YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**by Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Lecture 50: "You have made them all in wisdom"**

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

### IV. THe second half of the Psalm (sections 5-9)

Does the second half of the psalm demonstrate thematic unity that expresses itself in a clear structure, as does the first half? Or is the second half merely a collection of sections dealing with varied topics, the common denominator between them being their not belonging to the first half?

In order to answer this question, we must first examine the subject matter of this half, section by section.

### Section 5 (vv. 19-23) – the division of the night and the day between night animals and man

(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.

This is the way that Weiss defines the relationship between this section and the previous sections, and the primary difference between them:

Following the description of the benefits that the land derives from the fact that the water was separated from it and [then] redirected toward it, we come to the benefit that the land derives from the separation of light and darkness, and their redirection and alternation (vv. 19-23). **God's blessed wisdom regarding the foundation of space reveals itself in the boundaries set between land and water, and His wisdom regarding the arrangement of time reveals itself in the boundaries set between light and darkness.**

In the last sentence in this passage (printed in bold), Weiss relates exclusively to section 5, but in the continuation of our analysis of this half of the psalm, we will argue that this sentence contains the key to finding the common denominator between most of the sections comprising this half.

In the first verse in this section,

He made the moon for the seasons.

The sun knows its setting place (v. 19),

the two verbs, "*asa"* and "*yada*,*"* appear in past tense. Thus, it alludes (as in verses 5, 8 and 9 above) that this verse refers back to the creation account in *Bereishit* 1, to the fourth day of creation (vv. 14-19):

And God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years…”

And God made the two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night…

And God set them in the firmament of heaven… and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness…

Our psalm mentions by name the lesser light, the moon, and the greater light, the sun. From among the various roles the book of *Bereishit* assigns to these luminaries, our psalm mentions the role of "for the seasons" exclusively with respect to the moon.[[1]](#footnote-1) The second clause of verse 19 is governed by the first clause: "[He made] the sun, [which] knows its setting place ("*mevo'o*")." Actually, the sun's "*mavo*" refers to both its rising and its setting,[[2]](#footnote-2) and so this is the role mentioned in the *Bereishit* account - "and for days."[[3]](#footnote-3)

Our psalm mentions the moon before the sun and the night before the day. This stands in contrast to the account in *Bereishit*, where the greater light, which rules over the day, is mentioned before the lesser light, which rules the night.

What is the reason for this change? Weiss answers as follows:

Scripture speaks first of sunset ("You put down darkness…") because it understands that the night was given out of concern for the animals, and according to its understanding this concern precedes the concern about man, as we find above in v. 14, "He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for the service of man."[[4]](#footnote-4)

The next four verses of section 5 describe the division of the twenty-four hours of the day between the forest beasts and man. Let us juxtapose vv. 20-21, which describe nighttime, to vv. 22-23, which describe daytime:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Night | Day |
| Description of the change in time: | 1. You put down darkness, and it is night,   when all the forest beasts creep out. | 1. The sun rises, they gather together   and lie within their dens. |
| Description of the activity: | (21) The young lions roar for their prey,  and seek food from God. | (23) Man goes forth to his work,  and to his labor until evening. |

There is a twofold difference between the two accounts, first in the description of the change in time in each part of the twenty-four day, and second in the description of the activity of the various creatures during each period.

This is what Weiss says about the first difference and its reason:

(20) "You put down darkness, and it is night" – Even though darkness arrives together with sunset, darkness is not perceived [here] as a necessary consequence of sunset, but rather as the result of a free action on the part of God. "You put down darkness" – an indicative statement, "and it is night" – so that it be night.

(22) "The sun rises, they gather together, and lie within their dens" – regarding the arrival of night it says: "You put down darkness" (v. 20), [but] regarding the arrival of day, it says: "The sun rises." There God acts and the darkness is acted upon; here the sun acts on its own, and He who activates it is not revealed in its activity. The terrors of darkness and the fears of night become diminished by the presence of God, who had set them down. With sunrise, man recovers and regains his confidence, and he sees the world acting in accordance with its laws, after the animals "gather together and lie within their dens."

And this is what Weiss says about the second difference and its reason:

(20) "When all the forest beasts creep out" – the night is the feeding time of the wild animals. Like verses 11 and 17, verse 21 states about a particular species ("young lions") what it had said in verse 20 about the entire category ("the forest beasts"). "The young lions roar for their prey, and seek food from God" – the infinitive with the *lamed* (­"*u-le-vakesh*") expresses the objective of the inflected verb ("*sho'agim*"), and the sense of the *vav* is emphatic [“that is to say”].[[5]](#footnote-5)

(23) "Man goes forth to his work, and to his labor until evening" – so that the animals and man not disturb each other. Man's activity during the day is not the same as the activity of the animals at night. The animals seek their food from God, whereas man goes out "to his work, and to his labor until evening." The animal's activity is perceived as "religious," man's activity as profane. Regarding the animals who lack intelligence, emphasis is placed on their dependence on their Creator; regarding man who is graced with intelligence, emphasis is placed on his independence in attaining his food (compare verse 14). The night comes in order to allow animals "to seek their food from God," and the day comes to allow man to go out "to his work and to his labor until evening."

Let us conclude our discussion of this section by presenting its main point. As in the first half, in this section, the psalm wishes to illustrate the wisdom of God that reveals itself in the creation and in its arrangements. These arrangements had already been established when the moon and the sun were created on the fourth day of creation, but they realize themselves in the world familiar to our psalm in the present. As Weiss says:

Through the phenomena of creation, our psalm sees the Creator, who, owing to His concern and wisdom, causes the day to pass and the night to come, so that each of His creatures will receive what is due him under the best possible conditions for him… To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose. If in the previous section (vv. 5-18) the psalm clarified that no place exists to which some creature has not been assigned, in this section it becomes clear that no time exists to which some creature has not been assigned.

As in the first half, in our section God's wisdom becomes manifest by way of separation.[[6]](#footnote-6) The differentiation between day and night, like the differentiation between land and water, makes it possible for the world to exist. It allows for the animals and for man to be active at the times most appropriate for them.

What we said in the first half applies here as well: "Differentiation does not imply absolute separation." The wild beasts and young lions need the night for their activity, but this does not mean that the day is a meaningless time for them. After their nocturnal activity comes to an end, "the sun rises, they gather together, and lie within their dens;" daytime is their time of rest. They gather together in their dens in order to sleep there during the hot hours of the day.

Just the opposite is true with respect to man. Man toils during the day, because his work requires light and because then he is safe from the wild beasts who rest during those hours in their dens. But once again, this does not mean that the night has no meaning for him. When the verse says, "Man goes forth to his work, and to his labor **until evening**," it alludes to the fact that a person returns home in the evening; at night, enjoying the protection of his home against nocturnal dangers, he sleeps in his bed and gathers strength for the next day.

It turns out, then, that night creatures need to rest during the day, whereas day creatures need to rest during the night, and that night and day are not entirely cut off from each other with respect to their roles for any creature in the world.

### Section 6 (v. 24) – intermediate summary

How great are Your works, O Lord!

You have made them all in wisdom.

The earth is full of Your creatures. (v. 24)

This verse gives us the impression that we have reached the end of the psalm – a summary and synopsis of all that had been said thus far. As Weiss puts it:

As a result of the psalmist's contemplation of the world and its arrangements, his feelings solidify into cognition. The many isolated images that had passed before his eyes join together to form one whole picture. The details of the descriptions join together to a general explanation of the descriptions, to an interpretation of creation, which involves an evaluation of the Creator. This evaluation cannot be expressed by way of an indicative statement – it requires an impassioned cry: "How great are Your works, O Lord! You have made them all in wisdom. The earth is full of Your creatures" (v. 24). His view, which encompasses all the works of creation, sees them first in themselves, in their quantity and in their quality, and then it rests on the vessel that holds them, on the world that is filled with them.

This impression, however, does not fit in with the facts. The psalm is not about to end; it continues for another 11 verses! And what is more surprising, the next two verses, vv. 25-26, focus on a description of the sea and what is found in it – one element in creation, whose appropriate place is in the first half of the psalm. Surely that half includes a depiction of the foundation of the sea (v. 8), and it is wholly dedicated to a description of the relationship between the land and the water. Weiss asks as follows:

The location of this impassioned cry between the description of the purposefulness in the arrangements of time (section 4) and the description of the utility of the sea seems like a breach in the wall of the psalm. It would seem that the place of this summarizing call should have been at the end of all the descriptions of the details of the wonders of creation, and not between the description of one element and the next… This inconsistency in the structure of the psalm decides the case of the psalm from an aesthetic perspective; it is an artistic blemish.

We shall bring Weiss's reconciliation of this difficulty in our discussion of the next section.

### 3. Section 7 (VV. 25-26) – The Sea and all that it contains

(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.

We should not disqualify inconsistencies or irregularities in a poem, unless they lack meaning and fail to express what is transpiring in the poet's soul. If we consider the psalmist's thought process thus far, we see that this inconsistency is, indeed, meaningful. The psalmist fulfilled the mission of blessing God that he had cast upon himself, when he lifted his eyes and saw the creatures above as tools of the Creator, testifying to His greatness. He then lowered his eyes, and when he saw the land upon which he was standing, he remembered its amazing foundation and the wondrous arrangements that ensure its continuous existence. As he sets all this before his eyes, a blessing wells up from within him: "How great are Your works, O Lord! You have made them all in wisdom. The earth is full of Your creatures." But when he sounds with his mouth and hears with his ears the words, "**the earth** is full of Your creatures," his heart tells him that with this he has not yet finished His praise of the Creator. For surely He did not only "establish the earth on its foundations, so that it should never collapse;" He also founded a place for the water "that they would not return to cover the earth." Is just **the earth** filled with God's possessions? He therefore interrupts his generalized call and returns once again to the waters that do not pass over their boundaries, to a description of the sea.

Weiss's reconstruction of the psychological process that our psalmist underwent until he "remembered" that the sea is also filled with God's possessions requires modification. According to Weiss, the sea is mentioned here almost by chance; had the psalmist not used the words, "**the earth** is full of Your creatures," he would not have remembered that the sea is similarly full of God's creatures. A poem, however, is not written "by chance," and its internal development does not depend on coincidental linguistic association.

The connection that Weiss makes between the description of the sea in this section and the psalmist's cry in verse 24 is indeed valid, but this connection is *le-khatchila*; it was planned and intended. Accordingly, we must make every effort to understand the meaning concealed behind it.

Man is a land creature. The water in the sea is not man's natural habitat, even though with his intelligence he has learned to utilize it for his needs. Therefore, when the psalmist comes to bless God for His wisdom that reveals itself in creation, what he first sees is the land that is familiar to him and the life forms to which it serves as home. "A person is close to himself" and it is the world that is familiar to him from personal experience that the psalmist describes in our psalm. While it is true that in the first half of the psalm he described the foundation of the sea, he did so in order to describe life on the earth.

It is, however, impossible to ignore the sea and the rich life teeming within it, for man occasionally encounters that as well. Therefore, the description of the sea in the context of our psalm can only be done as a "footnote," as sort of a postscript at the end of a letter. Accordingly, when the psalmist comes to summarize the mundane world constituting the foundation for God's blessing in this psalm, he summarizes it well by stating, "**the earth** is full of Your creatures" – for it is the land and all that lives upon it that has been described thus far. But when he utters this statement, he "forces" himself to add a short addendum in which he describes also the sea as a place filled with life and activity and asserts that the sea and the life it contains also belong to God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

For this very reason, the psalmist weaves into his description of sea life the clause, "there go the ships,*"* which seems to be foreign to its environment.[[8]](#footnote-8) Were it not for the fact that man travels the seas in the ships that he builds for that purpose, how would he know of the existence of the leviathans that play in the sea?[[9]](#footnote-9) The ships that sail at sea justify the fact that even the sea falls into the realm of man's contemplation of the created world around him, and not just the sea in general, but also the specific elements that it contains.

Let us conclude our discussion of the seventh section with two parallels that Weiss draws between this section, which deals with the sea, and the third section of the psalm, which deals with the springs that flow into the streams on land. This parallelism should not surprise us. Surely the source of the springs is in the sea, and thus there is a concrete connection between the topics discussed in these passages:

Just as the appearance of an alien element – the water – on land in the form of springs is indicated by the verb "*yehalekhun*" (v. 10: "**they go** ('*yehalekhun*') between the mountains"), so too the appearance of an alien element, a representative of the land, on the sea in the form of ships is indicated by the verb "*yehalekhun*."

And just as in the wake of the water's "invasion" of the land, the psalmist hears that "the birds of the sky… give voice," so too in the wake of the land's invasion of the sea, he sees "the leviathan that You made to play with" – on the sea. God's wisdom would not have been perfectly reflected in the world, on land and in the sea, had the psalm shown us nature, God's handiwork, as merely supplying material-bodily needs. God created His world so that happiness dwell within it, and not just that the heart of man should be gladdened (v. 15), but rather that there should be happiness for all creatures and in all of creation.

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Our psalmist may have understood that the four roles mentioned in the book of *Bereishit* with respect to the lights divide up two to each light. The moon was created "for signs and for seasons," as explained by the Radak on our psalm: "He made the moon in such a way, full and deficient, to know thereby the seasons, that is to say, to divide the year into twelve. Therefore, He made it full and deficient, for each month its light renews itself, and in that way we know the time of the year." Accordingly, the signs for the seasons are the new moon and the full moon. The next two roles, "and for days and for years," belong to the sun, to distinguish between one day and the next by way of the sun's rising, and between one year and the next by way of the completion of its cycle. The sun's role "for days" is mentioned later in this section (v. 22) – "the sun rises" – and then a new day starts, but it is already alluded to in the words, "the sun knows its setting place;" see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Radak: "For when the sun rises – it comes upon the earth, and when it sets, it comes below the earth. Only that because another term is used for sunrise, '*zericha*,' the term '*ba*,' unless otherwise specified, is used for sunset." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One of the differences between the description of the sun in our psalm and the corresponding description in the book of *Bereishit* is that in our psalm the sun is active, "the sun knows its setting place," whereas in *Bereishit* it is entirely passive – a tool in the hand of the Creator. We saw something similar in the second section, regarding the water that covered the land – "At Your rebuke they fled, at the sound of Your thunder they hastened away. They went up the mountains, they went down the valleys" – as opposed to what is stated in *Bereishit*: "Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together to one place, and let the dry land appear; and it was so." These differences are typical of the differences between prose and poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In note 32, Weiss refers to the following sources: *Bereishit* 24:32-33; *Shoftim* 19:21; *Devarim* 11:15. From the last mentioned verse, the law is learned (*Berakhot* 40a) that one is forbidden to eat before feeding one's animals. The priority given to animals in our section is attested to by the fact that Scripture describes their activity over three verses (vv. 20-22), and not just at night, but also during the day (v. 22), whereas man's activity is described in a single verse (v. 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Here Weiss refers in a note to the following examples: *Vayikra* 10:9-11; *Iyov* 34:8; *Kohelet* 9:1. We wish to add that according to our explanation of verses 14-15 in our psalm, the *vav* appearing at the beginning of the words "*ve-yayin*" and "*ve-lechem*" is also of this type. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See note 12 in the Part II of our study of psalm 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Regarding the connections between the verses that describe the sea and the call that precedes them, Weiss writes: "The statement, ‘Behold, **the great and wide sea**, where creeping things are innumerable,’ parallels the statement, ‘the earth is full of Your creatures.’ Both of them are a detailing of the general statement, "How great are Your works, O Lord!” (-"where creeping things are innumerable"). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Modern commentators raise several questions regarding the mention of ships in our psalm. Because of these objections, some commentators suggest that this clause is a later addition that is not part of the original psalm, while others propose various emendations of the word "*oniyot*" in order to resolve the difficulties. See Weiss's comments in *Ha-Mikra Ki-Demuto* (3rd ed., p. 80 and pp. 84-89), where he rejects these solutions. Our explanation of why it was necessary to mention the ships in this description of the sea is different than that of Weiss (ibid. p. 89). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Weiss expanded upon the term "leviathan" and the meaning of the words, "to play with," in the citation referred to in the previous note, pp. 78-92. The conclusion of his detailed discussion there is formulated in concise form in his article, "*Borkhi Nafshi*," as follows (p. 243): "On the surface of the sea 'go the ships,' which are accompanied by a living creature called 'leviathan,' because of its custom to accompany ('*le-hilavot*') ships… 'The leviathan that You made to play with' – **in the sea**.' Because it is the practice of the leviathan to collect a great quantity of water in its nostrils, and then to cast it high up in the air. And so too it is the practice of these sea creatures to jump out of the water one after the other in a long row." [↑](#footnote-ref-9)