or the way to bring up children in the modern world, but rather to explain our psalm and what it means to say. This presentation of the modern family comes only to serve as a contrast to the psalmist's idea of family, and I am thus, of course, guilty of anachronism (The change in the relationship between parents and children from what Scripture describes as ideal to what is commonly accepted in the modern world is briefly discussed in the appendix to our study of the previous psalm, no. 127).

   The medieval commentators sometimes noted the contrast to the description of family in our psalm in a manner that is not anachronistic. Here are examples from the words of the Radak:

   A wife should be modest in the innermost parts of the house, and not leave the house, for this is the way of an adulterous wife… 'Now is she outside, now in the streets' (*Mishlei* 7:12). And it says: 'in the innermost parts,' for even in her house she should be modest, and not sit at the door of her house so that she is seen by passers-by, for all this is the path of an evil woman… 'For she sits at the door of her house' (*Mishlei* 9:14)… And [the children] should always be around your table –not sent away, and not gluttonous or voracious, but rather they will only eat and drink at your table. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an explanation of these three terms (and their opposites) see the first part of our study of Psalm 127, notes 5-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Even though by Torah law a man is permitted to have more than one wife ("If a man have two wives…"; *Devarim* 21:15), it seems that the ideal family according to Scripture is comprised of a man and his one wife, as follows from the account of the creation of the first man and woman in *Bereishit* 1-2. This perception is concisely formulated by *Chazal* in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version 2, chap. 2: "Were it fitting for the first man to be given ten wives, He would have given [them] to him. But it was only fitting for him to be given a single wife." Families having more than one wife are generally the families of kings or other rulers, or families in which the first wife suffered from infertility, as in the case of the family of Elkana, Chana and Penina. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Iyyunim be-Mikra*, p.203. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Rav Steinsaltz edition of *Bava Kama* 81a, in the "Realia" section in the margin. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)