YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**by Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Lecture 48: "You have made them all in wisdom"**

**Psalm 104 according to Meir Weiss (Part II)**

Rav Elchanan Samet

### III. THe first Half (sections 1-4)

At the beginning of this study, we presented psalm 104 as divided into nine sections. This division is primarily based on the differences in content between the sections; sometimes, these substantive differences also express themselves in linguistic distinctions. In this section, we will discuss the first four sections of the psalm, which constitute its first half (vv. 1-18).

### The first section (vv. 1-4)

(1) Bless the Lord, O my soul.

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.

Immediately after the psalmist calls out to his soul, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," he moves on to the blessing itself. He turns to God in second person and says:

O Lord, my God, You are very great.

You are clothed with splendor and majesty.

Weiss comments about this verse as follows:

In their original sense, the words "splendor" and "majesty" – each one by itself and the two together – are "accessories" of royalty. Accordingly, that which is expressed in the first clause – that God is very great – is illustrated in the second clause with a metaphor meaning that God is king. This designation, as we all know, is one of the most common designations of God in Scripture.

Why, then, is the term "king" not explicitly mentioned in the first section, or, for that matter, anywhere in the entire psalm?[[1]](#footnote-1) The answer seems to be that the relationship described in our psalm between God and His world is not a relationship of "kingship" –of God's rule over His creatures - but rather a relationship of constant paternal concern on the part of the Creator with respect to His creations. In a certain sense, this relationship is the very opposite of that which characterizes kingship. It is not the subjects who serve their king, but rather it is God who worries about the lives and welfare of His creatures.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nevertheless, when the author of our psalm uses the words "You are very great" and "You are clothed with splendor and majesty," he surely alludes to the fact that God is king, as argued by Weiss.

Verse 1 is different than the three verses that follow it in the first section. First, there is a striking difference in the form of the verbs: "*gadalta*" and "*lavashta*" are in past tense, whereas the rest of the verbs in this section, "*ata*," "*nata*,” "*ha-mekareh*," "*ha-sam*," "*ha-mehalekh*" and *"asa*,*"* are all in present tense. Second, in v.1 the psalmist turns to God in second person, whereas in the following verses He refers to Him in third person.

This second difference is not unique to this section. Throughout the psalm, there is a constant switching back and forth between addressing God in second person and speaking about Him in third person. In one case, this switching is done in the very same verse, between two parallel clauses.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We cannot offer a persuasive explanation for all these switches in person in the psalm, and we will therefore disregard this phenomenon in our section as well.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The first difference, however, requires explanation. What is the reason for the change in tense from past to present?[[5]](#footnote-5) When we examine the rest of the psalm, we find that God's actions in establishing the world on its foundations at the time of its creation are described in past tense: "He established the earth on its foundations… You set a boundary… He made the moon for the seasons…." His continuous actions in maintaining the world, on the other hand, are described in present or future tense. The present and future terms are used precisely for this reason - to give expression to a continuous or often-repeating action. Here are several examples: "He sends the springs… He waters the mountains from His upper chambers… You put down darkness… You give them."

Based on this, it seems that v.1 should be understood as follows: "O Lord, my God," **when You created Your world,** "You were very great. You were clothed with splendor and majesty." In other words: When You created Your world, You became king.

In order to clarify the meaning concealed in this verse, let us cite the words of the anonymous *paytan* who composed the famous *piyyut*, "*Adon Olam*":

He is the eternal Lord who reigned

Before any being was created.

At the time when all was made by His will,

He was at once acknowledged as King!

While it is true that God was king even before any being was created, at that time there was no one to serve Him and no way to give expression to His kingship. When, however, God created His world, mankind was given the opportunity to imagine God's kingship by attributing the various created beings to Him. The psalmist will do this in the coming verses.

After God created the light, we can imagine God as a king whose garment – His royal garment that covers Him – is light; after He created the heavens, we can imagine God as one who spreads the heavens like a tent so that he can sit inside; after God set the heaven as a barrier between the upper waters and the lower waters, we can imagine God as a king who roofs His chambers with water. The rest of the created beings, those that were not explicitly mentioned in the account of the creation on the first and second days - the clouds, the winds, fire – help us imagine God as a king, these being His attendants.

It turns out, then, that v.1 relates to the meaning of the initial act of creation - through which God became king – and it is therefore formulated in past tense. The verses that follow teach how the first created beings – light, heaven, and that which is connected to them[[6]](#footnote-6) - those things that continue to exist from the time of creation and until today, serve man as means of imagining God's kingdom through them. Therefore, the verbs associated with these created beings appear in present tense, denoting: always, non-stop.

Let us summarize the significance of the first section with the words of Weiss:

The descriptions of God in verses 2-4 spell out and illustrate the general blessing: "O Lord, my God, You are very great. You are clothed with splendor and majesty" (v.1), not through the act of creation, but through the presentation of the act of creation as His tool. And it is appropriate for the incorporeal One that His tools be fashioned out of non-solid and non-material elements, elements that are ethereal: light, heaven, water, clouds, wind and fire.

As stated at the end of the previous section, the primary interest of our psalm lies in the description of the world as we know it at this time and as in need of God's management at all times. For this purpose, the author of our psalm sometimes makes use of the creation account in the book of *Bereishit*, for the maintenance of the world in the present is conditioned on the arrangements established when it was first created. Does the first section also serve this purpose? It would seem that this section deals with a portrayal of God's kingdom by way of the first creations - light and heaven; its interest is not in our mundane world – the home of man, the animals and the plants – but rather in heaven, the seat of God. The role of this section seems to be to praise God for His greatness as king, and this is an introduction to the rest of the psalm.

When, however, we reach the fourth section, we will see that this is not true. This section, whose connection to the act of creation is so clear, is also needed in order to understand the arrangements operating in our world at this time.

### 2. Section 2 (vv. 5-9) – the foundation of the earth and the sea

(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.

Weiss explains his considerations for defining verses 5-9 as a separate section as follows:

Verse 5 begins a new section that ends with verse 9. This is attested to by the past tense used at the beginning of the verse, "He established" (*yasad*), as opposed to the present tense of the previous verbs, on the one hand, and starting with verse 10, on the other. This is also attested to by the contents of the section beginning with verse 5. Nothing more is related here about the heavens above, but only about the earth below.

This section describes what happened on the third day of creation:

And God said, “Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together to one place, and let the dry land appear;” and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters He called Seas. (*Bereishit* 1:9-10)

The situation that preceded the creation of the dry land was described earlier, in *Bereishit* 1:2:

And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And a wind from God moved over the surface of the waters.

In our psalm, this situation is described in verse 6:

You covered it with great waters with a garment.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The waters stood above the mountains.

Weiss raises a difficulty concerning this section:

The topic of the section under discussion is the foundation of the earth, as is stated in the first clause of verse 5. The other verses in this section (vv. 6-9) also come to describe how the earth was founded. The gathering together of the water is merely a means for revealing the earth… Now Scripture speaks at length about the gathering together of the water to the point that it describes in detail the water's hasty fleeing, and even its going up and going down. At the same time, however, it makes no mention whatsoever of the appearance of the land itself, which is the main topic of the section.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This disproportion in the structure of the section is dictated by reality. The foundation of the earth is indeed a necessary consequence of God's occupation with the water that covered the earth. The objective of this occupation with the water was, of course, the appearance of the earth, and therefore the framework of this section is "the earth." At the beginning of the section, we read that "He established **the earth** on its foundations," and at its conclusion, "that they would not return to cover **the earth**." However, between the first time and the last time that the earth is mentioned, the section deals with the water: how the water covered the earth, before God's action; how the water responded to God's rebuke; and how God set a boundary that the water would no longer pass.

It should, therefore, be added that the removal of the water from the earth is not merely a negative action with respect to the water, the objective of which is the appearance of the earth. Rather, it is also connected to the new and positive situation created with respect to the water. This finds expression both in the Torah's account in *Bereishit* and in this section of our psalm. The Torah states: "Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together **to one place**… and the gathering together of the waters He called **Seas**." In other words, it was not only the Earth that was created on the third day; the seas were also created on that day. In the continuation of the creation account, in the description of the fifth day of creation, the water is turned into a place that is filled with life just like the earth, "And God said, Let the waters swarm abundantly with moving creatures that have life…," and the creatures living in the water are also blessed: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in **the seas**" (v. 20-22).

In the section of our psalm, this finds expression in the fact that the root "*yod-samekh-dalet*" appears twice in this section, once at the beginning - "He established ("*yasad*") the earth…" - and a second time near the end - "to the place that You prepared ("*yasadta*") for them. Hence, the action described in verses 8-9 has a twofold meaning - the foundation of the earth and the foundation of the seas.

The continuation of the psalm, sections 3-5, describe the maintenance of the earth, but even in our psalm, one section is dedicated to life in the sea – section 7.[[9]](#footnote-9)

According to Weiss, a comparison between the description of the foundation of the earth in our psalm and that in *Bereishit* reveals a twofold difference:

1. In the account in *Bereishit*, there is no mention of any action on the part of the water; the water is absolutely passive. God said, "and it was so." In the account in our psalm, the water is exceedingly active.
2. In *Bereishit*,God **speaks**; in our psalm He **rebukes** and **thunders**.

Weiss now asks:

What is our psalm's intention?… For what purpose does the author of our psalm describe the gathering together of the water in this fashion?… Why does he speak about God's rebuke and thunderous voice, about expressions of anger, and about the water's hasty fleeing and anxious reaction, rather than speak about the expression of absolute superiority, about a quiet and festive command, and about passive and mechanical obedience?

Weiss will only answer these questions when he reaches the final section of our psalm, and we, too, shall follow in his footsteps.

Let us conclude our discussion of this section with a question that is similar to the question raised at the end of the previous section. Is the description of the foundation of the earth and the sea at the time of creation necessary in order to describe the world in which the psalmist finds himself and which he comes to describe? Our psalmist doesn't describe the creation of the plant world, the animal kingdom, or man!

This question is not difficult. The maintenance of life on the earth, which is described in most of the rest of the psalm, and of life in the sea, which is described in section 7 of the psalm, is conditioned upon the primal differentiation that God made between the land and the water when He founded the earth and the seas!

But already in the next section, section 3, we will be given another, more precise answer.

### 3. Section 3 (vv. 10-12) – "He sends the springs into the streams"

(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.

This section seems to move to a new topic. It does not deal with a one-time action that God performed in the past, but rather with one of His constant actions – sending spring water into the streams. This shift finds expression in the tenses of the verbs. At the end of the previous section, it said: "You **set** a boundary that they could not pass over," in past tense, whereas our section opens with: "He **sends** the springs into the streams" – in the present tense.

Nevertheless, already upon a superficial reading we see a connection between the two sections. The action described in this section is the opposite of that performed by God in the previous section. There, God removed the water from the land, thus allowing for life on the land, whereas here God restores the water to the land in order to allow for the maintenance of that life. It is precisely such a contrast that teaches us about the relationship between the two sections.

Weiss points to an even more precise oppositional relationship between the two sections:

To understand the clause, "He sends (*ha-meshale'ach*) the springs (*ma'ayanim*) into the streams," attention should be paid to the original meaning of the verb "*shin-lamed-chet*" in the *pi'el* conjugation, which is the opposite of holding onto something by force: setting free one who had been restrained up until now, liberation (*Bereishit* 8:7; 31:42; 32:27; *Shemot* 5:1; I *Shemuel* 20:5; and elsewhere). Attention should also be paid to the precise meaning of the word "*ma'ayan*." The term "*ma'ayan*" refers to waters of "the deep," of the primordial ocean to which a boundary had been set (*Bereishit* 49:25; *Devarim* 33:13).[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, the verse, "He sends the springs into the streams," means that God sets free the waters of the depths to which He had set a boundary that would not be passed over when He had founded the earth, and He allows them to appear in the streams. If originally "the waters stood **above** ("*al*") the mountains," now "they go **between** ("*bein*") the mountains." And all this so that "they water every beast of the field. The wild asses quench their thirst" (v. 11). They (who are mentioned here because animals "accustomed to the wilderness do not enter a settled area" – Radak) break their thirst at the springs. "Beside them" (v. 12), beside the springs (Rashi, Ibn Ezra), "dwell the birds of the sky," and they "from among the branches" (*Daniel* 4:9, 11, 18) "give voice." In this way, God turns the waters of the deep, which could have inundated the earth, into a source of life and even a spring of joy.[[11]](#footnote-11) When God restrained the water of the depths at the time that He founded the earth, He revealed His greatness. When He sets free the springs that water "every beast of the field" and "the birds of the sky," He reveals His loving-kindness. And through this revelation of His loving-kindness, God's wisdom becomes manifest.

The wisdom of God that reveals itself in the creation is a dialectic wisdom; the act of creation and the its continued maintenance depend on God's performing an action and its very opposite. God's action in section 2 consists of a clear differentiation between water and land.[[12]](#footnote-12) This differentiation is a necessary condition for the maintenance of life on earth, but it does not suffice; without water there can be no life. And since "differentiation does not imply absolute separation,"[[13]](#footnote-13) God works toward a new and controlled encounter between the water and the land, and in this encounter lies the secret of the maintenance of life on earth.

One expression of maintenance of life on earth is in the channels through which water streams. The streams that flow through the land are arteries of life; this is especially striking in the case of streams that flow through dry desert areas. Thick vegetation grows along the banks of these streams, turning the streams into strips of green that gladden the eye. Many animals live in close proximity to these streams, where they quench their thirst, and birds sound their voices from the branches of their trees and bushes.

(Biblical) man derived almost no benefit from these streams,[[14]](#footnote-14) but in our psalm, man is only one of the partners in creation; even if he is the senior partner, not everything is measured from his utilitarian perspective. It is precisely in these streams that the joy of the created beings in their very existence is evident, far more so than in the places of human settlement. This joy expresses itself, among other ways, in the fact that birds give voice among the branches of the trees – in the chirping of the birds.

At the end of our discussion of the second section of our psalm, we asked whether the account of the founding of the land and the founding of the sea appearing in that section was needed for the description of the present world in which the psalmist lives – the world which is the topic of this psalm. It now becomes clear that not only is the founding of the land a condition for life upon it, but the founding of the sea is also a condition for this, for the water that God causes to flow non-stop into the streams, the water of the deep, is the very water that God rebuked when He created His world and gathered together in one place – the sea.

It turns out, then, that understanding the world in which our psalmist lives depends upon recognizing the dialectic arrangements between the sea and the dry land, arrangements that were established during the act of creation.

This issue – the dialectic connection between "water" and "land" – will continue to preoccupy the psalm (and us) in the next section as well.

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Weiss asks this question on p. 222 of *Mikra'ot Ke-Kavanatam* (henceforth, references will always be to this volume), and he answers it on p. 227. We offer a different answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This "novel idea" is emphasized in the words of Onkelos the Proselyte to the Roman emperor's agents who came to arrest him, as is related in tractate *Avoda Zara* 11a: After describing to them how a person in a lowly office carries a torch before a person in a higher office, he asks them, "The king – does he carry a torch before all of these people? “They said to him, “No.” He said to them, “The Holy One, blessed be He, carried a torch before Israel, as it says, 'And the Lord went before them by day… and by night in a pillar of fire' (*Shemot* 13:21).” They all converted [to Judaism]. He asked the next delegation about the *mezuza* affixed to the entranceway of his house. "What is this?” They said to him, “You tell us!” He said to them, “The way of the world is that a king of flesh and blood sits inside and his servants watch over him from the outside. But the Holy One, blessed be He – His servants are inside and He watches over them from outside…” They converted [to Judaism].

   See what I wrote about this *aggada* in my book *Pirkei Eliyahu*, pp. 480-484. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. V. 13 reads: " He waters the mountains **from His upper chambers**. The earth is satisfied with the fruit **of Your works**." A similar switch is found also in sections 1, 2, 4, and 5, but not in the very same verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Weiss explains the switch in v. 1 on p. 222 (bottom). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Weiss answers this question on p. 223 (top); we have offered a different answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It seems that the clouds and winds are connected to heaven, whereas fire is connected to light. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. a. The word "*tehom*" in this verse, as in *Bereishit* 1:2 ("and darkness was on the face of the deep [*tehom*]"), refers to the water that covered the earth before it was created. This becomes clear from the parallel verse in our psalm, "the waters stood above the mountains," and also from the continuation of the verse in *Bereishit.*

   b. Weiss's article (pp. 228-229) includes a lengthy discussion about the first clause of verse 6, both regarding the exegesis of the Masoretic text as it appears before us, "*kisito,*" according to which the subject of the clause is God, and regarding possible alternative readings based on the Septuagint, "*tehom ka-levush kesuta" –* of the land - or the suggestion of modern critics, "*kista*," "she covered it," in which case the subject of the clause is the deep water that covered the land.

   Weiss considers each reading and explanation, summarizing the discussion as follows: "In any event, the intention of verse 6, as is necessitated by the context, is: the land was covered as if with a garment, to the point that that there was water even on the high mountains." [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Owing, among other things, to this question, Weiss prefers to explain that the subject in the clause, "*ya'alu harim yerdu veka'ot*,” is the mountains and the valleys (in which case we are dealing with two clauses), and that these words constitute a parenthetical statement between the previous clause, "at the sound of Your thunder they hastened away," and its direct continuation after these words, "to the place that You prepared for them." There are so many difficulties with this understanding that it must be rejected. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The description of life in the sea appears in one short passage that has two verses. There is, of course, no room to ask about the disproportion between the account of life on land and the account of life in the sea. Man is a land creature, and "a person is close to himself." His admiration of creation is expressed through a description of the world in which he lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A verse that should have been cited here is the verse from the account of the flood (*Bereishit* 7:11): "On that same day were **all the fountains of the great deep** broken open, and the windows of heaven were opened." The punishment of the earth during the flood was that God restored it to its original state, as it was before the creation. Once again, deep water covered the earth (by way of the breaking open of the fountains of the great deep), and the upper waters were no longer differentiated from the lower waters, as was the case after the firmament was created (for "the windows of heaven were opened"). As a result, "the waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth; and all the high mountains were covered" (v.19) – just as it is described in our psalm: "You covered it with great waters with a garment. The waters stood above the mountains." [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The idea that the source of springs is the water of the deep, that is, the sea, may be incomprehensible to modern man, who is familiar with the natural water cycle. We know today that rain and other precipitation are the sole source of all the springs, streams, and rivers in the world (although the source of the rain is evaporation of ocean water). This knowledge, however, is very recent - from the nineteenth century. The prevalent view from the time of ancient Greece to the modern period was that the source of springs is the ocean. Ocean water penetrates the earth through underground channels, and in some way it is elevated to the places from which it wells forth. Leonardo De Vinci (1500) conjectured that rain plays an important role in the water cycle, but the scientists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were still of the opinion that precipitation does not suffice to explain the enormous quantity of water flowing through the streams and rivers of the world. It was only at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries that scientists began to conduct various kinds of measurements, the purpose of which was to prove that the evaporation of ocean water and precipitation are the source of the natural water cycle. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the view that the sea serves as the direct source of the water cycle was finally rejected.

    Scripture speaks in the language of man, and so scientific objections of this sort are superfluous and anachronistic. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. "You set a boundary that they could not pass over." Differentiation itself is an expression of wisdom, and for this reason the Sages enacted that the *havdala* passage recited on *Motza'ei Shabbat* ("*ata chonantanu*") should be recited in the "*chonen ha-da'at*" blessing, for "if there is no wisdom, whence differentiation?" (*Yerushalmi*, *Berakhot* 5:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook would repeat this statement very often in his talks; I am not familiar with an earlier source. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Of course, modern man pumps river water and utilizes it for his various needs. Modern man also uses rivers and streams in another way, hiking in and along them in the hope of experiencing their vitality – the animals, the fish, the birds and the plant life. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)