YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**Lecture 31:**

**"indeed, for your sake we are being killed all the day"**

**Psalm 44 (part IV)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

### VII. A psalm for its generation that is needed for all generations

What are the historical events during the biblical period upon which the second and most important part of Psalm 44 is based?[[1]](#footnote-1) The modern commentators were perplexed by this question, and failed to provide a clear answer to it.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The starting assumption for clarifying this issue must be that our psalm, as opposed to other communal psalms of complaint in the book of *Tehilim*, does not focus on a particular traumatic event in Israel's history,[[3]](#footnote-3) but rather on an entire historical period.[[4]](#footnote-4) A description of the various historical stages of this difficult period is found in sections 4-5, as was noted in our discussion of these sections. The stages are as follows:

1. Defeat at the hands of the enemy, leading to massive deaths among the people of Israel (vv. 10-12)
2. Israel's dispersion among the nations (vv. 12-13)
3. The nations' scorn and derision for Israel (vv. 14-17)
4. The killing and slaughter of Israel for holding fast to their faith in God (vv. 20 and 23)

The only historical period that enters into consideration is the period of the destruction of Yehuda and Jerusalem and the exile to Babylonia that followed.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This assumption raises several questions:

1. Our psalm does not mention the destruction of the country, the city of Jerusalem, or the Temple. And, in general, nowhere does our psalm clearly allude to any defined historical period: neither the place of exile nor the identity of the enemies is mentioned anywhere in the psalm.
2. If, indeed, section 5 describes the slaughter of Israel in the land of their exile for holding fast to their faith, "for Your sake we are being killed" – we have no knowledge that such a thing ever occurred in the Babylonian exile. From the allusions in Scripture and from external sources, we get the impression that the Babylonian exile was relatively comfortable for the Jews who lived there. In any event, there is no evidence that martyrdom for the sake of sanctifying God's name was a widespread phenomenon in Israel's history before the period of the decrees of Antiochus.
3. And the biggest question of all: Is it possible to describe the destruction and exile that God brought upon Israel at the end of the first Temple period as actions that have no justification, and the conduct of Israel across the generations as being sinless? Surely this contradicts the point of view expressed throughout Scripture – in the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings – that "because of our sins we were exiled from our country and banished far from our land"!

The great difficulty in matching the words of the psalm to a historical period familiar to us from Scripture brought the classical commentators to understand our psalm as referring from the outset to the period of the present exile, from the destruction of the second Temple to our very day.[[6]](#footnote-6) For example, Rav Samson R. Hirsch says as follows:[[7]](#footnote-7)

This psalm gives expression to the thoughts and emotions of Israel in exile… The statements contained in verses 10-22 of this chapter are true only of that exile which began with the destruction of the second Temple. They are preponderantly applicable to the last third of this period of banishment and, in part, are pertinent even to the most recent past and to Israel's situation in the present day….[[8]](#footnote-8)

Those who, devoid of Jewish spirit, would deny the existence of prophecy, may dismiss these psalms which prove inconvenient to their logic because their content indicates the Babylonian exile, by stating simply that they had been written "*after* the event (that is, the exile) had already come about." But they would have much greater difficulty in explaining this chapter, for anyone who examines psalm 44 with a clear and unprejudiced mind will readily see that its contents refer not to some event in the dim past but to the most recent centuries of our present period of dispersion. The national singers of our people were imbued with the spirit of the Lord which enabled them to see and sense even the remotest future and fate of their people, so that their songs might become the spiritual heritage that would accompany Israel in all of its wanderings through time.

Indeed, the assumption that our psalm relates to the present exile resolves the difficulties raised above:

1. It is not the destruction of Jerusalem or the Temple that stands at the center of our psalm, but rather the long and difficult exile that came in their wake. Israel's dispersion across many lands and among different peoples ("and You scattered us among the nations") explains why there is no mention of a specific place or people among whom Israel has been exiled.
2. Over the course of the present exile many members of Israel were slaughtered by their enemies, in different places and during different periods, for holding fast to their faith in God, the God of their forefathers. Israel's martyrdom for the sake of sanctifying God's name as a mass phenomenon in the present exile is one of the most outstanding characteristics of Jewish history from the Hadrianic decrees until our day.
3. During the present exile, the people of Israel remained faithful to God and to His commandments with all their hearts and all their souls, and it was generally felt that the calamities befalling Israel in every generation could not be explained as punishments for their sins.

All this having been said, anyone coming to explain our psalm according to its plain sense may not sit back idly, but rather he must search for a period or event in biblical history that can be reconciled with what is stated in our psalm (see note 1). On the other hand, it is not our responsibility to complete the task, and in this study we shall leave the discussion of this issue open.

### VIII. "For love is strong as death" (*Shir ha-Shirim* 8:6)

Our psalm's readers and commentators across the generations, beginning with the period of *Chazal*[[9]](#footnote-9) and down until recent generations,[[10]](#footnote-10) all sensed that the psalm was referring to their own generation or to recent generations. It was obvious to them that this psalm refers to the present exile of our people, and that it gives expression to events occurring during this exile and to feelings running through the hearts of many members of Israel.[[11]](#footnote-11) The longer the exile dragged on and the worse the situation became for our people, the more the psalm was perceived as referring to current events and as clearly expressing the Jewish ethos. Generations of exiles found, in this psalm, the most explicit Scriptural statement in praise of the people of Israel and in praise of its martyrdom for the sanctification of God's name.

This matter requires clarification: Surely our psalm is essentially a psalm of complaint sounded by Israel against God! How then was the psalm's center of gravity shifted to the praise of Israel and to the praise of martyrdom for the sanctification of God's name?

Indeed, together with the complaints voiced in our psalm regarding God's attitude toward His people, a declaration is also heard regarding Israel's amazing loyalty to God and unconditional love for Him. Only burning love, the love of *Shir Ha-shirim*, can explain the verses of our psalm that describe the obligations undertaken by Israel, the pathos concealed in them being so deep and profound:

(18) All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten

You, nor have we been false to Your covenant.

(19) Our heart has not turned back,

nor have our steps turned from Your way.

(21) I swear that we have not forgotten the name of our God,

nor have we stretched out our hands to a strange god.

(22) Surely God has searched this out,

for He knows the secrets of the heart.

(23) Indeed, for Your sake we are being killed all the day,

we are regarded as sheep for the slaughter.

Generations of martyrs who adopted our psalm as a hymn to the sanctification of God's name saw these verses as the heart of the psalm, and even the complaint found in the psalm was understood as words of love uttered by the beloved for her lover. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's homily recorded in *Shabbat* 88b on a verse in *Shir Ha-shirim* might clarify how these people understood our psalm:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: What is meant by: "My beloved is unto me as a bundle of myrrh [*tzeror ha-mor*], that lies between my breasts" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1:13)? The congregation of Israel spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the Universe! Though my life be distressed [*metzar*] and embittered [*memar*], yet my love lies between my breasts.[[12]](#footnote-12)

And indeed, various Sages, from Rabbi Akiva and on, who interpreted verses in *Shir Ha-shirim* as an expression of the beloved's love for her lover to the point of death, connected their interpretation to the plain sense of the verse in our psalm, "for Your sake we are being killed all the day."[[13]](#footnote-13)

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Our question is based on two assumptions that we cannot expand upon in the context of this study. The first assumption is that the psalms of *Tehilim* that reflect historical events were written by people who experienced these events and lived in that same generation (of course, we do not mean to include psalms that explicitly relate to the historical past or the eschatological future). The second assumption is that the book of *Tehilim* includes psalms that were written throughout the duration of the biblical period: The entire time that the prophetic spirit rested on Israel and their prophetic words were included in Scripture, the holy spirit rested on the poets of Israel and their poetic works were also included in Scripture. The justification for these assumptions, which were accepted by a minority of the traditional commentators, will be given on some other occasion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This question was generally not raised by the medieval commentators, because it was clear to most of them that the psalm was written about their own period, and not about ancient events that took place during the biblical period. R. Moshe ha-Kohen ibn Gikatilla, a sage living in eleventh century Spain, is exceptional, in that his commentary (in Arabic) to *Tehilim* is based on the two assumptions mentioned in the previous note, and he therefore takes a stand on our question, which will be mentioned below in the second part of note 5.

   Among the modern commentators who were unable to identify an event in the biblical period as underlying our psalm, some attributed our psalm to the period of the decrees of Antiochus. Besides the lack of correspondence between the contents of our psalm and the events that took place in that period (e.g., "and You scattered us among the nations"), it stands to reason that psalms were no longer being added to the book of *Tehilim* at such a late date. Proofs may be adduced that by this time the book of *Tehilim* had already been sealed and in the form familiar to us today. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Tehilim* 74 and 79, for example, deal with the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is also true of the first half of the psalm, which is not the object of our present discussion. Section 1 describes the period of the conquest and settlement of Eretz Israel, whereas sections 2-3 describe the salvations of God during later periods, when Israel resided in their land, even though they make no mention of specific events. See what we wrote regarding section 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is unreasonable to assume that our psalm describes an array of difficult events from different periods of biblical history, for the internal development that characterizes the structure and contents of the psalm, as was noted in previous chapters, testifies to a single, but gradually worsening series of events.

   R. Moshe ha-Kohen ibn Gikatilla maintains that the sons of Korach who authored our psalm and other psalms were Levites who lived in the Babylonian exile. This is partly due to the fact that some of the psalms that mention the sons of Korach in their headings clearly echo life in exile (42-43; 44; 84; 85).

   R. Moshe ha-Kohen's commentary was written in Arabic, and has still not been translated into Hebrew or even published. The only manuscript of this commentary had lain for many years in the Leningrad Library, without anybody knowing what had happened to it. R. Avraham ibn Ezra made systematic use of this commentary, and he mentions it dozens of times throughout his commentary to the book. In the introduction to his commentary, the Ibn Ezra brings a concise summary of R. Moshe's exegetical approach: "… And there are others who say that this book contains no prophecy about the future, and thus they said that all the psalms attributed to the sons of Korach were written by one of the singers descending from the children of Heman who were in Babylonia, for their words indicate exile."

   The identification of this position with R. Moshe ha-Kohen and a broad discussion of R. Moshe's approach may be found in Prof. Uriel Simon's "*Arba Gishot le-Sefer Tehilim* (Bar-Ilan 5742). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Amos Chakham, in the conclusion section of his commentary to our psalm, mentions that this was also the position of R. Moshe Ashkenazi in his commentary, "*Ho'il Moshe.*" This commentator, who was a student of Sh.D. Luzzatto, followed the plain meaning of the biblical text. I have not seen what he wrote because his commentary is not readily available. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Psalms, with translation and commentary by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, translated by Gertrude Hirschler, Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem-New York, 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rav Hirsch's commentary was first published at the end of the nineteenth century (5642), about sixty years before the Holocaust. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Shmuel Safrai, "*Kiddush Ha-Shem be-Toratam shel ha-Nevi'im*, Zion, 44 (5739), especially pp. 32-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See above note 6, and the words of Rav Hirsch cited in the previous section. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A review of this attitude toward our psalm from the period of *Chazal* to the generation following the Spanish expulsion can be found in Prof. Yosef Hacker's comprehensive article, "*Im Shakhachnu Shem Elokeinu va-Nifros Kapeinu le-El Zar – Gilgulah shel Parshanut al Reka ha-Metzi'ut bi-Sefarad bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim*," *Zion* 57, 3 (5752), pp. 247-274. This article contains several citations from commentaries to our psalm that were written shortly after the expulsion from Spain, and remain in manuscript or were otherwise published in their time, but are not readily available. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In our study of psalm 131, note 4 we brought Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi's poem, "*Yitav be-Einekha*," the last line of which accords well with the account of Israel's loving relationship with God as described here:

    Add pain, I will add love,

    for my love for you (*ahavatekha*) is more wonderful to me.

    There, we also cited A.L. Strauss's explanation that "*ahavatekha*" means the love that I have for you, as the term is used in the verse alluded to by Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi, "Your love (*ahavatekha*) to me was wonderful, more than the love of women" (II *Shmuel* 1:27), where David is referring to the love that he has for Yonatan. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Here are several examples:

    The verse in *Shir Ha-shirim* 1:2, "therefore do the maidens (*alamot*) love you," is expounded in several places as if it read "*al-mot ahevukha*," "they love you until death," the reference being to those who lovingly suffered martyrdom for the sake of the sanctification of God's name. Thus expounds Rabbi Akiva in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishm'el* (ed. Horwitz, p. 127) on the verse (*Shemot* 15:2): "This is my God, and I will praise Him":

    Rabbi Akiva says: I will speak of the beauty and the praise of Him who spoke and brought the world into existence before all the peoples of the world. For the peoples of the world ask Israel as follows: "What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you so charge us" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 5:9) – for you die on His behalf and let yourselves be killed on His behalf? **As it is stated: "Therefore do the maidens love you" – they love you until death, as it is written: "Indeed, for Your sake we are being killed all the day."**

    In *Midrash Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* on verse 7:1, "Return, return, that we may look upon you," it says:

    The peoples of the world say to Israel: How long will you die for the sake of your God and dedicate yourselves to Him" This is what is written: "Therefore, the maidens love you." And how long will you allow yourselves to be killed on His behalf? As it is written: "Indeed, for Your sake we are being killed all the day." And how long will you repay Him with good things, while He repays you with bad things? Come to us… And Israel answers them: … And our forefathers did not serve idols, and we shall not serve idols after them.

    In that same midrash, there is an exposition of the verse in *Shir ha-Shirim* 8:6: "For love is strong as death":

    The love with which the generation of persecution (= the generation that lived at the time of the Hadrianic decrees) loved the Holy One, blessed be He. As it is stated: "Indeed, for Your sake we are being killed all the day."

    See also the midrash of the Rabbis on the verse, "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles, and by the hinds of field" (*Shir ha-Shirim* 2:7), and in *Midrash Tehilim* to psalm 9, with respect to the end of the verse in *Shir ha-Shirim* 5:8: "I am sick with love" (ed. Buber, p. 46a). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)