YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Lecture 47: "You have made them all in wisdom"**

**Psalm 104 according to Meir Weiss**

(1) Bless the Lord, O my soul.

I

O Lord, my God, You are very great.

You are clothed with splendor and majesty.

(2) He covers Himself with light as a garment.

He spreads the heavens like a curtain.

(3) Who roofs His chambers with water,

who makes the clouds His chariot,

who walks upon the wings of the wind.

(4) He makes His angels winds.

His ministers flaming fire.

II

(5) He established the earth on its foundations,

so that it should never collapse.

(6) You covered it with great waters with a garment.

The waters stood above the mountains.

(7) At Your rebuke they fled.

At the sound of Your thunder they hastened away.

(8) They went up the mountains, they went down the valleys,

to the place that You prepared for them.

(9) You set a boundary that they could not pass over,

that they would not return to cover the earth.

III

(10) He sends the springs into the streams.

They go between the mountains.

(11) They water every beast of the field.

The wild asses quench their thirst.

(12) Beside them dwell the birds of the sky

From among the branches they give voice.

IV

(13) He waters the mountains from His upper chambers.

The earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works.

(14) He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,

and plants for the service of man,

and He brings forth food from the earth.

(15) And wine gladdens the heart of man,

to brighten his face with oil,

and bread sustains the heart of man.

(16) The trees of the Lord are satisfied,

the cedars of Lebanon that He planted.

(17) Where the birds make their nests.

As for the stork, the cypress trees are her house.

(18) The high hills are for the wild goats,

the rocks are a refuge for the badgers.

V

(19) He made the moon for the seasons.

The sun knows its setting place.

(20) You put down darkness, and it is night,

when all the forest beasts creep out.

(21) The young lions roar for their prey,

and seek food from God.

(22) The sun rises, they gather together,

and lie within their dens.

(23) Man goes forth to his work,

and to his labor until evening.

VI

(24) How great are Your works, O Lord!

You have made them all in wisdom.

The earth is full of Your creatures.

VII

(25) Behold, the great and wide sea,

where creeping things are innumerable,

small beasts and big ones.

(26) There go the ships,

the leviathan that You made to play with.

VIII

(27) All of them wait upon You,

to give them their food in its season.

(28) You give them, they gather it.

You open Your hand, they are filled with good.

(29) You hide Your face, they are terrified.

You take away their breath, they die,

and return to their dust.

(30) You send forth Your breath, they are created,

and You renew the face of the earth.

IX

(31) May the glory of the Lord be forever,

may the Lord rejoice in His works.

(32) He looks upon the earth, and it trembles.

He touches the hills, and they smoke.

(33) I will sing to the Lord while I live.

I will sing praises to my God while I exist.

(34) My meditation will be sweet to Him.

I will rejoice in the Lord.

(35) May the sinners be removed from the earth,

and may the wicked be no more.

Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord.

### Prof. MEIR wEISS *Z"L* AND HIS WORK[[1]](#footnote-1)

In our study of psalm 104, we will follow in the footsteps of Meir Weiss's marvelous analysis of the psalm in his article, "*Borkhi Nafshi*."[[2]](#footnote-2) The importance of Weiss's work with respect to the study of Scripture in our generation, and especially regarding the book of *Tehillim*, is exceedingly great, and our studies as well have in no small measure been written under his influence. During the upcoming days, we shall mark the tenth anniversary of his passing. May this study serve as a candle to his memory, in the sense of "Their words serve as a memorial."[[3]](#footnote-3)

Meir Weiss was born in 1908 in Budapest, Hungary. When he was eighteen, he began to study in the rabbinical seminary of Budapest, and a year later he began parallel studies at the university. In 1932, he was awarded a doctoral degree for his thesis, "*Ha-Aggada Be-Tirgumo shel Yonatan ben Uziel li-Nevi'im*," and a year later he was ordained as a rabbi.[[4]](#footnote-4) Immediately afterwards, he began to serve as the rabbi of a small town in Hungary, and in 1937 he was appointed the rabbi of Debrecen,[[5]](#footnote-5) where he served until the Holocaust struck Hungarian Jewry in 1944.

After World War II ended in 1945, Weiss emigrated with his wife and two children from Switzerland to *Eretz Israel*, where he engaged in teaching and administration in high schools until 1957. In that year, he was appointed as lecturer in Bible at the newly established Bar Ilan University. In 1961, he moved to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he was eventually appointed to a professorship.

Even following his retirement in 1978, Weiss continued to lecture, conduct research, and write until his final days. In 1990, he was awarded the Israel Prize in Jewish Studies for his unique contribution to biblical research. He died in 1998.

Weiss was one of the leading proponents of the literary approach to biblical research in Israel and around the world. He passed down his unique approach in this area to his students through his university lectures and to the public at large through his books. Here is a list of his books:

* *Ha-Mikra ki-Demuto* – *Shitat Mechkar Ve-Histaklut Be-Mikra al pi Ikarei Mada Ha-Sifrut He-Chadash* (Mossad Bialik, 1962).

In this book, Weiss presents his methodology regarding the study of biblical poetry. This book was published in a greatly revised and expanded third edition in 1987.

* *Mikra'ot Ke-Kavanatam – Leket Ma'amarim* (Mossad Bialik, 1988).

This book is a collection of many of Weiss's articles that appeared over the years in various publications. These articles illustrate and apply the approach that Weiss presented in systematic manner in his book, *Ha-Mikra Ki-Demuto*, with respect to many complete literary units. Most of these articles were written in a clear style and directed at the general reader, and not necessarily the biblical scholar.

* *Sefer Amos* (Magnes Press, 1992).

This is a monumental commentary on the book of *Amos*; Weiss dedicated thirty years to writing it. The commentary was published in two volumes, a volume of commentary and a volume of notes. This book also constitutes a realization of the methodological approach that Weiss presented in his book, *Ha-Mikra Ki-Demuto*.

* *Emunot Ve-De'ot Be-Mizmorei Tehillim* (Mossad Bialik, 2001).

This book is comprised of 15 relatively short articles on 15 psalms in the book of *Tehillim*. These articles appeared in various publications and were collected by Weiss's students toward the end of his life. The book itself was published posthumously.

Apart from his commentary to the book of *Amos*, Weiss was primarily preoccupied with the book of *Tehillim*. (See this note for a list of the psalms that Weiss analyzed as complete literary units.)[[6]](#footnote-6)

Weiss called his approach to Bible study "the method of total interpretation," and this designation serves as the subtitle of the third edition of *Ha-Mikra Ki-Demuto*. We will cite Weiss's own definition of his literary approach as he formulated it in the introduction to his commentary to the book of *Amos*:

The method of total interpretation… was presented and illustrated in my books *Ha-Mikra Ki-Demuto*… and *Mikra'ot Ke-Kavanatam*… According to this approach, the explanation of a literary work is based on "two-fold reading," that is to say, explaining each and every detail based on the work – the literary unit – as a whole, and explaining the entire work based on each and every detail. To be more precise, an explanation that is based on a profound understanding of all the elements that together fashion the unified form of the given work.

Finally, we must comment upon the relationship between Weiss's exegetical project relating to the book of *Tehillim* and that of A.L. Strauss, which preceded it by about fifteen years.[[7]](#footnote-7) Strauss was a pioneer in the field of the literary approach to Scripture, and laid a modest foundation comprised of an analysis of five psalms in the book of *Tehillim*. Weiss followed in Strauss's path and greatly developed it, and even disagreed with him on certain issues. There is, however, an important difference between them. Strauss was not a biblical scholar by training, but rather a poet and an important literary theoretician. His literary approach to the psalms of *Tehillim* stemmed from intuition that was not founded on earlier biblical research and interpretation. Weiss, in contrast, approached the psalms of *Tehillim* outfitted with all the commentary written about them down to his day: traditional Jewish exegesis, modern interpretations, and the articles authored by biblical scholars. In addition, Weiss was equipped with the literary theories of his day, and it was with this double baggage – in the field of biblical study and in the field of literature – that he approached the task of explaining the psalms of *Tehillim* in accordance with his unique approach.

Weiss was also equipped with something that is not characteristic of biblical scholars in general: he was a Torah scholar who was intimately familiar with all the sources of the Oral Law, from the literature of *Chazal* to the halakhic codes of the *Acharonim.*

Owing to all these factors, Weiss's articles enjoy wholeness and an interdisciplinary character that contribute to the application of his unique analysis.

Strauss's articles do not have the same wholeness, although they demonstrate freshness, originality, and an unmediated approach to Scripture. His articles are less "scholarly," but it is perhaps precisely for that reason that they touch the soul without the barrier of footnotes and references to previous scholarship.

The work of these two scholars was continued in Israel. Weiss had many students, those who learned directly from him and those who learned from his writings. It may be argued that the literary approach to Scripture in general and to the book of *Tehillim* in particular is today the prevalent approach to biblical research in Israel.

### Introduction

### 1. The purpose of descriptions of nature in Scripture and in our psalm

Psalm 104 offers the most detailed and diversified description of nature in all of Scripture. It contains an abundance of images from the animal,[[8]](#footnote-8) plant,[[9]](#footnote-9) and mineral[[10]](#footnote-10) worlds, and relates to man as part of creation.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The various realms of creation are not described by themselves, but as maintaining dependent relationships between themselves. The mineral world serves the plant kingdom, the animal kingdom and man;[[12]](#footnote-12) the plant world serves the animal world and man;[[13]](#footnote-13) and the animals and man are partners in their use of the resources of creation,[[14]](#footnote-14) and both depend upon the Creator, who either provides them with food or withholds it from them.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Scripture does not describe nature for its own sake. Generally speaking, the natural landscape is only described in the biblical story when such a description is necessary for understanding details in the plot of the story.[[16]](#footnote-16) Descriptions of nature are often brought in biblical poetry in order to arouse religious feeling in man, who reaches conclusions about his Creator, and sometimes also about his own standing in the world and before his Creator, from studying the creation.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Our psalm is no exception to this rule. The framework in which this psalm is set is the twofold call of the psalmist to his soul, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." This blessing is clearly connected to the descriptions of nature appearing in the body of the psalm; they are what bring the psalmist to his fierce desire to bless God for what was revealed to him in the creation.

Even the main body of the psalm – the description of the various parts of creation – is not merely a description of landscapes and creatures, but rather a description of the works of God who created all these things: "Who roofs His chambers with water… He established the earth… You set a boundary… He sends the springs… He causes the grass to grow… and plants… He made the moon," and many other such descriptions the entire length of the psalm.

The descriptions of creation as the handiwork of God brings the psalmist at a certain stage of the psalm to call out with excitement: "How great are Your works, O Lord! You have made them all in wisdom. The earth is full of Your creatures!" (v.24).

And in the end, towards the psalm's conclusion (v.31), the psalmist offers to God a prayer that He should rejoice in His works, and that the world that He had created should endure forever, and thus give expression to the glory of the Lord.[[18]](#footnote-18)

All this teaches us the goal for the sake of which the psalmist lifted up his eyes to contemplate the world around him and to describe it in our psalm. His goal was to bless and praise God for the wonderful world that He created.

### 2. "You have made them all in wisdom."

Now let us be more specific. The created world reveals many different things about its Creator – it gives expression to various traits of His which manifest themselves in it. The created world can attest to the loving-kindness and goodness of God in His relationship towards it,[[19]](#footnote-19) or to His might, which reveals itself in its various aspects and in the amazing creatures created in it.[[20]](#footnote-20) It can teach about God's glory and greatness, which manifest themselves in its enormous expanses;[[21]](#footnote-21) it teaches about the insignificance of man who stands before his Creator, or about the glory that God bestowed upon him when He gave him to rule over the created world.[[22]](#footnote-22)

What Divine quality reveals itself in the created world as it is described in our psalm? It is, of course, possible that not one, but several Divine qualities reveal themselves in our psalm. Still, we may ask, what is the main quality of God that stands out in our psalm?

It seems that the answer to our question is given in verse 24, in which everything that had been described thus far brings the psalmist to cry out in excitement:

How great are Your works, O Lord!

**You have made them all in wisdom.**

God's wisdom manifests itself in the creation, both in the one-time act through which God created His world and in His orderly maintenance of His world afterwards.

This seems to be the perspective from which the psalm should be considered, in both its general outline and in its details. This will be our objective in the continuation of this study, but in order to realize this goal we must first consider the following question.

### 3. Does our psalm Have a literary structure?

As we said at the beginning of the introduction, our psalm contains an abundance of images from the animal, plant, and mineral worlds, more than any other description of nature in Scripture. Does this abundance of images revolve around a single organizing principle, where the many details strive to express one central idea? Or perhaps our psalm constitutes a colorful panorama of the world, the objective of which is to challenge our imagination, causing the reader to feel that he is on a journey crossing multiple landscapes. He passes through streams through which spring waters flow, and he encounters rich plant and animal life on their banks. He passes through pasture lands and sees cattle grazing in peace, and he passes through agricultural lands and sees the fields and orchards worked by man. He climbs the high mountains and meets the animals living there and the trees serving as nesting places for the birds. He experiences a night trip through the forests and meets (a virtual encounter, of course) with the beasts of the forest and with young lions, the night being their period of activity. Finally, he descends deep into the sea and sees the enormous numbers of fish and other sea creatures, and then he boards a ship and watches the leviathans accompanying its journey at sea.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Let us formulate our question differently: Does our psalm have a structure that reflects its central idea, or perhaps, owing to the psalm's variegated character, there is no need to search for a rigorous structure?

Our natural inclination is to accept the second possibility. This accords with the sharp and constant shifts from one landscape to another that fill the psalm, and it also exempts us from the need to "make order" in the created world described in the psalm, or in the psalm itself.[[24]](#footnote-24)

We have already revealed, however, that verse 24 explicitly mentions the central principle that the various parts of the psalm are supposed to illustrate: "How great are Your works, O Lord! **You have made them all in wisdom**." It is precisely the manifestation of God's wisdom in the created world that obligates us to find order in it, and this order should also find expression in our psalm!

As we strive to uncover the psalm's structure, we will follow in the footsteps of Prof. Meir Weiss's article, "*Borkhi Nafshi*." Since "there is no *bet midrash* without a novel insight," we will add to what he says, and also occasionally disagree with him. But anyone who wishes to fully understand our psalm, both its details and its structure, its central and its less central ideas, is advised to carefully study Weiss's article, which consists of a "twofold reading" of the psalm and relates to every small detail and every difficulty in it.

In this study, we will not engage in a "twofold reading" of the psalm, nor shall we deal with all its difficulties, as Weiss already did this in a long article spanning almost forty pages. We will emphasize some of Weiss's novel insights in his article, while adopting his overall approach to our psalm. In places where we do not cite Weiss's own words, the responsibility for the formulation of the ideas, and sometimes even the ideas themselves, is my own.

### 4. Our psalm and the description of the creation in *Bereishit* 1

Before we move on in the coming sections to review the various parts of our psalm, we must first consider the relationship between our psalm and the creation story in *Bereishit* 1. Both medieval and modern commentators pointed to such a connection, and it is very reasonable. It is only natural that a psalm that offers as comprehensive a description of creation as ours, and which praises God who created this amazing and variegated world, would make use of an account that describes the order of creation and its parts, as is found in the first chapter of the book of *Bereishit.*

Indeed, already in the first section we find the light that was created on the first day – "He covers Himself with light as a garment" - and then the heavens that were created on the second day – "He spreads the heavens like a curtain." Even heaven's role, to divide "between the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament" (*Bereishit* 1:7), is alluded to at the beginning of our psalm: "Who roofs His chambers (‘*aliyotav*’) with water." An "*aliya*" is a room built on the roof of a house, and here the reference is to heaven. Our verse says that the roof of God's *aliyot* is water, that is, "the waters which were above the firmament."

In the second section, we find a description of what happened on the third day of creation – the appearance of land through the distancing of the water and the revelation of the dry land beneath it.

However, even this initial comparison shows that our psalm is not enslaved to the creation story found in the book of *Bereishit*. Our psalm adds many details and omits others; our psalm even expresses that which is common to both in a different manner than found in the book of *Bereishit*. These differences stem not only from the difference in literary genres – prose and poetry - but also from the different objective of each account. The facts described in the book of *Bereishit* in exalted and minimalist style were meant to teach the reader a fundamental religious teaching. In our psalm, on the other hand, these facts serve as the foundation of a song of praise and blessing – the expression of a bursting soul.

Starting in the third section, the order of creation in *Bereishit* ceases to serve as our psalm's model. *Bereishit* 1 makes no mention whatsoever of springs, and the "beasts of the field" and the wild asses were not created until the sixth day. "The birds of the sky" mentioned in the verse that closes this section (v.12) were created on the fifth day. The fourth section mainly describes the various kinds of plants, and they were created on the third day.

In general, it may be argued that our psalm's description of the animal kingdom, the plant world, and man does not attribute their existence to the act of creation described in *Bereishit* 1. Rather, their existence constitutes a given, the original establishment of which need not be explained. Only a few details are explicitly attributed to the original act of creation in the account given in our psalm: the establishment of the land and the sea described in the second section and the making of the moon and the sun mentioned at the beginning of the fifth section.

What, then, is the relationship between our psalm and the account of creation in *Bereishit* 1? It seems that this relationship is not of primary importance in our psalm, but rather a matter of secondary importance. Our psalm is trying to describe not the original and one-time act of creation, but rather the created world as it manifests itself to the psalmist at this time. Therefore, the existence of animals and plants and even of man is a given in our psalm. It is not the psalm's intention to describe the hour of their original creation, because this is not the topic of our psalm. The nature of all that exists **in the present** is, however, conditioned on certain arrangements that were established at the time of the original creation, and it is solely for this reason that the author of our psalm refers to the creation account in the book of *Bereishit.*

For example, the division of periods of activity between man and the forest beasts, as it was known to the psalmist when he wrote the psalm, follows from the order established on the fourth day of creation, "to divide the day from the night" by means of "the greater light to rule the day" and "the lesser light to rule the night." The psalmist's interest in the fifth section is not in what happened at the time of creation, but in what is happening in the world around him, and it is only for this reason that he mentions the creation of the moon and the sun. Accordingly, there is no reason to expect that the order of the account in our psalm should match the order of creation in *Bereishit* 1.

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Our comments here are based on the introduction written by Prof. Yair Zakovitz, a student of Weiss, to Weiss's last book, published posthumously: "*Emunot Ve-De'ot* *Be-Mizmorei Tehillim*," and the entry on Meir Weiss's in Wikipedia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This article was first published in *Ma'ayanot* vol. VIII, a volume that was dedicated to the topic of "prayer," ed. by Chaim Chamiel (Jerusalem, 5728), pp. 221-254. The article was reprinted in the collection of Meir Weiss's articles, *Mikra'ot Ke-Kavanatam* (Mossad Bialik, Jerusalem, 5748), pp. 214-251. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Yerushalmi*, *Shekalim* 2:5 and *Bereishit Rabba* 2, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This combination of Torah and academic education was characteristic of the rabbinical seminaries in Germany and Hungary. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The communities in which Weiss served as rabbi were "status-quo" communities – the stream of Hungarian Jewry that did not take part in the secession of the Orthodox communities from the general community but, unlike the "Neologists," remained faithful to tradition and Halakha. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In *Ha-Mikra Ki-Demuto* (3rd ed.) Weiss analyzes psalms 74, 13, 46, 114, beginning on p. 265 and continuing until p. 353.

   In *Mikra'ot Ke-Kavanatam*, Weiss deals with psalms 1, 3, 6, 15, 8, 36, 47, 90, 104, 114, 145, beginning on p. 111 and continuing until p. 291.

   In *Emunot Ve-De'ot Be-Mizmorei Tehillim*, Weiss deals with psalms 6, 23, 26, 27, 39, 42-43, 77, 88, 92, 99, 122, 130, 133, 136, 139.

   In all, Weiss analyzed 29 psalms, some of which (psalms 6 and 114) he analyzed in two of his books because in the later volume he retracted his earlier analysis.

   *Mikra Ki-Demuto* also contains tens of analyses of parts of psalms, through which Weiss illustrates the various stages in the analysis of a scriptural literary unit according to his approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See our study of psalm 131 in the wake of Strauss's article dealing with that psalm, and especially sections I and II of that study. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In our psalm, animals are mentioned in thirteen places: in seven places we find general terms for animals [beast of the field (11); the birds of the sky (12); cattle (14); birds (17); the forest beasts (20); creeping things (25); small beasts and big ones (25)] and in six places we find the names of specific animals [wild asses (11); stork (17); wild goats; badgers (18); young lions (21); leviathan (26)]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In the psalm, plants are mentioned in six places: In four places we find general designations of plants [branches (12); grass; plants (14); the trees of the Lord (16)], and in two places we find the names of specific plants [the cedars of Lebanon (16); cypress trees (17)]. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In our psalm, non-living things are mentioned as part of the description of creation in more than twenty places. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In two places, the description of man is integrated into the descriptions of nature: in verses 14-15 ("… and plants for the service of man, and He brings forth food from the earth, and wine… with oil… and bread…"); and verse 23 ("Man goes forth to his work, and to his labor until evening"). In the description of the sea, man is mentioned implicitly (26): "There go the ships." At the end of the psalm (v. 35), mention is made of sinners and wicked people. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For example, the rain and the earth cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and they similarly cause plants to grow from which man derives his food with his work (vv. 13-15). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In addition to what was stated in the previous note, the cedars of Lebanon and the cypress trees serve the birds and the stork as a place to build their nests. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In vv. 14-15, man and cattle divide among themselves that which the earth issues forth: for the cattle – grass, and for man - various kinds of crops that he toils to raise for his food. In vv. 19-23, man and the beasts of the forest (including young lions) divide between themselves the hours of the day: nighttime for the beasts of the forest, and daytime for man. In v. 26, man and the leviathan divide the sea between themselves for their various activities. It should be noted that nowhere in our psalm is mention made of human use of animals. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. "**All of them** wait upon You…" (vv. 27-30) - the reference is to all animate beings – human beings and the entire animal kingdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For example, *Bereishit* 13:10 says: "And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere… like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt." This description of the landscape, from Lot's perspective, is meant to explain the reason that Lot chooses in the next verse to settle in the plain of the Jordan. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For example, *Tehillim* 8 and *Iyov* 38-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The meaning of v. 31 will be discussed later in this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Part of psalm 145, in which it says, "You open Your hand, and You satisfy the desire of every living thing" (v. 16), describes this quality of God. See Weiss's article on this psalm in *Mikra'ot Ke-Kavanatam*, pp. 263-291. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Many of the descriptions of nature in God's oration in chapters 38-41 in the book of *Iyov* are devoted to this idea. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The beginning of psalm 8 and the first half of psalm 19 are dedicated to this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Man's standing in the context of the accounts of the created world is discussed in psalm 8 and in God's oration in the book of *Iyov.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The meaning of the words, "the leviathan that You made to play with," will be discussed later in this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This approach to our psalm finds expression in various attempts to visually illustrate our psalm. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)