YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# Tehillim

Lecture 22: "*Nafshi*" and "*Ani*"

Psalm 131 according to A.L. Strauss (Part III)

Rav Elchanan Samet

(1) A Song of Ascents of David.

O Lord,

1 My heart was not haughty,

Nor were my eyes lofty.

2 And I did not occupy myself with great things,

Or with things beyond my power.

3 (2) Surely ("*im lo*," lit. "if not")I composed

And stilled my soul.

4 Like a weaned child beside its mother:

My soul is to me like a weaned child.

(3) Israel, hope for the Lord,

From now and for ever.

### Stanza 4 – the poem's climax

This composition proclaims that we are drawing close to the goal, which is achieved in the last stanza. And it is only this stanza, the climax and conclusion, that is emphasized through the use of an analogy - an original analogy that is not likely to be forgotten and that paints an entire picture.

Thus far, the poem's language is metaphoric, but there is no explicit analogy and no development of an illustrative image.[[1]](#footnote-1) The shadowy and undeveloped pictures that we might imagine when we read the first three stanzas reveal a tendency of descent from the heights to the plain. The transition from the verbs *"gava*" ("be haughty") and "*ramu*" ("be lofty") to "*hilakhti*" ("occupy oneself," " walk in"), already give us the feeling of going down from an act of ascent to movement on an even level. This descent achieves its goal with the verbs "*shiviti*" ("composed") and "*domamti"* ("stilled") which denote a leveling action.

Against the background of these shadows, on the plain, a background achieved in the third stanza, what stands out in the final stanza is the only developed picture in the poem, the picture of the weaned child in its mother's lap. At the beginning, in the first line, the image is still somewhat vague: "like a weaned child" ("*ke-gamul*"); with the insertion of the definite article in the following line – "*ka-gamul*" – it assumes a much more vigorous form. Its outlines become more fixed and striking, as if the poet-artist were drawing its contours a second time with a heavier line, in order to present the image of the weaned child on its mother's lap as the image of the serene soul on the lap of the "I". This reinforced repetition of a single word, i.e., of a single image, allows us to share in the creation of the picture. Moreover, it expresses the profound satisfaction of the soul, the homey and maternal peace that encompasses it, the feeling of return to its eternal home that arises within it, when it makes peace with its lot, after having previously striven for the infinite and for the overcoming of all constriction – and in the end it recognizes that it is to its advantage to accept its constriction.

This stage of the process shaped in our poem contains the surprise of the self-evident – the same surprise that is aroused when something close and familiar reveals itself to us in an abundance of concealed meaning and brings us to what we had been vainly seeking in distant places. This surprise of the self-evident is found in the analogy, which is new and innovative upon every reading, but at the same time appears to us as something known by virtue of the nature of our existence.

There are times that the analysis of poetry so excels that it itself turns into a poem. It is as if the poem confers of its spirit upon its interpreter and elevates his words to the level of poetry. Let it be noted once again: never before had a psalm in *Tehilim* merited such a commentary, and only one who himself is a poet could have authored such words.

The analogy of the serene soul in relation to the "I" to "a weaned child beside its mother" requires a bit of expansion: What is "a weaned child"? This term usually refers to a child who has been weaned from its mother's milk. Accordingly, the reference is to a two- or three-year old child.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Would it not have been more appropriate to compare the serene soul to a younger infant?[[3]](#footnote-3)

The analogy to a nursing infant suffers from two opposite deficiencies: a nursing child makes constant demands upon its mother, whose milk it always desires. Would this have served as an appropriate image for "the serene soul on the lap of the 'I'"? Surely the soul's embrace of the "I" expresses "making peace with its lot"!

The other disadvantage of the image of a nursing child is its utter powerlessness, its absolute dependence upon its mother. But surely, this "soul," which is likened to a child, "had previously striven for the infinite and for the overcoming of all constriction," that is to say, it had been independent and wayward. Only that in the end it returns reconciled to the "I" – to the mother, upon whose lap it lies out of reconciliation that involves no weakness or dependence, but also no demands.

The age of the "weaned" child – about three years old – is exceedingly appropriate for the goal of the analogy in our psalm. This is a child in whom signs of independence, and even rebelliousness and stubbornness, are already evident. A three-year old is likely to be a mischievous child, who is drawn to diverse adventures inside his home and outside of it.

These adventures end, however, with the child returning to its mother and her love, "the homey and maternal peace" with which she surrounds him. The "weaned child beside its mother" is a most perfect analogy for the soul's reconciliation with the "I" – reconciliation that involves satisfaction and is reached by conscious choice and with no demands.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The distinction that our psalm makes between the "soul" and the "I," to the point that the soul is likened to a weaned child and the "I" to its mother, raises a question: Isn't the "I" identical with the "soul"? Can they really be separated?

Indeed, our psalm does not identify the one with the other, as is evident even before we reach stanza 4, when the speaker vows: "Surely I composed and stilled my soul"! We see then that the soul is an inner force that wishes to burst forth with no limits, whereas man, who rules his inner forces just as he rules his outer limbs, is expected to harness and subdue his wayward soul, until it turns into a serene soul which finds itself in an ideal mutual relationship with its master, "like a weaned child beside its mother."

We find a similar distinction between the "I" and that stormy and wayward inner force inside the "I" in an amazing midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 16, 5, and parallels), which deals with the question who are those persons who rule over that inner force called "heart" (so too at the beginning of our psalm), and who are those persons who are ruled by it. The midrash builds its distinctions on a comparison between two types of verses appearing in Scripture:

The wicked are controlled by their hearts:

The fool has said **in his heart…** (*Tehilim* 14:1)

And Esav said **in his heart…** (*Bereishit* 27:41)

And Yerov'am said **in his heart…** (I *Melakhim* 12:26)

But the righteous are in control of their hearts:

Now Chana spoke **in her heart…** (I *Shemuel* 1:13)

And David said **in his heart…** (ibid. 27:1)

But Daniyel purposed **in his heart…** (*Daniyel* 1:8)

They are similar to their Creator:

And the Lord said **in his heart…** (*Bereishit* 8:21)[[5]](#footnote-5)

### The various types of Parallelism in the Poem: From the simple parallelism in Stanza 1 to the complex Parallelism in Stanza 4

Strauss opens his discussion regarding the parallels in our psalm with the following assertion: "All four stanzas are built on parallelism between the two lines of which each is comprised." Is this really true?

There is no doubt about the matter regarding stanzas 1 and 4, and later in this section we will bring Strauss's comments on the nature of the parallelism in each of them. Regarding stanzas 2-3, however, the matter is not so clear: it would have been possible to see each of these stanzas as a consecutive statement containing no parallelism.

It seems, however, that Strauss is right. In both stanzas 2 and 3 we find a similar phenomenon: At the center of each stanza there are two synonymous terms: "*bi-gedolot*"/"*u-be-nifla'ot*" – "great things"/"things beyond my power"; "*shiviti*"/"*ve-domamti*" – "I composed"/"and I stilled." This phenomenon alludes to the poetic parallelism found in each of these stanzas.

The fact that these two stanzas are surrounded by stanzas in which the parallelism is clear and striking also strengthens the reasonability that all four of the psalm's stanzas are built upon the parallelism between their two lines.

Let us now consider the nature of the parallelism in each of the four stanzas, following, of course, in the footsteps of Strauss:

The parallelism in stanza 1 is synonymous, direct and complete:[[6]](#footnote-6)

*Lo gava libi (*"My heart was not haughty")

*Ve-lo ramu einay* ("nor were my eyes lofty")

In the next two stanzas the parallelism is synonymous but incomplete.[[7]](#footnote-7) In stanza 2, the second line is missing an element, and it is completed by the first line:

*Ve-lo hilakhti bi-gedolot* ("And I did notoccupy myself with great things")

*ve-*(*lo hilakhti*) *be-nifla'ot mimeni* ("or with things beyond my power")

In stanza 3, both lines are missing elements and they complete each other:

*Im lo shiviti* (*nafshi*) ("Surely I composed")

*Ve-*(*im lo*) *domamti nafshi* ("And stilled my

soul")

These two middle stanzas give a false impression of chiastic parallelism because the parallel words meet at the seam of the two lines:

*"Ve-lo hilakhti bi-gedolot*,

*u-be-nifla'ot mimeni.*

*Im lo shiviti*

*Ve-domamti nafshi.[[8]](#footnote-8)*

The truth is that chiastic parallelism is found only in the last stanza, and there it is hidden. That stanza, in which the poem reaches its climax, both in terms of its contents and in terms of the power of the description, stands out also in the nature of its parallelism, because only in that stanza do we find synthetic parallelism (parallelism involving an analogy and the object of the analogy), and the structure of this parallelism is exceedingly complicated and delicate. *"Ki-gemul*" in the first line parallels "*nafshi*" in the second line," and "*alei imo*" in the first line parallels "*alai*" in the second line:

*Ki-gemul alei imo*

*Alai nafshi*

The chiastic order of the parallelism is blurred by two deceptive phenomena: the repetition of the word "*gemul*" and the similarity in sound between the words "*alei*" and "*alai*": both of them give the impression of parallelism of the type found in stanza 1 – direct parallelism.

*Ke-gamul alei imo*

*Ka-gamul alai nafshi.[[9]](#footnote-9)*

The similarity in sound, which in stanza 4 joins the first two words in the first line to the first two words in the second line, blurs the parallelism between the word "*imo*" and the word "*alai*" and between the word "*nafshi*" and the word "*gemul*," so that the words "*imo*" and "*nafshi*" appear to stand on their own at the end of their lines, and therefore are stressed more strongly. The stressing of the word "*imo*" is important in that it strengthens the feeling of returning to the serenity of childhood that is concealed in motherhood.

### The word "*Nafshi*" ("My soul") in the psalm's concluding Line proclaims the psalm's topic

Stronger than this stress [= on the word "*imo*"] is the stress on the word "*nafshi*," ("my soul"); it is not only because this word is located at the end of the entire poem, but also because it already appeared at the end of stanza 3.

All of the words in the last line are stressed by virtue of the fact that they repeat words or at least sounds that were already heard in the two previous lines. This is not the repetition of an entire clause in the same form, but rather the bringing together of elements that had already appeared as isolated elements into a new connection – and therefore this repetition does not have the rhetorical character of a repeated clause.

The word "*nafshi*' repeats a word found at a greater distance from it than the distances between the rest of the words in the line and the sounds that they repeat. But it conquers this distance, for already in its first appearance this word had been given a place of prominence - just as a very old memory can be the determining memory.

"*Nafshi*," the word that is stressed by way of its imaginary isolation from the parallel structure, by way of its place at the end of the psalm, by way of the memory of the same word in another important place in our poem – proclaims the subject of the entire poem. At first it hides in the word "*libi*," "my heart," at the end of the first line, and then it becomes revealed at the end of stanza 3 as the soul that submits itself to the "I" that composes and stills it – and it reappears at the end of the poem as the soul that sits on the lap of the "I" without rebelling, without thirst, without demands, like a weaned child on its mother's lap.

Toward the end of his words,[[10]](#footnote-10) Strauss summarizes everything that he had demonstrated thus far regarding stanza 4, which is the climax and the objective of the entire poem:

With the emphasis on the concluding stanza as the climax of the poem… all the elements of its being come and join together: the inner movement and the forms of expression, the order of the words and the forms of parallelism, the composition and descriptiveness, the rhythm and the sound.

Strauss dedicates his closing line to a final assessment of the poem from an artistic perspective, and even though it is not our practice to evaluate the psalms that we study, it is interesting to see the view of an expert on the matter:

Like several of the finest creations of world lyrical poetry, our poem joins together extreme simplicity and the qualities of a delicate and ramified artistic organism. It has nothing of the transient; it speaks wholly of necessity, regularity and unity.

### Appendix: "A song of Ascents of David"

The psalms of *Tehilim*, even when their headings attribute them to a specific author, and even to a specific event in the life of that author, bear a general nature that make them appropriate for varied human situations. Therefore, anyone coming to explain a particular psalm is not required to limit his explanation so that it accords with one personality or one event. On the contrary, he must broaden his explanation so that it will suit anyone finding himself in the situation described by the psalm.

There are times, however, when it is advantageous to match the contents of a psalm to a specific character (usually the one mentioned in the psalm's heading) and his life. Such an approach is likely to concretize the ideas expressed in the psalm, which at times are very abstract or indefinite.

Psalm 131's heading reads "A Song of Ascents of David." Is there an event in David's life that accords with the contents of the psalm and can shed light on it, or perhaps the reverse, can we see David in a new light thanks to what is stated in the psalm?

An amazing midrash provides an affirmative answer to this question: It is not one particular event, but David's stormy life as a whole that serves as a backdrop for our psalm, sheds light on it and is illuminated by way of it.

It may indeed be asked: what other biblical personality was graced with such a stormy soul and with life experiences providing such great temptation to come to a haughty heart and lofty eyes? Who else but David is described as given to moments of test in which the question is raised whether his soul will dictate his actions, or he will subdue his soul and still it? And who else but David emerged victorious from such tests?

David is one of the great humble men in Scripture. His humility, however, was not a natural trait. Nor did the marvelous circumstances of his life help develop it, but rather the opposite: they put his humility to difficult tests. But David, the great warrior, fought also against his soul, and after he subdued it, merited the ideal life of the soul: "like a weaned child beside its mother," so, too, his soul.

Indeed, it is fitting for David to confess before his God and say, "My heart was not haughty, nor were my eyes lofty…" until the end of the psalm, and this short psalm is fitting to serve as a summation of David's stormy life.

This is what is stated by a midrash, brought in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 2:4, 20b):

It is written: "A Song of Ascents of David. O Lord, my heart was not haughty" – when Shemuel anointed me [as king].[[11]](#footnote-11)

"Nor were my eyes lofty" – when I killed Golyat.[[12]](#footnote-12)

"And I did not occupy myself with great things" – when I brought the ark up.[[13]](#footnote-13)

"Or with things beyond my power" – when I was returned to my kingdom.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Rather, "Surely I composed and stilled my soul, like a weaned child beside its mother: my soul is to me like a weaned child" – like a child who emerged from his mother's womb – so was my soul to me.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This midrash mentions four important stations in David's life, in each of which he achieved extraordinary greatness: from the first time that David is mentioned in Scripture – when Shemuel anointed him as king when he was still a young lad, and until his return to the throne following Avshalom's failed rebellion, when David was already approaching the end of his life. The common denominator of these four events is that they provided great temptation for arrogance and haughtiness. Scripture, however, testifies to David's great modesty even after these impressive successes, whereas the attribution of the confession in our psalm to David attests that this humility was the product of a difficult internal struggle, a struggle in which David emerged victorious.

In this way, this short two-verse psalm, turns into a summary of David's stormy life, a life which has no parallel in Scripture for the description of the life of the soul and internal struggle.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. "A metaphor involves a binding together of two words… one of which preserves its original, literal meaning, while the other is given a new and different meaning, which is no longer exclusively literal" (Yosef Even, *Milon Munachei ha-Sifrut*, s.v. *metaphorah*). "Haughty (*gavoha*) heart" and "lofty (*ramot*) eyes" are metaphors, because "*gavoha*" and "*ramot*" describe places in the concrete world, but when they are joined to "heart" and "eyes," they express an inner world, and their usage is borrowed. As opposed to an analogy, a metaphor does not raise a concrete image in the reader or listener's imagination, certainly not in the case of a trite metaphor, i.e., one that has entered everyday speech, so that nobody even notices that it is a metaphor. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "*Gemul*" is mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, outside of our psalm, in *Yeshayahu* 11:8, and there we find a parallelism between "*yonek*" (sucking infant) and "*gemul*," something that does not necessarily indicate that the two are identical. All instances of "*gemila*" in Scripture refer to a child's cessation from nursing. For example, "Those that are weaned ("*gemulei*") from the milk, and removed from the breasts" (*Yeshayahu* 28:9). The age of weaning is discussed in *Ketubot* 60a-b, and from there it appears that the norm was not before two years old, though there were those who were weaned only much later. It is reasonable to assume that the situation during the biblical period was no different. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Indeed, Rashi understands "*gemul*" as a nursing infant. The Radak and the Meiri, on the other hand, understand that the reference here is to a child who has been weaned from its mother's breast. They explain that this analogy was chosen because the weaned child is weak and dependent upon his mother for walking and eating. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Strauss's original interpretation of stanza 4 is unlike that of the early commentators (whose works he apparently did not examine, just as he never studied the works of the modern commentators). They understood the "mother" in the analogy as referring to God (R. Yeshaya) or to teachers and tradition (Radak), or the like. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Regarding this midrash and the issue discussed here in general, see my *Iyyunim le-Parashat ha-Shavu'a*, second series, *Parashat Yitro*, pp. 319-320. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The meaning of these three terms was explained in our study of psalm 127, section 1, notes 5-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. We refer to parallelism that is not complete as "incomplete parallelism"; see the reference cited in the previous note. The question whether these parallelisms are direct or chiastic will be discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We noted a similar phenomenon in our study of psalm 127: The verse: "Behold, the heritage of God – children/ And reward - fruit of the womb" displays direct parallelism. But owing to the internal structure of each line, it gives the impression of chiastic parallelism. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Here Strauss discusses the composition of the poem from the perspective of the nature of the parallelism found in each of its four stanzas: Is the composition centralized and symmetric (stanza 1 paralleling stanza 4, and stanzas 2-3 paralleling each other) or does the composition advance toward the conclusion – toward the climax in stanza 4 (stanza 1 – simple parallelism; stanzas 2-3 – more complicated parallelism; stanza 4 – the most complicated parallelism in the poem). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We have omitted an entire section of Strauss's article in which he analyzes the psalm from the perspective of meter and accent. We did this because his comments would require a broad introduction that would be inappropriate in this forum. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. David's anointing as king is described in I *Shemuel* 16:1-13. The potential for arrogance at this stage follows not only from the fact that God chose David to be anointed as king, but also because David was the youngest of Yishai's sons, and he was anointed after his older brothers were all rejected.

    "A haughty heart" is inner arrogance that is not displayed outwards. It is precisely this quality that fits that event which took place in a concealed manner (following the commentary of *Korban ha-Eida*).

    David's modesty is evident from his conduct later in that very chapter: He stands before Shaul as his arms-bearer, and plays music in order to remove the evil spirit from him. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The killing of Golyat is described in I *Shemuel* 17, and since it took place in the presence of all of Israel, it had the potential to lead to arrogance and haughtiness displayed outwards, or as our psalm calls it – "lofty eyes." David's modesty is evident in his answer to Shaul's question: "Whose son are you, lad" – "And David answered, I am the son of your servant Yishai the Bet-Lechemite" (I *Shemuel* 17:58). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The second time the ark is brought up is described in II *Shemuel* 6:12-23. From David's perspective, this was an opportunity to display his royal dignity before the people – "to occupy himself with great things." But David "danced and leaped before the Lord," causing Michal to despise him in her heart and to mock him later with her words. David's modesty is displayed not only in his very dancing before the people, but also in his answer to Michal: "And I will yet be more lightly esteemed than this, holding myself lowly; and of the maidservants of whom you have spoken, of them shall I be had in honor" (v. 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. David's return to the throne is described in II *Shemuel* 19:10-44. When he crosses the Jordan, David is received by representatives of all the tribes of Israel and of the tribe of Yehuda, and also by Shim'i ben Gera, who comes to plead for his life. David could have exploited his success and settle accounts with Shim'i ben Gera and the rest of his enemies, but he refrains from doing so and vigorously rejects Avishai's proposal that he kill Shim'i.

    It is difficult to understand the midrash's association to this event of the words in our psalm, "or with things beyond my power." Indeed, the Radak had a different reading of the *Yerushalmi*, which reverses the order: "'And I did not occupy myself with great things' – when I was returned to my kingdom; 'Or with things beyond my power' – when I brought the ark up." According to this reading, the words, "or with things beyond my power (*u-be-nifla'ot*)," refer to the ark itself, which David brought up in awe, guarding its being "*mufla*" – hidden and concealed, rather than in the way it was handled by the people of Bet-Shemesh (I *Shemuel* 6:19.)

    According to the Radak's reading, the event of being "returned to his kingdom" should be understood as referring not to what happened after the failed rebellion of Avshalom, but to David's being anointed as king over all of Israel, as is described in II *Shemuel* 5:1-3, for according to the other explanation, the events are not arranged in proper chronological order.

    There are two striking difficulties with the Radak's reading: First, the word "*hecheziruni"* is inappropriate in connection with David's being anointed for the first time as king of Israel. Second, according to this reading, the four stations in David's life are limited to the first half of his life. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The end of the midrash leads to two conclusions regarding its understanding of the fourth stanza of the poem:

    It seems to have understood the word "*gemul*" as denoting a newborn infant, rather than a weaned child, as was proposed in our study.

    It seems to have understood the parallelism, "Like a weaned child beside its mother/ My soul is to me like a weaned child," in the same way as Strauss did: "like a child… so was my soul to me," and not in the way it was understood by the *Rishonim* (see note 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)