YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SEFER TEHILLIM**

**Lecture 19: The difference between "Happy is everyone who fears the Lord" And "Thus Shall the Man be blessed who fears the Lord" - Psalm 128 (Part Iv)**

**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.

### VII. The second half: God's blessing of what is not in man's hands

Let us now turn to the second half of the psalm, and ask why it is that the good things mentioned there are different than the good things described in the first half, and why it is that precisely these things are defined as the blessing with which God blesses the man who fears Him and is deserving of blessing.

We already saw in section IV that there are linguistic and substantive parallels between the two halves of the psalm. These parallels teach us that the good things described in the second half constitute a development and expansion of the good things described in the first half. This expansion expresses itself in the **scope** of these good things, from the personal, "and it will be well **with you**," to the national, "the good **of Jerusalem”**, and in the **duration** of these good things, from "your children" to "your children's children." It was also mentioned that seeing the good of Jerusalem will be "**all the days of your life**" – thus hinting that the God-fearing man will merit longevity.

It is precisely these expansions of the good things as they are described in the second half of the psalm that must be defined as a Divine blessing. The reason is that these good things are not in man's hands and do not depend upon him.

Let us first examine the expansion in scope: the personal good that a person enjoys and the good of his family depend in great measure on the way in which he leads his life. If he walks in the ways of God described in the first half, and merits Divine help, "He will be happy, and it will be well with him." The good of Jerusalem and peace upon Israel – the good of the people and the land – are not in his hands, and it is only God's blessing from Zion that will allow the deserving person to see these good things.

Let us now consider the expanded duration of the good things mentioned in the second half: the establishment of a generation of blessed descendants, as in the first half, depends in great measure on a person's own efforts and on his following in a path that leads to that end. But seeing a third generation – "your children's children" – is not in a person's hands, but rather they depend on external factors. One of these factors is that the person merit to live a long life – "all the days of your life" – and this is certainly a Divine blessing, and not in the hands of the individual himself.

Attention should be paid to the repetition of the word "*u-re'eh*" – "see" – in the second half of the psalm at the beginning of stanzas 5 and 6. This term or one similar to it does not appear in the first half, because that deals with the ways of the God-fearing man – his efforts to establish a family and raise a generation of righteous children. The word "see," on the other hand, fits a situation in which man is not at the center of action, but rather he stands on the side. This is truly the situation described in the second half: God's blessing falls upon a person who merits good things that he did not create. "The good of Jerusalem" and "your children's children" are blessings in the personal and national realms that find expression in the fact that the person merits **to see them.** It turns out then that the repetition of the word "see" is also characteristic of the unique contents of the second half of the psalm.

Based on what does a person merit to receive the Divine blessings described in the second half of the psalm? The answer to this question is found at the beginning of this half (stanza 5): "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord" – it is the fear of God that leads to His blessing. Also at the beginning of the first half it is stated, "Happy is everyone **who fears the Lord**," only that there, as stated above, the God-fearing man is praised for his way of life. According to this, we can outline the structure of the psalm in this manner:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| The God-fearing man merits | |
| A God-fearing man merits: | |
| First half | Second half |
| A happy life which is a consequence of his walking in the ways of God | Divine blessing which is a reward for his fear of God |

However, the second half's appearance **after** the first half and in correspondence to it, and especially the linguistic connections between them which testify to the development and expansion of the good things mentioned in it, suggest a more profound explanation of why the God-fearing man merits the blessings bestowed upon him. This stems from his walking in the ways of God – his conducting of his life in an upright and happy manner – as is described in the first half of the psalm. Not only does this way of life give meaning to the life of the God-fearing man, but it also draws reward from God – His blessings – also in realms that are not under man's control.

According to this, the second half not only parallels the first half, but flows from it and expands it from various perspectives. Thus, the structure of the psalm should be outlined as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| First half | Second half |
| The man who fears the Lord and walks in His ways |  |
| Conducts his life in a happy and praiseworthy manner 🡪 | And owing to this way of life, he later merits the blessings of God |

### VIII. The literary structure of stanzas 6-7

Before concluding, I wish to comment on the literary structure of stanzas 6-7: The first two lines in stanza 6 appear to parallel each other:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| May the Lord bless you | From Zion |
| And may you see the good | of Jerusalem |

From the perspective of meaning, there is really no parallel, but rather continuation – the second line is a realization of what was said in the first line: "May the Lord bless you…." What will this blessing be? "And may you see the good of Jerusalem." Therefore the subject of the first line is God, whereas the subject of the second line is man. The respective functions of the words "Zion" and "Jerusalem" are also different in each line: In the first line Zion is the place from which God will bless you, whereas in the second line Jerusalem is the object of your sight. Nevertheless we are left with the impression of parallelism between the words: "blessing"-"good" and "Zion"-"Jerusalem"; and it stands to reason that this literary device is intentional.

Substantively, the words, "May the Lord bless you from Zion," serve as a general statement, the details of which are spelled out in the continuation of stanza 6 and in stanza 7, in four lines that have an interesting structure:

May the Lord bless you from Zion:

And **may you see** the good of Jerusalem

All the days of your life.

And **may you see** your children's children

Peace be upon Israel.

Substantively, there are four blessings here. Even though the words "all the days of your life" serve as a time frame for the words that precede them, they nevertheless allude to the blessing of longevity. Thus, the four blessings can be divided into two categories: the outer circle is comprised of blessings on the national level (Jerusalem – Israel), whereas the inner circle is comprised of blessings on the individual level, having similar content, for longevity and seeing one's children's children are connected. It turns out then that the four blessings have a chiastic structure.

On the other hand, the repetition of the term, "And may you see," at the beginning of the first line and at the beginning of the third line alludes to a different classification of the blessings: the first two constitute one pair, and the last two might constitute a second pair.

Fundamentally, the first pair is a blessing to see the national good – "the good of Jerusalem," and the words, "all the days of your life" define the time framework within which this seeing will be realized.

According to this, it might be argued that fundamentally the second pair is a blessing of individual good – seeing one's children's children, and the words, "peace be upon Israel," are appended to the main blessing and constitute a condition, or perhaps a consequence.

Indeed, *Chazal* (*Ketubot* 3a) understood the connection between these two blessings in accordance with the last possibility:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: When your children have children there is peace upon Israel, for they do not come to *chalitza* and levirate marriage [= for if one of a person's sons dies without children, his wife must perform *chalitza* or enter into levirate marriage with one of her late husband's brothers, and this negatively impacts upon family harmony].

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani said: When your children have children there is peace upon the **judges** of Israel, for they do not come to quarrels [= regarding the issue of inheriting a man who dies without children, which relative inherits, for when the deceased has children, they inherit him].

According to the plain sense of Scripture, the words "peace be upon Israel" can be understood as a **condition** for seeing one's children's children, for when Israel is engaged in war, young people die and the elderly do not merit to see their children's children.[[1]](#footnote-1) Why then doesn't the condition precede the blessing itself?

Concluding the series of blessings and concluding the entire psalm with the word "peace" is very appropriate, as Rabbi Levi expounded in *Vayikra Rabba* 9, 9:

Great is peace, for all the blessings, good things, and consolations that the Holy One, blessed be He, brings Israel conclude with peace. In the reading of *Shema –* "who spreads the shelter of peace"[[2]](#footnote-2); in the *Amida* prayer – "He who creates peace"; in the priestly blessing – "and may He grant you peace."

We can add: So too in our psalm, all the blessings and good things conclude with peace – "Peace be upon Israel."[[3]](#footnote-3)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. A similar explanation was suggested by Amos Chakham in his commentary to our psalm, in *Da'at Mikra*, note 7b. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Vayikra Rabba* was composed in Eretz Israel, and according to the ancient rite of Eretz Israel, the *"Hashkiveinu*" blessing recited every night ended with the words, "who spreads the shelter of peace." Our custom today (following the Geonim) is a compromise: on weekdays we end the blessing with the words, "who watches over His people forever," in accordance with the custom in Babylonia, and on Shabbat we end the blessing in accordance with the custom in Eretz Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Concluding the series of blessings in our psalm with the blessing of peace, in the same manner as in the priestly benediction and in other places in Scripture and outside of it, testifies to the fact that the conclusion is part of the psalm itself, and that it is not a conclusion that was appended to it. The structure of the psalm, which is divided into two halves of equal length, brings us to the same conclusion. See our discussion of this question in the first part of this study, no. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)